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WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY IN THE AGE OF FRAGMENTATION

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Women, Peace and Security in the Age of Fragmentation

Scottish Council on Global Affairs Insight Report

Authors: Laura Wise, Salma Yusuf, Kasia Houghton, and Fiona Campbell

Introduction

The Women, Peace and Security agenda (WPS) is marking 25 years of institutionalization through United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000). Resolution 1325 was the first UNSC resolution to recognise women's contributions to conflict prevention, peacemaking, and peacebuilding, and has become the backbone of inclusion advocacy across peace process practice by the UN, regional organisations, governments, and civil society.

However, the WPS agenda also faces an intersection of contemporary crises. Feminist scholars and activists are questioning the patchy implementation of WPS commitments, and neocolonial practices that further marginalise Global South expertise and reify whiteness (Parashar, 2018). Liberal peacemaking failures in places such as Afghanistan, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, have also highlighted the limitations of commitments to gender equality that are hard won during peace processes, but are easily lost when transitions collapse or reverse (Akbari and True, 2024). Meanwhile, leading global WPS donors are retreating from normative leadership, despite their historical contributions to the agenda, by implementing substantial cuts to Overseas Development Assistance (ODA), reallocating this spending into accelerated defence funding and reframing security as 'militarized' or 'nuclear' rather than 'human' (GAPS, 2025). These cuts have evolved against a backdrop of rising anti-gender mobilization, a global movement which has been bolstered by Donald Trump's administrative purge of Diversity, Equality and Inclusion initiatives, which has included targeting WPS programming across foreign and defence departments (James and Mehta, 2025).

Whilst the current moment can be conceptualised with a variety of 'ages' (Garton Ash, 2024) - of which the age of 'fragmentation' is one of many - the changing nature of both conflict and peace raises urgent questions for gender equality and inclusion advocates. Institutionally mainstreamed in the aftermath of the conflicts of the 1990s, UNSCR 1325 was adopted at a time when peacemaking was informed by a liberal agenda and a multilateral peacemaking blueprint as part of a unipolar moment. Much of the evidence base about women's meaningful participation has been drawn from peace process case studies from previous 'ages'. These processes were often led or co-led by mediation actors who explicitly advocated for liberal notions of inclusive settlements, and were predominantly addressing state-based conflict between a government and one or several non-state armed actors, who were cohered into an overarching 'national' peace process (Bell and Wise, 2022a). Gender-equality advocates now rarely deal with 'a' peace process between two or three conflict parties, but instead face a series of interconnected and shifting dialogue efforts across a complex nexus of actors, which can be understood as 'multi-party mediation' or 'multi-mediation' (Hellmüller and Salaymeh, 2024; Bell, 2024).

Strategies employed by WPS advocates have therefore developed to operate within certain paradigms. These paradigms assume the presence of a mediator with an institutional mandate for inclusion as a norm, a 'main' peacemaking initiative that coheres all conflict actors under one process, and the use of multi-track mediation to include broader sectoral perspectives in an effort to create an inclusive, democratic, and plural political, economic, and social environment. Such evidence and strategies have continued to inform much policymaking into the current era of global fragmentation, especially by governments and intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) that are guided by democratic and liberal principles. For example, many of the prominent studies on women's participation cited in the UK 2023-2027 National Action Plan draw on peace process cases from the 1990s and 2000s (UK Government, 2023). Global fragmentation, however, has ushered in diverse peace-making and peacebuilding approaches among actors that have not traditionally led peace initiatives nor conform neatly to the liberal peace model, such as Russia, China, and Qatar. An urgent question for gender-equality advocates is whether dominant approaches to inclusion are still applicable to the fragmented conflicts and complex mediation ecosystems of today, and how to explore the adaptability of common inclusion modalities and strategies such as gender commissions, consultations, high-level workshops, and mass action (c.f. Paffenholz, et. al, 2016).

In this report, we draw on reflections from an expert workshop and our own reflections to identify key findings and recommendations for policymakers supporting WPS and peacemaking interventions in fragmented conflicts. In Part I, we set out what we understand by 'global fragmentation', and how this phenomenon manifests through diversified and competing peace processes, and proliferation of conflict actors. We also explore contemporary global crises facing the WPS agenda, including anti-gender backlash, securitization, and modern technological and climate threats to women and gender minorities. In Part II, we identify some new challenges faced by WPS and gender advocates in navigating peace processes under fragmentation, such as the sidelining of gender in mediation, splintering women's movements, and funding cuts. We also reflect on ways that peace and security actors are navigating multi-mediation to advance gendered perspectives, and the transformative potentials of inclusive

grassroots peacemaking in fragmented conflicts. Finally, in the Conclusion, we propose some ways to rethink WPS in response to global fragmentation, and emphasise the importance of remaining hopeful as feminists during challenging times.

Key Findings and Policy Recommendations

1. **Global fragmentation is contributing to the systemic erosion of the WPS agenda.** The WPS agenda is facing an epistemic crisis and threats to its fundamental survival due to political retrogression, anti-gender backlash, and severe funding cuts to grassroots women peacebuilders. Democratic and liberal backsliding, the redistribution of funds from development and towards defence, and ideological trends away from women's empowerment and inclusion have weakened global commitment to gender equality, while militarisation has distorted feminist foreign policy.

   Recommendation: Feminist policies and human security principles should not be seen as incompatible with national and international security and interests. A reassessment of the integrity of human security, including WPS, as critically underpinning national and international security can help to move thinking towards reinvestment in long-term strategies that build upon the WPS agenda.

2. **Global fragmentation is impacting women's meaningful participation and leadership in peace processes.** Increased inter-state competition and complex conflict landscapes has transformed peacemaking. Peacemaking now takes place across multiple, often competing, mediation spaces, which reinforces the hierarchy of talks, with limited inclusion of women at the most influential level, and broad consultations rarely feeding into Track 1 processes. This creates challenges for inclusion advocates and increases the resource burden on civil society actors. However, multi-mediation may also create opportunities for meaningful inclusion interventions, in contexts where process hierarchies are not as strong.

   Recommendation: WPS strategies should be reimagined for fragmented conflict systems, in order to make the most of these opportunities and to create greater space for meaningful implementation. Gender-equality actors need to develop adaptive advocacy and innovative leadership models that engage across multiple mediation initiatives rather than focusing on a single national process, and include mechanisms to facilitate active, equitable engagement with civil society concerns and initiatives at all levels of a peace process.

3. **Multi-mediation enables the sidelining of diverse women's groups and gender perspectives.** Competitive mediation incentivises forum shopping for belligerents and civil society actors but also client shopping by mediators, which enables elites to choose which actors and groups are included in peace processes. This client shopping can lead to the prioritisation of specific women's groups and issues over others, and often relegates gender issues to symbolic or "soft" forums.

    Recommendation: Mediators should incorporate coalition-building support for women's groups, deliberately engaging with diverse factions to facilitate open dialogue and transparent deliberation across the women's movement. They should also actively resist the temptation to forum shop for moderate voices aligned with geopolitical interests. Intervenor states and blocs must be held accountable to international norms (including WPS) regardless of the unilateral or multilateral nature of their engagement.

4. **Resource constraints and care deficits challenge the implementation of WPS.** The current political and economic context has constrained financial resources for women's organisations, who now need to navigate multiple peace processes and fora simultaneously, due to the rise of competitive mediation and peace-making. This navigation compounds financial precarity, and depletes the social resources such as caregiving, that are expended by women and women's organisations during conflict and peace-making, further limiting women's ability to influence multiple peace processes.

    Recommendation: Donor governments must urgently reconsider decisions on budget cuts and significantly increase flexible, long-term core funding directly to grassroots women's civil society organizations (CSOs) in conflict-affected regions. This resource support must explicitly cover caregiving as labour, wellbeing to tackle the burnout risks associated with navigating complex peace environments, and trauma-informed responses.

5. **Digital technologies offer opportunities, but also risks for implementing the WPS agenda.** Emerging technologies, such as generative AI, have been deployed as a cost-effective and limitless way of promoting political and social narratives and ideologies that stoke resistance to the WPS agenda. The siloing of technology research from WPS work means that new digital tools for inclusion are often deployed without addressing risks including Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV) and the vast gendered and class-based discrepancies in digital access.

Recommendation: Donor governments should prioritize regulatory capacity to combat TFGBV and online misogyny, and mandate the integration of gendered risk mitigation and digital literacy support into all peace technology initiatives to ensure equitable and safe participation.

6. **The climate emergency also presents new challenges for WPS in peace and security.** Climate crises not only increase the risk of resource scarcity and natural disasters, both of which contribute to violent conflict, but climate change also facilitates extractivist dealmaking over critical minerals in transactional mediation, often excluding gendered impacts and local communities. These emerging and evolving phenomena are reshaping peace and conflict dynamics in ways to which the donor community must be responsive.

   Recommendation: Women's organisations in conflict-affected areas that are vulnerable to climate crises require greater resourcing to secure the social and political labour carried out by women that preserves the fabric and security of conflict-vulnerable societies. Mechanisms such as gender and conflict-sensitivity audits can identify the structural, extractivist violence embedded within peace agreements, particularly those resulting from transactional, geopolitical mediation.

7. **Fragmentation requires new feminist coalitions.** Global fragmentation has tended to amplify policy paradoxes, such as the dichotomy between domestic and foreign policy, siloing action within donor states, and has exacerbated Global North/South inequalities. However, fragmentation also blurs the boundaries between these binaries. While security issues may have renewed relevance in foreign policy, human security at home and abroad are intrinsically linked and connected to the notion of care.

   Recommendation: Build equitable, transnational feminist coalitions and bridge domestic/foreign policy divides, and treat WPS as a cross-cutting, whole-of-society commitment. Caring for domestic populations could increase domestic support for care towards international communities by dissolving the zero-sum mentality that feeds xenophobic discourses.

8. **Local and relational peacemaking offers hope for WPS.** Grassroots and civic-led sub-national peace processes, as seen in Colombia (Nariño) and South Sudan, demonstrate that inclusive, relational, and trust-building approaches are not incompatible with fragmentation. These processes, which center women in leadership for structural transformation, de-escalation, and community trust-building, offer models for sustainable, transformative peace that challenge the prevailing dynamic of quick, transactional elite wins.

Recommendation: Donor and intergovernmental organizations should invest in, study, and strategically link local, relational, and civic-led peacemaking initiatives (like those in Nariño, Colombia, and in South Sudan) to national or Track 1 processes. These models challenge the hierarchy of talks and prioritize trust-building and structural economic transformation, and should be recognized as essential components for achieving sustainable peace in fragmented conflicts.

9. **Contextual action is fundamental for effective WPS interventions in contemporary peacemaking.** Gender advocates face varying political contexts and resistance globally. Therefore, a variety of languages and frameworks need to be used to avoid the mutual alienation of traditional political and security actors and WPS advocates.

   Recommendation: Prioritize investment in adaptive, customary, peacemaking infrastructures, including localized Women Mediators' Networks, who can operate across fragmented territories and leverage indigenous knowledge and customs for conflict resolution. Funding must be flexible enough to allow women leaders to design interventions that are culturally acceptable to local male elites and power brokers.

10. **Strategic allyship is important for advancing gender perspectives in multi-mediation.** This is particularly the case in highly securitized and militarized negotiations with limited access for civic or feminist groups, or in which macho dealmaking cultures mean that women's interventions are likely to be dismissed as secondary.

    Recommendation: Gender equality actors should implement early-mapping of potential WPS allies across all tracks and layers of multi-mediation. This includes fostering genuine internal and external allyship (including with sympathetic senior men) to strategically introduce gender perspectives using contextual, non-alienating language, and by reframing inclusion as integral to other high-level issues (e.g., local ceasefires, economic transformation).

Part I: The Age of Fragmentation

Peacemaking is undergoing seismic changes in the contemporary era. Changes in the international system and global order have seriously impacted the way peace is made, who does it, and the outcomes of peace processes. There has been a turn away from multilateralism towards greater unilateral peace initiatives, contributing to the emergence of multi-mediation (Bell, 2024). Furthermore, peacemaking and

peacebuilding has become more transactional, usually serving the geopolitical interests of third parties, often to the detriment of multilateral initiatives and a sustainable and inclusive peace for conflict-affected societies.

Between the end of the Cold War and around 2010, peace processes largely followed a blueprint designed and predominantly led by liberal peace actors. Multilateral initiatives led by “the West” took precedence over unilateral peace processes in an attempt to prevent the catastrophic consequences of conflicts such as those in Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Rwanda from repeating. Peace processes that occurred under what can be described as the “unipolar moment” (Krauthammer in Ryan, 2018), in which the liberal West led by the United States became the most dominant bloc within the international system, contributed to the seeming ubiquity of the liberal peacemaking and peacebuilding approach. Such an approach has, even if only nominally, promoted inclusivity – gender, ethnicity, religion, political affiliation – democracy, the participation of civil society, and liberal market economics (Richmond, 2006).

Numerous critiques have highlighted issues with this agenda, namely its imposition of an order that (re)enforced neo-imperialist dynamics between liberal Western states and conflict-affected societies, as well as limited local buy-in, especially where previous incumbents lost their power (Heathershaw, 2008; Mac Ginty, 2011). Nonetheless, the liberal peace agenda prioritised inclusivity (Pospisil, 2019), even if only rhetorically, instrumentally or thinly, at all stages of the peace process and the subsequent political and economic system.

Global Fragmentation and Multi-mediation

Global fragmentation describes the complexity of contemporary wars as the global order shifts to accommodate a more multipolar or polycentric system. Conflicts in Myanmar, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, reflect a web of embedded sub-national, national, transnational, regional, and global-level geopolitical conflicts and rivalries. These conflicts demonstrate the diversification of conflict actors, with the greater involvement of criminal gangs (Amaya-Panche, 2024; Yusuf, 2024a), private military companies and mercenaries, militias and transnational groups with identity-based, political, or sectarian ideologies. Traditional peacekeeping and conflict resolution strategies, such as large UN peacekeeping and special political missions, which were initially designed to reduce violence and promote peace between two militaries or a government and rebel group, seem anachronistic. This fragmentation of the conflict zone and among conflict actors is also reflected in disjointed belligerent demands and limited political cohesion, even among conflict actors that ostensibly find themselves on the same side of a conflict (Bell and Wise, 2022b; Whitfield, 2024).

Opportunistic belligerent behavior complicates the work of mediators, and brings additional complexity into what was already a challenging role.

This trend towards diversification of conflict actors has also been reflected among peace actors and peace practices (Peter and Houghton, 2023). Since around 2010, increasing competition between global and regional powers has affected how peace is made and who makes it. As the world has shifted from a brief unipolar moment to a more contested order, where multiple powers seek to promote alternative norms and systems of global governance, peace itself has become a political instrument. Rather than being pursued as an end in its own right, peacemaking is increasingly deployed as a tool of influence. In contexts of political turmoil and instability, conflicts present opportunities for external powers, as well as belligerents, to expand their leverage. These processes are less about resolving violence for its own sake, and more about securing access to arenas of international security and advancing strategic interests (Beaujouan, 2024).

As such, peacemaking, peacebuilding, and peacekeeping have become transactional (Hellmüller and Salaymeh, 2025). Given that the pursuit of peace is increasingly about securing interests and influence, unilateral approaches to peacemaking and peacebuilding are now commonplace. This unilateralism has impacted the tools that are wielded in pursuit of making, building, and keeping an often-violent peace. Coercion, demographic engineering, and political domination increasingly feature in mediation efforts and peace agreements, especially where external powers attempt to impose or influence peace (Sosnowski, 2023). In cases where this approach to peace has been most prevalent, methods traditionally accepted as peacemaking or peacebuilding have become integrated with approaches more akin to warmaking. This shift has implications for the structural violence embedded within peace agreements and their implementation, as peace processes provide the legal structures to secure a (post-)conflict political order that continues to serve the interests of the most dominant third party and their local associates or proxies.

As peace has become an arena of competition, and peacemaking is used in rivalrous contention, parallel peace processes have proliferated, leading to a peace-making landscape typified by multi-mediation (Bell, 2024). Peacemaking is increasingly carried out by singular states, or blocs, to the detriment of truly multilateral initiatives. No new UN peacekeeping missions have been mandated since 2014, despite the world now facing the highest number of violent conflicts since World War II (Anyadike, 2024). Multilateral initiatives now compete with parallel unilateral and mini-lateral peace processes, producing a constellation of efforts that feed into, and sometimes detract from, each other. Meanwhile, multilateral peace and security organisations must either participate in the parallel peace process, risking the appearance of bias or endorsement of activities with which its members may not agree, or refrain from

participating and lose control over the peace process (Hellmüller and Salaymeh, 2024).

Peace processes have therefore become political marketplaces, where governments, intergovernmental organisations, non-governmental organisations, and even private companies seek to gain leverage and use it to influence the conflict outcome. Conflict actors can forum shop for the most conducive peace process to their goals and interests, whilst external intervenors are incentivised to exert sustained influence over the conflict through military, diplomatic, or economic means (Adhikari et. al, 2025). Simultaneously, rapid advancements in digital technologies and generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) have further challenged the dominance of state-based systems of governance, breaking down transnational boundaries in both conflict and peacemaking dynamics. These offer belligerents new ways of conducting war, and third parties new pathways for influencing peace processes.

Women, Peace and Security at 25: Systemic Erosion and Epistemic Crisis

As peacemaking undergoes seismic changes in the contemporary era, so do the normative buy-in, institutional architecture, and collective resources to implement the WPS agenda. The 25th anniversary of WPS is being met with widespread pessimism and the collective sense that the agenda's advocates are fighting for its fundamental survival amidst political retrogression, attacks on the concept of 'gender', and funding cuts. This crisis is forcing WPS actors to face difficult choices as to how they can advance transformative feminist approaches to peace when the fundamentals of gender equality are being threatened across societies worldwide. Wide-ranging phenomena, such as heightened global competition and rivalry, the rise of new technologies, and climate breakdown, have a multifaceted impact on implementation of the WPS agenda at grassroots, societal, and governance levels.

Feminist approaches to foreign policy are being dangerously diluted or instrumentalized, both by being co-opted into non-transformative political documents, or to justify increasingly militaristic policy. Policymakers who are personally committed to advancing gender equality globally, are now mandated to act on behalf of publics who increasingly do not prioritize overseas development spending, or struggle to find resonance with the language of WPS as being something that affects their lives. At the same time, far right actors in many European states have effectively co-opted and weaponized WPS languages of protecting "their" women and girls to advance anti-immigration agendas, pushing more centrist parties to adopt softer versions of such agendas (Gentleman, 2025).

An example of difficult choices faced by feminist peace advocates is the rapid shift of many leading WPS donor states from human security approaches to securitisation and militarisation. This could advance women's participation in militaries and security sectors, which would be a positive result according to some interpretations of WPS. However, others see this as further hijacking of WPS away from its pacifist roots and the 'prevention' pillar, and redirecting much needed funds away from grassroots women peacebuilders. For feminists in donor states, the strength with which realist, militaritised visions of security have captured foreign policy has made it difficult to identify opportunities for pushback. Meanwhile, feminists working in conflict contexts are facing the immediate consequences of rapid and severe budget cuts towards groups working to advance women's rights, gender equality, and peace (UN Women, 2025).

WPS retrenchment is nested within a wider environment of growing misogyny across all spheres of public life, a growth that is exacerbated by Technology-Facilitated Gender Based Violence (TFGBV) and the intentional targeting of young men and boys with 'manosphere' digital content. Online misogyny means that in addition to confronting threats to gender-equality in public life, societies are also facing a relentless fight to preserve girls' ambition and deal with the gender backlash at home and in schools. This directly constrains the space for women's inclusion and leadership in areas traditionally thought of as masculine, such as governance, politics, and security, a core tenet of the WPS agenda. Despite the rapid advancement of generative AI, and its ability to transform political debates, manipulate public perceptions, and facilitate GBV, regulatory capacities have been outpaced by development, and research into tech, conflict, and peacemaking is often siloed from WPS research. This siloing means that digital technologies are increasingly used in peace processes as a tool for widening access to excluded constituencies, but without understanding the protection risks that technology presents to women from different intersectional backgrounds, or the huge gendered and class-based discrepancies in digital access and literacy.

Finally, the WPS crisis is happening against a backdrop of climate emergency and ecological collapse (Cohn and Duncanson, 2020). This collapse not only has security implications for women and girls on the 'frontlines' of the climate emergency, and exacerbates drivers of conflict in many fragile states, but also is affecting the types of geopolitical deals that are being made under the guise of 'peace'. Extractivist dealmaking over critical minerals and rare earth materials has become a central feature of transactional mediation, with U.S mediated or negotiated agreements in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Ukraine granting access to critical minerals in exchange for military support and international investment (Atlantic Council, 2025). The gendered impacts of natural resource exploitation is commonly absent from such deals, and the likelihood of sustainable peace dividends for local communities is also missing as they are excluded from high-level negotiations on extraction.

Within the expert deliberations during the workshop discussion that inform this report, divisions emerged as to the roots of the WPS crisis, the extent to which this crisis is existential, and the ways in which WPS advocates and feminists in peacemaking should respond. As an observation, this division demonstrates that the current moment and global political climate that feminists are navigating is highly polarised, and this in itself poses a challenge for collectively sustaining the WPS agenda.

Part II: Impacts of Fragmentation for Inclusive Peace Processes

Women's leadership and influence in peace processes is affected by both the realities of global fragmentation and the diversity of crises facing the WPS agenda. Multi-mediation presents a new ecosystem of peacemaking that requires adaptive ways of mobilising for gender equality, both to support women's full, equal, safe, and meaningful participation in peace processes, and to advance gender perspectives in the substance of negotiations. Rather than understanding multi-mediation as a positive or negative binary for women's participation, it is instead an evolving landscape in which there are opportunities for rethinking masculine and hierarchical mediation orthodoxies. At the same time, navigating multi-mediation is resource intensive, which is challenged by the short supply of feminist resources in the context of de-funding.

Elite Resistance through Competitive Mediation

Women's groups and gender issues are often perceived as challenging the power of militarized elites. Whilst this is a long-term issue for inclusion advocacy, multi-mediation further enables elites to sideline mediators who insist on inclusive agendas. This allows them to shunt gender discussions into "softer" forums with no real decision-making power, effectively creating a hierarchy of talks where women are relegated to the least influential fora. Hierarchies within peace talks is not a new issue, given that the dominant Track 1, 2, 3 model of mediation has also been critiqued for sidelining women's groups and civic society movements into separate tracks seen as less political or sensitive (Fal-Dutra Santos, 2024). However, while the emergent trend of multi-mediation may produce opportunities to change this, it seems to have more commonly proliferated this hierarchy and separation across different mediation initiatives.

Multi-mediation has increased the number of fora for dialogue within a given conflict, incentivising forum shopping not only amongst belligerent parties, but also civil society and inclusion advocates. In cases of competitive mediation, inclusion advocates may focus their efforts and limited resources on one distinct process or dialogue led by a more 'sympathetic' mediation actor. This can create space to bring gendered ideas into the multi-mediation ecosystem. If the core political deal is actually being brokered elsewhere, however, this forum shopping perpetuates the sidelining of societal interest groups from elite bargains (see Pospisil, 2025 on Sudan).

Furthermore, fragmentation can have a paradoxical effect on forum shopping depending on the context. Not only does it lead to increased competition between peace processes, mediators, belligerents, and advocates, but it can also create the

opposite outcome: a lack of choice between fora. For example, Russia's domination of the Syrian peace landscape and battlefield led to the relegation of the UN-led peace process, limiting the number of peace processes and securing Russia's domination over it (Beaujouan, 2024; Houghton, 2024). This indicates that the diversification of peace actors globally does not always contribute to the proliferation of diverse fora. Rather, it can curb choice, increasing the influence of dominant actors (belligerents and mediators) within the peace process and the conflict.

Different mediators may also favor different women's groups - perhaps choosing those seen as more moderate or aligned with their geopolitical interests, particularly as fragmentation leads to the involvement of a greater variety of state actors as third-parties (Peter and Houghton, 2023; Peter and Rice, 2022). By offering a seat at the table to one faction of women and not another, external powers can intentionally or unintentionally splinter women's coalitions, reducing the collective bargaining power of a unified women's movement, and impacting their overall influence. This favouring exacerbates the fact that, just like political and military actors in conflict, women will have different agendas and priorities, and are unlikely to represent the diverse views and interests of all women within a society. Different perspectives can emerge through dialogue to elicit compromise, cohesion, and decision-making. However, selectively including certain groups of women can make cross-movement dialogue difficult and factional.

For inclusion advocates, navigating multiple mediation processes or trying to access elite processes is also resource-intensive. This resource-intensity disproportionately harms women's civil society organizations, which are typically underfunded, and whose financial precarity has often worsened in 2025. The constant need to travel, translate documents, arrange caregiving cover, and maintain a presence across different diplomatic venues exhausts women's organisations' limited capacity, and negatively impacts their abilities to substantively influence peace processes. Furthermore, this system creates a "credentialing paradox": to be taken seriously by one mediator, a group must prove its legitimacy, often by demonstrating influence in other processes. For new or hyper-local women's groups, sometimes emerging in response to effects of conflict fragmentation - such as emergent splinter groups or security threats in particular communities - this creates an impossible barrier to entry, locking them out of the very networks that could grant them legitimacy.

In the age of fragmentation, explicit resistance to women's inclusion in peace processes seems emboldened by contemporary U.S. mediation approaches in which both women and discussions on gender are notably absent, sidelined, or publicly subject to sexist remarks (such as co-led talks on Gaza in 2025). However, previous ages of peacemaking also had inclusion limits, particularly in processes where women were subject to tokenism by being symbolically represented, but without substantive agency or process ownership (Yusuf, 2023a). For example, women's advisory boards and groups in UN-led peace processes in Yemen and Syria - often cited by officials as

examples of high-level participation mechanisms for women in conflict - have also been criticized for only delivering the veneer of inclusion, without providing substantive pathways for women's influence (Zahar, 2023; Buringa, 2021).

Under conditions of fragmentation, tokenism wastes the limited legitimacy and resources available for peacemaking, which could instead be focused on leaders who can deliver durable change at the community level. While explicit resistance may challenge women's inclusion (Çuhadar, 2020), it can also help to preserve resources that may otherwise be misspent on superficial inclusion initiatives, and may contribute to innovative responses to associated challenges. Contemporary cases of explicit resistance demonstrate that there is still value in adapting lessons-learned from women's historical experiences: for example, how women's organisations navigated explicit resistance to their participation by the lead mediator in the Algier's process for Mali in 2014 (Lorentzen, 2020).

Navigating Multi-mediation for Gender Advocacy

Whilst fragmentation raises new threats to women's participation in peace processes, the emergence of multi-mediation necessitates that inclusion advocates adapt accordingly. The decentralisation of mediation from global multilateral organisations to regionally-led initiatives, opens up spaces for more contextualised engagement, particularly in regions with a strong normative ownership of the WPS agenda, such as the African Union - although African feminists and civil society are also facing anti-gender backlash and the impacts of fragmentation in armed conflicts (Haastrup, 2025). The rise of private mediation organisations, stepping into vacuums left by international organisations and ODA-retrenching states, could also introduce new creative ways of flexibly addressing exclusion, without being constrained by institutional bureaucracies and politicking (Yusuf, 2022; Djalal, 2021). However, such private organisations also come with their own internal conflicts and perspectives on gender-equality as a normative value in mediation, and gender-equality advocates often have to strategically engage with resistance from colleagues, as well as from conflict parties, in order to advance WPS actions.

Multi-mediation is also requiring gender advocates to think more strategically about entry points, and where they should focus their limited resources. In some conflicts, where there is limited space to negotiate inclusion in a Track 1 process, this may mean focusing efforts on grassroots initiatives as the level of interventions where women have had the most impact. For example, women and civic formations in Sudan have negotiated humanitarian access with belligerents, established mutual aid networks, and led processes to imagine alternative forms of governance (Makawi and Benson-

Strohmayer, 2025). Over the past 25 years, civic movements have shown efficacy in bringing conflict parties together, building societal buy-in for negotiations, and developing alternate visions of peace. If Track 1 processes are increasingly being captured by political-military-economic elites who have a clear resistance to gender equality - and in some instances, are actively driving anti-gender movements - then civic actors, who have proven to be a powerful pillar within the grassroots WPS movement, should be better supported to develop mediation initiatives.

In the context of global de-funding, many civic actors have already reassessed their reliance on unreliable government donors, and developed more adaptable ways of working. However, this adaptation has been driven by necessity, and comes with real risks of burnout exacerbated by trauma. Understanding 'care' as labour is central to feminist peace, but has not always been taken seriously in institutional approaches to peacemaking (Fal-Dutra Santos, 2024), nor routinely supported by donors. Acknowledging and addressing the emotional and unpaid labour of women's peace work is critical to enact the participation pillar, especially in a climate of escalating conflict and anti-gender backlash.

In some elite-driven processes, however, there may still be opportunities to advance women's perspectives and agendas into highly masculinised dialogues at Track 1 and Track 2. Careful allyship between 'within movement gender equality actors' (c.f. Haines, 2025) and external gender equality actors who are trusted to organise talks, can bring domestic gender perspectives into discussion agendas by presenting it as external, technical advice. Internal and external allyship can also ensure that facilitators understand how to strategically use contextual, alternate languages. In contexts such as Iraq, where sustained anti-gender pushback has created a hostile environment for women's rights organisations (Women for Women International, 2025: 14), avoiding terms such as 'gender', 'feminism', or 'women's rights' can reduce the risk of alienating parties resistant to gender as a concept, and protects space for subtle feminist interventions (Abadi, 2025).

Reframing women's participation as integral to other issues, such as impacting local ceasefire dynamics, can also be a way to elicit buy-in and entry points for engaging local actors. This reframing requires real coalition-building between local women's groups and external gender equality advocates, rather than tokenistic 'consultations', to understand what arguments are likely to be more effective. Such allyship, however, often relies on within-movement gender equality actors having relationships with or access to sympathetic mediation teams, which can rely on a degree of opportunity, rather than design. Early-mapping of potential WPS allies across different fora, processes, and layers of talks, can promote contextually relevant and impactful conversations, particularly through genuine allyship from senior men (Münch, 2025).

Whilst transactionalism becomes more central to elite bargains in contemporary mediation, there are still peace processes in which relationality and trust-building holds

currency, offering examples of contextually informed long-termist approaches intersecting with fragmentation. These peace processes are often found at more territorially ‘local’ scales of peacemaking. However, such local processes are often linked to national processes in complex ways, and can sometimes be seen as a barometer test for replicating initiatives across other parts of a country.

In Colombia, the ´Territorial Peace Co-Construction Body for Nariño’ brings the Government together with the Comuneros del Sur (CS), a former faction of the National Liberation Army (ELN), with direct participation by grassroots social organisations, indigenous people, the Church, and international organisations. Relational restorative structures to rebuild the fabric of society are central to the process, with a focus on implementing partial agreements on issues such as ‘de-escalation, mine action, returning displaced populations, the search for missing persons, and improving indigenous peoples’ living conditions’ (Mutis Rosero and Posada-Téllez, 2024). Women have held key leadership roles across negotiation teams, coordinating and overseeing the sub-commissions and technical processes that are implementing the partial agreements, even in the absence of a ‘final’ agreement or ceasefire. Working across the negotiating teams and civil society, women in Nariño have also been fundamental in implementing the structural and economic transformations to reduce inequality and to combat the illicit economy, which fuels and funds the conflict, and in centralising the concept of care during the negotiations. Peace co-construction in Nariño also challenges the notion of hierarchy, as the government and the CS are among the participants of the process, rather than meeting through a separate track that is hierarchically above other stakeholders.

In South Sudan, local peace processes have demonstrated the importance of adaptivity in fragmented conflicts, and how local peacemaking through trusted civic mediators can respond to changing patterns of violence, particularly when internationally-supported national level processes have functionally stalled (Pospisil, Wilson, Joseph & Magara, 2025). In Yei River County, women’s groups are among the civic actors who have ‘increasingly stepped in to mediate disputes, rebuild trust, and improve civil-military relations’, or have acted as guarantors of agreements (Ibid, 13; 15), whilst in Wau, they ‘were often the ones maintaining community trust and enabling continuity between agreements’ (Ibid, 19). Local peace processes in South Sudan also show the value of dialogue processes whether or not a formal agreement is reached, and that such ‘pre-negotiation’ can contribute to trust-building, de-escalation, and future capacities for dialogue (Ibid, 2; see also Holliger, 2025: 81).

When the state is weak or contested, the most robust source of authority often resides in local networks and traditional mechanisms, such as customary law, community courts, and religious or cultural communities. Women’s leadership in local initiatives demonstrates the iterative nature of peacemaking in fragmented conflicts: informal legitimacy precedes and enables formal political power, reversing the typical top-down hierarchy (Yusuf, 2024b).These examples from Colombia and South Sudan counter

the current macho dynamic of quick, transactional, geopolitical or national wins in negotiations, and demonstrate that conflict fragmentation is not incompatible with inclusive, civic, ‘everyday’ peacemaking approaches. Rather, relational, community-rooted approaches are necessary for sustainable, transformative peace in such complex conflict environments, and offer substantive opportunities for women’s influential participation.

Conclusion: Rethinking Women, Peace and Security

After 25 years of WPS, there is a collective sense of exhaustion and despair, with limited consensus on where the agenda should focus in response to a cacophony of threats. Whilst identifying and reflecting on the sources of this despair are necessary for developing responses to these problems, maintaining a sense of hope as a foundational feminist principle is critical for moving from beyond despair to tangible actions.

There are also opportunities within this moment of crisis to reorient or reimagine the WPS agenda where it has previously fallen short. Global North/South hierarchies in WPS policy and programming have long been criticised, but the current failures of WPS implementation demonstrate more than ever the urgent need for broad, inclusive coalitions that prioritise local and Global South expertise. Working in WPS partnership across national boundaries - not only with “like-minded nations”, but also with partners who hold political currency within contemporary peacemaking - also provides an avenue for strategic coalitions. Such work is important not only to engage resistant peace actors, but also to reduce duplication and competition where it exists so that partners are reinforcing each other’s work within and across governments.

Coalition building not only needs to take place globally, but also domestically, particularly to reduce the binary of national/international within many Global North WPS donor states and National Action Plans (Hagen and Haastrup, 2020) and to learn from domestic civic actors who have been effective in achieving policy and social change on issues such as GBV and combating far right extremism. Reducing domestic/foreign binaries not only requires concerted coalition building and equitable knowledge exchange between organisations, but also high-level, political strategies to defend WPS, which advocates for a shift from a siloed "foreign policy" topic to a cross-cutting domestic and international commitment that brings human security back to the centre.

Cross-cutting does not only mean focusing on spaces within ‘national’ policy documents, but taking a policy ecosystems approach (Kirby and Shepherd, 2021), and strategising across private, local, devolved, national, regional, and global peace and security architecture, to make the case for gender equality as central to sustainable peace. To overcome relegation of the WPS agenda, developing common goals and strategies between WPS advocates and local, national, and international political and security actors is key to realising and reinforcing the interdependence between transformative, inclusive peace and broader security interests.

Within this re-orientation of WPS hierarchies, there is also a need to broaden understandings of "peacemaking" to incorporate fragmented contexts where the primary threat is not an interstate war, but a breakdown of human security driven by transnational organized crime, gang violence, and a culture of impunity. This opens space for supporting women's leadership in violence prevention and community justice initiatives, in which women address the immediate and tangible insecurity felt by communities. Such approaches are a rebuttal to traditional militarized and elite-focused definition of security, and offer more resilient forms of peacemaking against the systemic chaos of fragmentation, but only if they are properly resourced (Yusuf, 2024a).

Feminist and civic visions of peacemaking are facing unprecedented challenges, but across WPS ecosystems, there are examples of transformative wins, even if small, which remind us that long-term visions can be combined with incremental steps. Whilst adaptability is in order, there is still value in consolidating and building on what has already been achieved, as well as looking outwards to see how the broader political and social landscapes have changed for peace and security action.

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The purpose of the workshop was to explore what Global Fragmentation and the contemporary Women Peace Security crisis/es means for women's rights advocates in peace processes. The workshop brought together a group of individuals at multiple career stages from the worlds of diplomacy, governance, research, policy, practice, and activism to collectively make sense of this current moment in peacemaking, and generate new ideas to respond to a common challenge. This collective work included reflections on the past and present of peacemaking and WPS, and thinking about the future trajectory of feminist approaches to peace.

The workshop was structured as a series of plenary sessions, with opening remarks from pre-invited participants designed to provoke discussion, followed by an open dialogue between all participants. This report is therefore informed by the ideas of a collective conversation that took place during the workshop and the reflections and analyses of the report's authors following the workshop. We acknowledge and appreciate the insightful and generous sharing by all participants at the workshop both in person and online.

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