



# Shrinking Spaces for Women Peacebuilders and Organizations Advancing Feminist Peace

Taking Stock and Rethinking Women's  
Access, Participation and Influence in  
National, Regional and Global Policy-  
making on Peace and Security



Research Partners: Cordaid and Women's International Peace Centre

### **Research Team**

Amon Ashaba Mwiine (Lead Researcher)  
Latifah Namutebi  
Perpetue Kanyange  
Sandra Tumwesigye

### **Editorial Team**

Juliet Were, The Peace Centre  
Ester Versnel, Cordaid

Proof-readers    Angela Rwabose  
                         Sharon Eryenyu  
Translator        Ernest Hategeka

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Please address all correspondence to:  
The Executive Director  
Women's International Peace Centre (The Peace Centre)  
Plot 1, Martyrs Garden Road B, Ntinda  
P. O. Box 4934, Kampala - Uganda  
+256-414-543953  
program@wipc.org  
www.wipc.org

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# Executive Summary

The centrality of women's rights groups in the framing of the women, peace and security agenda that culminated into the 1325 resolution is well documented. Accordingly, the conceptual roots of 1325 are traced in the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action and its specific focus on women and armed conflict. Feminist scholars such as Cohn (2004) add that it was the 1998 UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) debate about the obstacles to implementing that chapter that a group of NGOs and the Women and Armed Conflict Caucus, started to think about taking the issue of "women, peace and security" (WPS) to the Security Council. Women's rights organisations are credited for adopting a complex strategy that included extreme investment in educating the Security Council; mapping high quality and relevant literature which was then presented to the Council delegations; meeting with and learning the protocol of how and when to approach council members and developing relationships with relevant departments of governments in the member states' capitals. This kind of strategic mapping (of actors, interests and institutional cultures) speaks to women's collective agency and consistent investedness in a process that later institutionalized WPS agenda.

Despite these historical achievements both in women's collective organisation, as well as the passage of a resolution that has since shaped WPS agenda, there is an increasing sense of frustration among Women's Rights organisations regarding women's access, participation and influence in policy making. These frustrations are due to shrinking space for civic engagement at global, regional,

national and local levels. In this study, shrinking civic space was conceptualized as a form of pushback/backlash motivated by feminist initiatives that question and seek to change the status quo in peace and conflict. Backlash may be understood as: intentional and sustained action (words and/or deeds/strategies) by specific – albeit diverse – actors who are opposed to gender justice, equality and women's equal rights. These actions and strategies mostly become visible at critical junctures when the status quo on an issue is in flux, or in relation to a challenge mounted by women's rights or other gender justice actors (in other words, during episodes of contention or contestation).

Drawing on a sensing of increasing pushback against feminist gains in peace and security despite the pending 20th celebration of the UNSCR 1325, this study set out to explore possibilities of women peace builders' access, participation and influence in policy-making spaces. In particular, the study drew on qualitative interviews with women peace builders and took stock of existing policy platforms at national, regional and global levels, analysed institutional cultures that buttress different policy-making platforms and the implications these institutional cultures have for women's access, participation and influence in peace building processes. The study further explored opportunities that exist to rethink and strengthen women access, participation and influence (voice) in policy making platforms to promote a transformative agenda for peace.

## Study Findings

Participants identified numerous spaces and platforms (both formal and informal) within which decisions around peace and security are nurtured, discussed and critical agendas framed for sustainable and inclusive peace. Global platforms women peace builders identified include; formal spaces such as the UN Security Council, the UN General Assembly, selected United Nations Departments e.g. the United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) and the numerous special political missions therein. Other spaces mentioned were annual meetings, conventions (e.g. CSW) and celebrations such as the UNSCR 1325, UN thematic debates especially on sexual and gender based violence, working groups, special envoys, meetings, and workshops organized by global actors such as European Union, UN Women, UNFPA and UNDP among others. At the regional level, participants identified regional bodies/ networks such as the African Union (AU), AU Peace and Security Council (PSC), Economic community of West African States (ECOWAS), special envoy on women, peace and security, Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and other specific missions created to support international peace and security processes.

Participants drew attention to women's rights movements at all levels as critical spaces through which sensitization, awareness creation, documentation of grass-root experiences, capacity building of women peace builders and activism to influence peace building occur. Women-specific spaces created a sense of unity and enabled women collective agency especially as they confronted states, non-state actors, regional and global actors to respond to women's and girls' interests in peace building.

Participants noted an increasing presence of women in global, regional and national policy-making spaces. At the African regional level, women peace builders pointed to the AU Security Council decision to appoint a Special Envoy of the Chairperson of the African

Union Commission as a key step towards increasing women's presence in regional policy-making processes. Women activists in Liberia, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan and Yemen, talked about women's involvement in mediation teams and in peace talks and how essential it was to have women on the negotiation table. In Somalia, for instance, women activists have worked alongside the female minister to keep the Sexual Offences Bill (SOB) on the legislative agenda despite stiff resistance from religious institutions and a male dominated parliament.

### *On the shrinking Civic engagement in policy making spaces*

Despite the presence and participation of women as indicated above, the numbers of women in policy-making spaces remain dismally small compared to men, two decades after the 1325 UN resolution. Participants noted peace teams that remained exclusively male, giving no room to women peace negotiators. Exclusive peace processes create feelings of mistrust among peace actors and contribute to broader patterns of civic disengagement between communities experiencing conflict and international peace and security actors.

Literature on Women, Peace and Security and the participants talked to, pointed to the history of male participation in policy making inscribing a patriarchal culture that dictates a masculine infrastructure of international peace and security. There is an idea that security paradigm is based on elitist masculinities and this plays out across different sectors and spaces where women activists continue to be excluded. As masculine institutions, global and regional policy making platforms have priorities that are overtly and covertly guided by regulatory frameworks, which valorize male presence and participation while negating women's presence and voice. Some women peace builders cited the presence of 'great intellectual Senegalese women' at the United Nations level as well as African Union, but adds that their participation in policy making is not enough because traditions weigh



heavily on their engagement. In effect, policy platforms have commonly remained male dominated spaces where women are at times “invited” rather than spaces they occupy, influence and shape the agenda.

There were reports of sexual abuse of women participating in peace processes. In interviews, some women peace builders pointed out cases in which young women peace builders in peace processes were viewed as sexual symbols and prizes brought forth to motivate the signing of peace agreement. In their study *“Making a Difference: Embracing the challenge of women’s substantive engagement in political leadership in Uganda”*, Ahikire, Musiimenta and Mwiine (2015) conceptualise sexual abuse embedded in institutional cultures as sexual pacification – the “exercise of power to disempower women through sexual practices”. The sexual language used to describe women peace builders as ‘looking edible’, and equating women peace builders as some form of gifts to entice male leaders of warring parties to sign the peace agreement goes beyond acceptable jokes in formal peace processes. Such sexist utterances point to the dominant discourses that frame women as sexual objects rather than political actors, consequently narrowing their scope of participation and influence in policy-making spaces.

Participants pointed out inter-generational differences amongst women who access and participate in policy-making platforms. They noted that while women representation was low overall, the few women that participate exclude young women, women from indigenous communities and women with disabilities among other social groups. Participants noted that there are cases where ‘same old faces’ of women activists will appear in the few available spaces such as at the national level, regional meetings and global conventions such as CSW to the detriment of diverse categories of women and their interests.

Perhaps COVID 19 is one of the contemporary concerns that has eroded the opportunities

and informal spaces that women engaged in historically to mobilise, build capacities and participate in local, national, regional and global platforms for policy-making. COVID-19 pandemic and the protective -lockdown - measures put in place to contain the spread disrupted everyday ways of social interaction, mobilisation, mobility to access and participate in local, regional and global platforms. At the local level, participants pointed out ways in which the pandemic eroded informal social spaces through which activists would gather stories from communities affected by war and raise awareness about women’s experiences. Zoom meetings, which emerged as the symbol of virtual engagement, created opportunities to connect globally were constrained by the lack of adequate infrastructure for virtual spaces – constant electricity, stable internet connectivity, interactive platforms.

### **Call for Action**

Given the multiple manifestations of pushback on women’s access, participation and voice in WPS, women peace builders suggest actions to draw global and regional actors’ attention to the crippling effect of institutional cultures that constrain women’s participation and curtail implementation of resolutions that seek to transform unequal and oppressive structures. These calls included urging UNSC and state parties to meaningfully implement resolution 1325; investment in infrastructure to facilitate virtual engagement. Participants also called upon **women’s rights movement to build** activism for peace from below, establish feminist models of mentorship, integrating critical masculinities perspective in gender-sensitive peacebuilding, and strengthening women peace builders’ potential in leadership and decision-making structures. Other calls were directed to funding agencies to invest in psychosocial self-care for women activists to address trauma emerging from attending to women victims sexual and gender-based violence.

# 1. Background to the Study

Women's representation, participation and influence in ending conflicts, peace building and post conflict reconstruction is globally acknowledged as key towards inclusive and sustainable peace building (African Union Commission, 2019; Klot, 2011). Women's representation and participation in decision making at all levels in relation to preventing, managing, and resolving conflicts is located in what scholars on women peace and security have termed the "watershed doctrinal triumph" (Klot, 2011, p. 263) and the first ever action on women and peace and security adopted in 2000 as the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. Notably, UNSCR 1325 is often perceived as a landmark resolution "because it represents the first time the Security Council directly addressed the subject of women and armed conflict, beyond a few passing references to women as victims, or women as a 'vulnerable group'." (Cohn, 2004, p. 2)

Through this landmark resolution, the United Nations Security Council, as a key global policy actor in international peace and security, urged the UN Secretary-General and Member States to increase women's representation in decision making at all levels. The Council also called on Member States to incorporate a gender perspective into peacekeeping operations where appropriate, including through training and in the context of sanctions, disarmament, demobilization, reintegration programmes, and in post-conflict reconstruction. Further guidance on a Women, Peace and Security (WPS) policy framework included global calls for action towards inclusion and support to "local women's peace initiatives, measures that ensure the protection and respect for human rights of women and girls, and their protection against sexual and gender-based violence" (Klot, 2011). The historic resolution (UNSCR 1325) and the resultant initiatives not only evolved into a WPS policy framework, but also provided a mapping of spaces (global, regional and local women peace initiatives) and actors central in the furtherance of a sustainable and meaningful peace agenda.



A street protest with market women and religious women calling for peace during the Prime Minister head of government's visit to the Bamenda, North West Region of Cameroon in May 2019

## 1.1 Localization of the Global Agenda on Women Peace and Security

Drawing from the landmark UNSCR 1325, the African Union Commission (2019), noted how the principle of gender equality and female participation in decision-making processes has increasingly become a key norm in the search for a peaceful and secure Africa. Accordingly, the continental body's commitment to women's representation and participation in leadership is reiterated in policy commitments such as the African Union Constitutive Act of 2002. Other policy frameworks that provide for women's access and participation in Peace and Security processes include the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (SDGEA), the Maputo Protocol, the African Union Gender Policy and above all, Agenda 2063 in which Aspiration 6 specifically recognizes the centrality of women in Africa's development (African Union Commission, 2019, p. 2). The 1325 Resolution has also been echoed at national and local levels as a key reference point and tool that guides women's participation in national policy platforms as well as national and grassroots movements that relentlessly advocate for women's rights in peace building processes.

The centrality of women's rights groups in the framing of the women, peace and security agenda that culminated into the 1325 resolution is well documented. In her work, *Mainstreaming Gender in UN Security Policy: A Path to Political Transformation?* Carol Cohn traces the conceptual roots of UNSCR 1325 in the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action's chapter devoted to women and armed conflict (2004, p. 4). Cohn argues that it was following the 1998 UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) debate about the obstacles to implementing that chapter that a group of NGOs, the Women and Armed Conflict Caucus, started to think about taking the issue of "women, peace and security" (WPS) to the Security Council (SC). While the eventual drafting and passage of the resolution was an enormous, multifaceted and complex story with many different actors,

Cohn demonstrates ways in which women NGOs did "groundwork for this resolution, including the initial drafting, and the political work of preparing Security Council members to accept that the resolution was relevant to and had precedents in the Security Council's work" (2004, p. 4). Women rights organisations are credited for adopting a complex strategy that included extreme investment in educating the Security Council, mapping high quality and relevant literature (on WPS) which was then presented to the Council delegations, meeting with and learning the protocol of how and when to approach council members, and developing relationships with relevant departments of government in the member states' capitals. This kind of strategic mapping (of actors, interests and institutional cultures) speaks to women's collective agency and consistent investment in a process that would otherwise have been perceived as the Security Council's inherent responsibility to promote inclusive peace and security.

Despite these historical achievements both in women's collective organisation, as well as the passage of a resolution that has since shaped the WPS agenda, there is an increasing sense of frustration among women's rights organisations regarding women's access, participation and influence in policy making fora on WPS. Recent studies on obstacles to meaningful women's participation in peacebuilding indicate for instance, "[in] the current context, confidence that the WPS agenda will enable women's participation and leadership is diminishing at global, national and local levels. This is happening both within women's civil society groups and grassroots organisations, and within the core community of peace and security actors. The broad view in many CSOs is that there has been a severe lack of political will and leadership from key implementing bodies to operationalize UNSCR 1325 effectively, and that state and non-state actors continue to undermine the status of women and delegitimize their work in conflict prevention, resolution and reconciliation" (McMinn, 2015, p. 7).

## 1.2 On the Shrinking Civic Space

Shrinking civic space or closing spaces for engagement, limited engagement or obstruction of action to influence change in policy or decision-making is increasingly silencing and affecting the ability of women's rights organisations (WROs) to advocate for accountability for the implementation of the women, peace and security frameworks at all levels. In global, regional and national activism for women, peace and security, shrinking space for civic engagement has been conceptualized as a form of backlash towards women's rights in the peace and security sector (McMinn, 2015; Taylor & Baldwin, 2019). In their recent research entitled *The Global Pushback on Women's Rights: The State of the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda*, Taylor and Baldwin argue that [by] many indicators, the global status of commitments to gender equality, including of efforts to prevent and end conflict, is under threat. This, they add, is despite global recognition that the level of gender equality can be a litmus test of a community's capacity to eschew violent responses to threats and that women's leadership and women's status are inextricably linked to conflict prevention and resolution.

Other feminist critics argue that "while there is much to celebrate about the Security Council's WPS agenda in terms of policy and institutional developments, admission into the inner sanctum of the Security Council's work has come at some cost to feminist goals" (Otto, 2016). Notably one of the costs relates to ways in which feminist conceptions of positive peace have become captive to the militarized security frame of the council's operation. In particular, Dianne Otto argues:

"One cost has been a softening of feminist opposition to war, evidenced by a shift in the focus of feminist peace advocates from strengthening the laws that make armed conflict illegal (*jus ad bellum*) to seeking to humanize the laws that govern the conduct of armed

conflict (*jus in bello*); from aiming to end all wars to making wars safer for women. The idea that lawful justifications for the use of force might even be expanded to include protection of the rights of women has been endorsed, and while some of the long-term goals of feminist peace advocates appear to have been embraced, this engagement has proved to be largely "ritualistic", involving the formal acceptance of norms which are then undermined through inaction."

This feminist view lays the ground for this study, that is, understanding the progress of women in accessing, participating and influencing the peace and security agenda. Particularly, Dianne Otto raises key concerns that point to a seemingly gradual yet systematic resistance to the women's peace agenda exemplified through dilution of feminist goals on illegality of war, end of all conflicts as opposed to making wars safer for women as well as the increasing ritualistic involvement of women in policy making spaces.

Drawing on a sensing of increasing pushback against feminist gains in peace and security, this study set out to explore possibilities of women peace builders' access, participation and influence in policy-making spaces. In particular, the study took stock of existing policy platforms at national, regional and global levels; and analysed institutional cultures that buttress different policy-making platforms and the implications these institutional cultures have for women's access, participation and influence in peace building processes. The study further explored opportunities that exist to rethink and strengthen women access, participation and influence (voice) in policy-making platforms to promote a transformative agenda for peace.

### 1.3 Conceptualizing Shrinking Civic Space for Gender Justice Struggles

In this study, shrinking civic space was conceptualized as a form of pushback/backlash motivated by feminist initiatives that question and seek to change the status quo in peace and conflict. Backlash may be understood as:

- a. Intentional and sustained action (words and/or deeds/strategies) by specific – albeit diverse – actors who are opposed to gender justice, equality and women’s equal rights
- b. Actions and strategies mostly visible at critical junctures when the status quo on an issue is in flux, or in relation to a challenge mounted by women’s rights or other gender justice actors (in other words, during episodes of contention or contestation).

Backlash is often used interchangeably with resistance and manifests in different forms. These may include deliberate lack of bureaucratic implementation (delays/inaction/active stalling/lack of transparency; co-option, appropriation and subversion of gender justice objectives, policies and strategies; de-legitimization and non-recognition (of both issues as well as groups); or stigmatization and vilification (Flood, Dragiewicz, & Bob, 2018). The study drew on this conceptual understanding of backlash as a broader context in which to understand shrinking spaces at global, regional and national level, including spaces within and amongst grassroots and women’s rights organisations focused on WPS.



# 2. Research Purpose and Objectives

Women's International Peace Centre and Cordaid seek to increase the engagement of women's rights organisations in regional and international policy making platforms to improve their influence and ability to contribute effectively to decision-making on the women, peace and security agenda. The need to address Engaging women in global and regional policy making platforms to influence women's representation and voice in peace building processes becomes apparent as the world moves to celebrate two decades of UNSCR 1325, but also to address the fragilities exemplified through protracted armed conflicts as well as the Covid-19 pandemic. As such, the study had the following objectives:

## 2.1 General Objectives

To increase understanding of the current shrinking civic space and priority concerns for women's rights organisations working on women, peace and security agenda within global peace and security, and human rights mechanisms.

## 2.2 Specific Objectives

1. Historicise the evolution of the women, peace and security agenda
2. Analyse the nature of the pushbacks to women's rights organisations in accessing, participating and influencing for the women peace and security agenda
3. Identify strategies or priority actions needed to enhance participation,

leadership and influence of women's rights organisations in advancing the WPS agenda at regional and global level

## 2.3 Research Methodology

The study employed qualitative methods of engagement and knowledge production. These methods included critical review of literature and conducting online interview conversations with selected women peace builders. The study covered a total of 18 women peace builders from Africa, Middle East and Asia. Women peace builders interviewed came from Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Central African Republic (CAR), Libya, South Sudan, Somalia, Yemen, and Nepal (*see Appendix 1 for the list of participants*).

### **a. Critical Literature Review**

This method included critical review of literature on feminist activism on peace and security, exploring experiences of women's rights organisations at global, regional, national and grassroots level in mobilising for peace, and literature on global and regional policy-making platforms and processes. The review further mapped out critical junctures in the framing of the WPS agenda, actors involved, interests and ideas drawn upon, and milestones registered in the context of UNSCR 1325.

### **b. Online Interview Conversations**

Interviews with women peace builders were conducted using virtual means, given the limits of mobility and the distance between the participants. The study conducted telephone interviews and Zoom meetings. Interview conversations focused on learning from a diversity of participants' country contexts and experiences of working with women builders in grassroot women's organisations, national structures, regional and global platforms. Interviews collected views from women activists in different age groups; different career professions bring forth a multiplicity of women's interests in peace building. Interviews explored milestones registered globally and regionally regarding the WPS agenda, existing avenues for policymaking, women's access to and influence in these spaces and constraints encountered.

Participants also shared insights into actionable strategies to strengthen women's collective efforts and enhance their access, participation and influence in policy-making spaces at regional and global level. Interviews were conducted in English and French to widen the possibilities of capturing experiences of women activists in these discourse communities.

### **c. Analysis**

Knowledge on women's access to and participation in regional and global policymaking platforms was analysed based on the common narratives and themes emerging from the literature, as well as individual women peace builders. This thematic analysis was in part guided by the study objectives and more so questions on existing policy making platforms, the presence or absence of women therein, and whether women activists' voice is shaping the agenda on peacebuilding. The motive of this mode of analysis was to enable women activists evaluate policy-making spaces regarding their accommodation of women's interests in peacebuilding, account for the shrinking of these spaces and suggest a call for action towards enhancing meaningful women's participation in shaping policies on international peace and security agenda.



# 3. Study Findings

## 3.1 Introduction

Research respondents across the countries that participated in this study were asked to reflect on the WPS agenda and the place of Women Rights Organisations (WROs) in influencing women's representation, participation and influence. Below, the study presents thematic reflections on WROs' perceptions on women's presence, participation and voice in policy-making platforms at different levels.

## 3.2 Existing Formal Policy-making Platforms

Participants identified numerous spaces and platforms (both formal and informal) within which decisions around peace and security are nurtured, and discussed, as well as critical agendas framed for sustainable and inclusive peace. Global platforms women peace builders identified include formal spaces such as the UN Security Council, the UN General Assembly, selected United Nations Departments e.g. the United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) and the numerous special political missions therein. Other spaces mentioned were annual meetings, e.g. around the UN Commission of the Status of Women) and celebrations such as the UNSCR 1325 anniversary, UN thematic debates especially on sexual and gender based violence, working groups, special envoys, meetings, and workshops organized by global actors such as European Union, UN Women, UNFPA and UNDP among others. At the regional level, participants identified regional bodies/networks such as the African Union (AU),

AU Peace and Security Council (PSC), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), special envoy on women, peace and security, Inter-governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and other specific missions created to support international peace and security processes.

While the focus of the study was on policy making spaces at regional and global levels, participants identified national-level spaces such as government ministries, national legislatures, parliamentary committees, working groups, civil society networks and grassroots movements as critical spaces where decisions on peace and security within UN members states take place. States and their structures on peace and security were seen as critical spaces for discussion and implementation of global and regional commitments on the WPS agenda.

Some of these formal spaces focus on the mainstream peace and security issues while others were women-specific initiatives mandated to oversee integration of women's concerns in international peace and security agenda. For example, the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), the AU Special Envoy on Women, Peace and Security with the mandate to promote the protection and advancement of women's rights and the active participation of women in conflict prevention, conflict resolution and peacebuilding, among others.

From the interviews it was clear that the work of advancing the women, peace and security agenda involves many actors and takes place at various political levels. These levels are intricately connected and it is therefore important to pay attention at all levels in



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order to harness the potential of what one of the participants refers to as the critical “coalitions beyond the state borders”. This would provide important opportunities to exchange experiences and share learning on the challenges that women peace builders face across countries.

Besides such potential, there are also challenges involved. Between community,

national, regional and global levels, there are power relations at play that could stand in the way of further advancement of the WPS agenda, undermining localization and the meaningful involvement and representation of women’s rights organisations

A manifestation of such power relations within policy making spaces is brought forward in the postcolonial critique of the WPS agenda



Photo © UN Somalia

that there is a “discourse for understanding WPS that perceives of individuals in the Global South as merely recipients of norms” (Parashar, 2018). Parashar argues that “for the WPS agenda to acquire universal character and meaning, the Global South must be employed as a site of knowledge and investigation”.

### 3.3 ‘Women’s Movement’ as a Space for Policy Influence

Along formal policy-making spaces identified, participants drew attention to women’s rights movements at all levels as critical spaces through which sensitization, awareness creation, documentation of grassroots experiences, capacity building of women peace builders and activism to influence peace building occur.

All the participants talked to identified with a women’s rights organisation, whether it is at the grassroots, national level, regional level or a global network. Majority of the women peace builders co-founded or co-chaired organisations or were members of networks promoting women’s representation and participation in institutional structures that promote WPS issues. These networks included grassroots organisations on women and indigenous communities, youth networks for peace, national/regional networks on UNSCR 1325, national alliances of women human rights defenders, civil society platforms for peace, and networks of organisations working with women with disabilities. Regional women’s rights networks such as Femmes Africa Solidarité (FAS), Women’s Network for Peace and Security in West Africa, and the African Women Leadership Network, among others, were founded within the framework of Resolution 1325 to foster solidarity amongst women, highlight the plight of women in armed conflicts and reimagine women as agents of change in peace building. At a global level, participants revealed ways in which international actors supporting women’s rights such as the UN Women, and UNDP and UNFPA often facilitated women’s participation at regional and global level policy-making spaces.

Coumba Fall Venn of Femmes Africa Solidarité (FAS) recalled:

“As FAS secretariat, we have worked a lot alongside the United Nations by strengthening the Women’s Working Group, which subsequently focused on the work of women in peace and security. We have been able to chair this platform for many years and the same at the African Union. We have had a liaison office with the United Nations for over 15 years and we are also very active during CSW. FAS is one of the African Organisations that has carried out some CSW activities creating visibility of women activism in Africa.”

(Interview with woman peace builder from Senegal)

In Libya, a women’s rights activist noted:

“We influence change when the government sees that there is a collective effort - and that’s why recently we started doing that a lot. We have the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) coalition, the SDGs coalitions, and 1325 network. Under Covid-19 response, we have also collaborated with 13 other organisations to present a statement to the Presidency Council. These collective efforts create a level of focus on demands of the network, increases pressure on governments and non-state actors and divert possible attacks from individual activists and lone organisations.”

(Interview with woman peace builder in Libya)

Women-specific spaces created a sense of unity and enabled women collective agency especially as they confronted states, non-state actors, regional and global actors to respond to women's and girls' interests in peace building. Women's collective mobilization was credited as a tactic that promotes safety of individuals in fragile states with multiple possibilities of attacks on those that demand peace building.

### 3.4 On Women's Presence, Participation and Influence in Policy Making Spaces

Participants noted an increasing presence of women in global, regional and national policy-making spaces. At the African regional level, women peace builders pointed to the AU Security Council decision to appoint a Special Envoy of the Chairperson of the African Union Commission on women, peace and security as a key step towards increasing women's presence in regional policy-making processes. Notably, prior to the appointment of Her Excellency Bineta Diop as AU Special Envoy on WPS, she participated in the development of UNSCR 1325 while at the helm of *Femme Africa Solidarite (FAS)*. “[*Mme Diop highlighted the contributions of women peace builders, she*] gave the background of the *Manu River* where women peacebuilders met with the three leaders [*President Charles Taylor (Liberia), President Lansana Conté (Guinea), and President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah (Sierra Leone)*] and brought them back to the negotiating table as the UN troops were being pulled out of *Sierra Leone and Liberia*” Coumba Fall Venn recounts. As a Special Envoy on WPS, Diop, along with other women activists on the continent, has participated in peace talks in Democratic Republic of Congo, facilitated women peace negotiators in Burundi and launched the African Women Leadership Network (AWLN) as a continental movement to elevate the status of women's leadership in Africa (Diop & Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2020). Through her office, Bineta Diop coordinated the development of the Continental Results Framework, a twenty-eight (28) indicators-mechanism to monitor

implementation of the WPS Agenda in Africa (African Union Commission, 2019).

Women activists in Liberia, DRC, South Sudan and Yemen talked about women's involvement in mediation teams and in peace talks and how essential it was to have women at the negotiation table. Indeed, women reportedly participated in peace negotiations in Yemen as well as in South Sudan. In Cameroon, women's rights organisations conduct most of the work on peace building. In Nepal, the National Alliance of Women Human Rights Defenders is actively engaged at the national level (in provinces, parliament) pushing for transformative acts especially as enshrined in the national constitution. Women peace builders highlighted the increasing cases of suicide and GBV during the Covid-19 pandemic. Through webinars, they highlighted mental health as a key concern to the people and a central element of a holistic peace agenda. As Dr. Renu Adhikari noted:

“We took advantage of Covid-19 to tell government that it has not been on the right track. During this season, suicide is high and a lot of migrant workers are back and migrant women workers are worried about the way they are treated by the community and ... violence against women has increased. So, all these things have given us solid ground to say to the government, look, you are not moving in the right direction. That's our advocacy, and I am very happy to share at least we have been listened to by the government at this point. The Prime Minister's ears are open and then Women's Minister is open and the Planning Commission is also open. Only a small civil society group had always been consulted on how to move forward. For us as the national alliance

of women’s rights defenders, we are trying to take this space, to push for the transformative acts even from the community.”

(Interview with a woman peace builder in Nepal)

The feeling of being listened to points to women gaining influence in determining the national agenda on women, peace and security.

In Somalia women activists have worked alongside the female ministers to keep the Sexual Offences Bill (SOB) on the legislative agenda, despite stiff resistance from religious institutions and a male-dominated parliament. In Nepal, the presence of women activists (human rights defenders and activists on issues of women with disabilities) has kept pressure on government to focus on women’s peace building priorities as well as women’s representation and participation in politics. These and many other women peace builders’ encounters with policy makers point to opportunities of learning from and influencing the visibility of women’s rights and concerns in conflict affected communities.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, one of the grassroots women activists we talked to noted:

“When it comes to policy making, I am a simple woman who works at the local level but with good impact. I have never participated in those spaces where policies are made. However, we have a woman elected as a Member of Parliament who later became the President of the National Assembly. At the level of North Kivu Province, we have a woman who is a Vice-Governor. This is the first time we have reached 37 % of women who are in politics throughout the country. So, when it

comes to participation at regional and international levels, it is these women who are invited to those platforms where policies are developed.”

(Interview with woman peace builder in DRC)

To the women peace builders in DRC, women’s participation in regional and global policy platforms largely depends on women’s presence and participation in national level politics. They argue that women’s participation in local and national leadership gives them skills, exposure and grounds to be invited to participate in regional and global policy platforms.

### 3.5 Women ‘Invited’ to Speak in Global Policy-making Platforms

Women peace builders also pointed out different ways they have participated in policy spaces at regional and global level. Most of the forms of participation noted include ‘invitations’ to speak at international events organised by the UN and its partners, addressing the UN Security Council or the UN General Assembly. Women peace activists from Libya, Yemen, and South Sudan shared their recent experiences when they were invited to address the UN General Assembly on the plight of women, youth and children in civil wars in their countries. In Libya for example, Inas Miloud shared her 2019 experience participating in a UN Security Council Open Debate on sexual violence in conflict. A year later, Olla Al Sakkaf, a young female peace builder with Youth without Borders Organization for Development (YWBOD), addressed the UN Security Council on youth, peace and security in Yemen. In our interview, Olla talks about the nature of participation in global debates:



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**Researcher:** Coming to the UN as a global policy making space, I saw your participation in the UN Security Council debate on youth and peace. That looked like another space where issues of young women and peace are discussed. What was your experience there? Is it an open space where the youth speak and their voice gets taken seriously?

**Female Activist:** It is a space for us to speak, although Yemeni youth are not getting a lot of opportunities to speak at such events. But we are now trying hard to get more opportunities. Actually, that helped us to let the world understand what we are going through. We were trying just to give a message about our situation and what they [UN Security Council] should do. We at YWBOD have had the opportunity to speak and many youth had also the opportunities to speak in different events, but things are not changing in our reality. They [UN officials in attendance] understand, they show sympathy but they are actually not doing serious actions toward this.

(Interview with a young female activist in Yemen)

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Olla's response points to the complexity of the conversation on women representation and participation in policy-making processes. The complexities are highlighted in the explicit acknowledgement of the existence of spaces, women's invitation therein and women's ability to speak about and highlight key concerns from communities in conflict.

Nonetheless, Olla's reflections are repeatedly dotted with the conjunction "BUT". These reveal just how challenging it is for women's voice to be heard and for these events and apparent sympathies of policy makers to translate into serious actions that transform the lives of women and youth. Inadequate implementation, whether of legal and policy frameworks or policy actions delivered by women's rights organisations to policy makers has been formally documented by regional and global bodies on international peace

and security. For instance, the AU Continental Results Framework notes that despite many positive commitments to inclusive peace building, "implementation is wanting, yet commitments are only meaningful and life-transforming when implemented" (African Union Commission, 2019).

It is this documented frustration with inadequate implementation that women peace builders view as constituting a backlash to the WPS. In the section below, the study draws on women's voices from different communities, to share the nature of backlash and how pushbacks on the WPS agenda are particularly narrowing the space for women's participation and influence in conflict prevention, resolution, peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction.





Sally Mboumien, Founder and  
CEO, Common Action for Gender  
Development (COMAGEND)

# 4. On the Shrinking Civic Engagement in Policymaking Spaces

Despite the presence and participation of women as indicated above, the numbers of women in policy-making spaces remain dismally small compared to men, two decades after the 1325 UN resolution. According to the United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, “inclusion and meaningful participation of women in conflict prevention, mediation and peacebuilding processes is fundamental to the full realization of their human rights. Peace making strategies that systematically include women – and civil society, including formal networks of women leaders – are more likely to generate national ownership and support for a negotiated settlement and to lead to more sustainable peace” (UN DPPA, 2019).

Yet, the UN body adds, “the number of women involved in formal peace making processes remains low” (UN DPPA, 2020). Numbers of women actors are not only low in formal spaces but women actors in civil society organisations are also commonly excluded from peace building processes.

#### 4.1 Male Exclusive Peace Missions and The Silence on Women's Experiences

In Libya, examples were given of peace teams that were exclusively male, giving no room to women peace negotiators. Accordingly, a recent United Nations Special Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) led peace processes that largely excluded Libyan women, youth and indigenous groups (NGO Working Group on Women Peace and Security, 2019). Further, in September 2020, the international community and regional organisations commended efforts by the Kingdom of Morocco in mediating rivalling armed groups in Libya. United Nations credited Morocco's role as an active and 'constructive' contribution to a peaceful resolution of the conflict in Libya. Yet, just like the UNSMIL, the peace negotiation team was exclusively male (The North Africa Post, 2020).

Such experiences are described by women peace builders as regular, unfortunate, patriarchal practices that compromise inclusivity of peace building processes. For instance women's rights actors in North Africa note that as a result of the male domination of UNSMIL, "the 2015 Libyan Political Agreement does not reflect many crucial issues that affect women" (NGO Working Group on Women Peace and Security, 2019).

Absence of women's participation and voice in policy-making spaces often lead to agreements and resolutions that either silence or trivialize concerns such as gender equality, sexual and gender-based violence, displacement, and restrictions on freedom of movement, particularly of women and girls. Exclusive peace processes create feelings of mistrust among peace actors and contributes to broader patterns of civic disengagement between communities experiencing conflict and international peace and security actors.

#### 4.2 Policy-making Spaces and their Institutional cultures

The participants talked to and literature on Women, Peace and Security, pointed to the history of male participation in policy making inscribing a patriarchal culture that dictates a masculine infrastructure of international peace and security. There is an idea that security paradigm is based on elitist masculinities and this plays out across different sectors and spaces where women activists continue to be excluded.

According to *Candid Voices* (McMinn, 2015, p. 29), patriarchal norms account for continued male domination of structures of power whether this is within peace and security or beyond. Highlighting male-centered approaches and structures at the global level, McMinn argues that "[within] the UN, patriarchal norms are evident in the institutional setup of departments and bodies that exclude women from influence and key decision-making roles, in the limited space and low status given in connection with the discussion of WPS issues, and in the limited scale and allocation of financial resources for a holistic WPS agenda". These exclusive practices congeal into cultures in which everything about war and the solution to the end of wars is legitimised as a male prerogative. As masculine institutions, global and regional policy making platforms have priorities that are overtly and covertly guided by regulatory frameworks, which valorise male presence and participation while negating women's presence and voice. Coumba, for instance, alerts us to the presence of 'great intellectual Senegalese women' at the United Nations level as well as African Union, but adds that their participation in policy making is not enough because traditions weighs heavily on their engagement.

Cohn (2004) and Klot (2011) discuss the ways in which international peace and security agenda and the actors at the UN level are products of a militarized culture animated by patriarchy and masculine virtues



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of aggression, competition, and control. According to Cohn, the UN Security Council is the primary UN decision-making body in the area of international peace and security, and it is at the center of UN power. Yet, Cohn argues, “not coincidentally, it is also an overwhelmingly male and masculinist domain, devoted to the ‘hardcore’ issue of military threats to international peace and security”. On her part, Jennifer Klot notes how, at times, feminist scholars and activists have remained unfamiliar with the UN’s peacebuilding architecture, institutional, and bureaucratic processes, especially when they place what she terms “far too much expectation on a single resolution’s [UNSCR 1325] potential for transformative change” (2011, p. 265). Both Cohn and Klot’s reading of the UN policy-making platforms underscore the complexity of these institutions but also alert us to the ways in which the peace agenda they promote may be animated by patriarchal norms and values and less likely to buy into a

transformative (WPS) agenda that advocates for the disruption of patriarchy and related forms of extremism.

In effect:

- Policy platforms have commonly remained male-dominated spaces where women are at times “invited”, rather than spaces they occupy, influence and shape the agenda
- Spaces that are governed by institutionalized norms, values and practices that give privilege to male leadership
- Spaces in which women and children are dominantly viewed through a discourse of weakness and vulnerability and in need of protection without due regard to women

### **CASE STUDY 1: Sexual Offences Bill (SOB) in Somalia**

The study interacted with peace builders from IIDA Women's Development Organisation (IIDA), a non-governmental organisation based in Mogadishu, Somalia with networks and working relationships regionally and globally. The organisation is centered on peacebuilding, advancing human rights, child protection, and the promotion of active citizenship in the context of state-building and post-conflict transition in Somalia. In an interview, Hibo Yassin, a peace builder we talked to, alerted us to the tensions between women activists for peace both in CSOs and femocrats (Feminist activists within the state) on the one hand and the male dominated parliament on the other, over the Sexual Offences Bill. "Civil Society Organizations in Somalia have been pushing to have this bill enacted into law to offer better protection for victims of sexual violence- particularly women, children and other vulnerable persons. The bill, developed after several years of wide-ranging consultations with key stakeholders, is seen as part of the progressive pieces of legislation that women, civil society, the international community and peace activists are pushing to be introduced to advance human rights protection and strengthen justice and accountability mechanisms in the country", Ms. Yassin said. The bill offers additional layer of protection currently not provided under the Somali Penal Code (1962), a colonial era Italian law. According to Legal Action Worldwide (LAW), the penal code fails to protect the survivors and prosecute the perpetrators of sexual and gender-based violence. If passed into law, "the Somali Sexual Offences Bill will effectively criminalize a wide range of sexual offences, provide vital support to survivors, and clearly define the roles and responsibilities of those investigating and prosecuting sexual violence" (LAW, 2018). The bill, which is promoted in the context of

1325 resolution was unanimously approved by the Council of ministers in 2018 and brought to parliament. Despite this, Ms. Yassin observed that since it was brought to (the male dominated) Parliament, the bill has faced strong resistance from the speakership of the House of the People (Lower House of Parliament) on the account of the provisions therein the bill that criminalizes child marriages and provides stiffer punishment for the offenses of rape and defilement.

**"despite having 25% female representation in Parliament, the voices of women in Parliament, are significantly muted, many of the women MPs have shied away from speaking in defense of these progressive bills"**

This obstinate opposition to the transformation and positive change also manifests in other facets of the socio-political life in Somalia. For instance, the Somalia Constitution Review Process, which would have genuinely ushered in a new chapter in Somalia continues to be sabotaged at every turn by the political class (mostly men). All actions that would have strengthened the rule of law and anchored the protection of fundamental human rights of Somali citizens have been undermined and impeded: progressive laws such as the Child Rights Bill, the Sexual Offences Bill, the Counter-Trafficking in Persons Bill, and many more which constitute the cornerstone of legal protection to all citizens, have all been stalled by the political class. At the same time, "despite having 25% female representation in Parliament, the voices of women in Parliament, are significantly muted, many of the women MPs have shied away from speaking in defence of these progressive bills", Ms. Yassin added.

## CASE STUDY 2: A case of Control of Policymaking space and the Associated Censorship

In another revealing interview, a young woman peace builder (names withheld on request) shared her experience of accessing and speaking at an international forum in the UN on women peace and security. She talked about how she was approached by an international women's rights organisation to share her experience with the rest of the world. The organisation offered to meet her costs related to travel and attendance. In return she was requested to write and share her presentation with them. The two disagreed on what should be presented at the high-level meeting. While the young peace builder wanted to share experiences of sexual abuse by women and girls in the context of armed conflict, the funding institution preferred not to have these experiences shared.

“When we talk about such spaces, we also need to think about who controls these spaces. I have been taken to New York several times by different organisations. The UNFPA, for example, took me to New York to speak about GBV and they asked me to give them my statement that I was going to give. I gave them my statement and my statement was speaking about violence towards girls and women, speaking about women being side-lined in leadership, because I have felt that as a young woman being in that space meant a lot. When they asked me for my speech, they said I should edit out some things. They said that I should not talk about rape, I should say GBV. So, they limited me from saying a lot of things and I was so frustrated. I was like, then what do you want me to talk about because if I

do not talk about 35% representation of women campaign that I was part of, then it does not make sense for me because the fact that women are side-lined in leadership in government, it's a form of GBV itself. We need to name the types of violence that girls and women are facing. If I speak about rape, it is a thing that I see in my country, it is the thing that I live with in my country because I work with survivors. So, why would you really condense my speech or decide on what I should talk about?”

Experiences reflected in Somalia's Sexual Offences Bill and the young women activists' feeling of being controlled, and their ideas being 'edited out', 'censored' and condensed to the effect of silencing experiences of rape during armed conflicts speak to extreme marginalisation of women's voice in international policy fora.

Notably, these experiences speak to clashes in interests and motives of key actors in peace building processes as manifestations of deep-rooted institutional cultures and histories characterised by harmful forms of masculinity, militarized use of power and gender inequalities. These structural regulatory frameworks have the potential to limit women's entry into policy making, their participation and voice especially on issues that push for inclusive and transformative peace building processes.

### 4.3 Cultures that Make Women Secondary in Policy-making Platforms

The norm around women, peace and security programming repeatedly draws on the language of women 'invited' to speak, or being appointed or selected onto policy platforms. Women teams are often hastily assembled and added onto 'male-stream' peace teams. These discursive practices

reinforce and legitimise intra-team hierarchies in which women occupy secondary status. In effect, this has the potential to impact how women identify and relate with others in peace teams, and whether their voices will be taken seriously.

In Cameroon, Fidelle reminds us that even when women are invited in government policy meetings, there is no guarantee that women's ideas will be considered. She argued

**“even if you can speak, we are not sure that the government will take into consideration what you say. It's like even if they invite your organization, you are just there to be present but they don't take into consideration, effectively what you say.”**

Silencing or trivializing women activists voices in policy meetings is often compounded by relations of mistrust between the state and civil society organisations, in which historically patriarchal states constantly seek to evade CSOs that demand accountability to peace and more so gender sensitive peace building processes.

#### **4.4 'Sexual Pacification' and its Effects on Women's Participation**

Women's participation in spaces where key decisions on peace building are framed and key decisions are made was subject to what some women peace builders termed as sexual abuse. In the dialogue below, the report picks up on one of the conversations in which young women peace builders in peace processes were viewed as sexual symbols and prizes brought forth to motivate the signing of peace agreements.



Olla Alsakkaf, Programme Manager  
Youth without Borders Organization for  
Development (YWBOD), Yemen



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**Researcher:** You talked about being part of the peace process. I just wanted to learn from you as a young woman being on these technical support committees, what is it like inside there? Are these structures or spaces that accommodate women? Are women's numbers there? Are women's voices taken seriously in these regional interfaces that you have had?

**Youth Peace Builder:** Well, I mean it is one thing to be a woman in this world and it is another to be a woman in South Sudan and its worse to be a young woman from my world. I have felt the extent to which women can be like discriminated against with regard to age. I will give an example. When I was in the peace process, we were doing a lot of work on lobbying influencers or those who had power towards our process to see what it was that they could do to ensure that we have peace in South Sudan, like the IGAD, the Troika and other partners. We use things like art to encourage our leaders to be productive towards peace building and things like that. I remember when I was sharing this art piece specifically with one of the old men, he looked at us as the young women, myself and the rest. These men were like, "Oh! This time, they've brought for us young women, you know, they are very beautiful and young and we shall surely sign the peace agreement". For me, that was a form of sexual violence, you know, but my eye was on the prize. So, I didn't really pay attention to such kind of sexist statements. The conversation is totally different. When you are a young woman and you are there, they look at you like, oh she looks edible, you know, the conversation changes, but when it's a person like Mama Zainab, an old woman that goes in, the conversation changes to Mama, you know, even the respect changes. So as young women, we've got to bargain for our spaces twice. It is difficult to negotiate as a younger woman in such space.

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The young peace builder reflects on the internal dynamics and the character of the peace process she has been part of and the kinds of interactions she encountered as a young woman. She alerts us to the multiple hurdles one has to negotiate as a young female in a historically patriarchal community experiencing armed struggles. Accordingly, young women in peace processes are not viewed in terms of age difference, personal experiences of war and the desired dream of having peaceful nations. Rather, their

presence and participation is sexualized to the effect that they are seen as sex symbols brought forth to motivate male actors to sign agreements. Notably, while sexual abuse in such spaces is more likely to affect all women, the young peace builder emphasized that young women are more likely to be disrespected, and their participation sexualized.

Ahikire, Musiimenta and Mwiine (2015) conceptualise sexual abuse embedded in

institutional cultures as sexual pacification – the “exercise of power to disempower women through sexual practices”. The sexual language used to describe women peace builders as ‘looking edible’, and equating women peace builders as some form of gifts to entice male leaders of warring parties to sign peace agreements goes beyond acceptable jokes in formal peace processes. Such sexist utterances point to the dominant discourses that frame women as sexual objects rather than political actors, consequently narrowing their scope of participation and influence in policy making spaces.

#### 4.5 Perceived Underrepresentation of Certain Categories of Women

Participants pointed out inter-generational differences amongst women who access and participate in policy-making platforms. They noted that while women representation was low overall, the few women that participate exclude young women, women from indigenous communities and women with disabilities, among other social groups. Participants noted that there are cases where ‘same old faces’ of women activists will appear in the few available spaces such as at the national level, regional meetings or global conventions such as UN CSW.

**“I believe that young women can do a lot with old women. But, you just see the same faces who have been doing the same thing and they do not give chance for others to participate with them.”**

(Interview with a young woman peace builder)

**“In Nepal, the federation of women with disabilities was very much focused on the 1325 Resolution; on enhancing the capacity of women, talking about the violence against women during the peace process and all these things. The resolution is very good for all women, especially those victimized by the war, but I didn’t find anything about the rights of persons with disability. They address the person with disability who became disabled after conflict. Like those who carried guns and went for the fight and became disabled. But they have not mentioned any rights of women with disability or any rights of a person who is born with disability.”**

(Interview with woman peace builder in Nepal)

In a statement to the UN Security Council during the debate on sexual violence in Libya, Inas Miloud points out how “hundreds of indigenous women are targets of sexual and gender-based violence simply for belonging to communities such as the Toubou, Tuareg, and my own people, the Amazigh”. (NGO Working Group on Women Peace and Security, 2019)

Women’s identities around disability, age and ethnicity were some aspects upon which participants noted social tensions that have the potential to narrow the space for women’s access and participation, as well as addressing specific concerns that these groups are exposed to during conflict.

#### 4.6 Covid-19 pandemic, Virtual Platforms and the Shrinking Women's Voice

Covid-19 is one of the contemporary concerns that has eroded the opportunities and informal spaces that women engaged in historically to mobilise, build capacities and participate in local, national, regional and global platforms for policy-making. The Covid-19 pandemic and the protective lockdown measures put in place to contain the spread disrupted everyday ways of social interaction, mobilisation, mobility to access and participate in local, regional and global platforms. At the local level, participants pointed out ways in which the pandemic eroded informal social spaces that activists used to gather stories from communities affected by war and raise awareness about women's experiences.

Due to limits of mobility and new normal of social distancing, the Covid-19 pandemic led to a surge in the use of virtual spaces as alternatives to regional and global physical meetings. For many activists we talked to, Zoom meetings emerged as the symbol of virtual engagement. Indeed, all women peace builders we talked to had either hosted or participated in Zoom meetings for peace building purposes. Yet despite the borderless opportunities virtual spaces offer, these were not without limits. In particular, participants decried the lack of adequate infrastructure for virtual spaces – constant electricity, stable internet connectivity, interactive platforms – in the conflict affected communities.

At the technical level, participants point out how Zoom was at times inaccessible by women peace builders in rural areas. Zoom features such as waiting rooms, auto-muting, and limited interaction where it is only main speakers that deliver the speech relegated the rest to mere listeners. All these narrowed the space for women to access and participate

in global meetings for peace building. Hibo Yassin, a woman peace builder shared how, like in many other fragile and conflict-affected countries, Covid-19 was quickly becoming an issue of human rights, injustice, and gender-based violence.

#### 4.7 States and Non-state Actors' Repression Of Women's Rights Organisations

Participants point out repressive relations between states and non-state actors on the one hand and the civil society organisations, including women's rights organisations, on the other. Alleged cases of repression, which limit women's access and participation in policy making spaces manifested in form of arrests and detention of women activists. In an interview with a young woman peace builder from South Sudan, she noted:

**“Recently, I was arrested and my arrest comes in from so many allegations that I do not understand, up to now. I was told that we are spoiling girls and women of South Sudan so I don't know what that really means. It seems women are not supposed to say much. There is this Arabic saying: ‘Ant mjrd aimra’a’ – you're just a woman. When I was arrested, I heard it a lot. Keep quiet. Don't speak too much. You are just a woman”**

*(Interview with young woman peace builder in South Sudan)*

Physical and verbal attacks, as exemplified in such arrests, are intended to demean women who attempt to actively participate in public politics, in particular championing policies that advocate for gender change. Active women leaders are labelled in denigrating ways as 'spoilt' or repeatedly reminded 'you are just a woman' to water down their motives and negate their influence. Such linguistic attacks "limit women's appreciation and ultimate pursuance of critical gender concerns that challenge the established norm" (Isis-WICCE & UWOPA, 2014, p. 48). Arrests of this nature have a crippling effect on how women activists are likely to engage in spaces that influence choices on peace building.

Other repressive practices pointed out by peace builders included constrained mobility where women (activists) can only move when they are accompanied by male kin, and restrictions on WROs interaction with international actors. In Libya, for example, the government passed a decree barring all CSOs from communicating with international actors, for fear that CSOs, including WROs, were receiving support from the international community to destabilize their countries. Additionally, all international community actors moved from Libya to Tunis, (neighbouring Tunisia) out of Yemen, out of Somalia, further complicating closer interactions.



Photo © International Crisis Group

## 4.8 Conceptualizing Shrinking Civic Space as Backlash

| Forms of Backlash |   | Examples   | Manifestation   | Response Strategies   |
|-------------------|---|--|---|---|
| 1                 | Bureaucratic delays/inaction/active stalling of policy decisions                              | <p>Increasing frustration on delayed implementation of 1325, protocols and gender policies</p> <p>Passing policies and committing no resources for implementation</p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Women excluded from decision making by society's unwritten rules and political control of dominant and vested interests</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lobby and monitor implementation</li> <li>Public education and media</li> <li>Policy research</li> <li>Shadow reports</li> <li>Women run for political office</li> <li>Marches and demonstrations</li> </ul> |
| 2                 | Co-option/appropriation of feminist agenda on WPS into 'hardcore' military-leaning approaches | Shifting narratives from ending wars to making war safer for women   |   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Re-think and popularise feminist peace agenda</li> <li>Research and disseminate information that validates and legitimises a transformative WPS agenda</li> </ul>  |
| 3                 | Invisible de-legitimisation of women's voice/bureaucratic rhetoric/Ritualising WPS            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Women invited to speak but their voices don't translate into action</li> <li>Sexual objectification of women peace builders</li> </ul>  | Internalised feelings of powerlessness/ shame/ feeling unworthy   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strengthen organisations, coalitions, movements</li> <li>Build capacities of accountable leaders</li> </ul>  |
| 4                 | Regressive practices  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>WROs prohibited from speaking to international community without state clearance</li> <li>Arrest and detention of women activists without trial</li> <li>Threats to sexually assault activists</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Feminist activism blamed for breaking homes/ framed as an attack on religion</li> <li>Feminists labelled in homophobic ways as promoting same sex relationships</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lobby and negotiate</li> <li>Marches and demonstrations</li> <li>Conduct action research to reveal hidden agenda of opposition actors/ coalitions</li> </ul>   |



*Photo © Global Network of Women  
Peacebuilders*

# 5. Global and Regional Call for Action

## 5.1 What we learn from women peace builders' voices

The question of women's access, participation and influence in policy-making platforms is a global, regional and national governance question beyond contexts of peace and security. Feminist campaigns on women's participation in public life have taken several years and efforts, and the outcomes are reflected in international human rights frameworks as well as national efforts that acknowledge women's right to participate in public spaces. Notably, while women have gained ascendance into political leadership positions, especially in peaceful communities, or in communities emerging from war, "it has become more evident than ever that the strategy of getting women in formal political [decision making] spaces is only part of what it takes to engender democracy" (Ahikire et al., 2015, p. 26).

This study has demonstrated ways in which women have increasingly gained access to global and regional policy-making platforms whether by occupying technical and appointive positions, being invited to speak about their experiences of conflict and/or peace building in their communities,

or participation in what many described as 'pop-up' events around international peace and security. Yet, women peace builders argue that these forms of access and participation are only inconsistent, episodic and non-institutionalized. Even when there is a seeming level of women's visibility in these platforms, their voice is hardly taken seriously by institutional cultures heavily guided by what Carol Cohn (2004) terms the overwhelmingly male and masculinist values, devoted to the 'hardcore' issue of military threats to international peace and security. The language of the 'hardcore' as the mainstream business of international peace and security and the male centeredness that accrues from male domination of policy-making platforms often cuts back on the space for women engagement. Accordingly, institutional cultures which valorise male participation while negating the voice of women, have had a deep-seated crippling effect even when we stand to celebrate feminist milestones like the 1325 Resolution.

Given the multiple manifestations of pushback on women's access, participation and voice in WPS, women peace builders propose actions to draw global and regional actors' attention to the crippling effect of institutional



cultures that constrain women's participation and curtail implementation of resolutions that seek to transform unequal and oppressive structures. Women activists also assessed the nature of the women's movement and suggested strategies that would nurture capacities of women activists and frame a collective feminist agenda to enable them participate in leadership and decision-making within peace building and the broader social economic and political spheres.

## 5.2 Call for action on the meaningful implementation of UNSCR 1325

We call upon the United Nations, regional bodies and international actors to:

- Implement UNSCR 1325 on increased representation of women at all decision-making levels at national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for prevention of, management and resolution of conflicts.
- Encourage the UN Secretary General to emphasize representation of women's rights activists in mediation and peace building processes.
- Urge regional and global actors in peace processes to draw on reports, testimonies and stories collected and shared by women's rights organisations to make informed and contextual decisions in peace building processes.
- Call upon the UN Secretary-General and international women's rights organisations (e.g. UN WOMEN, UNFPA, UNDP) to combat retrogressive mentalities among states and non-state actors who still think that peace and security matters are men's affairs.
- Call upon global and regional parties to conceptualise women's participation and representation as a 'right' towards contributing to sustainable peace and secure communities rather than a 'favour'.
- Request technical and financial partners and multilateral corporations to use their working relations to demand

accountability from member states on the implementation of regional and UN resolutions that promote women's representation and participation in decision making at all levels.

- Urge member states to promote strategies that enable women's participation in elective leadership positions to legitimise women's participation in public politics whether in peaceful communities or in fragile and conflict affected communities.
- Demand stronger commitment from global, regional actors and member states to ensure that WPS issues raised and passed into policies are implemented.
- Call upon the UN Security Council to meaningfully include women, indigenous peoples and youth in decision-making structures

## 5.3 Investment in Virtual spaces

Usage of virtual platforms is increasingly becoming a norm especially in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and its associated social distancing measures. Communities in fragile situations also felt detached from regional and global platforms mandated to pursue international peace and security, especially as international offices tend to vacate conflict-affected areas.

To facilitate continued engagement in policy-making spaces and connectedness to the rest of the world, women peace builders call on the UN, international community actors, and regional bodies in peace building processes to:

- a. Prioritize investment in infrastructure development to enable communities affected by conflicts access and participate in virtual spaces to share their experiences. This includes providing resources to establish and/or maintain energy sources e.g. electricity, and establishing internet centers to enable connectivity.
- b. Adopt usage of inclusive and interactive online platforms. These include webinars that encourage participation of those in

- attendance beyond the main speakers.
- c. Explore usage of off-line communication methods such as e-mails, recordings and sharing meeting proceedings, among others.

## 5.4 Call to the Women's Rights Movements at National, Regional and Global Levels

### a) Build activism for peace from below

- Develop country-based activism and facilitate programmes on women's empowerment from grassroots levels.
- Advocate for women joining formal political and economic structures e.g. contesting for elective positions to nurture activism within political structures and in the mainstream women's rights movements.
- Create local and national networks of women peace builders whose motive is the wellbeing of communities affected by conflicts. Purposive building of the women's movement as a strong social movement. As a social movement, the women's movement has to make concrete plans for successes and failures.
- Offer leadership in feminist research and documentation of the impact of war on women and profile women's efforts to rebuild their communities. Make visible these experiences to regional and global platforms to inform decisions on conflict resolution, peace building and reconstruction.
- Conduct consistent and coordinated activism for peace building to avoid lapses that create room for failed implementation.
- Conduct research and document patterns of inadequate implementation of policies that seek to transform unequal gender norms. Explicitly 'name' failed policy implementation as a backlash constraining inclusive peace building.
- To speak and be heard and taken seriously, women peace movements need strong, consistent and collective activism. Build a robust, cohesive

and vibrant network of women peace builders from grassroots and across regions and make it 'risky' for global and regional structures to ignore women's participation.

- Map the capacities of women's rights organisations and individual activists across regions, and promote linkages on common thematic concerns – create channels and partners across regions to facilitate regional participation.
- Put in place an information programme to document and share progress, best practices and hurdles on the status of women in leadership and decision-making positions at all levels; raise awareness about existing women's rights organisations and their mandates, and opportunities for capacity building and networking.

### b) Establish feminist models of mentorship

- Design mentorship programmes that speak to diverse interests of women – young women, women with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, among other identities.
- Establish young women leaders' networks across regions. Women's participation is rooted in early childhood education. Girls and boys should be given a sense of responsibility and social and civic engagement. If children are educated on human rights and gender equality at an early age, it will provide a solid foundation for women to engage in peace and security issues.
- Intentional nurturing of women for peace movements (we should not chance on any individual CSO that opens up to invest in the business of peace building)
- Create awareness about existing women leadership networks and strengthen collaboration among these to foster a collective agenda on women in leadership and peace building.

### **c) Integrating critical masculinities perspective in gender-sensitive peacebuilding**

- Initiate strategic conversations with male actors in global and regional platforms on the necessity of gender equal participation in policy-making.
- Create a critical mass of men with knowledge on the women's agenda for peace and belief in feminist leadership values.
- Train young men in understanding normalized and harmful forms of masculine behaviours and practices and how to challenge these.

### **d) Strengthening women peace builders' potential in leadership and decision making structures**

- Capacity building of women in advocacy to equip women with knowledge and skill to discern, negotiate and make appropriate actions in peace building processes. Build capacities of women to know when and how to detonate or negotiate patriarchal resistance.
- Consistent reflection on the need for collective action amongst women political actors, consciousness about the nature of political resistance and women's predicament as well as the need to have common gender interests despite differences in race, class, age and other variations. Highlight the importance and power of collective organising to the cohesion of women peace builders and their ultimate potential to influence policy-making.
- Regional women's rights organisations should create mechanisms for liaising with the African Union and the AU Special Envoy on Women, Peace and Security, on the implementation of Continental Results framework (CRF) to ensure full and effective participation and representation of women in peace processes.

- Strengthen women peace builders' capacities through international leadership programmes to expose them to acceptable international leadership norms and practices.
- Awareness creation amongst women and the youth to appreciate participation in inclusive peace building as their right.
- Tap into existing regional networks e.g. Gender is My Agenda Campaign network, African Women Leadership network, to build trans-national alliances of women's rights organisations to promote a collective agenda of women representation and participation in leadership positions at all levels.
- Deliberate promotion of intersectional conversations (ethnicity, minority groups, disability, age and class relations, etc) in WPS agenda.
- Conscious framing of a feminist agenda beyond the 20 years of UNSCR 1325. This would include trans-national and trans-continental repositioning of a feminist agenda for peace that re-centers women's participation in peace processes as a right rather than a privilege afforded to women by global patriarchal patrons of international peace and security.

### **e) Funding**

- Call upon funding agencies to invest in social projects
- Invest in psychosocial self-care for women activists to address trauma emerging from attending to women victims of sexual and gender based violence.

# 6. Appendices

## 6.1 List of Participants

| Name of Respondent |   |
|--------------------|---|
| 1                  | Ina Miloud, Libyan Activist, Co-founder and Chair Tamazight Women Movement  |
| 2                  | Fidelle Djebba, Far North, Cameroonian Woman of Courage awardee 2017  |
| 3                  | Olla Al Sakkaf, Programmes Manager, Youth Without Borders Organisation for Development, Yemen   |
| 4                  | Renu Rajhbandari, National Alliance of Women Human Rights Defenders , Nepal   |
| 5                  | Rama Dhakal, National Federation of the Disabled, Nepal   |
| 6                  | Valnora Edwin, Sierra Leone War Trust, Sierra Leone   |
| 7                  | Hibo Yassin, IIDA Women's Development Organisation - Somalia  |
| 8                  | Riya Williams, Crown The Woman, South Sudan   |
| 9                  | Coumba Fall Venn, Femmes Africa Solidarité (FAS) - Senegal  |
| 10                 | Lisette Mavungu, Congolese Women Lawyers Association, DRC and Deputy Chair Women International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), DRC                                  |
| 11                 | Ude Fati, team member, Voz di Paz in Guinea Bissau  |
| 12                 | Josephine Maombi, Initiatrice de la Synergie des Femmes Unies pour la Paix et le Développement - DRC / Initiator of the Synergy of United Women for Peace and Development |
| 13                 | Jolly Kamuntu, Karibu Jeunesse Nouvelle - KJN and Association des Femmes des Médias - DRC   |
| 16                 | Nadia Carine Fomei, Federation of Women Lawyers FIDA - Central Africa Republic (CAR)  |
| 17                 | Claire Améyo Quenum, FLORAISSON - TOGO  |
| 18                 | Sally Mboumien, Common Action For Gender Development (COMAGEND), Cameroon   |

## 6.2 Interview Guide

### Interview Guide - English

#### Introduction

The Peace Centre in partnership Cordaid is conducting a study to take stock of 20 years of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 with a focus on the *Shrinking Spaces at Global and Regional policy-making platforms for Women's Rights Organisations focused on the Women Peace and Security Agenda*. The study aims to explore subtle and explicit forms of pushbacks against women's access, participation and influence in policy-making structures and suggest actionable ways to enhance leadership of women's rights organisations within regional and global peace, security and human rights mechanisms. Your views and experiences as a woman leader and peace builder will contribute towards a call for action in the moment of celebrating the 20th anniversary of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 this October.

A research Team of 4 people will interact with you. This team includes;

- Dr. Amon Ashaba Mwiine, Makerere University
- Ms. Sandra Tumwesigye, Women's International Peace Centre
- Ms. Latifah Namutebi, Research Assistant, Women's International Peace Centre
- Ms. Perpetue Kanyange, Women's International Peace Centre

#### Interview conversation

1. Tell us about your role in women and peace building processes
2. How would you describe the context you are working in?
3. What platforms (spaces) exist for you to participate in to influence policies that inform WPS agenda?
  - a. National level spaces
  - b. Regional level spaces
  - c. Global level spaces
4. What is the nature of these spaces? Are they open, do they enable women's participation? Are women [at national and grassroots level] peace activists part of (invited to) these spaces? Women numbers vs Men?
5. What are the priorities of these policy-making spaces?
6. How do these priorities resonate with contemporary concerns/priorities for women, peace and security in your country/region?
7. How has Covid-19 influenced women's access and participation in policy-making spaces?
8. How do women engage?
9. Do women peace activist feel they have voice and influence in those space? (If yes, how, if no, how)
10. What are some of the challenges they face in these spaces? (Any specific examples of barriers national/regional/global policy-making spaces?)
11. In your view what accounts for increasing shrinking spaces for women in policymaking spaces?
12. What actions would you recommend to enhance women's access, participation and influence in policy making processes:
  - a. National level
  - b. Regional level
  - c. Global level

### Interview Guide - French version

#### Introduction

Le Centre pour la Paix, en partenariat avec l'Organisation Catholique pour les Secours et l'Aide au Développement (Cordaid), mène une étude sur la restriction des espaces dans les plates-formes mondiales et régionales d'élaboration des politiques, pour les organisations des droits des femmes ayant le focus sur l'agenda des femmes pour la paix et la sécurité.

L'étude vise à explorer les formes subtiles et explicites de refus d'accès, de participation et d'influence des femmes dans les structures décisionnelles et à proposer des voies et

moyens concrets de renforcer le leadership des organisations de défense des droits des femmes au sein des mécanismes régionaux et mondiaux de paix, de sécurité et de droits de l'homme.

Vos points de vue et expériences, en tant que femme leader et bâtisseuse de paix, contribueront à un appel à l'action au moment de la célébration du 20e anniversaire de la Résolution 1325 du Conseil de Sécurité des Nations Unies en Octobre.

Une équipe de recherche de 4 personnes interagira avec vous. Cette équipe est composée de :

1. Dr Amon Ashaba Mwiine, Université Makerere
2. Mme Sandra Tumwesigye, Centre International des Femmes pour la Paix / Women International Peace Centre (WIPC)
3. Mme Latifah Namutebi, Assistante de Recherche, Centre International des Femmes pour la Paix / Women International Peace Centre (WIPC)
4. Mme Perpétue Kanyange, Consultante sur les Femmes, la Paix et la Sécurité

### Questions lors de l'entretien:

1. Parlez-nous de votre rôle dans le domaine des femmes et les processus de consolidation de la paix.
2. À l'échelle mondiale, quel a été le parcours de l'élaboration des politiques autour des femmes et de la paix ? (Quels sont les principaux jalons ou références enregistrés au niveau mondial / régional, national?)
3. Où en sommes-nous actuellement en termes d'élaboration de politiques pour les Femmes, la Paix et la Sécurité?
4. Quelles sont les plates-formes existantes auxquelles vous pouvez participer pour influencer les politiques qui mettent à jour ou alimentent l'Agenda Femmes, Paix et Sécurité?
  - a. Structures au niveau national
  - b. Structures au niveau régional
  - c. Structures au niveau mondial
5. Les femmes activistes de la paix font-elles partie (invitées) de ces espaces? (Femmes vs Hommes?)
6. Quelles sont les priorités de ces espaces décisionnels ?
7. Comment ces priorités correspondent-elles aux préoccupations/priorités contemporaines pour les Femmes, la Paix et la Sécurité dans votre pays / région?
8. Comment les femmes s'engagent-elles ?
9. Les femmes activistes pour la paix ont-elles le sentiment d'avoir voix au chapitre dans ces espaces ? (Si oui, comment, si non, comment) ?
10. Quels sont certains des défis auxquels elles sont confrontées dans ces espaces ? (Des exemples spécifiques de ces contraintes?)
11. À votre avis, qu'est-ce qui explique l'augmentation du rétrécissement des espaces pour les femmes dans ces espaces décisionnelles ?
12. Quelles sont les possibilités de renforcer le plaidoyer politique pour l'Agenda Femmes Paix et Sécurité



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# Cordaid



PO Box 16440  
2500 BK The Hague  
The Netherlands  
+31 (0) 70 - 31 36 300



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Please direct all correspondence to:

Executive Director  
Women's International Peace Centre  
Plot 1, Martyrs' Garden Road B,  
Ministers' Village Ntinda  
P. O. BOX 4924, Kampala, Uganda  
**Tel** +256-414-543953  
**Email** [program@wipc.org](mailto:program@wipc.org)  
**Web** [www.wipc.org](http://www.wipc.org)

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