

AFGHANISTAN RESEARCH NETWORK

## **Is the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda Still Relevant for Afghanistan?**

Gaisu Yari





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## Afghanistan Research Network

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PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform  
School of Law, Old College, The University of Edinburgh  
South Bridge, Edinburgh EH8 9YL  
Tel. +44 (0)131 651 4566  
Fax. +44 (0)131 650 2005  
E-mail: [peacerep@ed.ac.uk](mailto:peacerep@ed.ac.uk)  
Website: [PeaceRep.org](https://www.peacerep.org)  
LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/peacerep/>

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### About the author:

Gaisu Yari is an experienced Afghan gender expert from Afghanistan and current leads the Afghan Voices of Hope Project. Previously she was a Wilson International Competition Fellow (2024-2025) and a civil service commissioner in Afghanistan. She holds a master's degree in human rights from Columbia University and a bachelor's degree in Middle Eastern studies and gender studies from the University of Virginia. Follow her on X @GaisuY.

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## Introduction

The year 2025 marks yet another critical and challenging year for the women of Afghanistan, who are facing one of the most severe crises in their struggle for rights and dignity. They face an oppressive regime that has systematically stripped them of their fundamental freedoms, all while navigating a fragmented and uncoordinated international response. Since the failed 2018 peace process initiated by the international community, led by the United States, there has not been any peace process undertaken either by the international community or the women or politicians of Afghanistan. Moreover, amid numerous international efforts, including accountability mechanisms, engagements, conferences, and the "Doha talks" led by the United Nations (UN) leadership with the Taliban, the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Agenda has been overlooked, despite being the most relevant framework for addressing the plight of women in Afghanistan. Member states can no longer afford the luxury of sidelining such frameworks, especially as the situation for women in Afghanistan grows increasingly dire. Recent years have shown that global norms especially those led by the global north actors are unlikely to provide concrete solutions to the severity of violence against women in Afghanistan, given the specific and systematic policies against them. Unless member states take additional steps to safeguard women's rights, such as creating new, legally binding tools under international law, progress will remain limited.

This policy brief looks at the progress and setbacks of women's rights in Afghanistan and the different approaches and interventions under the WPS Agenda. It first provides a comprehensive analysis of gains made from 2001 to 2021, followed by the Taliban's policies over the past three years and their devastating impact on women's rights and participation. It then evaluates the application and limitations of the WPS Agenda in Afghanistan, identifying the exclusion of Afghan women from peace processes, increasing restrictions on their rights, and inconsistent and often inadequate international engagement as critical challenges. Finally, this brief provides actionable recommendations for policymakers, member states, and stakeholders, integrating lessons from experiences in other conflict-affected regions.

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## Women's Rights Before and After the Taliban

Afghan women have paid a high price, both personally and professionally, to pave the way for a generation that could contribute to the nation's future. It took women in Afghanistan two decades to establish human rights-based foundations, standards, laws, regulations, and policies that included them in the country's development, especially after 2001, when the international community began investing in Afghanistan, and later in 2004, when gender equality was integrated in Afghanistan's new constitution, allowing the government to establish policies and legal frameworks and ratify international obligations.<sup>1</sup> In 2003, Afghanistan ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence against Women (CEDAW) and started reporting on it in 2009, and in 2015, the government established its National Action Plan (NAP) on the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325).<sup>2</sup>

With these national and international laws and obligations, the women of Afghanistan experienced years of progress, despite facing significant challenges. Notably, the number of women enrolled in the education sector saw a remarkable increase; enrollment at all educational levels grew from one million in 2001 to ten million in 2018. The number of girls in primary school also rose dramatically, from none in 2001 to 2.5 million in 2018. Furthermore, enrollment in higher education grew by nearly 20 times, from 5,000 in 2001 to 100,000 in 2021.<sup>3</sup>

Women were also accomplished in different sectors, such as social development and political participation. Research indicates that since 2001, women have been part of 1,150 investments, which would be worth more than \$77 million.<sup>4</sup> After a 2004 constitutional quota for women's political participation, women held 27% of seats in the parliament.<sup>5</sup> Women had comprised 21% of the civil service, with 16% holding senior-leadership positions.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, one of the bold improvements both at the national and local level was that women were elected as part of the Community Development Council (CDC). By mid-2019, they comprised almost 50% of memberships.<sup>7</sup>

Since the Taliban's takeover of the country in August 2021, women's rights have been significantly eroded. The Taliban have enforced severe legal and social restrictions that profoundly affect women's daily lives and future generations. Echoing the oppressive conditions of the 1990s, their policies are rooted in a strict interpretation of Sharia law and are designed to limit women's presence in the public sphere and strip them of their basic rights, violating international obligations, human rights laws, and Afghanistan's commitments to accountability measures.<sup>8</sup>

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On one hand, these measures are overt, but on the other, research and evidence illustrate their deeper impact and the enduring consequences on women's ability to survive under systematic oppression.<sup>9</sup> Neither the international community nor the people of Afghanistan anticipated the systemic inflexibility of the Taliban's policies, which show no signs of fostering a robust and inclusive government. This failure is partly due to the Taliban's lack of credibility and their ideological commitment to fundamentalist beliefs.

According to numerous human rights organizations, the Taliban's actions have resulted in a cascade of negative effects on women's lives. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have documented the widespread exclusion of women from public life, education, and employment, leading to increased poverty and psychological distress.<sup>10</sup> Reports highlight that bans on girls' education and restrictions on women working in NGOs have not only limited their opportunities but also severely hampered humanitarian aid efforts, particularly in regions where women are the key beneficiaries.<sup>11</sup>

Women's movement and dress remains a strong focus for the Taliban's Ministry of Virtue and Vice (previously: the Ministry of Women's Affairs). Dress restrictions were not an immediate decision imposed on women after 2021. Initially, the Taliban launched a campaign "recommending" that women wear a burka, or long dress covering them from head to toe. They used various platforms, including billboards and public announcements, to ensure their campaign had an impact and relied on individual Taliban members to enforce it in different settings.<sup>12</sup> The campaign failed to meet the Taliban's expectations. In May 2022, the Taliban escalated their efforts by issuing a decree requiring women to be fully covered and that the best Sharia-compliant hijab for women was for them to remain at home.<sup>13</sup> Organizations such as Amnesty International and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan have researched the impacts of these restrictions and concluded that any woman in public without a mahram (male guardian) is at a higher risk of punishment.<sup>14</sup> These policies are erasing what had been established for women of Afghanistan, including international obligations such as WPS principles.

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## The WPS Agenda in Afghanistan

Although the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) 25 years ago in response to the exclusion of women from conflict prevention, peace processes, and efforts to promote peace globally, the concept remains relatively new within the UN system at the international policy level. UN Women is responsible for overseeing the WPS Agenda's implementation through tracking National Action Plans (NAPs). However, implementation has not been entirely successful.<sup>15</sup> By the end of 2024, only 56% of UN member states adopted at least one NAP for UNSCR 1325.<sup>16</sup>

Scholars and academics have argued that the WPS Agenda functions more as a norm than as a fully realized concept, which cannot guarantee comprehensive implementation or significant impact.<sup>17</sup> For instance, WPS scholar Farkhunda Akbari stated in an interview that expectations of the resolution often exceed its actual capacity. NAPs, a state-centric concept, are meant to enhance national accountability, but many have lacked meaningful engagement with women's leadership and civil society.<sup>18</sup> A 2004 UN presidential statement encouraging NAP development paradoxically acknowledged the essential role of women's organizations while reinforcing state responsibility, revealing the tensions that have hampered successful implementation, including in Afghanistan.<sup>19</sup> Experts argue that "the consequences of excluding civil society organizations from the NAP development processes include a separation of WPS principles from the lived experiences of individuals within the state in question, a lack of grounded understanding of community needs related to WPS provisions," and the neglect of community expertise during the development and implementation.<sup>20</sup> Resultantly, the NAPs in many countries, including Afghanistan, are often replicated without meaningful adaptation and have not been effectively localized.

Afghanistan completed the implementation of its first NAP on UNSCR 1325 in 2018.<sup>21</sup> The initial plan was set to be implemented in two phases: phase one from 2015 to 2018, and phase two from 2018 to 2022. Reports assessing the first phase of implementation indicate mixed outcomes. Implementation faced significant challenges, including budget constraints, insufficient political will, lack of coordination among implementing agencies, limited capacity, and ongoing insecurity in the country.<sup>22</sup> Both civil society and the government designed specific policies to increase women's involvement in the peace process and reconciliation efforts.<sup>23</sup> While women's political participation increased, their involvement in the security sector and elections remained low.

From 2019 to 2021, the WPS principles in Afghanistan faced major setbacks. Despite civil society, human rights defenders, and women's rights activists using the WPS Agenda as a platform for advocacy in official peace negotiations with the Taliban in Doha, Qatar, the Taliban remained ambiguous in their responses, raising alarms among Afghan women, who feared a return to rights violations they had previously endured.<sup>24</sup> Despite these concerns, Western allies proceeded with negotiations with the Taliban in Doha.<sup>25</sup>

Following the failure of the WPS Agenda before August 2021, Afghan women have faced severe repression over the past three years. The failure of the WPS Agenda also has broader consequences. Locally, a lack of women's participation in local communities and aid distribution worsens humanitarian conditions. Regionally, an unstable Afghanistan fuels cross-border terrorism, stronger extremist groups, and increasing security risks. The Pakistani Taliban (TTP), a faction of the Taliban, has sanctuaries in Afghanistan and is using Afghan soil to launch attacks in Pakistan.<sup>26</sup> This has led to strained relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, disturbing the regional dynamics. Moreover, an unstable Afghanistan mocks human rights and democracy at a global scale: the regressive policies of the Taliban towards women, complemented by the global quiet, set a dangerous precedent for how states can openly flout international norms. The erosion of women's rights in Afghanistan comes at a cost: in future, authoritarian and regressive regimes across the globe may be emboldened. The status quo in Afghanistan is also unfortunately blinding future generations towards progressive gender norms.

While the WPS Agenda has been the subject of extensive debate and has seen mixed outcomes, it remains a valuable normative framework to advocate for women's participation and to engage with member states before introducing new accountability mechanisms.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the agenda's terminology and framework should be seen as tools to guide countries in establishing and interpreting their strategies based on their unique contexts and needs.<sup>28</sup> In Afghanistan, the WPS framework could be relevant only if the agenda is moved from the state-controlled authority (the Taliban) to be used and led by civil society.

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## WPS in UN Convenings on Afghanistan

In recent UN convenings, the WPS Agenda was somewhat initiated but later sidelined by international actors and special envoys for Afghanistan. In May 2023, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres convened a two-day meeting in Doha, Qatar with special envoys to deliberate on international engagement with Afghanistan (Doha I).<sup>29</sup> The Taliban were not invited and discussions were based on the complexities of dealing with the regime, the country's economic failure, and the condition of women and girls impacted by the Taliban's systematic policies.<sup>30</sup> In December 2022, the Taliban imposed a ban on Afghan women working with NGOs, which was extended to the UN in April 2023.<sup>31</sup> These restrictions severely disrupted humanitarian operations and intensified concerns about women's rights in Afghanistan. While the UN voiced strong objections to the ban, emphasizing that aid distribution would face significant challenges without the participation of women, the Taliban has yet to reverse any of its edicts.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the ban, Doha I witnessed initial optimism about engaging the Taliban, which some experts argue stemmed from the earlier Doha talks (2020–2021). The international community had hoped that the group might engage constructively and demonstrate respect for freedoms, human rights, and the rights of women and girls.<sup>33</sup> There was also an expectation that a pluralistic government could be established and that the Taliban would honour their commitment to granting amnesty to former military officials.<sup>34</sup> Following Doha I, the UN Security Council called for an independent assessment of member states' engagement with Afghanistan and appointed Feridun Sinirlioglu as the coordinator.<sup>35</sup> The evaluation recommended a roadmap for full international engagement with Afghanistan aimed at addressing challenges and re-integrating the country into international economic and legal frameworks.<sup>36</sup> The report also suggested establishing three mechanisms to oversee its implementation: a large group of member states' special envoys on Afghanistan, a smaller contact group selected from the larger group, and a UN special envoy focused on diplomacy between Afghanistan and international stakeholders, as well as advancing intra-Afghan dialogue.<sup>37</sup> The Taliban opposed some recommendations, particularly the appointment of a UN special envoy, arguing that Afghanistan is not a conflict zone and has had negative experiences with UN special envoys in the past. While the first convening included civil society and women's groups, paving the way for an inclusive process that could cover different groups, marginalized communities and those opposing the Taliban, the meeting's conclusion was more transactional. The international community could not coherently agree on a unified approach to engaging with the Taliban, balancing the need for humanitarian assistance with the imperative to uphold human rights and gender equality.

In February 2024, the second meeting of the special envoys on Afghanistan was convened in Doha, with the aim to enhance international engagement with Afghanistan, guided by recommendations from the independent assessment report.<sup>38</sup> Women and civil society in Afghanistan were part of this meeting, and discussions focused on the evolving situation in Afghanistan, particularly concerning human rights with an emphasis on the rights of women and girls, inclusive governance, counter-terrorism efforts, and drug trafficking. The meeting underscored the complexities of international engagement with Afghanistan, particularly concerning the Taliban's stance on external involvement and the international community's efforts to address humanitarian needs while promoting human rights and inclusive governance. During the Security Council meeting, members who have endorsed the Shared Commitments on Women, Peace, and Security were expected to deliver a joint statement on Afghanistan.<sup>39</sup> In 2024, the joint statement emphasized the importance of the international member states' commitments to women's participation and inclusion while pressuring the Taliban to revoke policies in place since 2021.<sup>40</sup> On one hand, the joint statement was important for the women of Afghanistan to hear that they are still a priority for many member states. On the other hand, these statements had minimal impact on the reality that women face in the country.

Finally, in June 2024, the UN Security Council held Doha III, one of the most controversial UN convenings on Afghanistan.<sup>41</sup> The Taliban were invited to this meeting, while the women and the civil society of Afghanistan were excluded. The agenda favoured the Taliban and the regional countries as it focused on two specific sectors: economic issues affecting the private sector and counternarcotics.<sup>42</sup> Women's groups, human rights organizations, and activists criticized the meeting due to its lack of transparency and exclusion of women from the discussion. Doha III managed to bring the regional actors to an agreement but at the cost of human rights and women's rights in Afghanistan. The majority of the stakeholders, including activists from Afghanistan and outside, counted the meeting as a failure of the UN.

As a result of Doha III, two technical committees began working on solutions that prioritize the interests of regional actors and the Taliban. Doha III demonstrated that such a process is not feasible with a UN representative leading it, along with specific committees and the international community's engagement with the Taliban.<sup>43</sup> The Taliban not only oppose involving a UN envoy but also reject any mechanisms that challenge their policies, ensure transparency in aid distribution, or transition to a process or format that would delay the Taliban's legitimacy.

Looking ahead, Doha IV is unlikely to yield better outcomes. The timing and the agenda of Doha IV depend on the priorities of the current US administration and other global actors, which could lead to further delays. Moreover, countries with feminist foreign policies, or those that have integrated the WPS Agenda into their foreign policies, may find it difficult to support a process that lacks inclusivity and accountability.<sup>44</sup> If these states proceed with engagement that ignores Afghan women and civil society, it could undermine their credibility.

Member states and international organizations face a critical dilemma. They have to determine the right approach to engage with the Taliban and find a sustainable solution for Afghanistan's future. While humanitarian aid continues to receive support, transitioning to a long-term developmental approach presents additional difficulties. States also face obstacles in ensuring transparency and accountability in the distribution of critical humanitarian aid, aiming to prevent its misuse by the Taliban. Furthermore, upholding global human rights norms, commitments, and obligations adds another layer of complexity for states trying to agree on a collective and unified policy toward the Taliban. Subsequently, the fragmented regional dynamic further complicates future engagement. Some regional actors are already engaging regularly with the Taliban, undermining the collective approach advocated by the UN.<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, the participation and representation of women, civil society, marginalized groups, and other stakeholders risk being overlooked. Today, states are torn between succumbing to international pressure to disregard these values or isolating the Taliban and taking accountability measures. Given these tensions, Doha IV is unlikely to achieve more than limited agreements. These may include continued humanitarian aid, improved coordination mechanisms, and the establishment of an international consensus on a framework for engagement in Afghanistan, potentially led by the UN.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Over two decades, numerous human rights-based tools, institutions, laws, and regulations were established in Afghanistan. However, the Taliban's return has reversed much of this progress. With a strict, exclusionary approach, the Taliban have systematically repressed women's rights. Despite Afghanistan remaining a priority for many countries, the UN's inconsistent interventions in engaging with the Taliban neither inspire hope nor promise a clear direction toward stability in Afghanistan or the region. Instead, these efforts further exacerbate uncertainty regarding the WPS Agenda and women's rights in the country. Human rights organizations, researchers, experts, civil society, women's movements, and other stakeholders have observed significant yet unbalanced shifts in the approaches of many countries toward Afghanistan since 2001. Without international accountability, transparency in aid commitments, and the prioritization of women in Afghanistan, global norms are unlikely to provide a concrete solution for a brighter future anytime soon. Within this ecosystem, the following recommendations should be considered while the UN member states are engaging on Afghanistan:

**Establish a non-governmental WPS framework:** A civil-society-led WPS framework would represent a shift from traditional state-centric norms toward collective efforts to unify international WPS obligations while empowering the women of Afghanistan to strategize on their future and envision an Afghanistan where their rights and dignity are preserved.

**Empower the role of the Global South and feminist foreign policy states:** Both countries in the Global South and those with feminist foreign policies can uphold their commitments to the women of Afghanistan by collaborating with the global women's movement and taking the lead in amplifying the voices of Afghan women. Global south countries with feminist foreign policies must continue leading accountability mechanisms and prioritizing the WPS Agenda when engaging with the Taliban. Furthermore, these countries should appoint specific envoys dedicated to working with women's groups on the WPS Agenda in Afghanistan. While access to Afghanistan remains challenging, these networks can ensure that the WPS Agenda applies to the women of Afghanistan, strengthens the hidden civil society, and supports their efforts effectively. Countries in the Global South can also play a critical role in building the capacity of Afghan women by supporting initiatives to document human rights abuses and the gender apartheid campaign for recognition under international law,<sup>46</sup> and advocating for justice.

**Establish a UN fact-finding mission:** Drawing on lessons from previous UN fact-finding missions in Myanmar and Sudan – where widespread human rights violations were systematically documented – the UN should urgently establish a similar independent mission to investigate the ongoing impact of Taliban policies on women since 2021. Such a mission is critical not only to help uncover the full scope and scale of violations but also to ensure that credible evidence is collected to support future accountability efforts. This process is essential for laying the foundation for potential legal action through international mechanisms such as the ICC or the ICJ, and for sending a clear message that impunity for crimes against women in Afghanistan will not be tolerated.

**Mandate women's inclusion in all diplomatic engagements and aid delivery:** As demonstrated in other post-conflict recovery experiences, the meaningful inclusion of women is essential to effective diplomacy and sustainable aid delivery. Excluding Afghan women from processes such as Doha IV and other important discussions not only delegitimizes their role but also undermines their agency in shaping Afghanistan's future. Humanitarian operations and donor frameworks must explicitly condition engagement and assistance on the meaningful inclusion of women to ensure both the effective delivery of assistance and sound policy-making.

**Appoint a special representative for Afghanistan:** The UN should appoint a special representative for Afghanistan to lead engagement processes that involve a broad range of stakeholders, including civil society, leading parties, and member states. A process dominated by a single actor risks overlooking the diverse voices essential to building a sustainable and just future for Afghanistan.

**Build consensus:** Finally, UN member states must work toward consensus-building in coordination with women's movements and civil society to develop a roadmap that aligns with the needs of women, while supporting international interventions. This collaborative effort will ensure a sustainable and inclusive approach to addressing the crisis in Afghanistan.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>9</sup> Belquis Ahmadi and William Byrd, "How the Taliban Enables Violence Against Women, United States Institute of Peace," December 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/12/how-taliban-enables-violence-against-women>.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>39</sup> Members include: Ecuador, France, Guyana, Japan, Malta, the Republic of Korea, Sierra Leone, Slovenia, Switzerland, the UK, and the US. "Joint Statement by the Security Council Signatories of the Statement of Shared Commitments for the Principles of Women, Peace, and Security," US Mission to the United Nations, 12 December 2024, <https://usun.usmission.gov/joint-statement-by-the-security-council-signatories-of-the-statement-of-shared-commitments-for-the-principles-of-women-peace-and-security-4/>.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Doha III was a private meeting, where under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs Rosemary DiCarlo provided a briefing. This session was convened following Resolution 2721, adopted on 29 December 2023, which, among other directives, called for the appointment of a special envoy for Afghanistan and requested the Secretary-General to brief the Council within 60 days on related consultations and discussions. The meeting aimed to discuss the international engagement on Afghanistan with a more cohesive, well-coordinated, and strengthened structure; "Afghanistan: Private Meeting," Security Council Report, 5 February 2024, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2024/02/afghanistan-private-meeting-2.php>.

<sup>42</sup> Glenna L. P. S. Callaway, "What's Next for the UN's Doha Process on Afghanistan," United States Institute of Peace, July 2024. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/07/whats-next-uns-doha-process-afghanistan>.

<sup>43</sup> Andrew Watkins, "What's Next for the UN's Doha Process on Afghanistan?" United States Institute of Peace, July 2024, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/07/whats-next-uns-doha-process-afghanistan>.



<sup>44</sup> "In Brief: Feminist Foreign Policies: An Introduction," UN Women, 2022, [https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/Brief-Feminist-foreign-policies-en\\_0.pdf](https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/Brief-Feminist-foreign-policies-en_0.pdf).

<sup>45</sup> Toghrul Ali, "Central Asia's Careful Engagement with the Taliban," Caspian Policy Center, 5 February 2023, <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/security-and-politics-program-spp/central-asias-careful-engagement-with-the-taliban>.

<sup>46</sup> Metra Mehran, "Recognition of Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan Justified (Afghanistan Research Network Reflection)," PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform, University of Edinburgh, 1 June 2023, <https://peacerep.org/publication/afghanistan-research-network-recognition-of-gender-apartheid/>.

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✉ [peacerep@ed.ac.uk](mailto:peacerep@ed.ac.uk)

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## About Us

PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform is a research consortium based at Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

Consortium members include: Conciliation Resources, Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (CTPSR) at Coventry University, Dialectiq, Edinburgh Law School, International IDEA, LSE Conflict and Civiness Research Group, LSE Middle East Centre, Queens University Belfast, University of St Andrews, University of Stirling, and the World Peace Foundation at Tufts University.

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PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform  
[peacerep@ed.ac.uk](mailto:peacerep@ed.ac.uk) | <https://peacerep.org>

University of Edinburgh, School of Law  
Old College, South Bridge EH8 9YL