

Women, Peace, And Security: Progress And Challenges In Global Leadership And Policy

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Abstract

The inclusion of women in peacebuilding, leadership, and security frameworks has been a significant focus of international policy since the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR) 1325 (2000) and 1820 (2008). These resolutions marked a turning point by recognizing women's critical role in conflict resolution and the prevention of sexual violence as a weapon of war. However, significant challenges remain. Women continue to face systemic exclusion from leadership roles, marginalization in peace negotiations, and persistent violence that undermines their agency and rights.

This article examines five key areas critical to advancing the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda: (1) women's participation in peace processes, (2) ending impunity for violence against women (VAW), (3) prevention through empowerment, (4) intersectionality and inclusion, and (5) data-driven policies and accountability. Real-world examples, such as the UNITE to End Violence Against Women campaign, India's Bell Bajao initiative, and the Generation Equality Forum (2021), demonstrate both the progress achieved and the gaps that persist. The findings underscore the need for a holistic, intersectional, and inclusive approach to gender equality that combines grassroots activism with sustained international commitments.

By addressing structural barriers and fostering accountability, women's leadership can drive sustainable peace and security worldwide. Achieving gender parity in peacebuilding is not merely a moral imperative but a strategic necessity for achieving inclusive, long-term development.

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I. Introduction

The adoption of UNSCR 1325 in 2000 was a landmark moment in global policy. For the first time, the United Nations recognized women's essential role in achieving sustainable peace. UNSCR 1820 (2008) expanded on this agenda, specifically addressing sexual violence as a tactic of war and calling for its prevention. These resolutions laid the groundwork for the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, emphasizing gender equality in peacebuilding and conflict prevention.

However, progress remains uneven. As of 2023, women account for only 13% of peace negotiators and fewer than 5% of peace agreement signatories (UN Women, 2023). In conflict-affected regions, women continue to face violence, exclusion, and systemic inequality that undermine their roles as leaders and agents of change.

This article explores five critical areas:

1. Women's participation in peace processes.
2. Ending impunity for violence against women.
3. Prevention strategies rooted in empowerment.
4. Intersectionality and inclusive policies.
5. Data-driven approaches for accountability.

II. Global Progress And Challenges

Women's Participation in Peace Processes

Women's participation in peace negotiations is a proven strategy for achieving durable agreements. Research by UN Women indicates that peace agreements are **35% more likely to last for at least 15 years** when women are involved. Women's inclusion brings diverse perspectives, emphasizing human rights, reconciliation, and community needs.

Despite this evidence, systemic barriers remain:

Structural Discrimination: Cultural norms and legal restrictions often exclude women from leadership. For instance, women in Yemen face significant barriers due to sociocultural norms.

Lack of Education and Training: Limited access to education and professional skills training deprives women of opportunities to engage in formal peace processes.

Token Representation: Women's roles are often symbolic, with little meaningful influence, as seen in the Yemeni National Dialogue Conference (2014).

To overcome these barriers, initiatives such as gender quotas, leadership training, and legal reforms are essential. Programs like the *Global Acceleration Plan for Gender Equality* (2021) emphasize building capacity for women to play substantive roles in conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

Structural Discrimination

Structural discrimination refers to the systemic barriers embedded in institutions, laws, and cultural norms that exclude women from participating fully in decision-making processes, leadership, and peace negotiations. This form of discrimination is not merely individual or situational; rather, it is entrenched in political, economic, and social structures that perpetuate inequality.

Examples of Structural Discrimination:

- **Political Systems:** Many countries still have legal frameworks or electoral systems that either exclude women directly or create conditions that make their participation in leadership impractical. For instance, women in countries like Yemen face structural challenges due to legal restrictions and sociocultural norms that limit their political participation.
- **Economic Barriers:** Women often lack access to the financial resources required for political campaigns or leadership positions. Research by *UN Women* (2022) highlights that women hold less than **25%** of parliamentary seats globally, a reflection of systemic discrimination.
- **Cultural Norms:** Deeply ingrained patriarchal attitudes often reinforce the idea that leadership and conflict resolution are “male domains.” In Afghanistan, for example, cultural expectations have historically marginalized women from formal decision-making spaces.

Solutions to Structural Discrimination:

1. Implementing **gender quotas** in peace processes and political representation. Countries like Rwanda and Norway have successfully increased women's participation through legislative quotas.
2. Reforming legal systems to eliminate discriminatory laws. The *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW) serves as a foundational international framework for legal reforms.
3. Promoting women's leadership at the grassroots level and investing in their inclusion in local governance systems.

Lack of Education and Training

Access to quality education and professional training is critical for empowering women and ensuring they can fully participate in leadership roles, negotiations, and peacebuilding efforts. However, women in many parts of the world face significant disparities in educational opportunities.

Key Data and Examples:

Globally, **129 million girls** are out of school, according to *UNESCO* (2021), with conflict-affected regions showing the highest disparities. For instance, in South Sudan, only **8% of girls** complete primary education, limiting their future opportunities.

Even when women access education, they often lack targeted **training opportunities** to develop the negotiation, diplomatic, and leadership skills needed to participate in peace processes. In countries recovering from conflict, the focus on men as “natural leaders” often deprioritizes women's professional development.

Impact of Limited Education and Training:

Women are less likely to be considered for leadership roles in peace negotiations.

Without training in areas such as conflict resolution, diplomacy, and legal systems, women's voices are sidelined, and their participation is seen as symbolic.

Solutions to Address the Gap:

1. **Investing in Education for Women and Girls:** Programs such as the *Malala Fund* advocate for universal secondary education for girls, particularly in conflict-affected regions.
2. **Leadership Training Programs:** Initiatives like the *Women in Peace Operations* program provide professional training for women to engage effectively in peacebuilding.
3. **Mentorship and Capacity-Building:** Pairing emerging women leaders with experienced mentors can equip them with the tools needed for successful negotiation and advocacy.

Token Representation

Token representation refers to the practice of including a small number of women in decision-making processes to create the appearance of gender inclusivity while denying them meaningful influence. Women are often given symbolic roles without the authority or resources to make substantive contributions.

Key Characteristics of Tokenism:

Women are included in peace processes or leadership roles to meet minimal quotas, but their participation lacks depth or decision-making power.

Women are often excluded from discussions of critical issues such as security or resource allocation.

Examples of Token Representation:

In many peace processes, women's roles are limited to "advisory" or "observer" positions, with little capacity to influence outcomes.

In the 2014 **Yemeni National Dialogue Conference**, women made up nearly 30% of participants; however, they were excluded from key decision-making committees.

Symbolic inclusion in corporate and governmental settings, such as the appointment of "token" female ministers, often serves as a performative gesture without systemic change.

Impact of Tokenism:

It undermines women's credibility and reinforces stereotypes that they lack the capacity for leadership.

Peace agreements often fail to address gender-specific issues because women's perspectives are sidelined.

Solutions to Token Representation:

1. Ensuring that women have **decision-making authority** in peace negotiations, not just symbolic roles.
2. Implementing **accountability mechanisms** to monitor the quality of women's participation.
3. Promoting gender-sensitive training for mediators and facilitators to challenge tokenism.

Real-World Example:

The Colombian peace process (2016) demonstrated the importance of moving beyond tokenism. While initial stages excluded women, grassroots women's organizations demanded a formal role in the negotiations, leading to substantive contributions to the final agreement.

Ending Impunity for Violence Against Women (VAW)

Impunity for VAW remains a pervasive issue, particularly in conflict zones where sexual violence is used as a weapon of war. Examples include:

In the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, sexual violence continues, yet perpetrators rarely face justice.

In Syria, reports of systematic violence against women highlight the lack of international accountability.

Even outside conflict settings, societal stigma, weak enforcement of laws, and systemic delays perpetuate impunity. For example, India's 2012 Delhi gang rape case spurred legal reforms, but implementation gaps remain.

Key solutions include:

1. Strengthening judicial systems and survivor-centered approaches.
2. International mechanisms to prosecute sexual violence in conflict zones.
3. Accountability campaigns such as the *UNITE to End Violence Against Women* initiative.

Prevention Through Empowerment

Empowering women economically, socially, and politically is critical to preventing VAW. Addressing gender inequality at its root ensures sustainable change.

Economic Empowerment: Programs like microfinance initiatives in Bangladesh have reduced domestic violence by enhancing women's financial independence.

Education and Training: Education equips women with the tools to challenge harmful norms. UNESCO (2021) reports that 129 million girls worldwide remain out of school, limiting their opportunities.

Engaging Men and Boys: India's *Bell Bajao* campaign encourages men to intervene and challenge societal tolerance of violence.

Empowerment strategies must prioritize women's leadership and agency while addressing systemic barriers that perpetuate gender inequality.

Intersectionality and Inclusion

An intersectional approach is essential to address the overlapping forms of discrimination that affect women. Marginalized groups—such as refugee women, women with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ individuals—face unique vulnerabilities in conflict and post-conflict settings.

Examples:

In refugee camps, displaced women often lack protection and support, making them vulnerable to sexual violence.

Women with disabilities face additional challenges accessing justice and survivor services.

Policies must adopt an inclusive framework that ensures all women, regardless of background, are protected and empowered.

Data-Driven Policies and Accountability

Reliable data is essential for measuring progress and identifying effective solutions. Currently, many countries lack systems for collecting disaggregated data on VAW.

During the **COVID-19 pandemic**, reports of domestic violence surged globally, yet responses were hindered by inadequate data.

Initiatives like the *Global Database on Violence Against Women* provide valuable insights for policymakers.

Investing in data collection, research, and evaluation ensures policies are evidence-based and responsive to the needs of diverse populations.

III. Conclusion

Achieving the objectives set forth by UNSCR 1325 (2000) and UNSCR 1820 (2008) remains one of the most critical global priorities for ensuring peace, security, and gender equality. Over two decades after their adoption, progress has been made, yet systemic barriers continue to hinder women's full participation in leadership, peace processes, and conflict resolution. The exclusion of women from critical decision-making spaces, impunity for violence against women, and the persistent lack of resources and data are significant challenges that require urgent action.

The evidence is clear: **women's meaningful participation in peace processes enhances the sustainability of peace agreements**, yet they remain marginalized. Addressing this requires dismantling structural discrimination, ensuring access to education and training, and combating token representation. Women must not only have a seat at the table but also a voice that carries influence and authority.

Efforts to combat **violence against women (VAW)** demand an intersectional and survivor-centered approach. Impunity for perpetrators perpetuates cycles of violence, particularly in conflict zones where sexual violence remains a weapon of war. Governments, international organizations, and civil society must prioritize the enforcement of laws, provide access to justice, and implement preventative measures rooted in gender equality and women's empowerment.

Furthermore, **intersectionality** must be at the core of all policies and programs. Women's experiences of violence and discrimination are shaped by overlapping factors such as race, class, sexual orientation, disability, and migration status. Without addressing these dimensions, solutions risk leaving marginalized women behind.

Investing in **data-driven approaches** is equally critical. Governments and institutions must prioritize accurate, disaggregated data collection to evaluate policies, measure progress, and identify gaps. The availability of reliable data enables evidence-based decision-making and supports targeted interventions that address the root causes of inequality and violence.

Moving forward, achieving the WPS agenda will require **collective action** at all levels:

Governments must implement gender-sensitive legal reforms, allocate sufficient funding, and hold perpetrators accountable.

International organizations like the United Nations must continue to lead by example, ensuring their policies reflect zero tolerance for violence and exclusion.

Civil society organizations play a pivotal role in advocacy, grassroots mobilization, and providing services for survivors. Partnerships with women's groups ensure localized, context-specific solutions.

Men and boys must be engaged as allies, challenging patriarchal norms and supporting women's leadership.

Ultimately, women's empowerment is not just a moral imperative but a **strategic necessity** for sustainable peace, development, and security. A world where women have equal opportunities to lead, contribute, and thrive is a world that is more peaceful, just, and inclusive. Realizing this vision demands courage, commitment, and sustained action from all stakeholders.

As the global community moves forward, it must remember that women are not merely victims of conflict but powerful agents of change. By addressing systemic barriers, fostering accountability, and promoting gender equality at all levels, we can create a foundation for a more peaceful and equitable future.

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