AGENCY FOR PEACEBUILDING

UNSUNG CHAMPIONS OF PEACE: STREGTHENING THE ROLE OF WOMEN MEDIATORS IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

Research report

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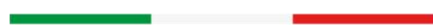
ABOUT THE AGENCY FOR PEACEBUILDING

The Agency for Peacebuilding (AP) is a think-and-do organisation committed to bridging the gap between research and practice in peacebuilding.

AP aims to contribute to more peaceful and just societies by preventing and transforming violent conflict and creating spaces for dialogue and cooperation across sectors and divides. AP's vision is of a world where conflicts can be transformed without violence and where peace can be promoted through inclusive, innovative sustainable means.

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Cover photo credit: Women participants in the "Sawtaha (Her Voice)" initiative in Darfur, Sudan (UNDP; 2020).

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GLOSSARY

ADR	Alternative Dispute Resolution
AP	Agency for Peacebuilding
ARCSS	Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan
AU	African Union
AWLN	African Women Leaders Network
CIJ	Customary and informal justice
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Accords
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
ENDC	Ethiopia National Dialogue Commission
FEMNET	African Women's Development and Communication Network
FFC	Forces of Freedom and Change
FGS	Federal Government of Somalia
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
KNAP	Kenya National Action Plan
MIND-Ethiopia	Multi-Stakeholder Initiative for National Dialogue
MoLSA	Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs
NAP	National Action Plan
NEWA	Network of Ethiopian Women's Associations
NGEC	National Gender and Equality Commission
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
R-ARCSS	Revised Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan
REFWOMEN	Regional Faith Women Mediators Network
SIHA	Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa
SSWCP	South Sudan Women Coalition for Peace
SWB	Sisters Without Borders
TLC	Transitional Legislative Council
UN	United Nations
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
WMC	Women Mediators across the Commonwealth
WPS	Women, Peace and Security

AT A GLANCE

Twenty-five years after the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, which established the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, the participation of women in decision-making processes in the Horn of Africa remains very limited. A regional network of women mediators does not yet exist. At the same time, women peacebuilders and mediators across the region are yet to be engaged to their full potential.

At the regional level, the research found 14 active regional networks, which involve women peacebuilders and mediators from the Horn of Africa—chief among them FemWise-Africa. These networks have strengths, but also weaknesses. In general, they have not yet been able to address all the needs that continue to affect the work of women mediators across the region.

Regional networking efforts start from the experiences that women peacebuilders and mediators have in their own countries.

These are very different from one country to another, reflecting the differences that exist in the legal and policy frameworks. Yet, there are also many commonalities, which are largely derived from the fact that, while history and cultures may differ, the situation of women can be remarkably similar regardless of where they live.

There is the space for another network, one that is specific to the Horn of Africa, that addresses the specific challenges of women mediators in the region, and that harnesses their unique strengths and opportunities. For this reason, the report makes six recommendations:

1. Cultivate greater regional collaboration;

2. Leverage complementarities and synergies between existing networks;

3. Promote an enabling policy and legal environment;

4. Focus on changing the narrative around women's expertise; and

5. Enhance safety and security for women peacebuilders and mediator.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Horn of Africa is going through a time of great instability, with tensions raising in numerous countries and war raging in others. Yet, if violent conflict can affect many people, communities and countries at the same time, it has a particularly profound impact on women. Acknowledging this reality is, indeed, what led to the adoption of the adoption by United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 and the creation of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda. Since then, notable progress has been made, including the approval of National Action Plans (NAPs) in almost all the region's countries. At the same time, the participation of women in decision-making processes in the Horn of Africa remains very limited. This demands greater efforts to support women peacebuilders and mediators, as a necessary step to build a just and sustainable peace in the region.

In this regard, a useful tool could be the establishment of a regional network of women mediators. Such networks have recently sprung up in different parts of the world with the goal of promoting a different kind of participation than what women have been able to achieve in the past. These networks work locally, regionally and internationally, supporting their members with training, technical assistance and, in some cases, also political support.

In the Horn of Africa, such a network does not presently exist. At the same time, women peacebuilders and mediators across the region are yet to be engaged to their full potential. These are the starting points for the present research, which has sought to understand the motivations, opportunities and barriers affecting how women build peace and mediate in their own countries, and how these shape efforts to collaborate regionally.

Experiences from Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia and Somaliland, South Sudan and Sudan

Regional networking efforts start from the experiences that women peacebuilders and mediators have in their own countries. These are very different from one country to another,

reflecting the differences that exist in the legal and policy frameworks. Yet, there are also many commonalities, which are largely derived from the fact that, while history and cultures may differ, the situation of women can be remarkably similar regardless of where they live.

In **Ethiopia**, there are many examples of women playing the role of peacebuilders and mediators at the grassroots level, within the country's regional states that are affected by violent conflict—like the Tigray—and nationally. Since the adoption of the revised constitution in 1994, the country has indeed made progress in ensuring full equality and participation for women in decision-making processes, including on peace and security. Frameworks likes the Ethiopian Women Policy have created an environment that supports women's participation. However, the lack of specific policies, such as a NAP on UNSCR 1325, continues to undermine their role. Important challenges also include patriarchal norms, a lack of specialised skills, and the difficulties of connecting efforts across the country. Overall, the active engagement of women through civil society organisations (CSOs) has made up for some of these limitations. CSOs represent a driver, even a multiplier, for women's participation. This has been the case, most recently, with the Ethiopia National Dialogue Commission, which was launched thanks mainly to the advocacy efforts of CSOs. Within the Commission, women have been able to secure significant participation quotas.

In **Kenya**, significant progress has been made to integrate gender perspectives into peacebuilding and mediation processes, supported by extensive legal frameworks, civil society efforts, and international commitments. Frameworks and mechanisms have been established to enhance women's participation in peacebuilding, including mediation, starting from the country's 2010 Constitution. These efforts align with international commitments, such as UNSCR 1325, and put Kenya generally ahead compared to what other countries in the Horn of Africa have been able to achieve. Notably, the country has adopted two NAPs, and is now working on its third. And it has a formal accreditation system for women mediators. Overall, this architecture is anchored in institutional mechanisms—like a WPS Working Group—and the active engagement of civil society. It is based on a multifaceted approach, which recognises the

importance of women participation as both a value and an objective. Yet, challenges and barriers remain, and women can still see their expertise unrecognised, or instance.

In **Somalia and Somaliland**, women are almost exclusively depicted as victims of conflict. Yet, in practice they play the role of peacebuilders and mediators often, most prominently at the grassroots level, but also within national and high-level peace processes. For instance, women played a significant role in the Borama and Arta peace conferences, which were important milestones in the state-building processes of Somaliland and Somalia respectively. In spite of many positive achievements, however, the narrative around women's participation in Somalia and Somaliland remains focused on the limitations—which are indeed many and significant. In particular, patriarchal norms and insecurity undermine opportunities for women, while la ack of specific capacities for peacebuilding and mediation hinders their effectiveness. Nevertheless, Somali women have sought engagement, through creativity and flexibility, like with the Somali Women Charter in 2022. This process accompanied the development of the country's first NAP, which it influenced by setting ambitious targets.

South Sudan achieved independence on July 9, 2011, but quickly descended into political violence. Women have participated in the peace processes before and after the country's independence, but they have always faced challenges. For instance, during the negotiations that brought an end to the civil war in 2015, women comprised only 15% of the participants. When the agreement was re-negotiated, in 2018, women's participation increased to 33%. However, there was only one female mediator in the process, and women represented just 20% of the signatories to the revitalised agreement. These figures reflect the systemic exclusion of women from critical peacebuilding platforms, despite their significant suffering during the conflict. South Sudanese women have fought this disparity by mobilising through CSOs, which have come together to form national coalitions and networks that are fighting for women to take part in peace processes. A generally weak legal and policy framework, in spite of a NAP, have undermined these efforts.

Sudan is in the midst of a civil war that is wreaking havoc among communities and civilians across the country. Women are bearing the brunt of this violence, as they have in all of the country's past conflicts. This said, Sudanese women have found, and continue to find, ways to advocate for peace. In Sudan, women peacebuilders and mediators have mobilised in particular through CSOs and at the grassroots level. Their efforts have, however, often included both peacebuilding and humanitarian assistance. If women have always sought to play a role on peacebuilding and mediation, their participation in the 2018-2019 revolution was unlike anything else in the country's history. Women led the movement, yet they were side-lined almost immediately after the fall of the regime of Omar al-Bashir, Sudan's long-time dictator. Exclusion and marginalisation are recurrent challenges, as women's role in decision-making processes is socially opposed and actively resisted at the political level.

Assessing regional networks

Several initiatives have been launched in the Horn of Africa with the aim of creating and consolidating networks of women peacebuilders and mediators, in particular at national level, and eventually also at regional level. There are indeed many examples of these, and, in general, the networking landscape in the region appears rather full, at least on the surface. The initiatives launched have been supported by international donors or organisations, by CSOs or by prominent leaders. All of them have been animated by a desire for women's voices to gain power, and with power to influence decisions related peace and security, but also to their well-being.

The landscape of existing networks covering the Horn of Africa is a patchwork of differences and commonalities. The first aspect that draws attention is that a network of women mediators specifically covering the Horn of Africa region does not yet exist. There are networks that cover the region, but are not focused on peacebuilding and mediation, as is the case with the Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA). Among the networks that have peace and security as a focus area, these either cover only some countries within the region—Sisters Without Borders (SWB), for example—or they cover countries both within and outside of the Horn of Africa. FemWise-Africa, for instance, is a pan-African network. The Great Lakes Region Women's Platform for Peace and Security, another network, covers both the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes. Only the Roster of Mediators of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) can be said to both have focus on mediation and cover all the region's countries—but this is not a network *per se*, nor is it focused on women specifically. The differences among existing

networks can also be seen in terms of the needs targeted, their goals and focus areas. At the operational level, networks also vary, some having formal structures, even secretariats, others being informal groupings of individuals or organisations.

All the regional networks that are operating today have emerged to champion women's empowerment, and each tries to play a unique role. Most of these networks provide essential training opportunities and resources. Nearly all of them also advocate for the inclusion of women in decision-making roles, albeit focusing on different levels. Despite their significant contributions, however, these networks face continuous challenges, such as limited resources and cultural barriers, underscoring the need for ongoing support from governments, international organisations, and civil society.

Overall, these networks have not yet been able to help women peacebuilders and mediators overcome the limitations affecting their efforts. This points to the existence of factors that can either enable or hinder collaborative action. There are also gaps that are not yet been fully addressed by existing networks.

The factors enabling collaborative action within regional networks are multi-faceted. A shared vision and common goals among members create a foundation for effective collaboration. Trust and strong relationships are essential, as they facilitate open communication and mutual support. Additionally, capacity-building initiatives empower women mediators with the necessary skills and resources to engage actively in peacebuilding efforts, locally and nationally. Supportive policies that promote gender equality and women empowerment, like NAPs, enhance these collaborative endeavours, ensuring that women's contributions are recognised and valued.

Where such enablers are present, networks appear to be the most healthy and effective. Unfortunately, they seldom are all present. All the identified regional networks face limitations, in fact, which can be mainly be attributed to women's underrepresentation in decision-making processes, cultural and social norms, the disconnect that exists between grassroots and national efforts, security risks, competition and lack of resources, political tensions, implementation gaps related to the WPS Agenda, and lack of long-term strategic strategies.

Ultimately, the research highlights how the participation of CSOs brings a unique strength to regional networks. Within all countries, such organisations fill critical gaps by providing

resources, mentorship, and advocacy platforms. CSOs often work in partnership with international organisations, and these collaborations can amplify the impact of women peacebuilders and mediators, enabling them to access additional resources and networks. The presence of CSOs as members of regional networks can also help with their sustainability, s capacity-building and exchange initiatives launched in these settings usually benefit not only individuals, but also the organisations they represent.

Conclusions and recommendations

The research ultimately paints a picture that goes against mainstream narratives about women in the Horn of Africa. Whereas women are generally described as playing roles that rarely go beyond those of victims or passive agents of change, the examples coming from all countries show how women are, in reality, protagonists of peacebuilding and mediation processes.

Yet, women's ability to influence peacebuilding and mediation processes remains weak because of limitations such as underrepresentation and cultural barriers. As such, the efforts of women remain largely focused at the grassroots level, and mainly channelled through CSOs. Still, that is not a limit that affects the quality of these efforts, or their effectiveness. In all countries, women who engage in peacebuilding and mediation gain specialised knowledge, and become veritable experts. This expertise they immediately want to share with other women, in their own countries and internationally. There is a push towards networking and making connections with peers in other countries, which is evidenced by the number of regional networks that are currently operating. And the establishment of networks, such as FemWise-Africa, has facilitated collaboration and knowledge-sharing.

In conclusion, regional networking efforts have had inconsistent results so far, and more is needed to build a truly enabling environment that can lead to more effective and inclusive peacebuilding processes in the region. The following recommendations are made for those organisations and policy-makers pursuing this goal:

Cultivate greater regional collaboration. While several different regional networks exist, which are helping to raise women's voices, more efforts are needed.

Regional networks should be expanded to foster more cross-border learning and solidarity. Initiatives like the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network can serve as models for establishing effective regional collaborations that address transnational conflicts, especially in a region, the Horn of Africa, which does not have a dedicated network yet.

Leverage complementarities and synergies between existing networks. At the same time, any new initiatives should build on the successes of established networks, ensuring that they complement existing efforts and fill specific gaps—in terms of the needs being address, or the women being supported. Resources are limited, and there can all too often be competition among CSOs, and networks.

Collaborative initiatives among networks will amplify advocacy efforts and enhance the visibility of women mediators, but only insofar as they are able to nurture solidarity. In this regard, the role of FemWise-Africa as the foremost network for women working on mediation should be acknowledge, and all efforts make to contribute to its consolidation. Regional initiatives like SIHA also play an important role, and can count on established networks of collaborators. New regional networking efforts should seek to fill the gaps that these other initiatives are not currently focusing one. In this regard, each network should establish a clear identity and niche, which aligns with its goals. This focused approach should enhance visibility, attract partnerships, and ensure sustainability.

Promote an enabling policy and legal environment. Governments and intergovernmental bodies like IGAD must prioritise the integration of women mediators into national leadership frameworks. This can be achieved by ensuring that NAPS are not only established, as they are in nearly all countries, but also implemented effectively, with specific provisions for cross-sectoral collaboration.

Where NAPs have been adopted, it is important that governments also allocate funds that support the implementation of these plans. Supporting national implementation along these lines will ensure that women and women-led organisations can more effectively engage in regional networking efforts, and that such efforts can in turn contribute to enhancing the impact of national policies, through the sharing of lessons learned and best practices.

Focus on changing the narrative around women's expertise. Advocacy and communication efforts must aim to shift cultural perceptions surrounding women's roles in peacebuilding and mediation. Inclusive strategies that address the challenges faced by marginalised groups, including young women and women with disabilities, should be prioritised.

These should include efforts to recognise the expertise of women who have been doing peacebuilding and mediation for years, if not decades. Accreditation mechanisms, like the ones in Kenya, can help in this regard. At the same time, communication efforts are also essential, as are efforts to engage men, in particular traditional leaders, to ensure that they, too, recognise that women should play a role.

Enhance safety and security for women peacebuilders and mediators. Support systems must be established to protect women peacebuilders and mediators, particularly in conflict zones. This includes creating safety nets and providing resources that encourage their active participation in mediation roles. It may also include providing specialised training to those women who are working on the frontlines of active conflicts and wars. Lastly, such support should include funds to allow women to conduct activities in safe areas, including outside of their own country, where and when this may be necessary to ensure their safety.

INTRODUCTION

The Horn of Africa is going through a time of great instability, with tensions raising in numerous countries and war raging in others. Yet, if violent conflict can affect many people, communities and countries at the same time, it has a particularly profound impact on women. The record of gender-based violence (GBV) in countries and regions affected by war, like South Sudan or Ethiopia's Tigray regional state, is both tragic and well known. Less visible are the indirect effects of conflict, such as displacement, famine, and lack of access to essential services, which affect women more deeply, and more lethally, than men.

Awareness of the enormous impact of armed conflict on women is not new, however. It is, indeed, what led to the creation of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda, with the adoption by United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, in 2000. The Resolution introduced a new framework to address the needs of women in conflict, which included not only post-conflict protection and recovery, but also their active participation in decision-making processes. Over the last quarter of a century, this normative framework has been buttressed by additional resolutions, all of which have aimed at making women protagonists within peace and security decisions, and not merely victims. Arguably, it is this focus on women's participation that represents the most innovative pillar of Resolution 1325, and the most transformative feature of the WPS Agenda.

Acknowledging the impact that UNSCR 1325 could have on the peace and security challenges faced by all people in the Horn of Africa, the international community has long been supporting the implementation of the WPS Agenda in the region. And much attention has also been given to supporting the commitments made under the Resolution's participation pillar. This has led to notable progress over the past twenty-five years, including the approval of National Action Plans (NAPs) in almost all the region's countries. Importantly, the empowerment of women in processes related to peace ands security is now considered a priority for both the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), respectively the main continental and regional intergovernmental organisations mandated to promote peacebuilding and conflict resolution, including through mediation, in the Horn of Africa.

Yet, the participation of women in decision-making processes related to peace and security still remains very limited.

The presence of women in official peace negotiations remains extremely low. Women are very active in resolving conflicts at the local level, but for this role they rarely receive recognition or support. Their engagement is all too often hindered by traditions and norms that limit their rights. This is all the more worrying since the needs, under Resolution 1325's participation pillar, are not only profound, but also increasing with the proliferation of violent conflict in countries like Ethiopia and Sudan.

The various armed conflicts in the region and their impact on the female population demand greater participation of women in peace processes.

This is a necessary step to build a just and sustainable peace. In this regard, a useful tool could be a regional network of women mediators. Such networks have sprung up in different parts of the world—the Nordic network (called the Nordic Women Mediators) was born in 2015, the Pan-African one (FemWise-Africa) and the Mediterranean one (Mediterranean Women Mediators Network) in 2017—with the goal of promoting a different kind of participation than what women have been able to achieve in the past. These networks work locally, regionally and internationally, supporting their members with training, technical assistance and, in some cases, also political support.

In the nascent and evolving landscape of regional networks, one such body for the Horn of Africa does not presently exist. At the same time, women peacebuilders and mediators across the region are yet to be engaged to their full potential.

These are the starting points for the present research, whose overall goal is to contribute to strengthening the participation of women to processes related to peace and security in the Horn of Africa. Specifically, the research has sought to understand the motivations, opportunities and barriers facing how women build peace and mediate in their own countries, and how these shape efforts to collaborate regionally. The research looked both at the peace and security architecture promoting women participation, nationally and regionally, and at the lived-in experiences of women peacebuilders and mediators. Ultimately, the research wants to support the possible creation of a regional network specific to the Horn of Africa.

The research has produced in-depth, interesting findings. Some of them are aligned with what other studies have already found. Some of them add nuance and details to existing resources. There are also some new insights, which can hopefully increase the understanding of how networking processes have evolved, and are evolving, and what can make them more effective and impactful in the future.

The report is divided into two parts. The first part follows this introduction and the methodology, and focuses on country-level findings, which are presented by country. The second part analyses regional networking efforts, how they developed and what makes them effective (or not). The report ends with some conclusions and recommendations, useful for both policy and practice.

METHODOLOGY

The research aimed to explore the feasibility of establishing a regional network of women's mediators in the Horn of Africa. While no such network presently exists, over the years there have been various efforts to bring together and train women mediators. There is also a regional peace and security architecture, with multiple actors working at different levels to promote peacebuilding, including on mediation specifically. If a network is to be created, this should happen with particular attention to avoiding any duplication with ongoing initiatives supporting the implementation of the WPS Agenda, and to promoting ownership by the members' potential members. Ultimately, a network will be only as successful as the commitment of its members to nurture and grow it.

Given this, the research focused on the following key questions:

1. What does the landscape in terms of women's participation in peace mediation currently look like?

2. How, and at what level, do individual women mediate, and what motivates their engagement?

3. What have been the efforts to create networks of women mediators locally, nationally or regionally? And what can be learned from them?

Geographically, the research focused only on Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia and Somaliland, South Sudan and Sudan. Relevant regional efforts and initiatives were considered, where they were deemed relevant for answering the research questions. This means that several countries were excluded from the scope of the study. The choice was pragmatic and linked to the resources and time available for the research. Focusing on the experience of women peacebuilders and mediators from all countries in the Horn of Africa remains important, however, and it is an activity that should be done within future research efforts.

Thematically, the research was framed within the WPS Agenda and its implementation in each of the chosen locations, as well as at the regional level. Particular attention was given to efforts promoted or framed under the participation pillar of UNSCR 1325, although other dimensions of women empowerment were also considered, where relevant. The research's approach has been holistic: first, it looked at the institutional aspects of women's participation; then it considered the direct experiences of women peacebuilders and mediators, with the aim of understanding and describing their reality; and, finally, it looked at the launch and evolution of regional networking initiatives.

The research used primary and secondary data sources. Primary sources included women peacebuilders and mediators, and WPS experts. Secondary sources included academic papers and journal articles, research reports, briefs and analyses produced by international organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society organisations (CSOs), research centres and universities. The research was based on selected in-depth interviews and an extensive literature review.

While the research did not encounter any significant limitations, in terms of data collection, it is important to note that capturing experiences as rich and multi-faced as those of women peacebuilders and mediators from the Horn of Africa is inherently difficult. So is the task of assessing complex national and regional policies on women empowerment, or networking activities. The literature review relied on a wealth of documents, including some first-hand accounts, which helped to fill critical gaps. Others remain, however, which future research efforts will have to address.

EXPERIENCES FROM ETHIOPIA

Policy frameworks and mechanisms for women's participation

Ethiopia has strong legal frameworks committing the country to ensuring women's full equality and participation in decision-making processes. It has also adopted several of the most significant international policies to ensure women's protection and participation, as the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (better known as the Maputo Protocol). Yet, on the specific issue of participation in peace and security, including mediation processes, the country has adopted few commitments, such as a NAP on UNSCR 1325, and this has hobbled efforts to ensure that women can take part, and lead, peacebuilding and mediation efforts.

The country's commitment to women's equality and participation is evidenced in the Ethiopian Women Policy (1993) and the Federal Constitution (1994). The Policy is aimed at institutionalising gender sensitivity across all the policies and structures of the country's regional states, so that all development opportunities are available to women as they are to men. The Policy also emphasises the need to integrate women into all aspects of national development, including peace and security[1]. The Constitution enshrines women's rights and equality on all matters of economic, social and political development.

At the international level, Ethiopia has adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, without reservations. This has led to the adoption of commitments to improve the situation of women, including through empowerment efforts—i.e., capacity-building and advocacy. Ethiopia's alignment with this global framework has created several opportunities for increasing women's participation. However, there remains a gap between policy commitments and actual implementation.

This gap is most evident in the fact that the country still lacks a NAP on UNSCR 1325. This is not the only policy framework supporting women peacebuilders and mediators: in Ethiopia, positive progress has been achieved, for instance, with the National Dialogue, which will be discussed in more detail later. Yet, the absence of a NAP is visible in a region where all other countries, including Sudan, have adopted one. Perhaps in recognition of this, UN Women, in collaboration with the Ethiopian Government, has recently launched efforts to develop the country's first-ever plan[2], under the leadership and ownership of key government institutions, chiefly the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs (MoWSA) and the Ministry of Peace, and also including CSOs and women-led organisations, so as to ensure that the plan reflects the needs and voices of women across Ethiopia[3].

While existing policies provide a framework for women's inclusion, their implementation has faced challenges, including limited resources, weak institutional capacity, and resistance from patriarchal structures. There are indications, for instance, that women's contributions continue being undervalued in formal peace negotiations, and safety concerns, such as victimisation and human rights violations further deter their active involvement[4]. Many women in Ethiopia also face significant capacity gaps, lacking access to specialised training in conflict resolution and mediation.

Civil society-led and grassroots initiatives have played an essential role in addressing these gaps, at least in part. For instance, community-based organisations and women's groups have been instrumental in fostering dialogue and reconciliation, especially in rural areas, where formal peacebuilding structures are often absent[5]. These efforts have demonstrated the potential of grassroots activism in empowering women as peacebuilders within their communities[6].

Ethiopia has also been very active in supporting efforts on peace and security by IGAD. The country is one of the main players within the intergovernmental organisation, whose

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[1] "Ethiopian Women's Policy", Ministry of Women and Social Affairs, Government of Ethiopia (1993).

[2] "The women, peace and security agenda: Enhanced participation of women in peace and conflict resolution in Ethiopia", UN Women Ethiopia (2022).

[3] Ibid.

[4] "The Role Of Women In National And Sub-National Peace Processes In Ethiopia", Rift Valley Institute (2023).

[5] "Ethiopia Peace and Justice Survey 2023", Harvard Humanitarian Initiative (2023).

[6] "Assessment on the Role of Women in Peace and Reconciliation in Oromia and Somali Regional State", UNDP (2021).

headquarters are in Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa. Through IGAD, Ethiopia has therefore been able to engage in the development of policies such as IGAD's Regional Action Plan on UNSCR 1325.

International organisations, AU and UN Women, have also been pivotal in advocating for women's inclusion in peace processes[7]. One of the best examples of these efforts is the Salama Hub, which focuses on enhancing women's roles in mediation and negotiations in the Horn of Africa. Since its creation, the Hub has provided valuable support for capacity building and leadership development[8]. The launch of the National Dialogue has also represented an opportunity for greater women involvement on peace and security at the national level, while at the local and grassroots levels, many CSOs are regularly involved in peacebuilding and conflict prevention or resolution.

These initiatives highlight the growing recognition of women's contributions to peacebuilding, while international support and grassroots activism present a promising trajectory for women's leadership. This said, there remains a pressing need for sustained investment in capacity-building programmes and institutional reforms.

Women's experiences in peacebuilding and mediation

In Ethiopia, a country marked by complex conflicts ranging from inter-ethnic disputes to civil wars, women have played critical roles at local, national, and regional levels. However, their participation remains constrained by structural barriers, socio-cultural norms, and institutional weaknesses. This section provides a detailed analysis of the extent to which Ethiopian women have been involved in peacebuilding and mediation efforts, highlighting successes, challenges, and opportunities for further engagement.

Starting at the local and grassroots levels, Ethiopian women have historically played vital roles in informal and community-based conflict resolution mechanisms. Their contributions are often rooted in cultural norms that position them as neutral actors, trusted to mediate disputes and foster dialogue.

Despite being largely informal and unrecognised in official processes, their efforts have been instrumental in de-escalating tensions and resolving conflicts at this level, particularly in rural and pastoralist communities.

Within these communities, traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, such as the *Shimglina* system (elder-led mediation) in the Oromia regional state, play an important role in defusing tensions and maintain peace among groups. And while these mechanisms are predominantly male-dominated, women have been able to play a role as informal mediators, particularly in family disputes, inter-clan conflicts, and resource-based disputes. For example, in pastoralist regional states such as Afar and Somali State, women have mediated disputes over access to water and grazing land, using emotional intelligence and neutrality to effectively broker agreements between rival groups[9].

Women's peace committees are another example of local level engagement. These have emerged in various regional states to address localised conflicts and promote dialogue, usually operating outside formal institutional frameworks. For example, in Sidama regional state, women's committees played a pivotal role in mediating disputes during the 2019 referendum for statehood, and their efforts were credited with helping to de-escalate tensions and prevent violence during a politically sensitive period[10]. Another example is in Gambella, where women's peace committees facilitated dialogues between the Nuer and Anuak communities, two groups with a history of ethnic tension. By organising community discussions and promoting reconciliation, these committees helped reduce hostilities and fostered a sense of unity[11]. Yet another example is from the Borana zone of Oromia, where women mediated disputes between pastoralist clans over access to water points during periods of drought. Their efforts not only resolved immediate conflicts but also laid the groundwork for long-term cooperation between communities[12].

Women's peace committees are often more inclusive and participatory than formal processes, as they engage women from diverse backgrounds and prioritise community needs. Through these committees, women can also play active roles in resolving resource-based conflicts, which can be

[7] "Report on the Implementation of the Women, Peace & Security Agenda in Africa 2020", African Union (2020).

[8] See: https://afsc.org/programs/salama-hub.

[9] "Conflict Management over Contested Natural Resources: A Case Study of Pastoralist Areas in Ethiopia", A. Pankhurst (2003).

[10] "Women's Role in Peacebuilding in Ethiopia", International Alert (2018).

[11] "Women and Cross-Border Peacebuilding in the Horn of Africa", African Union (2019).

[12] "Women's Participation in Peace Processes in the Horn of Africa", IGAD (2020).

common due to competition over scarce resources such as water and grazing land. This highlights their capacity to influence peacebuilding processes at the grassroots level. However, their contributions are often undervalued due to the patriarchal structures of social systems, which prioritise male leadership in formal decision-making.

Women have also had experience acting as mediators and facilitators at the level of regional states, leveraging their cultural roles and moral authority. In the Benshangul Gumuz regional state, for example, women played a critical role in facilitating peace talks between armed groups and the Ethiopian Government. Acting as messengers, they built trust between the conflicting parties and persuaded them to negotiate. Women's emotional appeals, such as "putting out their breasts" to beg for peace, were instrumental in initiating dialogue[13].

At the national level, Ethiopian women have made some strides in participating in formal peace processes, but their involvement has often been symbolic or peripheral.

Women are rarely included as negotiators or decision-makers and are more commonly engaged as observers or advisors. This limited representation reflects broader gender inequalities in political and institutional structures. For example, during the Pretoria peace talks in 2022, which led to the cessation of hostilities between the Ethiopian Government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), women leaders from organisations like the Network of Ethiopian Women's Associations (NEWA), Setaweet, and the Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA) were present. However, their role was largely informal. They were not direct participants at the negotiation table[14].

Women's success in taking part in peacebuilding and mediation at the national level is more closely tied to their activism in civil society than to their formal inclusion in official peace processes. CSOs can be powerful vehicles for promoting peacebuilding, in fact, and this is nowhere more evident than in the case of the National Dialogue.

Following the mass protests that erupted across the country in 2018, the Ethiopian Government launched an official national reform process to address people's grievances. This was a top-down process.

However, CSOs noted an opportunity for participation. Several of them came together in a network and announced the creation of the Multi-Stakeholder Initiative for National Dialogue (MIND-Ethiopia), with the aim of facilitating reconciliation and peacebuilding across the country. The initiative was so successful that it eventually led the Government to create launch its own formal initiative, the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission (ENDC), with the goal of creating conducive conditions for national consensus on particularly divisive issues.

The creation of MIND-Ethiopia represents a good example of how CSOs and civil society networks, including many that are women-led, play a crucial role in ensuring women's participation in peacebuilding. They advocate for women's inclusion, provide platforms for their voices to be heard, and work to address gender-specific issues within peace and security initiatives. Within MIND-Ethiopia, for instance, women-led organisations were included as a specific constituency group, and when the initiative was replaced by the ENDC, women continued to represent a specific constituency group, and they were also given a 20% quota in all other constituency groups[15].

CSOs also work to challenge cultural and structural barriers that hinder women's participation. Through advocacy, awareness campaigns, and collaborative partnerships with government and international organisations, they strive to create an inclusive environment where women can actively contribute to sustainable peace and reconciliation in Ethiopia[16]. By amplifying women's voices and addressing their specific concerns, CSOs are instrumental in shaping more equitable and effective peacebuilding processes. For example, during the Tigray conflict, women's organisations advocated for inclusive peace talks and provided humanitarian support to affected communities. While formal mediation roles were limited, women's voices were instrumental in calling for ceasefires and reconciliation[17].

The experiences accrued at the level of regional states, or nationally, have helped Ethiopian women peacebuilders and mediators to become engaged also beyond the country's borders. For example, Ethiopian women have used their platforms to advocate for the inclusion of women in international

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[13] "Advancing Women, Peace, and Security Agenda in Ethiopia", UN Women Ethiopia (2021).

[14] "Women's Participation in Peace Processes in Africa", African Union (2023).

[15] "The role of women in national and sub-national peace processes in Ethiopia", Rift Valley Institute (2023).

[16] "Promoting Women's Participation in Peace Negotiations and Peace Processes", GIZ (2012).

[17] "Ethiopia: Women's Role in Conflict Resolution and Humanitarian Response", OCHA (2022).

peace processes. Former President of Ethiopia, Sahle-Work Zewde, has been a particularly vocal advocate for women's inclusion in peace processes[18]. Ethiopian and Eritrean women have also collaborated on initiatives to promote reconciliation and rebuild trust following the 2018 peace agreement between the two countries. In this case, their efforts focused on fostering cross-border dialogue, addressing shared challenges such as displacement and gender-based violence, and advocating for the inclusion of women in the treaty's implementation processes[19]. Women's groups from Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia have also collaborated on cross-border peacebuilding projects, addressing issues such as cattle rustling and resource sharing in the so-called the Karamoja Cluster[20]. Finally, Ethiopian women diplomats and civil society leaders have regularly contributed to IGAD's mediation efforts, advocating for gender-sensitive approaches to peacebuilding[21].

If the experience of Ethiopian women in peacebuilding and mediation is significant, the fact that most of the most visible successes have taken place outside of formal peace process, and in particular through CSOs, highlights the limits of their efforts. Where they made contributions, these have remained informal or rarely acknowledged in official narratives. Despite government policies, international frameworks, and advocacy from women's rights organisations, much work remains to ensure women's full and meaningful participation in peacebuilding and mediation processes.

Women's motivations, effectiveness and challenges

Ethiopian women mediators are driven by a diverse range of motivations that reflect their unique experiences, cultural roles, and aspirations for societal transformation. Their involvement in mediation efforts stems from deeply personal encounters with conflict, traditional expectations of women as peacemakers, a commitment to gender equality, and ethical and religious values. These motivations not only fuel their dedication to peacebuilding, but also shape the approaches they use to resolve conflicts and foster reconciliation.

Many Ethiopian women mediators are motivated by their own experiences of conflict and displacement. These experiences are what gives them a unique perspective and a deep commitment to preventing future violence. Women who have survived gender-based violence (GBV) or displacement during conflicts, such as the war in Tigray, often channel their trauma into mediation efforts to help others[22].

Women may also be motivated by cultural expectations that see them as caregivers and peacemakers. As part of these expectations, in many Ethiopian communities' women are seen as neutral parties who can bridge divides between conflicting groups. This perception can play a significant role in motivating women's interest in becoming engaged in mediation, especially at the grassroots level, and on issues, like family disputes, where their participation is usually less controversial.

At the same time, women who decide to become involved in mediation are also driven by a desire to challenge patriarchal norms—their participation representing a way to advocate for greater gender equality in peace processes specifically, and in society generally. Lastly, religious teachings and ethical principles often inspire Ethiopian women to take on mediation roles. Women from Ethiopia's Christian and Muslim communities have used their faith-based values to promote forgiveness and reconciliation.

Once motivated, Ethiopian women can mediate at multiple levels, as the experiences described in the previous section make clear. Their effectiveness varies significantly from one level to another. So do the challenges they face.

At the grassroots and community level, Ethiopian women often mediate disputes among families, clans, and neighbours. It is a common phenomenon to see women in rural Ethiopia mediate land disputes and conflicts over water resources, as in the previously described examples from regional states like Oromia and Afar. They also become involved in women peace committees and in traditional conflict resolution mechanisms. The fact that they can play these roles, more often than not with no external support of any kind, suggests that they are seen as credible actors, and capable of finding solutions that are appropriate and acceptable.

[18] "Ethiopia's President calls for enhanced actions on women empowerment", Africa Union (2022).

[19] "Cross-Border Peacebuilding Initiatives in the Horn of Africa", Women's International Peace Centre (2019).

[20] "Women and Cross-Border Peacebuilding in the Horn of Africa", African Union (2019).

[21] "Women's Participation in Peace Processes in the Horn of Africa", IGAD (2020).

[22] "Gender and Conflict in Ethiopia: The Role of Women Mediators", UN Women (2022).

The challenges to their participation at this level are, however, manifold. There are, to begin with, cultural and societal norms that often restrict women's roles in conflict resolution, limiting their influence and visibility. As already hinted, there is a lack of institutional support: at the grassroots level, women's initiatives are rarely integrated into formal peacebuilding frameworks, reducing the resources they have to bring parties together, or travel. The security risks can be high, especially in areas where violent conflict is a daily fact of life, deterring their participation. Lastly, there is an absence of effective systems to connect grassroots initiatives with national and regional platforms. This gap limits the ability to document best practices and to give visibility to women-led efforts.

Some Ethiopian women have been able to take part in national-level peace processes, where they have used their engagement to establish systems that facilitate and support the participation of other women. These efforts have been driven by a commitment to enhancing women's roles in peacebuilding processes across the country.

One such initiative is the Presidential Leadership Programme, launched by former President Sahle-Work Zewde. While the programme was not exclusively focused on women mediators, it aimed to increase women's representation in leadership role and included training in negotiation skills[23]. Another is NEWA's Negotiation, Mediation, and Conflict Resolution programme. Conducted in partnership with UN Women, the programme laid the foundation for the establishment of Ethiopia's Women Peacebuilders Network[24]. Lastly, there is the African Women Peace and Security Institute, a CSO founded by experienced Ethiopian women ambassadors, which has trained women mediators across the country[25].

Several significant challenges have hindered, and continue to hinder, such empowerment efforts, the main one being underrepresentation in decision-making roles. Women are underrepresented in all political and institutional structures, which limits their ability to influence formal decision-making processes[26].

Patriarchal norms and stereotypes can also marginalise women involved in national processes, with male leaders viewing them as less capable of contributing to high-level negotiation[27]. Many women in Ethiopia lack access to specialised training opportunities[28], a gap in capacity-building that further entrenches their exclusion. And there remains a significant disconnect between national mediation initiatives and grassroots-level[29].

Networking has helped to bridge this disconnect, both within the country and across borders. Nationally, CSOs have played a prominent role in supporting women mediators by providing resources, capacity-building, advocacy, and platforms for collaboration. In contexts where government support is lacking, CSOs are filling the gap. They have regularly come together to increase their voice and better advocate for changes, including on peacebuilding and mediation. NEWA, MIND-Ethiopia and other networks that bring together organisations working on issues that relate to peace, including human rights and democratisation, suggest that, among activists and civil society, there is a recognition that some changes can only happen through joint action.

Similarly, there is a record of networking to meet specific political opportunities, like the Eritrea-Ethiopia peace agreement, when women from the two countries partnered to promote reconciliation and rebuild trust, or the 2018 popular protests, which led to the creation of MIND-Ethiopia. Across borders, there is a record of initiatives launched to meet specific challenges, for example addressing local conflicts in the border area between Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya. There is also IGAD and all the efforts on peace and security that the organisation sponsors, and which usually involve Ethiopian representatives. In late 2023, FemWise-Africa also launched a national chapter in the country, to consolidate its support to Ethiopian women wanting to play a stronger in mediation.

[23] "Presidential Leadership Program: Advancing Women's Leadership and Negotiation Skills in Ethiopia", UN Women (2020).
[24] Interview with WPS expert, Agency for Peacebuilding (2025).
[25] "Second Round of Training for Women Mediators in Ethiopia", African Women Peace and Security Institute (2024).
[26] "Shed Light in the Hall: Gender representation in Ethiopian politics since 1990's up to 2021", G. Atsede G et al. (2022).

[27] "Understanding Support and Barriers for Women Leaders in Ethiopia", EMAH Social Development Consulting (2022).
[28] Ibid.
[29] "Building Resilient Peace: Strategic Pathways for Strengthening the UN Peacebuilding Architecture in Africa", UN (2024).

EXPERIENCES FROM KENYA

Policy frameworks and mechanisms for women's participation

Kenya's architecture for promoting women's participation on peace and security is built on several key policies: the Constitution, the country's NAPs on UNSCR 1325, Vision 2030, the Kenya National Peacebuilding Policy and the National Gender Equality Act.

The Kenyan Constitution, adopted in 2010, represents a fundamental step in institutionalising women's participation, including in peacebuilding and mediation[30]. The Constitution is a progressive legal document that guarantees gender equality and prohibits discrimination based on gender. It guarantees full equal rights for women and men, in all areas, and includes gender-focused provisions and quotas designed to lower barriers to women's involvement in leadership and governance. For instance, the Constitution features the "two-thirds rule", which dictates that no more than two-thirds of the members of elective public bodies shall be of the same gender. This rule has ensured women's representation in governance and decision-making structures.

If the Constitution lays the foundations for women's participation, the Kenya National Actions Plans (KNAP) on UNSCR 1325 formalise the specific commitments on the part of the state and lay out the strategic objectives pursued by government. Kenya adopted its first KNAP in 2016 and has renewed this document ever since. Currently, it is developing its third plan, which will cover the period from 2025 to 2029, following the conclusion of the Plan launched in 2020 (KNAP II). KNAP II focused on four main goals and included a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation system, but faced challenges such as the absence of a dedicated budget allocation. KNAP III is being developed to overcome those challenges, with a focus on reducing women's vulnerability to conflict and human security threats, and on

amplifying women's voices from the grassroots to national and regional platforms[31].

The development of the KNAPs has been grounded in another key policy: Vision 2030 and its Medium-Term Plan III. In the Medium-Term Plan, the importance of security, peacebuilding, and conflict resolution for sustainable development are all highlighted. Indeed, these thematic areas tie in with the KNAPs and are meant to ensure that there is complementarity in the implementation of both frameworks. The Medium-Term Plan also includes specific programmes—such as continued support to early warning and conflict prevention, and the development and implementation of a conflict mediation strategy and a post-conflict reconstruction and recovery strategy—which are aligned with the commitments made under the KNAPs.

The last two key frameworks are the National Policy on Peacebuilding and Conflict Management and the National Gender Equality Act. The former provides direction on the mainstreaming of peacebuilding and conflict management in development policies, plans, and projects, and enables communities and peace structures to operationalise their commitment to the peaceful resolution of conflicts[32]. The latter establishes the legal foundation for promoting gender equality in all sectors, including peacebuilding. It mandates the inclusion of women in decision-making structures and provides for affirmative action to address historical inequalities.

All these legal and policy frameworks have led, over the years, to the establishment of several important mechanisms to promote women's participation. These include the National Gender and Equality Commission, Gender Desks within Ministries and Police Departments, peace committees and customary and informal justice (CIJ) systems. Multilateral organisations, including UN Women, and CSOs also represent mechanisms that offer regular opportunities for participation.

The National Gender and Equality Commission (NGEC) is a key institution tasked with promoting gender equality and monitoring the implementation of gender-related policies. It works closely with government agencies, CSOs, and international partners to ensure that women are included in peacebuilding initiatives. This is achieved through policy advocacy, capacity-building of state institutions, and the development of gender-responsive frameworks. For example, NGEC has

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[30] "The Constitution of Kenya", Government of Kenya (2010).
[31] Interview with WPS Expert, Agency for Peacebuilding (2025).

[32] "Peacebuilding Policies and Frameworks in Kenya", ACCORD (2022).

been instrumental in mainstreaming gender into the KNAPs, and in supporting county-level peace committees to adopt inclusive approaches[33]. Gender Desks have been established in various government ministries and police departments to address gender-specific issues[34].

If the NGEC and the Gender Desks are examples of mechanisms created through top-down approaches, peace committees represent grassroots institutions, which have been established to promote conflict resolution and peacebuilding, particularly in regions prone to inter-community violence and resource-based conflicts[35]. Peace committees are made up of diverse stakeholders, including local leaders, elders, women, youth and religious figures, ensuring broad representation and inclusivity. They operate at various levels, including village, district, county and national levels, and are often supported by the Government, CSOs, and international partners[36]. Thanks to these committees, initiatives have been launched, which focus on local conflict resolution by empowering women to mediate disputes within their communities. This is the case, for example, of the *Amani Mashinani* ("Peace at the Grassroots") initiative[37]. Committees have also played a particularly important role in resolving local conflicts by issuing peace declarations. In Isiolo, Wajir, Garissa, and Marsabit Counties, for instance, local peace committees successfully established a conflict resolution mechanism rooted in indigenous practices that emphasised holistic and reconciliatory approaches. This included reinforcing traditional rangeland management techniques to mitigate conflicts during droughts and periods of limited grazing resources[38].

In Kenya, the Constitution also allows for the use of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR), including traditional mechanisms[39]. Women make up the largest group of individuals relying on these systems. They turn to them to resolve issues related to family disputes, civil matters, access to land and natural resources, housing, debts, and more[40]. Women are not only beneficiaries of these systems, however; they also play key roles as justice providers within them. This said, their contributions and roles often go underappreciated and unnoticed[41].

Finally, there is a strong role played by both international organisations, like UN Women, and CSOs, and such organisations have been instrumental in promoting women's participation in peacebuilding and mediation across Kenya[42]. In particular, this has happened through advocacy and awareness-raising efforts, and through the provision of capacity-building opportunities.

Women-led organisations play a pivotal role in empowering women mediators by regularly offering training opportunities that focus on negotiation, leadership and conflict resolution skills. These initiatives are usually designed to build the capacity of women to actively participate in peacebuilding processes and assume leadership roles in mediation efforts. For instance, organisations like FIDA Kenya[43] and Rural Women Peace Link[44] have been training women mediators to address conflicts arising from inter-ethnic violence, resource disputes and electoral tensions. These programmes often emphasise the use of both traditional and modern mediation techniques, enabling women to navigate diverse conflict scenarios effectively. Another notable example is the Uwiano Platform for Peace[45], which has trained women mediators in regions prone to political and resource-based conflicts. Similarly, the Women's Mediation Network[46] has provided mentorship and training to women mediators, enabling them to address conflicts in marginalised areas of the country. Overall, these efforts, and many more that have been implemented over the last twenty years, have resulted in increased representation of women in peace processes, fostering more inclusive and holistic approaches to conflict resolution.

[33] "Annual Report 2019/2020: Promoting Equality and Inclusion", National Gender and Equality Commission (2020).
[34] "Status of gender desks at police stations in Kenya: A case study of Nairobi province", Institute of Economic Affairs (2009).
[35] "Peace Committees in Kenya: Building Local Capacities for Sustainable Peace", National Steering Committee on Peacebuilding and Conflict Management (2014).
[36] "An Architecture For Building Peace At The Local Level: A Comparative Study of Local Peace Committees", UNDP (2011).
[37] "Local Dispute Resolution In Kenya: A Case Study From Isiolo County", Samantha Gamez And Luqman Ahmed (2022).
[38] Ibid.
[39] "Traditional dispute resolution mechanisms under article 159 of the Constitution of Kenya 2010", Kariuki Muigua (2018).
[40] "Customary Law and Women's Rights in Kenya", Winifred Kamau (2011).

[41] "Navigating complex pathways to justice: Women's participation and leadership in customary and informal justice systems", IDLO (2023).
[42] " Putting Women and Youth at the Centre of Regional Peacebuilding", Office Of the UN Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region of Africa (2023).
[43] "Empowering Women Mediators: Training and Advocacy Programmes", FIDA Kenya (2019).
[44] "Building Capacity for Women in Peacebuilding", Rural Women Peace Link (2018).
[45] "Women in Mediation: A Collaborative Approach to Peacebuilding. Nairobi: National Steering Committee on Peacebuilding", Uwiano Platform for Peace (2021).
[46] "*Women's Mediation Network: Advancing Women's Role in Peace Processes*", UN Women (2020).

Women's experiences in peacebuilding and mediation

A great deal of energy and time is invested by women to take part in local-level peacebuilding and mediation efforts. Indeed, at this level Kenyan women have been instrumental in fostering dialogue and reconciliation within communities, particularly during and after periods of conflict.

A notable example is the response to the violence that erupted following the 2007 national elections. During this time, women's groups were at the forefront of resolving conflicts and rebuilding trust in those communities that had been most affected by violent clashes. Grassroots organisations, such as village women's networks, initiated peace dialogues, supported survivors of violence, and promoted reconciliation among warring communities[47]. During this period, women's groups, such as Rural Women Peace Link and Amani Mashinani, worked to rebuild trust and facilitate dialogue between violence-affected communities. Uasin Gishu County was one of the hardest-hit regions during the post-electoral violence, with widespread displacement and ethnic tensions over land ownership. There, women mediators from the Rural Women Peace Link played a crucial role in reconciling warring communities by facilitating dialogue (women organised community forums where members of conflicting ethnic groups could openly discuss grievances and fear), by reintegrating displaced people (women mediated land disputes and ensured fair resource-sharing agreements between displaced families and host communities), and by empowering other women to mediate (they trained local women to act as mediators in smaller, localised conflicts, ensuring that disputes were resolved before escalating into larger violence)[48]. Other women's groups also provided psycho-social support to survivors and worked to reintegrate displaced people into society[49].

In general, women have increasingly taken on roles as mediators in local conflicts, such as disputes over land and resources[50]. Their ability to navigate cultural sensitivities and build trust within communities has made them effective mediators in many rural and urban settings.

Specific groups of women have also risen to prominence. This is case of faith-based women mediators and leaders, who have played a pivotal role in promoting peace through religious platforms, particularly in areas affected by ethnic and political violence. In Mandera County, for example, women faith leaders from the Supreme Council of Kenyan Muslims and local mosques have launched important efforts to foster peace and reconciliation, especially during clan-based conflicts often fuelled by competition over resources such as water and grazing land. Women faith leaders are more and more being credited not just for mediation efforts, but also for supporting peacebuilding more generally. For instance, Muslim women faith leaders organised and participated in mediation efforts between the Garre and Murule clans in North-East Kenya, which were in conflict over grazing land[51].

At the national level, Kenyan women have contributed to peacebuilding through participation in formal peace processes and through advocacy. Women were involved in the mediation process following the 2007 post-election violence, and this experienced allowed them to also become engaged in the formulation of the Constitution, in 2010, a process that they significantly influenced. Women's engagement at this level was also facilitated by the Kenya Women's Consultative Group, which ensured that gender perspectives were included in the peace agreements and post-conflict reconstruction plans adopted following the 2007 elections[52].

Lastly, Kenyan women have played pivotal roles in peacebuilding efforts across the Horn of Africa, and also the Great Lakes Region[53], addressing conflicts and promoting stability through various mechanisms, organisations, and initiatives. To begin with, Kenyan women have been actively involved in mediation efforts under the auspices of both the AU and

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[47] "Participation of Women in Peace Building and Reconciliation After the 2007-2008 Post-Election Violence in Rift Valley, Kenya", Daniel Mbakaya (unspecified date).

[48] "The Role of Women in Peacebuilding: Lessons from the Wajir Peace Process", UNDP Kenya (2010).

[49] *"Grassroots Women's Role in Peacebuilding in Kenya: The Case of Rural Women Peace Link", R,* Ochieng (2015).

[50] "Mainstreaming the Role of Women in Peace-making and Environmental Management in Kenya", Kariuki Muigua (2020).

[51] "Inter-clan Conflict in Mandera District a Case of the Garre and Murulle", Hussein Mohamed Alio (2012).

[52] "Women in Peace and Transition Processes: Kenya (2008-2013)", Inclusive Peace and Transition Initiative (2016).

[53] Efforts by Kenyan women in the Great Lakes are not covered under this research. They nevertheless show the extent of women's participation in regional efforts. Kenyan women have, in fact, contributed to the peace processes in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Burundi. Through organizations like the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) and the Kenya Female Advisory Organization (KEFEADO), Kenyan women have advocated for gender-responsive approaches to conflict resolution, emphasizing the importance of including women in decision-making roles.

IGAD[54]. For instance, women leaders participated in the South Sudan peace process, advocating for the inclusion of women's voices in the negotiations. Kenyan mediators like Florence Nyambura Mpaayei were also brought into the negotiations to provide expertise in fostering dialogue between conflicting parties[55].

In their attempts to participate to peacebuilding and mediation efforts at the regional level, Kenyan women have effectively utilised international frameworks, such as UNSCR 1325. They have also been active in regional organisations such as the African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET) and the Horn of Africa Women's Network. These platforms have enabled women to share experiences, advocate for peace, and build capacity for conflict resolution.

Women's motivations, effectiveness and challenges

The involvement of women in mediation and peacebuilding is driven by a combination of personal experiences, societal expectations, and a commitment to fostering sustainable peace. However, despite their significant contributions, women mediators continue to face numerous challenges, including cultural barriers, lack of institutional support and security risks. These challenges vary depending on the level— grassroots, regional or national—at which women engage in mediation or peacebuilding efforts.

Women mediators at the grassroots level form the backbone of conflict resolution in Kenyan communities, addressing a wide range of local disputes, including domestic conflicts, land disagreements, and inter-family or inter-clan tensions that could potentially escalate into broader community conflicts. These women are trusted figures within their communities, where they leverage their deep understanding of local dynamics and relationships to mediate effectively. Their work often involves engaging within informal mechanisms, such as community dialogues and traditional councils, where they provide unique perspectives on conflict resolution. Operating within established traditional structures, they can introduce progressive elements that promote gender equality and women's rights, demonstrating remarkable ability to navigate complex family and community relationships. In

many cases, these women act as the first point of contact for dispute resolution, intervening before conflicts reach formal judicial systems.

While grassroots mediation is impactful, the challenges are manifold. Women often lack formal recognition, and face resistance from traditional leaders who view their involvement as a challenge to cultural norms. This leaves women mediators without access to resources or institutional support. Additionally, their reliance on traditional mechanisms can sometimes perpetuate patriarchal norms that limit women's broader participation in decision-making processes.

At the regional level, women mediators have emerged as crucial actors in addressing cross-border conflicts, particularly in pastoral communities in regions like the North Rift. Their work extends beyond national boundaries, focusing on resource-based conflicts such as disputes over water points and grazing lands. These mediators have developed extensive networks across borders, enabling them to facilitate dialogue between communities that have historically been in conflict. However, regional mediation efforts are often hindered by logistical challenges, such as poor infrastructure and limited funding. Additionally, the lack of formal frameworks for cross-border mediation can undermine the sustainability of peace agreements.

Women's engagement in national-level peace processes have included participation in formal peace processes, political dialogues, and institutional conflict resolution mechanisms. Women mediators often serve on national peace committees, contribute to policy formulation, and participate in high-level negotiations. Their work at this level has been crucial in ensuring that peace agreements and national policies reflect the needs and concerns of communities, particularly women and marginalized groups.

Despite their contributions, however, women at this level are often underrepresented. Structural barriers, such as political exclusion and gender bias, limit their participation and influence in shaping national peacebuilding agendas. And when they have roles, these can be seemingly given to comply with national laws and international instruments. Consequently, Kenyan women are often required to prove their worth in these positions, a standard that is not equally applied to their male counterparts.

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[54] "Report on Women's Participation in the South Sudan Peace Process", IGAD (2018).

[55] "Role of Women in Post Conflict Societies: Comparative Analysis of Kenya and Uganda", Jackline Moraa Oeri (2014).

The motivations driving Kenyan women to engage in mediation are deeply personal and often rooted in their own experiences with conflict. Many women mediators have personally witnessed the devastating effects of conflict on their families and communities, compelling them to take active roles in peace-building. Their commitment is often strengthened by religious beliefs, moral convictions and a deep sense of responsibility to protect and preserve their communities. Personal experiences of loss, displacement, or violence have transformed many women into passionate advocates for peace, using their experiences to inform their mediation approaches and build empathy with conflicting parties.

Overall, women have been able to become engaged in peacebuilding and mediation over the years. And communities have come to value women's unique contributions to peacebuilding, acknowledging their ability to bring different perspectives to conflict resolution. This recognition is often based on women's demonstrated capacity to make significant and meaningful contributions, at all levels. This, in turn, has created trust for women mediators both among communities and within institutions. It is a positive evolution that has been made possible by the policy and legal framework in the country. The role of the Constitution is particularly important in this regard: as the supreme law of the land, it provides the foundation for affirmative action and gender inclusivity. And it has been the starting point for the adoption of additional policies (including Kenya's Vision 2030 and the KNAPs) integral to improve women's participation on peace and security.

The country's existing frameworks, coupled with an enabling civic space, have created opportunities for women to come together into movements and other forms of collective action. Local, regional and national networks of women mediators have been established over the years—such as the Women's Mediation Network[56], the Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA Kenya)[57] and the North Rift Women's Peace Network.

These initiatives have been a significant motivator for women's participation in peacebuilding and mediation, as they provide platforms for collaboration, capacity-building[58], advocacy and empowerment. And with national platforms, women mediators from Kenya are able to tap in and benefit from Africa-wide and international efforts. Kenyan women mediators have, for example, regularly collaborated with international organisations like UN Women and the AU, gaining access to resources and platforms that enhance their mediation efforts[59]. They also have access to FemWise-Africa and the Women Mediators across the Commonwealth Network—two of the more established regional networks in Africa.

Clearly, participation in women networks enhances the recognition and legitimacy of women mediators. This recognition motivates women to continue their mediation efforts, as they see their work making a meaningful impact. For example, women mediators in the Uwiano Platform for Peace have gained national recognition for their role in preventing electoral violence, motivating others to join similar initiatives.[60] These networks create an environment where women feel valued and capable of making a difference. However, networking efforts are also hindered by the challenges mentioned before, such as limited funding and cultural resistance.

EXPERIENCES FROM SOMALIA AND SOMALILAND

Policy frameworks and mechanisms for women's participation

Across Somalia and Somaliland[61], the legal and policy frameworks for women's participation, where they exist, are generally weak. Women enjoyed equal rights under the regime of long-term dictator Siad Barre, including equal claims to property and

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[56] "Women Mediation Networks: A mechanism for localisation and inclusion", ACCORD (2021)

[57] "Empowering Women Mediators in Kenya, FIDA Kenya (2019).

[58] Non-governmental organizations like PeaceNet Kenya and Saferworld offer training sessions specifically tailored for women mediators, enhancing their ability to navigate both traditional and modern conflict resolution mechanisms.

[59] "Women in Peacebuilding: Partnerships for Progress in Kenya", UN Women (2020).

[60] "Preventing Electoral Violence Through Women's Mediation", Uwiano Platform for Peace (2021).

[61] Somaliland declared its independence from Somalia in 1991 and has been an autonomous region ever since, albeit not recognised internationally. This said, Somalia and Somaliland have a common history, and their society continue to share important traits. For this reason, research findings related to Somalia and Somaliland are discussed together.

the right to organise around social and political issues (albeit usually in the interests of the regime), but those ceased with the fall of the regime and Somalia's descent into civil war, in 1991. And while women have been actively engaged in peace and reconciliation efforts over the last three decades, the gendered nature of clan-based politics in both Somalia and in Somaliland means that women have remained excluded from fully participating in decision-making processes, including on peace and security.

In Somalia, the overarching document framing the protection of women's right and their participation is the Provisional Constitution, which was adopted by the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) in 2012. This document commits the Somali state to full gender equality and protects many women's rights—albeit not all of them. Women's participation has been mainly ensured through the creation of a 30% quota for women representatives in the federal parliament. Yet, while the success of the FGS in this respect might be laudable, the quota remains largely unfulfilled: presently, in fact, women occupy 19% of the lower house's 275 seats, and 26% of the 54 seats in the upper house.

Somalia has also adopted several mechanisms to ensure and promote women's participation on peace and security specifically, but these are incomplete, weak or not implemented effectively. In part, this is due to the fact that the country's transition towards a federal system is very much ongoing. Federal ministries and agencies are not yet present in all of the country's recognised states, The states themselves vary significantly in terms of their capacity. For instance, the main body responsible for promoting women's rights within the FGS is the Ministry of Women and Human Rights Development (MWHRD), which is present in the capital, Mogadishu. In Puntland State, however, issues pertaining to women's participation fall under the purview of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA). The two bodies are not yet integrated, and these divisions—between federal and state institutions— make the implementation of the policies that do exist difficult.

One notable policy that was recently adopted by the FGS was Somalia's first NAP on UNSCR 1325[62]. The Plan, adopted in 2022, was developed by MWHRD through a process that saw the participation of other federal ministries, CSOs and international organisations. It has the goal of ensuring the inclusion and participation of Somali women in peacebuilding and decision-making at all levels. Importantly, the NAP occurred in parallel with efforts to also adopt local action plans in five federal states. The integration of these two processes clearly sought to address the gap in implementation between the federal government and federal states, by including the national and local plans into a single policy package. The NAP also established a National Steering Committee composed of both ministries and CSOs.

Somalia's NAP is unique in that it is not only aimed at promoting the implementation of UNSCR 1325, but also of the Somali Women's Charter. This is a transformative document, developed by the MWHRD through broad consultations with Somali women across all of federal Somalia.

To develop the Charter, the Ministry brought together hundreds of women activists, leaders and CSO representatives at the Somali Women's Convention, in 2019, in a process that was clearly galvanising and inspirational. While the Charter only provides indications for how women rights and participation should be organised in the future, its recommendations are, in fact, very ambitious. For instance, the Charter calls for a 50% quota for women's participation in all political and peacebuilding processes, zero tolerance for GBV, and laws that secure gender equality and women's rights, and sanction discriminatory acts against women and girls[63].

Somaliland also has a Constitution, adopted in 2001, which guarantees full equality under law for women and men. However, the Constitution is based on Sharia law and therefore offers limited protection for some women's rights, as well as limited guarantees for their participation. Since the country's declaration of independence from Somalia, women in Somaliland have been active in peace processes, yet their success in changing the Constitution's provisions has been limited. For instance, the campaign for a gender quota in Somaliland's parliamentary elections—which started with independence—is still ongoing, and presently there is only one woman in parliament.

In 2013, Somaliland's Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA) adopted a National Gender Action Plan to coordinate and monitor development aid earmarked for women and other vulnerable groups. Authorities also created women's and children's desks at some police stations and two shelters for

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[62] "Somalia launches National Action Plan on UNSCR 13 for women and security", UN Women Africa (2023).

[63] "Somali Women's Charter", Ministry of Women and Human Rights Development, Federal Government of Somalia (2022)

victims. On the whole, information about the practical implementation of these policies and their consequences are very scarce, however.

Across Somalia, a very important role is played by UN agencies—in particular the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and UN Women. It is these organisations that are largely responsible for the implementation of existing policies on gender equality, whereas authorities have generally tended to ignore the issue.

Beyond UN agencies, an important role is played also by community-based organisations, which support women's participation mainly at the local level, but also nationally. In Somaliland, the main such organisation is the Nagaad Network, which represents 46 women and women-led organisations. Nagaad delivers key services for women across the territory, and leads advocacy efforts to ensure women's participation in all decision-making processes, including on peace and security.

In Somalia's different states, CSOs also play an important role. In many locations, the more established organisations are veritable institutions, providing basic services to women in their communities. Overall, civil society represents an institutional force, in which Somali communities place considerable trust.

Women's experiences in peacebuilding and mediation

Women in Somalia and Somaliland have a long history of participating in peace and security. This history is, indeed, as long the country's conflicts, and just as multi-faceted. Somali women have promoted peace, including through mediation, from the grassroots to the national levels. Their efforts have come in the face of huge challenges, yet they managed to produce important changes in the ways that women are allowed to participate in decision-making processes. The prevalence of violence, however, has served to tamper down, and regularly undo, these achievements.

There are many examples of Somali women taking part in peacebuilding and mediation processes in Somalia, from the grassroots to the federal level. These examples are helpful to identify several common features, in relation to how women participate in peacebuilding and mediation, and

also some unique characteristics, which can be traced back to the differences in political contexts. There is, for instance, a considerable difference in the way women have sought to influence peace and security decisions across Somalia compared to Somaliland—differences that are due to how different regions have developed their own governance systems following the end of the Barre regime and the start of the civil war, as will be discussed in greater detail later.

In Somalia and Somaliland, women are highly active in peacebuilding and mediation at the grassroots level. There are plentiful examples of such efforts. In Kismayo, in 2018, the Kismayo Women's Group convened clan elders from two clans fighting over land use rights[64]. In Dhusamareb, the Elman Peace and Human Rights Center and the Dhusamareb Women's Association, two women-led organisations, visited villages outside of the city town to talk with conflicting clans, and then brought together clan elders and government officials to mediate[65].

Examples such as these ones attest to the variety and richness in the roles women play during such processes. Women are most often the ones who tend to the logistical aspects of meetings, cooking food and ensuring hospitality. Yet, women can just as often play important roles behind the formal proceedings, chasing clan leaders and fighters, convincing or at times even forcing them to sit at the negotiation table. And it regularly happens that women also play important roles within formal proceedings, even where their role is heavily curtailed and limited by political forces uninterested in having women participate.

At the national level, the history of Somalia and Somaliland after 1991 is made up of gatherings aimed to bring about peace, and in nearly all of them, the role of women has been significant. In Somalia, the best example of this is the Arta peace conference in 2000.

The Arta conference is often described as one of the most inclusive peace conferences held to find a political solution to Somalia's conflicts. Not only did it feature strong representation by women, but also displayed the full power of women's advocacy efforts. While women were initially given a very limited role in the conference, they were, in fact, able to effectively mobilise and deeply influence the conference's final decisions. Specifically, the women delegates present in Arta were able to close ranks and create a coalition, or a movement, which

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[64] "Mapping report on existing women peacemakers, leaders, networks, and forums in Somalia", UN Women (2023).

[65] Ibid.

become known as the "the sixth clan"[66]— the women clan, which was then able to advocate for its members on par with the clans that formally represented Somalia's communities and traditional power-brokers, and that were represented exclusively by men. By coming together and being in the same place, with direct access to the negotiation table, the women of "the sixth clan" were able to develop and implement complex advocacy strategies, which drew attention to the need to integrate quotas for women in Somalia's new governance systems, and to give priority to specific issues, like GBV.

Following the success in Arta, Somali women were able to participate and build effective coalitions in the context of other national reconciliation events. At the Somalia National Reconciliation Conference, which took place between 2002 and 2004, women delegates were fewer than at Arta, yet they continued to present a unified agenda, as the "sixth clan". During this process, women delegates were also able to coordinate their efforts at the negotiation table with those of activists and movements leading protests launched in Mogadishu and other cities, which also demanded a governance system that protected women's rights and ensured their participation[67].

Interestingly, women in Somaliland have gone through similar experiences. There, women were able to effectively take part in the Borama conference, in 1993, which represented the first of a series of peace conferences that effectively served to stabilise the region and set it on its path towards democratisation[68]. Unlike the Arta and the National Reconciliation conferences, the Borama event was not supported by the international community, and was thus largely set up by Somaliland's clan elders—who were all male. For this reason, participating women had, if anything, even less leverage than that held by those attending the processes in Arta. Yet, 17 women observers were ultimately invited to, and attended, the conference. This was already a very significant achievement and the result of advocacy by Somaliland's women's groups. Once at the conference, the women coordinated with other women-led organisations that had launched protests outside of the conference, thus creating pressure for change.

The results of these efforts have been significant. To begin with, even having women participate at the

highest levels of this negotiations was far from guaranteed, and women's participation was regularly opposed—as it is to this day. Yet, women were able to effectively advocate on their own behalf, to both national and international decision-makers, and they were able to attend the events. Attendance then translated into concrete successes. At Arta, for example, women were able to integrate the idea of a quota for female parliamentarians, which was eventually adopted with the creation of the FGS in 2012. In the case of Somaliland, women were unable to create quotas for political inclusion, yet their participation ensured them a role within the region's governance system, and many have joined the ranks of governmental bodies as elected or appointed officials.

These results have also been difficult to sustain, however, due to the challenges that Somali women faced, and continue to face. Norms are one of these key challenges: Somalia and Somaliland are largely patriarchal and conservative societies, and women are expected to stay at home. This is a common experience for women trying to build peace, witnessed at grassroots, local and national levels. Because of these norms, Somalia's and Somaliland's peace and security infrastructures continue being male-dominated. Official mechanisms are inaccessible because women get much fewer educational and employment opportunities compared to men, and face the threat of GBV almost on a daily basis. All this adds to a lack of capacity among women and, even more, to a lack of confidence in one's own ability to take part in a decision-making process, and possibly influence it.

Women's motivations, effectiveness and challenges

The examples described in the previous section show that Somali women have played a significant and active role on peacebuilding and mediation through the history of both Somalia ad Somaliland. They also show that these efforts have taken place at multiple levels, from household disputes to clan conflicts and to national processes. This is a record that stands in contrast to how women are often portrayed, as mere victims of events. Instead, Somali women have a strong sense of their agency, which they exercise

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[66] "Women in Peace and Transition Processes: Somalia (2000)", Inclusive Peace and Transition Initiative (2018), page 7.
[67] Ibid., page 11.

[68] "Women in Peace and Transition Processes: Somaliland (1993)", Inclusive Peace and Transition Initiative (2017).

regularly and creatively. Yet, the violent conflict undoes many of their achievements.

The main motivation for Somali women's engagement in peacebuilding and mediation is the desire for safety—for themselves, their children and their families. This is a universal aspiration, one which has immediate allure in Somalia in particular, where violent conflict remains pervasive. Because of this, and the limitations women face in how they exercise their desire for agency, their efforts to engage in peacebuilding and mediation often start within the household, with relatives or with other women. Somali women are regularly engaged in resolving disputes at this level, for example on issues such as theft or domestic violence[69]. At this level, women's engagement is widely seen as acceptable. Yet, within the household women can also engage those who are closest to them in order to stave off violence. This is what one report calls "persuasive intervention", whereby "women are clear that when they want an end to conflict, they start by persuading their closest menfolk to disarm", with the rationale that "conflict begins at home" and, if "you solve it [there], you can participate in peacebuilding activities"[70].

Engagement does not stop at the household level, however. Women transcend that level regularly in an attempt to influence the decisions of clans, communities and even Somali institutions and society. Beyond the household is where collective action starts, and this can take several forms. For instance, women are regularly invited into peace negotiations, conferences or meetings, but mainly to assist with the logistical organisation of meetings, and with hospitality tasks. In these cases, women are thus relegated to cooking food, greeting guests and cleaning venues, "ancillary" roles, in the words of one report, in the service of "the attending (often all-male) parties"[71].

While such forms of engagement are common, women's desire for agency regularly brings them to take roles beyond hospitality. Once they are at meetings or conferences, women may feel a stake in the outcome such that they are willing to face the parties to a conflict. Often, representatives from conflicting clans are brought together to find a solution to their conflict, but they fail to find any agreement. There are several examples, from across Somalia and Somaliland, where women in

these situations were able to chase clan representatives and convince them to return to the table, and to final an acceptable solution. Somali women have been launching effective collective actions also at the national level. At the Arta conference, for instance, women were initially denied the chance to join as delegates. In response, several representatives of women-led organisations wrote a letter to the then UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, and to the then President of Djibouti, Ismail Guelleh, and the women's requests were heeded[72].

Creativity is an important feature of how Somali women engage in peacebuilding and mediation. This is well on display in the example just described above, and it is the result of the otherwise limited and difficult conditions they face. Acknowledging that they cannot rely on the same institutions that men can rely on, women regularly resort to creating new structures from zero, or finding novel entry points for their advocacy. The efforts of women are almost always characterised by leadership, sensitivity, endurance, flexibility, and also courage[73]. In finding ways to play roles on peacebuilding and mediation, Somali women can rely on the fact that they are often seen as having multiple clan affiliations: with their father's clan, and also their mother's, husband's, children's and son-in-law's clans. This perception can give women the chance to act as a conduit for dialogue between warring parties and to exert pressure on them to keep talking[74].

In Somalia, however, it is often said that if women can build peace, only men can make it. This saying points to the continued challenges Somali women face in trying to build peace and mediate conflicts. Norms, as already mentioned, make women's participation very difficult. For example, women do not contribute to the *diya* system, which is a clan's ability to pay compensation and to defend itself in the event of attacks, and this is used to justify their exclusion whenever clans come together to try and resolve disputes. Women's multiple clan affiliations are also regularly used against them, as a sign of untrustworthiness, which justifies their exclusion from negotiations and decision-making processes.

Insecurity is the other main challenge affecting women's participation in peacebuilding and mediation. In Somalia in particular, insecurity regularly affects women who want to be active in

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[69] "Mapping report on existing women peacemakers, leaders, networks, and forums in Somalia", UN Women (2023).

[70] "Learning from Kismayo", Life & Peace Institute (2018), page 66.

[71] "Mapping report on existing women peacemakers, leaders, networks, and forums in Somalia", UN Women (2023), page 6.

[72] "Women in Peace and Transition Processes: Somalia (2000)", Inclusive Peace and Transition Initiative (2018), page 6.

[73] "Learning from Kismayo", Life & Peace Institute (2018), page 67.

[74] "Whose peace is it anyway? Connecting Somali and international peacemaking", Accord Series, Conciliation Resources (2010).

peacebuilding, by, for instance, making it unsafe for women to attend meetings during certain times of the day[75]. Violence puts pressure on women to stay at home, or is used to keep them in the home (53% of reported incidents of GBV in Somalia occur in the survivors' residence)[76]. Violence also engenders high levels of anxiety and trauma, conditions that affect women more than all other groups within Somali society. And trauma then creates even more obstacles to women's participation, both in Somalia and in Somaliland.

In the face of these challenges, Women have still found ways to come together. With support from international organisations and NGOs, they have created local and national networks to pool knowledge and foster solidarity. The Berghof Foundation, for example, has been sponsoring an Insider Peacebuilders Network in Somalia's Hirshabelle and Galmudug states since 2017. The network's members are clan elders as well as women activists. The Life & Peace Institute and the Folke Bernadotte Academy have also convened groups of women's peacebuilders and mediators from across Somalia, while the already mentioned Nagaad Network has done the same in Somaliland. Some of these efforts have spilled beyond borders and involved women mediators from neighbouring countries, in particular Kenya[77].

Opportunities to network have been greatly appreciated by Somali women. Yet, Somalia remains somewhat disconnected from regional networking efforts, and Somaliland even more so. The political situation, where relations between countries and territories continue to be tense, can account for this disconnect. It can also be logistically difficult to engage Somali women in relevant events, because of visa requirements, costs, and the insecurity still affecting many areas, in Somalia in particular.

EXPERIENCES FROM SOUTH SUDAN

Policy frameworks and mechanisms for women's participation

Since gaining independence in 2011, South Sudan has adopted several legal frameworks and policies aimed at ensuring women's rights and promoting their participation, including in peacebuilding processes. However, due to the country's post-independence instability, these frameworks and policies have remained either incomplete or unenforced in practice.

This assessment applies to the country's Transitional Constitution, adopted upon independence. The document gives South Sudanese women full equality and dignity under the law, including the right to participate in public life equally with men. It also requires all levels of government to promote women's participation, establishing a 25% quota for women in both the executive and legislative branches. However, if all the right provisions are in the Constitution, their application has lagged far behind, because of the country's instability. For instance, a bill to address GBV by protecting victims and holding perpetrators accountable, proposed in 2020, has yet to be officially adopted by parliament. Similarly, the Government of South Sudan recently ratified the Maputo Protocol, yet the approval process was long-delayed and tortuous[78]. Overall, institutions remain weak, and the political will to prioritise gender equality and women's rights continues to be lacking.

Positively, South Sudan adopted a NAP on UNSCR 1325 already in 2015, for the period 2015-2020. The policy was developed by the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare (MGCSW), and through broad consultations with CSOs, including women-led organisations, as well as international organizations. The NAP had ambitious goals, but also an implementation matrix, to provide concrete guidelines and milestones for how the plan should be operationalised. The NAP also created a National

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[75] "Mapping report on existing women peacemakers, leaders, networks, and forums in Somalia", UN Women (2023), page 31.

[76] UNFPA, 2022.

[77] See section on Kenya for additional information.

[78] "South Sudan Ratifies Crucial African Women's Rights Treaty", Human Rights Watch (2023).

Steering Committee, which includes CSOs as well as relevant national ministries. The Committee is tasked with coordinating and monitoring the implementation of the plan. This was delayed, however, because of the resurgence of conflict the same year the plan was adopted. Momentum was not completed halted, fortunately, and the groups that had activated to advocate for, and eventually work on, the development and adoption of the first plan activated once more to ensure that a follow-up NAP would be developed. This happened in 2023, when the country's second NAP, covering the period 2023-2027, was adopted[79].

Presently, the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), signed in 2018, is the main policy framework under which peace and security decisions are made in South Sudan. In relation to women participation, the agreement mandates a 35% representation of women in all decision-making bodies, including peace processes[80]. The quota is higher than the one included in the Transitional Constitution, which reflects the impact of advocacy efforts led by South Sudanese women, as this will be discussed in more detail below. The quota has effectively led to the inclusion of women in key positions, including in the Transitional Government of National Unity (TGoNU)[81].

Despite this quota, formal mechanisms for women's participation on peace and mediation in South Sudan remain incomplete or weak. Ultimately, the implementation of such mechanisms needs an effective state, but in South Sudan, the state's capacity to operate continuously is hindered by the waves of internal conflict. With the challenges facing the state, leadership on these efforts have been left to CSOs.

There is, indeed, a strong women movement in the country, with many women-led organisations, and several successful attempts at creating networks. One is the South Sudan Women Coalition for Peace (SSWCP), which brings together over 50 women and women-led organisations from South Sudan, Kenya and Uganda. Formed in September 2017, the Coalition's membership is truly inclusive: its members are women irrespective of their political affiliation, religion, socio-economic status, as well as residency (refugees and internally displaced people are all represented in the network). The Coalition's overall objective is to build a strong women's movement in

South Sudan and to promote their effective engagement on matters affecting their lives, including insecurity, underrepresentation in leadership and decision-making structures, national development and peacebuilding [82] . Another example is the Women's Bloc of South Sudan, a CSO that advocates for women's rights and participation in peace negotiations. The bloc was formed in 2015 by women peace activists from different backgrounds, and the organisation was able to secure a seat for one of its representatives in the IGAD-led peace process that resulted in the R-ARCSS.

These national networks, as well as individual organisations that have, over the years, consolidated their roots in communities while also gaining national recognition, are institutions that have contributed steadily to empowering women as peacebuilders and mediators, many even before 2011, all the way back to the efforts that eventually led to the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Accords (CPA) in 2005—the agreements that paved the way to independence. These efforts have been successful on many fronts and on many issues, as will be discussed later. The lack of more consolidated mechanisms remains, however, a key challenge constraining South Sudanese women's role on peacebuilding and mediation.

Women's experiences in peacebuilding and mediation

Women in South Sudan have played a pivotal role in peacebuilding and mediation efforts, contributing significantly to fostering stability and reconciliation in a country plagued by prolonged conflict. This engagement has taken place at both the local and national levels. At the grassroots level, women have provided essential services, established support networks to address the immediate needs of conflict-affected communities, and organized peace committees. Nationally, they have participated in key peace agreements, advocated for gender-responsive policies, and formed coalitions to ensure their voices are included in decision-making processes. South Sudanese women have also extended their influence through cross-border advocacy and mediation, emphasising the importance of inclusive peace efforts.

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[79] "South Sudan Validates Second National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security", UN South Sudan (2023).
[80] Ibid.

[81] Recommendations by Inclusive Security (2016).
[82] See: https://sswcp.org/about.

Despite facing cultural and structural barriers, their resilience and dedication continue to shape the peacebuilding landscape in South Sudan. This starts at the grassroots level, where women have played a pivotal role in peacebuilding efforts, particularly through informal networks and community-based organisations.

Such women-led initiatives focus on addressing the immediate needs of conflict-affected populations while fostering long-term community resilience. There have been cases of women organising food distribution to combat hunger and malnutrition, especially among vulnerable groups such as children and the elderly[83]. Women also establish temporary shelters for displaced families, ensuring safety and stability for those who have lost their homes. In the healthcare sector, women contribute by offering basic medical assistance, organising vaccination drives, and raising awareness about hygiene and disease prevention. Additionally, South Sudanese women promote education by setting up informal schools, advocating for children's right to learn, and empowering young girls to continue their studies despite the challenges of displacement[84].

Beyond meeting these immediate needs, women also facilitate economic empowerment by initiating vocational training programmes and creating opportunities for small-scale businesses. These efforts help families generate income, reduce dependency on aid, and foster self-reliance—all the while empowering women. Through these grassroots activities, in fact, South Sudanese women not only address the urgent requirements of their communities but also lay the foundation for reconciliation and stability in the aftermath of conflict[85].

At the local and grassroots level, South Sudanese women can also form peace committees, or *Monyemiji*, to heal ethnic divides. Through such committees, they collaborate with traditional leaders to mediate conflicts, promote peaceful coexistence, and raise awareness about alternatives to conflict[86]. The creation of peace committees varies significantly from region to region, as do their composition and functioning. For instance, in regional states like Aweil, committees are established at the county level, and may include different groups,

including women and youth, who are then entrusted the role of mediating disputes between communities by upholding standards of compensation and ensuring the obligations of conflicting parties are met[87]. In other states, however, peace committees may not exist in every county or may be entirely absent.

Grassroots efforts are often led by community-based organisations, whose involvement in informal peacebuilding contributes significantly to societal reconstruction. Women play a crucial role in these organisations by providing practical support to rebuild communities and enhance the quality of everyday life. Importantly, given the level of displacement in the country, many of these organisations are established by internally displaced women and serve as platforms for discussions on issues that disproportionately affect them, including insecurity caused by rebel groups, early pregnancies, and income-generating activities.

At the national level, South Sudanese women have also played important roles in peacebuilding and mediation efforts. This has happened through both direct engagement and advocacy. Success, where this arrived, has come mainly thanks to the engagement by CSOs and women's movements, whereas official engagement has been limited.

Women represented only 15% of negotiators during this peace process that led to the signing of the original agreement, ARCSS, which ended the country's civil war in 2015. Notably, while the government's official delegation was made up only of men, three women were part of the opposition's delegation, one of whom had actively participated in the conflict as a frontline fighter[88]. Faced with few official opportunities to reach the negotiation table, women self-organised through CSOs and networks. Thus, representatives from the Women's Bloc of South Sudan were able to play a significant role as formal observers and signatories to the 2015 agreement [89]. The agreement itself expressly prohibited sexual violence in conflict, and the Women's Bloc succeeded in being included in the Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission, which

[83] "South Sudan Country Gender Profile: Resilience Building Through Humanitarian and Development Interventions", ADB (2023

[84] "Education and Female Youth in Displacement in South Sudan and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq", Feinstein International Centre, Tufts University (2022).

[85] "Women's Experiences in the South Sudan Peace Process 2013-2018", Folke Bernadotte Academy (2019).

[86] "A Mapping of Community-based Peacebuilding and Reconciliation Mechanisms in South Sudan", UNDP (2018).

[87] "Sudan-South Sudan pastoralists agree on 'peace committee'", Dabanga (2014).

[88] https://www.cmi.no/publications/6700-womens-informal-peace-efforts

[89] "South Sudan: Gender Analysis Of The Peace Agreement Legal Memorandum", Public International Law & Policy Group January (2016).

was tasked with overseeing the agreement's implementation[90].

When peace negotiations resumed in 2018—in the process that eventually led to the signing of the R-ARCSS—there was, again, very limited women representation. There was only one female mediator officially accredited, and women represented 25% of the official delegates. And again, women self-organised, this time through the South Sudan Women Coalition for Peace, whose members actively participated in the process as official observers and eventually as contributors and signatories to the renewed peace agreement[91].

Women's advocacy has not stopped at the opportunities provided by formal peace processes, however. Since the 2015 agreement, more than 500 women from across South Sudan have collaborated and endorsed a seven-point agenda aimed at ensuring that any future peace agreement is gender-responsive[92]. This initiative started at a National Women's Peace Dialogue, held in 2015, which emphasised the importance of integrating women's perspectives into the peace process. The agenda provided key recommendations for all parties, including a commitment to consult women on security reforms, and the establishment of holistic psycho-social services for survivors of violence[93].

Overall, women's experiences on peacebuilding and mediation in South Sudan revolve around civil society. The role of individual organisations, like Eve Organisation for Women Development or the South Sudan's Women Empowerment Network, has been crucial to ensure that development initiatives benefitted women. The work of individual organisations has then been the driving force behind successful networks, like the South Sudan Women's Coalition for Peace. A key characteristic of these organisations is how they have been able to bridge the gap between local and national efforts, addressing localised conflicts on issues like cattle raiding and inter-ethnic violence, and contributing to informal peace processes.

South Sudanese women's organisations have also expanded their peacebuilding efforts beyond national borders, reaching refugee camps in neighbouring countries such as Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia. Organisations engage with displaced populations to advocate for peace and stability, fostering a sense of hope and unity among displaced communities. They also collaborate with international agencies, regional bodies, and host governments to amplify their calls for peace and to ensure that the needs of refugees are addressed, including access to education, healthcare, and livelihood opportunities[94].

Women's motivations, effectiveness and challenges

South Sudanese women mediate at various levels, from grassroots community disputes to national and regional peace processes. Their efforts are deeply rooted in personal experiences, cultural expectations, and a strong commitment to fostering peace and stability, which is all the stronger given the struggle faced by the country from even before its recent independence. There is, indeed, a strong connection between the efforts of women, and women's movements, when the country was still part of Sudan, and present-day efforts. And while the political situation has changed significantly between 2005 and today, the challenges remain largely the same.

At the grassroots level, women often mediate disputes within their local communities, addressing issues such as land conflicts, cattle raids, and inter-family disputes. Their cultural standing as nurturers and peacemakers enables them to be seen as reliable mediators, who can approach conflicts with empathy and fairness. For instance, women in rural areas frequently organise dialogues, reconciliation ceremonies, and peace committees, leveraging their trust and relationships within the community to bring warring parties to the negotiation table.

Efforts to organise collectively, at local and national levels, are borne out of the great toll that decades of violent conflict have exacted from South Sudanese women—within and outside of the country. Many women have firsthand experience of the devastating impacts of conflict, including displacement, loss of loved ones, and exposure to violence. These experiences motivate them to work toward preventing further suffering in their communities[95]. This is an element common among all women, regardless of their political affiliation. There

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[90] Ibid.

[91] "Women's informal peace efforts: Grassroots activism in South Sudan", Helen Kezie-Nwoha and Juliet Were (2018).

[92] "South Sudan: Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Strategy 2016 – 2017", UNDP (2016).

[93] Ibid.

[94] "Inclusion and peace among refugees and host communities", Global Compact on Refugees (2024).

[95] "Report on Women's Participation in South Sudan Peace Talks", African Union (2018).

are many cases, for instance, of women coming together simply to express solidarity in the face of their husbands or sons' involvement in the wars. Once together, collective action has regularly emerged, leading to the formation of CSOs and networks, or the launch of protests against the war and for a peaceful solution.

Faith also plays a significant role in motivating South Sudanese women to mediate. Many see their efforts as a moral responsibility, inspired by religious teachings that emphasise forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace[96]. The common experiences of loss and religion are likely some of the reasons why women-led initiatives are likely to be able to engage women regardless of their political affiliation—as, for example, with the SSCWP.

Self-organisation and movement-building have then allowed women to play roles at the national level, where they have participated in formal peace processes, as already discussed. At this level, women have advocated for the inclusion of gender-specific issues in peace agreements, including fighting GBV and ensuring women's participation in governance. There is a high degree of collaboration among women leaders and activists, and among CSOs. This collaboration can also extend to government bodies, like the MGCSW, and to international mediators, chiefly IGAD, to ensure that their voices are represented in decision-making processes.

Social expectations can both promote and hinder women's participation on peace and security. In South Sudanese culture, women are often regarded as custodians of peace and harmony, which encourages their involvement in mediating family and community disputes[97].

Traditional norms, particularly in rural areas, can, however, create important barriers. Polygamy and underage marriage are still very common phenomena across the country, while women's rights to property and economic livelihoods are far from respected. During the country's waves of conflict, women have also been explicitly targeted by armed forces, and GBV levels remain high everywhere. Women face risks in their everyday lives, and even more whenever they attempt to engage in peacebuilding or mediation.

In the face of this, South Sudanese women have found sources of empowerment and support from CSOs, NGOs, and international organisations. Training opportunities, funding, and advocacy campaign—many of which have been sponsored under the WPS Agenda—have equipped them with the skills and resources needed to engage effectively in peacebuilding and mediation[98]. Through this assistance and on their own, women have been able to extend their mediation efforts across borders, particularly in refugee camps in neighbouring countries. This cross-border advocacy emphasises the importance of maintaining connections between displaced populations and their home country[99].

The success of South Sudanese women in pursuing peacebuilding and mediation in the efface of successive waves of violent conflict is also due to the support provided by regional and international organisations. IGAD, the AU and the UN have supported these efforts by advocating for the inclusion of women in formal mediation processes. The support has been motivated by the belief that the presence of women in such high-stakes negotiations not only enhances the credibility and inclusiveness of peace agreements, but also ensures that the solutions proposed are more comprehensive and reflective of the needs of all members of society[100]. The support has translated in training opportunities, including through FemWise-Africa, which in 2022 established a chapter in the country[101], and in the launch of several initiatives, all of which are contributing to a growing trend in South Sudan and across the region, where women are increasingly stepping into leadership roles in peacebuilding.

[96] "Faith-Based Peacebuilding in South Sudan", World Council of Churches (2020).
[97] "Gender and Peacebuilding in South Sudan", International Crisis Group (2019).
[98] "Empowering Women Mediators in South Sudan", Oxfam (2019).
[99] "Women in Peace Processes: South Sudan Case Study", UN Women (2018).
[100] "Sudan Women's Peace Dialogue Concludes with a Powerful Call for Inclusive Peace and Security in Sudan", African Union (2024).
[101] "Putting Women at the Centre of South Sudan's Peace and Security Agenda", Women's International Peace Centre (2023), page 6.

EXPERIENCES FROM SUDAN

Policy frameworks and mechanisms for women's participation

The ongoing conflict in Sudan makes it difficult to properly assess the policy frameworks and mechanisms that have been adopted, in the country, to promote women's participation on peace and security. On the one hand, some progress has been made in the aftermath of the revolution that brought an end to the regime of long-time dictator Omar al-Bashir in 2019, but the failure of the transition and the start of the civil war in 2023 have seriously undermined those results. Ultimately, women's participation was low before the revolution, and it continues to be low now.

Before the revolution, Sudan had some legal frameworks, but these were not implemented effectively. The country adopted an interim Constitution in 2005, and this included important provisions to ensure gender equality. For instance, the Constitution stated that all persons were equal before the law and entitled to equal protection of law without discrimination as to sex. The country's new electoral law, adopted in 2008, introduced a 25% quota for women's participation[102]. Important decisions came also from the country's Supreme Court, which declared, for example, that women could not be discriminated against by political parties. The legal changes that occurred in 2004 and 2005 also pushed several of the country's states to pass gender-sensitive laws, which created a stronger protection system and new opportunities for women to take on roles within the government.

In the end, these new legal frameworks produced positive results. For instance, following the elections of 2015, women represented around 30% of all National Assembly members. In practice, however, these frameworks had limited effects, mostly on account of weak implementation. Norms in the country are such that women's participation remains firmly opposed, socially and politically. More generally, Sudan is not a party to the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and has failed to ratify the Maputo Protocol.

With the success of the revolution and the launch of the transition period, in 2019, new frameworks and mechanisms were swiftly created. They represented, on the whole, a setback for women's participation.

Following the fall of al-Bashir's regime, the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), the coalition representing the revolution, adopted the Constitutional Charter for the Transitional Period of 2019, which replaced the 2005 interim Constitution until a new, permanent constitution could be drafted and a new, civilian government elected. The Charter established three transition bodies: the Sovereignty Council, the Transitional Cabinet, and the Transitional Legislative Council (TLC). It included a gender quota, which, positively was set high—at 40%—but only for the TLC[103].

The quota was also lower than what had been demanded by women's groups, which had played a fundamental role in the revolution. The contributions of Sudanese women to the revolution were, indeed, massive. Women were present in large numbers in the streets. They led the protests and took care of logistics, including food distribution. They took strategic and tactical decisions, contributing to drafting the revolutionary movement's manifesto and picking locations for the sit-ins against al-Bashir's government[104]. Women often suffered more than men, and thus demanded a role that was equal to that of men. The post-revolutionary architecture did not satisfy their request.

Only two out of the 11 members of Sovereignty Council are women (18%), as are only four of the 21 members of Transitional Cabinet (19%) [105]. Notably, women are underrepresented also within the FFC. The coalition has a Central Council, which is responsible for discussing and taking political decisions, such as nominating people to key posts within the transitional bodies and federal state administrations. Only three of this council's 23 members are women (12%) [106]. This underrepresentation has contributed to keeping

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[102] "Sudan: General elections 2015", Make Every Women Count (2016).
[103] "Sudan's constitutional process: A gender inclusive approach", Terry Hoverted, Chr. Michelsen Institute (2021).
[104] "The long journey of Sudanese women", CMI (2023).

[105] "Sudan's constitutional process: A gender inclusive approach", Terry Hoverted, Chr. Michelsen Institute (2021).
[106] Reem Abbas and Liv Tønnessen, "Tokens of Peace? Women's Representation in the Juba Peace Process", African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review, vol. 12 no. 2 (2022).

women marginalised and excluded in decision-making processes, including on peace and security.

A notable achievement of the post-revolutionary period was the development of Sudan's first NAP on UNSCR 1325. This was adopted in March 2020 for the period 2020-2022, and it reflected the strong desire of Sudanese women to have a bigger role in peacebuilding and mediation. The Plan was developed by the Ministry of Labor and Social Development, which worked together with the NGO Geneva Institute for Human Rights. The plan's development process was inclusive. Relevant government ministries and stakeholders were involved, and also members of CSOs and women-led organisations—and not just from the capital Khartoum, but also from all of the country's federal states[107]. The Plan also established a working group to monitor its implementation, which included the Ministry of Labour and Social Development, university professors, a representative of the Women and Gender Equity Commission, state ministries, representative of the National Human Rights Commission, a representative of the Peace and Transitional Justice Commission and relevant CSOs. The working group was meant to convene every three months.

The adoption of the NAP would have represented a step in the direction of greater women engagement. Even women's inclusion in the transition's main bodies, while below expectations, could have been interpreted as a step into this same direction. And as long as the transition was ongoing, the expectations were that structural weaknesses could have been addressed. For instance, the NAP had been developed mostly with the contributions and participation of more experienced women activists and peacebuilders, whereas the participation of young women was deemed by some to be weak[108]. This could have been corrected, was it not for the civil war.

The civil war, started in 2023, threw into disarray the whole post-revolution architecture, and it effectively halted the implementation of existing frameworks and mechanisms relating to women's participation. It not only undermined the results obtained by women until that point, but also forced on them a new cycle of violence and insecurity. In this context, civil society became again the last and main safe space for engagement. If Sudanese women

have been active across political parties and locally, through neighbouring committees, for instance, civil society has been the main arena for mobilisation. CSOs have been vehicles for participation in the capital, where universities also played an important role, and also in various federal states[109].

Women's experiences in peacebuilding and mediation

In spite of the restrictions imposed by Sudan's autocratic regimes and the insecurity from the country's many violent conflicts—including the most recent civil war—Sudanese women have always found a way to make their voices heard and take part in peacebuilding and mediation efforts, even if and when their participation has been actively resisted.

It is difficult to untangle Sudanese women's activism at grassroots level and their protagonism at national level. In the context of the revolution, one is thought to have led to another, in a way that is often analysed as a single phenomenon.

Yet, the two are different. Historically and today, Sudanese women have regularly mobilised to support peacebuilding and mediation at the local level, in their neighbourhoods or in their communities. They have also regularly mobilised to support protests against the Sudanese government. Because of the specific challenges faced by women, these experiences have mainly centred on the delivery of aid, or the provision of specific basic services, or simply on the idea of fostering solidarity. Sudan has witnessed various iterations of regionally based conflicts, and women have suffered greatly as a result: their actions aimed thus to address the direct consequences of the violence, in ways that reflected the local nature of conflict dynamics[110].

While the extent of women's participation at grassroots level is generally acknowledged, details are often missing. Instead, available analysis tends to focus on the results of these efforts as these are seen, or not, at a higher level. For instance, reports on the role of women during and after the revolution describe innumerable cases of women taking leadership roles in organising sit-ins or protests in their own neighbourhoods, communities or cities.

[107] "National Action Plan for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Securoty 2020-2022", Ministry of Labor and Social Development, Republic of Sudan (2020).

[108] "Young Women's Perspectives on the Peace Negotiations and Peace Agreements", Ilaf Nasreldin and Samar Abushama.

[109] "A regional insight into Sudanese women's participation in the December Revolution", Yusra Elmobashir Abdalla et al., Sudan Norway Academic Collaboration (2023).

[110] "Feminist Initiatives in Sudan – A story of resilience, resistance, and solidarity", SIHA (2024), page 21.

Their experiences, however, are analysed in relation to how women's ability to influence national peacebuilding and mediation processes. The result is that information on how women engage in such activities at the grassroots level in Sudan is less than what it is for other countries.

Needless to say, the revolution was an extremely significant experience for the women who took part in the protests. As already described, women played a central role during the events that led to the fall of the regime of al-Bashir. In the transition period, Sudanese women continued to engage in the process as this became formalised. To their credit, they were able to be included in the negotiation team of the FFC. Outside of the formal negotiations, women-led groups continued to hold protests and calls for greater inclusion. In practice, these efforts likely contributed to the transitional constitutional Charter, which ensured the protection of women's rights in line with, and even beyond, what had been included in the 2005 constitution. They also contributed to the adoption of the 40% quota for women in the TLC. Despite their visible role and their engagement and contributions to the revolution, however, Sudanese women were largely side-lined during the post-revolutionary transition, nationally and also regionally[111].

This experience mirrors past ones. Before the 2019 revolution, Sudanese women had also tried to take part in the negotiations that took place in the early to mid-2000s, within the process that eventually led to the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005. This was not a successful experience, as women were largely excluded from the formal peace process. Still, recognising the importance of the occasion, women self-organised and advocated to have access the tables where decisions were being made. In the end, they did not gain the seat they coveted, but they were able to leverage enough pressure to ensure that the final agreement, which had not initially included any gender-related priorities or target, integrated some references to women, such as the recognition of GBV and the recommendation to involve women in legislative processes[112].

Since the start of the civil war, women-led peacebuilding efforts have once again concentrated at the grassroots level. These includes initiatives such

as Peace for Sudan Platform, Women Against War, Mothers of Sudan, the Red Sea Organisations' Initiative and Women's Situation Rooms. The approach behind these efforts is centred on responding to people's immediate needs in the face of violence. At the same time, the women, organisations and groups behind these initiatives do not shy away from launching advocacy efforts, aimed at bringing attention to people's—and women's—suffering. Such efforts are complicated by, and often made impossible, by the conflict's violence[113].

Beyond the grassroots, women have continued to engage within larger coalitions. This is, for instance, the case of *Taqaddum*, Sudan's largest antiwar coalition, which includes the groups that are part of the FFC. The coalition has committed to the inclusion of women, with female representation within its ranks at 30%. For many, however, this is a significant step backwards compared to the gains that had been made right after the revolution[114].

Another national initiative is the Sudan Women's Peace Dialogue, which has been convened by the AU. Involving more than 60 Sudanese women activists and peacebuilders, the Dialogue is promoting the building of a shared vision for a peaceful and stable Sudan[115]. So far, however, the initiative appears to be separate from official mediation processes.

Ultimately, the experience of Sudanese women peacebuilders and mediators is concentrated within CSOs. Working within civil society, their efforts focus on broader assistance, as already discussed. In the current war as in past ones, women and women-led organisations are often on the frontlines of the conflict, providing services that are needed to support women and girls in meeting basic needs, whether these revolve around protection, food or shelter[116].

While these activities are not always directly related to efforts advocating for peace, for women engaged in CSOs, they are all one and the same. CSOs clearly represent, for Sudanese women, spaces free of the restrictions they otherwise face when they engage through political parties, unions or even neighbourhood committees. This may explain why so many organisations—such as the

[111] "Patriarchy, Politics and Women's Activism in Post-Revolution Sudan", Liv Tønnessen, Samia al-Nagar, Chr. Michelsen Institute (2020).
[112] "Guests at the table? The role of women in peace processes", Anne Itto (2006).
[113] "Sudanese women's participation in ongoing peace processes", International IDEA (2024), page 11.

[114] Ibid., page 21.
[115] "Sudan Women's Peace Dialogue Concludes with a Powerful Call for Inclusive Peace and Security in Sudan", AU (2024).
[116] "Women and girls of Sudan: Fortitude amid the flame of war", UN Women (2014).

Association of Beja Women, the Surkanat Feminist Organization, Women's Forum, '8 March group', Elbanfsage Initiative and 'Decembriat', just to cite a few [117]—were set up after the revolution, when restrictions on civil society were finally lifted. Interestingly, universities had a similar role as CSOs in Sudan, allowing women to find a safe space for collective organisation[118].

Women's motivations, effectiveness and challenges

Sudanese women have taken an active interest in peacebuilding and mediation, generally motivated by experiences of struggle (personal, communal and social) and by a desire for change. This desire motivates engagement that, at the most immediate level, is expressed through grassroots engagement. The record of Sudanese women launching or joining protest movements is long and predates the 2019 revolution. Yet, if they have taken part in all of the country's major events, related to peace and security, they have always also met resistance, and their achievements have regularly been undone.

The analysis of women's motivations must start with the revolution. This is because of the importance of this event for the social and political history of Sudan, and also because of how it represented a sea change for women's participation. According to some reports, women composed nearly 70% of the protesters[119], a level of participation much higher than that recorded in any of the country's previous popular uprisings. Women took to the streets and, as already mentioned, played important roles in supporting and leading the protests. In doing so, they were clearly motivated by a desire for social change—a desire that was articulated in the revolution's slogan of "freedom, peace and justice". Motivations were, however, much more holistic and complex than these three words.

At the broadest level, women participated to end a system that had provided few opportunities for them. Al-Bashir's militarised regime offered limited, if any,

spaces for women to freely exercise their agency. Not only did women not enjoy freedom politically, but their opportunities were heavily curtailed also in the social and economic spheres. And where women in other countries could find meaningful ways to engage on peace and security through CSOs, in Al-Bashir's Sudan even the civil society space was heavily restricted.

Women took to the streets also to improve their economic well-being. Especially among women protesters and activists outside of the capital Khartoum, the economic motives behind collective actions have been very strong[120]. At the same time, it would be a mistake to say that women protested only for these reasons. Instead, the language they used, even when highlighting the importance of economic motivations, always emphasised a desire for dignity [121]. Dignity, as a way to frame participation in the protests, effectively cut across regions and backgrounds, becoming a way for women to express their motivations for a better life—a life without restrictions[122]. Related to this, women's motivations have always been linked to objectives of care and solidarity[123].

The massive participation and the key contributions by women have not been enough, however. In the passage from informal protesting to formal organising, the participation of women has met fierce resistance. In the post-revolutionary period, women have been effectively excluded from the power-sharing mechanisms. This has been blamed on Sudan's deeply patriarchal and highly hierarchical society, which was evident even in the FFC itself—the body that was meant to reflect the revolutionary movement of the civilian coalition. In its composition, the FFC should have reflected the very important role that women had in the revolution, and women groups did indeed advocate for a high level of representation. In spite of this, women represented only 12% of the FFC's central council members[124].

Because of society's patriarchal mentality, Sudanese women have much fewer opportunities than men. In Sudan more than in other countries, there is also what some have defined as a veritable narrative against

[117] "Patriarchy, Politics and Women's Activism in Post-Revolution Sudan", Liv Tønnessen and Samia al-Nagar, Chr. Michelsen Institute (2020).

[118] See, for example: "Scared, but still trying: stories of women activists working for peace in conflict areas in Sudan", Reem Abbas, Chr. Michelsen Institute (2024).

[119] "Sudan's constitutional process: A gender inclusive approach", Terry Hoverted, Chr. Michelsen Institute (2021).

[119] "The long journey of Sudanese women", CMI (2023).

[120] A regional insight into Sudanese women's participation in the December Revolution", Yusra Elmobashir Abdalla et al., Sudan Norway Academic Collaboration (2023), page 10.

[121] See, for example: "Sudanese women on the front lines of the resistance", Hala al-Karib, SIHA (2021).

[122] A regional insight into Sudanese women's participation in the December Revolution", Yusra Elmobashir Abdalla et al., Sudan Norway Academic Collaboration (2023), page 4.

[123] "Feminist Initiatives in Sudan – A story of resilience, resistance, and solidarity", SIHA (2024), page 19.

[124] "Sudanese women's revolution for freedom, dignity and justice continues", Liv Tønnessen, Chr. Michelsen Institute (2020).

women participation[125]. This is evident on the issue of capacity. Women who engage on peacebuilding and mediation regularly lament a lack of specialised skills and training, pointing, as the cause, to their marginalisation[126] by institutional actors, like political parties. Women still went out during the revolution and led the protests, and when they finally had a chance to seat at the negotiation table and address their need for capacities, political actors claiming to represent the revolution excluded them, using, as justification, the fact that women lacked political experience[127]. The narrative, which presents women as lacking capacity and confidence, as well as being too emotional to take part in important decisions, is often used to justify putting pressure on women to disengage, also through bullying[128].

Linked to this, Sudanese women face huge risks when they choose to take part in peacebuilding and mediation. In times of active conflict, women are regularly targeted by warring factions. They are among the casualties of fighting. Even during the revolution, and within the revolutionary movement, women were much more likely to be victims of harassment and GBV than their male peers. For women facing economic strains, in cities and even more so in rural areas, there can be huge pressures to stay at home and focus on making ends meet. For them participation can seem like a luxury[129].

Sudan is also the only country where a social backlash to women's participation was recorded. Following the collapse of the transition period and the start of the civil war, communities and politicians have spoken about how women who took part in the revolution are to be considered responsible for the deterioration in living conditions that Sudanese experienced following the fall of al-Bashir[130].

The critiques levied at women are in line with the narrative opposing their participation, and they have increased the risks women face as they continue, in spite of the danger, to provide support. Challenges of insecurity also affect CSOs, whose operations are also limited by a dearth in available funding[131].

Lastly, motivations, effectiveness and challenges change depending on age. In this regard, there is, among women peacebuilders and mediators in Sudan, a clear generational gap. During the revolution, for instance, young people were ready to challenge norms much more aggressively than older activists and advocates for peace[132]. At the same time, young peacebuilders and mediators were likely to have less experience than their older peers, and they were also very likely to be facing greater risks than them.

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[125] "Sudanese Women Trapped Between Conflict and Political Marginalization in Peace Negotiations", Areej el-Haf, The Washington Institute (2024).

[126] "Young Women's Perspectives on the Peace Negotiations and Peace Agreements", Ilaf Nasreldin and Samar Abushama.

[127] "A regional insight into Sudanese women's participation in the December Revolution", Yusra Elmobashir Abdalla et al., Sudan Norway Academic Collaboration (2023), page 12.

[128] "Sudanese Women Trapped Between Conflict and Political Marginalization in Peace Negotiations", Areej el-Haf, The Washington Institute (2024).

[129] "Young Women's Perspectives on the Peace Negotiations and Peace Agreements", Ilaf Nasreldin and Samar Abushama.

[130] "Scared, but still trying: stories of women activists working for peace in conflict areas in Sudan", Reem Abbas, Chr. Michelsen Institute (2024).

[131] "Women and girls of Sudan: Fortitude amid the flame of war", UN Women (2014), page 12.

[132] "Young Women's Perspectives on the Peace Negotiations and Peace Agreements", Ilaf Nasreldin and Samar Abushama.

ASSESSING EXISTING REGIONAL NETWORKS

As the importance of the WPS Agenda has gained significant recognition and momentum in the last twenty years, networks of women peacebuilders have come to be seen as important platforms, enabling women to collaborate, share resources, and amplify their voices in peacebuilding and mediation processes. Organisations such as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and UN Women's Global Network of Women Peacebuilders[133] exemplify this collective effort, fostering an environment where women can contribute meaningfully to peace initiatives.

Several initiatives have been launched over the years with the aim of creating and consolidating networks of women peacebuilders and mediators, in particular at national level, and eventually also at regional level. Nationally, relevant examples were discussed in the previous sections. This part of the report focuses on regional examples, of which there are indeed many. The networking landscape in the Horn of Africa appears, in fact, rather full, at least on the surface. The initiatives launched have been supported by international donors or organisations, by CSOs and by prominent leaders. All of them have been animated by a desire for women's voices to gain power, and with power to influence decisions related peace and security, but also to their well-being.

An in-depth analysis reveals significant differences in the networks that have been set up, however. The differences can be seen in terms of the countries represented, the needs targeted, their goals and focus areas. At the operational level, networks also vary, some having formal structures, even secretariats, others being informal groupings of individuals or organisations. This section takes stock of ongoing regional networks: it starts with identifying the main ones, and then looks the factors that determine whether they are successful and effective, or not.

Overview of regional networks covering the Horn of Africa

The landscape of existing networks covering the Horn of Africa is a patchwork of differences and commonalities. The first aspect that draws attention is that a network of women mediators specifically covering the Horn of Africa region does not yet exist. There are networks that cover the region, but are not focused on peacebuilding and mediation, as is the case with the Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA). Among the networks that have peace and security as a focus area, these either cover only some countries within the region—Sisters Without Borders (SWB), for example—or they cover countries both within and outside of the Horn of Africa—FemWise-Africa, for instance, which is a pan-African network, or the Great Lakes Region Women's Platform for Peace and Security, which covers both the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes. Only IGAD's Roster of Mediators can be said to both have focus on mediation and cover all the region's countries—but this is not a network *per se*, nor is it focused on women specifically.

The table in the next page provides a list of all the major networks that cover, to one extent or another, the region. It includes the aforementioned ones, and others also, which continue to operate at the time of writing.

These networks have all emerged to champion women's empowerment over the last 10 years, each tyring to play a unique role in enhancing women's participation in peacebuilding and mediation.

Most of these networks provide essential training opportunities and resources; nearly all of them also advocate for the inclusion of women in decision-making roles, albeit focusing on different levels.

Despite their significant contributions, these networks face challenges such as limited resources and cultural barriers, underscoring the need for ongoing support from governments, international organisations, and civil society.

To understand how they are similar and how they different, it is useful to present some of them in more depth.

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[133] See: https://gnwp.org/.

Table 1: Existing regional networks in the Horn of Africa

Network name	Countries involved	Mandate and focus areas
African Women Leaders Network (AWLN)	Africa-wide	AWLN seeks to galvanize women's leadership of Africa towards lasting peace and sustainable development in all sectors and at all levels. It works on governance, peace and security, finance and youth.
African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET)	Africa-wide	FENMET is a feminist, membership-based network, working to ensure that the voices of African women are amplified, and that their needs and aspirations are prioritized in key policy dialogues and outcomes. It focuses on climate and economic justice, governance, sexual and reproductive rights, and youth.
East African Women's Network for Peacebuilding	Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda.	The Network works to empower women to lead peacebuilding and mediation efforts in East Africa. It focuses on grassroots initiatives and provides training.
FemWise-Africa	Africa-wide	FemWise seeks to strengthen the role of women in conflict prevention and mediation efforts by providing a platform for strategic advocacy, capacity-building and networking. Established by the AU, it works on peace and security.
Great Lakes Region Women's Platform for Peace and Security	Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Tanzania, Kenya, South Sudan	The Platform is focused on enhancing women's participation in peacebuilding and mediation efforts across the Great Lakes region. It focuses on peace and security.
IGAD Roster of Mediators	Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda	The roster includes more than 30 mediators, of which around seven are women, and aims to support mediation processes that IGAD leads or contributes to.
Karama Network	Egypt, Libya, Sudan, and Somalia	The Network addresses violence against women and promoting women's leadership in peacebuilding and mediation across North Africa and the Horn of Africa. If focuses on peace and security.
Regional Faith Women Mediators Network (REFWOMEN)	Burundi, DRC, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda	REFWOMEN was created to coordinate and consolidate the Faith Women's voice for sustainable peace in the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa region. It focuses on peace and security.
Sisters Without Borders (SWB)	Uganda, Tanzania, Ethiopia and Djibouti	SWB is a network of women leaders from different CSOs, working to champion peace and security in their communities and country. If focuses on peace and security.
Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA)	Uganda, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Eritrea, Somalia, Somaliland, Sudan and South Sudan	SIHA aims to contribute to unlocking the massive potential of the women's rights movement in the Greater Horn of Africa by strengthening CSOs. It works on protection, access to justice, economic empowerment and movement-building.
Sudanese Women's Peace Network	Sudan and South Sudan	The Network promotes women's involvement in peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts in Sudan and South Sudan. It focuses on peace and security.

Women's International Peace Centre (the Peace Centre)	Africa-wide	The Peace Centre is a global resource centre for women human rights defenders to document and disseminate women's own experiences, concerns and ideas for ending gender inequality.
Women Mediators across the Commonwealth (WMC)	Kenya, Uganda	WMC network brings together a diverse community of practice of almost 50 conflict mediators from all Commonwealth regions. It works exclusively on mediation.
Women's Regional Network East Africa (WRN-EA)	Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Ethiopia, and South Sudan	WRN-EA strives to build meaningful peace, by advancing gender justice among the marginalized women and girls in the East African region. It focuses on gender justice, peace and human security.

FemWise-Africa, also known as the Network of African Women in Conflict Prevention and Mediation, is to date the most well-known network dedicated to enhancing the role of African women in mediation and conflict resolution processes across the continent. Affiliated with the AU, it aims to increase women's participation in these critical areas. It covers the whole of Africa, advocating for women's voices to be heard locally, nationally and regionally. Key activities of FemWise-Africa include providing essential training and capacity-building for women mediators, ensuring that they are equipped with the skills needed to engage effectively in conflict resolution. Additionally, the network actively supports women's inclusion in various peace processes, emphasising the importance of their contributions to conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and post-conflict reconstruction efforts.

Overall, FemWise-Africa plays a crucial role in fostering a more inclusive approach to peace and security in Africa through the aforementioned activities, as well as through its unique affiliation with the AU. The network is, in fact, a subsidiary mechanism of the Panel of the Wise, one of the pillars of the Peace and Security Architecture of the AU. While FemWise-Africa has mainly operated at the continental level, offering opportunities to its membership regardless of their country of origin, in recent years it has also established a stronger presence at the national level. In the Horn of Africa, the network has thus opened national chapters in Ethiopia and South Sudan.

FemWise-Africa represents a network created and run by an international organisation—the AU. It shares this feature with the Women Mediators across the Commonwealth (WMC) and the IGAD Roster of Mediators. These three networks act as critical interlocutors between expert women peacebuilders and mediators, the majority of whom are active within civil society, and national and international institutions. They also play an important role in enhancing the visibility and participation of women in formal and high-level peace processes. This said, they are more distant from mediation efforts that take place at grassroots and local levels, and tend to engage women who are already recognised as peacebuilding and mediation experts.

Several networks focus on women leadership. Some of these were indeed created thanks to the efforts of prominent women leaders. This includes the African Women Leaders Network (AWLN) and the Great Lakes Region Women's Platform for Peace and Security, both of which are mainly focused on promoting women's participation in high-level peace processes. Their activities can include advocacy, mentoring and capacity-building—all of which are meant to promote changes within high-level processes.

Finally, there are the networks created by activists or by CSOs. The majority of those on the list above fall under this category, including the East African Women's Network for Peacebuilding, which focuses on grassroots peacebuilding initiatives, the Karama Network, SWB and the Women's International Peace Centre. These networks have been created to bridge the gap between women's efforts at the grassroots and at national levels. They do so by providing training opportunities, and facilitating exchanges of knowledge and experiences. Their membership can be very diverse, though what they do is all too often limited by a lack of resources.

If the networks currently active in the region are many, they have not yet been able to address all the challenges faced by women peacebuilders and mediators, as these have been discussed in the first part of this report. Networks provide training and advocacy to ensure that women are included in decision-making processes and conflict resolution efforts. However, challenges such as limited

resources and cultural barriers persist, which points to the existence of factors that can either enable or hinder collaborative action. The analysis also suggests that there are gaps that are not yet been fully addressed by existing networks.

Enablers of collaborative action

Women mediators in the Horn of Africa are pivotal for the advancement of processes of peacebuilding and mediation. Their contributions are the result of the motivations, opportunities and challenges that have been described earlier in this report. They are underscored by a commitment to collaborative action, which is understood by women peacebuilders and mediators as essential for fostering sustainable peace in a region all too frequently impacted by violent conflict. The experiences matured within their own countries push women to connect with each other, almost naturally. The number and diversity of the regional networks, discussed just above, are a testament to women peacebuilders' desire to share their experiences with peers, while also finding more effective ways to overcome the challenges than hamper their daily work. Collaborative action is, however, not easy. Fortunately, there are enabling factors, which is what this section focuses on.

The enablers of collaborative action among regional networks are multi-faceted. In general, a shared vision and common goals among members create a foundation for effective collaboration. Trust and strong relationships are essential, as they facilitate open communication and mutual support. Additionally, capacity-building initiatives empower women mediators with the necessary skills and resources to engage actively in peacebuilding efforts, in their own context (local or national), and subsequently also at the national level. Supportive policies that promote gender equality and women empowerment further enhance these collaborative endeavours, ensuring that women's contributions are recognised, valued, and receive support[134].

Enablers of effective networking emerge around common elements in the work of women peacebuilders and mediators. For instance, inclusivity is a hallmark of their approach, as women strive to ensure that diverse perspectives are represented in peace processes[135]. Inclusivity is a key enabler for collective action at the regional level: engaging diverse groups of individuals and CSOs motivates the exchange and experiences and knowledge. Engaging local communities is another aspect that is common across the experiences of women regardless of where they are from, as women know that grassroot engagement enhances the relevance and acceptance of peace initiatives.

Another important commonality between the efforts of women peacebuilders from different countries and territories is that they usually adopt holistic approaches, addressing not only the immediate symptoms of violent conflict, but also the underlying social, economic, and political factors that contribute to instability[136]. The experience of doing peacebuilding as women in the Horn of Africa begets solidarity. Networks amplify the sense of solidarity and foster a sense of community, enabling shared learning and strengthening their collective impact[137].

Overall, the enablers of networking efforts encompass a range of specific factors that enhance the operational capacity of women peacebuilders and mediators. These include: national networks or connections, cultural competence, training opportunities, supportive legal frameworks, and international support.

Where these enablers are present, they serve to create regional networks capable of empowering women peacebuilders and mediators to engage effectively with conflicting parties, build trust, and advocate for inclusive dialogue. And where women were able to leverage these enablers, they not only enhanced their peacebuilding and mediation skills, but also ensured that the voices of their constituents were heard in peace processes. Below, each of these enablers is discussed in more depth.

The establishment of robust national networks, alliances or connections. This is a fundamental factor for fostering collective action, including through networks. Affirming that networks are effective for building networks may sound overly simple. In practice, however, building connections and alliances is a gradual process, which starts locally, or nationally. Where such efforts are

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[134] "Women, Peace, and Security and Human Rights in the Digital Age: Opportunities and risks to advance women's meaningful participation and protect their rights", Global Network of Women Peacebuilders and ICT4Peace Foundation (2021).

[135] "Women's meaningful participation in peace processes: Modalities and strategies across tracks", UN Women (2018).

[136] "Women's transformational roles in local conflict prevention: Case Study of WPHF-Supported Civil Society Organizations in Burundi, Iraq, Palestine, Philippines, and Uganda", Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (2023).

[137] Ibid.

effective, larger and more impactful collective action becomes possible. National networks support the work of individual women mediators. They also facilitate collaboration between women and other stakeholders, including local communities, governmental bodies, and international organisations. This is the case for example of the Sudanese Women's Peace Network, which was borne out of national networking efforts in both South Sudan and Sudan. By fostering relationships built on trust and mutual respect, women peacebuilders and mediators have effectively mobilised resources and support for their initiatives. Such alliances often lead to collective action, enhancing the legitimacy and reach of mediation efforts. The interconnectedness provided by these networks allows for the sharing of best practices, experiences, and strategies, ultimately strengthening the overall efficacy of peacebuilding endeavours.

Cultural competencies. This refers to the ability of women peacebuilders and mediators to navigate and understand the diverse cultural landscapes across individual countries and the Horn of Africa region. Women leverage their cultural knowledge to establish rapport with conflicting parties, which is crucial in conflict resolution scenarios. By demonstrating respect for local customs and traditions, women mediators can foster an environment conducive to open dialogue. This cultural sensitivity not only aids in building trust, but also ensures that the mediation process is relevant and acceptable to all parties involved. The ability to engage meaningfully with local contexts enhances the likelihood of achieving sustainable peace outcomes. Cultural competencies are a key enabler for all the networks mentioned in Table 1. In fact, the diversity of these networks is a testament to the strong knowledge of local and international contexts that women peacebuilders and mediators have. Whether pushing feminist principles (as FEMNET does), enhancing women's interventions in local conflicts (see, for instance, the work of REFWOMEN), or advocating for women's engagement in high-level processes (as AWLN, FemWise, and SIHA do), what all these networks have in common is an ability of their members to navigate the social and political complexities of the region.

Access to training and capacity-building opportunities. This is vital for empowering women peacebuilders and mediators. Such opportunities equip them with essential skills in negotiation, conflict resolution, and leadership. Through targeted training, women can enhance their competencies,

enabling them to handle complex conflict situations more effectively. Capacity-building efforts also promote self-confidence among women mediators, encouraging them to assert their roles in peace processes. For CSOs in particular, investing in the development of these skills can support the mobilisation of additional cadres of capable women leaders, who can then be prepared to address the multifaceted challenges of conflict in the region. Capacity and confidence are necessary for women to gain the competencies to expand the impact of their efforts, including through networks. Capacity-building is a central feature of all the networks in Table 1.

Supportive legal frameworks. These play a crucial role in facilitating women's participation in peace processes. National and regional policies that promote gender equality, women's rights and empowerment create an enabling environment for women mediators. Such frameworks not only recognise the importance of women's contributions to peacebuilding but also provide the necessary protections and resources to support their involvement. When legal structures are in place to advocate for women's rights, this empowers peacebuilders and mediators to engage more effectively in decision-making processes, ensuring that their voices are heard and considered in peace negotiations. Legal and policy frameworks make the process of establishing networks easier and less uncertain.

International support and funding. These factors are instrumental in sustaining the initiatives of women peacebuilders and mediators. Financial and technical assistance from international organisations and NGOs significantly enhances the capacity of women-led mediation efforts. This support often includes funding for projects aimed at promoting women's leadership in peacebuilding, as well as resources for training and capacity-building programmes. By securing international backing, women peacebuilders and mediators can expand their reach and amplify their impact, ensuring that their efforts contribute to broader peace and reconciliation goals in the Horn of Africa. FemWise-Africa is emblematic of this, as the network's success is tied to its affiliation with, and support from, the AU.

The enablers of collaborative action identified above are critical to the success of networks, and of women's local efforts. The analysis is thus useful to understand when and where networks are created, and why some persevere while others wither and disappear. Creating regional networks is an

inherently difficult process, and understanding and leveraging these factors is therefore essential for promoting sustainable peace in the region. Enabling factors are also useful to understand where and how networking efforts can be effective, which is what the report now turns to.

The effectiveness and limits of regional networks

The list of regional networks presented in Table 1 reflects the desire of women peacebuilders and mediators to come together, to pool resources, to share lessons learned and best practices, and to amplify the collective power and agency of women. The enablers described just above help to explain where and how regional networks have emerged. This section looks at the factors that make them effective, and the limits they continue to face.

The factors favouring effectiveness include: a focus on capacity-building, supportive national policy frameworks, financial resources, a commitment to exchanges, the participation of CSOs, and the level of recognition and legitimacy. Where all these factors are present, networks appear to be the most effective. Unfortunately, they seldom are all present. A more in-depth analysis of each factor is useful to understand how and why.

Structured training opportunities in negotiation, mediation, and conflict resolution are instrumental in empowering women to engage effectively in peace processes. This is because women tend to have much less specialised skills, even where their experience is the same, or even greater, than their male peers. The gap is clearly evident in countries like Somalia and Sudan. Even in Kenya, however, women have fewer opportunities for high-level engagement, and thus lack skills. Training opportunities are a way to level the playing field. It is not a coincidence then that nearly all the regional networks in Table 1 focus on capacity-building. Even IGAD has invested in training women mediators from their roster of mediators, even though these were already chosen based on their skills and experiences.

The effectiveness of regional networks appears to also be tied to training opportunities and programmes available at national level. Where these are strong, such as in Ethiopia with the Ethiopia Women Peacebuilders Network or in Kenya with county-level peace committees, which regularly provide women with essential skills on mediation, the confidence of women increases. Capacity-building

efforts within and outside of regional network not only prepare women for the complexities of mediation but also foster a sense of agency and leadership.

Supportive national policies are also important for the effectiveness of regional networks. The presence of NAPs in particular can have significant positive effects, increasing women's confidence and driving their engagement. NAPs are foundational policies for advocating women's participation in peace and security. Where they exist, they create a mandate for women's participation and engagement. More concretely still, the existence of NAPS usually means that multi-stakeholder mechanisms already exist, which can ensure participation and consultation. Finally, NAPs are usually an indicator of the commitment of governments to implement the WPS Agenda. As discussed in the first part of the report, NAPs exist in almost all of the countries in the region. In Kenya and in South Sudan, they are essential platforms for women peacebuilders and mediators to come together. They represent a base upon which regional engagement becomes easier and more effective. The commitment of governments to support women's participation through quotas and affirmative action can also be crucial. Political will creates an environment where women can thrive as mediators, ensuring their contributions are valued and integrated into formal peace processes.

Where there is political will to support women's participation on peace and security, in line with the commitments of UNSCR 1325, financial resources are also usually available. And if they are, this tends to correlate with effectiveness. Access to adequate financial resources is, after all, essential for the sustainability of all peacebuilding and mediation initiatives. Funding from international organisations, governmental bodies, and private donors can provide the necessary support for the capacity-building, exchange and advocacy activities that make networks successful.

A commitment to cross-border and regional exchanges is a central feature of all regional networks. Where such exchanges are organised regularly, networks are clearly reinforced. Exchanges are at the heart of what FemWise-Africa does, for instance. The network promotes collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and solidarity among women mediators. Not only that: FemWise-Africa is also part of the Global Alliance of Regional Women Mediator Networks, which brings together regional networks from across the world, and thus offers its members exchanges opportunities beyond Africa. In general, all regional networks facilitate

such exchanges. Some of them also support their members in launching cross-border initiatives that address transnational conflicts, leveraging shared cultural and historical ties.

The participation of CSOs brings a unique strength to regional networks. Within all countries, such organisations fill critical gaps by providing resources, mentorship, and advocacy platforms. CSOs often work in partnership with international organisations, and these collaborations can amplify the impact of women peacebuilders and mediators, enabling them to access additional resources and networks. The presence of CSOs as members of regional networks can also help with their sustainability. Capacity-building and exchange initiatives launched in these settings usually benefit not only individuals, but also the organisations they represent.

The last factor that favours the effectiveness of networks is their recognition and legitimacy. This is true nationally as well as regionally, and, indeed, recognition can be transferred, at least to some extent. This is best exemplified once again by FemWise-Africa, one of the most well-known networks. Its recognition is, indeed, a resource for its members, while the visibility of individual members can be an asset for the network. In general, participation in networks enhances the visibility and legitimacy of women mediators, motivating their continued engagement. Recognition in turn fosters a culture of respect and acknowledgment for women peacebuilders and mediators, addressing a key need.

A specific way for women to gain recognition is accreditation, a process that is usually linked to existing national policies. In Kenya, for instance, mediators are officially recognised, and both men and women can become accredited through national institutions like Strathmore and the Mediation Accreditation Committee. At the regional level, FemWise-Africa, WAC and IGAD also have official rosters of mediators. In general, accreditation is a contributing factor to ensuring that women's expertise is fully recognised, even if, by itself, it might not be sufficient to ensure that women are then engaged in mediation efforts.

The networks that have been able to integrate the aforementioned factors have, generally speaking been able to increase their effectiveness. They have been able to become more operational and better serve their members. They have, on average, been able to be more successful in their efforts to ensure

that women have a role in peacebuilding and mediation.

All the networks in Table 1 continue to face limitations, however, which can be mainly be attributed to women's underrepresentation in decision-making processes, cultural and social norms, the disconnect that exists between grassroots and national efforts, security risks, competition and lack of resources, political tensions, implementation gaps related to the WPS Agenda, and lack of long-term strategic strategies. Here, too, a more in-depth analysis of each factor is useful to understand how and why the effectiveness of networks remains limited.

Women in the Horn of Africa face systemic underrepresentation in political and institutional structures. This underrepresentation limits their influence on decision-making processes related to peace and security, including formal peace processes. Underrepresentation happens in all countries surveyed under this study, though in some more than in others. For instance, in Somalia and Somaliland, peace and security structures are male-dominated. In those countries as well as others, whenever official high-level processes are launched, women are by default not present. Where there have been some successes, however, the social and political environment for women's participation has improved. Women's official representation in institutions and the presence of supportive policy and legal frameworks are likely correlated. This is best seen in Kenya, where the architecture for ensuring that women take part in peace and security is relatively strong, and women have succeeded in gaining official leadership posts.

Overall, underrepresentation can be largely attributed to cultural and patriarchal norms that perpetuate stereotypes marginalising women. Across the region, women are all too often deemed less able to hold leadership positions or formal mediation roles. Consequently, their voices are frequently excluded from critical discussions that shape peace and security. These norms are deeply entrenched in communities and societies; they hinder women's participation in all aspects of society, including on peace and security, and in mediation specifically. The perception of women as less competent entrenches gender inequality, by restricting their access to decision-making platforms.

Closely linked to the above challenge is the fact that a lot of the experience that women peacebuilders and mediators gain is at the grassroots level—mediating family, community, and resource-based

conflicts, as shown in the many examples provided in the country-specific sections—yet, this expertise is almost never recognised at national and regional levels. There is a disconnect between grassroots-level engagement and national- or regional-level engagement, and this serves to diminish the visibility of women's efforts.

Grassroots efforts often operate independently of national peacebuilding initiatives, and this undermines the potential for women to be included on this higher level. Bridging this gap has long been seen as essential for creating cohesive and effective mediation strategies that can leverage local insights while aligning with national objectives. Some networks are trying to do exactly this, including REWOMEN and SIHA.

Yet, the gap still exists, in part because of the need for ever more specialised skills as women mediators level up, but in part also because of a bias that undervalues women's expertise and their contributions to peace and security at the local level, which is related in turn to the role of norms.

Security risks represent an important challenge for networks as much as for their individual members. Women peacebuilders and mediators, particularly in conflict zones, face significant personal and professional risks. In Somalia and Sudan, for instance, women cannot travel and face regular, everyday threats of violence, often in the home as much as outside of it. The lack of safety nets and support systems discourages participation in mediation roles, and networks can help on this, by providing platforms for solidarity, and creating safe spaces that women can join without the normal risks they would face in their own countries. Networks can also provide resources and specialised training opportunities on risk management and psycho-social support. These, however, are rarely enough to overcome the sense of fear that women have for their own safety or that of their families.

If CSOs can be instrumental in mobilising women's collective action for peacebuilding, the impact of their efforts can be severely limited by competition for resources and attention. Organisations across the region face continuous struggles to raise resources and institutional support for peacebuilding and mediation work. These struggles are often carried over into efforts at national and regional levels: most networks have limited funding, which affects their ability to sustain activities and provide consistent support.

Lack of resources can lead to increased competition, including among the regional networks listed in

Table 1. The very participation of CSOs to the life and activities of networks can be limited by struggles to secure adequate funding or, conversely, by the pressure of managing secured funds.

The strength and effectiveness of regional networks can be weakened by political tensions between countries in the region. Somaliland is the best example of this. Owning to its unrecognised status, Somaliland's women peacebuilders and mediators are not as integrated into regional networking efforts as women from other countries. Among the networks from Table 1, only SIHA formally mentions that it covers Somaliland. Political tensions among other countries can also have similar effects. For instance, women from Somalia have faced difficulties in travelling to other countries, creating access challenges.

Turning now to the WPS Agenda, while national and regional policies to implement UNSCR 1325 exist, their implementation remains inconsistent across the five countries. This inconsistency leads to different levels of familiarity with the WPS Agenda, and different levels of knowledge and capacity. In some countries, like Kenya, implementation has advanced and this has strengthened consultation platforms, which in turn have increased the confidence and experience of women peacebuilders and mediators in that country. In Ethiopia and Sudan, where the Agenda has not been implemented consistently, there are many actors who are still not familiar with it. This creates a gap in knowledge, which negatively affects collective action.

Finally, networks often lack long-term strategies for sustainability, relying heavily on donor funding and external support. This is a challenge that is also carried over from individual CSOs, who struggle with the same issues. At the level of networks, however, the failure to think about long-term objectives and outcomes may be more critical still, hampering not only the implementation of specific activities, but also their general operations. This is, of course, a challenge that affects mostly the networks that have been funded by CSOs or individual activists. The lack of sustainability challenges might also, however, affect the efforts of networks like FemWise-Africa or IGAD's Roster of Mediators, whose activities are also reliant on international support. Ultimately, developing multi-sectoral approaches and integrating networks into existing support systems can help address these sustainability challenges—yet, even these steps are predicated on strategic decisions that not all networks are naturally equipped to make.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The report ultimately paints a picture that goes against mainstream narratives about women in the Horn of Africa. Whereas women are generally described as playing roles that rarely go beyond those of victims or passive agents of change, the examples coming from all countries show how women are, in reality, protagonists of peacebuilding and mediation processes. Their influence can, in fact, be seen in many policies— from electoral quotas to NAPs—which, twenty-five years after the adoption of UNSCR 1325, can almost be taken for granted. Even when women are actively excluded, and their participation resisted, they find effective and often innovative ways to participate.

The effectiveness of women peacebuilders and mediators in the region is significantly influenced by a complex interplay of enabling factors and persistent challenges. While structured training programmes and supportive policy frameworks have empowered women to engage in peacebuilding and mediation processes, systemic underrepresentation and cultural barriers continue to hinder their participation.

Because of these limitations, the efforts of women remain largely focused at the grassroots level, and mainly channelled through CSOs. Still, that is not a limit that affects the quality of these efforts, or their effectiveness. In all countries, women who engage in peacebuilding and mediation gain specialised knowledge, and become veritable experts. This expertise they immediately want to share with other women, in their own countries and internationally.

There is, indeed, a push towards networking and making connections with peers in other countries, which is evidenced by the number of regional networks currently active in the Horn of Africa. This push comes from the motivations that animate women's decisions to build peace in their communities and countries. These can be deeply personal and tied to direct experiences of violence. They are certainly tied to a desire of safety for themselves and their loved ones. They can be a manifestation of their desire for greater social or economic agency. Ultimately, they are a direct reaction to the restricted environments in which women across the region all too often find themselves.

The establishment of networks, such as FemWise-Africa, has facilitated collaboration and knowledge-sharing. Networks provide significant opportunities to amplify women's voices. Yet, these efforts have had inconsistent results so far, mainly due to the fact that women continue being marginalised in decision-making roles. In their own countries, entrenched patriarchal norms also mean that women continue having too few opportunities to join high-level processes, while differences between how frameworks like UNSCR 1325 are implemented across countries create inequalities. Violent conflict, which has been on the rise in various countries, increases risks for women more than any other social group.

In conclusion, if much has been done to do address the needs of women peacebuilders and mediators in the Horn of Africa, much more is needed to build a more enabling environment, ultimately leading to more effective and inclusive peacebuilding processes in the region. The following recommendations are made for those organisations and policy-makers pursuing this goal:

Cultivate greater regional collaboration. While several different regional networks exist, which are helping to raise women's voices, more efforts are needed.

Regional networks should be expanded to foster more cross-border learning and solidarity. Initiatives like the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network can serve as models for establishing effective regional collaborations that address transnational conflicts, especially in a region, the Horn of Africa, which does not have a dedicated network yet.

Leverage complementarities and synergies between existing networks. At the same time, any new initiatives should build on the successes of established networks, ensuring that they complement existing efforts and fill specific gaps—in terms of the needs being address, or the women being supported. Resources are limited, and there can all too often be competition among CSOs, and networks.

Collaborative initiatives among networks will amplify advocacy efforts and enhance the visibility of women mediators, but only insofar as they are able to nurture solidarity. In this regard, the role of FemWise-Africa as the foremost network for women working on mediation should be acknowledge, and all efforts make to contribute to its consolidation. Regional initiatives like SIHA also play an important role, and can count on established networks of

collaborators. New regional networking efforts should seek to fill the gaps that these other initiatives are not currently focusing one. In this regard, each network should establish a clear identity and niche, which aligns with its goals. This focused approach should enhance visibility, attract partnerships, and ensure sustainability.

Promote an enabling policy and legal environment. Governments and intergovernmental bodies like IGAD must prioritise the integration of women mediators into national leadership frameworks. This can be achieved by ensuring that NAPS are not only established, as they are in nearly all countries, but also implemented effectively, with specific provisions for cross-sectoral collaboration.

Where NAPs have been adopted, it is important that governments also allocate funds that support the implementation of these plans. Supporting national implementation along these lines will ensure that women and women-led organisations can more effectively engage in regional networking efforts, and that such efforts can in turn contribute to enhancing the impact of national policies, through the sharing of lessons learned and best practices.

Focus on changing the narrative around women's expertise. Advocacy and communication efforts must aim to shift cultural perceptions surrounding women's roles in peacebuilding and mediation. Inclusive strategies that address the challenges faced by marginalised groups, including young women and women with disabilities, should be prioritised.

These should include efforts to recognise the expertise of women who have been doing peacebuilding and mediation for years, if not decades. Accreditation mechanisms, like the ones in Kenya, can help in this regard. At the same time, communication efforts are also essential, as are efforts to engage men, in particular traditional leaders, to ensure that they, too, recognise that women should play a role.

Enhance safety and security for women peacebuilders and mediators. Support systems must be established to protect women peacebuilders and mediators, particularly in conflict zones. This includes creating safety nets and providing resources that encourage their active participation in mediation roles. It may also include providing specialised training to those women who are working on the frontlines of active conflicts and wars. Lastly, such support should include funds to allow women to conduct activities in safe areas, including outside of their own country, where and when this may be necessary to ensure their safety.

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