

# INSIGHTS

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## BEYOND REPRESENTATION: WHY WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION STRENGTHENS PEACE NEGOTIATIONS

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# BEYOND REPRESENTATION

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## Why Women's Participation Strengthens Peace Negotiations

Calls for increasing women's representation in peace negotiations have often been framed as matters of fairness or inclusion. While these normative arguments remain important, a growing body of empirical research suggests that the critical issue is not representation itself but meaningful participation in negotiation processes. This short insight examines some of the mechanisms through which women's participation affects negotiation dynamics and the durability of peace agreements.

### Women's Participation and the Durability of Peace Agreements

A consistent finding across the peace-building literature is that women's participation is associated with more durable peace agreements. For instance, in their noteworthy article, Jana Krause, Werner Krause, and Piia Bränfors, argue that women's meaningful participation in peace negotiations improves both the quality and durability of peace agreements. Statistical analysis shows that agreements signed by women tend to

include more provisions and higher implementation rates, two factors strongly associated with long-lasting peace. The authors also highlight that the positive impact of women's participation is linked to connections between female negotiators and women's civil society networks, which help shape negotiation agendas and support the implementation of agreements. The authors conclude that effective inclusion requires recognizing the diversity of women actors – including civil society leaders, government representatives, and members of armed groups – rather than focusing only on gender language in peace agreements.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, a frequently cited studies, conducted by Laurel Stone, analyses peace processes between 1989 and 2011 and identifies a strong relationship between women's participation – as negotiators, mediators, or signatories – and the longevity of peace agreements.<sup>2</sup> Importantly, the study moves beyond simple correlation by examining the mechanisms that may explain this relationship. As previously pointed out,

women's inclusion often strengthens connections between negotiating parties and civil society organizations, encourages broader issue framing during negotiations, and helps generate implementation coalitions capable of sustaining agreements over time.

These findings are reinforced by research conducted by UN Women. For instance, drawing on multiple datasets and studies related to the Women, Peace and Security agenda, UN Women reports that peace agreements are 20% more likely to last at least two years and 35% more likely to last fifteen years when women participate in the negotiation process. While such findings should not be interpreted as evidence that gender alone determines negotiation outcomes, they nonetheless point to a consistent pattern suggesting that more inclusive peace processes may generate stronger foundations for long-term stability.<sup>3</sup>

Further support for the relationship between women's participation and peace durability comes from the global study on the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. The study highlights a growing body of empirical evidence linking women's participation in peace processes – including negotiations, national dialogues, and post-conflict implementation – to more stable and durable peace outcomes.

Importantly, the report emphasizes that traditional mediation frameworks have historically prioritized elite negotiating among armed actors -

while excluding large segments of society, including women. Yet this narrow definition of effectiveness has produced fragile settlements: more than half of peace processes relapse into conflict within five years. The study therefore argues for a broader understanding of peacemaking as a societal process rather than a closed diplomatic negotiation among belligerents. Women's participation helps bring a wider range of social actors and concerns into peace processes, making negotiations more inclusive and reflective of societal priorities. Evidence summarized in the study further indicates that when women influence negotiations meaningfully, agreements are significantly more likely to be reached and sustained over time.<sup>4</sup>

Despite this growing body of evidence, women remain significantly underrepresented in formal peace negotiations.

Between 1992 and 2019, women constituted on average 13 percent of negotiators, 6 percent of mediators, and 6 percent of signatories in major peace processes worldwide. Even in more recent years, progress has been limited: between 2015 and 2019, women accounted for 14 percent of negotiators, 11 percent of mediators, and 7 percent of signatories. These figures highlight the persistent gap between the normative commitments of the Women, Peace and Security agenda and the realities of women's participation<sup>5</sup> in high-level peace negotiations.

These dynamics are particularly -

relevant in the context of contemporary conflict trends. Global peace has been in decline for several consecutive years, with the Middle East and North Africa experiencing multiple high-intensity armed conflicts and widely regarded as one of the least peaceful regions in the world. Despite sustained efforts by the United Nations, regional organizations, and civil society actors, many high-level peace processes in the region remain stalled. At the same time, women's meaningful participation in these negotiations remains limited, reducing the likelihood that peace agreements will achieve the legitimacy and societal support necessary for long-term stability.<sup>6</sup>

### **Meaningful Participation Rather Than Symbolic Representation**

In light of the above, let me stress out that women's participation matters not simply because of their presence, but because it alters how negotiations are conducted and implemented. Women often act as bridges between formal peace negotiations and broader society. Their involvement ensures that peace agreements reflect the concerns of communities affected by conflict and that post-agreement implementation structures are socially embedded.

Women's inclusion in peace negotiations can shift the dynamics of the process itself, facilitating both the conclusion of negotiations and the implementation of agreements. When women participate meaningfully, they often bring attention to issues that extend beyond immediate security -

arrangements, including governance, justice, accountability, social recovery, and institutional reform. Integrating these concerns into peace agreements can contribute to building a more robust and sustainable peace, enabling a faster restoration of the rule of law and strengthening public trust in emerging state institutions.

Women's participation also tends to broaden peace processes beyond the narrow circle of armed actors traditionally represented at the negotiating table. By linking formal negotiations to civil society organizations and affected communities, women can help expand the range of stakeholders engaged in peacebuilding. International and national peacebuilding actors increasingly recognize that social exclusion is a major driver of conflict, while inclusive political settlements can strengthen the legitimacy and durability of peace agreements. In this context, women's inclusion is particularly significant. Their participation can facilitate broader social acceptance of negotiated settlements and foster stronger community commitment to the rebuilding of post-conflict societies.<sup>7</sup>

Experiences from Northwestern Uganda, the Ferghana Valley, and the Occupied Palestinian Territory highlight several key lessons for strengthening women's meaningful participation in peace processes. First, locally led and context-specific interventions are essential, as externally imposed models often fail to reflect local realities. Second, economic empowerment is crucial because financial independence increases women's ability to engage in peace initiatives. Third, addressing -

psychological trauma and building resilience is necessary, as conflict-related trauma can limit women's participation. The cases also show the importance of inclusive and collaborative spaces, where women from different backgrounds can build networks, mentorship, and peer support. In addition, direct engagement with decision-makers helps ensure women's perspectives influence policy and negotiations.<sup>8</sup>

UN Women similarly emphasizes that women's participation transforms peace processes from elite bargaining exercises into societal processes, embedding community priorities into agreements and reinforcing the implementation and monitoring of commitments.<sup>9</sup>

Women's participation also expands the constituency involved in peace-building, extending engagement beyond armed actors to communities affected by conflict. Social inclusion has been identified as a critical determinant of stability: excluding marginalized groups increases the likelihood of relapse into conflict, while inclusive processes encourage broader investment in governance and post-conflict reconstruction. In this sense, women's participation enhances both the legitimacy of agreements and the long-term resilience of post-conflict societies.

### **Gender, Negotiation, and Contextual Dynamic**

These insights also resonate with findings from research on negotiation dynamics more broadly. Studies of -

“everyday” negotiations suggest that gender differences in negotiation outcomes are less about inherent ability and more about context, structural constraints, and social expectations. Large meta-analyses in negotiation research do not support the simplistic claim that women negotiate in fundamentally different ways from men. Instead, they find relatively small average differences that are highly moderated by situational conditions, including the roles negotiators occupy, the expectations associated with those roles, and the institutional environment in which negotiations take place. Research drawing on role congruity theory, for instance, shows that negotiation outcomes often depend on whether individuals' behaviour aligns with prevailing social expectations.<sup>10</sup> When women adopt assertive bargaining strategies that contradict traditional gender norms, they may face reputational penalties or forms of social backlash, which can negatively affect negotiation outcomes even when their performance is objectively comparable to that of men.

Related findings emerge from research examining the initiation of negotiations, which explores who begins the bargaining process. A large meta-analysis including more than 17,000 participants across multiple studies finds that women are slightly less likely than men to initiate negotiations. Importantly, however, this difference is relatively small and strongly shaped by contextual factors. Gender gaps decrease significantly when negotiation situations are clearly defined and when there is low ambiguity about whether negotiating is appropriate.

Similarly, differences become smaller when situational cues align with expectations associated with the female gender role. The analysis also finds that these differences have gradually declined over time, suggesting that they reflect changing social norms and institutional conditions rather than fixed behavioural differences.<sup>11</sup>

Taken together, these findings highlight that gender disparities in negotiation are largely context-bound. When negotiation environments are ambiguous, informal, or socially risky, women may be less likely to initiate negotiations due to uncertainty about the legitimacy of doing so or the potential for negative social reactions. Conversely, when negotiation processes are institutionalized, clearly structured, and supported by formal roles and expectations, gender differences tend to diminish.<sup>12</sup>

This perspective is particularly relevant in the context of peace negotiations. Peace processes are rarely neutral negotiation settings; they are typically embedded in highly politicized and hierarchical institutional environments where access to the negotiating table is controlled by political and military elites. Opportunities to influence agendas or participate directly in negotiations are often shaped by informal networks, power hierarchies, and gatekeeping dynamics that historically have excluded women. In such contexts, women's lower representation in formal negotiations should not be interpreted as evidence of lower negotiation capacity, but -

rather as a reflection of structural barriers and institutional ambiguity surrounding access to negotiation arenas.

Understanding negotiation dynamics in this way helps explain why many of the mechanisms highlighted in the peacebuilding literature – such as strengthening women's networks, creating inclusive platforms for participation, supporting economic empowerment, and facilitating direct engagement with policymakers – are so important. These interventions do not aim to “fix” women's negotiation abilities; rather, they seek to reshape the contextual conditions in which negotiations occur. As previously mentioned, negotiation science shows that gender differences emerge mostly due to context, social expectations, and institutional cues, not competence. Therefore, by reducing structural barriers, clarifying participation mechanisms, and expanding access to decision-making spaces, they create environments in which women can participate more effectively and exercise meaningful influence over both the substance of peace agreements and their subsequent implementation.

For this reason, policy discussions increasingly emphasize the need for institutional commitments that guarantee women's meaningful participation throughout peace processes. All actors involved in official negotiations should make quantifiable and time-sensitive commitments to ensure women's direct participation during specific phases of negotiations, while systematically integrating women's perspectives and gender-

responsive provisions into meetings, consultations, and agreements. Importantly, women's involvement should not be limited to symbolic or peripheral roles. Observer status, for instance, should not be treated as a substitute for effective participation. Rather, women should be fully integrated into negotiation delegations and decision-making structures, ensuring that they are able to shape both the substance of agreements and the political future of their societies.<sup>13</sup>

More broadly, these insights reinforce the argument that meaningful participation matters more than symbolic representation. Simply including women in negotiations does not automatically transform outcomes if the underlying structures of decision-making remain unchanged. However, when women are able to participate with voice and influence, the negotiation process itself can become more inclusive and socially embedded. This, in turn, strengthens the legitimacy of peace agreements, broadens the range of issues addressed during negotiations, and enhances the prospects for their long-term sustainability.

Put differently, if peace negotiation procedures are structured inclusively, women can exercise meaningful procedural influence, which is precisely what generates more durable and legitimate agreements.

## Conclusion

The empirical literature on gender and peace negotiations increasingly converges on a clear conclusion:

women's participation matters when it translates into substantive engagement with negotiation mechanisms. Durable peace agreements appear more likely not simply because women are present at the negotiating table, but because their participation often reshapes the relational and institutional dynamics of negotiations.

Policies aimed at strengthening women's participation should therefore move beyond representation toward ensuring that women have access to the institutional channels that allow their participation to influence negotiation outcomes. In this sense, the evidence suggests that the question is not simply how many women participate in peace negotiations, but how negotiation processes are structured to enable their participation to shape the mechanisms that sustain peace

The evidence converges on a clear point: women's participation strengthens peace processes by activating mechanisms that broaden agendas, link negotiations to civil society, and reinforce implementation. Durable peace is less a function of numbers and more a product of meaningful participation, where women have access to agenda-setting, coalition-building, and implementation channels. Policy and practice must therefore move beyond mere representation to ensure that women are empowered to influence negotiation content, connect with societal actors, and support the effective implementation of agreements, thereby translating inclusion into robust and sustainable peace.

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