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Confronting the Exclusion of Women in Ethiopia's Peace Processes

A Background Paper

Acknowledgments

This background paper is part of the *Breaking Barriers, Making Peace* project, led by the European Institute of Peace with support from the German Federal Foreign Office. It examines the intersection of gender and conflict in Ethiopia, with a focus on how and where women have been leading on and meaningfully participated in peacebuilding efforts. The findings highlight the persistent barriers that undermine women's participation and set out concrete actions to enhance their role in conflict prevention and peace processes. The findings highlight the persistent barriers that undermine women's participation and set out concrete actions to enhance their role in conflict prevention and peace processes. These insights contribute to the *"*Status Quo or Bold Adaptation? Reclaiming the Women, Peace and Security Agenda*"* report, which aims to advance the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda globally by equipping policymakers and practitioners with evidence-based recommendations on how to promote women's meaningful participation, including in evolving areas such as environmental peacebuilding.

This background paper is accompanied by two others entitled "Navigating Barriers To Women's Participation in Policy Spaces Intersecting with Environmental Peacebuilding in Myanmar" and "Reclaiming the WPS Agenda in Sudan". The papers have informed the findings in the global report and a policy brief under the same title. The findings from the global report are also backed by references included in a practitioner-friendly compendium of resources.

The timing is significant, as the international community approaches the 25th anniversary of the formal WPS agenda. This milestone invites reflection and renewed commitment. The global report, compendium and background papers, underscore the critical importance of grounding international policy in the lived experiences, knowledge and innovations emerging from women peacebuilders on the ground. It will help shape more responsive and effective WPS approaches in the years to come.

The Institute extends sincere gratitude to the research participants who, despite the risks involved, generously agreed to be interviewed. Their contributions were essential to the study and are deeply valued.

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1. Introduction

This background report is part of the European Institute of Peace's Breaking Barriers, Making Peace project. Ethiopia stands at a critical juncture – torn between a legacy of violent political transitions and the fragile hope for inclusive peace. While recent reforms have kindled aspirations for democratic renewal, they also expose deep-seated fractures within the state, unleashing a wave of overlapping conflicts that continue to devastate lives and erode social cohesion.[1] Women and girls – who bear the brunt of displacement, sexual violence and economic collapse – have been both frontline responders and invisible casualties in this crisis. Yet their leadership in peacebuilding remains undervalued, unsupported and structurally sidelined. This report argues that Ethiopia must include women in order to forge a path to sustainable peace. It calls for a reimagining of peace processes that centre women not as *beneficiaries* of peace, but as architects of its design, strategy and delivery.

Political tensions between Ethiopia's federal and regional elites have escalated into large-scale armed conflict in several regions, most notably in Tigray, Oromia and Amhara. The war in northern Ethiopia between the federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) was triggered by a breakdown in trust over federalism, power sharing and military control. While the exact number of casualties caused by the conflict is unknown due to an intense blockade against media and aid agencies,[2] the civilian death toll is estimated at 600,000.[3] Both parties to the conflict have been accused of committing war crimes and crimes against humanity.[4]

In the centre of the country, the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) is engaged in a protracted insurgency rooted in long-standing grievances related to political marginalisation and demands for regional autonomy.[5] In the Amhara region, Fano militias – armed nationalist youth groups – have mobilised in response to perceived threats to their regional identity, territorial integrity and the dismantling of regional security forces.[6] These overlapping conflicts have triggered extensive civilian casualties, displacement and widespread economic disruption.[7]

At the time of writing, Ethiopia is facing a severe humanitarian crisis: over 20 million people are in need of assistance due to ongoing conflicts, climate-induced disasters and significant funding shortfalls.[8] In 2024, humanitarian operations reached approximately 11.4 million people, yet the gap between needs and aid delivery remains wide.[9] The country also hosts over 1 million refugees and more than 4.5 million internally displaced persons who face acute food insecurity, primarily as a result of violence in Tigray, Oromia and Amhara, as well as climatic shocks.[10]

The conflicts in Ethiopia have disproportionately affected women and girls, manifesting in widespread sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), displacement and the collapse of essential services. During the 2-year war in the Tigray, Amhara, Afar and Oromia regions, an estimated 40–50 per cent of women and girls experienced SGBV; over 90 per cent of these cases involved underage girls.[11] The number of people in need of GBV services across the country increased from 3.5 million in 2021 to 5.8 million in 2022.[12] The destruction of healthcare infrastructure has further exacerbated the crisis; in Tigray, the HIV prevalence rate in Tigray has more than doubled to 3 per cent; rates among displaced populations and sexual violence survivors are even higher.[13]

This research seeks to: (1) uncover the barriers affecting women's meaningful participation in conflict prevention, peace processes and environmental issues in Ethiopia and (2) identify strategies or promising practices that have been used to overcome these barriers and enhance women's meaningful participation. The report builds on significant prior analysis (predominantly conducted by local women's rights organisations) and assesses the current position of women in the country's political and peacebuilding spaces.

1.1 Summary of Key Findings

The research identified four interrelated barriers to women's meaningful participation in peacebuilding and conflict resolution in Ethiopia and offers targeted strategies to overcome them. Ethiopia's political fragility, economic constraints and entrenched gender norms shape each barrier, and must be addressed through coordinated legal, financial and community-led interventions.

- **BARRIER 1: Insecurity and shrinking civic space**
  Enhance protection mechanisms for women peacebuilders operating in conflict-affected areas through relocation support, digital safety tools and early warning systems. Promote inclusive peace tables that do not rely on militarised logics of negotiation. Prioritise local legitimacy over elite or armed representation and ensure women's access to safe civic platforms for engagement.

- **BARRIER 2: Policy inertia and lack of accountability**
  Accelerate the adoption of Ethiopia's revised National Gender Policy and the National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS). Embed gender quotas into electoral and peace governance frameworks and hold institutions accountable for their implementation. Support women-led civil society organisations (CSOs) to play oversight roles and establish legal mandates for WPS commitments across federal and regional governance systems.

- **BARRIER 3: Financial barriers and economic exclusion**
  Expand women's access to core and flexible funding, vocational training and income-generating opportunities linked to peacebuilding. Provide stipends, childcare and logistical support to enable grassroots women to engage in dialogue processes. Ensure donor strategies align with humanitarian–development–peace principles and support women-led organisations through sustained, trust-based partnerships.

- **BARRIER 4: Restrictive gender norms and social stigma**
  Challenge entrenched patriarchal beliefs that exclude women from traditional and formal peace processes. Invest in community-level sensitisation campaigns, gender-transformative education and cross-generational dialogue to elevate women's leadership. Promote locally embedded feminist organising that leverages existing social structures – including religious and customary systems – to shift norms.

1.2 Report Structure

This report examines the intersection of gender and conflict in Ethiopia (Section 2) with a focus on how and where women have been able to meaningfully participate that emerged through consultations with relevant Ethiopian stakeholders. The findings seek to detail the barriers that derail women's participation and set out clear actions to address these (Section 3). These barriers include recommendations detailing actions that could be taken to enhance women's meaningful participation in conflict prevention and peace processes in Ethiopia. The Annex describes the methodology.

2. Background

In response to these crises, CSOs have initiated peacebuilding interventions, including the creation of dialogue platforms that seek to resolve entrenched grievances and facilitate conflict transformation. The Ethiopian government has adopted two complementary strategies: the National Dialogue process and direct negotiations with armed groups. The National Dialogue is designed to address the structural drivers of conflict, while the negotiations focus on reaching political settlements with active insurgent movements. To lead this process, the government established the National Dialogue Commission on 13 January 2022, comprising 11 commissioners – only three of whom are women.[14] In parallel, the government has engaged in formal negotiations with the TPLF and factions of the Oromo Liberation Front.

Women have long been key actors in Ethiopia's political transitions, yet their leadership and peacebuilding roles have rarely yielded sustained political empowerment. From the 1974 revolution to the 1991 regime change and the 2018 reforms, women have participated in both peaceful protest and armed resistance. Their mobilisation – through grassroots activism, formal organisations and liberation movements – has often shaped political outcomes, even as they remain underrepresented in decision-making spaces.[15]

The 2018 reforms under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed marked a turning point in women's political representation. His administration introduced a gender-equal cabinet, appointed Ethiopia's first female president, and placed women at the helm of the Supreme Court and the National Election Board.[16] These symbolic milestones generated hope for a gender-transformative political order. In a 2019 national peace conference, female leaders affirmed their shared commitment to peace and called for mentorship, coordination and solidarity to amplify women's voices.[17] In some areas, such as Somali Regional State, appointing women to leadership roles has shifted societal attitudes, opening space for local dialogues and challenging long-held gender norms.[18] However, meaningful progress will depend on sustained political will, inclusive peace processes and women's full participation in governance beyond representation.

Although Ethiopia's conflicts have disproportionately affected women, the WPS agenda remains marginal in formal peace processes. For example, no women were included as principal negotiators or mediators in the process leading to the Pretoria Agreement in November 2022 that ended the Tigray conflict.[19] Similarly, grassroots women's organisations – many of which have long histories of advancing community-based peacebuilding – have largely been excluded from formal consultations and agenda setting.[20] Subsequent negotiations between the federal government and the OLA in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania in April and November 2023 also lacked female representation. Prior to the second round, women peacebuilders from Oromia and across the country publicly called for inclusion, highlighting the gendered impacts of the conflict – displacement, sexual violence and insecurity – but were again left out of the process.[21] The January 2024 regional peace deal between the President of Oromia and a former OLA commander again involved no women.[22]

Ethiopia is a signatory to UNSC Resolution 1325 and has committed to implementing the WPS agenda. However, its institutional frameworks remain inadequate. The current legislation lacks provisions to address the gendered impacts of conflict, ensure women's participation in peace processes, or guarantee protection in humanitarian and post-conflict settings.[23] UN Women and Ethiopia's Ministry of Women and Social Affairs have led efforts to develop a NAP on WPS since 2019, but implementation remains limited.[24]

Women in Ethiopia have consistently contributed to peace and security – as organisers, peacekeepers and negotiators. Yet patriarchal norms and institutional barriers continue to marginalise their voices. Without urgent reform to ensure women's inclusion, peace processes risk being neither representative nor sustainable. Their exclusion also ignores women's needs and capacity to contribute meaningfully to conflict resolution and recovery. Integrating the WPS agenda into Ethiopia's national and subnational peace processes is not only a matter of justice: it is a strategic imperative for inclusive peacebuilding.

3. Findings: Barriers that Derail Women's Meaningful Participation and Actions to Address Them

Despite notable progress in women's political representation in Ethiopia, a complex web of political, security and policy-related barriers continues to hinder women's meaningful participation in peace processes. The interplay between active armed conflicts, mistrust in state institutions, gender-blind policies and shrinking civic space has created a hostile environment for women peacebuilders. Without legal protections, inclusive policies or safe operating conditions, women's contributions to peace and reconciliation remain limited, undervalued and often sidelined. This section explores how these structural challenges intersect and identifies urgent gaps that must be addressed to advance the country's WPS agenda.

- BARRIER 1: Insecurity and shrinking civic space
- BARRIER 2: Policy inertia and lack of accountability
- BARRIER 3: Financial barriers and economic exclusion
- BARRIER 4: Restrictive gender norms and social stigma

3.1 BARRIER 1: Insecurity and shrinking civic space

The politicisation of ethnicity, the proliferation of armed actors and declining state legitimacy are shrinking the civic space for women peacebuilders in Ethiopia. Since the onset of overlapping conflicts – including the Tigray War, insurgency in Oromia and unrest in Amhara – political life has become increasingly militarised. The rise of non-state armed groups, the state's weakened monopoly on violence, and growing distrust between citizens and the government have created an environment of insecurity and fear.[25]

Political engagement is no longer considered a civic responsibility but a risky and often dangerous act, especially for women.[26] Women peacebuilders, whether working independently or within CSOs, are frequently mischaracterised as political agents rather than facilitators of reconciliation.[27] This suspicion is magnified in ethnically polarised regions, where an individual's identity often overshadows their credentials.[28] A peacebuilder from Oromia described this challenge: "Whenever I begin any peacebuilding activity, including conflict resolution, people immediately suspect that I have a political agenda. It's easier to build trust with non-Oromos, but with Oromos, it's more difficult. People don't accept you for who you are as a professional; instead, they focus on your background and start to question your intentions."[29]

Suspicion of foreign funding and growing restrictions on civic space further constrain women's political participation. Tensions between the Ethiopian government and some Western governments, especially over issues such as human rights, media freedom and civil society, have narrowed the operating space for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and peacebuilding actors.[30] Women-led organisations that work on rights-based issues or receive international support are often viewed with suspicion. This leads to increased scrutiny, limited access to decision-making spaces and – in some cases – operational restrictions or backlash from local authorities.[31] In many conflict-affected areas, these dynamics push women peacebuilders to operate without institutional support or protections, relying instead on informal networks and personal credibility.

Pervasive insecurity, particularly in conflict zones, has intensified the risks for women peacebuilders. Armed actors continue to control large swathes of territory in parts of Oromia, Amhara and Tigray, and often operate with impunity. This insecurity disproportionately impacts women. Many women peacebuilders have been harassed, threatened or forced to flee their communities due to their activism.[32] The absence of protective infrastructure – legal, institutional or financial – renders their work both precarious and invisible. While male leaders can often navigate armed landscapes through negotiating or forming alliances, women are more likely to be excluded, targeted or coerced into silence. Some women peacebuilders have been subjected to sexual violence or threats against their families in an attempt to dissuade their civic engagement. Others have reported being accused of espionage or politically motivated sabotage simply for convening dialogue across community lines.[33] As a result, women's presence in local peace processes has become more fragmented, inconsistent, and heavily dependent on personal networks for protection and legitimacy.

Actions to address and overcome this barrier

1. **Establish decentralised women-led protection networks.** Where formal security guarantees are weak or absent, community-based protection mechanisms offer a viable alternative. Drawing on successful models from South Sudan and northern Nigeria, Ethiopian women's rights organisations – particularly in Oromia, Amhara and Tigray – should be supported to establish women-led early warning and protection committees. These groups can monitor emerging threats, share real-time security updates via encrypted channels, and coordinate safe evacuation plans. Partnerships with local elders and religious leaders can bolster the groups' legitimacy and uptake. International donors and international NGOs (INGOs) should provide discreet, flexible funding for these networks, with a focus on protective accompaniment, trauma support and secure mobility.

2. **Embed flexible security support into peacebuilding funds.** Peacebuilding grants should include budget lines for protective services (e.g., relocation, legal aid, digital security training, temporary safehouses). These measures must be co-designed with women peacebuilders and tailored to local hazards, including sexual violence and reputational attacks. To overcome the risks of political suspicion or targeting, funds should be channelled via trusted local CSOs or consortia that are well networked and accepted in target areas.

3. **Strengthen legal frameworks and mechanisms to respond to targeted violence.** A critical gap in Ethiopia's WPS landscape is the lack of tailored legal protections for women facing political or conflict-related violence. For example, ombudsperson-style mechanisms or independent protection focal points could be established for women peacebuilders at the federal and regional levels. These bodies, led by women, can document violations, liaise with justice institutions and advocate for accountability. They should be accompanied by strong political will to investigate threats against women peace actors, particularly in remote or militarised areas.

4. **Engage non-state armed actors on WPS commitments through quiet diplomacy.** Given the role of non-state armed groups in controlling territory and shaping local governance in Ethiopia, discreet engagement on WPS norms is essential. Drawing on the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs' engagement strategies and Geneva Call's Deed of Commitment framework, donors and CSOs should engage non-state actors in dialogue on the protection and participation of women in peace processes. Framing these conversations around local values (e.g., honour, community well-being) rather than external mandates can reduce resistance. Women peacebuilders should help design these engagements, and men in these armed groups should be included as potential allies.

3.2 BARRIER 2: Policy inertia and lack of accountability

Outdated gender policies and the absence of enforceable legal commitments continue to obstruct women's political inclusion and leadership in Ethiopia. Despite repeated national and international commitments to gender equality, Ethiopia's 1993 National Gender Policy remains outdated and largely unimplemented. Although a revised draft was prepared to align with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action, and UNSCR 1325, it has yet to be enacted into law.[34] The policy's stagnation has resulted in the fragmented implementation of gender mainstreaming and made gender equality dependent on political will rather than binding legal obligations.

This legal vacuum has helped reduce women's representation in leadership roles. The gains achieved during the 2018 political reform period, such as the appointment of a gender-balanced cabinet and high-level female leaders, have been reversed without consequence. The 30 per cent political representation quota for women is inconsistently applied, and there is no legal mechanism to enforce it at the national or subnational level. Respondents underscored that without enforcement mechanisms, women's political inclusion is merely symbolic.[35] The Ministry of Women and Social Affairs remains significantly underfunded, and lacks sufficient political clout to drive accountability or monitor cross-sectoral compliance with gender commitments.

The absence of a ratified NAP on WPS further limits Ethiopia's ability to deliver on UNSCR 1325. Although the government expressed its intention to develop a NAP in 2019 and UN Women and the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs began leading consultations in 2020, the process has stalled.[36] Without a formalised NAP, women's participation in peace processes remains ad hoc and often externally driven. As several interviewees noted, this gap inhibits women-led CSOs from accessing peacebuilding funds, engaging in ceasefire monitoring and contributing to transitional justice mechanisms.

Despite these challenges, women's organisations have taken the lead in demanding legal reform and institutional accountability. The Network of Ethiopian Women's Associations and the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association have been instrumental in developing shadow reports, hosting national consultations and lobbying policymakers to revitalise gender frameworks. Their persistent advocacy has pushed the draft gender policy closer to adoption and kept the WPS agenda on the national radar. Regional women's organisations and legal experts have worked in parallel to localise WPS principles by proposing subnational action plans and monitoring tools tailored to Ethiopia's federal structure.[37] However, entrenched political resistance, limited financial support and bureaucratic inertia have hampered their progress. Since it has not formally adopted the gender policy or NAP, Ethiopia remains without a structured, state-led framework to advance women's participation in peace and security governance.

If passed and implemented, these policy instruments could significantly enhance institutional accountability and catalyse broader cultural and political transformation. Their adoption would provide a legal basis for enforcing quotas, safeguarding women's leadership roles, securing resources for peacebuilding, and embedding WPS across federal, regional and community systems. Until then, women's participation will continue to rely on ad hoc political opportunities – leaving progress vulnerable to reversal.

Actions to address and overcome this barrier

1. **Finalise and enact the revised National Gender Policy and WPS NAP.** This would establish a clear, enforceable legal framework that aligns with UNSCR 1325 and CEDAW. This should include binding mechanisms to hold institutions accountable for implementation, resource allocation, and monitoring of gender commitments at the national and regional levels. Ethiopia can learn from the experience of other African countries like Kenya and Nigeria, which use NAPs to mainstream gender across the peacebuilding and security sectors.

2. **Legally institutionalise gender quotas and leadership targets.** Transform existing voluntary or symbolic gender quotas into enforceable legal provisions that guarantee a minimum of 30–50 per cent women's representation across all decision-making bodies. These should apply to peace negotiations, transitional governance bodies, and federal and regional parliaments. Legal mechanisms should include penalties or incentives to ensure compliance. Rwanda's constitutional quota system provides a successful regional model for anchoring women's political participation in the law.

3. **Increase and ring-fence gender-responsive funding.** Ensure that the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs and other gender-focused agencies receive increased, dedicated funding to implement the gender policy and WPS NAP. Funding should be earmarked for decentralised activities, including subnational WPS action plans, gender budgeting and capacity building for regional gender directorates. Donors should also provide multi-year, flexible funding directly to women-led CSOs engaged in peace and governance.

4. **Establish inclusive, permanent multi-stakeholder accountability mechanisms.** Create independent, multi-stakeholder coordination platforms that include government ministries, women's rights organisations, legal experts and regional representatives to oversee the implementation of the gender policy and NAP. These platforms should monitor compliance, collect gender-disaggregated data, issue public progress reports and recommend course corrections. Such mechanisms can increase transparency and reduce political inertia while institutionalising the role of civil society in WPS governance.

3.3 BARRIER 3: Financial barriers and economic exclusion

Women's lack of financial independence and structural economic exclusion severely limits their ability to participate in peacebuilding across Ethiopia. These barriers affect women at all levels – from grassroots peace actors struggling to make ends meet, to civil society practitioners attempting to influence post-conflict recovery and national dialogue.[38] If the economic constraints that shape women's access to peace platforms are not addressed, their participation will remain limited, symbolic or unsustainable.

The northern conflict has forced many women – particularly in Tigray, Amhara and Afar – to become primary breadwinners amidst widespread displacement, loss of male household members and destruction of local economies. In Wollo, women have been left to shoulder the economic fallout of ongoing conflict between government forces and armed actors. With livelihoods disrupted and markets fractured, women face compounding burdens – sustaining their households while navigating threats of displacement, violence and extortion.[39] As one Tigrayan respondent shared, "For war survivors, especially women who have lost spouses, the focus is on survival. These women are often left to head their families and provide for them. Asking them to participate in peacebuilding efforts is seen as a luxury when basic needs, like food and shelter, are not yet secured."[40] While national peacebuilding actors have acknowledged the gendered impacts of the war, few have integrated economic recovery support to enable women's leadership in post-conflict processes.

In regions like Oromia and Somali, economic insecurity combines with patriarchal norms to exclude women from local peace efforts. Women's unpaid care burdens often limit their availability for training, consultations or dialogue forums. One participant noted, "During a training session in southeastern Oromia, despite being a full-day event, many women could only attend for half the day because they had to prepare local alcohol to sustain themselves and pick up their kids from volunteers watching them while they were out."[41] The inability to afford transport, childcare or time away from income-generating activities effectively excludes women from sustained engagement in peace processes. In Somali region, even if local governments invite women to contribute to peace initiatives, their economic dependence on male relatives (coupled with the absence of supportive mechanisms such as transport stipends or flexible participation formats) restricts their involvement.[42]

Women-led peacebuilding organisations, particularly those operating in rural or underserved areas, remain structurally underfunded. According to a peacebuilder in Oromia, "On one hand, the concept of peacebuilding is new at the grassroots level. To effectively reach this level, adequate resources are necessary. However, due to funding limitations, practitioners in the region are not receiving enough training that could help them gain scientific approaches and methods to address conflicts in the region."[43] Donors routinely overlook emerging actors with deep community networks and contextual knowledge in favour of larger (often urban-based) NGOs.

Few women's organisations receive multi-year, core support that would allow them to sustain engagement in the longer-term peace architecture, such as national dialogue structures or ceasefire monitoring bodies. While global WPS frameworks call for the localisation of funding and support to women peacebuilders, access to such funding remains highly centralised, bureaucratically cumbersome and shaped by donors' risk aversion rather than contextual need.

Without systemic attention to economic barriers, women will continue to be excluded from Ethiopia's evolving peace and security architecture – not because of a lack of interest or leadership, but due to structural neglect. Targeted financial support, paired with gender-responsive peace financing frameworks, is urgently required to ensure that women shape Ethiopia's political future.

Box 1: Coffee for Peace – A Model of Gender-Inclusive Peacebuilding

The Bunna-le-Selam (Coffee for Peace) initiative is a women-led, grassroots movement designed and coordinated by the Network of Ethiopian Women's Associations (NEWA) and the Ethiopian Women Peacebuilders (EWPB) to address Ethiopia's gender gap in peacemaking and conflict prevention.

The initiative builds on Ethiopia's long-valued coffee ceremony tradition, which has historically provided spaces to discuss issues and resolve local disputes. Building on this cultural practice, women invite one another to share ideas and concerns over coffee. These community-level conversations create safe spaces for women to articulate their own peace and security interests and priorities in their local languages, making the process more impactful and less likely to be dismissed as "Western" or elite-driven.

Since its launch, the initiative has reached eight regions and 16 districts, convening dozens of community conversations and inter-regional dialogues among women from Sidama, Addis Ababa, Eastern Oromia, Somali, and border communities. These dialogues have enabled women to articulate peace agendas and identify and address local conflict triggers, including climate change, urban crime, political marginalisation, and poor governance and enabled direct engagement with local officials.

By fostering trust and harmony between different groups of women, challenging stereotypes, and empowering them to make recommendations to community councils and local governments, this forward-looking initiative has strengthened women's leadership and fostered a culture of peace and women's rights at both grassroots and national levels.

Actions to address and overcome this barrier

1. **Prioritise gender-responsive funding within the humanitarian–development–peace nexus.** Donors should include gender-sensitive economic recovery as a core objective of peacebuilding programming, particularly in regions where conflict has decimated livelihoods. This includes allocating ring-fenced funding within humanitarian–development–peace nexus frameworks for initiatives that simultaneously support women's income generation and civic participation. Tailored support packages should cover transport stipends, childcare and communication tools, ensuring women can participate in dialogue processes without sacrificing survival needs.

2. **Invest in women-led microenterprises and cooperative structures.** Economic empowerment initiatives must go beyond individual entrepreneurship and support collective models, such as women-led cooperatives, community savings groups and agricultural collectives. Donors and INGOs should partner with local CSOs to deliver context-appropriate training in financial literacy, vocational skills and market access, ensuring women gain both income and influence. Embedding civic engagement modules within these programmes strengthens women's ability to participate in peace forums, land reform efforts and local governance structures.

3. **Expand access to conflict-sensitive microfinance and climate-adaptive livelihoods.** Microfinance institutions and savings groups should be supported to extend services to conflict-affected women, particularly those who have been displaced or are the primary breadwinners. In places that lack access to conventional credit markets, mobile money platforms, rotating savings and loan associations, and cash-for-work schemes tailored to women can serve as transitional mechanisms. Prioritising climate-resilient livelihoods such as drought-resistant crops, clean energy or sustainable handicrafts allows women to build economic autonomy while contributing to local recovery and resilience.

4. **Provide long-term core support to women's peacebuilding organisations.** Donors must shift away from short-term, project-based funding and provide multi-year core support to women's organisations working on peace and economic justice. This includes flexible grants to cover institutional overheads, movement building, leadership development and advocacy. Funding should be delivered through trust-based partnerships with local CSOs that understand community dynamics. Where possible, participatory grant-making approaches should be adopted to ensure women define their own priorities, timelines and modes of engagement.

3.4 BARRIER 4: Restrictive gender norms and social stigma

Deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes continue to impede women's active participation in peacebuilding across Ethiopia. These norms, reinforced across generations, not only restrict women's roles to the private sphere but also diminish their visibility and influence in community leadership, public decision-making and conflict resolution. The impact is particularly acute in rural and conflict-affected areas, where cultural beliefs are tightly interwoven with traditional governance structures.[44]

In Wollo in the Amhara region, gendered expectations prescribe a rigid division of labour. Women are expected to assume domestic and caregiving responsibilities, while justice, leadership and dispute resolution are considered men's domain.[45] As an interviewee explained, **"Cultural expectations in the… community place women in care-giving roles for their households and children, making it nearly impossible for women to take on tasks that involve traveling or engaging in peacebuilding activities, even though Islam does not prohibit me from doing so".[46]** This deeply rooted norm excludes women from participating in traditional peace structures such as the Abagar – an elders' council that mediates local disputes. These councils are exclusively male spaces, reinforcing male dominance in community governance.[47]

Cultural proverbs and idioms continue to transmit and uphold gender hierarchies. In the Somali region, for instance, the saying **"A woman's scarf cannot cut a tree"** is used to belittle women's perceived power and efficacy.[48] Another proverb, **"The breast milk a baby girl consumes stays with her as milk, while the baby boy's milk nourishes his mind"**, signals an implicit belief in the intellectual superiority of men, disqualifying women from roles requiring leadership, judgment or strategy.[49] These idioms are not simply linguistic artifacts; they shape and legitimise structural barriers to women's participation in peacebuilding by constructing female agency as unnatural or transgressive.

In the Borana zone of Oromia, local norms dictate that credible peace processes require the sanction and involvement of male elders. Women's contributions, even when informally recognised, are not institutionalised or legitimised.[50] As a result, women who attempt to take on visible roles in mediation or negotiation are often subject to intense social scrutiny and even personal risk. A female peacebuilder from the Somali region described being shamed for sharing her lived experiences publicly. **"In Somali culture, women are expected to hide their problems like they hide their bodies with cloth,"** she said. **"Speaking openly was seen as exposing myself – I was called crazy and sinful."[51]**

Even where women have demonstrated political agency and have fought in active combat, their post-conflict roles are sidelined. In Tigray, thousands of women fought in the Northern Ethiopia war[52] but were not included in the peace negotiations or reconstruction processes. As one Tigrayan woman observed, **"It is normal for women to be freedom fighters and actively involved in war; a significant number of soldiers in Tigray are women, and they do not only provide food for the military but also directly participate in combat. However, when it comes to peacebuilding, women are often excluded from the peace table. This exclusion is driven by several factors. After the war, the focus shifted to issues of resources and power. Women often struggle to secure political positions or opportunities to participate in peace discussions. Men typically meet in informal settings, like bars late at night, where women are culturally prohibited from attending. This exclusion from decision-making spaces significantly limits their involvement in peace processes."[53]** As a result, formal and informal systems of exclusion reinforce one another, excluding nearly all women from key peacebuilding processes.

These exclusions are cultural as well as institutional. Women across regions report systemic failures to support their leadership. One peacebuilder from Oromia explained, **"There is a lack of acceptance when [a woman] participates in peacebuilding, despite proving her expertise in the field. The culture that marginalises women is indirectly reflected, systematically excluding them. As a woman, you don't receive opportunities or recognition, even with extensive experience in peacebuilding. The system does not support you, and the patriarchal structure is not limited to the government; it is pervasive everywhere. Priority is often given to men in peacebuilding and conflict resolution roles."**[54] These barriers are often compounded by limited access to financial resources, networks and platforms that enable women to organise, sustain their efforts and build legitimacy. The global WPS agenda highlights that meaningful inclusion entails more than symbolic participation: it requires transformative change in the social norms and power structures that marginalise women.

International actors, donors and Ethiopian institutions must confront the normative frameworks that devalue women's political capabilities. This includes reshaping peace processes to allow gender-inclusive design from the outset, supporting local women-led initiatives and amplifying the voices of women engaged in informal peacebuilding work. Without these shifts, Ethiopia's peace processes will remain incomplete – exclusionary in form, and fragile in outcome.

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Actions to address and overcome this barrier

1. **Create space to disrupt patriarchal norms.** Deeply entrenched beliefs about women's domestic roles, religiously justified exclusion and gendered expectations of silence must be actively challenged. Donors and CSOs should not shy away from disrupting gatekeeping norms, particularly where traditional and religious authorities define the boundaries of women's political agency. Programming must be designed to shift harmful narratives – for instance by funding cultural dialogue forums, supporting feminist religious reinterpretation or helping women participate visibility in peace processes. Engaging male allies, religious scholars and customary leaders in reflective practice can help catalyse change from within.

2. **Build long-term pathways for women's leadership in peacebuilding.** One-off trainings or tokenistic inclusion are not enough. Donors and national actors must invest in structured, long-term leadership development programmes that equip women with peacebuilding, mediation and negotiation skills, while building confidence and community legitimacy. This includes accompanying women into political and customary spaces, supporting tailored mentoring and coaching, and creating alternative leadership forums where women can practise and amplify their voices. Women peacebuilders in Ethiopia often begin with informal community dispute resolution. These entry points should be linked with formal mechanisms such as national dialogue structures, federal peace secretariats and regional reconciliation commissions. Ensuring women are not only included but consistently retained in decision-making spaces is critical to transformation.

3. **Localise public norm change campaigns with grassroots credibility.** Messaging to change gender norms must be locally grounded and contextually resonant. Communication strategies should incorporate local languages, idioms, religious symbolism and storytelling traditions that challenge discriminatory norms while championing women peacebuilders. Highlighting respected female elders, returning fighters, women mediators and interfaith leaders can normalise women's presence in political spaces and disrupt assumptions of male-only authority. These campaigns should also showcase men who support women's leadership to model positive deviance. Local CSOs, radio stations and youth networks should be supported to lead these efforts to ensure credibility, authenticity and reach.

4. **Institutionalise accountability for gender parity in traditional and formal peace structures.** Raising the bar for women's meaningful participation from 30 to 50 per cent must be paired with mechanisms that ensure *influence*, not just attendance. Quotas should extend to national and regional peace commissions, traditional conflict resolution councils (such as Abagar or Gadaa assemblies), and new transitional bodies emerging through national dialogue and negotiation processes. Donors and government bodies should co-create gender accountability frameworks that measure women's participation across all phases of peacebuilding – from agenda setting to resource allocation. Civil society can play a key role in monitoring implementation and holding actors accountable to the WPS agenda, while also pushing for inclusive reforms in law, policy and custom.

4. Conclusion

Women in Ethiopia have long served as agents of resilience, bridging divides, sustaining communities and advancing peace – often in the shadows of formal processes that overlook or marginalise their roles. While successive waves of political reform have promised greater inclusivity, women remain largely excluded from the spaces where peace is negotiated, decisions are made and power is distributed. Their exclusion is not incidental; it is structural – rooted in patriarchal norms, financial disempowerment, policy neglect and a security environment that punishes political engagement.

This report demonstrates that three interlocking barriers constrain meaningful women's participation in peacebuilding in Ethiopia: deep-rooted social norms that relegate women to the private sphere, economic hardship that limits their mobility and time, and political and institutional frameworks that either ignore or actively obstruct their inclusion. These are not new challenges. Yet they are made more acute by the country's current crisis: conflict-affected communities are now demanding a more just, representative and locally owned peace.

Despite these barriers, women across Ethiopia are not waiting for permission to lead. From coffee dialogues in Oromia to legal advocacy in Addis Ababa, they are creating alternative spaces for negotiation, fostering social cohesion and holding political actors accountable. Initiatives like Bunna-le-Selam, Let Us Talk, and grassroots mobilisation in Tigray and Somali regions provide compelling examples of inclusive peacebuilding. These efforts must be recognised not as ancillary, but as central to the nation's recovery.

To move beyond tokenism towards genuine inclusion, women must be supported not only as participants, but as architects of peace. This requires legal reform to enforce gender quotas, financial investment in women-led organisations, and gender-sensitive protection strategies that account for the risks women face as civic leaders in fragile settings. Ethiopia's WPS NAP must also be urgently finalised and implemented, and backed by political will, institutional funding and mechanisms for civil society oversight.

As Ethiopia navigates a complex and fragile transition, including women is not just a matter of equity; it is a precondition for sustainable peace. Elevating women's voices, experiences and leadership will enhance the legitimacy of peace processes and build the social foundations required to move the country from conflict to transformation.

Annex: Research Methodology

This study employed an exploratory research design to identify and understand effective practices for overcoming barriers to women's meaningful participation in peace processes. Given the complexity and limited prior research on this topic, this approach provided flexibility for in-depth investigation. A multiple-case study strategy was used to examine barriers and good practices across various initiatives in Ethiopia, focusing on the key actors and stakeholders involved. To ensure broader applicability, cases were selected from multi-ethnic regions with similar conflict contexts, including communal conflicts, regional separatist movements and comparable state-building politics. This provided a representative understanding of women's involvement in peace processes. The study adopted a qualitative approach, using document reviews, in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to gather detailed data. Document reviews analysed women-led peace initiatives in Ethiopia over the past 6 years, including key peace talks and national dialogue efforts. Data was discussed thematically.

Key Informant Interviews (KII) and FGDs were conducted to gather insights from a diverse sample in terms of gender, location, age, religion, ethnicity, rural/urban background and education level. FGDs included participants of different sexes to capture varied perspectives. The researchers leveraged their experience in peacebuilding and women's empowerment to involve CSOs, government officials and activists. Data collection focused on five regions: Tigray, Amhara, Oromia, Somali and Addis Ababa, which have experienced conflicts and peace processes in the past 5 years.

A total of 20 KIIs were conducted (6 men, 14 women), with 4 interviews per region, involving policymakers, NGO leaders, community leaders and peacebuilding experts. Two FGDs with a total of 19 participants (5 men, 14 women (including 2 with disabilities)) were held in Addis Ababa, featuring women activists, local community members and peacebuilding practitioners to capture diverse viewpoints.

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