

Waging Peace While Others Wage War: The Promise and Practice of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda for Effective Mediation

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Introduction

In August 2025, an image circulated on social media of a woman protesting genocide in Gaza. She was holding a sign that read: “You can bomb the world to pieces, but you can’t bomb it to peace.” They are the lyrics of a 2003 protest song against the occupation of Iraq, but they remain resonant today, as the UN Security Council marks 25 years since its unanimous adoption of Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security (WPS).

From the outset, the WPS agenda was rooted in, informed by and inspired by women who lived the realities of war across Africa, the Middle East, Europe, Asia and South America. They had witnessed first-hand the failure of elite-led peace processes and responded by forging alternative pathways to peace rooted in and inclusive of affected communities.

In adopting Resolution 1325, the UNSC codified these experiences. It also recognized a paradigm of women-led war-resistance and peacemaking, which had existed in many cultures historically, but was largely ignored in the scholarship and praxis of contemporary state-based conflict mediation. The unique contribution of the resolution lies in its recognition of both the differential impacts of war on women and men, and women’s complex roles and agency as peacemakers, mediators and fighters.

Twenty-five years on, the WPS agenda is anchored in 10 UNSC resolutions and reflected in commitments from the European Union, African Union, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, League of Arab States, Organization of American States and Association of Southeast Asian Nations. The framework has expanded from the original “four Ps” – prevention, participation of women, protection and peacekeeping in wars – to encompass violent extremism, climate-related conflicts and rising militarism.

Yet the agenda and its global constituency are at an inflection point. Although 109 states have national action plans committing to implement the agenda’s key provisions, women peacebuilders are experiencing greater exclusion and increased risk. The targeting of women and children in wars has reached unprecedented levels. Meanwhile, multilateral institutions and the post-Cold War transnational civil society ecosystem that serve as custodians of the agendas are at risk.

The threats come from two directions. First, with the rise of power politics, disregard for international law and sweeping reductions in overseas development assistance, there is a retreat from mediation to resolve conflicts. The result is sharp decreases in organizational operating capacities and the loss of experienced personnel. Second, there is a backlash against women's rights and, more specifically, the marginalization of women in the already exclusive, male-dominated realms of peace and security decision-making.

Ironically, the backlash is partly fuelled by the mischaracterization of the WPS agenda as a Western imposition – a liberal normative project concerned with “gender equality” artificially aiming to increase the number of women in formal diplomatic, mediation and negotiation roles.

This misunderstanding has frequently led to outright resistance to the agenda, as well as ad hoc, performative and technocratic fixes. Internationally led mediation efforts consistently overlook the peacebuilding and mediation work undertaken by locally rooted women through indigenous social structures at the frontlines of conflicts. Also, routinely disregarded is the trust that women peacebuilders have from their communities, their knowledge of early warning signs, practical responses to humanitarian issues, security provisions related to ceasefires or detainee negotiations and local political issues directly relevant to mediation processes. The result, often, is that the warnings of women peacebuilders are ignored, violence escalates and as armed groups proliferate, opportunities for peace mediation are lost.

Twenty-five years on, the few processes in which independent delegations of women peacebuilders have been included, or where political delegations have agreed to include a critical mass of women, remain the exception.

From Afghanistan and Syria to Ukraine and Sudan, women peacebuilders are frustrated by this lack of progress, but undeterred. As self-declared and often self-taught mediators and peacebuilders, they identify and fill gaps left by multilateral entities and powerful states. Their actions are driven neither by external interests nor by “Western” norms. Instead, their approaches are typically inspired by a blend of cultural traditions and faith teachings, understanding of their societal contexts and transnational exchanges of good practices within their global community of practice. They bring new perspectives and challenge the conventional wisdom around the theory and practice of mediation, definitions of “peace” and the purposes of peace processes.

Despite the rise of transactional diplomacy and retreat of multilateralism, the global WPS community of practice remains vibrant and actively engaged in the peaceful mitigation of conflict. How can mediation practitioners learn from the WPS community of practice and implement the spirit, intent and vision of this agenda to ensure better peace outcomes? This chapter offers six key reflections.

Local Roots, Global Branches: The Power and Value of Peace and Security Policies Rooted in Lived Realities

It is past time to dispel the myth that human rights, women's participation and conflict prevention policies were created to impose a Western policy agenda globally. The WPS agenda originated with women in war zones and in the shared human experiences of violence across different times and places. Examples from the 1990s include: South Africa, where the first politicians to meet publicly across the divide and address issues of political transformation and reconciliation were women; Colombia, where indigenous and Afro-Colombian women who had resisted displacement brought a collective rights agenda to the

negotiating table; Israeli and Palestinian women, including the Four Mothers movement that was pivotal to ending Israel's 20-year occupation of Lebanon; and Serbia's Women in Black movement, formed in 1991 to stop their state's regional war. These and similar efforts elsewhere translated women's moral and social legitimacy into political influence.

The WPS agenda's resilience is a testament to its resonance with many indigenous values and practices and the universal drive for peace and coexistence. Its codification as a pillar of international peace and security in UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) was a critical turning point driven by a global, women-led civil society movement. Mobilizing in 1998, through the Women Building Peace: From the Village Council to the Negotiating Table campaign, over 100 NGOs and networks collaborated internationally, consulting with women in war zones to determine their key concerns and priorities. The key pillars of the agenda – conflict prevention, participation of women in peacemaking and peacekeeping, protection and gender-responsive crisis response recovery – were universally relevant. A global petition and public postcard campaign addressed to then-UN Secretary General Kofi Annan synthesized the demands (see box). The process revealed women's leading roles in justice movements and non-violent conflict resolution and mediation practices throughout history across cultures and societies. Ironically, as formal state structures became dominant, women's praxis was erased. But where states have been weak or absent, particularly when conflicts expedite state failure, women become active.

The agenda's emphasis on recognizing women's contributions to peace and security resonated with the UNSC's membership in 2000. With the only female ambassador on the council in 2000, Jamaica was a strong supporter. For Bangladesh, a country with a history of conflict, the experiences of women as protectors, leaders and victims were significant. Canada was championing the human security agenda, which aligned with WPS. Namibia

Message on a Postcard:

Dear Secretary-General Kofi Annan,

Women everywhere applaud the efforts made by the United Nations. Women recognise the progress made in including women in peace making and peace building efforts within the UN itself and the pledges made to women during the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. However, we believe that five years later not enough has been done to make these pledges a reality. They must be implemented, as sustainable peace can only be achieved with the full participation of women from all levels of society. We ask the governments of the international community and the United Nations to stand by the commitments they have made to women. These are to:

1. Include women in peace negotiations as decision-makers
2. Put women at the heart of reconstruction and reconciliation
3. Strengthen the protection and representation of refugee and displaced women
4. End impunity for crimes committed against women and ensure redress
5. Give women and women's organisations the support and resources they need to build peace.

was concerned about UN peacekeepers sexually abusing and exploiting women and girls in the communities where they served. Additionally, since Namibia had benefited from civil society solidarity during its struggle for independence, it welcomed partnerships with the campaign's advocates. Holding the presidency of the UNSC in October 2000, Namibia played a crucial role in the unanimous adoption of the resolution. In subsequent years, other non-Western states such as Vietnam and South Africa also championed women's agency and participation in peacemaking.

Everyone Helped Us Kill Each Other, No One Helped Us Talk to Each Other: Inclusivity and Political Will as Necessary Conditions for Mediation.

Peace actors in civil society matter. Successful peace processes are predicated on two key pillars: the political will of warring parties to seek resolution through negotiations, and inclusivity, bringing in broad societal constituencies to foster the middle ground in contexts of deep polarization and mistrust. Resolution 1325 explicitly called for women's participation in formal processes and support for women's local peace initiatives, as women peacebuilders are often the first to bridge the divides.

Moving beyond the simplistic notion of a conflict as a contest between two warring sides is critical in addressing today's conflicts, for two reasons. First, from Syria to Sudan, once violence breaks out, militias often splinter, transnational criminal organizations and mercenary forces enter the fray, and state actors and proxies fill vacuums. Meanwhile, local peacemakers also emerge and coalesce. Widening peace processes to include multiple actors may be challenging, but to be effective, the process must reflect the complexity of the context – this includes both warring and peacemaking parties.

Second, it is insufficient to frame mediation around the armed actors or as a two-party process. This assumes that communities bearing the brunt of the violence are represented by warring factions or are irrelevant to the outcomes of a political mediation process. But when civilian populations become the target, they often reject all warring parties – state and non-state. In 2012 in Syria, for example, women peace advocates leading citizen dialogues regularly questioned the international community's legitimization of violent factions while ignoring the non-violent peace actors.

From Somalia in the 1990s to Yemen today, women have stepped in, taking on the responsibility to protect civilians, addressing humanitarian issues and negotiating with armed forces. Some may have political and ideological affinities with warring factions, but their primary concern is for their societies. The majority are independent of the warring parties, taking on the risk of claiming the middle ground. Drawing on cultural sources of legitimacy – such as kinship and tribal ties, faith or socioeconomic roles as teachers, health professionals and social workers – they become trusted interlocutors.

Mediators seeking pathways to peace and spaces for dialogue can draw on the knowledge and solutions of such groups. For example, when Nelson Mandela faced an impasse in his mediation efforts between 19 warring factions in Burundi in 2000, he sought advice from the Burundian women's peace coalition. While the warring factions were unwilling to meet the women, Mandela found their solutions effective. As recounted in 2014, "In the evening he [Mandela] would sit and listen to [the women] and in the morning he suggested [their

points] as if they were his ideas, and the men loved them. Eventually, he told [the men] these were women's points, not his ... that is how he brought women in to the final two rounds [of talks]."¹

The UN Syria Envoy adapted and formalized this model in 2014 following considerable pressure from the Syrian women's peace movement. The UN team relied on the Women's Advisory Board for crucial issues, including sovereignty, citizenship and pluralism, as well as challenges related to safe refugee returns, women's rights and gender analysis of the constitution.² Similarly in 2016, the women's peace movement played a crucial role in the Colombian referendum for peace.

Needless to say, warring parties rarely welcome the scrutiny that civil society brings, but the WPS mandate enables mediators to engage and ensure that the peace process not only benefits from women's contributions but does not inadvertently harm women and society.

Yet most mediators overlook the power and potential of these *unarmed non-state* entities, putting their energy wholly into engaging and empowering armed entities. The implications can be devastating for long-term peace and specifically for women and minorities, as evident in Afghanistan.

Gender Analysis as a Window into Conflict Dynamics

Gender analysis is essential for effective mediation. This is a critical WPS contribution to mediation practices. Given the societal impact of wars today, gender analyses are essential for an informed understanding of power dynamics, differential impacts and the roles of women and men. From the outset, Resolution 1325 challenged the traditional binaries that framed women as passive victims and men as aggressors. It called for a nuanced understanding of women's power and agency as peacebuilders, as active participants in armed movements and as holders of cultural power and honour.

Across the world, women have often held leadership roles within armed and liberation groups. In the past decade, ideological extremists have recruited women into their movements, recognizing their sociocultural influence. Many women have joined such movements in pursuit of purpose and empowerment.³ Ignoring this reality undermines our understanding of their motivations and needs. It can also perpetuate post-war reintegration paradigms that overlook women's political and security roles and increase the risk of their disrupting peace efforts. Mediators must analyse women's agency and influence – as contributors or spoilers – with the same seriousness as men's, and not ignore or dismiss them due to gendered assumptions.⁴

¹ The anecdote was related by Ambassador Anwarul Chowdhury, former UN Under-Secretary-General, at the ICAN Better Peace Symposium in 2014. See International Civil Society Action Network, "Better peace tool", 2015. Available at <https://icanpeacework.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Better-Peace-Tool-English.pdf> (accessed on 26 November 2025).

² "Security Council Informal Expert Group on Women, Peace and Security, summary of meeting on the situation in Syria", 2 May 2023. Available at <https://uaecun.org/app/uploads/2024/01/IEG-WPS-Syria-summary-clean.pdf> (accessed on 26 November 2025).

³ See ICAN and United Nations Development Programme, *Invisible Women: Gender Dimensions of Return, Rehabilitation and Reintegration from Violent Extremism* (Paris, 2019).

⁴ L. Sjöberg and C. E. Gentry, C. Duroch, M. McRae and R. Grais, "Description and consequences of sexual violence in Ituri Province, Democratic Republic of Congo", *BMC International Health and Human Rights*, vol. 11, No. 5 (2011). (London, Zed Books, 2007).

Additionally, for the first time in history, the WPS agenda elevated the urgency of addressing gender-based violence (GBV), particularly sexual violence, not only as a humanitarian or human rights issue but as a central element of peace and security. As such, it is a critical factor shaping the dynamics and outcomes of mediation processes. By humanizing war, it also drew attention to men's victimization and vulnerabilities.⁵

As evident in the current contexts of Gaza and Sudan, sexual violence inflames conflicts, fuelling hatred and revenge. When used strategically or tactically, it is employed to sow fear and undermine community cohesion. In Bosnia and Rwanda, it was deployed as a tactic of genocide – with women's bodies as the frontline in a battle to destroy identity. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, it has been a tool for military domination and economic exploitation.⁶ The threat of rape forces communities to flee their homes en masse, enabling armed groups to loot and claim territory. When security systems and social taboos break down, opportunistic sexual violence also increases, destroying societies from within. In Kenya, for example, in 2008, post-election violence included the opportunistic rape of women and men by security forces and civilians.⁷ Such acts undermine public trust in state institutions, feeding vigilantism and militancy.

Trauma induced by political violence instigates a continuum of private violence. In Palestine, the levels of domestic GBV have spiked since the post-7 October Israeli onslaught on the West Bank and in Gaza.⁸ In Ukraine, many men fighting the Russians to protect their homeland bring war trauma home, tragically turning violent against their families.⁹ Ukrainian women's organizations undertake the delicate task of providing shelters while facing pressure to remain silent. Too often, politicians overlook the sacrifices faced by families and ignore the expertise of women-led organizations bearing the burden of caring for victims.

By shining a light on these horrific forms of violence against women, Resolution 1325, and subsequent resolutions, notably UNSC Resolution 1820, also drew attention to sexual violence against men that has historically been underreported and universally stigmatized.

Addressing such violence within mediation processes is essential. First, it is a matter of security for victims and ongoing negotiations. Incidents of sexual violence can weaken ceasefire agreements and incite retaliatory violence. Second, it concerns justice and accountability,

⁵ For example, UNSC Resolution 1820 (2008) explicitly calls for addressing women and girls as victims of sexual violence. While member states were resistant to the inclusion of men and boys as victims, WPS advocates ensured gender neutral language in the resolution to enable attention to men and boys as well. The increased international discourse on sexual violence against women created space for men to come forward, too, and eased the deep taboos and silence surrounding such violence against men.

⁶ C. Duroch, M. McRae and R. Grais, "Description and consequences of sexual violence in Ituri Province, Democratic Republic of Congo," *BMC International Health and Human Rights*, vol. 11, No. 5 (2011).

⁷ International Centre for Transitional Justice, "The accountability gap on sexual violence in Kenya: reforms and initiatives since the post-elections crisis," ICTJ Briefing (Nairobi, 2014). Available at <https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Briefing-Kenya-SGBVAccountability-2014.pdf> (accessed on 26 November 2025).

⁸ United Nations Population Fund, "Gender-based violence safety audit report: West Bank, The Occupied Palestinian Territory," January 2025. Available at <https://palestine.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/2025-03/GBV%20Safety%20Audit%20Report%20-%20West%20Bank%20January%202025.pdf> (accessed on 26 November 2025).

⁹ Jessie Williams, "'This war made him a monster.' Ukrainian women fear the return of their partners," *Time*, 13 March 2023. Available at <https://time.com/6261977/ukraine-women-domestic-violence/> (accessed on 26 November 2025).

influencing survivors' willingness to accept peace deals and post-conflict processes. The implications can also be generational if children born of wartime rape are ignored. Third, if left unaddressed, impunity for such violence is normalized. Feminist mediators and women peacebuilders contributed to the UN's Guidance for Mediators on addressing sexual violence in ceasefire agreements and for survivor-centred approaches in truth and reconciliation processes.¹⁰ The 2016 Colombian peace accord, for example, explicitly acknowledges sexual violence, calling for justice mechanisms.

From Power to Responsibility Sharing: Reframing the Mediator's Agenda

Speak of responsibility – not power sharing. Proponents of the WPS agenda have often critiqued the limited premises of peace processes. Rather than viewing mediation as a technical exercise that rewards violence with elite bargains, women peacebuilders consider sustainable and just peace as the overarching narrative and the ultimate goal of any process. They view peace processes as historic, moral and political opportunities for transformation, to address the root causes and consequences of violent conflict and establish societal contracts for a future anchored in justice, dignity and pluralism. These perspectives stem from the lived experience of communities that have suffered and survived war. For example, during the Northern Ireland peace process, the Women's Coalition introduced the need for integrated education, prison and police reform to the talks.¹¹ These were essential to reimagining society for the future and a durable peace.

Second, the WPS agenda rejects the minimalist approaches often favoured by traditional mediation frameworks. Ceasefires, security guarantees and elite bargains may temporarily silence the guns, but do little to change the underlying sociopolitical factors that drive conflict. In situations like South Sudan and Libya, the recycling of elite – often violent – actors through peace deals has resulted in recurrent violence. Women peacebuilders have voiced strong critiques of such arrangements. As Yemeni peacebuilder Rasha Jarhum has noted, peace that ignores justice and dignity is not peace, it's a pause before the next round of violence.

Third, WPS-informed mediation rejects the overreliance on power-sharing among warring elites as the hallmark of political settlement. Instead, it promotes a paradigm of accountability and what I termed "responsibility-sharing" while serving as the first Gender and Inclusion Expert on the UN's Standby Team of Mediation Advisors in Somalia in 2012. Power-sharing, as practiced in many post-conflict settings, rewards those who take up arms and marginalizes civil society actors who have worked tirelessly for peace. In Somalia, during the 2012 Garowe II negotiations, warring clans disputed the sharing of positions in the transitional government and parliament. This focus on securing "power" for themselves was distinctly at odds with the urgency of a famine then plaguing Somalia, to which Somali women peacebuilders were dedicating their efforts. By reframing power to responsibility, I sought to prioritize responsibility to the nation over the personal benefits of power. Such approaches bring to the fore politicians' accountability to peace for the public.

¹⁰ UN Department of Political Affairs, *Guidance for Mediators: Addressing Conflict related Sexual Violence in Ceasefire and Peace Agreements* (New York, 2012).

¹¹ Kate Fearon, *Women's Work: The Story of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition* (Belfast, Blackstaff Press, 1999).

Liberia offers examples. From 1989 to 1998, 14 peace agreements were broken. In 2002, when the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) mobilized a mass action for peace, they demanded a ceasefire, representation in the negotiations and accountability for former warlords so that violence was not rewarded with political power. They had experienced the impact of such deals following the 1996 peace agreement, when warlord Charles Taylor was elected president and renewed a brutal war. In 2003, WIPNET first coalesced around a “no more war” message and immediately mobilized to support Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in the presidential elections. Their activism was instrumental in securing a representative post-war political system and sustained national peacebuilding.¹²

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the WPS agenda reframes peace as a transformative process of building trust, rather than transferring wartime dynamics into the political realm. In Syria, for instance, from the outset of the war in 2011, women led local dialogues and trust-building across political and sectarian divisions. These bottom-up processes stood in stark contrast to the elite-dominated Geneva and Astana talks, which largely failed to produce a viable path forward. In 2024, when the Assad regime collapsed, the women-led networks were again vital to mitigating tensions and violence as the forces led by Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham took control. They continue leading social reconciliation in communities where tensions – and the risk of violence – remain high.

This attention to a peacebuilding ecosystem linking the national and subnational – mitigating localized violence, fostering trust, acknowledging harms and promoting shared values – sets feminist approaches apart from technocratic mediation. When violent conflict penetrates society deeply, political and military solutions are necessary but not sufficient. For sustaining peace, communities impacted by conflict must feel the benefits. Otherwise, the risk of localized violence sparking new conflict is high. In Colombia, for example, the 2016 peace accord ended the state’s conflict with FARC, the largest armed group. But the violence metastasized at subnational levels with splinter groups and organized crime groups vying for control of natural resources. From 2016 to 2023, over 1,000 community leaders were assassinated.¹³ Without effective, trusted state security systems, locally rooted civilian structures and community organizations are essential in dispute resolution and building peace from the ground up. This work is often done by women.

The WPS agenda provides mediators with a practical framework for supporting this peacebuilding ecosystem. It questions prevailing mediation practices to limit privileging armed actors as the sole political stakeholders. It also mandates mediators to seek out those women, who, despite exclusion and under-resourcing, have shown the greatest commitment to peace. This enables more legitimate, sustainable and ethical mediation practices.

Rationality and Emotionality, the Past and the Future: Reframing Mediation

Let the vision of a peaceful future guide the negotiations of the present. Implicitly and often explicitly, mediation processes are driven by the historic grievances between warring parties. Negotiations become mired in trauma, narratives of revenge and retribution. The past – be

¹² Leymah Gbowee and Carole Mithers, *Mighty Be Our Powers: How Sisterhood, Prayer, and Sex Changed a Nation at War. A Memoir* (New York, Beast Books, 2013).

¹³ Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2023* (New York, 2023), pp. 162–170.

it 3,000 or 30 years ago – is thus not only present but also becomes the key determinant of the future.

In contrast, as civil society actors – especially women – have entered negotiation spaces, they have sought to focus on a vision of a shared and just future as the determinant of negotiations in the present. In Northern Ireland, women negotiators were frustrated by the historic scorekeeping and persisted with attention to bread-and-butter issues and their children's future. Similarly, in Rwanda, by 1998, four years after the genocide, women were speaking of reconciliation, not to diminish the depravity of violence and lost lives, but to give a chance to those who survived.

Much of today's political mediation practice, with its assumptions of "rational" and "interest-based" actors, is derived from the commercial world and game theory. Women, meanwhile, are labelled as emotional and irrational, and this has been an excuse to exclude them from decision-making. The logic is flawed on two counts. First, wars are complex existential crises, not business deals. Fear and grievances are manipulated to polarize and justify violence. Over time, the hate, trauma and mistrust become embedded in people's hearts and minds. Technical solutions and rationality are necessary, but not sufficient when emotions are raw. Mediators need to acknowledge the emotional drivers to weave trust to transform long-frayed relationships. Second, if emotionality is the reason for exclusion, it should be applied to male leaders who often act out of anger and humiliation, justifying violence. Experience across conflict zones reveals how women acknowledge these emotions while being future-oriented and committed to non-violent conflict resolution. As Israeli-American peace activist Terry Greenblatt stated when appearing at the UNSC in 2003 with her Palestinian counterpart, Maha Abu Dayyeh-Shamas:

Even when we are women whose very existence and narrative contradict each other, we will talk – we will not shoot ... We are willing to sit together – on the same side of the table ... look at our complex joint history, with the commitment and intention of not getting up until – in respect and reciprocity – we can get up together and ... fulfil our joint destiny.¹⁴

Envisioning a shared future as a guide for negotiations enables confidence-building and transforms relations. South African negotiators adopted this strategy during the transition from apartheid to democracy. Instead of being mired in the past, this flipping of the script enabled them to identify shared solutions for the future, then work backwards to identify pathways for justice, reparations, reconciliation and memorialization addressing the past.

Conclusions: WPS and Innovations in Mediation

It would be naive to ignore the depth and complexity of today's global security challenges. Likewise, it would be just as naive to believe that such challenges, ranging from domestic and international political and ideological threats to climate, organized crime and cybersecurity-induced risks, can be solved militarily or addressed solely by states.

¹⁴ Reem Bahdi, "Jerusalem Link and Right of Return.pdf," Refuge, 2003. Available at https://www.academia.edu/38487010/Jerusalem_Link_and_Right_of_Return_pdf (accessed on 26 November 2025)

More than ever, we need an ecosystem approach that draws on the strengths of all sectors to foster peace, justice and human and state security. Civil society networks, active locally and connected globally, are essential. They play key roles in mitigating, mediating and preventing conflict. Women peacebuilders, often underestimated, have been key interlocutors and influencers in grassroots, national and international contexts. As the WPS agenda marks its twenty-fifth anniversary, recommitting to its principles of conflict prevention and peacebuilding, particularly through partnerships with civil society, offers mediators and states pathways out of this current era of pessimism.

The five steps below are key.

1. Seat women peacebuilders as independent actors in peace processes

- Recognize civil society-based women peacebuilders as independent negotiating stakeholders, not token delegates.
- Invite and issue timely visas for independent civil society, including women's coalitions, with speaking and drafting rights.
- Aim for 30–40 per cent women across political parties, avoiding last-minute token quotas.
- Where resistance to women's participation is high, ensure observer status, advisory roles, agenda access and written responses to their proposals.
- Challenge those who question women's legitimacy by highlighting their agency as unarmed actors serving their communities and their knowledge of the issues being addressed.

2. Embed and systematize gender responsiveness throughout mediation and negotiation processes, including substantively

- Appoint a UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for WPS to serve as a bridge between states and civil society and to provide technical oversight support for gender responsiveness in mediation efforts.
- Mandate inclusion provisions in envoys' terms.
- Provide gendered briefing papers on all agenda topics for the mediation team and delegations.
- Deploy gender and inclusion advisors to provide such support, so that delegates can raise awareness of the human implications and avoid inadvertently harming women, men, boys and girls.
- Frame governance as responsibility-sharing with service delivery benchmarks.
- Per UN guidance, ceasefire agreements should prohibit conflict-related sexual violence, designate civilian no-fire zones and use gender-sensitive monitors.
- Include gender-responsive mechanisms for detainee release and missing-persons cases.

3. Fund and protect women's movements

- Partner with existing funds (such as the Innovative Peace Fund designed by the International Civil Society Action Network and the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund) that offer rapid grants (24–72 hours) covering travel, convenings, security, care, translation and legal needs.
- Provide multi-year core funding to women-led peacebuilding organizations in war zones.
- Adopt and implement the Protection of Women Peacebuilders' Guidance.¹⁵

4. Institutionalize inclusion and accountability

- Budget for participation costs.
- Ensure systematic consultations.
- Publish participation scorecards and require formal responses to civic proposals.
- If women peacebuilders are excluded, invite them to join your delegations.
- Do not fund or support processes and outcomes if agreements erase guarantees for women's rights or enable gender-based discrimination or exclusion.

5. Strengthen the WPS ecosystem and integrate it into global mediation efforts

- Integrate WPS approaches and actors in mediation fora and gatherings.
- Establish a “global innovations in mediation” course inspired by the WPS agenda for the professional development of all diplomats.
- Sponsor fellowships and residencies for women peacebuilders.
- Advocate for WPS practice standards in regional organizations, including the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Arab League.
- Support the written and audiovisual documentation and dissemination of women's peace leadership for public awareness.

¹⁵ The Protection of Women Peacebuilders' Guidance is a practical framework developed by ICAN with members of the Women's Alliance for Security Leadership to enhance the safety of women working in peacebuilding. It is available at https://icanpeacework.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/ICAN_Protecting-Women-Peacebuilders-Guidance_EN.pdf (accessed on 26 November 2025).