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Changing the world with women and girls

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Leading the Way

Civil Society Movements Reshaping Peace & Security

The challenges, and alternative solutions to peace, pioneered by women's rights organisations, and youth movements in Colombia, Ethiopia, Myanmar and Uganda.

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Executive summary

Women-led and women's rights organisations (WLOs and WROs) are central to peacebuilding, humanitarian response, and community resilience in conflict-affected regions. Yet their leadership is too often underfunded, under-recognised, and excluded from formal peace and security frameworks. This report presents findings from research conducted by ActionAid across four conflict-affected contexts – Myanmar, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Colombia – to better understand the realities these movements face, the solutions they offer, and what is needed to support transformative, feminist peace.

The report highlights a persistent disconnect between international approaches to peace and the lived experiences of women and girls. While global actors focus on high-level agreements, women's movements are addressing the everyday realities of violence, land dispossession, displacement, and injustice. In Myanmar, the 2021 military coup has left women at extreme risk of violence and economic collapse. In Northern Uganda, the legacy of war continues through stigma, land conflict, and limited access to justice. In Ethiopia, entrenched inequality has been deepened by conflict and displacement. In Colombia, despite a formal peace process, women continue to face marginalisation, insecurity, and the long-term impacts of armed violence. Across all four countries, the lack of justice and accountability for survivors remains a key barrier to peace.

Despite these challenges, women's movements are responding with powerful alternatives: mediating disputes, leading humanitarian action, preserving ancestral healing practices, supporting survivors, and developing economic alternatives to instability. These efforts not only sustain their communities but also offer critical feminist models for peace and recovery that international actors too often overlook.

Feminist movements have long argued that peace cannot be built without justice, reparations, and systems change. As such, there is a growing call to reframe the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda not only as a protection mechanism, but as a transformative, anti-militarist, and decolonial political framework that centres the lived realities of women and girls in all their diversity. To achieve this, we must listen to the voices, struggles, and experiences of women leaders, and those who have trespassed the limits of the WPS space, and who have built their own forms of harmony, even when formal peace and security have failed them.

Women's movements are not passive beneficiaries. They are frontline responders, political actors, and architects of peace. Their leadership must no longer be the exception, but the foundation of any meaningful peace and security agenda.

Overview of recommendations

This report calls on donors, policymakers, and humanitarian organisations to take immediate action to increase funding, recognition, and meaningful inclusion of women-led organisations in peacebuilding efforts globally. Sustainable peace cannot be achieved without their leadership and expertise. To strengthen and amplify this work, the report sets out the following urgent priorities:

- **Participation**, by investing in WROs' capacity through training, skills development, and organisational support, and ensuring consistent access to decision-making spaces.
- P**rotection**, by embedding WROs' safety within programme design through conflict analysis and risk assessments, alongside measures to mitigate gender-based violence and adopt gender-transformative approaches.
- **Advocacy and information sharing**, by resourcing WROs' advocacy through dedicated funding, learning exchanges, and feminist, community-led research.
- **Prevention**, by prioritising conflict prevention through WROs' involvement in early warning, risk reporting, and local mediation and dialogue.
- **Accessible peacebuilding resources**, by funding translated and simplified materials, including infographics and pamphlets, to widen access to peacebuilding information and tools.
- **Funding modalities**, by shifting towards multi-year, flexible funding, structured advisory engagement with WROs, and inclusive mechanisms that reach women and young people.

Taken together, these actions provide a practical pathway to support women-led peacebuilding and deliver more legitimate and durable peace outcomes.

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Focus group with Canasteando Association. Tumaco, in Colombia December 23, 2023.

1 Introduction

In the two decades since the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda remains a critical global framework for recognising the impact of conflict on women and girls and promoting their leadership in peacebuilding.[1] But today, as conflicts intensify, civic space shrinks, and militarised approaches dominate global security policy, many women's movements are questioning whether the agenda has delivered on its transformative promise.

Women's movements in conflict-affected regions play a crucial role in peacebuilding, humanitarian response, and community resilience. However, their contributions are often underfunded, under recognised, and hindered by entrenched gender inequalities, ongoing violence, and the failure of international actors to fully integrate their expertise into peace and security frameworks.

This report collates findings from research conducted in Myanmar, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Colombia, documenting the lived experiences of women-led organisations (WLOs) and women's rights organisations (WROs) in these contexts. It highlights the challenges they face, the alternative solutions they have developed, and the urgent need for greater investment in their work to advance sustainable peace and security.

The lack of justice and accountability for conflict and war survivors across these contexts remains a major barrier to peace. In response, women's movements have led humanitarian responses and continue to advocate for peace. They are pioneering livelihood programmes, peacebuilding initiatives, and the preservation of ancestral healing practices. From advocating for justice and mediating land disputes, to supporting survivors and driving economic empowerment, they are shaping locally driven solutions for sustainable peace.

Across the four contexts, common themes emerge: the need for long-term, flexible funding for women's movements and their organisations; the importance of integrating women's voices into formal peace and security processes; and the necessity of shifting power, decision-making, and resources to local actors who have deep-rooted knowledge of their communities. Our research demonstrates that they have played a significant role in redefining peace and security through their lived experiences. However, our findings show that international responses often fail to meaningfully incorporate these perspectives, as policy frameworks and programmatic interventions tend to prioritise top-down approaches that overlook locally grounded knowledge and priorities.

1.1 Conflict, women, peace and security

The global landscape of conflict has dramatically shifted since the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000, which first established the Women, Peace and Security agenda. There has been a steep rise in violent conflicts, displacement, and authoritarianism in the last few years. According to the *Global Peace Index 2025*, 59 conflicts were recorded globally in 2024 alone, the most since the end of WWII and a stark increase from 38 in 2020.[2]

Women and girls are disproportionately affected by the direct and indirect consequences of crisis, war, and occupation, including experiencing gender-based violence (GBV), forced displacement, economic disempowerment, and exclusion from peace processes. Despite these impacts, women remain severely underrepresented in decision-making on peace and security: in 2024, women made up only 7% of negotiators in formal peace processes worldwide – and many peace talks still include no women at all.[3]

Women and girls are disproportionately affected by the direct and indirect consequences of crisis, war, and occupation, including experiencing gender-based violence (GBV), forced displacement, economic disempowerment, and exclusion from peace processes.

While the WPS agenda was established to address these gaps, implementation has been uneven and often symbolic. Less than 1% of international funding for peace and security reaches WROs,[4] and cuts to Overseas Development Aid in 2025 threatened to close almost half of WROs and WLOs in crisis settings within months.[5]

In many contexts, women peacebuilders are operating under conditions of extreme insecurity and the widespread and routine repression of fundamental freedoms. Shrinking civic space continues to threaten the work of WROs: over 72.4% of the global population lives in conditions where civic space is repressed or completely closed,[6] with grave implications for women's safety and ability to organise.

To build lasting peace, international actors must redefine their approach by centring the perspectives of communities, investing in grassroots solutions, and ensuring that security policies reflect the needs of those on the ground, not just those in power. To achieve this, humanitarian and peacebuilding actors must invest in the leadership of women's movements and organisations, recognise their expertise, and create pathways for their participation in decision-making at local, national, and international levels.

1.2 Methodology

The purpose of this research is not only to document the challenges WROs face, but to highlight the strategies and solutions they are already leading, often with limited resources and little recognition. Drawing on focus group discussions, organisational interviews, and testimonies from women activists, this report centres their voices and explores what peace, security, and justice mean when defined from the ground up.

ActionAid adopts a feminist approach to research, seeing it as a tool to bring about shifts in power, through ActionAid's Feminist Research Guidelines[7]. Research findings and evidence are used to dismantle potential bias from decision-makers' views and actions, and to challenge how and where power negatively manifests and reproduces oppression. The voices of women and girls from communities, women-led organisations and women's rights organisations are prioritised as evidence. Women-only and girl-only spaces are created for evidence generation. By focusing on 'people-centred evidence', ActionAid's research builds solidarity and shifts power.

Aligned with this, the policy brief adopted a feminist approach, centring the experiences and rights of those who are most at risk of being marginalised within conflict affected regions, and interrogating the causes of inequalities.

To do so, this research took a participatory, reflexive and feminist approach throughout, co-developing and validating the evidencing questions

and findings with all participants. To do so, the research questions were co-designed with the women leaders and partner organisations ActionAid works with.

Qualitative data was collected through key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) with a total of 275 participants across Northern Uganda, Ethiopia, Myanmar, and Colombia.

KIIs allowed individuals to share personal experiences, while FGDs revealed group perspectives on issues, to crosscheck findings and allow a variety of diverse voices to be heard. The policy brief is a cross-sectional design with a mixed-method approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative data for comprehensive analysis. Secondary data was reviewed through literature, and a structured questionnaire was used for quantitative data collection from project participants.

The quality of the assessment was maintained using strategic monitoring measures at all stages, including planning, data collection, and data management (data cleaning and analysis), interpretation and write-up. All data was validated with the research participants, and the final recommendations were co-developed by the research participants.

While the Women, Peace and Security agenda remains a critical framework, its transformative promise has been undermined by escalating conflicts, shrinking civic space, militarised security approaches, and persistent gender inequality.

This report examines the role and experiences of WLOs and WROs in Myanmar, Northern Uganda, Ethiopia and Colombia. It documents how women and girls face disproportionate impacts of conflict and women peacebuilders remain underrepresented and underfunded despite their central role in peacebuilding and humanitarian response. Women's movements continue to develop locally grounded solutions to violence, injustice, and insecurity, yet their knowledge and leadership are frequently excluded from formal peace and security processes.

Using a participatory, reflexive and feminist methodology, the research centres the voices of women most affected by conflict and challenges power imbalances in knowledge production.

2 Report finding: The gendered impacts of conflict

"One of the biggest threats to women right now is their safety, their protection, and the abuse they face in many areas with active conflict. It is getting worse and worse as there is limited support."

WRO in Ethiopia

Conflict deepens existing inequalities, disproportionately affecting the rights of women and girls. Our research shows that women's and girls' experiences of conflict differ from those of men and boys, exposing them to greater risks to their safety and security.

Across all country contexts, rising militarisation and increased activity of armed groups have reinforced harmful cultural norms, further restricting women's and girls' access to livelihood opportunities, participation in peacebuilding efforts, and essential services such as healthcare and legal support.

2.1 Safety, protection and gender-based violence

Women in conflict-affected settings face heightened levels of gender-based violence (GBV),[8] including targeted sexual violence and use of sexual violence as a tactic of war by military and armed groups.[9] Across all country contexts, participants vividly described the impact of conflict on women's and girls' lives, reporting a troubling rise in early and forced marriage, sexual violence, economic exploitation, and physical abuse.

In Uganda, respondents described widespread sexual violence and the lasting consequences they face, including trauma, stigma, unwanted pregnancies, and serious gynaecological complications. One woman shared: "*while in the bush, many of us become teen mothers against our will since marriage to rebels was forceful. In*

ActionAid Focal Group discussions on Women Peace and Security, conflict resolution and justice in Northern Uganda.

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the bush, you do not select a husband, they just give, if you refuse, they kill you. I got two children in the bush."

Similarly, GBV was noted as widespread across all context. Sata from the Colombian Femicide Observatory shows that 621 cases of femicide were registered during the first nine months of 2025.[10] As a result of the widespread devastation caused by the earthquake hitting Myanmar in March 2025, women and girls face heightened protection and gender-based violence risks in overcrowded, mixed-gender shelters with limited privacy.[11]

Participants across contexts also emphasised the long-term psychological harms of conflict and systematic abuse, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. The link between conflict-related sexual violence and the increased risk of sexually transmitted infections was also evident in both our research and the wider literature.[12] In Ethiopia, women reported increases in sexually transmitted infections including HIV linked to sexual violence and increases in female genital mutilation (FGM) associated with early and forced marriage. One respondent captured the sense of ongoing insecurity: "*We have lost hope in [their] protection; Nothing has changed for women after the conflict. Just like before, women are raped, experience social isolation, they are discriminated against. This has affected day to day mental wellbeing.*"

2.2 Militarisation, coercion and gendered control

Our findings indicate that military violence, including sexual violence, such as rape, gang rape, and abduction committed by armed forces and armed groups, continues to be used as a tactic of war and intimidation. Across all contexts, the research shows a clear link between militarisation and rising armed violence against women and girls, alongside broader efforts to control communities through fear and punishment.

In Myanmar, participants described how the constant presence of soldiers shapes women's everyday lives and movement. Many reported feeling unsafe passing groups of soldiers who use weapons to intimidate and who perpetrate sexual harassment and assault. Respondents also described the direct targeting of women through arbitrary arrest, hostage-taking, torture, and killing, particularly of women who are protesting or who are perceived to be resisting the military.

This pattern of coercion and gendered control also emerged in other contexts, including the abduction of girls and young women by armed groups for forced 'marriage' and sexual servitude. In Uganda, one participant recounted how girls were taken from school during a night raid and subjected to extreme violence throughout captivity: "*They came to our school […] in the middle of the night. We were hiding under the beds, but they banged on the beds and told us to come out. They tied us and led us out […] at about 6am […] On the third day a little girl tried to escape, and they made us beat her and she bled to death. Then they made us lie down and they beat us fifteen strokes each […]*"

In Colombia, participants described how armed groups seize women, girls, and adolescents to control communities and punish resistance, including through threats against relatives:

> **There are also women, girls, adolescents, who have been forcibly seized by the armed groups themselves in order to be their women […] so that nothing happens to their family."**

For many, the harm does not end when women and girls escape or are released. Survivors described stigma, exclusion, and barriers to reintegration, sometimes accompanied by continued violence and discrimination from community members. Over time, sustained exposure to conflict-related violence can entrench patriarchal norms and normalise GBV, leaving women feeling powerless and eroding hope that change is possible.

2.3 Movement restrictions, displacement and exploitation

Ongoing instability and the threat of violence severely restrict women's and girls' freedom of movement, making it dangerous to travel for work, visit family, or access essential services.

In Colombia, participants described how armed groups' control of territory limits everyday mobility and disrupts social and cultural life, preventing them from visiting their families, taking part in family events and limiting their engagement in ancestral practices, resulting in an increase in mental health issues. A member of a WRO in Colombia said, "*The armed conflict has [made people] lose the habit of going to visit one's family […] There's a sense of caution and necessity to avoid going out […] They call the children to come home early...*" Another participant linked these restrictions directly to cultural loss and uprooting: "*The domination of the territory by armed groups brings with it the uprooting experienced by women who have had to leave the territory and begin to assume new customs [...] and leave behind their ancestral traditions.*" For many Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities in the Colombian Pacific, this is especially devastating as land is central to identity and wellbeing, a "corridor of life" where daily practices, spirituality, and ecosystems are deeply interconnected.

Movement restrictions also impose direct economic costs. Curfews and insecurity create additional barriers to employment and income generation, with women avoiding work that requires travel at night for fear of violence. In Myanmar, one participant noted: "*The local transportation system is not working at night in*

Women led youth groups have come together to support young people's long-term livelihood, by providing computer training in Kayin State, Myanmar.

Curfews and insecurity create additional barriers to employment and income generation, with women avoiding work that requires travel at night for fear of violence.

my town. It has become so dangerous for women to come back home at night." In Colombia, women described similar constraints on informal livelihoods, including selling goods early in the morning because "*armed actors now live within the territory, within the communities.*"

These dynamics are closely tied to displacement. Conflict-related human rights violations and weak protection systems both drive displacement and are reinforced by it.[13] As conditions deteriorate, women and girls are forced to flee in search of safety, yet displacement often increases risks of exploitation, trafficking, and abduction, and creates major barriers to healthcare, especially sexual and reproductive health services.[14] In Uganda, displaced women described economic marginalisation, dependence on aid, and exclusion from land rights. In Myanmar, participants reported that overcrowded, "contained" living conditions and lack of privacy can intensify violence in camps and households. Similar concerns were echoed in Ethiopia, where displaced women cited overcrowded camps and inadequate protection as drivers of insecurity for women and girls.

2.4 Impacts on livelihoods and girls' futures

Across all contexts in this report, conflict deepens women's economic insecurity by disrupting markets and livelihoods, reducing work opportunities, and reinforcing patriarchal norms that narrow women's roles and choices. In Colombia, women described how gang and criminal group activity makes economic independence extremely difficult. Women-led enterprises intended to strengthen livelihoods have been forced to pause due to targeting and intimidation, leaving many women without viable income sources.

Participants also described how economic collapse drives harmful coping strategies and community-level risks. In Colombia, women linked shrinking livelihood opportunities to increased drug redistribution, drug use, and trafficking involving children. A woman from the Canasteando organisation said: "*It generates anguish when the children also fall there, fall into that abyss […] and get into that life, not because they want it, but they need to survive.*"

Women also described how financial hardship can intensify reliance on traditional gender norms, increasing women's unpaid responsibilities and intimate partner violence. As one participant in Ethiopia put it: "*Women are under triple burden. They have to now be in charge of the economic activities, have all the caring responsibilities, and still be expected to do the community work […] the burden has come back to women, time and time again.*"

Across contexts, economic pressure was associated with increased child labour and declining girls' education, as families prioritise immediate survival over schooling, narrowing girls' future employment options and reinforcing cycles of dependency.

In Ethiopia, respondents reported girls being pushed into domestic or informal work to support household income, often at the expense of education and wellbeing. In Myanmar, participants described increased economic migration among young girls: "*Young women? They do not have the chance of being secure in homes and in the community at this moment. They seek other jobs or get into early marriage. That is the only way they think they can be secure.*" Others linked school closures and unaffordable schooling to early marriage, migration, and trafficking: "*Schools have closed for 2 years […] girls are forced to leave school because their parents cannot afford it […] for them the future has been early marriage, migrate for work, some are trafficked.*"

2.5 Disruption to public services and justice

Conflict is strongly linked to the disruption of public services, creating additional, compounding challenges for women and girls.[15] In 2024, UN Women reported 1,647 reported attacks on healthcare in 16 countries and territories with complex humanitarian emergencies, killing or injuring more than 2,700 people.[16] This has reduced access to health services through damaged infrastructure and the killing of medical staff, increasing women's vulnerabilities.

Across all contexts, women reported limited access to medical support in both conflict and post-conflict settings, including sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and mental health services. For example, in Myanmar, during 2024, 135 health facilities were damaged in incidents of violence against, or obstruction of, health care[17] with participants in Myanmar sharing that hospitals lack appropriate equipment, medication and doctors and highlighted the devastating impact this has on pregnant women.

> **"[In Myanmar] Conflict-affected communities' access to health is out of question. Even if we have access to doctors and nurses, they do not have equipment and medications that we would need."**

As militarisation expands and legal processes weaken, mistrust in institutions grows. In Colombia, women shared: "*There is a great lack of trust in the institutions and in the police. Women don't have confidence in the reporting process. This is why the work of women's*

© Photographer: ActionAid Ethiopia

Youth peacebuilders at Guna district, Ethiopia conducting focus group discussion for WPS research project.

organisations is important in the territory." Similar concerns were echoed in Myanmar, where women reported limited trust in legal systems under military control; even when they have claims, they often feel compelled to keep a low profile to remain safe.

The erosion of the rule of law also affects inheritance, land disputes, and unresolved legal matters, perpetuating instability and inequality for women. In Uganda, lack of legal support had significant impacts on women's livelihoods, including unresolved inheritance issues that leave women without rights to money or property. As one woman in Ethiopia reflected: "*Sometimes we question what is the point of reconciliation and the rule of law when we are always worrying about what time the next conflict will happen?*"

This report finds that conflict reshapes women's and girls' lives through intersecting harms: heightened insecurity and GBV, militarised control and coercion, restricted movement and displacement, and deepening economic hardship.

These pressures reinforce harmful gender norms and force families into coping strategies that undermine women's autonomy and girls' futures, particularly through school dropouts, early marriage, unsafe migration, and exploitation.

At the same time, the breakdown of health, justice, and protection systems leaves survivors without support or redress, while women's participation in leadership and peacebuilding remains constrained by insecurity, backlash, and exclusion from decision-making spaces.

Taken together, these findings show that women's rights, safety, and agency are not a secondary impact of conflict, but central to how conflict is experienced and to what recovery and lasting peace will require.

3 Report finding: Unpacking challenges facing WROs in crisis

"In conflict, peace is a fragmentation of one's identity. It is entangled with the structural truths of inequality and colonial legacies."

WRO member in Myanmar

Women leaders in conflict-affected communities consistently point to the gap between what international actors define as 'peace' and what people experience as safety, dignity, and justice in their daily lives. Too often, peace is framed through a state-centred lens, focused on military stabilisation and ceasefires, while the everyday insecurities faced by women and girls are treated as secondary.[18]

Consequently, conversations on the WPS agenda are viewed as an externally determined concept shaped by distant negotiations, with limited relevance to the structural violence and exclusion women experience daily. Women's and girls rights, and the movements that represent them, are still too often excluded from peace negotiations, reconstruction planning, and humanitarian decision-making, or included only symbolically. This is despite numerous studies documenting the benefits of women's participation in peacebuilding processes, such as more sustainable peace and improved implementation of peacebuilding policies.[19]

The WROs we spoke to stress that the absence of armed conflict does not always equal the presence of peace. Instead, peace must be defined by the dismantling of the systems that make violence possible in the first place: patriarchal norms, land dispossession, discriminatory laws, militarised governance, and colonial legacies.

Our research shows that, across all country contexts, lack of safety and security, alongside deeply rooted patriarchal norms, create significant barriers to women's engagement in decision-making spaces, directly impacting the peacebuilding work of women's rights and women-led organisations. This was consistently reported across all country contexts. For example, respondents from Uganda shared that society doesn't "*understand the importance and value of women's participation in all spheres.*" Similarly, a woman from Myanmar said, "*There is a lot of resistance within the family about why they are doing this job, and their family tell them to not try to do this job.*"

These attitudes have led to limited recognition of women's rights within communities and, in some cases, a lack of trust in the work of their organisations, often due to limited understanding of peacebuilding efforts. Youth organisations and movements also play a critical yet frequently overlooked role within these peacebuilding ecosystems. Across the research contexts, youth activists, particularly young women and young feminists, are engaged in community mobilisation, advocacy, and awareness-raising on peace, rights, and accountability. In Colombia, youth-led civil society movements contribute to grassroots mobilisation and the implementation of peace agreements, often working alongside women's organisations to address localised violence and structural inequalities. Similarly, in Ethiopia and Uganda, youth groups and youth wings within women's rights organisations support peacebuilding through community dialogue, civic education, and initiatives addressing gender-based violence and social cohesion. However, youth organisations face many of the same structural barriers as women's rights organisations, including limited access to funding,

Maria, a women leader leading on chocolate making as part of livelihood re-building in Colombia.

A woman leader who participated in an ActionAid and CSO led tailoring and Garment cutting training in North Uganda.

exclusion from decision-making spaces, and perceptions that youth activism lacks legitimacy or experience.

This sidelining of women and young people results in peace processes and humanitarian action that prioritise elite power-sharing and stabilisation, while ignoring the lived realities women confront every day: gender-based violence, economic exclusion, unequal access to land and justice, and the collapse of essential services. As a result, peace agreements, humanitarian action and reconstruction plans, often fail to address issues most vital to women's security: SRHR, GBV prevention, psychosocial support, livelihoods, education, and the rights of displaced women.

3.1 Gaps in international engagement with WROs working in crisis

Our research shows that the lack of engagement by international actors poses additional challenges for women's rights and women-led organisations in their peacebuilding and recovery work. 68% (184) of all respondents reported that the international community's response is insufficient.

In Uganda, Ethiopia, and Myanmar, 51% (110) of respondents do not believe that the international community adequately understands the peace and security realities in their countries. Additionally, 68% (182) of respondents across all contexts believe there is a disconnect between the realities on the ground and how the international community responds.

For example, in Myanmar, participants reported that international organisations often lack contextual understanding of conflict situations due to rapidly changing contexts. This leaves critical gaps that WROs and WLOs are left to address. One woman from Myanmar said, "*[International actors'] understanding of conflict and our experience in conflict is totally different. It seems they also want to colonise conflict in Myanmar. They do not put on our shoes.*" Similarly, women from Uganda shared that international organisations tend to favour short-term responses over long-term programmes, and prioritise immediate relief or specific projects based on easy-to-achieve outcomes.

The lack of gender-responsive programmes and exclusion of local organisations and communities by international actors were also noted by participants from Colombia, who said, "*The issues that concern women and girls, must be*

Our research shows that the lack of engagement by international actors poses additional challenges for women's rights and women-led organisations in their peacebuilding and recovery work. 68% (184) of all respondents reported that the international community's response is insufficient.

discussed among women themselves, not by others for those women and girls." This lack of engagement and partnership from international actors was further highlighted in the survey, where 93% of respondents felt that the international community is not sufficiently responding to the conflict in Myanmar, and 67% felt that the international community doesn't understand the context of conflict and peace in Myanmar. Without a contextual understanding, the response is fragmented and fails to adopt a long-term approach.

Despite this, international actors often lack the will to meaningfully support women's rights and women-led organisations in delivering work that is context-specific and fit for purpose. Participants from Colombia shared that some INGOs "*follow their set programme, and this can have slow procedures, and slow distributions, despite the context changing. They do not sit to better understand the needs or how this may have changed from their initial risk assessment at the beginning of the crisis, and therefore cannot meaningfully address the needs.*"

It was reported across all country contexts that international actors often don't listen to the voices of local organisations. One woman from Myanmar said, "*In general the international community decide based on their frame and interests. They came to consult with us, but do not listen to our voices.*" And another participant from Colombia shared, "*No one comes and asks us what we need. Right now, there are no access to services, no security, no guarantees for girls and women to have their rights protected. But this is not considered*".

© Photographer: Betty Namatovu

ActionAid and Civil society partner food relief distribution, post the 2020 lock-down in conflict affected regions of Northern Uganda.

3.2 Funding modalities

One of the main challenges raised by the WROs and WLOs we spoke to, is the severe lack of funding.

International resources disproportionately go to security sector reform and large INGOs or UN bodies, while the services women rely on, such as legal aid, health care, income generation, and community protection, remain systematically underfunded. WLOs are expected to fill these gaps, but are rarely resourced as equal partners, let alone granted the power to set priorities or hold decision-makers accountable. According to the research conducted by UN Women, organisations and movements supporting women's rights receive, on average, 0.3% of total aid annually.[20] This was noted particularly in conflict affected areas,[21] and this figure is estimated to continue to decrease.[22]

This is mainly due to significant proportion of funding being allocated to larger NGOs rather than directly to local women's organisations, as well as a lack of understanding among donors about localisation policies, including the goal of securing 1% of global funding for women's organisations.[23]

The lack of funding was also reflected in our research and reported by participants as one of the most significant barriers to their engagement in peacebuilding work. This is despite the critical role they play as first line respondents and despite global commitments to localisation.[24] For example, in Ethiopia, smaller organisations face difficulties in attracting funds, as donors are often unwilling to fund organisations that may lack the stringent policy mechanisms and systems required to meet donors' expectations. One woman from Ethiopia shared, "*[There is] limited funding compared with the high number of conflicts that [are] affecting individuals, there are limitations in what support we can provide due to limited funds and continuous expansion of conflict, and [its] fluctuating nature.*"

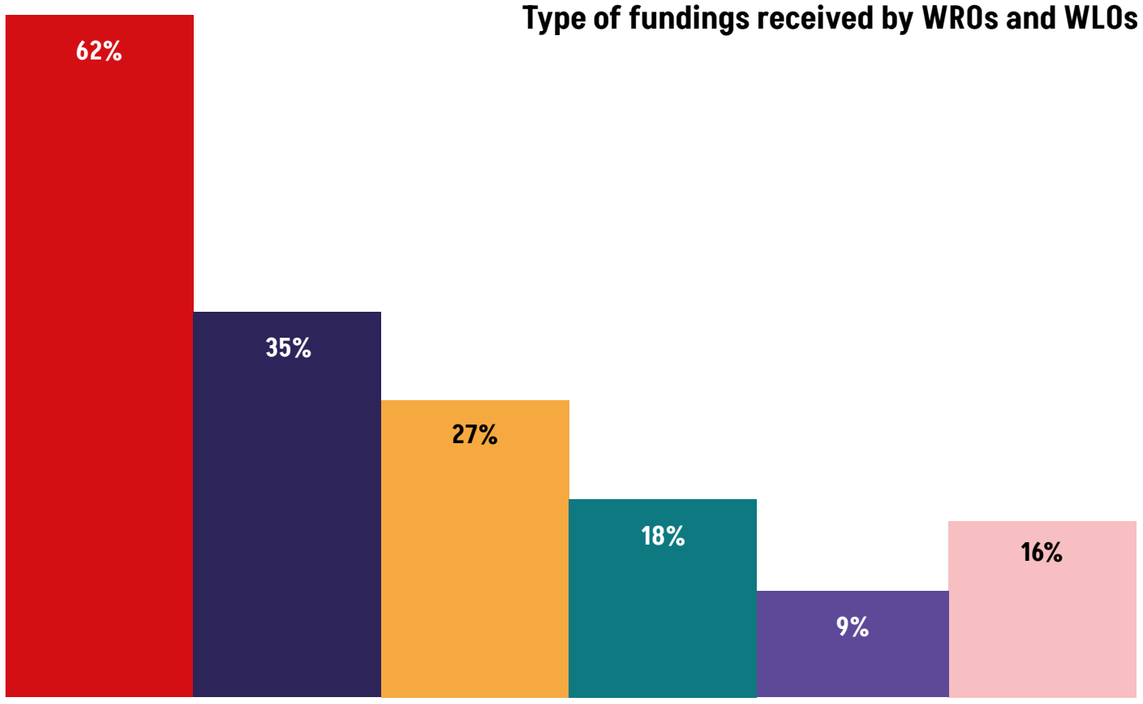
Respondents from Uganda added that international actors often fail to share critical information,

further limiting opportunities for women's rights and women-led organisations, particularly when applying for gender-specific funding. This exacerbates the challenges local actors face in navigating unequal power dynamics between local and international stakeholders.

Even when organisations can secure funding, it is often for short-term responses that don't adequately meet the needs of the communities. The survey conducted in Ethiopia shows that majority (57%) of respondents reported receiving short-term funds and nearly two out of three (59%) said that funding was limited to service delivery only.

Our research shows that across all country contexts, 97% (200) of respondents reported receiving short-term funding lasting less than one year. This includes 62% (128) of respondents who received funding of less than one year with limited flexibility, restricted to specific programme activities only and 35% (72) of respondents who received grants of less than one year with greater flexibility, allowing funds to be allocated to both programme delivery and core operations as needed.

Type of fundings received by WROs and WLOs



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Focus group with the Women Leaders Association (ASMUL). Tumaco, Colombia, January 25, 2024.

Women from Colombia shared that they primarily receive short-term funding, which is often inconsistent, project-based, and lacking flexibility, making it difficult to deliver sustainable programmes that address deep-rooted issues such as GBV. They also emphasised that a lack of adequate funding prevents women from engaging meaningfully in peacebuilding and decision-making spaces.

Our research found that donors often channel funds through international NGOs to serve as intermediaries, creating unequal power dynamics between local women's rights and women-led organisations and large international agencies. This practice reflects a lack of trust that smaller organisations can deliver the work effectively. One of the women from Colombia said, "*Access to resources is so important and we have no knowledge on how to easily access the resources. We don't want intermediaries. We want to take care of bringing the resources directly to the women or to the beneficiaries*".

As international resources often flow to security sector programming and larger UN entities and INGOs, services that women rely on such as GBV prevention and response, SRHR, psychosocial support, legal aid, and women's economic recovery, remain underfunded. Yet these are precisely the foundations of safety and resilience. Despite this, the conflict-driven, complex and volatile environment often creates challenges for international actors to fully engage in the relief, recovery or peacebuilding work. Women's organisations are repeatedly expected to fill the gaps but rarely resourced as equal partners who can set priorities, shape strategy, and hold institutions to account.

3.3 Women's participation and leadership

Women's participation in political, peacebuilding, and decision-making spaces remains limited, with the greatest disparities visible in conflict-affected countries. According to UN Women, women held 18% of elected seats in local governments across conflict-affected countries in 2024, while women held 21% of cabinet positions in these contexts in 2025.[25]

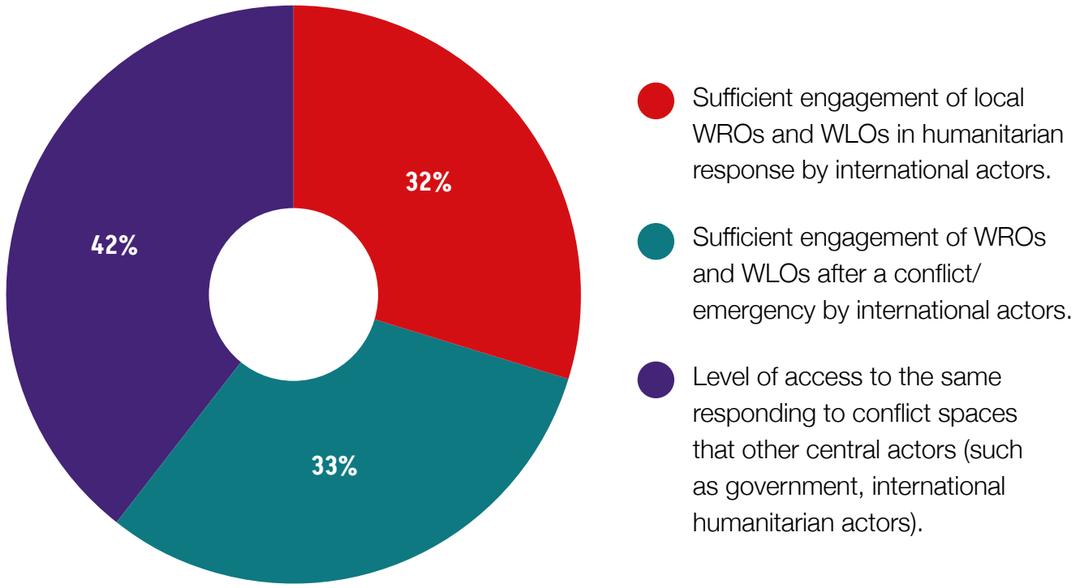
In Ethiopia, women's representation in higher political office is improving, with 195 (41%) of 470 parliamentary seats held by women in 2026.[26] However, participants still noted limited participation across local government, the private sector, and education. Across contexts, women stressed the importance of women speaking for themselves in decision-making spaces, commenting: "*Who advocates for our rights in these spaces?*" and "*We are the only ones who can.*" In Colombia, women similarly stated: *"The issues that concern women and girls must be discussed among women themselves, not by others for those women and girls.*"

In Myanmar, 2021 statistics show that only 14% of elected officials were women in Myanmar (below the global average of 24%), and only three women held decision-making positions in the Pyidaungasu Hluttaw compared to 17 men.[27] As one participant said: "*Women and girls have always been marginalised groups in Myanmar even before the conflict. After the coup this impact is even more high.*"

These inequalities are replicated in peacebuilding. UN Women calculations indicate that women make up only 7% of negotiators, 14% of mediators, and 20% of signatories in formal peace processes worldwide.[28] Participants across all contexts described limited participation in peacebuilding and conflict resolution due to entrenched patriarchal norms and insecurity. This inequality persists despite evidence that peace processes are more likely to be implemented and to endure when women are meaningfully involved.[29]

This was reflected in our own research findings:

Level of engagement and access for WROs and WLOs by international actors as reported by interviewed organisations



Working in a volatile environment creates barriers to engagement and increases risks to women's safety and security. Women's leaders and activists face constant threats, violence, and intimidation from armed groups or the military. One Colombian activist shared:

> **"The women of this community are the ones who are in all the spaces, they are the builders of peace, the ones who make the invitation to the assemblies, the ones who contribute to the preservation of customs, the creation of care routes, the support in the face of displacement. And because of this, at the same time, they are the ones who are disappearing and being murdered the most".**

Participants in Myanmar described backlash, often including violence, towards women who pursue leadership roles, driven by persistent beliefs that leadership is not for women. Participants noted that they can only gather in small groups: "*After you do something, you have [to] run away. Otherwise, you will be arrested.*" This experience was further replicated by another participant from Myanmar who also shared that the presence of checkpoints and increased militarisation impacted their ability to engage with local communities due to safety concerns for them and the participants. One woman from Myanmar said, "*Women are fleeing for their lives. They cannot participate fully. We feel bad to engage with them. For women to participate, they have to be secured.*"

The lack of safety creates additional challenges for women's rights and women-led organisations in building trust with communities, sometimes resulting in hostilities from communities due to perceived bias. Women from Ethiopia explained, "*[communities believe] peacebuilding working people are biased, either to the government side or other side*". This further undermines the safety and security for women's rights and women-led organisations and has a significant impact on women's mental health.

This report finds that WROs working in crisis contexts face significant and persistent challenges.

International actors' engagement with WROs in crisis settings remains limited, creating substantial gaps in crisis response. The exclusion of WROs, alongside a lack of gender-responsive programming, undermines international actors' understanding of rapidly evolving peace and security dynamics and the gender-specific risks faced by women and girls.

Despite their critical role in peacebuilding, WROs also face chronic funding constraints, including under-resourcing, limitations due to short-term and inflexible funding, and unequal power dynamics with international NGOs that often act as intermediaries.

At the same time, women's participation in political, peacebuilding, and decision-making spaces remains limited due to entrenched patriarchal norms and heightened safety and security risks for WROs who participate in these spaces.

4 Alternative solutions to peace, security and economic recovery

Across Colombia, Ethiopia, Myanmar, and Uganda, women-led organisations and youth groups are reimagining pathways to peace, security, and economic recovery amid overlapping crises of conflict, displacement, and humanitarian breakdown. While each context has its own history, these feminist movements face strikingly similar challenges: shrinking civic space, entrenched patriarchy, disrupted livelihoods, and chronic underfunding.

Despite these barriers, and often with limited international support, WROs are not only responding to crises, but actively shaping peace, rebuilding communities, and resisting systems of violence through acts of care, solidarity, and grassroots organising. Their work offers uniquely rooted solutions, reminding us that real peace is forged in the everyday, transformative work led by those closest to the crisis.

In redefining safety and security, local women's organisations have moved beyond a narrow focus on protection against immediate physical harm to developing proactive strategies that respond in real time to shifting conflict dynamics. In Colombia, for instance, women leaders work in closely-knit alliances, with one respondent explaining, "*Working in alliances, alongside our sisters and friends, means we are one louder voice. This is how we are working for our own safety.*" Such strategies enable these groups to continuously monitor local threats and adjust activities, whether by moving workshops online or selecting safer venues. In Ethiopia, similar challenges arise as communities navigate movement restrictions and the continuous threat of gender-based violence. While the conflicts differ, Myanmar faces heightened militarisation following a coup and Uganda contends with enduring social stigma, the underlying drive is a shared determination to articulate what peace should look like. One participant remarked, "*Often peace is assumed as a step only once violence has stopped. We should be able to speak to what we want peace to be now.*"

The restoration of livelihoods and economic resilience has emerged as a critical arena for change. In Colombia, displaced women have developed innovative enterprises around cocoa production, asserting that "*the issue of cocoa processing is something very fundamental for all peace [...] Our product, the product of peace, brings out everything better, all the good things we have, of course, yes, because the product that we present when someone takes it, knows that it is a product made by women.*" Such entrepreneurial ventures not only generate income but also support community solidarity and youth engagement by replacing illicit crops with sustainable alternatives. In Ethiopia, even in the face of chronic funding shortages and cumbersome administrative hurdles, grassroots initiatives have mobilised resources to meet immediate humanitarian needs while laying the groundwork for future economic recovery. In contexts like Myanmar and Uganda, where formal economic opportunities have contracted sharply, women and youth groups are devising strategies to transform local traditional practices into viable, modern economic models.

Underlying these strategies is an acute awareness of the root causes fuelling conflict and instability, as well as the systemic barriers imposed by external funding mechanisms. In Colombia, for example, one women's rights organisation member warned, "*The outside world, they do not see ongoing violence in Colombia as a 'humanitarian conflict' and therefore responses do not cross through the Nexus. This means a lot of root causes of the conflict are never addressed, and we have to address these.*"

Efforts to build sustainable peace also depend on fostering community cohesion and bridging the gaps imposed by external funding and systemic neglect. In Uganda, women have organised mediation initiatives to support group members experiencing conflicts within their households or communities. They emphasise the need to share challenges, devise solutions, and support each other through grassroots structures, such as a village saving and loan association that meets regularly to pool resources, provide loans, and support individual members during crises. As one leader from Northern Uganda noted, "*We support each other through mediation initiatives for group members who are having conflicts with the community or within their household. We continue to meet to share our challenges and devise solutions to cope with the pressure and stress of life.*" As they work tirelessly on the ground, local women stress that external funders and international agencies offer only short-term project-based support that fails to reflect the complexity of their needs. One participant shared the common experience that "*Every year, we receive invitations from international funds to submit proposals, but we are never successful [...] It feels like we are being fooled – our ideas get taken for free. The organisations we know that are actually implementing projects never get the funding, while those who do get funded end up subcontracting local partners.*"

Together, these narratives underscore a common truth: women-led initiatives are at the forefront of redefining and rebuilding their communities.

Together, these narratives underscore a common truth: women-led initiatives are at the forefront of redefining and rebuilding their communities. Whether it is through innovative economic initiatives, the recalibration of what constitutes safety in an insecure world, or the persistent struggle against tokenistic engagement by external actors, local women and youth are not only responding to the immediate effects of conflict but are actively shaping a sustainable, inclusive path to peace. Their efforts, rooted in local knowledge and amplified by collective action, form the backbone of long-lasting change, even as they confront tremendous challenges.

Focus group with the Social Foundation for Wellbeing and Sustainable Integral Development – Vida Digna. Buenaventura, Colombia, January 24, 2024.

1 Humanitarian response

WROs in Ethiopia deliver humanitarian aid to communities across the country, including areas that are inaccessible to INGOs. This support includes cash assistance, hygiene kits, food, and GBV support in displacement settings.

2 Ancestral practices as a source of resilience

Through healing circles ‘quilombos’ and the restoring the role of community ‘comadres’, Afro-Colombian women use ancestral knowledge to recover, rebuild and heal. Economic alternatives like women-processed cocoa are an alternative to illicit crops and a symbol of dignity and reconstruction.

3 Sisterhood and feminist solidarity

In Myanmar, WLOs have adopted a powerful form of feminist solidarity through a ‘sisterhood approach’ to amplify women’s voices while protecting anonymity in militarised and high-risk environments. Their collective voice resists ongoing oppression and acts as a trusted bridge between communities and donors.

4 Innovative peace-building activities

WROs and WLOs in Colombia have been recognised nationally and internationally for being the "best conciliators in equity” due to their traditional, nonviolent approaches to conflict resolution – most notably for defusing tensions between two youth groups through dialogue, family participation, and including respected local figures.

5 Women's land rights and access to justice

Women and youth groups in Uganda have fought to gain increased access and control over land. Mobile legal aid clinics and community mediation have supported women to apply for land and receive customary land documentation.

6 Inter-generational work through artistic expression

Young women in youth-focused peace and security groups in Ethiopia have adopted innovative approaches to reconciliation. Rather than relying solely on traditional tools like pamphlets and workshops, they bridge the gap between generations and use creative methods such as drama and other forms of artistic expression.

7 Women as peacebuilders and mediators

In Uganda, WLOs have mobilised grassroots participation in peace negotiations, led peace demonstrations that prompted temporary ceasefires, and coordinated a cross-border 'peace caravan' through DRC, Kenya, and Uganda to rally support for the Juba peace talks. Today, they continue today to mediate local disputes, foster social cohesion, and use traditional rituals for reconciliation.

8 Social media and tech as tools for resilience

WLOs in Myanmar use social media platforms, shared devices and virtual private servers to organise, raise awareness, document violations, conduct feminist peacebuilding training, and support women-run online businesses, even in blackout zones.

4.1 Stories of Change

These stories illustrate that while the global policy frameworks often emphasise technical solutions, it is the grounded, collective work of WROs that is sustaining communities and pushing for lasting peace. Across all four countries, women are not only coping with the aftermath of conflict but are reimagining justice and rebuilding systems of care, solidarity, and resistance.

These are not acts of resilience alone, they are bold political interventions. These movements do not ask for permission; they demand recognition, funding, and the redistribution of power. Their work challenges colonial models of humanitarianism, calling instead for a feminist peace rooted in autonomy, justice, and dignity. If global actors are serious about Women, Peace and Security, they must move beyond tokenism and fund these movements directly, flexibly, and long-term.

4.2 Decolonising humanitarian and peacebuilding systems

> **We work for the people. The international community works for the system."**
>
> **Women leader, Myanmar**

Across all four contexts, Colombia, Ethiopia, Myanmar, and Uganda, WROs and WLOs are calling not only for recognition and resources, but f or a radical shift in how humanitarian, peacebuilding, and development systems are designed and delivered. The message is clear: current models remain rooted in colonial power dynamics that marginalise local expertise, instrumentalise women's participation, and reproduce the very inequalities they claim to address.

Respondents from Uganda noted that they are not seen as equal partners by international organisations but are instead perceived as "victims of war". This is despite the significant progress

© Photographer: Tekom Gebrekorkos

Dignity kit distribution in Tigray. Women are leading ActionAid's emergency response in Ethiopia's Tigray region where communities are facing severe food shortages, conflict and widespread violence against women and girls.

Young Myanmar woman stares out at the Irawaddy River, Myanmar.

© Photographer: AAM Photobank

made by women's rights and women-led organisations in navigating the end of the war, stopping the abduction of children, helping rehabilitate survivors of war, and encouraging fighters to return to their communities.

Yet too often, international agencies maintain control over funding, agendas, and decision-making spaces. WROs in Uganda spoke of being "*used for stories but not supported*," while in Myanmar, many described donor consultations as tokenistic: "*We are invited, but the decisions are already made.*" Others shared that INGO policies blocked them from responding to urgent local needs, refusing, for example, to allow humanitarian kits to be adjusted based on different contexts, even when some items were unavailable or unnecessary. These rigid systems not only waste resources but undermine local leadership and responsiveness.

Decolonisation in this context is not a metaphor: it is a lived, urgent necessity. It means shifting power from international institutions to communities directly affected by conflict. It means valuing ancestral practices, collective knowledge, and non-Western forms of healing and justice. In Colombia, women are reclaiming Afro-descendant and Indigenous healing traditions not just as cultural heritage, but as tools of resistance and resilience. In Myanmar, WROs have rejected donor frameworks that force them to dilute their priorities, instead pioneering feminist emergency funds that are cash-based, flexible and reflect the communities' needs.

Decolonial humanitarian action means moving beyond militarised, top-down definitions of peace and toward a feminist, rights-based vision of human security. It demands that we ask not only whether fighting has stopped, but whose safety is being secured, whose insecurity is being normalised, and who gets to define the terms and priorities of peace.

5 Conclusion and recommendations

Despite global commitments under the WPS agenda, WROs are still too often excluded from negotiations, political settlements, and security decision-making, or included in ways that are symbolic rather than influential. When women's participation is tokenistic, peace processes tend to prioritise elite power-sharing and short-term stabilisation, while ignoring the structural drivers they confront daily: impunity for GBV, unequal access to justice and land, collapse of public services, economic exclusion, and entrenched patriarchal norms. This results in peace agreements that ignore gender-based violence, access to healthcare, land tenure, education, or the safety of displaced women.

For women leaders, reframing whose peace matters means moving beyond narrow definitions of security towards a rights-based conception of justice. This requires stronger alignment between the WPS agenda, humanitarian action, and justice efforts, recognising that protection, assistance, and accountability are mutually reinforcing and should not be pursued in isolation. Instead, conversations on the WPS agenda must be judged by whether women and girls can live free from violence, move safely, access health and justice, sustain dignified livelihoods, and participate meaningfully in decisions that shape their futures.

Women's movements are central to this shift. Their organising, advocacy, and service delivery sustain communities during crisis and shape pathways to peace and recovery. This research has indicated that recognising their role requires creating space for women's voices and stories to inform analysis, priorities, and definitions of success, and resourcing their activities over the long term. It also means protecting women human rights defenders and valuing community-led knowledge as essential evidence for policy and programming, not as an optional add-on.

© Photographer: Hailu Nurga

Capacity building training participant in Guna, Amhara region, Ethiopia: "By building my capacity, ActionAid protected my life and family"

Recommendations for international organisations and civil society:

1 Participation: The international community should actively engage with WROs and youth-led organisations. INGOs can enable these organisations to undertake peacebuilding work effectively within their local contexts by choosing to:

- Strengthen the participation of WROs in conflict resolution, peacebuilding activities, and decision-making processes by providing the necessary resources, training, and skills, and by ensuring their meaningful inclusion in policy design and implementation at local, national, and international levels.
- Advocate for the inclusion of women and WROs in decision-making structures and facilitate more opportunities for their participation in global spaces.

2 Protection: INGOs should ensure women's protection is meaningfully included in programme design, including by choosing to:

- Undertake conflict analysis and risk assessments for every programme, which must be updated regularly to account for volatile situations.
- Consider and mitigate the risk of gender-based violence, including partner violence, and early or forced marriage in all programme cycles.
- Adopt a survivor-centred approach in conflict sensitivity and participate in frequent gender transformative conflict sensitivity training.

Support the safety and security of WRO participants by undertaking frequent risk analysis to mitigate against and respond to potential risks and provide greater flexibility on partnership approaches.

3 Gender Transformative Programming: INGOs should recognise the gendered impacts of the conflict, and put in place gender-transformative responses, in order to meaningfully support peacebuilding and any long-term resilience programming. This can implemented by:

- Designing post-conflict transitional justice interventions, in collaboration and coordination with with WROs, WLOs and communities, to ensure their needs are represented.

4 Advocacy and information sharing: To support in strengthening WROs' advocacy and information sharing, INGOs should:

- Facilitate learning exchanges for WROs at local, regional, and international levels to promote peer-to-peer learning and replicate good practice from countries that have successfully recovered from post conflict.
- Share information with WROs in an accurate and timely manner during humanitarian response and peacebuilding activities.
- Expand peace and security language to incorporate the perspectives of WROs and indigenous women in policy and advocacy.
- Invest in feminist, community-led research and data collection to inform policy and advocacy.

5 Prevention: Conflict prevention must be given significant attention by actors at all levels to mitigate conflicts before they escalate, reducing the need for extensive post-conflict recovery measures. This can be achieved by:

- Increasing involvement of local women's rights and women-led organisations, and youth groups, in conflict prevention to enable them to identify and report potential conflict triggers and risks earlier and support with conflict mediations.

Recommendations for donors and international governments:

1 Accessible peacebuilding resources:

To enable the participation of women and youths in peace processes, donors and international governments should:

• Support the development of accessible peacebuilding resources including by funding the creation of translated materials, infographics and pamphlets to remove barriers such as language or literacy.

2 Funding modalities: To ensure peacebuilding programmes are comprehensive and have a lasting impact on the community, donors should:

• Provide long-term, multi-year and flexible funding which can be adapted to the needs of the most affected communities, and allow for different mechanisms for funding streams, e.g. providing cash rather than bank transfers.

• Set up in-country advisory meetings with WROs and WLOs to understand which funding mechanisms work best.

• Invest in national-level funding mechanisms for WPS advancement and ensure the funding mechanisms include women, young people and civil society organisations as key decision makers.

3 Capacity strengthening opportunities: Donors should invest in initiatives that strengthen women's capacity including:

• Training in case management and psychological support for leaders of survivor-led groups who are providing informal care to survivors.

• Work in post-conflict settings which support women to exercise and defend land and property rights.

• Leadership training for women on the frontline to enable them to engage in advocacy spaces and contribute to decision-making processes.

4 Advocacy: Donors and international governments should invest in initiatives that strengthen WROs' advocacy including:

• Providing funding dedicated to the support of WROs'.

• Hosting funding dialogues and safe conversations at local, national and regional levels that include WROs.

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