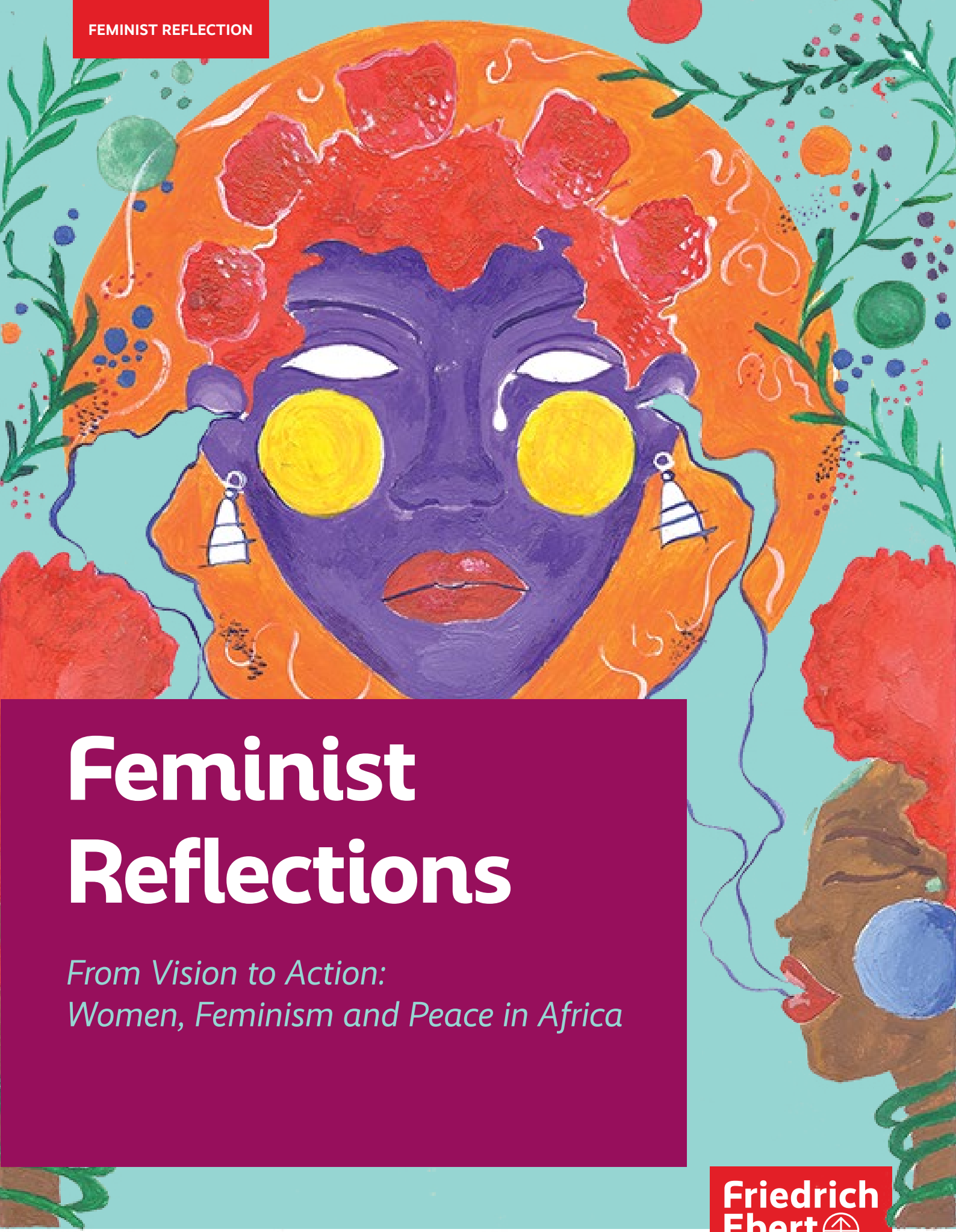
FEMINIST REFLECTION



Feminist Reflections

From Vision to Action:
Women, Feminism and Peace in Africa

Gender Justice Competence Center Sub-Saharan Africa

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Feminist Reflection

From Vision to Action:
Women, Feminism and Peace in Africa

Even peace has fled us and does not want to return.

From Vision to Action: Women, Feminism and Peace in Africa

Peace, as we see it, it's way beyond the silence of guns, and it feels far off. We face unprecedented rise of right-wing authorities, extremely militarized governments, severe environmental destruction, incessant extraction of scarce resources, disproportionate population growth and widespread social discontent. Peace is essential for societies to thrive and contribute to economic and social well-being. Policies, missions, advice and resolutions on peacebuilding and peacekeeping, such as the United Nations resolution 1325, have been adopted, but have not brought real peace. In the 21st century, we are experiencing a massive increase in armed conflicts and nuclear threats. The multilateral development of resolutions seems to have stalled, exposing the limits of current approaches.

To resist and dismantle the growing reality of militarization and oppression, we must embrace and implement feminist transformative approaches - collective organizing that challenges hierarchies and builds power from the ground up, inclusive practices of care, solidarity, and leadership that center women's voices and marginalized communities, and reimagined spaces for dialogue, resistance and action that disrupt patriarchal, militarized power and economic exploitation while nurturing local agency.

Peacebuilding and peacekeeping are active, urgent tasks, and essential ingredients in "cooking the peace dish"- a metaphor for crafting a future where real and sustainable peace takes center stage.

Introduction

The further development of the UN Human Rights Convention in the modern era, in a multilateralism that serves all people of the world, is also the greatest challenge in the 21st century. Fundamental civil liberties agreed and negotiated in the UN are being undermined. Militarization which is the reliance on violence to counter violence, and war profiteering have become global engines of capitalism that dominate the arenas of international politics. These dynamics disproportionately affect vulnerable groups, particularly women. In many war zones, especially across Asia, Middle East, Africa, and other marginalized regions of the world, the number of people struggling simply to survive is rising at an alarming pace.

Globally, peace is commonly understood through three interrelated concepts: negative peace[1], positive peace, and hybrid peace[2]. Negative peace basically refers to the absence of direct violence or armed conflict - such as war, terrorism, or physical aggression. While important, this definition does not address the root causes of conflict or the presence of structural inequalities. In contrast, positive peace encompasses the presence of social justice, equality, human rights, and conditions that enable individuals and communities to thrive. It recognizes that true peace must involve fairness, dignity, and access to basic needs. Hybrid peace, emerging from critiques of one-size-fits-all peacebuilding models, emphasizes the need to combine internationally recognized peace norms with local, culturally grounded mechanisms for reconciliation and justice. This approach leverages the contributions of grassroots actors, traditional authorities, and indigenous practices in shaping sustainable and inclusive peace.

In this light, the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*[3] "I am because we are" together with feminist perspectives of gender justice and other nationally developed approaches, becomes part of the peace dish, each bringing unique strengths in times of crisis, challenging structural inequalities, and rooting peace in justice, dignity, and care. The enduring networks of feminist movements and women's groups, combined with international norms and community-rooted feminist organizing, anchor multilateral agreements in lived realities and create pathways for inclusive, lasting, and transformative peace, deepening our understanding of what it truly means to build and sustain peace.

The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security that was adopted in 2000 seemed to have opened the floodgates to women's participation in peace processes. However, long before the adoption of this resolution, women had been contributing to peace processes in multiple ways both through formal and informal efforts, highlighting how the First World War affected men and women differently, and emphasizing the unique contributions that women brought to the peace process. The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), which was created in 1915 to protest the war, called for mediation, dialogue and the inclusion of women in peace processes[4]. Beyond protests, they engaged advocacy to influence policy and advanced arguments that shaped early feminist anti-military discourse[5].

Despite women's activism for peace from as far back as the first world war, coupled with the adoption of resolution 1325 in the year 2000, the Women, Peace and Security Agenda remains unknown in many parts of the world and women peacebuilders are still struggling to grasp a full understanding of the women's peace agenda and how to implement it. In Cameroon for example, although being on its second-generation National Action Plan, its implementation has been very weak. Many women and structures are unaware of this instrument and how to incorporate it in peace processes. In Benin, the first-generation Action Plan is yet to be rolled out, which is indicative of low levels of awareness of 1325 among women-led organizations and women peacebuilders. What may account for this is the fact that armed conflicts are not present in every context and such often serve as a stimulus for women's large-scale involvement in peace building. Regions that have experienced repeated and prolonged conflicts have often witnessed more organized women's movement for peace, while others are only encountering such conflicts in the 21st century and hence are in the earlier stages of mobilisation. At the same time, systemic barriers persist which constrain the capacities of women and feminist organisations to mobilize, lead and influence peace processes.

The nature of wars and conflicts are different, and conflict dynamics must be considered contextually to appropriately understand how it affects men, women, boys, girls and all genders. Where societies are heavily patriarchal and cultures and traditions valorise male power and dominance, women's voices take second place and their ability to contribute to peacebuilding is relegated to informal spaces within the home and immediate community. It is therefore interesting to bring together the body of knowledge that feminists have built over the years to situate women within conflict and peace discourses and how such efforts have directly led to the surge in women's movements for peace across Africa. For us to do that, we must explore existing notions of conflicts and wars.

1 Galtung,J.(1969). "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research." *Journal of Peace Research.*
2 MacGinty,R.(2010). "Hybrid Peace: The Interaction BetweenTop-Down and Bottom-Up Peace." *Security Dialogue.*
3 Ubuntu, a Southern African ethic of interdependence and collective humanity, is often summarized as *"I am because we are"* (Ramose, 2002)
4 WILPF.(1915).*Report of the International Congress of Women at The Hague.*
5 WILPF Archives (1919–1925), available online at www.wilpf.org

Conflict, War, Militarism The Feminist Critique

Competition over resources, political power, identity and geopolitical dominance continue to drive global conflicts and wars. Israel, Palestine and Iran, Russia and Ukraine, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali and the Democratic Republic of Congo are ongoing wars, both interstate and intra-state, that showcase the drive for dominance and control. These wars reveal the insurgence of militarism both government and non-state that sustain complex networks of political, economic, and arms interests. Militarism, which is the normalization of military values, institutions, and logic in civilian life, becomes deeply entrenched during armed conflicts, and reinforce cycles of violence, while diverting much needed resources from human development to security apparatuses. From the Middle East to the Sahel, Ukraine to Myanmar, global militarization exacerbates inequality, erodes democratic institutions, and disproportionately affects civilians, especially women and girls, children, and marginalized communities.

Feminist critique of militarism underscores the true nature of armed conflict which is the valorisation of dominance, aggression, and control. These values are traditionally associated with hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal notions of power. At the same time, other values such as care, cooperation, and empathy – often linked to femininity – are side lined or minimised. As a result of war, women and marginalized groups are disproportionately affected, not only as victims of direct violence, including sexual violence used as a weapon of war, but also through displacement, economic disenfranchisement, and exclusion from peace processes. Feminist scholars argue that militarized security solutions fail to address the root causes of conflict, such as inequality, colonial legacies, and structural violence and instead reproduce systems of oppression[6]. A suitable example is the Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon where the government's military approach has led to an excessive number of checkpoints for both military and separatist fighters. On any given day, travelling between two villages could cost a civilian from 5,000F ($8.00) CFA to 20,000F ($33.00) as payments at these checkpoints. These are extra costs that put a burden on women who often travel with minors, so bear the burden for their security and mobility. Therefore, feminist demands for a transformation of global security paradigms, through demilitarization, gender justice, and the inclusion of diverse voices[7] in building sustainable peace remains valid today.

In the middle of dystopia: War, Women and Peacebuilding

Feminist theorizing on war and peace emerged from a place of enforced invisibility. Women were systematically unseen, unheard of and unacknowledged in peacebuilding discourse and work. Therefore, the early critique from feminist analysis focused on making women's presence visible within the framework of war and peace. Their arguments highlighted the fact that women's contributions to peace often rooted in caregiving, community mobilization, protests and advocacy, were often informal, local and non-institutional, were not recognized as traditional peace processes8. Feminist scholars also critiqued the tokenism approach of adding a few women to peace talks, insisting instead that peace processes be entirely transformed including the very assumptions that underlie assumptions of peacebuilding, to reflect women lived experiences, needs and priorities[9]. It was important to identify and clarify the differential effects of war/violence on women as well as the diverse ways that women actively resist and build peace. This was not an easy feat given the lack of understanding and resistance that women have faced in challenging patriarchal systems. Notwithstanding, due to sustained feminist activism and knowledge production, women have gradually become more visible in peacebuilding discourse, reshaping its terms and possibilities.[10]

They say they are protecting the people and our lands, but these are nothing but fallacies.

6 Enloe,C.(2000).*Maneuvers: The international politics of militarizing women's lives*.University of California Press. True, J. (2012). *The political economy of violence against women.* Oxford University Press.
7 Cockburn, C. (2010). *Militarism and War.* In Georgina Waylen et al. (Eds.), The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics. Oxford University Press.
8 Rehn,E.,CSirleaf,E.J.(2002).*Women, War and Peace: The Independent Experts' Assessment on the Impact of Armed Conffict on Women and Women's Role in Peace-building.* UNIFEM.
9 Pankhurst, Donna. (2003). The 'Sex War' and Other Wars: Towards a Feminist Approach to Peacebuilding. Development in Practice, 13(2-3), 154–177.
10 Azkue, 2013 Post-conffict Peacebuilding: Divergences between Women's Organizations and International Cooperation in El Salvador and Bosnia and Herzegovina. PhD diss., University of the Basque Country,

Having written women into peacebuilding processes as active agents, feminist analysis turned to the question of how women were perceived and represented within peacebuilding spaces. Narratives around women's participation in peacebuilding generally emerged alongside women's participation in politics. Though the interests of politics are not often aligned with the interests of peace, the two however remain deeply intertwined. Policies led by politicians can make or mark peace outcomes. Similarly, the presence or absence of peace often determines what directions politicians take or policies they support. In this vein, it is important to note that women's activism for peace must leverage on women's participation in politics and governance, not as a matter of inclusion alone, but as a strategy to disrupt patriarchal power and advance transformative agendas. Globally, feminist perspectives on women's political participation are interconnected through resistance to exclusion and insistence on gender justice.[11] Notwithstanding, feminist priorities differ across regions, reflecting women's lived realities and political struggles. In Middle Eastern and North Africa, feminists confront authoritarianism, religious conservatism and colonial pasts[12], while feminists in Sub-Saharan Africa emphasize collective rights, community wellbeing and the enduring impact of colonial legacies in the political process[13]. The persistent absence of significant numbers of women within political structures _ parliaments, senates and other governing bodies _exposes the systemic disregard of women's specific experiences and needs. Even when women's numerical presence is high, as is the case of the Rwandan parliament, feminists continue to question whether representation translates into genuine influence, given the patriarchal nature of political structures. This critique is in line with feminist resistance to structural violence, which systematically affects women and their communities.

Beyond numerical representation, it is important to examine how women are perceived in both political and peacebuilding spaces, and what platforms genuinely enable their effective participation. The common narrative of women as victims of war became the dominant framing of women's participation in war and peacebuilding. The media is very effective in portraying dehumanizing images of women as they focus on stories of destitution, while overlooking the resilience and transformative agency embedded within those same stories. Notions such as "rape as a weapon of war" become popular in a seemingly dystopian space where the act is not perceived as a structural issue rooted in patriarchy but rather as a reflection of womanhood in violent conflict spaces. Feminist critique however advanced more concrete discourses by rejecting the notion that rape was a private crime between a soldier and a woman, but rather a deliberate tactic used for domination[14]. Furthermore, feminist discourse on rape advances an intersectional lens by recognizing how age, class, religion and ethnicity compound the vulnerabilities that women face in war[15]. This has been the case of women in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon, where poor women in remote villages have disproportionately suffered rape at the hands of both state and non-state actors during the conflict. In addition, what feminist scholars refer to as militarized forms of masculinity exposes how soldiers are socialized to perceive women as symbols of national honour, making them natural enemies during wars[16].

Therefore, it is essential to critically address notions of justice and how existing conflict mechanisms, often grounded in military options may lead to more abuses against women during conflict.[17] Evidence from the ongoing Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon, reveal varied forms of torture against women under the guise of justice. Many cases have been reported where non-state actors called "Amba Boys" have killed young girls as punishment for having intimate relationships with military officers. On the other hand, young women have been arrested and imprisoned by state forces for having similar relations with non-state actors. These realities underscore that women's experiences of conflict are far from uniform, it is therefore erroneous to assume a universal model of women's agency, as differences in geography, religion, ethnicity, class, and caste shape both gender norms and women's lived experiences in distinct ways[18].

Recognizing the diversity of women's experiences, as highlighted by Cockburn (ibid), demands inclusive political participation that reflects intersectional realities rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. Drawing from women's challenges to peace and security, including domestic violence and gender-based violence across cultural, structural and systemic levels, it becomes imperative to explore how these sectors interconnect because they are led and shaped by men who conform to sociocultural dictates of leadership. Therefore, women recognize that peacebuilding cannot be disentangled from politics, because entrenched political structures define and determine policies that influence their representation and participation in formal processes. The age long roles of women as mediators within the home and community is indicative of their ability to lead well in formal spaces. It is therefore imper-

11 Phillips, A. (1998). Feminism and politics. Oxford University Press.
12 Al-Ali, N. Secularism, gender and the state in the Middle East: The Egyptian women's movement. Cambridge University Press, 2018
13 Tamale, S. Decolonization and Afro-Feminism. Daraja Press, 2020
14 Brownmiller, S. Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape. New York: Simon C Schuster, 1975.
15 Zarkov,Dubravka.The Body o fWar: Media, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Break-up of Yugoslavia.Duke University Press, 2007.
16 Enloe, Cynthia. Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics. University of California Press, 2000.
17 Richters, 2004; Hamber,2009.
18 Cockburn, Cynthia."TheGenderedDynamicsofArmedConflictandPoliticalViolence."In Victims, Perpetrators or Actors? Gender, Armed Conffict and Political Violence, edited by Caroline O. N. Moser and Fiona C. Clark, 13–29. London: Zed Books, 2001.

ative that women engage and participate fully in political spaces at all levels. Such participation would address the issue of women's political under-representation, a concern central to feminist scholarship. Phillips (1995) and Mossuz-Lavau (1998) argue that the exclusion of women from political spaces not only reflects structural inequality but also limits the democratic legitimacy and responsiveness of governance[19]. Increasing women's leadership offers not just numerical inclusion but substantive representation—where women's unique needs and priorities can shape policy[20]. The benefits of women's participation in political processes are recorded in Rwanda where progressive laws on gender-based violence, land inheritance rights and maternal health have been passed[21]. In Liberia, under President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the country passed its first rape law and established a special court for sexual violence cases[22]. Women's participation in politics also leads to effective advocacy on gender-responsive budgeting, more inclusive and democratic governance as well as durable and inclusive peace. As stated by scholars, Peace agreements influenced by women are 35 per cent more likely to last at least 15 years[23].

Notwithstanding the recognised benefits of women's political leadership, some feminists have noted that women's underrepresentation in political spaces is not only structural but also influenced by internalized gender roles that discourage women from pursuing public leadership. Anderline (2007) suggests that this is, in part, due to a perceived reluctance by some women to sacrifice personal and familial responsibilities to engage in the demanding sphere of political leadership, which in turn limits women's potential contributions to peacebuilding and governance[24]. However, recent milestones such as the election of Namibia's first female president and the appointment of Ghana's first female vice president signal a historic shift. These breakthroughs offer hope and reveal possibilities, with the potential to inspire more women and girls to step into political roles and continue advancing the momentum toward greater gender parity in decision-making. In her first year of office, the Namibian President has already made significant

There is war.

contributions to women's political leadership by appointing a female vice president as well as a gender balanced cabinet[25], with 8 (57 per cent) women out of 14 ministers. In April 2025, the government announced that tertiary education will be free in public universities starting in 2026, reducing financial barriers that disproportionately affect young women. Namibia has achieved gender parity in the parliament, and she continues to strengthen legal processes and climate change policies that are gender responsive.

19 Mossuz-Lavau, Janine. *Femmes/Hommes:* Pour la Parité. Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1998.
20 Phillips, Anne. *The Politics of Presence.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
21 Powley, Elizabeth. "Rwanda: Women Hold Up Half the Parliament." *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers*. International IDEA, 2005.
22 Tripp, Aili Mari. *Women and Power in Post-Conffict Africa*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.
23 O'Reilly, Marie, Andrea Ó Súilleabháin, and Thania Paffenholz. "Reimagining Peacemaking: Women's Roles in Peace Processes." International Peace Institute, 2015.
24 Anderline,Lisa."Women's Leadership in Peace Processes."InWomenBuildingPeace:WhatTheyDo,WhyIt Matters, edited by Sanam Naraghi Anderlini, 53–71. London: International Alert, 2007.
25Lucia Witbooi Appointed as Namibia's First Female Vice President - Namibia Today

No matter our ethnic differences,
we share the same suffering; we are all equal

Fund, Act, Lead: The Empowerment of Female leaders

The relationship between funding and peacebuilding is central because sustainable peace efforts require consistent, inclusive and flexible financing. When wars break out, they take years to arrive at some form of resolution and even when ceasefire has been achieved, communities need time to heal and rebuild trust in one another as well as in the system. Engaging with conflict parties and communities require time and persistence on the field that can only be achieved if there is consistent funding to facilitate the process. The cases of the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) in Liberia, the Colombia Peace Accord, the Gender Monitoring Office in Rwanda and the Nepal Local Peace Committees are examples of how consistent funding to women in peacebuilding has yielded positive results. WIPNET received consistent funding from UNIFEM and OSIWA, which enabled them to monitor ceasefires, mobilize women for reconciliation and provide civic education ahead of elections. In Colombia, a multi-year fund from the European Union[26] and the UN Peacebuilding Fund[27] allowed women's organizations to monitor the peace accord as well as receive training to report human rights abuses. The Gender Monitoring Office in Rwanda receives budgetary allocations from the state, coupled with supplementary donor funding to oversee gender mainstreaming in all governance sectors. It also provides continuous training and support for women in peace and security roles[28]. These examples showcase not only some sources of funding for women in peacebuilding, but also how funding is structured, either direct from international bodies (Liberia) and state resources (Rwanda) but also through the funding of processes that benefit women peacebuilders (Colombia).

However, despite global recognition of their roles, women-led peacebuilding initiatives receive less than one per cent of international peace and security funding[29], which leads to several challenges: women's contributions to peacebuilding processes remain devalued and informal, their activities remain local and short-term, sometimes invisible and they face meltdown and insecurity due to the absence of institutional support. The case of the South West North West Women's Task Force in the Anglophone Crisis is a glaring example of the lack of institutional support. The Task Force was the first to carry out public protests of violence in 2018, calling for ceasefire and dialogue. Through various advocacy efforts, they highlighted the plight of women, girls and children in the crisis and raised international awareness about the conflict. However, when the Major National Dialogue was organized, members of the Task Force were not invited to participate in the talks and less than 15 per cent of women were invited from the ten regions to take part in the process. This is a glaring example of how women's experiences and contributions are excluded from peace processes.

Still related to funding, women-led peacebuilding organizations face challenges in accessing funds due to complex proposal requirements from donor agencies[30], often expecting women's organizations to provide complicated financial histories and fulfil government registration requirements. This is usually very challenging for women in frontline organizations especially during conflict because they often engage in peacebuilding as a matter of urgency and not as part of a strategic plan. As a result, they usually have no registration documents, nor any financial history to support their request for funding. Furthermore, with the shrinking civic space in Cameroon, it has become extremely difficult for women to obtain registration documents because it sometimes requires exorbitant amounts to bribe one official or the other. To those women-led organizations that effectively receive funds, they suffer other forms of exclusion. For instance, their perceived lack of capacity to manage resources and reporting according to donor requirements has sometimes led the recruitment of a male supervisory authority and this often leads to a conflict in the vision and operational functioning of the organization. Some of these areas of conflict include costs of travel and other logistical arrangements for attending meetings and other events. Most donor agencies prefer to pay transportation, provide meals and accommodation to participants in costly hotels for two or three nights but they do not offer Daily Sitting Allowances (DSA). This is quite challenging for women on the frontlines,

26 European Union External Action, *Support to Colombia's Peace Process: Gender Action Plan*, EU Report, 2020,
27 United Nations Peacebuilding Fund, *Sustaining Peace through Long-Term Funding: Lessons from the Field*, UN PBF Report, 2019
28 Republic of Rwanda, Gender Monitoring Office. Annual Report, 2023
29 UN Women. *Financing for Gender Equality in the Context of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda.* UN Women Policy Brief, 2022.
30 AWID (Association for Women's Rights in Development). *Where is the Money for Feminist Organizing?* 2020.

who abandon their sources of income (mostly farming and *buyam-sellam*[31]), leave their children and sometimes elderly family members in the care of others to attend these meetings. Some also must negotiate with their husbands for permission to participate in these processes. Without a DSA, they go home empty handed, not able to buy food or fruits on their return trip and this significantly and negatively influences their chances of attending future meetings. Alternatively, what the Task Force negotiated with some of its partners, was to allow women to arrange lodgings for themselves provided that they will be present and on time at the workshop grounds. This allowed them to pair up to save some money from lodging to make up for their absence from home. These are lived experiences of women on the ground that should not be questioned but understood and incorporated in the budget. This is often not the case and is hardly ever considered when the funding supervisor is a man (Southwest North West Women's Task (SNWOT), contrary to when it is a woman.

Furthermore, funding procedures should be carefully assessed to ensure that they do not negatively influence women's processes and their capacity to build sustainable movements. A recent observation of the women's civil society space in Cameroon indicates internal rivalry among women over donor bodies. Due to the scarcity of funding, women leaders have become rivals in the pursuit of financing and women's movements sometimes deviate from their initial goals because funders decide what they want to fund and if women want their money, they must tailor their activities towards what funders want. This weakens the consistency of women's advocacy in certain areas as they constantly shift their priorities to suit donor interests. Funding should therefore be tailored to local needs and existing areas of intervention, rather than tailoring the local context to funding interests. A recommendation here is for funding agencies to work in a consortium to ensure that funds are streamlined towards the goals of women led civil societies working within their various communities.

While the impact of funding for women peacebuilders has been recognized as contributing to the effective management of sexual violence, education and land rights, as well as durable and inclusive peace processes, feminists and UN agencies more recently call for:

- Direct, core funding for women-led organizations
- Gender responsive budgeting in national peacebuilding policies
- Simplified, accessible funding mechanisms including foreign exchange and timely transfer of funds
- Localization of aid to amplify the work and visibility of frontline women peacebuilders.

These are proactive measures that could significantly improve women's participation in peacebuilding processes both quantitatively and qualitatively.

We have lost our homes, our farms, and today we are refugees in our own land.

31 Buyam-sellam are small scale market women who buy foodstuffs daily from suppliers to resell in the same market. Their capital can be as little as 10,000 to 200,000 XAF

We fled and left everything behind, and we have nowhere to go.

Women's Agency in Conflict and Peace

Historically, the dominant narrative of war has been about securing national boundaries and protecting civilian life. However, these narratives have often been riddled with tales of male heroism driven by love for wife or mother. Weaved within these narratives is the thread that men's lives are hard and that they must fight to protect and keep women safe – women who are then perceived as weak and dependent on male power for survival. This has led to the persistent representation of women solely as victims of war and conflict. The statistics are clear: more men take up arms than women; more men go to the warfront than women; more men have historically died at warfronts and in battle than women. However, what is war? Do we stay within the traditional confines of the definition of war, or do we go beyond to see the cross sectoral impact of war both on and off the warfront? Additionally, wars are no longer fought in specific locations; they have reached the home front where women become active participants with or without their consent. Recognising women's agency therefore shifts the focus from what is done to them, to what they do, which is vital for developing strategies and processes for inclusion at all levels of decision-making.

The definitions of peace and the reality of peace in terms of cause, effect and solutions cannot be complete without women's perspectives. When peace is simply defined as the absence of war, it negates other forms of violence that work against peace. It conceptualizes conflict and violence as public and large scale, thereby limiting focus on other forms of violence and conflict that women encounter daily in the private space and structurally. Similarly, constructions of war have historically narrowed the scope of understanding its effects. Clausewitz in 1832[32] defined war simply as the continuation of politics by other means, while Wright (1942)[33] defined it as armed force. Discourses about and semantics of war are still influenced and dominated by historical "white" narratives. These definitions also systematically omit the role of women in war, and then in peacebuilding, given their historic underrepresentation in politics and government. However, recent definitions have expanded the discourse on war to include organized crime and human rights violations, through networks of state and non-state actors[34]. Contemporary definitions expand the discourse on war to include human trafficking, white slavery and other forms of organized crime that enslave and exploit women's bodies and labour. In this vein, women's civil society work becomes recognised as they continuously participate to break the chains of human trafficking especially of women and girls. During conflicts, they have significantly contributed to freeing young girls from the clutches of armed fighters and terrorist groups. This has been the case with women- led organisations in the Far North of Cameroon, faced with the Boko Haram Insurgency.

One of feminism's tasks is to expose, through a "feminist curiosity," how "patriarchy – in all its varied guises, camouflaged, *khaki* clad, and pin-striped – is a principal cause both of the outbreak of violent societal conflicts and of the international community's frequent failures in providing long-term resolutions to those violent conflicts.[35]" Moreover, feminists observe that the exclusion of women from the public realm results in an unjust social order that is antithetical to peace.

> *when violence against women is sanctioned by society, it leads to the acceptability of violence against several others, hence to the sanctioning and acceptability of war and the preparation for war.*[36]

This underscores the imperative of women's agency, which challenges the limiting victim- only narrative, centers intersectionality, and advances more effective peacebuilding strategies that confront entrenched power structures and are aligned with the principles of the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR 1325).[37] In this vein,

32 Carl von Clausewitz, On War, ed. And trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984
33 Quincy Wright, A Study of War, 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965
34 Mary Kaldor, New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era, 3rd ed. Standford: Stanford University Press, 201
35 Cynthia Enloe, The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in a New Age of Empire (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004
36 Betty A. Reardon, Sexism and the War System (New York: Teachers College Press, 1985), 40.
37 Carol Cohn, Helen Kinsella, and Sheri Gibbings, "Women, Peace and Security Resolution 1325," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 6, no. 1 (2004): 130–140.

for decades feminists and women peacebuilders have worked to achieve: meaningful representation and participation, reconceptualization of the notions of war and peace beyond patriarchal definitions, policy design and implementation that reflect the full spectrum of women's experiences, acknowledgment of the intersecting realities of women´s experiences[38], significant and accessible funding for women's transformative work, and the building of alliances that resist exclusionary institutions while fostering effective collaboration.

a) Meaningful Representation and participation: The numbers of women in peacebuilding processes have been on the increase across the world, with more women participating in peacekeeping missions and peacebuilding processes. According to the UN Secretary General's report on the Women, Peace and Security Agenda of 2023, and based on 50 peace processes examined, 9.6 per cent of women acted as negotiators, 13.7 per cent as mediators and 26.6 per cent[39] as signatories to peace and ceasefire agreements. Regionally, African countries recorded higher levels of female participation in peace processes with 41 per cent in the South Sudan local peace initiatives in 2022 and 35 per cent in the Central African Peace Process[40]. In Libya, women also made up 23 per cent of negotiators in formal peace processes in 2020[41]. According to UN Women data, while there has been an increase of women in peacebuilding processes, more of them participate in local peacebuilding initiatives. The Honyomiji in South Sudan is a women's traditional society that promote community education, social cohesion as well as facilitate conflict resolution through peace ceremonies, mediated disputes and transmitted cultural norms[42]. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, women participated in the Local Peace Committees to resolve land disputes, address tensions between returnees and host communities and mediate militia-community conflicts[43]. Interestingly, these grassroots peacebuilding initiatives defy the narrative that culture and tradition are largely responsible for keeping women out of leadership. It is therefore important to explore more concretely what drives women's agency in informal processes at grassroots level as opposed to the formal processes led by traditional societies and authorities.

Notwithstanding women's participation in dialogue processes, the issue of numbers remains valid. With larger numbers in peace processes, women can determine outcomes through their votes, if they agree on a common position. Their numbers are still very low and, in some cases, the women who eventually join these processes are selected based on political affiliation, and not on their competences to contribute meaningfully to the process. This was the case of the Major National Dialogue in Cameroon, where recognised women's peacebuilding networks were left out of the dialogue process while individual women belonging to political parties were invited. Given the political climate, it is very likely that these women will prioritize party over women's issues. This means therefore that women in politics need to engage broad based capacity building, so that they can effectively use their platforms and spaces to advocate for the WPS agenda.

The representation of women though largely advocated for is far from achieving its desired goals at the level of implementation. This calls for increased engagement in getting women represented not only in peace processes but in all structures and systems because they are all interdependent and women's voices across all levels will create more concrete impact than if they're focused in only some areas. As Desmond Tutu reminds us, "if we want peace, we do not speak to our friends, we speak to our enemies" (Tutu, n.d.). However, belligerents who have no reason to take the other party's side cannot sit at the table and achieve lasting peace without an intervening variable that gives them reason to seek peace. This intervening variable is women peacebuilders, therefore, there is a need to ensure greater inclusion of women in peace talks.

If we were not a rich people, would there be war in our land.

38 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," Feminist Review 30 (1988): 61–88.
39 UnitedNations.(2023).*Report of the Secretary-General on Women, Peace and Security (S/2023/725).* Retrieved from https://www.un.org/en/peace-and-security/why-we-need-more-women-mediators
40 Council on Foreign Relations. *Women's Participation in Peace Processes – Explore the Data.* Retrieved from: https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/explore-the-data
41 Rishmawi, M., C Hilal, L. (2023). *Women's Participation in Local Mediation: Lessons from Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen.* Research Gate. Retrieved from Research Gate database.
42 Bedigen, W. (2021). "Honyomiji: the local women's peacebuilding institution in South Sudan." Peacebuilding, 9(4), 457–476.
43 Shemitalo, Leonard. (2024) Gender Integration and Peace building in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo: The Case of Uvira Territory https://www.gicnetwork.be/wp content/uploads/2024/10/02_PAPER_EGender-integration-and-peacebuilding-in-eastern-Democratic- Republic-of-Congo.pdf

Participating in the Women's Situation Room of the 2024 Ghana Presidential elections, I picked up some important perceptions regarding women in leadership positions. As one of the women said, "It makes no difference when a woman is number two because she is not the decision maker". This is indicative of the need for women to be more strategic in the leadership positions that they seek to occupy. If women come second, it reinforces the perception that they are merely a follower to male leadership limiting the extent to which they can contribute to women's overall advancement. Unfortunately for women parliamentary candidates in the Ghana elections, predictions seemed to indicate a drop in the number of women in parliament. This calls for an extensive evaluation of constituency psychology in line with women's political strategy.

b) Reconceptualization of the notions of war and peace beyond patriarchal definitions: Perceptions of war and conflict have for long focused on armed combat involving, military, paramilitary or non-state actors. Though armed combat destabilizes society, it is, however, only one explanation for the lack of peace. The absence of peace comes from many different dimensions, from conflicts within the home to the community and nation. Women's inability to provide for their kids or care for their parents and loved ones is a source of conflict that leads to the absence of peace. According to UN Women's 2020 report, globally, women's unpaid care and domestic work increases during conflicts.44 In their daily lives, many married African women face conflicts with their in-laws, and this takes away their peace. The sources of differences that lead to conflicts within households could be traced to the economy and how scarce resources penalize women who depend on their spouses. Women who earn an income also find themselves burdened with extended family care as they receive and care for relatives whether they want to or not. Engaging conversations around peace therefore require an extensive definition of conflict and peace that takes into consideration women's varied experiences across all levels. This requires increased conversations with feminists and women on the ground to bridge the gap between theorizing on women, peace and security and effectively engaging actors on the ground. Why is this necessary? From observation, women on the frontlines engage in peacebuilding without understanding the bigger picture of women's representation and participation in peace processes. Perceived as actors, when invited to the table, they often do not have an agenda that aligns with the overall goals of equality. They show up but they do not hold up under the pressure of male politics and diplomacy. Instead of advancing the women's agenda, their participation becomes a setback, as these enthusiastic women are used as examples to argue against women's leadership in peace processes.

They invaded our homes and destroyed our ecosystem.

c) Policy design and implementation that reflect the full spectrum of women's experiences: There is an implementation gap because the lives of women in conflict affected areas remain unchallenged, and women continue to play a marginal role in formal peace talks.[45]

The continued challenges that women face in occupying leadership positions in formal peace processes does not only lie in the absence of policy but also depends on the effective implementation of existing policies. The UNSCR 1325 (and the National Action Plans), including subsequent resolutions and instruments on women and human rights and conflict resolution indicate international commitment towards addressing women's issues in peace and security. However, there are other factors that prevent these policies from being effectively implemented such as cultural and societal barriers, structural challenges, underrepresentation of women in policy development, inefficient accountability and tokenism.

Further to the above challenges, the use of language (words and expressions) has also been identified as one of the areas that creates nuances in the interpretation and implementation of WPS policy. Through the National Action Plans (NAPs), different countries operationalize policies based on their specific needs, and this has led to feminist critique of how language sometimes reinforces notions of patriarchy. Hudson (2017) has explored how certain discourses that focus heavily on women reinforce stereotypical notions of women as victims or peacemakers, men as protectors or perpetrators[46]. This may explain why during armed conflict; female military are pulled from the front because armed combatants are mostly men.

44 UNWomen(2020)MakingEveryWomanCount:RisingtotheCOVIDChallenge.
MEWGC_ANNUAL_REPORT_2020_FULL_REPORT.pd
45 Hudson, H (2017) The Power of Mixed Messages: Women, Peace, and Security Language in National Action Plans from Africa. Africa Spectrum
46 Hudson, H (2017) The Power of Mixed Messages: Women, Peace, and Security Language in National Action Plans from Africa. Africa Spectrum

In the early stages of the Anglophone Crisis, a pregnant female military was brutally murdered by non-state actors prompting the withdrawal of all female military from active combat in the two regions. This led to conclusions about the need to "protect" women, even when they have been trained for combat.

The use of language is very important in policy design and implementation because it determines women's adherence to certain actions. In 2022 when President Macron paid a visit to Cameroon, some women peacebuilders sought to send out a strong message regarding France's role in the Anglophone Crisis. However, other women of the same group refused to be a part of that protest action. They expressed concern about their capacity to receive the support of their husbands if they were identified as part of such radical content. Many women peacebuilders, gender activists and politicians do not want to be identified as feminist. They prefer softer words because for them the word feminist translates into confrontational, extremist and a hater of men. Given the context within which they work and the need to collaborate with men, they prefer ego massaging approaches and language that soothes the man's ego while convincing them to give way and support women's accession to leadership. In my experience, there is a limit to which many women want to go as feminists, most especially women who are public figures. They are worried about how they will be perceived and how the understanding of what is feminism in Africa will affect their capacity to make inroads into their careers. Though these issues of identity enlarge the scope for discourse and theorizing on feminism, they complicate activism for women who seek to engage systems from a more lived experience approach. Lee-Koo (2016) confirms this when she states that implementation is not just an empirical issue, but is connected to how participation, protection, prevention, and gender equality are discursively produced[47]. Thus, we must contend with how policy language defines and shapes roles for women in peacebuilding. Some feminist scholars, as Shepherd discusses[48], are concerned that policies have shifted focus over time from men to women and men, and back to men.

d) Acknowledgment of the intersecting realities of women in experiences: Within the peacebuilding space, there are many different types of women who participate across all levels. I refer to feminist scholars as the architects of the women, peace and security agenda. Alongside the United Nations in consultation with governments and civil society, feminists have played a transformative role to conflict, peace and security by challenging traditional, militarized understandings of peace and security, and advocating for inclusive and justice-based frameworks. Peace is no longer defined as merely the absence the war, it has been reframed to include domestic violence, economic and environmental inequalities[49]. Feminist scholars and activists have critiqued militarism as inherently patriarchal, leading conversations on demilitarization and disarmament, and advocating for resource reallocation for social welfare[50]. Over the years, they have produced knowledge and developed policies on women's representation and participation in peacebuilding. They have structured the role of women within political, economic, technological and security spaces, constantly seeking understanding to develop processes for more women to occupy leadership roles and contribute meaningfully to policy development and implementation. Feminists alongside women-led NGOs were instrumental in drafting and lobbying for the UNSCR 1325[51].

The next group of women within the peacebuilding space are the leaders across all sectors – those women who effectively occupy the spaces that have been created. These are women who either by self-empowerment or circumstances, buy the idea of women's empowerment and immediately take up the challenge to break new ground and occupy new spaces. Feminist theorizing for gender equality and mainstreaming of intersectionality are realized by women leaders. However, this group of women are often more practical, moving away from the purist interventions of theorists to mixing and matching strategies according to the needs of their community and their individual objectives. They are not focused on interpreting feminist perspectives on ground but rather on passing through the cracks to achieve their goals. For instance, a female politician who conforms to patriarchal norms, does not seek to confront patriarchy, but rather to survive it. Within the feminist peace architecture, these women are responsible for the everyday peace in our communities, providing care, healing and community rebuilding.

These women that I refer to as the builders understand the terrain; they are acquainted with the mindsets of men, women and systems. They avoid confrontation not only because for them it delays their progress but also because some of them accept existing sociocultural norms as natural and support them. Others think focusing on changing these norms may delay progress to their leadership goals and undermine their efforts among men, with whom they are supposed to collaborate. Their approach to women's leadership in peacebuilding is to use women's culturally accepted strengths to negotiate. They are not very interested in overtly challenging patriarchal norms, if not doing so would give them an inroad into leadership. Some of them are not particularly preoccupied with women's issues and those who are, do not always agree on strategic approaches enshrined in feminist activism[52]. The builders are a necessary component for women's representation and participation in peacebuilding, but without understanding

47 Lee-Koo, K. (2016). Engaging UNSCR 1325 through Australia's national action plan. *International Political Science Review*,
48 Hudson, H. (2017). The Power of Mixed Messages: Women, Peace, and Security Language in Nat
49 Cohn,C.(2013)."Women and Wars: Contested Histories, Uncertain Futures." Polity Press.
50 Enloe, C. (2014). Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics. University of California Press.
51 Tryggestad,T.L.(2009)."Trick or Treat? The UN and Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325." Global Governance,
52 Skard, T, "Getting Our History Right: How Were Equal Rights of Women and Men Included in the Charter of the United Nations?" Forum for Development Studies

the vision of feminism's drive towards gender equality, they sometimes prevent effective gains for all women: for instance, collaborating with men to have a seat at the table without pushing for policy that facilitates access to the table for all women. Some women in leadership therefore benefit from the access created by feminist activism but shy away from strategies aligned with feminist activism.

Another classification of women in leadership is the woman on the ground whose engagement in peacebuilding is driven neither by the desire to uphold feminist ideals or to attain leadership but rather by lived experiences and compelling conditions that push them to act[53]. Women on the frontline in peacebuilding are recognized as feminist activist. They are too diverse in their perception of issues and in their capacity to manage local concerns. A woman on the ground who seems to be concerned only with caring for her family today, may be leading a revolution the next day. They often act when pushed to the extreme and when that happens, their repository of knowledge comes from their lived experiences, and their commitment comes from the pain they have been subjected to. Though they do not understand the overarching goals of the feminist movement or cannot grasp policy and its implications, they possess power that comes from their contributions to community life. This power can be effectively harnessed towards a more strategic engagement to leadership and peacebuilding at frontline level. Feminist scholarship on feminism on the frontlines have acknowledged their contributions to community leadership, feminist solidarity and resistance to patriarchal norms[54]. Frontline women peacebuilders innovate and adapt strategies based on existing conditions and their objectives. In 2019, members of the South west North West Women's Task Force quickly rallied together during the Major National Dialogue to devise ways to participate in the dialogue. One of their strategies was to borrow the badges of women who had been invited but did not show up. This gave them entry into the various committees, where they shared their perspectives on the Anglophone Crisis. This strategy was a huge success as they effectively influenced resolutions that were taken in the various committees.

e) Funding for Women's Peacebuilding Work

Many women working in the peacebuilding space operate through civil society organizations (CSOs) that depend heavily on donor funding to sustain their projects and programmes. A major challenge these organizations face is securing significant and consistent funding. Women-led CSOs often receive short-term, project-based funding with little or no institutional support. This leads to implementation challenges, including inadequate staffing and a lack of basic office resources. As a result, these organizations remain financially dependent on donor cycles and are unable to plan for the long term.

Another persistent issue is the mismatch between donor priorities and the actual needs of women-led CSOs. While these organizations are established to respond to pressing community concerns, financial pressures often push them to align with donor agendas at the expense of their core missions. Donor requirements also tend to be complex, with compliance processes that overwhelm small organizations operating with limited administrative capacity.

In response, women-led CSOs are increasingly leading conversations about donor practices: questioning who the donors are, whether their policies reflect feminist principles, and how they can be engaged to adopt more supportive funding approaches for women's peacebuilding work.

In the Anglophone regions of Cameroon, the absence of funding has stalled critical peacebuilding efforts. Over the past four years, our coalition developed a peacebuilding manual intended for use across the two regions and eventually nationwide. However, due to lack of funding, including the withdrawal of Canadian support to Cameroon, we have been unable to translate the manual or organize trainings for women on the frontlines.

We share stories of danger and suffering among ourselves to cope with everything.

53 Mohanty, C.T: Feminism without borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity. Duke University Press, 2003
54 Sankey, M.D: Women and War in the 21st Century: A Country-by-Country Guide. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018

Moving Forward: Challenges and Recommendations

The challenges that women face in navigating policy and politics in conflict and peacebuilding remain critical as conflicts mutate and access to the power to influence change remains largely in the hands of men. Without control over sources of power, women are unable to directly shape the implementation of policy. Subramanian- Montgomery, Fedynsky, and Bandiaky-Badji[55] affirm this in their study, which revealed that less than 25 per cent of National Action Plans receive a budget upon adoption - a trend that cuts across most programmes targeting women. In Cameroon, for example, the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family consistently operates on one of the lowest annual budgets. This lack of adequate financing limits women's capacity to drive real change, while overreliance on donors often shapes the design and implementation of women's projects in ways that may not reflect their priorities.

Beyond funding, there is also the need to bridge the ideological gap between feminists and grassroots women peacebuilders. In many communities in Cameroon, feminism is misunderstood as a confrontational, man-hating identity, often associated with aggression or even stigmatized as lesbianism. This perception undermines decades of feminist contributions to policy and practice. For feminism to grow and open new spaces for women, it requires a strong support system—one rooted in collaboration with women on the ground. Cross-pollinating feminist strategies across women's groups can foster mutual understanding, clarify roles, and create synergies. Bridging the gap between feminism and women's political/peacebuilding activism will transform political spaces and usher in a different visioning of women as actors and co-creators of policies, thereby enhancing women's capacities to break down walls and rebuild systems that have historically oppressed them. Women's empowerment cannot exist without feminist visioning, yet feminism equally depends on broader women's movements to adopt and operationalize its ideologies in real time.

Considering these challenges, several recommendations can help advance the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda and strengthen women's organizing in peacebuilding:

- **Integrate climate security and environmental justice:** Expand the WPS agenda to address the links between environmental degradation, conflict, and insecurity, recognizing their disproportionate impact on women and girls.

- **Strengthen accountability and financing mechanisms:** Establish national bureaus dedicated to WPS implementation with direct state funding, backed by regional monitoring systems and sanctions for non-compliance. Sustainable financing and accountability are essential for continuity and impact.

- **Engage with digital peace and cybersecurity:** Recognize online spaces as new arenas of conflict where women and girls are disproportionately targeted. Develop concrete strategies for digital peacebuilding and cybersecurity protections.

- **Broaden the scope of intersectionality:** Increase diversity measures by examining how global geopolitics and business practices shape the lived experiences of women and girls across different contexts.

The war has brought more abuse of women's and girls' bodies, sexual slavery, and prostitution into their lives.

55 Subramanian-Montgomery, Fedynsky C Badianky-Badji: 20 Years After Resolution 1325: Why are Women Still Excluded from Peace Processes?

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About the feminist reflections series

The “Feminist Reflections” series shares relevant dissertations from the collective work of the African Feminist Reflection and Action Group. The group includes 40 scholar feminists, social activists and progressive women from trade unions and political arena of different regions of Africa. Since November 2017, the group has been meeting regularly to critically discuss the challenges arising from neoliberal development patterns and the current negative political reactions against women to contemporary African feminist activism. The meetings have been facilitated by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Gender Justice Competence Center, based in Maputo Mozambique.

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Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is the oldest political foundation in Germany. The foundation is named after Friedrich Ebert, the first democratically elected president of Germany.

The Gender Justice Competence Center (GJCC) Sub-Saharan Africa coordinates FES’ work on gender justice in the region. Together with colleagues, feminists and partners in the region we create spaces for exchange and mutual learning and develop transformative strategies for a more gender just future.

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