

POLICY BRIEF

Status of Gender for Inclusive Peacebuilding in the East and Horn of Africa

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**American
Friends
Service
Committee**



Abbreviations

AFSC	American Friends Service Committee
AU	African Union
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
GPS	Gender, Peace and Security
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
PWDs	Persons with Disabilities
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
WPS	Women, Peace and Security
YPS	Youth, Peace and Security

Executive summary

Across the Horn of Africa, women and youth are increasingly recognized as vital actors in peacebuilding efforts. From community-level mediation to cross-border peace dialogues, their involvement has proven instrumental in fostering inclusive and sustainable peace. These efforts redefine how conflict resolution is approached, illustrating that genuine inclusion contributes to long-lasting peace outcomes.

Encouragingly, regional policies and frameworks are beginning to align with and support this growing recognition of inclusive peacebuilding approaches. Instruments such as the African Union's Continental Framework on Youth, Peace and Security, the IGAD Protocol on Women in Peace and Security, and national action plans on UNSCR 1325 have provided a supportive policy environment for the active participation of women and youth. These commitments reflect an increasing awareness among both regional and national actors that lasting peace is unattainable without including the perspectives, contributions, and leadership of these communities. Yet, despite notable progress, challenges remain in translating policy commitments into consistent, well-resourced action. Despite formal commitments to inclusion, cultural norms, patriarchal systems, and institutional biases continue to marginalize women, youth, persons with disabilities (PWDs), and displaced populations from peace processes and governance structures.

Despite comprising more than half of the region's population, women continue to be marginalized in official peace processes. Persistent gender inequalities manifested through exclusion, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and restricted access to political and economic opportunities continue to hinder effective peacebuilding in the region. Youth and PWDs face a compounded marginalization due to stigma, systemic inaccessibility, cultural norms, and a lack of targeted support mechanisms. Under such circumstances, it is important to increase opportunities for the inclusion of women, youth, and persons with disabilities in peacebuilding efforts. This entails advancing women's leadership, strengthening mentorship opportunities, and supporting capacity-building initiatives that align with the objectives of the UN's Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) and Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) frameworks, alongside the African Union's Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa.

I. Introduction

Gender inequality remains a persistent barrier to sustainable peace and development across the East and Horn of Africa. In a region frequently affected by conflict, displacement, and humanitarian crises, the lives of women, men, girls, and boys are significantly influenced by deep-rooted cultural traditions and unequal power structures. Women and girls are more vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence, economic exclusion, and are often left out of peacebuilding and decision-making efforts. Patriarchal norms restrict their leadership and participation, while limited access to education, resources, and protection mechanisms further entrench inequality.

Men and boys, especially youth, also experience unique vulnerabilities, including forced recruitment into non-state armed groups, trauma, and rigid expectations of masculinity that can perpetuate violence. Meanwhile, PWDs and displaced populations face compounded marginalization and are often excluded from informal and formal peacebuilding efforts.

Gender analysis is a critical tool for uncovering structural disparities and shaping peacebuilding efforts that are inclusive, responsive, and effective. In 2024, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) commissioned a gender analysis focused on exploring how issues of peace and security affect individuals differently based on gender across the East and Horn of Africa. The findings of this study revealed that despite comprising over half of the region's population, women remain significantly underrepresented in formal peace processes. For instance, in South Sudan's 2015 peace negotiations, women accounted for only 15% of participants. Deeply embedded gender stereotypes and patriarchal values frequently reduce women's roles to symbolic participation, positioning them as victims instead of proactive contributors to peacebuilding. Conflict situations intensify the vulnerability of women and girls to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), while also deepening their marginalisation from political and economic systems. They continue to face significant obstacles

in accessing leadership roles and participating in decision-making processes.

The study also highlighted that youth and persons with disabilities (PWDs) face compounded marginalization and are routinely excluded from formal peacebuilding frameworks. PWDs face structural discrimination, stigma, physical inaccessibility, and insecurity, which significantly hinder their participation. These intersecting forms of exclusion not only undermine the effectiveness of peace initiatives but also perpetuate existing inequalities. In addition, youth too often lack access to civic platforms, skills development opportunities, and resources that would allow them to meaningfully engage in peace processes. The study called for the integration of gender-sensitive and intersectional frameworks in the design, implementation, and evaluation of peace-building programs to ensure that all voices, especially those of marginalized groups, are reflected and valued in building sustainable peace.

Regional integration and human mobility is imperative, which can transform the region's socio-economic development by promoting trade and labor mobility. Integrated border management, such as One-Stop Border Posts (OSBPs), and digitalization of operations can also enable legal cross-border movement of people, goods, and services. More importantly, there is a need for emergency life-saving humanitarian aid, including shelter, clean water, food, medical supplies, and psychosocial support, to those affected by this crisis. In the long-term, there is a need for the U.S. Government to invest in sustainable development programs in the above-mentioned affected countries, focusing on access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities to build resilience within the communities. Supporting initiatives that promote peace, reconciliation, and conflict resolution to reduce the number of refugees and internally displaced persons is also paramount.

II. Reframing Peacebuilding through a Gender Lens

- ***Unequal Burdens: Gendered Impacts of Conflict and Instability***

Conflict and instability in the East and Horn of Africa affect women, men, girls, and boys differently, with each group experiencing unique and often unequal consequences shaped by gender. Women and girls are disproportionately affected by gender-based violence, economic exclusion, and forced displacement; they are subjected to exploitation as perpetrators' spouses, endure significant trauma, and are systematically marginalized from formal peacebuilding processes despite their critical roles in sustaining communities during crises. At the same time, men and boys face risks of coercive enlistment into armed groups, frequent exposure to violence, and psychological trauma. They also contend with rigid societal expectations that associate masculinity with dominance, emotional suppression, and aggression, thus limiting their ability to engage in nonviolent roles within peacebuilding efforts. Such conditions intensify inequality and fuel recurring conflicts, highlighting the necessity for inclusive and gender-aware peace-building strategies.

- ***Persistent Inequalities: Barriers to Participation in Peacebuilding***

Deeply rooted cultural norms and patriarchal systems across the East and Horn of Africa region continue to restrict women's representation and leadership in political, economic, and peacebuilding spaces. These gendered power imbalances are reinforced by widespread gender-based violence, which undermines the security and human dignity of women and girls, serving as a powerful deterrent to their public participation and civic engagement. At the same time, limited access to education, livelihoods, and economic opportunities affects women disproportionately, while also marginalizing men who are economically disenfranchised and socially excluded, particularly young men. These intersecting barriers create a context in which gender inequality is both a cause and a consequence of conflict, making it essential to

address them in any peace-building initiative.

- ***Overlooked Voices: Intersectionality and Exclusion***

Youth, Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), and displaced populations face layered and overlapping forms of exclusion that severely restrict their involvement in official peace processes. These groups are often overlooked in policy and program design, with their unique experiences, perspectives, and needs excluded from decision-making platforms. For persons with disabilities, barriers such as limited mobility, stigma, lack of access to information, and systemic discrimination further deepen their exclusion. For the youth, cultural norms that see them as inexperienced and untrustworthy continue to marginalize them. Despite their resilience and critical roles in community cohesion and conflict resolution, their absence from formal peacebuilding structures perpetuates inequities while undermining the inclusivity and effectiveness of peace initiatives across the region.

- ***Toward Inclusive Peacebuilding: Opportunities for Gender-Responsive Transformation***

The AFSC Gender Analysis highlights a pressing need to reorient peace-building frameworks in the East and Horn of Africa region to become genuinely gender-responsive and inclusive. While regional and national actors have made formal commitments to gender equality, many peace and security initiatives remain gender-neutral or tokenistic. As a result, they fail to address the lived realities and endemic structural disadvantages faced by women, youth, persons with disabilities, and other marginalized groups. This disconnect weakens the credibility of peace processes and limits their ability to achieve sustainable outcomes.

True integration of gender perspectives in peacebuilding goes beyond the symbolic inclusion of women in dialogue; it requires a fun-

damental shift in how programs are designed, funded, and implemented. Governments and peace actors must embed gender-sensitive goals and measurable indicators into every stage of peacebuilding, from conflict analysis and early warning mechanisms to mediation efforts and post-conflict rehabilitation. These approaches must recognize and respond to the overlapping identities and multiple challenges faced by marginalized groups, including young people, displaced individuals, and persons with disabilities.

Achieving long-term change requires directly challenging and breaking down male-dominant cultural norms and entrenched institutional systems that present barriers to meaningful participation. Unless systemic obstacles such as discriminatory laws, unequal resource access, and weak protection mechanisms are addressed, peacebuilding initiatives risk reinforcing the very inequalities that drive conflict. Therefore, achieving gender-inclusive peace will require coordinated efforts among national governments, civil society, donors, and regional bodies. It also demands sustained investment in grassroots leadership, adaptable funding to support gender-transformative initiatives, and robust accountability frameworks to uphold policy commitments and result in tangible and equitable outcomes.

- ***Structural Gaps: Challenges in Existing Peacebuilding Frameworks***

Existing peacebuilding frameworks often fail to address gender inequalities effectively due to several key challenges. Gender-neutral approaches tend to reinforce, rather than challenge, the underlying power imbalances, perpetuating existing inequalities. Furthermore,

the weak implementation of gender-sensitive frameworks undermines their potential impact, leaving gender considerations superficial or under-resourced. This is compounded by insufficient funding for gender-inclusive peacebuilding programs, limiting the ability to implement comprehensive, transformative initiatives. These challenges highlight the urgent need for a more robust commitment to gender-responsive peacebuilding strategies that actively work to dismantle structural inequalities.

- ***Grassroots Momentum: Opportunities for Advancing Inclusive Governance***

Opportunities to advance inclusive governance are increasingly emerging from localized peacebuilding efforts that deliberately integrate gender perspectives. These grassroots initiatives offer context-specific, transformative solutions that respond directly to the needs and priorities of affected communities. By empowering local actors, especially women, youth, and marginalized groups, these approaches foster more inclusive involvement of underrepresented populations in governance and peacebuilding efforts. Of equal significance is the need for collaboration and effective partnerships across sectors, including government institutions, civil society, and local community leadership. Such partnerships are essential for integrating gender-responsive policies into institutional frameworks. They also help ensure that peacebuilding efforts are shaped by a wide range of viewpoints and real-world experiences, strengthening the inclusiveness, transparency, and adaptability of governance systems.

III. Policy and Programmatic Implications

Peacebuilding initiatives that overlook or inadequately address gender dynamics risk reinforcing existing inequalities, neglecting the deeper drivers of conflict, and compromising the sustainability of peace outcomes. Integrating gender-sensitive approaches is essential for effective, equitable, and lasting peacebuilding within the East and Horn of Africa region. Without these considerations, peace initiatives risk being incomplete, ineffective, and prone to relapse. Embedding gender-sensitive and intersectional frameworks into peace and security programs ensures that all groups, including women, men, youth, persons with disabilities (PWDs), and displaced populations, are meaningfully included. This requires integrating gender analysis throughout the peacebuilding cycle, challenging patriarchy and patriarchal institutions, and recognizing the unique contributions and needs of marginalized groups to create a transformative, long-term impact.

IV. Call to Action: Recommendations

i. For National Governments

National governments must institutionalize gender-responsive policies and frameworks within their peace and security strategies. These should align with international and regional commitments such as the AU Framework on Women, Peace and Security; AU Framework on Youth, Peace and Security; AU Peace and Security Council; IGAD Protocol on Women in Peace and Security; IGAD Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Strategy; IGAD Youth, Peace and Security Framework; IGAD Gender Equality Strategy 2023-2030, AU Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality, and Agenda 2063; as well as National Action Plans (NAPs) on UNSCR 1325.

Governments must move beyond policy adoption to tangible action by fully operationalizing their National Action Plans aligned with the Women, Peace and Security agenda. These frameworks represent critical national commitments to advancing inclusive peace; however, without coordinated resourcing, monitoring, and political will, they risk remaining symbolic.

Governments must take active steps to uphold and implement laws that safeguard the rights of women, girls, and marginalized communities, including persons with disabilities and ethnic minorities. To ensure meaningful participation in peace processes, proactive measures like quota

systems should be introduced. Additionally, allocating targeted public funding to inclusive peacebuilding efforts and strengthening accountability mechanisms is essential.

ii. For Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)

Civil society organizations should focus on strengthening inclusive community networks that empower women, youth, and marginalized groups to lead peacebuilding initiatives. They must invest in capacity-building to challenge harmful gender norms and promote social justice through education and advocacy. Holistic support services for survivors of violence, including psychosocial, legal, and economic assistance, are essential. In addition, civil society organizations should cultivate strategic collaborations with government entities and international stakeholders to enhance their influence and the sustainability of their advocacy efforts. These efforts should actively advance the comprehensive implementation of key frameworks, including UNSCR 1325 and 2250, the IGAD Gender Equality Strategy (2023–2030), and the African Union's Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality, and Agenda 2063, all of which are key to advancing gender-responsive peacebuilding.

iii. For Regional Bodies (IGAD and African Union)

Regional institutions should fully operationalize existing commitments under the WPS and YPS frameworks by developing and funding actionable regional strategies with measurable outcomes. While instruments like the African Union's Continental Frameworks on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and Youth, Peace and Security (YPS), the IGAD Protocol on Women in Peace and Security, and the Maputo Protocol on Women's Rights in Africa establish a robust normative base, their effectiveness relies heavily on how well they are implemented. The African Union, IGAD, and other regional bodies must engage member countries in taking concrete steps to translate these frameworks into actionable, well-resourced strategies with measurable outcomes.

IGAD, the AU, and others must promote cross-border learning and coordination among member states to share tools and best practices. The appointment of gender advisors to peacekeeping, mediation, and early warning structures must be standardized to ensure gender considerations are integrated throughout peace and security mechanisms. These institutions need to provide sufficient support to regional Gender, Peace, and Security (GPS) initiatives such as FemWise-Africa and the IGAD Roster of Women Mediators by incorporating them

iv. For Donors and International Partners (EU, UN, Diplomatic Special Envoys Offices to the Eastern and Horn of Africa, etc.)

Donors should prioritize support to sustained, flexible, and gender-transformative peacebuilding initiatives that extend beyond short-term or reactive approaches. Funded programs must be grounded in intersectional gender analysis and require community engagement throughout the project lifecycle. Support should also be directed toward building local data systems that enable disaggregated tracking of progress by gender, age, and disability. Funding models that emphasize local ownership, flexibility, and collaborative governance will be essential to

achieving sustainable, inclusive peace.

V. Conclusion

Achieving inclusive and sustainable peace in the East and Horn of Africa demands bold, systemic transformation that centers on gender equity and dismantles structural barriers to participation. Women, youth, persons with disabilities (PWDs), and displaced populations, far from being passive recipients of peace-building efforts, play an important role in shaping and sustaining peace. Their exclusion from peace processes like conflict mapping, negotiation, and mediation not only violates their fundamental rights but also undermines the legitimacy, effectiveness, and durability of peace outcomes.

A shift from gender-blind and tokenistic practices to truly gender-responsive, intersectional, and participatory peacebuilding is essential. This requires aligning policy frameworks with implementation, ensuring measurable targets, and resourcing grassroots, youth, women, and PWD-led initiatives. National governments must embed inclusivity in law and policy; civil society must foster inclusive leadership and challenge harmful norms; regional bodies must promote cross-border coordination; and donors must prioritize long-term, flexible investments that sustain local peace infrastructures.

Crucially, regional peace and security frameworks must mainstream transitional justice and trauma healing. Addressing the psychosocial consequences of conflict is a critical policy priority for breaking recurrent cycles of violence and laying the groundwork for sustainable reconciliation. In addition, early warning and response systems must be inclusive, community-informed, and context-specific; thereby enabling timely and coordinated interventions that reflect local realities and the perspectives of those most affected.

Only through collective action, shared accountability, and sustained political will can we forge a peace-building paradigm that reflects the di-

verse experiences and aspirations of the region's people; one that is not only inclusive and just but truly transformative and enduring.

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About the All Africa Conference of Churches, AACC:

AACC (All Africa Conference of Churches) is a continental ecumenical body that accounts for over 200 million Christians across the African continent. AACC is the largest association of Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, and Indigenous churches in Africa, and a member of the worldwide ecumenical network. As an ecumenical body, AACC is a fellowship of 214 members comprising Churches, National Christian Councils (NCCs), theological and lay training institutions, and other Christian organizations in 43 African countries. With eleven programmatic focus areas, AACC's current strategy ensures that churches and other Christian institutions in Africa significantly contribute to the realization of the Continental and Global sustainable development agendas, such as the 17 SDGs and the AU Agenda 2065: "The Africa We Want."

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