WORKING PAPER 2025-03

INCLUSIVE PEACE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Priority Areas for The Second World Summit for Social Development

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Research for Social Change 1963–2025

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September 2025

Suggested citation: Jones, B. et al. 2025. *Inclusive Peace for Social Development: Priority Areas for The Second World Summit for Social Development*. Geneva: UNRISD.

Abstract

For the 2025 Second World Summit for Social Development (WSSD2), the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), as the only institution within the UN system with a dedicated mandate to research the social dimensions for development, launched a global consultation to understand public concerns and collect effective solutions and policies to the biggest social development challenges of our time, shaping the outcomes of the WSSD2 and future implementation of its programme of action.

In this context, UNRISD, in collaboration with the Warwick Interdisciplinary Research Centre for International Development and the Warwick Society and Culture Interdisciplinary Research Spotlight, launched a survey targeting students and young peace makers to gather their perspectives on peace and social development. A follow up workshop was held at the 2024 Geneva Peace Week, and a group of students were selected, following a competitive application process, and invited to co-author this paper. Their work focuses on the intersection between peace and social development, using illustrative case studies from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and the Pacific, and covering the topics of education, socio-economic development, women's participation, and urban governance.

Taken as a whole, this paper argues for an inclusive approach to peace in order to achieve socio-economic development which enhances well-being for all.

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Acronyms

AU	African Union
AYAP	African Union Youth Ambassador for Peace
CJTF	Civilian Joint Task Force
COVID	Coronavirus Disease
CPSS	Centre for Policy and Strategic Studies, Uppsala University Department of Peace and Conflict Research
CSO	Civil society organizations
DCAF	Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance
GBV	Gender-based violence
GoU	Government of Uganda
GROOTS	GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING TOGETHER IN SISTERHOOD
GROW	Generating Growth Opportunities and Productivity for Women Enterprises
HEY	Holistic Education for Youth
KACITA	Kampala City Traders Association
KCCA	Kampala Capital City Authority
KNDR	Kenya National Dialogue and Reconciliation
MOE	Ministry of Education
MOEST	Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology
NAP	National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
RCP LAC	Regional Collaborative Platform for Latin America and the Caribbean
SAP	State Action Plan - Nigeria
SAT	Sistema de Apredizaje Tutorial
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNRISD	United Nations Research for Social Development
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
UWEP	Uganda Women's Empowerment Programme
WPC	Women Peacebuilding Councils
WPM	Women Peace Mentor
WPS	Women, Peace and Security
WSSD2	Second World Summit for Social Development
YPS	Youth, Peace and Security

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the Geneva Peace Week 2024 organising team, for their support of the workshop which has informed this working paper. We would also like to thank all survey respondents and participants in the workshop.

1 Setting the scene: Preparing for the Second World Summit for Social Development

"We need love, and to ensure love, we need to have full employment, and we need social justice. We need gender equity. We need freedom from hunger. These are our most fundamental needs as social creatures." ~ David Suzuki (2013)

In 2025, the United Nations General Assembly will convene the WSSD2 to address ongoing social challenges and renew commitments made in the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development and Programme of Action (UN, 1995). This summit, to be held 30 years after the first, aims to accelerate progress towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015) by focusing on social justice, equality and inclusion.

For the WSSD2, UNRISD, as the only institution within the UN system with a dedicated mandate to research the social dimensions for development, launched a global consultation to understand public concerns and collect effective solutions and policies to the biggest social development challenges of our time, shaping the outcomes of the WSSD2 and future implementation of its programme of action.

In this context, UNRISD, in collaboration with the Warwick Interdisciplinary Research Centre for International Development, and the University of Warwick Society and Culture Interdisciplinary_Research Spotlight, launched a research initiative to explore the nexus between peace and social development. To support this mission, a survey was launched targeting students and young peacemakers to collect their perspectives on peace and social development, and a follow up interactive workshop was held at the 2024 Geneva Peace Week on the 15 October 2024.

The survey asked respondents for their views on peace, justice, and the roles of different actors. The following word clouds and key quotes give a sense of the responses:

In your opinion, what does peace look like?

"…beyond the mere absence of violence to encompass issues of inclusive representation, functional institutions, protection of human rights, and access to livelihood opportunities especially for youth and women who are traditionally marginalized"

"Peace is a complex web or relationships and agreements between social, economic and political actors that ensure the unfolding of everyday social life"

"It looks like diverse people gathered in a park, smiling, sharing, and listening to one another"

What are the key challenges for peace and social development?

"Weakness of the national institutions make it hard to achieve peace and social development"

"Uneven structures of power may perpetuate conflicts and poverties despite a general agreement on peace and social development strategies"

"We need more diverse governments and institutions that are truly representative, addressing the concerns and needs of all people, regardless of class, race, gender or sexual orientation"

Who should be working together to achieve peace and justice in your community?

"Governments should lead by establishing strong legal frameworks and transparent systems to promote accountability and fairness. Civil society organizations play a critical role in advocating for rights, providing services and holding authorities accountable, ensuring that marginalized voices are heard"

"…all these stakeholders should work together in a collaborative and coordinated manner to achieve peace and justice. This can involve sharing information, resources, and expertise, as well as developing and implementing joint initiatives"

"…peace and conflict has become nested at both local, national, regional and global levels and needs to be addressed as such"

In the interactive workshop during 2024 Geneva Peace Week, *Bridging Generations: Co-Creating Solutions for Peace and Social Development*, participants themselves selected three priority areas: economy; education; and social protection. In the discussions they highlighted issues which

echoed the findings of the survey, and which reinforced an understanding of peace and social development as interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

Building on these insights, in a third step, the co-authors of this paper—Faith Chelangat Tonui, Nakabira Nashiba, Marianne Oliveira, and Denise Worth—were selected following a competitive application process—to work with Briony Jones and Rebecca Morris and to research and produce this paper. This mentoring process is part of broader efforts at UNRISD to engage and support youth as key social development actors.

2 Socio-economic peace: Bringing social development and peace together[1]

The First World Summit for Social Development, held in Copenhagen in 1995, states in the *Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development* that "social development and social justice are indispensable for the achievement and maintenance of peace and security within and among our nations. In turn, social development and social justice cannot be attained in the absence of peace and security or in the absence of respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms" (UN 1995:1). The declaration goes on to commit to reinforcing peace by "promoting tolerance, non-violence and respect for diversity, and by settling disputes by peaceful means" (p.7) and to "Promote international peace and security" (p.7).

The *Pact for the Future* (UN, 2024), adopted at the Summit of the Future in September 2024, acknowledges these ongoing challenges, highlighting international peace and security as a key policy area for development and human flourishing. In the run-up to the WSSD2, the Doha Political Declaration (UN 2025) reiterated the commitment of the Copenhagen Declaration, again acknowledging that social development and peace are co-constitutive. It is vital that we advocate for a joined-up approach and highlight the interconnections between social development and efforts to establish and maintain peace within and between countries.

Sustainable Development Goal 16—Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions—represents what has long been understood: that peace building is a long term and complex process which involves interconnected social, political, economic and legal transformations. The latest reports indicate that not only is the world not on target to meet its SDG 16 commitments (UN 2023), but that recent increases in global conflict rates and deaths (UCDP 2024) jeopardize achievement of the other SDGs (UN 2024). Understood as a keystone goal (Fielder et al. 2015), the success of all the SDGs is in many ways predicated on our ability to establish peaceful societies.

Our understanding of what peace is, and how it can be supported, has evolved away from a sole focus on negative peace (meaning an absence of violent conflict) towards including positive peace (meaning equal societies, human flourishing, absence of structural violence). Positive peace approaches bring us closer to the nexus between peace and social development, arguing that we cannot have one without the other, and that understanding root causes of conflict is vital to ensuring sustainable peace and development. This insight has led to a vibrant field of research

[1] This section is authored by Briony Jones.

and thinking which argues for hybrid or local approaches to peace building as "an emancipatory activity, more concerned with a sophisticated order of justice and equity in a societal context than a basic security enforced through institutions" (Richmond 2010:15).

It is no surprise then that multilateral efforts at peace and development have come ever closer, with the scene setting 1992 *An Agenda for Peace* report stating:

> "The sources of conflict and war are pervasive and deep. To reach them will require our utmost effort to enhance respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, to promote sustainable economic and social development for wider prosperity, to alleviate distress and to curtail the existence and use of massively destructive weapons" (Boutros-Ghali 1992:2).

Peace and development go hand-in-hand:

> "Disregarding socio-economic aspects of peace and how they relate to people's everyday lives leaves a vacuum in our understanding of peace, particularly a just and sustainable peace, and the formation of post-conflict economies" (Distler et al. 2018: 139).

If we take positive peace as our starting point, then equal societies, human flourishing, and the absence of structural violence are the goals we need to work towards. In his influential work on positive peace, Johan Galting writes about what has come to be known as structural violence, saying that "violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations" (1969: 168). This means that inequality, marginalization, and discrimination are both root causes of conflict as well as acts of violence themselves.

However, studies have shown that violence does not impact all people equally and can exacerbate or generate new inequalities (Arjona 2021). In response, socioeconomic peace policies can generate economic, social and political stakes in peace as well as help to address root causes of violence. They can also generate resilience which protects against future conflict and risks of violence, and the damage conflict can do to social development. In this understanding ***peace is social development and social development is peace.*** This is in line with recent research which has identified a 'peace formula' referring to a series of key policies which are crucial for curbing armed conflict and achieving transition to lasting peace and prosperity: jobs, democratic participation and guaranteeing the security and basic functions of the state (Rohner 2024).

Unfortunately, socioeconomic aspects of peace are too often on the margins of peace building discussions. The same can be said in the other direction. Socioeconomic development discussions do not often make peace central to their concerns, despite some important efforts to the contrary:

> "Many of the debates about peacebuilding and conflict prevention are still detached from the basic livelihoods and everyday concerns of citizens in conflict-affected societies" (Distler et al. 2018:139).

We can see the intersection between peace and social development in cases across the globe. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, following the 1992-95 war, access to jobs, opportunities and political power are still highly mediated by ethno-national group allegiance, as well as age and gender (World

bank 2016), which studies have found leads to ongoing resentment and acts of violence (Human Rights Watch 2023). In Côte d'Ivoire, post-election violence in 2010-11 was rooted in exclusionary citizenship regimes, anti-immigrant sentiment and disputed land ownership. President Ouattara, who has been in power since then, has emphasized economic recovery and access to economic opportunity as the basis for social cohesion in the country, albeit with mixed success (Bakare 2021). In Tunisia in 2010, 26-year-old street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi self-immolated in protest at treatment by local officials. Socioeconomic injustice, crime, marginalization and discrimination paved the way for a series of popular uprisings and change of regime in the country (The New Arab 2020).

These examples reinforce the argument that social development and peace are co-constitutive. As will be seen in the thematic sections which follow, policies which foster the co-constitutive nature of peace and social development can generate resilience which protects against conflict and risks of violence and the damage conflict can do to social development.

In sum, social development policies and peace building policies have many areas of potential overlap which could be leveraged to both scale up impacts and utilize available funds more efficiently.

3 Addressing structural barriers in formal education: An intersectional approach for inclusive peace and social development[2]

3.1 Education as the vehicle for social development and peace?

The relationship between social development and peace is deeply interdependent, as this wider paper argues. Education has long been positioned as a cornerstone of both agendas, framed as a vehicle for social mobility, social cohesion and democratic values for peace building. Landmark human rights-based declarations, conventions[3] and global policy commitments[4] have aimed to meet these goals by expanding access to formal education for all, reinforcing its role in promoting social development and peace.[5] Yet, while access has improved for many learners, deeper structural conditions remain unchanged. Education is often framed as a great equalizer, generating positive individual returns and social externalities (Psacharopoulos and Patrinos 2004; Heckman et al. 2010), but its promise of returns is unequally realized as education gaps widen across socioeconomic, gender, and spatial lines of inequality. Entrenched systems of power, discriminatory norms, labour market precarity and structural violence shape who can access, remain in and benefit from the social and economic returns to education, constraining its

2 This section is authored by Denise Worth.

3 Article 28 in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989); Article 26 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948).

4 In response to further deepening educational inequalities post-COVID, UNESCO'S 2022 Transforming Education Summit built on the 2021 report Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education (UNESCO 2021), reiterated its commitment to upholding quality education as a universal right and a public good to foster "peaceful, just and sustainable futures for all" (UNESCO 2021, p. 3).

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potential to advance positive peace and inclusive social development (UNESCO 2024; Walker 2020). These dynamics risk reinforcing inequalities when unequal access and outcomes persist. Without intentional efforts to dismantle these intersecting structural barriers, formal education risks reinforcing exclusion rather than enabling transformation.

Intersectionality offers a critical lens to understand how these structural barriers interact in learners' lives. It provides a multidimensional analysis of how power reinforces exclusion (Unterhalter et al. 2020), highlighting many 'invisible' inequalities in formal education, and offering insights into who is marginalized, privileged, and why (Christoffersen 2023). Crenshaw (1989) critiques 'single axis' frameworks that obscure the multidimensional nature of exclusion, cautioning against simplistic interpretations of inclusion, and advocates for an analytical structure with an intersectional lens to address the unique experiences of subordination experienced by individuals living amidst certain hierarchies and power structures. Applying such a lens enables a nuanced understanding of marginality within and around education systems and their implications for peace and social development goals.

This section examines how intersecting structural barriers in formal education hinder inclusive social development and peace building. It highlights the urgent need to operationalize intersectional analysis, both to advance inclusion and to inform responsive policies that address and dismantle existing exclusionary barriers to equity, which is a critical step toward sustainable, positive peace.

3.2 Applying an intersectional lens to structural barriers in formal education

Multidimensional structural barriers in formal education vary depending on context, but evidence widely suggests that socioeconomic status remains a major factor influencing participation in formal schooling worldwide (Reardon 2011). In a draft resolution submitted by the Chair of the Commission for Social Development it is noted,

> "[...] with concern […] that progress towards education for all has slowed and that poor households often struggle to afford the costs of sending their children to school, which can affect their future well-being and reduce opportunities later in life" (2025:6).

The structural violence of poverty and socioeconomic disparity is not an isolated issue, as it is shaped by historically entrenched systems of power and intersects with other inequalities to compound exclusion in formal education, as exemplified by the case study of Honduras below.[6] According to the Honduran National Institute of Statistics and Ministry of Education (MOE) (2019), the national poverty rate pre-COVID stood at 68 percent, with Indigenous and Afro-descendent communities disproportionately experiencing the highest levels—a pattern that highlights notable intersections of poverty, ethnicity, and systemic discrimination. Meanwhile, 83 percent of Honduran children live in households that cannot pay for their basic daily needs (MOE 2019: 35). Further data from the Latin American region highlight similar intersections, as Afro descendants in both Brazil and Colombia disproportionately represent the largest populations living in poverty: in Brazil, 26 percent compared to 12 percent of others, and in Colombia, 41 percent compared to 27 percent, respectively (UNESCO 2020). The United

6 See Case Study 1: Systema Aprendizaje Tutorial (SAT), a formal education program in rural Honduras.

Nations Pact for the Future (2024) has most recently called for increased investment in the multidimensional aspects of young people's social and economic development, echoing the dedication of the Copenhagen Declaration for Social Development to eradicate poverty, increase productive labour opportunities, and promote social integration (1995). Commitments Five and Six of the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development advocate for universal education as a tool for empowerment, employment, and social integration (1995:11-13).

Formal education is normatively framed as a driver of positive externalities such as political engagement, higher wage earnings and improved health outcomes (Psacharopoulus and Patrinos 2004; United Nations and RCP LAC 2024). However, critics caution that while considered a generator of social capital on the one hand, formal education can also function as a mechanism of social closure, restricting opportunities for less advantaged groups and reinforcing power hierarchies by requiring increasing formal qualifications to access jobs and privileged positions (Green and Preston 2001; Van de Werfhorst 2011; Allais and Nathan 2014: 111). Those unable to obtain formal employment often turn to informal labour which often lacks formal arrangements, social protection, or safety nets (UNRISD 2024; World Bank 2022), further widening socioeconomic disparities and undermining social cohesion. Education as a pathway to productive labour opportunities requires "parallel efforts" in other policy areas to make equality in education and employment a reality (Alban Conto and Forti 2022: 29), with particular attention to transitions in life stages for women and their careers (Castellsagué 2023). Opportunities in and through formal education stumble over intersecting barriers which further exacerbate exclusion, threatening inclusive social development and cohesion for greater positive peace.

3.2.1 Structural barriers in formal education: Intersections of poverty, systemic violence, and gender norms in Latin America and the Caribbean

Despite the presence of legal frameworks and significant investment in the supply of secondary education, post-COVID, students from low socioeconomic background in Latin America and the Caribbean have varying chances of completing secondary school (Nëidhofer et al. 2021). Disaggregated data from the World Bank (2023) shows an overall regional completion rate of 76 percent for girls and 72 percent for boys at the lower secondary level, both near the global average of 75 percent. While Argentina, Chile, Mexico and Peru reported near-universal lower secondary completion rates ranging from 90 to 100 percent in 2022, Guatemala, Honduras and Suriname reported much lower rates from 30 to 50 percent in 2023. Disaggregated further by gender, data shows that female completion rates follow a similar geographic trend with Argentina, Chile and Mexico reporting female completion rates between 75 and 100 percent (Bonfert and Wadhwa 2024; United Nations and RCP LAC 2024), while Guatemala, Honduras and Haiti report rates ranging from less than 25 percent to 50 percent (World Bank 2023). External factors such as low household income, increasingly complicated transitions from education to formal employment, and persistent gender stereotypes continue to generate opportunity costs and drive dropout rates from formal education (Murphy-Graham 2024), widening the gap of inclusive social development.

Evidence from the World Bank Gender Data Portal has found that women across all global economies spend more time on household chores and caregiving than men, holding gender equality implications for education and social development. Many women carry the double burden of being productive in both public and private domains, that is, responsible for both

social and remunerated production (Fraser 2016), limiting time available to pursue further education, hold senior positions in companies, or legislate through formal political leadership roles. For instance, despite gains in secondary completion rates and achieving parity at tertiary levels in some Latin American countries, women across the region spend more time on unpaid care activities than men, with some putting in five more non-market hours than men (Berniell et al. 2024).

Labour force data from the World Bank (2023) in Latin America and the Caribbean reports 51 percent of women participate in the labour force as compared to 75 percent of men, even though in most countries in the region, "girls outnumber and outperform boys in lower secondary education" (Murphy-Graham 2024: 274). Berniell et al. (2024) further find that women experience a decline in workforce participation (-20 percent) and earnings (-40 percent) following parenthood, with a notable absence of such associations for men.

3.2.1.1 Case study—Sistema de aprendizaje tutorial: Formal education programming in Honduras

The Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial (SAT) programme in Honduras provides students from remote, rural locations with access to formal education. Operating in around 120 rural Honduran communities, it serves learners at both lower and upper secondary levels. According to Murphy-Graham (2024), its curriculum focuses on tackling gender inequality and in 2016, HEY! (Holistic Education for Youth) was launched alongside the SAT to provide additional resources for gender transformative formal education, aiding community outreach in the form of podcasts and parental engagement on gender equality and norms. Despite the gains noted with the programme, student dropout remains a frequent occurrence. In a qualitative study, students shared they no longer wished to be a student for multiple reasons, with boys reporting increased distrust that education would lead to better employment and opting to join the informal labour market in low-skilled jobs to generate income for their families while girls reported concern that they could not access work outside of their homes and hence struggled to envisage a future where they are not mothers and caregivers (Murphy-Graham 2024: 282).

Compounding these inequalities is the prevalence of structural violence from organized crime interrupting school trajectories, as parents keep children at home or encourage them to migrate (MoE 2019: 37). An analysis from the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) noted criminal gangs perpetuate "forced displacement, threats, kidnapping, sexual violence and homicides" with girls and women further suffering from gender-based violence and exploitation (NRC 2016). In this context, structural barriers determine who can safely access and engage in formal secondary education, as well as who can benefit from its opportunities and returns, differing across students of varying socioeconomic status, gender, and locality. The SAT programme in Honduras underscores that peace and social development are mutually reinforcing and must be addressed together in policy. Structural violence rooted in organized crime and poverty, compounded by gender inequalities, creates barriers that restrict educational access and outcomes, perpetuating cycles of exclusion and instability for rural students. Effective policies must therefore integrate education, gender justice, job creation and security to dismantle these barriers, ensuring safe and equitable learning environments and realistic pathways to formal employment. By doing so, education can fulfil its dual role as a catalyst for social development and a critical pillar for sustainable, positive peace.

3.2.2 Structural barrier in education: Intersections of poverty, feminization of care, and lack of services for young mothers

Teenage pregnancy is a global occurrence that disproportionately impacts girls' education trajectories. Depending on context and intersecting factors, it can result in girls dropping out of formal education altogether. In some cases, this is due to expulsion from the education system itself,[7] while in others it reflects experiences of gender-based violence in schools, limited social protection, or the challenge of balancing caregiving and schooling in the absence of childcare services. For many, poverty compounds these pressures through direct costs of continuing education and the high opportunity cost of staying in school rather than entering the workforce. Cultural and gender norms along with the feminization of care reinforce girls' roles as caregivers, while in other contexts discriminatory social stigma surrounding pregnancy add a layer to their experience of exclusion (Chinkondenji 2025:7). These intersecting factors determine who can return to school postpartum, often marginalizing those with the least financial and social support. Malawi's Readmission Policy (2018) represents a multi-sectoral, holistic approach to re-entry that aims to enhance supportive mechanisms both within and beyond school walls (MOE 2018: 18).

Gender responsive and inclusive policies that allow girls to return to school after childbirth have improved the likelihood of continuation in formal education, creating opportunities in formal education that had not been there in years past. Re-entry policies that integrate counselling and academic remediation increase the chances of a successful return. Yet structural barriers remain, such as the feminization of care and limited access to childcare services, hindering equitable education opportunities for girls from the most marginalized households.

3.2.2.1 Case study—Inclusive re-entry policy in Malawi

Research by Chinkondenji (2025) explores how young girls navigate secondary schooling after pregnancy in Malawi and finds evidence that the inclusive language of the Ministry of Education Science and Technology (MoEST) Readmission Policy (2018) offers important support for re-entry, including counselling, psychosocial support, and academic remediation once receiving assurance that the baby is in safe care (MOEST 2018). However, the policy language lacks clarity on the multiple structural barriers of financial support and absence of childcare services that exclude the least privileged girls from benefiting from this policy. The study finds that young women navigate this ambiguous space through communitarian ethos and informal support from their families, but these supports are unevenly distributed. For those from low-income households, the choice between earning an income and managing unpaid care often outweighs the long-term but uncertain returns to schooling. The feminized nature of care further limits options and is noted as the primary barrier to re-entry in this study. Teenage girls who have lost their mothers, live independently, or have working mothers are unable to find childcare services; these girls without maternal or family support frequently have no access to safe childcare, making re-enrolment impossible. While the policy addresses key aspects of re-entry, Chinkondenji highlights the importance of understanding the financial and social interdependence that shape young mothers' decisions. Without efforts to mitigate these barriers, the most marginalized girls will remain excluded from education, hindering inclusive development and reinforcing gendered inequality. Exclusion in education not only undermines the right to education but also reproduces patterns of structural violence that weaken efforts to

[7] See Chilisa (2002) for discussion on three categories of pregnancy policies in Sub Saharan Africa: expulsion, re-entry, and continuation policies.

build positive peace. Incorporating context-specific intersectional analysis into policy design is essential both to expand equitable opportunities and address the overlapping structural conditions that perpetuate inequality.

3.3 Conclusion

These two case studies seek to highlight the importance of addressing structural barriers in formal education, especially in relation to intersecting inequalities of race, gender, socioeconomic status and locality tied to experiences of marginalization due to poverty, structural violence, care work, and gender inequality in the home and labour market. Intersectionality demonstrates how interconnected and compounding inequalities can change the education trajectory and employment chances for students in formal education and helps to reveal where policies may unintentionally maintain inequities, weakening the social cohesion and inclusion necessary for sustainable peace. Developing intersectional and multi-sectoral policy that is gender-responsive is crucial for fostering societies where peace is grounded in equity, care and inclusive participation.

3.3.1 Challenges and recommendations

Dismantling intersecting structural barriers in formal education and its pathway to employment is essential for advancing inclusive social and economic development, gender justice, and building more equitable, peaceful societies. Achieving this requires transformative change that addresses the underlying social, economic, cultural and political factors that shape exclusion. Without such efforts, education may fall short of its ability to support social development and positive peace. The following remaining challenges emerge from the case study:

There is a crucial need for improved understanding of intersectionality in the analysis of structural causes of inequality in formal education.

Despite widespread policy efforts to expand access to formal education, there is a crucial need for improved understanding of intersectionality in analyzing structural causes of inequality in education, particularly in recognizing how lived experiences in formal education and other 'formations of power' shape their opportunities both within and through education (Unterhalter et al. 2020).

Key legal barriers persist in transitioning from education to employment, including discriminatory labour markets and insufficient safety and childcare policies.

Research from Women, Business and the Law 2.0 (2024) reveals a gap between gender equality laws and the mechanisms needed to enforce them, with fewer than 40 percent of the necessary frameworks in place. This lack of supportive structures, particularly in safety and childcare, not only limits women's engagement in education and employment but also reinforces economic precarity, undermining women's economic empowerment and broader gender equality.

In terms of recommendations, the following two points are of relevance.

Intersectionality needs to be operationalized. This requires focusing on the needs and interests of marginalized learners, identifying 'gaps in knowledge' and missing data, and taking seriously the evidence produced by marginalized groups themselves.

It is imperative to focus on the needs and interests of marginalized learners "within the context of cross-cutting issues affecting differently marginalized groups" (Christoffersen 2023: 10) to

best understand the nuances of lived experiences—both in the collection of disaggregated data to capture what is missing, as well as in the policy approach that is multisectoral, and complimentary (UNRISD 2024). Key actors and stakeholders include policy makers, researchers, students, parents, teachers and education administrators, as well as civil society organizations (CSOs) and community activists and leaders.

Ensure cross-sectoral policy coherence to address structural barriers across education, labour and social systems with responsiveness to localized contexts. This requires the application of intersectional analyses for integrated policy design and implementation. A coordinated, cross-sectoral approach is essential to dismantle structural barriers that impede education, inclusive social development and positive peace. This includes applying an intersectional analysis to the design and implementation of cross-sectoral policies that reflect local contexts. It is essential to address education policy alongside the policies outside of it, such as labour policy that promotes dignified work with social policy that addresses care responsibilities and well-being alongside macroeconomic policies. Policy makers with expertise in intersectionality, supported by participatory data, are critical to crafting coherent strategies that advance equity in education, gender equality, economic participation, and sustainable peace.

4 From conflict to cohesion: The role of socio-economic development in peacebuilding in Kenya and Sierra Leone[8]

4.1 Introduction

Contemporary peacebuilding initiatives in post-conflict societies within sub-Saharan Africa often prioritize political and legal solutions, overlooking the equally crucial role of socioeconomic development in mainstreaming social cohesion and sustainable peace in the context of post-conflict peacebuilding (Orago, 2017:226). To avoid a relapse to conflict within vulnerable societies emerging from conflict in sub-Saharan Africa, it is pertinent to prioritize socioeconomic development and equitable resource distribution as crucial enablers for building peace and achieving social cohesion beyond mere conflict resolution (Orago, 2017:226). Social cohesion, which the World Bank lists as among the key pillars for underscoring social sustainability, has been found to be a necessary condition for fostering sustainable peace (Chatterjee et al. 2023:2).

Socioeconomic development is a strategic peace building tool for redressing deeply entrenched or systemic inequalities that, if unaddressed, often catalyse a return to conflict, even after a peaceful resolution within post-conflict societies (Chatterjee et al. 2023:9). Both Kenya (following post-election violence in 2007-2008) and Sierra Leone (following a civil war from 1999-2002) exemplify this challenge, as well as the possible approaches that can be taken to break cycles of violence. In both cases, efforts to address conflict drivers by tackling underlying inequalities include addressing skewed and inequitable resource distribution as well as prioritizing grassroots peace building initiatives. As explored in the following section, both case studies illustrate the importance of socioeconomic development for achieving social cohesion and lasting peace, alongside political and governance efforts (Nderitu 2014:14; Musyoka 2016:48).

8 This section is authored by Faith Chelangat Tonui.

4.1.1 The link between conflict and socio-economic inequality: Socioeconomic development as a pathway to sustainable peace

Researchers have found compelling evidence suggesting socioeconomic inequality fuels conflict (Richmond 2014:449; Prince et al., 2023:69). The association between conflict and socioeconomic inequality, however, is bidirectional, as either one of these factors could lead to the other. On the one hand, socioeconomic inequalities which manifest through material deprivation, competition for limited resources, and a culture of political exclusion and marginalization, not only escalate conflict but also act as avenues that ripen opportunities for conflict to thrive in divided societies, especially in Africa, where these enablers for conflict often intersect (Prince et al. 2023:71). On the other hand, conflict can perpetuate socioeconomic inequality through, for example, election-related violence, where property destruction coupled with the disruption of economic activities and schooling run counter to social cohesion and perpetuate inequalities (Abdul-Rahman and Peter 2018:19).

In the context of Kenya, post-election violence in 2007-2008 followed contested presidential elections which pitted the incumbent, Mwai Kibaki, against veteran opposition leader, Raila Odinga. The violence led to the deaths of over 1,300 people, widespread property damage, and the displacement of about 600,000 people (Musyoka 2016:47; Nderitu 2014:12). Rono (2009:25) attributes this violence largely to the sharp socioeconomic inequalities that have existed in the country since independence, setting the stage for ethnic rivalry and violence (Nderitu 2014:13). A similar pattern of marginalization and inequality was experienced in Sierra Leone during the country's prolonged civil war of 1991-2002 where systematic violence was partly occasioned by the contestation over the control of the nation's diamond resources (Kaldor and Vincent 2006: 7; Gberie 2005:1). The West African nation's diamond mining industry, which was stationed in places characterized by weak governance coupled with inadequate economic opportunities for the populace thus acted as the basis for escalating conflict and societal fragmentation by providing funding for such rebel groups as the Revolutionary United Front (Kaldor and Vincent 2006; Gberie 2005:1). The civil war led to the deaths of approximately 75,000 people and the displacement of more than twp million people (Kaldor and Vincent 2006:8; Gberie 2005:3).

Given the established link between lasting peace and socioeconomic development (Lima 2018: 339), Kenya and Sierra Leone exemplify cases where centralizing economic development implies the utilization of peace building policies that revolve around wealth redistribution, infrastructure development, and the prioritization of equitable growth. The approach is crucial to entrenching peace since it provides direct redress for structural inequalities underlying violent conflict, thereby fostering societal cohesion by ensuring the inclusion of marginalized demographic segments.

In Kenya, the mediation team under the auspices of the Kenyan National Dialogue and Reconciliation (KNDR) process earmarked socioeconomic inequalities as a difficult issue that needed urgent and sustainable redress (Nderitu 2014:15). The KNDR saw this step as essential in preventing relapse to similar conflicts in the future and identified six long-standing issues that fuelled the conflict: economic disparities; poverty; regional inequalities manifesting in high youth unemployment rates; legal, constitutional, and institutional change; land reforms and related historical land injustices particularly those revolving around disputed ownership, access and redistribution and the necessity of fostering a shared national identity across regionally and ethnically diverse populations as a measure to strengthening national cohesion and mitigating

political marginalization (Musyoka 2016:8). While it is worth noting that Kenya's economic blueprint, dubbed Vision 2030, had been conceived earlier, the centralization of socioeconomic development in peace building efforts following the National Dialogue and Reconciliation Accord presented an opportunity to actualize Vision 2030's implementation from 2008 onwards. Economic reforms in the public and private sectors, efforts to minimize and alleviate poverty, elevate entrepreneurship levels, revamp agricultural productivity, improve the living standards of Kenyans, and plans to establish critical infrastructures became a key consideration for leaders in the Grand Coalition Government and successive governments in Kenya to date (Musyoka 2016: 49).

Likewise, Sierra Leone's post-war economic reconstruction project began following the end of the country's civil war in 2002 aimed at redressing socioeconomic inequality. In Sierra Leone, economic reforms such as joining the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, which focused on ensuring greater accountability and public oversight in natural resources revenue management, coupled with the institutionalization of the National Revenue Authority, which mitigated financial leakages and enhanced the mobilization of domestic revenue, were key pillars of post-war economic recovery and reconstruction that manifested through enhanced management and revenue collection (Fanthorpe and Maconachie 2010:254). It is worth mentioning that Kenyan governments, post-2008 and Sierra Leonean governments post-2002, have demonstrated consistency in treating inclusive socioeconomic development as a central and not peripheral peace building pillar, and, therefore, the ultimate pathway to achieving sustainable peace and social cohesion in the respective countries. Recent research shows a decline in absolute poverty amidst the achievement of some developmental gains despite persistent inequalities in both countries. Despite some progress, to date, regional and income disparities remain a persistent concern in Kenya (David et al. 2025:8), whereas, in Sierra Leone, perceptions of cohesion have experienced modest improvement due to strides in education access and local governance despite economic marginalization continuing to threaten national unity (Chatterjee et al. 2023:22).

4.1.2 Inclusive policies, good governance, and community-led reconciliation

Kenya's National Dialogue and Reconciliation Accord birthed the Grand Coalition Government in 2008, which, according to Nyirakibali (2008:38), addressed the long-standing shortfalls of the 'winner-takes-it-all' presidential system through the introduction of a power-sharing structure that accommodated Raila Odinga's Orange Democratic Movement into a coalition government alongside President Kibaki's Party of National Unity. This Kofi Annan-led power sharing agreement also created room for conversations over greater public participation of Kenyans in governance although practically, this is far from realization. The establishment of independent commissions such as the National Cohesion and Integration Commission incorporated public participation as a key policy requirement for governance, something which is observable to date but whose realization is far from full attainment, and fraught with challenges (Medina et al. 2025: 21-22). With good governance, participatory democracy, a culture of political accountability, and the promotion of the rule of law institutionalized through inclusive policies, political stability became the new normal post-2008, paving the way for the country's socioeconomic development. However, the recent Gen-Z protests that saw Kenyan youth from across the political shades voice their displeasure over the unpopular Finance Bill by storming parliament on Tuesday 25 June 2024 (Ogao 2024), proved that good governance remains a pipe dream in the East African nation.

Grassroots involvement in peace building was a significant post-2008 development in Kenya, underscoring socioeconomic development through a focus on the immediate challenges and needs of local people. The involvement of local and international women's groups in socioeconomic development through non-violent advocacy campaigns, including such women groups as GROOTS, African Women's Development Fund, the Gender Violence Recovery Centre, and Vital Voices Nairobi Peace Initiative, are examples of the promotion of greater inclusivity, participatory governance and entrenching national cohesion in Kenya (Shekhawat 2008: 12). In Sierra Leone, an inclusive governance structure was initiated through the 2004 Local Government Act and the 2015 instituted National Land Policy that bestowed women with more access and control rights over land although rural agricultural areas proved otherwise as customary land governance structures continue to steepen the inequalities in favour of male landholders (Turay et al. 2025:1).

4.2 Key challenges and recommendations

While both Kenya and Sierra Leone have made significant strides in mitigating inequalities and circumventing socioeconomic development challenges, persistent institutional and structural challenges continue to hamper the success of peace building efforts. Wanton corruption, persistent and deeply entrenched socioeconomic inequality, uneven policy implementation, and weak institutional accountability remain an ever pressing challenge (David et al. 2025: 8; Medina et al. 2025: 22). In Kenya's case, citizen and particularly youth disillusionment over state governance failures and perceived economic exclusion recently played out through the June 2024 Gen-Z-led public protests (Ogao 2024). In Sierra Leone's context, formal reforms are yet to achieve the desired results due to deeply entrenched customary land systems that continue limiting women's access and control over land while concurrently entrenching rural inequality (Turay et al. 2025: 1). To circumvent such hurdles, Kenya and Sierra Leone should:

- enforce accountability, transparency, and anti-corruption measures;
- ensure the implementation of more inclusive policies that redress youth and women's; grievances and concerns.
- ensure that national development plans redress social cohesion indicators;
- empower grassroots actors in peace building (Chatterjee et al. 2023:17).

The rationale is that achieving sustainable peace requires more than development plans and political pronouncements and necessitates equitable implementation, which is instrumental in redressing structural injustices while redressing the problem of fragile state-citizen trust. Such approaches will be necessary for transforming fragile societies emerging from conflict and fostering social cohesion.

5 Women's inclusion in peace building processes: Insights from urban security and governance in Kampala City and Nigeria's women-led grassroots peace initiatives[9]

In a world where conflict and insecurity are increasing, the role of women in peace building processes has become an increasingly critical issue because data consistently demonstrates that when women are involved in peace negotiations, agreements are more likely to be durable and reflective of diverse needs.[10] This section will examine this issue by looking at two case studies. The first explores the impact of urban security and city governance on young women's engagement and participation in peace building efforts in Kampala, Uganda. The second analysis focuses on Nigeria's women-led grassroots peace building initiatives and how these contribute to social development. As will be highlighted below, both these cases demonstrate the vital contributions women make in transforming conflict-ridden environments into spaces of resilience, unity and lasting peace.

5.1 The impact of urban security and city governance on young women's engagement and participation in peacebuilding efforts in Kampala City, Uganda

As key agents of change, young women have the potential to champion peace and social development initiatives. Young women as a category are consistently subsumed into the different Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and Youth Peace and Security (YPS) frameworks and yet are not explicitly mentioned, meaning that the specifics of their situation and voice are more likely to be excluded from important dialogues and decision making. In many contexts, young women face double discrimination for being young and female, regardless of their being at the intersection of the YPS and WPS Agendas.[11] In the case of Uganda, young women have been disproportionately affected by exclusion from governance and development processes, in turn limiting their meaningful engagement in building inclusive and peaceful communities.

Kampala, the capital city of Uganda, is located in East Africa and is home to nearly 2 million people, with women constituting a significant majority,[12] with 80 males for every 100 females.[13] The city stands as a microcosm of the nation's complex social, political, and economic landscape, where urban security and City administration intersect to shape the lives and opportunities of its residents, particularly young women. Despite progressive policy steps by the Government of Uganda (GoU) toward women's empowerment through programmes such as Uganda Women's Empowerment Programme (UWEP) and Generating Growth Opportunities and Productivity for Women Enterprises (GROW) Project, young women in Kampala remain marginalized in peace building efforts and urban governance, especially in decision making roles that directly affect their lives and safety.

9 This section is authored by Nashiba Nakabira.
10 GPPAC Learning Paper. (2024): Supporting Women's Impactful Participation in Peace Processes
11 UN Women (2018), Young Women in Peace and Security: At the Intersection of YPS and WPS Agendas
12 National Population and Housing Census (2024)
13 Uganda Bureau of Statistics, (2022

5.1.1 Progress and policy gaps in gender equality

Over the past two decades, Uganda has made considerable strides in promoting gender equality. Notably, the Government revised its National Gender Policy in 2007, focusing on key areas such as: (1) expanding women's participation in decision making processes, (2) gender mainstreaming in economic management, (3) enhancing gender responsive livelihoods, and (4) eliminating discrimination against women. Despite these positive steps, the actual representation and active participation of women, especially young women (aged 18-35), in decision making bodies such as the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) and other local governance structures remains limited. The Local Government Act mandates the inclusion of women, but young women's presence in local councils is minimal,[14] leaving their voices largely absent from crucial discussions on security, urban planning, and community development. In 2017, Uganda introduced its National Urban Policy, emphasizing the protection of human rights, non-discrimination, and the inclusion of all residents, including young women, in urban and territorial development decisions. While this policy seeks to foster more inclusive participation, its actual impact on the ground has been slow. The exclusion of women and particularly young women (aged 18-35), from urban governance continues to hinder their ability to influence key decisions affecting their security, livelihoods, and well-being.[15]

5.1.2 Challenges facing young women in Kampala

Young women in Kampala face multiple barriers to economic and social participation, exacerbated by high unemployment rates and limited access to education and vocational training. Studies indicate that young women in Kampala are three times more likely than young men to be classified as "NEET" (Not in Education, Employment, or Training).[16] This is caused by early marriage, significant caregiving duties, and systemic inequalities in access to education and job opportunities. As a result, many young women are relegated to low-paying, precarious work in the informal economy, including roadside vending, domestic labour, and sex work; all jobs with limited social protection.

Moreover, young women's mobility in the city is frequently restricted by gender-based violence (GBV), including domestic violence, sexual assault, and harassment, particularly in high-crime, slum areas.[17] These violent conditions, coupled with the threat of sexual exploitation, curtail their ability to engage freely in public life and peace building activities such as civic awareness campaigns, community policing, and stakeholders' dialogue platforms. The prevalence of criminal gangs in these areas fosters an environment of lawlessness, further isolating young women from opportunities to participate in civic and peace initiatives, especially during periods of political instability, such as election cycles.

5.1.3 Urbanization, inequality, and increased vulnerability

Rapid urbanization in Kampala has led to an expansion of informal settlements, which are often marked by poverty, inequality, and inadequate public services. These settlements are breeding grounds for criminal activity, sexual exploitation, and heightened violence against young women. As the city grows, the lack of affordable housing and economic opportunities for newcomers can

14 Survey Report 'Women's Participation in Politics at The Local Government Level in Uganda' (EPRC,2021)
15 Survey Report 'Women's Participation in Politics at The Local Government Level in Uganda' (EPRC,2021).
16 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2018). Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Uganda: A Review of Progress and Gaps. New York: UNDP.
17 Kampala Capital City Authority. (2023). Annual Report on Gender and Urban Development. Kampala: KCCA Publications.

exacerbate the vulnerability of young women. Many migrate to the city without stable housing or support systems, making them more susceptible to exploitation and violence.

The absence of effective policing and inadequate urban management contribute to the proliferation of slums and informal settlements, where young women face daily risks of violence and exploitation. A previous study has noted that night-time trips to latrines in Kampala carry a risk of danger, such as theft, rape, or assault, most notably for young women.[18]

5.1.4 Recognizing young women as agents of change

Despite the numerous challenges they face, young women in Kampala are crucial actors in the peace building process. Their experiences with gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health rights, and socioeconomic marginalization provide invaluable insights into the city's security challenges. These young women possess the potential to drive change, given their demographic characteristics and the available affirmative action efforts, offering unique perspectives on addressing urban violence and inequality. Recognizing and amplifying their voices in peace building efforts ensures that their needs are adequately represented in governance and urban policy.

To effectively empower young women and integrate their contributions into peace efforts, the GoU must collaborate with a wide range of stakeholders, including civil society, the private sector, and international partners. A holistic approach that strengthens partnerships, promotes gender mainstreaming, and advocates for greater inclusion in local governance is necessary. Furthermore, initiatives such as entrepreneurship training, lobbying for policy reform, and enhancing community policing efforts are essential to ensure that young women can actively engage in urban governance and contribute to the long-term peace and stability of Kampala.

5.1.5 The role of the private sector in promoting peace

The private sector, for example, organizations like the Kampala City Traders Association (KASITA), can play a significant role in fostering inclusive peace efforts.[19] By engaging in initiatives such as promoting safe cities, advocating for gender-sensitive urban policies, and supporting conflict resolution mechanisms, businesses can contribute to creating a more secure and equitable environment for young women. Through partnerships with local government and civil society, the private sector can help bridge gaps between policy and practice, ensuring that the needs of young women are addressed in both the economic and security spheres. For example, KACITA partnered with International Alert and other local (SOs) to launch the Safer City Campaign, which contributed to promoting peace and sustainable conflict resolution mechanisms in Kampala City. The Safer City campaign also strengthened collaboration to reduce crime, violence, and conflicts and built a collaborative partnership to sustain awareness on maintaining mechanisms for ensuring peace and security in Kampala City,[20] including sensitization against crimes of theft, drug abuse, and gender-based violence, which mostly affect young women.

18 Mukwaya, P., et al. (2011). Urbanization and its Impact on Young Women in Kampala. Kampala: University of Uganda Press.

19 Kampala City Traders Association (KASITA). (2022). Promoting Inclusive Peace in Urban Settings. Kampala: KASITA Publications.

20 Centre for Economic, Social, Cultural Rights in Africa: Urban Safety and Security. Available at: https://cescra.org/urban-safety-and-security/

5.1.6 Recommendations

- Strengthen existing interventions that foster young women's safety, livelihoods and empowerment.
- Implement interventions that address the vulnerabilities and security threats of young women in Kampala, to enhance their ability to access educational and economic opportunities and eventually their engagement and participation in city governance and urban security efforts.
- Coordinate between government, civil society, and the private sector to create an inclusive and safe environment that empowers young women to take on active roles in shaping the future of Kampala and Uganda as a whole.

5.2 How women-led grassroots peacebuilding initiatives contribute to social development: A case study from Nigeria

Nigeria has experienced recurring regional or state legitimacy crises, which often hinder efforts at democratization, stability, economic development, and national unity since independence (Haldum and Opeyemi 2016). Women make up about half of Nigeria's population and play vital roles as mothers, producers, managers, community developers, and contributors to society (Makama 2013).

A study by Action Aid on the varied impact of rising insecurity in the lives of Nigerian women (2021) showed that women and girls in conflict and post-conflict situations in Nigeria suffer from severe violence and abuse, along with double deprivations that raise mortality rates and increase their vulnerability to exploitation. Moreover, the study further portrays how the outbreak and persistence of violent conflicts and crimes such as banditry, insurgency, militancy, herdsmen attacks, ritual killings, and separatist agitations have impacted the security and well-being of women in varying ways, including displacement, injury, death, loss of livelihood, psychological trauma and mental stress.

According to Omorogbe (2019), gender issues are a vital part of the ongoing problems with peace and security, which need to be addressed in Nigeria. Although the impact of insecurity is not specific to any one gender, women have borne a heavy burden in the conflicts and violence that have intensified over the past two decades.

Moreover, poverty and injustice not only exacerbate violent conflicts where women are disproportionately affected but also weaken tolerance and social solidarity, while fostering radicalism and terrorism, particularly acute in the northeast (Boas and Dunn 2007). While men are more often radicalized, the effects of violence are disproportionately experienced by women and children (Adeleye and Osadola 2022; Gbadeyan et al. 2024). This includes through internal displacement and food insecurity[21]. The statistics indicate that "women and girls make up at least 79% of approximately 2.5 million people displaced across Nigeria's northeast" (Titilope 2022). Such incidents not only instill fear but also disrupt the lives of young women, limiting their opportunities for education and personal development (Reuters 2024; Sloan et al. 2023).

[21] Joint Shadow Report of CEDAW Committee, 2017

5.2.1 Women as active agents of peace and conflict transformation in Nigeria

Despite these significant challenges, displaced women and victims of violence in Nigeria are using their agency, through peace building, political mobilization, and engagement (Reuters 2024) as they strive to compensate for the shortfalls in policy and humanitarian responses. They are not necessarily helpless victims, but actors in building just communities and lasting peace.

Through the development and implementation of its National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (NAP), Nigeria has made several strides in promoting women's role in peace-building processes. Nigeria's NAP is unique due to its localization at the state and local levels. Specifically, the development of State Action Plans (SAPs) and Local Action Plans (LAPs) are informed by community-level action plans, highlighting the importance of sub-national plans for United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325.[22] In addition, Nigeria's National Gender Policy is "to build a just society devoid of discrimination, where the needs and concerns of women, men, girls, boys, and other vulnerable groups are mainstreamed equitably into all sectors of national development".[23] Regardless of these interventions, women's political representation in Nigeria has decreased since 2011 (to only 4 percent of parliamentary seats).[24]

Grassroots efforts in Nigeria are often one of the main outlets of women's peace activism, given the relative lack of presence of women in the formal political realm. According to Donna (2000), those women are excluded from formal conflict resolution efforts yet are at the forefront of grassroots organizations that address the issues caused by prolonged violent conflict.[25] Their involvement in peace efforts spans a variety of initiatives, from dialogue facilitation to community-based conflict mediation. In Nigeria, grassroots women's involvement not only helps address local conflicts but also contributes to broader social development through improved community relations, economic empowerment, and better health and education outcomes.

5.2.2 Grassroots peacebuilding measures undertaken by women in Nigeria that foster social development

In conflict prone regions like the Niger Delta, Northeast Nigeria, and the Middle Belt, women frequently take the lead in efforts to reduce violence. Women's groups in these regions participate in peace negotiations and reconciliation efforts by utilizing their social roles as caregivers and community influencers. This involvement includes participation in the 'kungiyar marhaba' (hunters associations) and the Borno state-based Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) (Ayesha et al. 2020). Additionally, although women are often excluded from formal peace building discussions, at the national level, they negotiate locally to secure the return of abductees and have even offered themselves as substitutes for their children (Ayesha et al. 2020). In Northern Nigeria, women engage in entrepreneurial ventures and community mobilization. For instance, they train other women and youth in income generating activities, helping them cope with the war's impacts and providing alternatives to joining the jihadists[26]. Moreover, these tangible solutions are often overlooked by official peace missions, negotiators, and government

22 Federal Ministry of Women's Affairs and Social Development, 2017.
23 Federal Ministry of Women and Gender Affairs, 2021, page xviii.
24 The World Bank, 2023; Nkereuwem, 2023
25 Donna, R.M. (2000). Women in War and Peace: Grassroots Peacebuilding. United States Institute of Peace.
26 Global Studies Quarterly (2025). Available at: https://academic.oup.com/isagsq/article/5/1/ksaf003/8005162.

officials, yet they are vital for ending conflict and transforming the structural conditions that have fuelled violence.

Women in Nigeria have also established peace councils at the grassroots, such as Women's Peacebuilding Councils (WPCs) that act as mentorship platforms for women, where they convene to share their experiences on the available peace building initiatives, secure connections to peace and security stakeholders, and receive guidance on peace building and professional development. In addition, the Women Peace Mentor (WPM) Project, a UN Women initiative, facilitated inter-community dialogue and mediation, as well as advocacy and sensitization efforts, across four target local government areas in Plateau State.[27]

These platforms have been essential in helping to break down existing gender norms and barriers that have historically prevented women's involvement in peacebuilding at the community level (Mercy Corps 2024). Women's groups in Nigeria also provide early warning indicators of violent conflicts and advocate for greater attention to women's peace and security issues, including breaking down social and political barriers to ensure their involvement in peace building decision-making processes (Mercy Corps 2024).

Grassroots women's groups often promote education for girls, which has long-term implications for peace building and social development. For example, the Kebetkache Women Development, a non-governmental organization for women's advocacy and education has worked with women to build their capacity and facilitate their participation in community affairs (Oluwaseun 2021). By advocating for better access to education, women ensure that future generations are better equipped to contribute to a peaceful, stable society. In many Nigerian communities, women's efforts to educate young girls have transformed attitudes toward female education, promoting gender equality and preparing women to take on leadership roles in both peace efforts and community development (World Bank 2025).

5.2.3 Collaboration and support from like-minded actors

Women's groups deliver unique peace building contributions to their communities, yet their work would not be as effective without collaboration and support from other peace and security actors (Mercy Corps 2024). This includes community elders, religious leaders, security agencies, and other government actors who are invited to directly participate in community dialogue, mediation, and peace building activities and events organized by the women's groups at the grassroots. For this to be effective, women and girls must therefore be equipped with information and resources that may be used to facilitate and improve this coordination and conflict resolution work (Ebube 2023).

5.2.4 Tolerance and embracing diversity as key aspects of building peaceful communities

The diversity of the women's groups themselves contributes to fostering social cohesion and trust within their communities by acting as a bridge between divided ethnic and religious groups (WFDD 2020). This diversity has fostered inclusive initiatives and a vision of peace defined in terms of social justice (Gbadeyan et al 2024).

[27] UN Women (2016), Promoting Women's Engagement in Peace and Security in Northern Nigeria.

5.2.5 Youth Inclusion as an aspect of social development

The persistent conflicts and violence in Nigeria have a particularly damaging effect on the next generation given the negative impacts on education and livelihood opportunities.[28] Young women and young men regularly face several challenges and insecurities in Nigeria, all of which can further threaten their potential to achieve their aspirations. For young women, recent studies have shown that limited livelihood opportunities have led to prostitution and substance abuse. Women's groups in Nigeria have endeavoured to tackle these issues by engaging with youth and encouraging livelihood opportunities and skills training, as well as promoting education and awareness raising (Global Peace Foundation 2024).

5.3 Key challenges and recommendations

1. Women's grassroots groups in Nigeria fill important gaps that other peace and security actors cannot fill, such as helping young people who drop out of school due to conflicts and insecurity and increasing the visibility of women peace builders by advocating for their inclusion and leadership opportunities. Still, more resources should be allocated to the groups to strengthen the impact of their work.
2. Collaboration and support from other peace and security actors, particularly other male actors and community leaders, can contribute to the success of these women's groups. However, opportunities to include women members in male only groups, like the Traditional Council, should be explored to amplify women's voices in male dominated spaces.
3. Mobilize resources for women's groups to lead in the development of community-level action plans. The NAP process in Nigeria takes a bottom-up approach since community-level action plans inform the plans made at the local government areas, state, and national levels. However, there is a greater need to enhance the inclusion of the voices of women and other marginalized groups within the community-level action plans.
4. Connect women-led peacebuilding grassroots initiatives to other sectors, especially economic opportunities. Instead of implementing stand-alone peacebuilding activities and programmes, civil society actors should connect women's groups with other sectors that can positively affect their efforts in the long-term, particularly livelihood activities, which are critical in inclusive social development.

Women engaged in grassroots actions in Nigeria have become indispensable agents of peace and social development. Through their involvement in mediation, dialogue facilitation, and socioeconomic development initiatives, women at the grassroots level play a key role in solving and preventing conflict, promoting social cohesion, and fostering economic growth. Their efforts not only contribute to short-term peace but also lay the groundwork for sustainable development by proving conflict early warning information and promoting social justice. However, to maximize their impact, there needs to be increased support for their initiatives, better representation in political spaces, and greater acknowledgment of their contributions to peace building efforts.

28 Sloan, et al, 2023

6 Beyond participation: Women as architects of local peace and development[29]

6.1 Introduction

This year marks 25 years since UNSCR 1325 recognized the essential role of women in peace and security. Yet, following this significant victory, there is little cause for celebration. Armed conflicts are increasingly violent towards women and girls. The UN reports that since 2023, the proportion of women killed in conflicts has doubled, while grave violations affecting girls in conflict zones have risen by 35 percent (United Nations 2024). Despite this, women have been systematically excluded from the negotiation table. Men overwhelmingly control decision making on peace and security issues, and the incremental progress in addressing gender inequality is alarmingly slow. An analysis of over 50 processes by UN Women found that in 2023, women accounted for only 9.6 percent of negotiators, 13.7 percent of mediators and 26.6 percent of peace agreement signatories (United Nations 2024). Peace building—spanning conflict prevention, mediation, peace keeping, and state building—has become central to international efforts for sustainable peace. However, its outcomes have often been critiqued for their inconsistencies and for the challenges posed by local complexities and inadequate resources, making it a contentious and highly relevant topic for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers alike.

2025 is a pivotal year for gender justice, coinciding with key milestones and global initiatives. It marks the 25th anniversary of the UNSCR 1325 and the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, a foundational framework for advancing women's rights. WSSD2 marks 30 years since the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development, offering a key moment to evaluate progress on social and gender justice. Scheduled for November 2025 in Doha, Qatar, the Summit builds on the 1995 World Summit for Social Development, reaffirming commitments to social inclusion, poverty eradication, and decent work. Bringing together governments, civil society, and the private sector, WSSD2 aims to accelerate global social development and reinforce the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.).

The truth is that current efforts are not sufficient. Considering this reality, we must ask ourselves: what initiatives can genuinely provide women with access to negotiating tables? Why discuss equal representation when women remain largely excluded from negotiations? While we understand that peace processes must account for local contexts and needs—and that replicating programmes wholesale is often problematic—it is worth reflecting on the following: What actions have proven successful in promoting gender inclusion in peace making processes? How can we institutionalize good practices beyond quotas, making women's participation essential rather than optional?

This case study of the Cidade Mulher methodology implemented in Pernambuco, Brazil, builds on the persistent exclusion of women from peace processes to examine how feminist and locally driven initiatives can institutionalize gender equality within peace building efforts. Anchored in

[29] This section is authored by Marianne Oliveira.

the normative framework of the WPS agenda, and situated within Lefebvre's concept of the right to the city' and intersectional feminist theory (Crenshaw 1989; Ribeiro 2017), this analysis frames women's participation as both a spatial and political demand for justice and transformation. It asks how these practices can move beyond symbolic participation to ensure that women become essential architects of sustainable peace.

6.2 Challenges and opportunities for transformation

The WPS agenda faces persistent obstacles to ensuring women's meaningful participation in decision making. Advancing the WPS agenda requires a shift in power dynamics, not just the setting of goals. Its challenges stem from structural, political, and societal factors, particularly patriarchal systems that reinforce gender inequalities. Several factors hinder the WPS agenda's progress. Major issues include the insufficient implementation of women's rights, lack of adequate funding (United Nations 2024), and ineffective inclusion mechanisms. Additionally, misinformation, polarization, and political environments fuelled by fake news, hate speech, and inflammatory rhetoric undermine efforts to increase women's presence in decision making spaces (Buchanan 2021). A growing backlash against gender equality, including attacks on women's rights defenders and civil society organizations, creates a hostile climate for advancing the WPS Agenda. These dynamics appear at all levels, particularly in UN negotiations like the Human Rights Council (HRC), where disputes over gender and human rights are increasingly polarized (Dupraz-Dobias 2024).

Structural inequalities that shape women's exclusion from peace and security processes are deeply entangled with racialized and class-based dynamics. In contexts marked by urban poverty and systemic neglect, Black and low-income women experience overlapping forms of marginalization. This calls for an intersectional analysis that considers how race, gender, and class interact to produce differentiated vulnerabilities and forms of resistance (Crenshaw 1989; Ribeiro 2017). Without this lens, peacebuilding frameworks risk reproducing the same hierarchies they seek to dismantle.

In this broader context, two interrelated challenges are addressed in the following sections: first, the systemic barriers that limit women's participation in strategic decision making; and second, the transformative potential of women's engagement in local peace building efforts. Each will be explored in detail in the next two sections (6.2.1 and 6.2.2), respectively.

6.2.1 Women's role in strategic decision making

A critical examination of patriarchy is essential to understanding the WPS agenda, as it sustains gender inequality and male-dominated power structures. Gender stereotypes and biases restrict women's participation in public and political life. Discrimination and institutional resistance obstruct women's access to leadership and the implementation of gender-inclusive policies. Women in security institutions must navigate discriminatory workplaces and constantly prove their competence in male-dominant environments. Managers often justify excluding women from certain tasks under the guise of "care", reinforcing gendered barriers. The belief that 'women need to be protected' is conveniently used, for example, to overlook a female mediator for an assignment in a dangerous region, despite her experience and competence. Such decisions stem from the flawed assumption that women are more sensitive and vulnerable—traits that cast doubt on the ability of competent female professionals to perform their duties—and this undermines their career prospects (Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, DCAF, n.d.).

Furthermore, peace-making processes commonly begin with men at the table and the promise that women will be involved next, which often doesn't happen (Buchanan 2021). These systemic practices effectively silence women in peace processes.

Addressing these systemic barriers requires a feminist peace framework that tackles the root causes of conflict through an intersectional lens. Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality is particularly useful here, as it reveals how overlapping systems of race, gender, and class compound exclusion—even within peace and security institutions—thereby calling for more nuanced and context-responsive strategies. Ensuring women's full, equal and meaningful participation is essential for sustainable and inclusive peace. This requires creating safe and enabling environments for women to engage in peace negotiations without fear or restrictions, ensuring that their contributions lead to comprehensive and lasting solutions to conflict (Geneva Peace Week 2024). Cross-sectoral and transnational feminist networks play a key role in promoting gender equality by fostering dialogue and sharing best practices.

Although frameworks such as INSCR 1325 provide essential normative guidance, their effective implementation remains a challenge. Adopted in 2000, UNSCR 1325 was the first resolution to formally recognize the distinct impact of armed conflict on women and girls and to affirm the importance of their participation in all aspects of peacebuilding, including prevention, protection, relief, and recovery. It calls on all UN member states to ensure women's full and equal involvement in peace processes and to incorporate gender perspectives into conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction. However, despite its transformative potential, the resolution's implementation has been inconsistent and often symbolic. Strengthening accountability mechanisms and using the law as a tool to hold perpetrators of violence accountable are crucial steps towards promoting justice and equality. Feminist peace building must also integrate interdisciplinary efforts, sustained advocacy, capacity development, and innovative strategies to overcome systemic barriers. These are some of the actions that combine to bring the global community closer to realizing the aspirations of the WPS agenda (Geneva Peace Week 2024).

6.2.2 Women's transformative impact on local peacebuilding

During peace processes, it is essential to safeguard the agency of local populations, recognizing their unique perspectives, resilience and ability to create solutions adapted to their specific realities. Policymakers must prioritize policies that empower local communities, particularly women, to control their narratives and initiatives. Fawzia Koofi, speaking at a peace talk event in Geneva,[30] emphasized the need for the international community to support local populations instead of insisting on leading or acting on their behalf. This approach not only strengthens the legitimacy of peace processes but is also aligned with the principles of the WPS agenda, ensuring that local voices remain central in shaping their own futures.

The idea of the right to the city (Lefebvre 1996) offers a powerful framework to understand women's claims to urban space as political acts. This conceptual lens helps explain why Cidade Mulher participants prioritized concrete issues such as lighting, mobility routes, and infrastructure as critical tools for reclaiming dignity and safety in urban life. Beyond demands for services or safety, women engage in grassroots peace building as a form of spatial justice—

30 PeaceTalks: ''What does peace mean to you?'' Geneva Peace Week, 16 October 2024. Retrieved from https://www.peacetalks.net/pt/geneva-peace-week-2024/

reclaiming agency in the production of urban life and insisting on their visibility, participation, and belonging in public space.

The goals of the WPS agenda require concrete mechanisms, such as NAPs, to ensure meaningful participation. Their successful design and implementation depend on broad civil society mobilization and the recognition that WPS applies even in countries not experiencing armed conflicts. To advance gender-sensitive peacebuilding, it is essential to identify and support models of women's participation that effectively integrate gender perspectives into security policies and practices, while ensuring that these initiatives are contextually grounded and locally driven.

6.2.3 Case study—Cidade Mulher: Engaging women in urban peacebuilding in Pernambuco, Brazil

The Cidade Mulher (*Women City*) methodology, implemented in the Brazilian state of Pernambuco, is based on the international Women's Safety Audits approach developed by UN-Habitat (2023). Originally created in Canada in 1989, this methodology was later adapted by UN-Habitat as part of the Global Safer Cities Programme. The initiative adopts a holistic, integrated approach with multi-level and multi-sector governance to enhance urban livability and improve residents' quality of life. It is grounded in evidence that urban governance, participatory planning, and management contribute to greater safety.

In Pernambuco, where women make up over 50 percent of the population, the Cidade Mulher initiative was implemented between 2021 and 2022 in ten urban territories. It aimed to generate localized, gender-sensitive diagnostics of urban insecurity through participatory methodologies rooted in feminist principles. Adapted from UN-Habitat's Women's Safety Audits, the approach combined collective mapping, exploratory walks, and focus groups to capture both physical and emotional perceptions of safety in public spaces. Participants—diverse in age, race, and gender identity—identified critical safety concerns, including poor lighting, inadequate public infrastructure, limited access to basic services, and drug related violence.

The workshops revealed not only the material conditions that shape insecurity but also institutional neglect and feelings of abandonment. In response, women proposed actionable solutions such as improving lighting, creating safe mobility routes, expanding childcare and cultural spaces, and enhancing community policing. These recommendations were compiled and systematized to inform state level violence prevention strategies.

Despite the richness of data and the empowerment generated among participants, the initiative faced challenges in ensuring institutional responsiveness and implementation of proposed changes—particularly due to limited budgetary and infrastructural capacity. Still, it succeeded in fostering a sense of agency, increasing awareness of women's rights, and strengthening community bonds.

Key reflective questions guided the workshops—"What makes you feel safe in the city?", "Which places in your neighborhood are safe or unsafe?", "What is missing in your area to improve your sense of security?"—allowing women to articulate nuanced perspectives on safety that go beyond crime rates to include systemic exclusion.

This initiative underscores the need for policies that address multifaceted urban insecurities through participatory approaches. It demonstrates that locally rooted, feminist informed practices can generate not only relevant diagnostics but also empower communities to co-create solutions. Their voices are not only morally essential but also critical to achieving tangible, lasting impact in the design of safer, more equitable urban environments (ONU-Habitat 2023).

6.2.4 Lessons learned and recommendations for an inclusive peace agenda

The successful implementation of the WPS agenda requires structural and transformative approaches that dismantle barriers and promote tangible progress in gender equality. To achieve this, it is essential for feminist networks to build transnational solidarities, foster strategic collaboration, and amplify the voices of those advocating for accountability in addressing gender-based injustices.

The following recommendations outline key actions to drive forward this essential agenda.

Center locally driven and contextually grounded solutions

The Cidade Mulher case underscores the importance of locally driven solutions that reflect the realities of the communities they serve, whether in conflict or non-conflict settings. Policymakers and international actors must move beyond top-down models, empowering local women and grassroots collectives to diagnose needs and shape appropriate responses.

Institutionalize gender inclusion in peace processes

Women's participation must be embedded as a foundational principle in peace building, not treated as an optional add-on. This requires institutional frameworks that guarantee women's inclusion in decision-making spaces and ensure that their perspectives are central to the design, negotiation, and implementation of peace processes. Formal mechanisms such as gender quotas, gender-responsive budgeting, and participatory forums should be adopted to secure their engagement.

Strengthen accountability and monitoring mechanisms

A truly transformative WPS agenda depends on robust systems to measure progress and enforce accountability. This involves not only setting clear benchmarks, monitoring implementation gaps, and holding states and institutions responsible for unmet commitments. Projects like Cidade Mulher should incorporate participatory evaluation tools, such as indicators co-developed with participants, public follow-up sessions, or community scorecards, to assess implementation and reinforce collective ownership of proposed actions. Disaggregated data collection and independent evaluations are crucial tools to assess the impact of gender-related initiatives and drive evidence-based policy adjustments.

Address structural and political barriers to women's leadership

Advancing gender equality requires confronting deep-rooted systems of oppression, including patriarchal norms, discriminatory legal frameworks, and political exclusion. Advocacy efforts must focus on cultivating political will, mobilizing adequate funding, and dismantling barriers that prevent women—particularly those from marginalized backgrounds—from accessing and exercising leadership in peace and security arenas.

Apply intersectional, interdisciplinary, and cross-sectoral approaches

Effective peace building must involve cross-sectoral collaboration that incorporates gender perspectives into various sectors—security, health, education, and urban development—while

also applying an intersectional lens that accounts for the diverse experiences of women based on race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and other axes of identity. This ensures that women's needs are addressed holistically and that their contributions lead to comprehensive, lasting peace. Feminist networks and global advocacy play a critical role in linking these efforts and promoting sustainable peace. Peace building efforts must integrate an intersectional framework that recognizes how systems of oppression overlap and reinforce one another. Feminist strategies rooted in everyday realities—grounded in care, cultural relevance, and political resistance—are essential to advancing an inclusive and just urban peace agenda.

The future of the WPS agenda does not lie in drafting more resolutions, but in committing to the structural changes necessary for its full implementation (Rees 2020). It is more than a political framework—it is a call to action for justice, equality and sustainable peace. By moving from rhetoric to tangible actions, we can create a future in which the principles of the WPS agenda transcend aspirations and become lived realities for women and communities globally. Recognizing women as architects of peace—not merely participants—is essential to building inclusive, transformative, and enduring peace processes.

7 Looking forward to the Second World Summit for Social Development[31]

Instead of viewing peace and social development as two areas to bring together, the WSSD2 should push for a framework which sees *peace as social development* and *social development as peace*. In the wider peace studies literature this is referred to as *socioeconomic peace*, meaning full and free employment, the elimination of discrimination, and reduction of wealth disparities (Adolf 2009: 241-242). More concretely, the following constitute priority issue areas:

1. *An expansive understanding of peace*
   While political efforts are rightly focused on ending the violence of large-scale, inter-state, and regional conflicts (Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan) we cannot lose sight of peace at the individual, community, and local levels. These are the foundations for peace cultures and peace education and can reinforce social development agendas. Positive peace means inclusive communities, equal opportunity, human flourishing, and deserves equal attention and financing.
2. *A Partnerships approach*
   The summit should continue and reinforce a message of partnerships and collective effort. This includes partnerships between the global South and global north as well as between different countries within those categories, between groups within countries and between policy makers, practitioners and researchers. In this way localized and contextualized approaches to peace can be leveraged, as well as a more inclusive set of dialogues. This will be helpful for a people-centred approach to development.

31 This section is authored by Briony Jones.

3. *Open civic space*
   A vibrant civic space with an active civil society is vital for socioeconomic peace. It helps to keep decision-makers accountable, to demand progressive approaches to social development, and to ensure that dialogue and disagreement remain non-violent.
4. *An Agenda of care*
   Unpaid care work is vital to peacetime and conflict and needs to be supported through various policies, ensuring that life is sustained, and value can be generated through the paid and unpaid work of others. Bringing care into the discussions, as envisaged in the Doha Political Declaration (2025), will address gender equality, economic equality, and the costs of violence.
5. *Invest in social development*
   Investing in social development is investing in peace, and will have important social, economic, and political returns for all.

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