



# Progress towards meaningful women's participation in conflict prevention and peacebuilding decision-making

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December 3 2021

## Question

*What evidence is available on the progress since 2018 towards meaningful women's participation in decision making processes in particular in conflict prevention and peacebuilding, including peace processes at community and national and international levels and what are emerging issues that are likely to be important in this field going forward?*

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## 1. Summary

**The Women, Peace and Security or Gender Peace and Security (WPS/GPS) agenda has expanded significantly over the 20+ years of concerted efforts at many levels to expand the role of women in conflict resolution and peacebuilding.** Yet many authors note that the expansion of international agreements and national plans to support greater women's participation in decision-making have yet to translate into concrete changes (see for example International Alert, 2020; Myrtilinen et al., 2020, Smyth et al., 2020).

**This report examines progress in promoting women's meaningful participation in decision making processes** in conflict prevention and peacebuilding, with a focus on changes since 2018 (when the latest UK Government's last WPS strategy was developed). Section 2 examines the ongoing changing emphasis on gender in peace and security policies since the WPS agenda became formalised and the expansion of the agenda in the intervening 20 years. Section 3 explores the ongoing structural barriers that continue to inhibit progress in promoting greater meaningful women's empowerment and recent initiatives that have sought to address these. Section 4 discusses the continued oversight of intersectionality in WPS policies and programming and highlights its implications in different regions. Section 5 explores recent progress in improving women's representation in formal institutions, focusing on representation in parliament and in formal peace negotiations. Section 6 concludes with a discussion of the gender, conflict, and climate nexus, an emerging agenda in its own right and with cross-cutting links to the WPS agenda.

**Evidence on women's meaningful participation in decision-making tends to focus on a small range of measurable outcomes** – such as women's representation in formal peacebuilding processes – with some studies considering the outcomes of women's involvement in those processes to determine the extent to which they might be 'meaningful'. Few studies examine differential outcomes of such initiatives for different groups of women, and most data does not allow for the disaggregation of intersecting identities between gender, ethnicity, race, disability, migration status and other key factors.

**Evidence collected for this report suggests that policies and programmes seeking to support greater women's participation in decision-making in conflict prevention and peacebuilding often struggle to address the broader structural factors that inhibit women's empowerment.** Tackling longstanding and often deeply embedded harmful social norms has proven challenging across sectors, and in conflict or post-conflict settings with highly complex social dynamics, this can be especially difficult. Many of the issues highlighted in the literature as hindering progress on the WPS agenda relate to cross-cutting issues at the heart of gender inequality – women's perceived roles within communities and in society, the victimisation of women, intersectional inequalities based on gender and ethnicity, disability and other factors, and the confluence of factors around gender, conflict and climate change. Multiple authors from within women's movements in conflict and post-conflict settings emphasise the need for policies and programmes that support women to act as agents of change in their own communities and which amplify their voices rather than speak on their behalf (see for example Kezie-Nwoha, 2020; Rolls & Evans, 2020). Recent achievements in South Sudan and the Pacific region are indicative of the potential of women's movements to affect change in conflict prevention and peacebuilding and suggest progress is being made in some areas, though gender equality in these processes may be a long way off.

## 2. Changing emphasis on meaningful women's participation

**Over the last two decades the critical role of women's meaningful participation in conflict prevention and peacebuilding has become mainstreamed in policy and programme approaches and evidence on effective practices has expanded.** Since the adoption of the United Nations Security Council resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on WPS in October 2000, the number of National Action Plans to implement the agenda has grown substantially and the UN Security Council has adopted nine related resolutions (Myrtilinen et al., 2020, p.8). As of 2019, 82 countries had adopted National Action Plans (NAPs), which are a "strategic tool for policymakers to operationalise and translate the international mandates of WPS agenda into the domestic context" (Hamilton et al., 2020, p.1).

**Among the four pillars of the WPS agenda (participation, prevention, protection, relief and recovery), increased women's participation in decision-making has garnered significant attention** (Myrtilinen et al., 2020, p.25). Content analysis of NAPs among countries in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) (57 states from Europe, Central Asia and the Americas) found participation to be the leading pillar mentioned across strategies. Increased women's participation in decision-making is seen by some as a unifying principle that is easy to agree on. For example, Tuncel (2021) argues that "almost everybody who is engaged in promoting the WPS agenda – be it diplomats, staff of peace operations or advocates in NGOs – likely agrees that every social group, including women, has the right to participate in decision making that affects them". She goes on to argue, however, that the process of getting to increased meaningful women's decision-making is not agreed upon in the same way.

**Despite wide recognition of the need for meaningful women's participation, progress has been slow to implement the principles of the WPS agenda in decision-making around conflict resolution and peacebuilding.** A 2011 review of 300 studies on humanitarian responses across five sectors found "limited, ad-hoc, sporadic" use of sex and age-disaggregated data and concluded that there were not, as yet, any good examples of gender analysis for planning, implementing and evaluating humanitarian responses (Mazurana et al., 2011). More recent analysis of major peace processes between 1992 and 2018 found that women constituted only 13% of negotiators, 3% of mediators and 4% of signatories (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020). Funding for programmes that support women's participation in conflict prevention and peacebuilding has also been highly inadequate to achieve the goals set out in the WPS agenda with only 1% of all gender-focused funding going to women's organizations supporting women's participation between 2016-2017 (Staszewka et al, 2019).

**In recent years, cross-cutting themes emerged across the WPS agenda including climate change, human trafficking, migration, and preventing violent extremism** (Myrtilinen et al., 2020, p.11). For example, the relationship between gender, conflict and climate change is now an area of policy and research in its own right. While increasing awareness of these interlinkages across historically segregated areas has generally been welcomed, concern has also been expressed with regard to the possible challenges this poses for ease of understanding and action to promote women's participation in conflict preventing and peacebuilding. "Increasing the range of topics with which [WPS] is concerned, however, increases the complexity of co-ordination, as often responsibilities for such topics cut across many different portfolios or lines of responsibility in government" (Myrtilinen et al., 2020, p.11).

### 3. The barrier of structural inequalities

**Underlying structural inequalities and broader harmful social norms are cited as key barriers to greater meaningful participation of women in conflict prevention and peace processes across contexts** (Kezie-Nwoha, 2020, International Alert, 2020; Myrntinen et al., 2020; Smyth et al., 2020). Smyth et al. (2020) argue that tackling the gendered dimensions of the roots causes of conflict are needed before, during and after conflict, and initiatives must be aware of the complexity of women's experiences more broadly and how these might intersect with exposure to violence and conflict.

“Violence span[s] the public and the personal, the community and the home. While acting as leaders in their community, in addition to their ‘formal’ work, women usually shoulder the responsibilities of domestic and unpaid care work. The stress of dealing with the trauma of war and crises while being responsible for keeping their families and communities together puts unacceptable pressure on women. Feminist peace recognizes these multiple roles and creates appropriate support mechanisms – childcare, economic empowerment, psychosocial services and access to self-care – to ensure that women are supported and can share the burden with men.

(Smyth et al., 2020, p.5)

**Lilly Kolts Be'Soer, a women's rights defender and advocate from Papua New Guinea, emphasises the need for women to be empowered as agents of change in the peace process and for structural inequalities to be dismantled to make space for this** (in Rolls & Evans, 2020, p.5). Speaking from her own perspective as a women's right defender she states:

“we experience all these inequalities [and] discrimination, and these experiences mean we have to make the change ourselves. We need to bring solidarity, build the network to collectively work together to make the change ourselves. We need to get into position of decision making”

(Quoted in Rolls & Evans, 2020, p.5).

**International Alert (2020) emphasises the need to recognise how structural inequalities affect women's decision-making power not just at international and national levels, but also at the community level.** Drawing on evidence from Afghanistan and Pakistan, they show that:

“the patriarchal values of male family members in particular meant that women were actively either discouraged or blocked from accessing WPS-related initiatives, or had to get permission from their husbands to attend related meetings. Where women do participate, they still often face concerted backlash in the form of harassment, violence and stigmatisation.

(International Alert, 2020, p.3)

The authors go on to suggest that backlash from local communities was one of the leading challenges to implementing the WPS agenda and argue that failure to address community level norms that support the subjugation and marginalisation of women would continue to prevent the WPS agenda from having real impact.

**Regional analyses have been carried out to observe the extent to which conflict prevention and peacebuilding initiatives have incorporated the need to address structural inequalities faced by women** (Kaya, 2020 in the Middle East and North Africa; Kezie-Nwoha, 2020 in Africa; Myrtilinen et al., 2020 in Europe and North America; Rolls & Evans, 2020 in the Pacific region;). Kezie-Nwoha highlights recent cases from the African continent which demonstrate women's movements have "made significant effort to dismantle patriarchal tendencies" in recent years:

- The Liberian women's peace movement focre[d] warring parties into a resolution [by] block[ing] the door s and windows and prevented anyone from leaving the peace talks.
- Burundi[an] women insist[ed] on their place and the peace table and influencing the outcome.
- South Sudanese women ensur[ed] the inclusion of a 35% quota in the Revitalized Agreement to enable women's representation in the transitional government structures.

(Kezie-Nwoha, 2020, p.4)

**Rolls and Evans' (2020) analysis of conflict prevention and peacebuilding in the Pacific region argue that while there has been progress in building national and regional action plans to maintain peace in the region, much of the progress that has been achieved can be attributed to the actions of women's rights movements at local, national, and regional levels.** They point to examples like Transcend Oceania, a Fijian organisation that implements a cross-gender dialogue where men are trained on peace education, power, and violence to engage men and boys as partners in the prevention of violence against women (Rolls & Evans, 2020, p.12). Following the conflict in Bougainville, women leaders established safe houses and men's hubs providing trauma healing and meditation support to address post-conflict psychological wounds (Rolls & Evans, 2020, p.13). Women's groups also sought to field more women in the 2020 Autonomous Bougainville Government elections, with 27 women having run for the four seats reserved for women, an additional 14 female candidate ran for 'open' seats and two ran for president (Taylor, 2020). Although the number of women elected did not change from 2015, the increased presence of women campaigning was seen as an effective challenge to the underlying structural gender balance in Bougainville politics (Taylor, 2020).

**Myrtilinen et al. (2020) demonstrate how the language of NAPs in the OSCE region have improved to capture the complexity of women's experiences and the need to address underlying structural inequalities, but with limited changes in practical application.** They highlight the Estonian NAP for its recognition that "changing attitudes and principles constitutes a long-term process" and the Irish NAP for acknowledging that "inequality, including gender inequality, is a key driver of conflict (quoted in Myrtilinen et al., 2020, p.19). The Spanish NAP perhaps offers the clearest link to this issue by stating "prevention means identifying and addressing the deep underlying causes of conflicts, often linked to structural inequalities that especially affect women and girls" (quoted in Myrtilinen et al., 2020, p.20). Their review observes however, that while the language of these NAPs demonstrates a commitment to eradicating the structural drivers of conflict, there are few examples of practical prevention initiatives or clear explanations of actions towards the realisation of this objective among the 44 NAPs studied (Myrtilinen et al., 2020, p.20).

**Within the WPS sector there is increasing recognition that intersectionality has not been effectively embedded into approaches that aim to improve decision-making.** Several

observers have noted that national plans and programmes supporting women’s decision-making tend to assume women to be one single group, thus overlooking the breadth of diversity among women and the need to ensure all perspectives are represented and heard in conflict prevention and peacebuilding processes (Henry, 2021; Myrntinen et al., 2020; Nagarajan, 2019; Smyth et al, 2020; UN Women, 2020). Intersections noted in the literature that tend to be omitted include the intersection of gender with race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, disability, geographic location and community status.

“[The WPS] agenda tends to emphasize ‘women’ rather than ‘gender’ in existing security practices in the fields of peace and security. As a result of their binary gender norms and lack of intersectional perspective, current policy debates and practices often perceive women as a homogeneous group and treat women’s participation in peace processes as synonymous with a gender perspective. This risks excluding women and men in marginalized groups as well as other gender identity groups from post-conflict and new political settlements.”

(Nagarajan, 2019, p.1)

Highlighting the impact of overlooking intersectionality in conflict prevention and peacebuilding in different global regions, Smyth et al. (2020) note the following evidence:

- In the Occupied Palestinian Territory, institutions developing the National Action Plan (NAP) and other WPS measures only include urban, professional, largely secular women, and have excluded women active in Islamist political parties and internally displaced women.
- In places such as the Pacific, the lack of infrastructure and transport makes it costly and challenging to travel, disenfranchising certain groups.

(Smyth et al., 2020, p.11)

**Language is one area highlighted as requiring greater attention to address the intersectionality of exclusion from meaningful participation in decision-making.**

Discussions at the 2019 Stockholm Forum on Peace and Development identified a built-in gender binary language in policy and practice that results in the exclusion of sexual minorities or young men from conflict prevention and peacebuilding processes, among others (Nagarajan, 2019). “Descriptive and substantive representation are not the same thing: women from different geographical locations, with different ethnic backgrounds, and who have accessed different educational and economic opportunities may have different views on peace and security issues and priorities” (Myrntinen, 2020, p.19). It has also been argued that this binary language can serve to reinforce harmful social norms and power relations through peacebuilding processes, undermining the basic principles of inclusion (Henry, 2021; Myrntinen et al., 2020).

“The idea that women are “natural” peacemakers while men are “naturally” conflict-prone not only reinforces the idea of a binary gender order but also attributes feminized characteristics – associated with peace, maternal care, and nurturing – to all women. Again, it is self evident that not all women share these characteristics. In a peace and security setting, these assumptions, embedded in problematic representations, can lead to women being overburdened and having unreasonable expectations placed upon them, while men’s agency is also diminished by the assumption that they are feckless, irresponsible with money, and inherently violent.

(Myrntinen et al., 2020, p.24)

Overgeneralisations of women as a homogenous entity also often leads to a lack of measurement of the impacts of policy and programmes on different groups due to a lack of disaggregated data collection on different identity factors (Nagarajan, 2019). This has important implications for the monitoring and evaluation of initiatives aimed at promoting women's meaningful participation, with missed opportunities to derive lessons learned from existing policies and programmes.

**A review of 44 reports examining conflicts and post-conflict transitions in seven countries by UN Women (2021) found that most documents did not take an intersectional approach.**

Looking at the intersection of gender and disability, the review found that “only 18 [reports] looked at the interaction and subsequent impacts of gender and disability together. Even in these cases, the intersectional groups were named without meaningful exploration of the impact of these intersections on lived experience (p.2).” “Where intersecting identities were acknowledged, such as rural women or women survivors of gender-based violence, compounded vulnerability was assumed and there was no further elaboration on specific impacts on their lived experiences” (UN women, p.2). The authors observed that reports by civil society organisations were more likely to adopt an intersectional lens than reports by government, international non-government organisations or UN agencies.

**The intersection of gender, race and ethnicity has been highlighted as a particular area of concern given that most peace processes involve ‘Western’ or ‘Northern’ intermediaries who are predominantly white, and these processes often struggle to break from historic colonial power relations.** (Kezie-Nwoha, 2020; Henry, 2021). Henry (2021) emphasises the need for a critical race theory approach to WPS based on the observation that the majority of teaching and global policy-making on women's participation in WPS is dominated by ‘whiteness’ (Henry, 2020, p.4).

“As academic homes of GPS/ WPS continue to ‘talk with’ state governments for exclusive consultancy contracts, access to the global stage, and humanitarian celebrities, BIPOC [Black, Indigenous and people of colour] faculty remain a small minority. This ‘white fog’ contributes to a depoliticisation of GPS/WPS in academia and maintains white privilege and the continued exclusion of Black women from ‘a seat at the table’ both in global governance circles and academia.”

(Henry, 2020, p.4)

Kezie-Nwoha notes that the racial and gender positionality of key figures in peace process not only reinforces neo-colonial power dynamics, but can limit their effectiveness, particularly at the local level.

“Most of the conflicts which are identity based, reflecting tribal, religious and ethnic cleavages are deeply enshrined in societies and would require conflict management at the community, social institutions, national and political levels and not necessarily by regional institutions. Further, the majority of the frameworks developed for peacebuilding by these institutions have been developed from the perspectives of men, who dominate leadership of these institutions.”

(Kezie-Nwoha, 2020, p. 4-5)

**Beyond the adoption of intersectional language in NAPs, no evidence of successful implementation of programming with an intersectional lens was identified for this report.**

The Serbian and Belgian NAPs are upheld by Myrntinen et al.'s (2020) review of national plans in OSCE countries as demonstrative of an intersectional approach. The 2017 Serbian NAP, for example, notes the importance of “creating equal opportunities in practice for education, employment, career guidance and advancement of women (especially women from multiply discriminated and minority groups) and men in the security system (p.19). However, the UN Women review of reports on conflict and post-conflict transitions found few reports identify challenges for intersectional group did not indicate any changes to implementation. “Social power dynamics and heightened risks of sexual and gender-based violence faced by women and girls with disabilities are well documented; however, subsequent interventions do not include targeted actions to address, for example, the stigma faced by women with psychosocial disabilities reporting sexual violence or the need for accessible courtrooms” (UN Women, 2021, p.3)

## 4. Inclusivity in formal institutions

**One area that has received significant attention as part of the WPS agenda has been the promotion of greater women’s representation in formal institutions including at different levels of government as well as in conflict prevention and peacebuilding roles such as formal negotiators and domestically within policing institutions.** Increasing women’s representation in formal roles in peacebuilding as well as wider institutional functions has been found to not only improve the durability of peacebuilding, but also to promote greater participation of women at local levels. “Women [peace agreement] signatories can become brokers who connect local-level women civil society networks to track-one negotiations ... [and] bridge gaps in social structures and facilitate the flow of goods, information, or knowledge across the gap” (Krause et al., 2018, p.991). While worldwide only one quarter of national parliamentarians are women, this figure is lower in conflict and post-conflict countries, at 19% in 2020 (UN Women, 2021). Women’s representation in local government is slightly higher at 25.9% in conflict and post-conflict countries, though still lagging the global average (UN Women, 2021). Quotas for women’s representation appears to be a leading driver of women’s participation with twice the number of women in parliament in those countries where quotas in place by comparison to those where they are not (UN Women, 2021).

**The number of women in parliament has increased in recent years, and in 2021 the UN celebrated that the number of female parliamentarians reached an ‘all-time high’ of 25.5%** (UN, 2021). Gender quotas were attributed with having a significant impact, having been applied in 25 of the 57 countries that had parliamentary renewals in 2020 (UN, 2021). Comoros, Mali and Niger have been highlighted for having made significant gains, having each recorded double-digit increases in the women’s representation in parliament (Pandey, 2021). Women’s participation remains lowest in the Pacific, Middle East, and North Africa regions. Papua New Guinea, Micronesia, Vanuatu, and Yemen all currently have no women in parliament (World Bank, 2020).

**The number of women in formal peace negotiations on the other hand has been in reversal in recent years, in contrast to progress being made on women’s representation in government.** In 2020, “only two peace agreements included any reference to signatories on behalf of women and none provided of the agreement provided for women being given a specific role in implementing the agreement” (Wise, 2021). For example, no women participated in negotiations for the 2019 Riyadh agreement and subsequent ceasefire in Yemen, and women



made up 4% of delegates at the 2018 Stockholm agreement, down from 12% of delegates at the 2016 peace talks for Yemen in Kuwait (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020). Discussing the reasons for ongoing challenges in women's participation in formal peace processes, Bafo argues:

“There was a lack of effort within the international community in promoting in real inclusive participation. The International peace processes remained exclusive and confined within the traditional realms of state centrism and formal institutions, that mainly focused on bringing armed groups who were rarely women, to the peace negotiation table. Even when a selective group of women are invited to these spaces of decision making, there remains unequal power dynamics and gendered norms within formal processes, that are inherently designed to cater to the prioritisation of men's experiences and needs, while excluding the voices of women.”

(Bafo, 2019)

**Recent peace negotiations in South Sudan have been singled out by some observers as bucking these trends, with women's organisations having made significant inroads in claiming their position at the negotiating table and with evidenced impacts on peace building outcomes** (Kezie-Nwoha, 2020; Oxfam, 2020). Women made up 25% of delegates in South Sudan's 2018 Peace negotiations, up from 15% in 2015 (Oxfam, 2020). Building on a history of women's promotion of peace and security in the country, women's groups organised peaceful processions, lobbied political parties and international stakeholders, produced position paper with gender-specific language and recommendations, and worked with male allies to amplify their messages (Oxfam, 2020). A concrete outcome from these efforts has been the securing of a provision for 35% representation of women in executive and transitional justice institutions going forwards (Oxfam, 2020).

## 5. The Gender, climate and conflict nexus

**Recent research and policy discussions have begun to recognise the cross-cutting impact of climate change on conflict and gender relations** (Women's International Peace Centre, 2021; Rolls & Evans, 2020, Smith et al., 2021). Climate change has come to be seen as “a risk multiplier, as part of a complex matrix of peoples' lives in conflict and post conflict contexts [that] is inherently gendered (LSE Women's International Peace Centre, 2021). Women's rights organisations have been calling for greater recognition of the gendered dynamics of climate change and conflict based on evidence that women are highly exposed to greater risks through both. Sostine Namanya from the National Association of Professional Environmentalist argues that:

“African women and girls are in large part not responsible for climate change issues yet they are disproportionately facing the burden of its impacts... in identifying solutions, it is important to remember that these will not come from the same places that have exported economic models of environmental degradation. Instead ... [there is a need to] centr[e] local practices and ensur[e] that these are weaved into platforms where women and girls, including rural women and girls, can advocate and are listened to on solutions to gender inequality, climate change and conflict.

(Quoted in LSE Women's International Peace Centre, 2021, p.7)

**The gender, climate and conflict nexus has become an important feature of the WPS agenda in the Pacific region, with the region highly exposed to the immediate consequences of climate change.** Regional women's groups have been active in promoting greater recognition of the combined risks posed by climate change and conflict on women and have been pushing for changes to national and international agreements across climate and conflict prevention agendas.

“In 2016 the GPPAC (Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict) Pacific network contributed to the establishment of the StP [Shifting the Power] Coalition, forged by 13 diverse Pacific women and women's organizations from Fiji, PNG (including Bougainville), Samoa, Tonga, Vanuatu, Australia, and the Pacific Disability Forum. As a unique, women-led mechanism, the feminist coalition draws on its members' capacity and collectively aims to enhance the capability for organizations to engage nationally and regionally in the humanitarian sector and climate change movement from a women's rights and feminist approach... Since the formation of the StP Coalition, Pacific Forum Leaders have adopted the Boe Declaration (2018), which broadened the definition of security to include human security, humanitarian assistance, environmental security, and regional cooperation.”

(Rolls & Evans, 2020, p.19-20)

While the gender, climate and conflict nexus is yet to be maintreamed across the climate and WPS agendas, Smith et al. (2021) suggest that greater integration with ongoing grassroots initiatives can help to fill the gap in international knowledge and action on this multifaceted, context specific issue.

“Successfully promoting the role of women in addressing the challenges presented by the climate-gender-conflict nexus requires connection of local and global efforts and translation of political commitments into action. Policymakers, scholars, and practitioners should leverage the strengths and expertise of current global policy frameworks aiming to advance gender equality.

(Smith et al., 2021, p. 12)

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## Suggested citation

Lenhardt, A. (2021). *Progress towards meaningful women's participation in conflict prevention and peacebuilding decision-making*. K4D Helpdesk Report. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies. DOI: [10.19088/K4D.2022.044](https://doi.org/10.19088/K4D.2022.044)

## About this report

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*K4D services are provided by a consortium of leading organisations working in international development, led by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), with Education Development Trust, Itad, University of Leeds Nuffield Centre for International Health and Development, Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine (LSTM), University of Birmingham International Development Department (IDD) and the University of Manchester Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute (HCRI).*

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