Policy Brief : Women, Peace and Security in the Age of Fragmentation

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AFTER 25 years of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda (WPS), the changing nature of conflict and peacemaking 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.

Strategies employed by WPS actors 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 to resolve state-based conflict. Such strategies have continued to inform 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.

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. WPS actors 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). 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

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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).

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 side-lining 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, silo-ing 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).