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The “Peace Huts”

Empowering Women in Liberia’s Peacebuilding Efforts

Lucie Calléja

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ISBN 978-3-032-11849-3 ISBN 978-3-032-11850-9 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-11850-9>

This work was supported by Universidade Católica Portuguesa.

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FOREWORD

“The ‘Peace Huts initiative’ in Liberia stands as a powerful testament to how a dramatic conflict situation can be transformed, in a simple and compelling way, from violence to peace. This book captures the vital role of grassroots movements in peacebuilding, particularly the leadership of local women in conflict prevention, reconciliation, and the pursuit of sustainable peace. Through an insightful mixed-methods approach, the author provides a unique analysis of community-driven resilience while challenging traditional peacebuilding models.

This remarkable work—both captivating in its reading and rigorous in its scholarship—demonstrates a refined and meticulous understanding of gender dynamics, conflict resolution, and sustainable peace. It is a compelling contribution to the field of Peace and Conflict Studies, offering valuable perspectives for scholars and practitioners alike.”

Lisbon, Portugal

Her Excellency Ana Martinho
Ambassador of Portugal
Associate Researcher CIEP/
Católica Lisbon

Acknowledgments To the memory of Ma'Annie, to her son and family, and to the Liberian people, especially the 'Peace Huts women' who welcomed me with trust and love.

To my family, for being my daily source of motivation and support, and without whom this experience would not have been possible.

To the Institute for Political Studies of Universidade Católica Portuguesa, and particularly to Professor Mónica Dias, for the precious advice given along the way.

To the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia of the Portuguese Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education for providing me with a Scholarship Grant to conduct my doctoral research between 2021 and 2024.

To Católica Doctoral School and the Post-Doctoral Program in Integral Human Development (DHI) for supporting me in the publication of this book.

To all those who, in some way, contributed to the elaboration of this work.
My most profound Thank You.

Competing Interests The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this manuscript.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lucie Calléja Drawing on her academic experience, Lucie's research interests focus on conflict resolution and peacebuilding, particularly across Africa, with an emphasis on community-based initiatives and women's participation. Her previous research has explored topics such as women's roles in Cabo Delgado's conflict, the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, the gender-environment nexus, and transnational terrorism. Lucie holds a Ph.D. in International Relations, Security and Defense, and is a researcher at the Institute for Political Studies of *Universidade Católica Portuguesa*. From 2021 to 2024, she was Research Fellow at the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) and she is currently Post-Doctoral Research Fellow in Integral Human Development (CADOS-DHI) at *Universidade Católica Portuguesa*.

ABBREVIATIONS

ACCORD	African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes
AU	African Union
AWCPD	Women's Committee on Peace and Development
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CCR	Centre for Conflict Resolution
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
CRC	<i>Convention on the Rights of the Child</i>
CSMO	Civil Society Monitoring Observatory
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CSW	Commission on the Status of Women
DDRR	Disarmament, Demobilisation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration
DPKO	Department for Peacekeeping Operations
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EU	European Union
FAS	Femmes Africa Solidarité
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
GAP	Gender Action Plan
GEWE	AU Strategy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment
GIWPS	Georgetown University's Institute for Women, Peace and Security
GNWP	Global Network of Women Peacebuilders
ISS	Institute for Security Studies

LNAP	Liberia National Action Plan
LDG	Legal Working Group
LWI	Liberia Women Initiative
MARWOPNET	Mano River Women's Peace Network
NAP	National Action Plan
NCSCCL	National Civil Society Council of Liberia
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NGOWG	NGO Working Group on Women, Peace, and Security
NSC	National Steering Committee
PBF	Peacebuilding Fund
PRS	Poverty Reduction Strategy
PSC	Peace and Security Council
PSD	Peace and Security Department
RECs	Regional Economic Communities
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SAWID	South African Women in Dialogue
SDGEA	Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa
SSR	Security Sector Reform
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
TWG	Technical Working Group
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
UNMIL	United Nations Mission in Liberia
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
VSLAs	Village Savings and Loan Associations
VYWL	Visionary Young Women in Leadership
WANEP	West African Peace Network
WGDD	Directorate of Gender, Women and Development
WIPNET	Women in Peacebuilding Network
WPS	Women, Peace and Security
WSR	Women's Situation Rooms

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Introduction

Abstract This chapter introduces the concepts, research questions, and methodology of the book. It situates the study within feminist debates on peacebuilding and the Women, Peace and Security agenda, with a focus on UNSCR 1325. The chapter outlines the book’s critical approach to women’s participation in peacebuilding and introduces Liberia as the empirical case through which local women’s agency and grassroots peace practices are examined.

Keywords Peacebuilding · UNSCR 1325 · Women’s participation · Civil society

I naturally expected that women would be sitting at the decision-making and policy-making tables by now, particularly on issues of national security and international security. But what we have never done, and it makes me depressed about the human species, is overcome the gendered power structure.

Elise Boulding (2001)

Elise Boulding (1920–2010), a major contributor to peace studies, described a culture of peace as “a mosaic of identities, attitudes, values” that accommodates difference and conflict while maintaining a balance between community cooperation and the need for individual space

(Boulding, 1998, 2001). Peace cultures are identifiable yet diverse; most societies display a coexistence of peace and violence, with a dynamic equilibrium between autonomy and cooperation. Crucially, peace cultures rely on spaces for problem-solving. Boulding identifies three stages in the problem-solving process: the initial conflict situation (including war and threats); a second stage involving arbitration, mediation, and negotiation; and a final stage of cooperation, integration, and union (Boulding, 1998). It is from the second and third stages of this process that the concept of peacebuilding emerges. Johan Galtung introduced this concept in 1976, stating:

The mechanisms that peace is based on should be built into the structure and be present there as a reservoir for the system itself to draw upon [...]. More particularly, structures must be found that remove causes of wars and offer alternatives to war in situations where wars might occur. (Galtung, 1976: 298)

Galtung's approach to peacebuilding emphasises structural transformation and a bottom-up logic—rooted in communities but extending to state-level actors. His vision has laid the basis of the United Nations' (UN) understanding of peacebuilding, as articulated in the 2000 Brahimi Report. There, peacebuilding is defined as a long-term process that aims to “reassemble the foundations of peace and provide the tools for building on those foundations something that is more than just the absence of war” (Brahimi, 2000: 3).

In this book, peacebuilding is understood as a process aimed at creating sustainable peace through the inclusion of community capacities and the creation of structures addressing the roots of conflict. In this sense, peacebuilding adds a structural frame to the concept of peace cultures developed by Boulding. This understanding was articulated most clearly in the early 1990s, following its formal introduction by UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali in the 1992 *Agenda for Peace*, which emphasised prevention, post-conflict reconstruction, and the participation of societies emerging from war (Boutros-Ghali, 1992). However, the institutionalisation of peacebuilding within United Nations practice has only partially realised this vision. Despite repeated UN reports stressing the need to broaden participation in post-conflict peacebuilding, including the involvement of women, youth, marginalised groups, civil society, and the private sector, the modern peacebuilding agenda largely

prioritised state-centric negotiations and military stabilisation. While these initiatives responded to urgent post-conflict needs, they also entrenched a model of peace that privileges actors already legible to the state and international donors. As a result, women’s contributions to stability—through organising, mediation, and social repair—have remained conceptually invisible or politically marginal. This gap between institutional recognition and lived practices of peace is precisely the analytical space in which this book intervenes.

WOMEN AND PEACEBUILDING

This book focuses on women’s roles in peacebuilding, a factor that has been analysed as an indicative variable of the success or failure of effective peacebuilding processes (Hudson, 2006). According to the UN, peace processes consist of informal and formal activities, the latter referring to “early warning, preventive diplomacy, conflict prevention, peacemaking, peace-building and global disarmament” involving activities such as “conflict resolution, peace negotiations, reconciliation, reconstruction of infrastructure and the provision of humanitarian aid” (United Nations, 2002a: 53). Although women have often been active in informal peacebuilding—through peace protests, inter-group dialogue, empowerment of citizens—they remain largely excluded formal processes, also named Track I diplomacy¹ (United Nations, 2002b: 68). The UN’s 2002 report² (2002b) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) emphasises that given the disproportionate impact of conflict on women, they must be included across all levels of peacebuilding, including in Tracks I and II, to voice their concerns and foster social justice. Yet, decades of feminist scholarship have shown that their inclusion without transformation may reproduce the gendered hierarchies of international security institutions. As Shepherd (2016) argues, the agenda’s emphasis on increasing

¹ Referring to the *African Union Mediation Support Handbook*, Track I diplomacy corresponds to official diplomacy and decision-making by governments or official representatives; Track II refers to unofficial dialogues or negotiations between specialists, NGOs, businesses, or ordinary citizens; and Track III involves unofficial works of third parties emanating from communities towards peace and reconstruction (ACCORD & AU, 2014: 184).

² United Nations (2002b). *Report of the Secretary-General on women, peace and security*, (S/2002/1154). Available at: <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/ods/S-2002-1154-E.pdf>.

the number of women present in formal institutions has produced a form of gendered governance. Participation is framed as inclusion within state and multilateral decision-making structures, not as a transformation of those structures themselves. Women are therefore encouraged to enter existing security architectures rather than question how militarism, hierarchy, and bureaucratic logics shape peacebuilding priorities. This framing risks narrowing women's political agency and overlooks the multiple spaces where women already make peace outside state-defined arenas. Shepherd's critique alerts us to the danger of mistaking the presence of women in institutions for a reordering of the politics of peace itself: representation becomes a metric of compliance, rather than a rethinking of what peace is, who builds it, and how.

Rather than assuming that women "naturally" mobilise in informal peace activism, it is the institutional architecture of peacebuilding that recognises authority in armed groups, state negotiators, and international mediators, while systematically overlooking community-based forms of conflict resolution. This epistemic hierarchy positions grassroots practices as peripheral, even when they constitute the daily infrastructure of social order. In this sense, the inclusion of all social groups enhances pluralism to develop an inclusive and democratic society.

The growth of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) has provided platforms for women and men to defend common interests and, for the major part, to develop a peace culture. Women's organisations in particular have played pivotal roles, serving as bridges between local communities and regional, national, and inter-governmental actors (Boulding, 1998). International and governmental bodies have increasingly recognised the need to support women's rights and enhance their peacebuilding capacities.

A major milestone was the 2000 adoption of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), which calls for gender mainstreaming in peace operations and the full participation of women at every stage of peace processes (United Nations, 2002b). The resolution asserts the intrinsic link between peace and gender equality and endorses that "the equal access and full participation of women in power structures and their full involvement in all efforts for the prevention and resolution of conflicts are essential for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security" (UN Press Release

SC/6816, 2000). Based on four pillars, including prevention, participation, protection, and recovery, UNSCR 1325 acknowledges women as peacemakers and peacebuilders, and not only as victims of armed conflicts.

In the years following the adoption of UNSCR 1325, seven additional resolutions expanded the Women, Peace and Security agenda. Regional organisations such as the African Union (AU) have adopted this framework through initiatives and instruments like the Protocol to the African Union Charter on Human Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (2005), and the establishment of a Directorate of Gender, Women and Development (WGDD) in 2000, designing programmes to promote women's rights and involvement in peace processes across Africa.

Moreover, several national commitments have been made through the adoption of National Action Plans (NAPs) to reach specific goals and further implement the Women, Peace and Security agenda. NAPs constitute a guideline for governments to adopt the best practices to establish just and inclusive peace and follow the implementation of UNSCR 1325 through evaluation, monitoring, and transparency. The African continent therefore offers an instructive vantage point: WPS architectures have expanded rapidly, yet their translation into practice reveals how "inclusion" is continuously negotiated, instrumentalised, and resisted.

Today, conflicts and instability persist across the African continent, hindering socio-economic development and peace in the region. Although the large diversity of contexts and realities observed in Africa do not permit undertaking a singular analysis of the topic, women's experiences during conflict and their significant exclusion from peace processes appear as a recurrent and common characteristic in the region. Data published by the African Union reveals the weak percentages of women taking part in peace negotiations in Africa. For instance, between 1992 and 2011, only two of sixteen peace processes in Africa included 5% women signatories and only three had women lead mediators. In the five cases where women were part of negotiating teams, the highest female representation was 25% in Kenya (2008), followed by 12% in the Democratic Republic of Congo (2003) (African Union, 2016: 20). These figures illustrated not a shortage of capable women, but a filtering of who counts as "legitimate" peace actors within existing diplomatic infrastructures.

Nevertheless, the African continent offers a compelling landscape for studying WPS efforts. The African Union has played an important role in those efforts and remains today an essential actor promoting gender

equality across Africa. Moreover, several African women mediators such as the Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET) and the West African Peace Network (WANEP) have supported the implementation of UNSCR 1325 and women's participation through training, advocacy, and grassroots mobilisation. Various programmes and donor organisations such as the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have also been instrumental in enhancing the inclusion of women.

Yet, despite many positive initiatives on Women, Peace and Security in Africa and around the world, studies have shown that women still constitute a marginalised group in peace and security processes (UN Women, 2018).³ Their participation in peacebuilding processes remains “one of the least advanced areas and one where advances are highly vulnerable to regression” (UN Women, 2018: 3). Various major global challenges were identified, including persisting patriarchal attitudes, ongoing violent conflict, and the undervaluation of women's capabilities. In this sense, it is essential to acknowledge the central roles women play in peace and reconciliation and the notable progress achieved in several African countries.

This book centres on Liberia to explore the implementation of UNSCR 1325 and the role of grassroots civil society actors. Liberia provides a valuable case study due to women's prominent activism towards sustainable peace. Liberian women's engagement became increasingly influential during the civil war starting from 1980, especially through peaceful marches, campaigns, and community-led initiatives, such as the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace in 2003. This movement united Christian and Muslim women in non-violent protests, which ultimately pressured warring parties to sign a peace agreement. After the signature of the peace agreement in 2003, Liberia began a post-conflict transition marked by democratic consolidation and institutional rebuilding. Women's civil society organisations played a crucial role in drafting and operationalising Liberia's National Action Plan (NAP) on UNSCR 1325, ensuring local ownership through public consultations and advocacy. The 2005 election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Africa's first

³ The 2018 report emphasises women's meaningful involvement and representation in peace processes and reflects the discussions of a group of experts regarding the good practices and lessons learned from various experiences. The report outlines recommendations and efforts needed for the 20th anniversary of UNSCR 1325 in 2020.

female president, marked a symbolic and practical shift towards women's empowerment.

Nevertheless, despite active civil society engagement, grassroots women often remain excluded from formal decision-making. The continuous weakness of the post-conflict state prejudices the effective implementation of UNSCR 1325, which requires stable and functional institutions. Liberia sits at the intersection of WPS promise and WPS limitation: it is celebrated as a model of women-led mobilisation while simultaneously revealing how grassroots achievements are later institutionalised in technocratic, donor-driven forms. The Liberian post-war context is therefore not only illustrative of women's mobilisation; it offers an analytical window into how global frameworks are reworked in places where the state is weak, donor priorities are unstable, and social authority is diffuse.

This book examines how UNSCR 1325 is being translated into action on the ground through grassroots civil society initiatives. It pursues two primary objectives: first, to assess the impact of international policy frameworks—particularly UNSCR 1325—on local women and communities in patriarchal contexts; second, to analyse how community-based civil society initiatives contribute to implementing UNSCR 1325 at the local level. More specifically, this project seeks to explore the following questions:

- a. Does UNSCR 1325 empower local women's participation in peacebuilding initiatives?
- b. How do local civil society actors contribute to the implementation of UNSCR 1325 and to women's empowerment at the community level?
- c. To what extent does UNSCR 1325 serve as a tool for women's groups to carry out their peacebuilding work, and how does the resolution influence their strategies?
- d. What forms of cooperation and interconnection exist between different levels of implementation?

Liberia is therefore analytically valuable not because it is "exceptional", but because it renders visible the frictions through which global norms are negotiated, translated, and reappropriated in local configurations of power. The research framework analyses the instruments and relationships mobilised at regional, national, and local levels in an African context,

to implement policy frameworks on the ground and promote the local ownership of UNSCR 1325. As I consider that grassroots civil society organisations constitute fundamental actors in the local implementation of UNSCR 1325, it appears essential to provide them with an adequate environment. In this sense, regional and national structures have a central role to enable an effective and localised application of UNSCR 1325. Furthermore, the study explores the improvements and challenges encountered during the implementation of UNSCR 1325 in post-conflict settings. Besides, this book contributes to the literature on civil society, peacebuilding, and women's engagement in peace processes, using the Liberian experience—and in particular, the Peace Huts initiative—as a lens to examine progress and persisting challenges in the WPS agenda.

WHY PEACE HUTS AND 1325 MATTER?

We must continue to unite in sisterhood to turn our tears into triumph.
There is no time to rest until our world achieves wholeness and balance,
where all men and women are considered equal and free.

Leymah Gbowee

Liberian Noble Peace Prize Laureate,
Oslo, December 10, 2011.

In recent decades, women have become a central focus of scholarship in international relations and peace studies. Since the end of the Cold War, various feminist approaches have emerged to challenge dominant realist paradigms, especially concerning the marginalisation of women in peace processes. These debates have introduced critical perspectives on conflict, peace, and gender, evolving alongside the global transformations of contemporary societies. The status and rights of women now represent a pivotal challenge in international security, peacebuilding, and democratic consolidation. Post-structuralist theorists (e.g., Vincent, 2003) have argued that gender is socially constructed, encouraging us to go beyond a binary lens of gender equality and examine how gender norms are shaped and reshaped by societal forces. This perspective calls for an exploration of how gender dynamics are embedded in peace and conflict processes, particularly in transitional societies.

In this sense, gender is not a variable that can simply be “added” to existing models of peacebuilding. It is a constitutive dimension of how

violence is produced, experienced, and remediated. Feminist peace scholarship therefore urges us to look at how peace is enacted in everyday environments—markets, households, neighbourhood councils—rather than only in formal negotiation rooms or international institutions.

African scholars and policymakers have increasingly recognised the interlinkages between gender and peace, stressing the need for women’s meaningful participation in all levels of decision-making to achieve sustainable peace (Makan-Lakha & Ngandu, 2017). Legal frameworks such as UNSCR 1325, adopted in 2000, aim to ensure women’s involvement in peacebuilding across all decision-making levels. These commitments have laid the foundation for the Women, Peace and Security agenda, which has gained traction across African states. As a result, a strong normative framework has emerged at continental and regional levels, driven by both institutional commitments and advocacy by African women’s organisations.

Yet, the operationalisation of these frameworks has often privileged National Action Plans, state institutions, and donor-facing NGOs. This institutional focus risks obscuring the ways in which African women have historically mobilised through informal networks, spiritual authority, and community mediation practices. Liberia’s Peace Huts, as I will argue, are not a derivative local project inspired by 1325. Rather, they exemplify a long lineage of women’s peace activism that predates, exceeds, and occasionally contradicts the procedural logics of the WPS agenda.

The African Union (AU) has established legal mechanisms aligned with the Women, Peace and Security agenda, and African activists have increasingly engaged in lobbying activities. In some cases, key leadership positions have been delegated to African women. Nevertheless, as Shepherd (2016) reminds us, institutional inclusion does not automatically equal feminist transformation. Grassroots women—who sustain everyday forms of peace—are routinely excluded precisely because their practices do not fit the governance logics that structure the WPS agenda. Although UNSCR 1325 is often perceived as an essential mechanism for women’s participation in peacebuilding processes, community-level initiatives often go unacknowledged by international actors, and the implementation of the resolution remains fragile. Consequently, there is a continuous imbalance between national, regional, or international commitments and the lived experiences of women in conflict-affected settings. The Peace Huts vividly show this tension: they are deeply embedded in local moral

authority and social reproduction, yet remain illegible to the bureaucratic metrics that donors and policy frameworks use to evaluate “participation”.

This book aims to respond to that gap. It highlights the need to establish structures and mechanisms inclined towards the meaningful participation of grassroots women in peacebuilding. Drawing on a case study design, it explores how grassroots organisations and local women engage with and shape the WPS agenda. The Liberian context—marked by diverse cultures and enduring patriarchal norms—offers a compelling setting to study the challenges and possibilities of implementing UNSCR 1325 and empowering women. My interest in this topic stems from extensive field research conducted across Africa, where the United Nations is engaged in peace operations more than in any other part of the world. Liberia, in particular, offers a rich site for understanding how local actors contribute to post-conflict peacebuilding and women’s empowerment. Peace Huts are not merely community associations: they are arenas of norm translation, where global discourses on peace and rights meet customary authority, religious ethics, and the affective labour of women. The book therefore does not treat UNSCR 1325 as a policy checklist to be evaluated, but as a living process through which Liberian women appropriate global norms.

CONCEPTUALISING ‘LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION’ OF 1325

This book departs from compliance-based approaches that evaluate whether states deliver UNSCR 1325 through institutions, funding, or indicators. Instead, implementation is analysed as a negotiated process in which actors translate global norms into existing moral economies, social infrastructures, and collective identities. It is less a technical exercise of policy enforcement than a struggle over meaning, legitimacy, and authority. Local implementation is therefore understood as the ways in which women’s organisations, community leaders, and grassroots activists reinterpret WPS principles to address their own political realities. Rather than applying a universal framework, they integrate its vocabulary into pre-existing repertoires of activism, conflict mediation, and communal responsibility.

This perspective also requires moving beyond homogeneous notions of “the local”. Community actors in Liberia include grassroots groups, religious networks, traditional authorities, survivors’ collectives, and feminist NGOs. Their engagements with UNSCR 1325 are partial and strategic,

shaped by local understandings of security, dignity, and social stability. As Kunz (2021) demonstrates, the politics of feminist knowledge are messy and generative: women rework international agendas while navigating donors, NGOs, and state institutions in ways that blur the boundaries between compliance, survival, and appropriation. Attention to local implementation therefore directs us to mechanisms that operate outside conventional policy spaces. As Luna and Whetstone (2022) argue, norm translation is mediated by symbolic meanings, relational dynamics, and historical inequalities. The outcome is not imitation of institutional expectations, but hybrid peace practices that recast what counts as protection, participation, and authority.

Liberia illustrates these dynamics. Local women's networks have mobilised the symbolic capital of UNSCR 1325 to sustain peace, confront patriarchy, and claim political space. Through Peace Huts, mediation initiatives, and community-based justice mechanisms, women enact forms of agency that exceed bureaucratic understandings of WPS implementation. These practices are embedded in memories of war, community reciprocity, and vernacular epistemologies of peace. By conceptualising implementation in this way, this book moves beyond indicators and state-centric benchmarks. It analyses how women enact the WPS agenda in spaces where formal authority is weak or absent, and where feminist knowledge is produced in everyday interactions. The goal is not to measure fidelity to policy documents, but to understand how global norms are made meaningful and politically consequential in local practice.

POSITIONING THE BOOK IN WPS SCHOLARSHIP

This book is situated within three interrelated strands of scholarship on Women, Peace and Security (WPS). First, policy-oriented research evaluates the diffusion of UNSCR 1325, measuring progress through National Action Plans, institutional participation, and donor-driven reforms (UN O'Reilly et al., 2015; Women, 2015). While this literature documents gaps and underperformance, it generally assumes that norm compliance and institutional optimisation are the appropriate measures of feminist progress. Its focus remains top-down, emphasising how states, UN agencies, and donors should fulfil pre-defined benchmarks.

Second, critical feminist and postcolonial approaches interrogate the agenda's underlying assumptions. Rather than asking how to implement WPS more effectively, these scholars ask what kind of political

order UNSCR 1325 produces. Shepherd (2016), Otto (2015), Heathcote (2011), and Cohn (2008) show how the agenda reifies militarised governance, essentialises women as either victims or peacebuilders, and recentres the state as the primary guarantor of security. Postcolonial analyses deepen this critique, emphasising the erasure of intersectional experience and the privileging of Global North epistemologies. As Haastrup and Hagen (2020) argue, the agenda reproduces racialised hierarchies: women from the Global South are positioned as beneficiaries of protection, while northern states and international organisations appear as rational providers of security knowledge. Mama and Okazawa-Rey (2012) and other African feminist scholars extend this critique, showing that African women are not merely recipients of international norms but political actors whose practices precede and exceed UN policy frameworks.

Third, an emerging strand examines localisation, norm translation, and the everyday practices of peacebuilding. Instead of treating “local actors” as implementers of externally designed agendas, this scholarship explores how communities reinterpret and rework WPS principles. Luna and Whetstone (2022) demonstrate that localisation is not a linear diffusion process but a contested terrain where norms are fragmented, resisted, and reimagined. These studies shift attention from formal structures to informal networks, social infrastructures, and material constraints, revealing how feminist agency is enacted outside institutional frameworks.

This book aligns with this third strand but advances it in two ways. First, it argues that localisation is not synonymous with decentralised institutionalisation. Liberian women often operate outside national bureaucracies, developing autonomous infrastructures of peace that function at the margins of state authority.

Second, it demonstrates that local actors do not simply fill governance gaps left by absent or ineffective institutions. They generate alternative political imaginaries that redefine participation, accountability, and security beyond the scope envisioned by WPS bureaucracies. Thus, this book does not ask whether Liberia has successfully implemented UNSCR 1325. Instead, it investigates how Liberian women activists and community leaders mobilise and transform the agenda to confront violence, negotiate authority, and rebuild everyday life. Treating UNSCR 1325 as a discursive resource, rather than a compliance instrument, enables us to see how its meanings are reshaped by those who invoke it and the political contexts in which they work.

Ultimately, this study seeks to reposition agency within WPS scholarship. It builds on critiques of militarisation, essentialism, and postcolonial erasure, yet moves beyond abstract debates to examine how women enact peace under conditions of uncertainty and constraint. By grounding this analysis in Liberia, the book provides an empirically rich account of how feminist practices endure long after international peacebuilding actors have departed.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This book is grounded in the case study of the ‘Peace Huts’—a grassroots, women-led initiative aimed at fostering conflict resolution and peacebuilding at the community level in Liberia. The analysis draws on theoretical frameworks related to peacebuilding, civil society, and women’s empowerment, with particular inspiration from the work of Elise Boulding. The objective is to assess whether national and regional commitments to UNSCR 1325 translate into meaningful local outcomes, and to understand the Peace Huts’ role in sustaining inclusive peace and empowering women. The research employs an exploratory case study approach, following Robert Yin’s (2003) guidance that case studies are particularly suited to capture complex, context-bound phenomena using a wide range of evidence—documents, artefacts, interviews, and observations.

The case study design enables an in-depth examination of the interaction between global frameworks (the Women, Peace and Security agenda) and local realities. It seeks to inform the development of guidelines for future interventions related to the implementation of UNSCR 1325 at the local level. More precisely, the analysis of the Peace Hut initiative combines qualitative and quantitative data to capture grassroots perspectives on the Women, Peace and Security agenda. The interviews, focus group discussions, and questionnaire centred on several core themes, including local awareness of UNSCR 1325, funding mechanisms for WPS initiatives, collaborations among stakeholders, and key priorities for advancing women’s participation in peacebuilding.

Case Selection

The Peace Huts of Liberia, initially led by the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET), aims at understanding a specific contemporary

phenomenon within a given context. The case study of Liberia was selected for its historical and contemporary significance in women-led peace activism. The criteria guiding case selection include: (1) the pivotal role of the women's mass movement in Liberia's peace process; (2) the emphasis on bottom-up, community-led peacebuilding; (3) the ongoing local efforts to promote women's empowerment and peace education.

The Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET), a branch of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), originally led the Peace Huts. WIPNET has been instrumental in promoting women's empowerment on several issues of socio-economic and political nature and advocating for inclusive peace across Liberia. The study was conducted over a period of three and a half years (2020–2023), with data collection concentrated between July and September 2021.

Methods of Data Collection

Data collection combined document analysis, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and a short questionnaire. These methods have enabled a multifaceted understanding of local women's involvement in peacebuilding and their interaction with national and international actors.

The gathering and analysis of existing documents constitute an important part of the research to increase knowledge and collect information. Since this practice does not require direct contact with the object of study, it can be considered relatively accessible (Melo et al., 2008). The preliminary phase involved reviewing national and international policy frameworks, NGO and government reports, survey results, as well as selected academic literature on UNSCR 1325. Several articles and books were identified as important sources of knowledge, providing various perspectives on women's involvement in peacebuilding. As an introduction to the topic, *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Conflict* (Aoláin et al., 2018) offers important insights into the Women, Peace and Security agenda and the study of gender in conflict and post-conflict settings. In addition, *Gender, Conflict, Peace & UNSC Resolution 1325* (Shekhawat, 2018) and *Gender, Peace and Security: Implementing the UN Security Council Resolution 1325* (Gizelis & Olsson, 2015) provide essential elements to study the implementation of UNSCR 1325. While documents have explicit importance in data collection, they might not be always accurate. Indeed, Yin argues that “in fact, you need to remember that every document was written for some specific purpose and some

specific audience other than those of the case study being done” (2003: 87).

Subsequent fieldwork involved 26 semi-structured interviews with a range of stakeholders, including government officials, UN representatives, women’s organisation leaders, activists, and community members. These interviews were informal and semi-structured, conducted both virtually and in person, between July and September 2021. Semi-structured interviews are an important tool used to collect qualitative data for interpretive study (Melo et al., 2008). Participants were selected based on their knowledge of the local context, roles, and accessibility, especially in light of COVID-19 constraints. The actors interviewed constitute important sources of information regarding (1) the role of women in peacebuilding processes and the implementation of UNSCR 1325 in Liberia; (2) the relationships between grassroots communities, civil society, the government of Liberia, the United Nations, and other regional organisations; (3) and the role of CSOs and local structures, especially the Peace Hut mechanism, in the implementation of UNSCR 1325. As expressed by Yin, well-informed respondents “provide the case study investigator with insights into a matter but also can suggest sources of corroboratory or contrary evidence – and also initiate the access to such sources” (Yin, 2003: 90). In parallel, I was a visiting researcher at the Kofi Annan Centre for Conflict Transformation in Monrovia, Liberia, which provided academic resources and further opportunities to engage with scholars and practitioners working in the field of conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and women’s rights.

Eight focus group discussions were held with members of the Peace Huts, referred to as ‘Peace Huts women’ regarding the local ownership of UNSCR 1325 in their respective communities. The communities were selected based on their activity level and accessibility during the rainy season, in collaboration with the National President of the Peace Huts, who provided crucial support in facilitating access and coordinating the visits. The Peace Huts were located in the Northern part of Liberia (See Fig. 1.1), in the communities of Gbarma (Gbarpolu County), Malema (Bomi County), Bo-Waterside (Grand Cape Mount County), Weala (Margibi County), Totota (Bong County), Ganta (Nimba County), and Schieffelin (Montserrado County). I also attended a community meeting held by the Lutheran Church in Liberia Trauma Healing and

Reconciliation Program in District 1, Grand Bassa County, and a workshop on conflict resolution for Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) organised by WIPNET in Lakpazee Community, Monrovia.

All interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in English, the official language of Liberia and the language most Peace Hut members speak fluently. Only in one instance was a local dialect used; clarification was then provided with the informal assistance of my Liberian driver, who accompanied me throughout the fieldwork to ensure mutual



Fig. 1.1 Map of the fieldwork in Liberia (This OpenStreetMap is made available under the Open Database License: <http://opendatacommons.org/licenses/odbl/1.0/>. Any rights in individual contents of the database are licensed under the Database Contents License: <http://opendatacommons.org/licenses/dbcl/1.0/>)

understanding. No local research assistants were employed, and all data collection was carried out directly by myself to maintain consistency and confidentiality.

Given the significant distances between the selected sites (often four to five hours' drive apart) and the climatic constraints of the rainy season, my presence in each community was limited to the duration of the focus group discussion and informal exchanges. However, advance coordination and previous phone contact with community leaders facilitated trust and ensured that the groups were ready to receive me. The endorsement of the National President of the Peace Huts also provided legitimacy and eased introductions, allowing participants to engage openly during the discussions.

In total, the research covered eight counties of Liberia. Focusing on the local level, this approach fostered our understanding of the role of the Peace Huts and grassroots communities in the implementation of UNSCR 1325. Due to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent social distancing measures, a questionnaire was designed to complement the interviews and focus groups. The survey was disseminated to 168 participants, including Peace Huts leaders and community members, and was also sent by email to respondents who were not reachable by phone, including women involved in Tracks II and III diplomacy. It aimed to collect direct testimonies about their knowledge of UNSCR 1325, collaboration with other actors, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their work in women, peace and security.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation guided all stages of this research. Prior to each focus group or interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, its non-commercial nature, and their right to withdraw at any time. No identifying information was collected, and quotes are anonymised throughout.

At the time of the fieldwork (2021), the Peace Huts and their surrounding communities did not appear to be over-researched or to suffer from “research fatigue”. The Women, Peace and Security agenda was familiar to some local leaders, but few prior research projects had engaged these communities in depth on the topic. Nonetheless, I am aware of the growing scholarly debate about ethics of fieldwork in

contexts where women's organisations are repeatedly studied. In retrospect, Liberia's long history of external research calls for particular attention to fair representation, reciprocity, and not reproducing extractive research practices. My approach sought to address these risks through direct and transparent communication with community leaders before and after the visits, respectful and participatory discussions, and by sharing the main findings with the Peace Hut network as a gesture of feedback and accountability.

As a foreign researcher affiliated with a European institution, my presence in Liberia was often met with curiosity and, at times, expectation. In government and CSO settings, respondents were generally familiar with international research and policy discourses and tended to frame their responses accordingly. By contrast, women in the Peace Huts appeared initially cautious but became increasingly open once mutual trust was established. This dynamic underscored how my positionality, both as an outsider and as a woman, shaped interactions and access to information. It also reinforced the importance of humility and attentiveness when working in communities that have experienced repeated engagement by external actors.

The fieldwork was also an opportunity for mutual learning. Informal conversations before the group discussions began helped build rapport and encouraged participants to share their perspectives more candidly, reflecting a relationship grounded in dialogue rather than data extraction.

Limitations

Some limitations must be acknowledged. Due to logistical challenges, particularly climatic conditions and limited financial resources, the southern regions of Liberia were not accessible during the fieldwork. As such, the study focuses on eight counties, offering a representative but not exhaustive view of local peacebuilding dynamics. In addition, while efforts were made to triangulate qualitative data with documentary and survey evidence, the lack of systematically available national statistics on the Peace Huts limited the ability to quantify some findings.

Overall, the combined methods enabled a comprehensive understanding of how grassroots actors perceive and enact UNSCR 1325, and the role of the Peace Huts in enhancing women's empowerment and the implementation of policy frameworks. The diverse perspectives collected permitted to assess the major priorities to create effective and

sustainable change in Liberia. Informal bottom-up peacebuilding efforts provide practical support to rebuild society and improve the lives of people in communities. Women gather across ethnic and cultural identities to foster peace through activities such as interfaith prayers, provision of food, healthcare, shelter, protection from sexual violence, education, and economic opportunities. The Peace Hut initiative enables grassroots women from different backgrounds to gather and discuss topics such as insecurity, sexual violence, pregnancy, conflict resolution, and economic empowerment, among others. These local structures have been created to strengthen social cohesion and engage with other community leaders such as traditional leaders or town chiefs to participate as mediators supporting peaceful relationships. Various instruments are used to raise awareness on specific topics within communities, including through radio shows and peaceful walks. Despite being considered informal, these initiatives significantly influence formal processes. The case of Liberia explored in this book illustrates this fact well. Starting in 2003, the gathering of thousands of women across the country to denounce the atrocities caused by the war and call for the end of the conflict led to the signature of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). However, despite their proven effectiveness, local civil society groups are often underrepresented in national and international decision-making processes. This book seeks to amplify their voices, assess their contributions, and explore how to better integrate bottom-up perspectives into global peace and security agendas.

This book is composed of six chapters. Following the Introduction (this chapter), Chapter 2 outlines major theoretical and empirical approaches to the nexus between women, conflict, and peace, situating these debates within both global feminist scholarship and the Liberian context. It analyses how traditional norms and conflict-related transformations shape women's roles during and after war, while challenging assumptions that women's contributions to peace stem from essentialist notions of women as inherently peaceful. Instead, the chapter demonstrates how wartime experiences reconfigure gender relations, presenting new opportunities and challenges for both women and men. It also contextualises the position of women in Liberian society and traces the pivotal role of women's organisations in initiating and sustaining peacebuilding efforts. Building on this, the chapter engages with feminist

critiques of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, particularly UNSCR 1325, highlighting tensions between top-down normative frameworks and locally grounded practices of peacebuilding.

Chapter 3 addresses the evolution of gender equality as a global normative framework. It analyses the legal and institutional mechanisms developed to translate awareness-raising into concrete policy implementation across international, national, and local levels. Special attention is given to the adoption and implementation of UNSCR 1325 in Liberia. The chapter assesses the progress achieved in women's protection and empowerment, focusing on the strategies employed to localise the WPS agenda and the synergies forged between national institutions and grassroots actors.

Chapter 4 further turns to the central role of civil society in Liberia's peacebuilding landscape. It investigates the emergence and development of the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET), the organisation behind the Peace Huts. This chapter delves into the objectives, internal dynamics, and funding structures of the Peace Huts, highlighting their role as critical community-based mechanisms for peacebuilding, mediation, and reconciliation. While recognising their importance, the analysis also critically reflects on the limitations and structural challenges this initiative faces.

Chapter 5 explores the interplay between UNSCR 1325 and the Peace Huts. Drawing on fieldwork data and an in-depth analysis of the Liberian context, the chapter examines how the Peace Huts have contributed to the local implementation of UNSCR 1325. It further assesses the ways in which the resolution, in turn, has supported grassroots women's political, social, and economic inclusion—both by legitimising their peacebuilding roles and by creating new opportunities for engagement.

Chapter 6 concludes the book by identifying major challenges in the implementation of UNSCR 1325 and proposing recommendations to enhance the participation of grassroots women in peacebuilding processes. It underscores the importance of fostering sustained collaboration among local, national, regional, and international actors. The conclusion also outlines avenues for future research on women's agency in post-conflict peacebuilding and the localisation of global peace agendas.

This book offers a grounded understanding of how grassroots civil society and local communities in Liberia contribute to women's empowerment in post-conflict peacebuilding. It highlights the dynamic interconnections between local practices and global frameworks, offering both

empirical insights and policy-relevant analysis for advancing the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

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CHAPTER 2

Women, Peace, and Conflict: An Overview

Abstract This chapter explores the complex relationships between women, conflict, and peace, highlighting both local and global dynamics. It examines how traditional norms and war experiences shape gender roles, producing new opportunities and challenges for both men and women. The chapter also situates women's participation in Liberia's peacebuilding process, tracing the contributions of grassroots women's organisations that were instrumental in shaping national outcomes. Building on this, it critically engages with feminist perspectives on the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, showing how top-down international norms can both constrain and enable women's agency. By juxtaposing global prescriptions with localised practices, the chapter demonstrates how Liberian women engage with these frameworks to advance context-specific visions of peace, security, and gender justice.

Keywords Liberian women · Women in conflict · Women in peacebuilding · Gender norms

Wherever there is conflict
Women must be part of the solution.
Michelle Bachelet (UN Women, 2012)

Over the last two decades, feminist scholars and activists have attempted to put the debates on gender, conflict, and post-conflict processes in Africa at the centre of the literature and policymaking frame. The existing literature characterises women as targets as well as essential actors in conflict and peace processes. The need for their inclusion at all stages—conflict prevention, peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding—has been acknowledged and analysed. In addition, scholars have studied the transformation of gender relations and gender norms in peace processes. This chapter maps different theoretical feminist approaches to conflict and peace studies, drawing the basis to understand how women, conflict, and peace are intertwined. It also analyses the status of women in Liberia and the role of women’s organisations, revealing the importance of grass-roots civil society engagement in the country’s peacebuilding process. Despite the challenges faced by these organisations, several groups—especially women-led organisations—gained a voice during the peace negotiations and managed to have some of their concerns included in the peace agenda. In this chapter, a vision of women as crucial actors in peacebuilding processes through the role of civil society and women’s organisations is acknowledged and promoted.

FEMINISMS: A PLURALITY OF APPROACHES TO GENDER, CONFLICT, AND PEACE

Feminist theories have emerged, developed, and fragmented throughout history. While this book does not primarily focus on the feminist approaches within international relations, these theoretical perspectives offer valuable tools for analysing and debating the complex dynamics of contemporary conflict.¹ Feminism encompasses a wide range of philosophical and moral beliefs and has taken multiple forms across historical and cultural contexts. Despite its internal diversity, feminism has consistently advocated for women’s social, economic, political, and cultural rights, and has sought to dismantle structures of female subordination.

¹ For example, the books *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (2014) by Cynthia Enloe and *Gender in International Relations: Feminist perspectives on Achieving Global Security* by Judith Ann Tickner (1992) constitute fundamental works that brought gender dynamics at the centre of international relations theories.

In Western thought, scholars have often referred to different ‘waves’ of feminism to mark cultural and political moments in its evolution.²

The First Wave of feminism³ took place between the nineteenth century and early twentieth century as an activist movement that emerged primarily in Europe and North America, but also in regions such as Egypt, Iran, and India (Malinowska, 2020).⁴ At the time, the feminist project of women’s emancipation centred on demands for voting rights, equal opportunities, and the rejection of a male-dominated society (Haradhan, 2022). Following World War II, the Second Wave emerged in both Western countries and the Global South, spanning from the early 1960s to the 1990s. This phase of feminism focused on redefining gender roles and advocating for women’s rights in education, employment, maternity leave, and sexual and reproductive autonomy (Haradhan, 2022). In the 1990s, the Third Wave of feminism arose in tandem with the rise of the internet and the evolving landscape of digital communication and technology. This period created new opportunities for women to access and contribute to technological innovation (Malinowska, 2020). Third Wave feminism also brought attention to the intersections of different forms of oppression, particularly the ways in which race and gender inequalities overlap.⁵

From the 2010s onwards, feminism has been increasingly expressed through online social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, which have become vehicles for advocating women’s rights and challenging gender-based discrimination. The Fourth Wave of feminism, marked by its inclusivity and participatory nature, mobilises

² This metaphor has been contested among feminists for reducing the multiple expressions of feminism over time to a linear interpretation. I consider that although the use of “waves” displays its weaknesses, it appears useful to understand the development of feminist thinking and the existence of overlapping sub-categories within each movement.

³ The pioneer movement was inspired by feminist works such as *The Subjection of Women*, written by John Stuart Mill in 1869.

⁴ Although several women, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, already appealed for women’s rights in the eighteenth century, there was not a consistent and organised movement at that time.

⁵ In “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color” (1991), Kimberle Crenshaw speaks of intersectionality to refer to the relationship between race and gender, pointing out that both characteristics constitute core aspects of Black women’s identities that cannot be isolated from each other.

women globally—both through digital networks and in public spaces—while amplifying voices beyond the Western world. Intersectionality remains a central concept in Fourth Wave feminism, alongside growing critiques of “white” or “Western” feminism for failing to adequately reflect the experiences and struggles of women of colour. This new feminist agenda is also characterised by a broader recognition of gender diversity, including challenges to binary gender categories and the incorporation of transgender women’s rights. Like its predecessors, the Fourth Wave is marked by a wide array of philosophical currents, fostering ongoing dialogue, constructive debate, as well as tensions and controversies within the movement.

While rigid categorisations of feminist theories should be avoided, it remains useful to examine the dominant divide between essentialist and non-essentialist perspectives. In the 1960s, amid the rise of new social movements, women’s liberation began to resist determinist conceptions of women as defined solely by their biological sex. During the Second Wave, women increasingly came to be viewed as a social group, challenging traditional notions of the family as naturally male-headed and resisting the ‘natural’ dominance of husbands over wives (Shanley & Narayan, 1997: 87). Essentialist vies, which grounded womanhood in biological motherhood, were increasingly contested by activists and theorists advocating for identity as socially and politically constructed. As Kathryn Woodward explains in *Identity and Difference* (1997), this argument could be framed in two ways: essentialist, which emphasised women’s uniqueness and called for recognition of their distinctiveness; or non-essentialist, which saw identity as fluid and argued against viewing women as a homogenous or unified group (Woodward, 1997).

From the outset of the feminist movement, women began to be recognised as autonomous subjects—capable of acquiring knowledge and engaging in intellectual life—challenging traditional conceptions of womanhood defined through male sexuality and desire. In *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, Martha Nussbaum (2000) identifies two distinct strands within feminism: one that focuses on male sexual domination, and another that centres on women’s economic dependency. The first group of feminists argues that sexual oppression is the root cause of women’s subordination and emphasises the need to transform gender roles. The second asserts that feminism’s core lies in challenging men’s economic dominance and in advocating for

women's economic independence as a means to eliminate discrimination.⁶ Although Nussbaum acknowledges this divide in feminist thought, she ultimately questions the validity of attributing women's subordination to a single source. Instead, she argues that oppression is multidimensional—shaped by both sexual and economic factors—which are embedded in broader social structures and mutually reinforce one another. For example, women may be perceived simultaneously as sexual possessions and economic dependents. Building on this, I argue that the hardships women face are even more complex. They extend beyond the sexual and economic subordination to include issues as hunger, poverty, legal inequality, forced marriage, and the denial of basic dignity, among others.

Over time, feminist interventions in peace and conflict research emerged within the field of international relations, notably through the work of scholars such as Judith Ann Tickner (1992, 1995), Cynthia Enloe (2014), and Carol Cohn (2004). These intellectuals contended that the marginalisation of women in conflict and peace studies stemmed from the dominance of realist and state-centric theories, which prioritised state power and male actors. Feminist critiques sought to introduce a gendered lens to the analysis of war and peace, arguing for the inclusion of gender as a critical variable in understanding conflict dynamics and peacebuilding processes.

In *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace, Conflict Development and Civilization* (1996), Johan Galtung posits that women are inherently more peace-loving in their relationships, whereas men are biologically predisposed to be less empathic and more aggressive. This essentialist view has been challenged by scholars such as Elise Boulding, who contends that peacefulness is not an innate trait but rather a set of skills and capabilities acquired through lived experiences. Boulding argues that women often develop these abilities through nurturing roles, such as child-rearing, while men, typically distanced from such contexts, may have fewer opportunities to cultivate similar qualities.

⁶ Nussbaum examines the rise of the “sexuality-versus-employment” debate in the case of India, which is also present on the global scene. She adds: “Members of S typically think that subordination is all about wanting a submissive sexual outlet, and that economic aspects of subordination are posterior. Members of T think that women's subordination is all about men wanting to control income and property and to have willing domestic servants—and that the sexual aspects of women's subordination are posterior” (Nussbaum, 2000: 291).

This book adopts a non-essentialist approach to women's roles in peacebuilding, viewing them not as natural or inherent, but as shaped by social and cultural influences that foster specific skills, attitudes, and behaviours. This perspective underscores the importance of ensuring equitable access to knowledge, opportunities, and human development for all, regardless of gender.

Nonetheless, as Elizabeth G. Ferris points out in “Women in Peacebuilding” in the book, *Women, Violence and Nonviolent Change* (2009):

While the question of whether women are “inherently” more peaceful than men is interesting, the fact remains that nearly all of the world's war have been initiated and largely fought by men. Even while women can be very violent and often support violence through their social roles, the war *system* and the institutionalization of violence are primarily male constructions. [...] it is men who make the actual decisions to go to war, to conduct a war in a certain way and to stop fighting. But women are among those most affected by decisions to go to war. (Ferris, 2009: 7)

This observation does not negate women's agency. On the contrary, it highlights the need to recognise that, while women may develop peace-promoting capacities due to their social roles, they can also contribute to sustaining systems of violence—either by actively supporting conflict or by reproducing violent norms within their communities. Thus, although men have historically been the primary agents in the initiation and conduct of war, women's roles in conflict—including their capacity for violence—must not be overlooked and underestimated.

In her article *Current Discourse on the Role of Women in Conflict Prevention and Conflict Prevention and Conflict Transformation* (2003), Louise Vincent outlines three dominant theoretical frameworks for understanding women's roles in conflict processes: liberal pluralism, standpoint feminism, and post-structuralist theory. The liberal pluralist approach suggests that women are often more inclined towards peacebuilding because, as mothers and wives, they tend to experience the harshest consequences of war. This framework advocates for the inclusion of women's unique perspectives in peace processes. However, it has been criticised for essentialising women's experiences and assuming that women inherently offer more peaceful and morally superior solutions to conflict (Vincent, 2003: 7).

Standpoint feminism presents an alternative that emphasises the need to recognise and integrate women’s experiences—shaped by their specific social positions—into peacebuilding strategies. Arguing that dominant theories have historically suffered from “gender blindness”, this perspective seeks to centre women’s lived realities within frameworks of conflict transformation (Vincent, 2003: 7). Nevertheless, it has also drawn criticism for the risk of reinforcing rigid binaries—for instance, by depicting men as inherently dominant and violent, and women as intrinsically peaceful and nurturing—thereby oversimplifying the complexities of gendered identities and behaviours.

Post-structuralism represents a third theoretical perspective that challenges both standpoint feminism and essentialist narratives. It posits that identities are not fixed or biologically determined but are instead socially constructed and fluid, shaped by context, discourse, and power relations. From this standpoint, individuals hold multiple and shifting identities that cannot be reduced to static categories such as “woman” or “man”. Vincent (2003: 8) highlights that many women from marginalised groups—such as those who are poor, working-class, Black, lesbian, or from rural communities—have criticised standpoint feminism for failing to fully capture the diversity of their lived experiences or to address the specific challenges they face. As a result, some feminist approaches have been critiqued for focusing too narrowly on sexual oppression, overlooking the complex intersections of race, class, sexuality, geography, and other identity markers that shape women’s realities.

This analysis affirms the value of inclusive feminist perspectives that reflect the vast diversity of cultures, experiences, and identities, and that resist reducing women to a single, homogenous category. While this book supports the broader promotion of women’s roles in peacebuilding and conflict transformation, it also recognises the importance of contextual sensitivity and acknowledges the multiple, intersecting factors that influence women’s lives in distinct and often unequal ways.

The concept of intersectionality captures how overlapping identities—such as race, gender, class, and ethnicity—shape this distinct experiences, vulnerabilities, and interests of women of colour. As Mary Lyndon Shanley and Uma Narayan argue in *Reconstructing Political Theory: Feminist Perspectives* (1997), mainstream Western feminism has often failed to account for the particular struggles of racially marginalised women, leading to a sense of exclusion. This ignorance of intra-group differences generated internal tensions and, ultimately, contributed to the emergence

of alternative feminist movements. Contemporary black feminism, for instance, began evolving in the 1960s, led by Black and so-called ‘Third World’ women who sought liberation from multiple sources of oppression, notably those linked to ethnicity, gender, and class (Hermann & Stewart, 2001). These women challenged the narrow frameworks of dominant feminist theory, arguing for a more expansive and inclusive approach that recognises the complexity of their lived realities.

Similarly, Heidi Hudson, in *Human Security and Peace-building Through a Gender Lens: Challenges of Implementation in Africa* (2006), stresses that viewing women as a unified group overlooks the varying security needs of women in different global contexts, such as between Western and non-Western societies. While she emphasises the importance of recognising these differences for advancing women’s rights, she also cautions against overemphasising them, as doing so may risk fragmenting collective feminist efforts.

An important alternative to the universalising tendencies of mainstream feminist theories is found in African feminisms, which recognise the complexity and intersections that shape African identities—including gender, ethnicity, culture, class, and colonial history. These frameworks call for the inclusion of indigenous perspectives on both feminism and security. From this standpoint, Hudson highlights:

as hybrid manifestations, African feminisms acknowledge their connections with international feminism but demarcate a specific African feminism with specific needs and goals arising out of the concrete realities of African women’s lives. Their point of departure is to address oppressions simultaneously, and in that context, gender is but one unit of analysis that sometimes has to subject itself to the universal bond between men and women against racism and imperialism. (Hudson, 2006: 6)

This approach aligns with the core idea of this book: that every context represents a specific reality, shaping how women are affected and what goals they pursue. From within this framework, the concept of ‘womanism’ emerges—a term grounded in African feminism that reflects the identities, values, and social realities of African women. Central to womanism is the importance of family and the necessity of collaboration between men and women in the pursuit of gender equality. It prioritises practical, experience-based needs and advocates for women’s inclusion in policy-making processes (Hudson, 2006). Womanism embraces a broader, more

adaptable understanding of feminism—one that incorporates cultural, ideological, spiritual, historical, and geographical factors. While African women may share some common experiences across countries, it is essential to avoid collapsing all their struggles into a single, idealised notion of sisterhood. Instead, acknowledging the plurality of experiences allows for a more honest and inclusive discourse (Kolawole, 2002). In this sense, womanism extends beyond continental boundaries, speaking to the experiences of women of African descent globally. Black women from the diaspora—whether in Europe, the Americas, or the Caribbean—carry a deep connection to African heritage, despite the impact of migration and historical displacement. As Kolawole notes, womanism serves as a unifying concept that addresses the shared concerns of Black women across the globe, including the value placed on family, the fight against all forms of oppression, and the importance of cultural and racial identity (Kolawole, 2002).

Another compelling approach is introduced in *Theorizing Feminism: Parallel Trends in the Humanities and Social Sciences* (Hermann & Stewart, 2001), where the emergence of a mobile feminism is explored. This perspective, which transcends geographic and identity boundaries, emphasises the plurality of women’s experiences and cultural contexts. ‘World-travelling’ feminism, as presented by Herrmann and Stewart, is built on empathy—allowing individuals to immerse themselves in different cultures and perspectives, and, through that process, to experience a transformation of the self. It involves experiencing different worlds, intermingling feminist cultures, and assimilating aspects of those cultures. By doing so, this approach challenges narrow, often Western-centric views, and instead highlights the diversity of women’s lived realities. The approach adopted in this book seeks to adopt similar methods by integrating local knowledge and cultural frameworks into the analysis of African contexts, while deliberately avoiding Eurocentric interpretations.

The development of diverse feminist theories has given rise to multiple interpretations of women’s roles in peace and conflict throughout history. It is crucial to recognise that these approaches are dynamic, continually influenced by changing social norms and internal debates within feminist thought. As Nussbaum (2000) suggests, feminist philosophy should be rooted in an understanding of women’s specific needs through direct dialogue with women themselves. In this book, special attention is given to examining the sociocultural contexts that influence women’s roles in conflict and peacebuilding processes.

TRADITIONAL NORMS AND WOMEN'S ROLES IN CONFLICT AND PEACE PROCESSES

A growing body of research has explored the impact of conflict on women and their livelihoods. To fully grasp women's roles in conflict, post-conflict, and peacebuilding settings, it is essential to examine the norms traditionally embedded in these processes.

Conflict, Gender, and Masculinity

The relationship between gender inequality and the likelihood of intrastate conflict has been highlighted by scholars like Mary Caprioli. In *Gender Equality and Civil Wars* (2003), she argues that violent conflict often stems from power structures grounded in patriarchal hierarchies. Within such systems, militarism and violence are deeply intertwined with gendered expectations that uphold male dominance, assigning greater social status to men through stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity.

Similarly, Diana Francis in *Culture, Power Asymmetries and Gender in Conflict Transformation* (2004) discusses how traditional constructs of masculinity—often associated with power, aggression, and control—are central to cultures of domination that rely on and reinforce unequal power dynamics. However, it is important to distinguish between the terms 'men' and 'masculinity', as the concept of masculinity is not fixed but varies across cultures, classes, ethnicity, social, and historical contexts. Men's acceptance or rejection of patriarchal norms and roles may also impact the meaning of masculinity. Helena Carreiras, in *Managing Crises, Making Peace: Towards a Strategic EU Vision for Security and Defense* (2016), points out that military cultures are shaped by specific social and historical factors, and therefore, conceptions of masculinity within those settings are diverse and multifaced. Consequently, it is inaccurate to regard male peacekeepers as a single, homogenous group. In light of these perspectives, this book adopts an understanding of masculinity as a flexible and context-dependent construct—one that shifts according to cultural norms, historical developments, and individual interpretations of gender roles.

On another hand, Cheryl Hendricks (2011) asserts that despite growing recognition of the links between gender, conflict, and peacebuilding, much of the dominant literature on conflict—particularly that

produced in the West—has yet to fully engage with feminist and gender-focused perspectives. Often, women are only briefly mentioned and are predominantly portrayed as victims. Indeed, numerous studies examine the effects of conflict on livelihoods and women’s suffering, reinforcing their image as passive casualties of war. As Hudson notes, post-conflict transformation is unlikely to succeed if political leaders continue to view women solely through the lens of victimhood or motherhood. This tendency to define women by their biological roles can obscure their agency as active participants in peace processes. Frequently grouped alongside children and other vulnerable populations, women are depicted as dependent on male protection, which restricts their visibility and influence in the public sphere. Such portrayals confine women to domestic roles as mothers and wives, effectively marginalising them from peacebuilding efforts and denying their potential for empowerment in political and societal arenas (Puechguirbal, 2005). While some theorists argue that women’s maternal roles offer unique contributions to peacebuilding, Nadine Puechguirbal (2005) warns that this view can easily lapse into essentialism, reducing women ‘natural’ peacekeepers by virtue of their nurturing capacities.

Similarly, Judith Ann Tickner, in *Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security* (1992), critiques this association of femininity with peace, arguing that it reinforces an idealised masculinity dependent on casting women as passive figures in need of protection. Carreiras (2016) further observes that framing women’s involvement in peacekeeping as a result of their supposed peaceful nature only strengthens existing gender stereotypes. She expresses:

the assumption of women’s special relationship to peace helps to perpetuate a dualism where the feminine side is assimilated to passivity and powerlessness. Likewise, a male soldier’s necessary socialisation into a warrior-like ideal and the stereotypical hyper-masculine traits that some analyses take for granted is, at best, an oversimplification. (2016: 86)

In contrast, rejecting these binary associations enables a more realistic and empowering understanding of women’s roles in peace and security—as active participants with diverse contributions. Although international discourse increasingly calls for the inclusion of women in peace processes and mediation, their participation remains contingent on how they are perceived both nationally and globally. Meaningful progress also depends

on reforming the language and frameworks found in peace agreements and international mandates, which often reflect masculine norms.

Consequently, this book advocates for recognising the full range of roles that women take on during conflict and post-conflict settings. Achieving this requires a fundamental shift away from rigid gender binaries towards more flexible, context-sensitive understandings of both masculinity and femininity socially and culturally constructed concepts.

Women in Conflict and Post-Conflict Contexts Across Africa

The picture associated with women in conflict and post-conflict scenarios often reinforces stereotypical narratives. As previously discussed, modern feminist thinkers have increasingly challenged essentialist views that associate women with innate non-violence. These biologically deterministic assumptions overlook women's agency and political responsibility, and instead, reinforce gendered modes of thought that contribute to the continued marginalisation of women.

In *Women and War* (1987), Jean Bethke Elshtain examines how Western traditions have historically linked women with peace and men with war, constructing enduring cultural myths that frame these associations as natural. In times of war, gendered expectations cast men and women into symbolic roles—men as protectors or warriors, and women as innocent, peace-loving figures. These narratives not only misrepresent actual wartime roles but also serve to reinforce conventional gender hierarchies. Such binary depictions obscure the existence of peaceful men, aggressive women, and the complex realities of individuals whose actions do not fit neatly within these normative frameworks.

Numerous cases, such as the Rwandan conflict, have demonstrated that women have not only supported war efforts but have also participated as combatants or engaged in acts of violence. Scholars have increasingly challenged the assumption that women and girls are inherently detached from violent activities during armed conflict. While women often suffer disproportionately from the consequences of war, they may also contribute to the societal divisions that lead to violence, encouraging male participation in fighting, and in some cases, directly taking up arms themselves (Francis, 2004; Hudson, 2006).

Cultural traditions play a significant role in shaping gender roles during both conflict and peacebuilding. A study by Azzain Mohamed (2004), as referenced by Hudson (2006), highlights how women in Darfur have

used culturally rooted practices—such as shame and ridicule—to incite men to take up arms. Through these tactics, women exert social pressure, reinforcing masculine ideals of bravery and honour as prerequisites for social integration.

Despite these examples, research shows that women generally favour non-violent approaches to resolving international disputes, particularly when they have access to education, employment, and political participation (Eichenberg, 2003). Cortright (2008) argues that women's reluctance to war is influenced by their lived experiences conditioned by legal frameworks, societal norms, and educational structures that are often embedded in patriarchal values. Supporting this view, Mary Caprioli and Mark Boyer, in "Gender, Violence and International Crisis" (2001), highlight an interdependent correlation between higher levels of gender equality and the adoption of more peaceful foreign policies. From this perspective, women's empowerment across social, economic, and political spheres—when combined with democratic governance, global interdependence, and active participation in international institutions—can significantly contribute to a more peaceful international environment.

Besides, women can also experience forms of empowerment during times of war—an observation supported by the social and political shifts that followed many African liberation struggles. While men are engaged in combat, women often assume the role of head of household, managing the resources and making key decisions (Francis, 2004). In some cases, conflict disrupts traditional gender norms, allowing women to take on responsibilities and roles previously reserved for men. However, it is crucial to recognise that the impact of war on gender roles varies depending on the type of conflict. As Codou Bop (2002)⁷ points out, wars of national independence are more likely to open spaces for women's participation than ethnic or class-based conflicts. In his view, such outcomes depend heavily on the presence of political will to transform entrenched gender dynamics.⁸

⁷ The chapter "Women in Conflicts, Their Gains and Losses" is part of the book *The Aftermath: Women in Post-Conflict Transformation* (2002), edited by Meintjes, Turshen & Pillay.

⁸ In this regard, I could also assess that long-term conflicts that established a war economy may provide more opportunities for women. However, further research would be necessary to confirm this assumption.

In various post-conflict contexts, including Angola, Rwanda, Somalia, and Sudan, women have gained increased influence and economic autonomy both within their household and in the public sphere (United Nations, 2002a). These shifts have often granted women greater freedom, adaptability, and access to new opportunities. As a result, such social transformations have supported the growth of women's activism and the formation of women-led associations and networks. However, the view that conflict always results in positive change for women is highly contested. In many cases, post-war periods are marked by a return to traditional gender hierarchies, leading to the erosion of the temporary gains women achieved during wartime.

This book recognises the diversity of roles that women assume and the varied needs and interests they hold in post-conflict and peacebuilding processes. For instance, in Liberia, women emphasised disarmament as a key priority, while in Burundi, they focused on addressing sexual violence and securing legal rights to inherit land (Chinkin & Charlesworth, 2006). These examples illustrate the importance of rejecting homogenised assumptions about women's experiences and instead providing the space for women to define their own priorities. Women need safe, inclusive environments where their voices are heard, and their concerns taken seriously. Based on this, I argue for the creation of institutional structures that actively incorporate women's perspectives and promote their meaningful participation at all stages of decision-making and peacebuilding processes.

Feminist scholars connect the concept of 'gender mainstreaming'⁹ in peacebuilding to broader efforts aimed at transforming institutional and organisational cultures that have traditionally prioritised masculine hierarchies, competitiveness, and aggression (Lewis, 2006). Desiree Lewis (2006) distinguishes 'inclusionary' and 'transformationalist' approaches to gender mainstreaming. While the former involves the inclusion of women within the existing framework to achieve gender balance, the latter advocates for a fundamental redefinition of power dynamics and the development of long-term strategies that challenge the *status quo*. Despite the value of inclusionary strategies, such as gender quotas, I argue for the necessity of transformational approaches that support meaningful, sustained social change. As Hendricks (2011) points out, policymakers

⁹ The concept of gender mainstreaming refers to a designed strategy towards the integration of women in policymaking frameworks and the realisation of gender equality.

often prioritise short-term gains over deep structural changes needed to address entrenched gender inequalities.

Elisabeth Rehn and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, in *Women, War and Peace: The Independent Experts' Assessment on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Women and Women's Role in Peace-building* (2002), cite the United Nations' definition of gender mainstreaming as:

a strategy for making the concerns and experiences of women as well as of men an integral part of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres, so that women and men benefit equally, and inequality is not perpetuated. (Rehn & Sirleaf, 2002: 63)

Gender mainstreaming in peace operations can manifest through official statements, gender-sensitive training, and the establishment of quotas. However, these measures require specialised knowledge and sustained commitment to integrate gender across sectors—from governance and security to humanitarian relief. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, alongside adequate funding, are essential to mainstream gender effectively and transparently. Yet, as Rehn and Sirleaf note, many of the necessary strategies and institutional supports remain underdeveloped (Rehn & Sirleaf, 2002: 63). While initiatives such as gender training, the appointment of gender experts, and the inclusion of women in peace operations have been introduced, their overall impact remains limited. For instance, the UN's Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy launched in 2018 sets targets of 20% women in formed police units and 30% in individual police roles by 2028. However, data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) indicates that by June 2022, women represented only 19% of UN police personnel—unchanged from the previous year. While women comprised 32% of individual police officers, the share of women in formed police units decline to 15%, down from the previous year by 1.3% points (Pfeifer, 2022).

This gap between commitments and outcomes highlights the need for stronger implementation and accountability mechanisms in peacebuilding processes. Beyond formal inclusion, it is crucial to recognise women as active agents of conflict transformation, particularly through grassroots women's organisations that promote dialogue, human rights, and peace education. Nonetheless, as Francis (2004) argues, “since wars are not fought for women's rights and they are not often involved in military

and political decisions to end them, once war is over the contribution and rights of women are all too often overlooked” (Francis, 2004: 10). Although women’s efforts actively advance changes in gender norms, the tendency to marginalise women in the post-conflict phase contributes to the erosion of their wartime gains and a return to traditional gender roles.

Nevertheless, there are numerous examples of women playing key roles during and after conflict—opposing war fighters, taking care of injured or displaced people during or after the hostilities. As Boulding expresses, “Yet women are today, as they have always been, both victims and shapers of the societies of which they are a part” (Boulding, 1994: 1). By rejecting the narrative of passive victimhood, women increasingly position themselves as agents of social transformation and ‘creators of the future’ (Boulding, 1994: 2). The next section examines women’s engagement in civil society organisations and their contributions to peacebuilding and societal reconstruction.

BUILDING NETWORKS AND ENGAGING TOWARDS PEACE

Civil society often serves as a platform through which minorities can gain access to power and influence public policy. By facilitating the flow of information and empowering citizens, well-functioning civil society organisations provide crucial spaces for the political engagement and development of women and marginalised groups, helping them to assert their rights and interests. Given the immense diversity of political cultures and traditions, it is important to approach civil society from a pluralistic perspective. The existence of various associations across different societal levels encourages the development of diverse agendas. This project draws inspiration from the work of Elise Boulding, who emphasised the potential of civil society in cultivating a participatory civic culture. Her perspective highlights the importance of incorporating the voices of historically excluded groups, such as women and children, into societal development. Since civil society plays a fundamental role in fostering peaceful, democratic, and inclusive systems, it is worthwhile exploring the ways in which women engage with and shape the civic space. In *Cultures of Peace: The Hidden Side of History* (2000), Boulding states:

It is how we deal with difference that determines how peaceable society is. [...] When groups of humans hold the need for bonding and autonomy in balance – nurturing one another, engaging in many cooperative activities,

but also giving each other space – then we find the conditions for peace culture. (Boulding, 2000: 2)

The Power of Women's Networks and Organisations

Social feminism, as a global framework, has encouraged the emergence of numerous women-led transnational organisations. This perspective considers systemic social injustices to be deeply rooted in gender-based oppression, while also viewing women's ways of thinking and organising as valuable resources for human well-being. Boulding advocated for celebrating feminist visions of the future by recognising the distinct models of action women create to bring about social change (Boulding, 1994). In this context, civil society organisations emerge as vital tools for shaping a global civic culture and foster an exchange of perspectives that enables mutual learning. These organisations offer platforms to influence national and international policy, promote education, citizenship, and disseminate knowledge.

Boulding (1991) described 'transnationalism' as a response to narrow, state-centric nationalism, emphasising the need for identities that transcend borders. While civil society promotes such cross-border awareness, it has also faced criticism for being overly influenced by Western perspectives, reflecting how internationalism has historically been defined by the Global North. The legacy of colonialism and the marginalisation of traditional practices have created significant asymmetries. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the development of international congresses has facilitated the spread of ideas and the formation of a new kind of civil society that extends beyond national boundaries. This evolution of transnationalism embraces the rich diversity of southern societies and provides opportunities for the North to engage with and learn from these traditions. For instance, organisations supporting Hispano-American communities in North America have helped these groups strengthen their cultural identities and advocate for their needs at both national and international levels. These organisations often prioritise global public interests over national ones and serve as vehicles for building a world civic culture.

While balancing the 'First' and 'Third' worlds' relationships, new transnationalism promotes a more inclusive form of globalism, enriched by multicultural dialogue and supported by initiatives from institutions

like the United Nations. Along the same line, the North-South Centre of the Council of Europe—established in 1990—was created to enhance understanding between regions, foster global citizenship, and raise awareness of global interconnectedness. The Centre aims to amplify the voices from the South and support the empowerment of civil society actors, particularly youth and women, through intercultural dialogue.

From this perspective, networking becomes a way to build mutual dependence across diverse cultural and political contexts, linking communities across continents through shared experiences and goals. Non-governmental organisations play a key role in this process by establishing global communication networks that connect locally run communities. These networks allow for the exchange of knowledge, resources, and strategies, reinforcing the idea that local and international collaborations—especially those that elevate women’s voices—are essential in promoting cultures of peace worldwide.

Tripp (2004) offers a valuable perspective on the rise of transnational feminism, noting that rather than being solely shaped by Western influences, it increasingly reflects the momentum of feminist movements originating in the Global South.¹⁰ She points out that today’s most impactful transnational mobilisations often emerge from southern-led global forums. Platforms such as regional dialogues, international agreements, and UN initiatives have provided multiple networking and advocacy opportunities. In particular, Tripp’s analysis of African women’s movements shows how knowledge-sharing across regional and sub-regional platforms has significantly influenced national policy development. These networks have built consensus around critical gender issues, including the integration of gender perspectives in policy, combating gender-based violence, and promoting women’s leadership in decision-making processes. A range of mechanisms—such as NGO coalitions and advocacy campaigns—has been instrumental in pushing both national governments and pan-African institutions to adopt policies supporting women’s political participation. Tripp also identifies a pivotal moment in the early 2000s, as multi-party political systems began to take hold across

¹⁰ According to Tripp (2004), we must recognise the importance of movements emerging from the South and their influence in advocating for women’s rights in non-Western regions. Hence, the term “transnational feminism” cannot be reduced to Western feminist engagement and advocacy around the world but must integrate all the dynamics of transnational mobilisations.

the continent. This shift coincided with the emergence of a generation of educated women leaders with the skills necessary to expand civil society organisations and deepen their impact.

Technological developments have played a major role in advancing women's advocacy efforts. The growing availability of digital tools, facilitating women's communication within and beyond the African continent, has highly influenced the growth of women's networks and their ability to coordinate their actions. Women-led initiatives have creatively used various forms of media—such as radio programmes, theatre shows, and videos—to share knowledge, promote peace, and reach marginalised communities, often using local languages to increase accessibility and impact (Rehn & Sirleaf, 2002). One key example of this media activism occurred in 1999, during the Pan-African Women's Conference for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence in Tanzania. Approximately 300 participants called for the creation of a pan-African radio programme that would focus specifically on gender and peace-related issues. This idea was later formalised in the Zanzibar Declaration, which stated:

We, Women of Africa,

17. Strongly advocate for full access to and use of appropriate communication tools and technology in order to effectively strengthen networking and solidarity among women at all levels. A Pan-African radio program on gender and peace issues should be created as an effective tool for civic and peace education, communication and mobilisation which will give visibility to African women's quest for peace. (1999: 2)

Rehn and Sirleaf (2002) underscore the importance of such media strategies, noting that many women, especially those in conflict-affected regions, rely on radio rather than print media due to high rates of illiteracy. Radio, therefore, becomes a critical communication channel—particularly in times of crisis—allowing women to share their stories, document human rights violations, and participate in peace processes. The impact of this approach is further supported by the digital era, which has created new platforms for grassroots women to access and distribute information more freely (Rehn & Sirleaf, 2002).

These developments have helped women's organisations to increase their influence on political structures across Africa. For example, sustained advocacy efforts led to significant achievements such as the election of Gertrude Mongella as president of the Pan-African Parliament of the AU

and the establishment of the African Women's Committee on Peace and Development (AWCPD). These milestones, in turn, have motivated other grassroots movements to carry up their advocacy at the national level (Tripp, 2004).

At the local level, women leaders are more apparent, often engaging in community peacebuilding efforts. Numerous women-led CSOs have contributed significantly to conflict resolution through protests, campaigns, and a range of other initiatives. Rehn and Sirleaf (2002) highlight how grassroots initiatives serve as a foundation for broader cross-border movements. One notable example is the Mano River Union Women's Network for Peace (MARWOPNET), which brings together both community activists and political leaders from Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea. Women from rural areas reported feeling represented by higher-level women delegates who could voice their concerns in formal political arenas. However, despite the importance of bottom-up approaches to peacebuilding, community women are still frequently excluded from official peace negotiations—often due to communication barriers with external mediators. Women's organisations, higher decision-making bodies, and international institutions are fundamental vehicles to fill this gap and enable meaningful participation. Recognising women's capabilities as peacebuilders is a crucial step towards fostering their inclusion in formal peace processes.

Acknowledging Women as Peacebuilders

In conflict-affected settings, women often develop leadership and peacebuilding capabilities as a result of the roles they are compelled to take on—ranging from managing households and caring for the wounded to rebuilding communities and navigating bureaucratic systems in the absence of men (Porter, 2003). Scholarly attention to women's roles in peacebuilding has grown significantly, with increasing recognition of the impact of local women-led initiatives and the organisations supporting them. Porter (2003) emphasises the importance of valuing local approaches, arguing that sustainable peacebuilding efforts must promote and integrate community-based strategies.

From this perspective, building local networks to share interests, experiences, and skills has been linked to reduced levels of violence (Hudson, 2006). In Liberia, grassroots mobilisations by women led to the 'Mass Action for Peace' campaign, uniting several organisations to actively

participate in peace talks. This effort, supported by the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) and MARWOPNET, became a landmark example of effective local activism. MARWOPNET is regarded as one of the most successful cases of sub-regional networking, having helped to bring the leaders of Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea back to the negotiation table in 2001 (Hudson, 2006).

The emergence of NGOs and advocacy networks has also been shaped by international treaties and initiatives that women's participation in decision-making as a normative priority (Tripp, 2004). The 2002 Report of the Secretary-General on Women, Peace and Security highlights the need to involve women at every stage of decision-making and peace processes. Former Secretary-General Kofi Annan further expresses:

where cultures of violence and discrimination against women and girls exist prior to conflict, they will be exacerbated during conflict. If women do not participate in the decision-making structures of a society, they are unlikely to become involved in decisions about the conflict or the peace process that follows. (United Nations, 2002b: 1)

The report further calls for the systematic inclusion of gender perspectives in both formal and informal peace processes. This includes ensuring that the outcomes of peace negotiations—whether political, economic, social, or security-related—advance gender equality. It also highlights the critical role that women-led grassroots organisations play in peace education and broader peacebuilding efforts. However, despite increased recognition at regional and international levels, many grassroots groups face barriers when trying to influence formal peace processes. One major constraint remains the lack of access to formal mechanisms that can carry forward their recommendations and priorities (United Nations, 2002b). To address these challenges, the Secretary-General's report presents several targeted actions for the Security Council's attention, including the integration of gender perspectives into Security Council missions, ensuring that peace accords explicitly reflect women's experiences, contributions, and needs, and supporting women's full participation in peace negotiations.

From my perspective, since formal peace processes seek to reconstruct the structures of post-conflict societies, the inclusion of women in these processes is not only essential but foundational. Ensuring that women's voices are heard and their concerns addressed is a matter

of both justice and effectiveness. All actors—local and international, men and women—share responsibility for advancing gender equality and supporting grassroots activism. In this context, the adoption of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000 stands as a historical milestone. It brought global attention to the disproportionate impact of armed conflict on women and underscored the crucial role they play in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. As former Secretary-General Kofi Annan noted, this resolution marked a transformative moment in recognising women's roles in shaping peaceful futures.

Based on women's capacity to build networks of engagement, the idea of a global civic peace culture progressively found its way into international legal and policy frameworks. A study by peace researcher Irene Santiago (2012) demonstrated how Boulding's concept of global civic peace culture has been increasingly reflected in UN policy (Woodhouse & Santiago, 2012: 9–10). Santiago's work in the Philippines focused on integrating UN Security Council Resolution 1325 at both national and grassroots levels, using a localised approach adapted to the conflict in Mindanao. This initiative helped strengthen women's activism in peacebuilding. As part of these efforts, a coalition known as 'Mindanao 1325' was formed, alongside the 'Women's Peace Table', which aimed to incorporate women's perspectives into national planning and to enhance the exchange of knowledge and skills among them (Woodhouse & Santiago, 2012: 9–10).

Other initiatives, such as the workshop report by the Centre for Conflict Resolution (CCR) and the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) on Women and Peacebuilding in Africa, have also highlighted women's significant grassroots roles in traditional societies (Hendricks & Chivasa, 2009). Collaboration between civil society organisations, academic institutions, governments, and the UN has increasingly aimed to identify major obstacles to women's involvement in peacebuilding and to reinforce related research. According to the report, women-led networks have emerged across Africa, affirming women's contributions to peace efforts, especially at the grassroots level (Hendricks & Chivasa, 2009). In Sudan, for example, women—who represent the majority of the population—played a crucial role in encouraging their husbands to support peace, assuming new responsibilities for generating income, and earning new status and skills through literacy campaigns and peace networks. Their involvement also extended to international forums like the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action. These efforts led to the founding of the Sudanese

Women Empowerment for Peace (SuWEP), which developed a unified women's peace agenda and a formal declaration advocating for peace (Hendricks & Chivasa, 2009).

The 2000 Arusha peace process in Burundi offers another relevant case. Although women were formally granted only observer status during negotiations, they still managed to exert influence through informal lobbying (King, 2005). With support from UNIFEM and regional women's networks advocating for women's full participation in the peace process, the All-Party Burundi Women's Peace Conference was established, and several of their proposals were ultimately included in the final peace agreement (King, 2005). Regional platforms such as the South African Women in Dialogue (SAWID) have also played an important role in fostering women's ability to engage in peacebuilding. SAWID has been active in Burundi, Sudan, and Liberia, developing strategies to raise women's voices, enhance community cohesion, and strengthen sustainable peace (Hendricks & Chivasa, 2009).

Still, despite the strong presence of women's groups in countries like Liberia and Burundi, the mechanisms intended to promote gender equity during peace processes are often poorly implemented or lack real influence. In my view, reinforcing peacebuilding tools at the community level is vital for recognising the essential work of grassroots women and ensuring they have a say in broader peace processes. However, several unresolved issues remain: Why do active women at the grassroots level tend to be absent in formal peace processes? How can community-based initiatives be strengthened? What obstacles continue to prevent women's meaningful participation across all stages of peacebuilding?

Challenges for Women in Peacebuilding Processes

African women take on diverse and often transformative roles during times of conflict, including positions of leadership that challenge traditional gender expectations. Their active participation in war economies demonstrates that they possess the skills and resources necessary for contributing to the rebuilding of communities (Rehn & Sirleaf, 2002). The post-conflict period can present a unique window of opportunity for women—not only to influence the formation of new political, social, and economic structures, but also to benefit from substantial international aid allocated to reconstruction efforts. However, for women to fully capitalise on these opportunities, the skills and experience gained during

conflict must be reinforced through deliberate and inclusive policies and programmes. This consolidation process tightly depends on the openness of structures and delegations towards the consultation of women's organisations and local peacebuilders. As noted by Boulding, women's potential as mediators and peacebuilders is often overlooked, particularly in developing contexts (Morrison, 2008).

In *The Aftermath: Women in Post-Conflict Transformation* (2002), Meintjes, Pillay and Turshen emphasise that despite some women gaining visibility and power during conflict, the post-war phase often sees a reassertion of traditional gender norms, especially in rural settings. There, women often lack opportunities and education to consolidate the gains made during wartime and may find themselves isolated with the disintegration of women's groups and activism built during conflict. While women may take on specific roles during wartime, they frequently face renewed marginalisation once peace is restored. Even when legal or political gains are achieved—as seen in post-Apartheid South Africa—these advances do not necessarily lead to a reduction in gender-based violence. Chinkin and Charlesworth (2006) argue that the concept of 'reconstruction' in post-conflict settings is often tied to a desire to restore the pre-war *status quo*. Yet, in cases where women experienced empowerment during the conflict, there can be a strong push to preserve these gains and challenge pre-existing patterns of gender inequality. Nonetheless, the prevailing trend is a return to traditional gender roles in the aftermath of war. Even when political leaders voice support for women's rights, nationalist agendas tend to dominate, undermining the diverse roles women played during the conflict. This often results in the erasure of feminist achievements made before and during the struggle (Hudson, 2006).

Hudson identifies multiple transitions that define post-conflict processes, including shifts from war to peace, authoritarianism to democracy, centralised economies to market-driven systems—and importantly, from patriarchal norms towards gender equity. However, these shifts can be accompanied by a reassertion of cultural gender expectations, posing a threat to sustainable peace. Achieving lasting peace, therefore, requires not just political and economic reforms but also the pursuit of 'gender justice', anchored in legal structures that address women's needs and rights (Hudson, 2006).

Gender mainstreaming plays a central role in these transitional processes, but for it to be truly effective, peacebuilding norms related to justice, governance, and development must explicitly incorporate a

gender-conscious lens. Hudson points out two major challenges women face in these contexts: first, translating grassroots women's efforts into formal processes, which are frequently dominated by elite interests; and second, ensuring that the key pillars of post-conflict reconstruction—security, justice and reconciliation, social and economic well-being, and governance—are all approached with gender sensitivity. The implementation of a gender perspective. To bridge this gap, strategies for gender mainstreaming must go beyond simply achieving gender balance in leadership positions. They should be linked to and reinforced by grassroots initiatives that reflect women's lived realities and community-based activism.

Progress has been made at the policy level, particularly through the adoption of gender quotas by several African sub-regional organisations. Africa now detains some of the highest global rates of women's political representation (Tripp, 2004). Rehn and Sirleaf (2002) note that quotas serve as formal tools to support women's inclusion in governance, especially in contexts where cultural norms limit their participation. While such measures can enhance women's visibility in political spaces, they do not automatically ensure that gender-related issues are addressed. Quotas should thus be understood as a foundational—yet incomplete—step towards gender equality: both a practical solution and a symbolic gesture that must be supported by deeper, long-term efforts to close the gender gap in peacebuilding and political processes (Rehn & Sirleaf, 2002).

In parallel, Hendricks (2011) observes that while references to gender equality in peace agreements and the establishment of quotas for women's inclusion in peace processes mark important steps, they do not guarantee the effective realisation of gender equality on the ground. Similarly, Boulding (1994) critiques what she terms 'equity feminism'—which includes mechanisms like electoral quotas—as insufficient unless complemented by transformational feminist measures focusing on social dysfunctions that perpetuate gender-based oppression and that recognise women's potential as agents of peace. Persistent issues such as violence and discrimination against women, trafficking, legal discrimination, and limited institutional support continue to significantly affect women and hinder broader development efforts (Hendricks & Chivasa, 2009). From this perspective, peacebuilding, sustainable development, and women's empowerment are deeply interconnected and must be addressed together.

Elite-level reforms and formal representation often fail to translate into empowerment for women at the community level. This underscores the importance of supporting locally rooted, collective strategies that prioritise capacity-building through advocacy training and peace-building education. Acknowledging this need, the 2001 G8 statement on “Strengthening the Role of Women in Conflict Prevention” called for greater involvement of women in conflict prevention and resolution efforts. It highlighted the unique contributions women make at the grassroots levels and urged the development of concrete strategies to facilitate their effective participation in peacebuilding processes.

Despite these international commitments and the existence of targeted programmes, progress in implementing these frameworks has been slow. Concrete results from the application of UNSCR 1325 remain limited, especially in terms of improving the lives of women at the local level (Hendricks & Chivasa, 2009). There is an urgent need to localise the implementation of UNSCR 1325 so that it directly benefits women in their communities. This resolution must be applied in an engaged and context-sensitive manner that accounts for the complex intersections of conflict with ethnic, religious, and cultural identities (Hudson, 2006). While affirming universal rights, liberal principles of gender equality should be adapted to respect cultural differences and translated into contextually relevant practical action.

In this context, women’s networks are crucial for raising awareness about legal frameworks related to women, peace and security. They can play a vital role in ensuring that UNSCR 1325 is understood and utilised at the grassroots level. The fact that many women’s groups in Africa do not rely on UNSCR 1325 to advance their interests points to a gap in communication and outreach within communities. Regional and sub-regional networks have the potential to pressure governments to disseminate information on gender rights and counter entrenched patriarchal norms.

However, many women’s organisations lack political autonomy in post-conflict settings, limiting their ability to advocate for transformative change. Sayigh (2005) argues that this lack of independence has contributed to the absence of a cohesive ideological vision to restructure gender relations in meaningful ways. On the other hand, Tripp (2004) cautions that when women’s organisations become independent from the state, they often shift their dependence to external donors, creating new vulnerabilities. While gender equality is widely acknowledged as essential

to sustainable peace, the sector remains significantly underfunded. This persistent funding gap as unacceptable, noting that many civil society organisations working on gender equality and women's empowerment continue to struggle for financial support necessary to carry out their initiatives (Hendricks & Chivasa, 2009).

From another perspective, it is important to recognise that women's groups formed during conflict might not always be aligned with women's broader interests in the post-conflict period. A key factor contributing to this disconnect is the division between those women who gain leadership positions and visibility, and those who return to private or domestic roles after the war (Meintjes et al., 2002). This fragmentation can weaken the potential for a unified movement of women, particularly when grassroots activism fails to influence national-level agendas. For post-conflict transitions and reconstruction to be truly transformative and address the root causes of conflict, women must be meaningfully involved in all stages of peacebuilding.

Rehn and Sirleaf (2002) outline four foundational elements necessary to strengthen women's contributions to peacebuilding: safety, political space, access to decision-makers, and adequate resources. They highlight that without sustained financial support and long-term investment, women's organisations will struggle to meet their objectives. A secure and inclusive environment is essential—one where women can freely express their interests, coordinate their initiatives, share knowledge, and establish networks across different levels of society.

In a similar vein, Hendricks and Chivasa (2009) stress that a sustainable peacebuilding strategy should prioritise the creation of platforms for dialogue between governments and civil society actors. Strengthening existing implementation mechanisms that promote women's participation is equally vital. They further argue that long-term peace depends on addressing the structural causes of conflict—such as poverty, inequality, and food insecurity. To effectively bridge the gap between conflict escalation and intervention strategies, early warning and response systems must be developed. Moreover, research that focuses on women and girls in conflict and post-conflict contexts is critical to understanding the specific needs of marginalised populations. A multidimensional approach to peacebuilding—one that includes social, political, and economic aspects—is necessary to challenge and transform the systemic inequalities that reproduce gender discrimination.

This section draws on scholarly contributions on women, conflict, and peacebuilding. Understanding women's contributions to peacebuilding processes requires analysing women's role in conflict and post-conflict situations and acknowledging the traditional norms associated with such processes. The limited participation of local women in formal peace negotiations underscores the urgency of mainstreaming gender perspectives at every level and prioritising grassroots consultations to ensure the meaningful implementation of UNSCR 1325. This chapter argues that women's plurality of experiences and struggles during conflict and post-conflict contexts must be adequately recognised and therefore, a transformation of rigid binaries—such as 'violent masculinity' and 'peaceful femininity'—is crucial. Long-term strategies must be developed alongside fast-track policy solutions to ensure effective change. In this process, women's networks and organisations have a pivotal role to play in catalysing social and cultural transformation and promoting cultures of peace. These networks also facilitate intercultural dialogue, helping to bridge Western philosophical thinking and other worldviews and promoting diversity as a source of strength. Ultimately, the responsibility for advancing gender-inclusive peacebuilding lies with all actors—grassroots movements, national and international networks, and formal decision-making bodies alike. Their collective efforts are essential to ensure women's voices are heard and their full participation is guaranteed in peacebuilding processes. Within this context, the case of Liberia offers a compelling example to further explore these dynamics.

WOMEN IN LIBERIAN SOCIETY

Between 1980 and 2003, Liberia endured a devastating conflict that resulted in widespread human suffering and the near-total collapse of state institutions. The violence among armed factions led to severe human rights abuses, including the recruitment of women and children into armed groups—either by force or out of necessity. Estimations show that the conflict resulted in approximately 250,000 deaths, 40,000 cases of rape, and the displacement of around two million people (United Nations, 2014; Specht, 2006).

Despite receiving substantial external assistance, Liberia remains one of the world's poorest nations. As of 2021, its Human Development

Index value stood at 0.481 (UNDP, 2022).¹¹ Although there have been some improvements in women's political and economic participation, progress in education and health remains limited, and Liberia continues to report some of the highest rates of gender-based violence globally. In 2021, it ranked 164 out of 191 on the Gender Inequality Index (UNDP, 2022). Given that women were disproportionately affected by the war, understanding their evolving roles in Liberian society is essential.

Liberia ratified the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW) in 1984, showing a commitment to advancing women's rights. However, the reality for women in Liberia continues to differ significantly depending on factors such as ethnic background, religion, and geographic location (UK Home Office, 1999). In rural areas, traditional laws remain dominant and often restrict women's rights, especially within the household and community. The unequal status between women and men, characterised by discrimination, abuses, and violations of women's rights, remains persistent on the Liberian territory. This situation is rooted in the existence of two legal systems—statutory and customary—that frequently conflict. Statutory law, influenced by American legal frameworks, is based on the primacy of the national constitution and division of powers. In contrast, customary law, widely practised in rural communities, often addresses conflictual relationships through controversial practices. The complex relationship between these legal systems has impeded the consistent implementation of gender policies. The state's inability to enforce exclusive control over the judiciary has further exposed its limited reach and underscored the power of customary institutions in Liberia (Graef, 2014, 2015). As Julian Graef (2014) observed, the formal justice system is largely absent from many Liberian communities and frequently viewed with suspicion. Instead, customary practices dominate, shaping daily life and local justice mechanisms. Although national efforts have aimed to improve women's rights through legal reforms, in practice, customary norms often supersede these laws, especially in matters like family rights and inheritance.

Despite these challenges, some actors have questioned the assumption that formal justice mechanisms are inherently more legitimate than

¹¹ In 2021, Liberia's HDI ranking was 178 out of 191 countries.

customary ones. The Liberian Legal Working Group (LWG),¹² for instance, has advocated for a more pragmatic and inclusive approach—one that prioritises the actual justice needs of the population over rigid adherence to legal frameworks. The LWG has emphasised the value of considering all available dispute resolution mechanisms, including customary, formal, alternative, and community-based systems, for their potential effectiveness in addressing local grievances (Legal Working Group, 2009).

However, in practical terms, women continue to face significant legal disadvantages under customary law. For example, women are generally denied parental authority and cannot share custody of children after a divorce or the death of a spouse. In some regions, they are also prohibited from appearing before traditional courts without a male representative (CEDAW, 2009: 13). While civil law grants equal inheritance rights, customary practices continue to prevent women from inheriting property. The dual legal structure also leads to contradictions in marriage law: statutory legislation sets the minimum age of marriage at 18, while customary norms permit marriage from age 16 (Kumalo & Kujeke, 2017). As a result, early marriage is widespread, with 36% of women aged 20–24 having married before 18 in 2019 (UNDP, 2019). Polygamy is another example of legal inconsistency: it is condemned under civil law but authorised under customary law. Nearly one-third of Liberian women aged 15–49 live in polygamous households (International Development Law Organization, 2010), reflecting the enduring power of traditional norms.

A justice programme director interviewed for this study emphasised that the judiciary remains one of the most severely affected institutions following the war. The widespread lack of trust in formal courts has made it particularly hard for women—already facing structural discrimination—to access justice effectively (In-person interview, Monrovia, August 18, 2021).

Recognising these challenges, the Liberian government implemented several programmes, such as the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) in 2008, aiming to align customary and statutory justice systems. The strategy seeks to ensure that customary justice mechanisms uphold

¹² Established in 2009, the LWG represents the Ministers of Justice and Internal Affairs, UNMIL's Legal and Judicial System Support Division (LJSSD), the American and Liberian Bar Associations, Law Schools and civil society actors.

human rights and gender equality and complement the legal framework (Republic of Liberia, 2008).

While these initiatives have led to some improvements—driven by government, international partners, and civil society—justice-related inequalities remain deeply rooted. Achieving gender justice in Liberia requires deeper integration between formal and customary systems and sustained commitment to reforms that prioritise the rights and dignity of women.

The violent conflicts that affected Liberia for over two decades had a profound and lasting impact on the country’s infrastructure. In the aftermath, the health sector in particular struggled to rebuild, hindered by a lack of basic institutional capacity and resources. During the wars, maternal mortality and HIV/AIDS infection rates rose considerably, exacerbating the health crisis (UNDP, 2019). The combination of inadequate healthcare services, limited access to contraception, and the absence of comprehensive sexual education left many women and girls increasingly vulnerable and underscored the persistent hardships they face.

By 2017, Liberia’s adult female literacy rate had fallen significantly below the Sub-Saharan African average—34.1% compared to 60.9%. Although women had a slightly higher life expectancy than men in 2020 (62 vs. 59 years), the maternal mortality rate remained high at 652 deaths per 100,000 live births. These figures, along with other human development indicators summarised in Table 2.1, give a clearer picture of the challenges Liberian women continue to face in health, education, and social well-being.

Table 2.1 Human development data for Liberia (2017–2020)

<i>Human development indicator</i>	<i>Result (year)</i>
Life expectancy male (years)	59 (2020)
Life expectancy female (years)	62 (2020)
Adult female literacy rate (%)	34,1 (2017)
Infant mortality per 1,000 births	57 (2021)
Maternal mortality rate per 100,000 births	652 (2020)
School enrolment, secondary (%)	40 (2020)
Children out of school (%)	27 (2020)

Source World Bank Data. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

Among the most pressing issues is the widespread occurrence of gender-based violence, which was exacerbated by the extended conflict and persists across both public and private spheres. Cases of sexual violence are closely linked to early pregnancies, further compounding risks for adolescent girls (Kumalo & Kujeke, 2017). While Liberia has made legislative efforts to combat sexual and gender-based violence, including the adoption of the Gender and Sexually Based Violence Act of 2008, which created a special court for rape cases, implementation remains inconsistent. The 2008 Poverty Reduction Strategy acknowledged this gap, noting that customary practices often override statutory protections for women and girls. In many regions, traditional norms continue to restrict women's rights to property, personal safety, and autonomy. Those who challenge gender roles frequently face violence intended to enforce traditional roles.

Along the same line, another important concern is female genital mutilation (FGM), provoking significant health damage in Liberia. This practice is not criminalised by law and remains an accepted rite in several tribal societies.¹³ Prior to the civil war, around half of girls aged 8 to 18 years reported undergoing FGM (UK Home Office, 1999). As of 2018, almost thirty years later, the practice continued to affect 44.4% of women aged 15 to 49 (UNDP, 2019). In response, international bodies such as the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) urged Liberia to ban FGM and prosecute perpetrators, stressing the need to dismantle the cultural justifications that support the practice (CEDAW, 2009).

Efforts have also been made to combat human trafficking. The 2005 Anti-Human Trafficking Act was designed to protect young girls from domestic labour and other exploitive practices.¹⁴ However, enforcement remains limited. Support services for survivors of sexual violence, providing access to healthcare, legal assistance, and protective measures, are insufficient or lacking in many areas (CEDAW, 2009: 8). Overall,

¹³ However, in 2022, a positive step was made towards women's rights with the three-years suspension of FGM practices.

¹⁴ Section 2 of the Act stipulates that the "recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of a person by means of the threat or use of force or other means of coercion or by abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability, or by giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person for the purpose of exploitation shall be a criminal offense within the Republic of Liberia" (Anti-Human Trafficking Act, 2005, Section 2).

sexual and gender-based violence, poor access to health and education, and limited representation in decision-making continue to pose significant barriers to women's empowerment in Liberia. The persistence of traditional practices, coupled with weak law enforcement and resource constraints, underscores the urgent need for systemic reform and strong institutions support for women's rights.

Despite some efforts to improve access to education for girls in Liberia, long-standing gender stereotypes and cultural practices considerably limit educational opportunities. As of 2017, only 34.1% of women over the age of 15 were literate, compared to 62.7% of men in the same age group (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2017). Schools, rather than being safe spaces for learning, have also been sites where girls are vulnerable to harassment, further limiting their ability to pursue education and, consequently, employment (Kumalo & Kujeke, 2017). While women represent 54.7% of the labour force in Liberia, the majority are confined to the informal sector, where they receive few, if any, social protections or benefits. This perpetuates a cycle of economic insecurity and limited opportunity. To address these challenges, the government adopted the Decent Work Act in 2015, which sets minimum standards for workplace safety, bargaining rights in the informal sector, and minimum national wages.

Several international organisations have also contributed to rebuilding Liberia's post-conflict economy with a focus on gender. The World Bank's 2007 initiative, 'Gender Equality as Smart Economics' assessed Liberian women's needs in the post-war context and noted that 77% of women were independent entrepreneurs and made up 53% of the agricultural workforce, generating 60% of the country's agricultural production (Bekoe & Parajon, 2007). Despite this, women's participation in sectors such as infrastructure, mining, and public service remains minimal.

The World Bank's Gender Action Plan (GAP) sought to empower women economically and support access to credit and entrepreneurship. However, the GAP's third-year progress report recognised the challenges of working in fragile states like Liberia, where persistent capacity gaps hinder sustainable impact (World Bank Group, 2014). While opportunities for innovation exist, more knowledge is needed on what effectively builds women's assets, skills, and access to leadership.

Beyond economic empowerment, women's participation in political life remains limited. The 2005 election of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf marked a symbolic milestone, yet it did not translate into broader gender

parity. By 2023, women held only 11% of seats in the National Parliament (8 out of 73), with just two women in the Senate, placing Liberia 162nd out of 191 countries for women's parliamentary representation (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023). Despite the possible positive impacts of establishing quotas for women in government, women's empowerment involves much more. Sociocultural barriers limiting women's education and impeding their economic emancipation should be addressed as a priority. Although civic education programmes have been implemented in various regions after the war, they often clash with traditional norms, slowing down positive outcomes (Kumalo & Kujeke, 2017). Addressing these challenges requires not only legal reform but also investment in women's basic education and skills training, particularly in rural areas. Civil society organisations play a critical role here but need sustained support to scale grassroots advocacy and transform it into broader structural change.

It is worth noting that the Government of Liberia has undertaken some positive initiatives by adopting various gender-focused policies. These include the 2006 National Gender-based Violence Plan of Action, the National Policy on Girls' Education, and a law criminalising marital rape. In 2008, Liberia ratified the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (2003). A National Action Plan was introduced in 2009 to support the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (Republic of Liberia, 2008).

Despite these efforts, cultural factors continue to obstruct the enforcement of these policies. The fourteen years of conflict experienced in Liberia had a significant impact on the perception of women in Liberian society and the roles they have been associated with. During the war, women and children were primary targets of sexual violence, contributing to increased rates of HIV infection, teenage pregnancy, prostitution, and a widespread trauma (UK Home Office, 1999). The violence also had long-term economic consequences, pushing many women into precarious livelihoods. Yet, these experiences also motivated powerful groups of women to mobilise and promote reconciliation, disarmament, and non-violence. Several initiatives were developed, and women leaders raised their voices to increase awareness and reduce abuses against women and girls. Nonetheless, governmental institutions and officials have often ignored their concerns and women's activists were sometimes restricted by police forces (UK Home Office, 1999).

In this sense, women's social, economic, and political empowerment in Liberia has still a long way to go. Liberia's 2009 National Gender Policy advanced that gender inequalities remain visible in both public and private spheres, and called for equal opportunities for all as essential to democratic development (Ministry of Gender and Development of Liberia, 2009). According to a Peace Brief by the Institute for Security Studies, two strategies are essential for advancing gender equality in Liberia. First, women must be empowered at the grassroots level, particularly through scholarships and targeted interventions. Second, women's organisations must receive adequate financial and institutional support to amplify their impact at the community level (Kumalo & Kujjeka, 2017). Overall, women's organisations played a critical role in Liberia's peace process. Peace campaigns like the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace and the leadership of the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET), which began organising as early as 1991, were instrumental in influencing the peace talks and the signature of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of 2003. These grassroots efforts showed the potential of women's activism to influence national outcomes, even when their voices were initially ignored or suppressed by authorities.

While grassroots women's activism in Liberia demonstrates the power of local agency, it also occurs within a broader international framework that shapes how participation, protection, and empowerment are understood. The WPS agenda, particularly UNSCR 1325, sets global norms for women's involvement in peace processes, but feminist scholars have long questioned whether these norms genuinely advance women's agency or merely reproduce existing hierarchies. Examining these critiques provides a necessary lens for understanding both the opportunities and constraints that shape Liberian women's peacebuilding practices, and situates local strategies, such as those of the Peace Huts, within the global discourse of women, peace, and security.

FEMINIST CRITIQUES OF WPS

UNSCR 1325 as a Top-Down Normative Project

The adoption of UNSCR 1325 is frequently criticised for institutionalising a conservative and managerial approach to mainstreaming gender in conflict and post-conflict settings. Rather than transforming the structures that generate insecurity, the resolution often reproduces hierarchical

relationships between global institutions and conflict-affected societies. As Santos et al. (2013) argue, the WPS agenda can function as a conduit for neoliberal peacebuilding, situating international actors as norm-producers and local societies as norm-takers. This dynamic is especially relevant in Liberia, where peacebuilding infrastructure was heavily shaped by transitional governance, humanitarian presence, and donor-led interventions. This book shows how this apparatus filtered down to women's networks, influencing the strategies they could legitimately mobilise and the forms of peace work that became institutionally recognisable.

Laura Shepherd (2016, 2020) deepens this critique by showing how the WPS framework imagines conflict as something that happens “elsewhere”—in distant territories and abnormal political contexts. This orientation obscures militarised everyday life and depoliticises peace by relocating insecurity onto remote Others. The Liberian experience initially appears to confirm this logic: the humanitarian-security complex treated Liberia as a paradigmatic site for post-conflict gender mainstreaming, not as a place with its own political history of organising. Yet this book demonstrates that Liberian women's groups did not simply inhabit this externally defined space; through the Peace Huts and community organisations, they reframed peacebuilding as an everyday practice rooted in material and social survival rather than a derivative of external doctrines.

Otto (2015) questions the assumption that UN resolutions are direct instruments of empowerment. While some international NGOs mobilise the agenda effectively, Otto finds that most grassroots activists do not use 1325 to design peacebuilding strategies; they use their own repertoires and later learn to translate them into the language of WPS for visibility and funding. The Liberian case provides rich empirical evidence of this pattern. Women's associations that emerged during and immediately after the war did not begin from 1325—they began from rituals of community accountability, leadership, spirituality, and local networks. Only later were these practices reframed as “WPS implementation”, often through donor intermediaries or government programmes. This confirms Otto's analysis but also extends it: localisation in Liberia is not merely a failed uptake of norms; it produces hybrid forms of authority that allow women's groups to negotiate and appropriate bureaucratic peacebuilding norms.

The limits of this top-down approach are documented empirically by Anderlini (2010), who shows that weak financial support, minimal state awareness, and a lack of consultation drive civil society organisations to repackage existing activities under the 1325 label. This pressure

to demonstrate “compliance” rather than transformation is visible in Liberia’s national policy cycles. As the findings of this book show, in some instances, local women rebranded long-standing conflict mediation practices as I325-aligned initiatives, both to satisfy reporting expectations and to retain access to donors. The agenda thus creates organisational incentives rather than political commitments, validating Anderlini’s argument while showing how bureaucratic peace practices are co-produced by donors and grassroots actors.

Basini and Ryan (2016) move this critique into the institutional domain, demonstrating that National Action Plans (NAPs) in Liberia and Sierra Leone centralise authority within the state and international partners. Instead of empowering women’s movements as political actors, NAPs bureaucratise them, reducing participation to a series of consultative moments and project cycles. This research corroborates this: the Liberian NAP processes largely bypassed the most active local organisations, privileging technocratic actors and internationally linked NGOs. Yet at the same time, community organisations learned to strategically instrumentalise NAP language, using it to signal legitimacy, challenge local authorities, or secure resources. This complicates Basini and Ryan’s emphasis on co-optation by showing that the same bureaucratisation can become an opening for tactical agency.

Haastrup and Hagen (2020) introduces a further layer to this critique: localisation is not only gendered but racialised. WPS embeds hierarchies of knowledge where Global North actors constitute “experts”, while African women appear as beneficiaries needing instruction and capacity-building. Liberia is a critical case here because it was framed internationally as a success story of “African women peace activism”, while the most influential forms of activism—market-based networks, inter-religious mediation, community pressure—remained illegible to donors. This book demonstrates how these hierarchies shape which practices are documented, funded, or elevated transnationally, and which remain local, informal, or invisible.

Finally, Luna and Whetstone (2022) highlight that localisation is not unidirectional imposition; it involves norm translation from below. Their work shows how women’s organisations selectively appropriate I325 to pursue long-standing priorities, reframing the agenda to fit local political realities. This insight is central to my contribution. In Liberia, women activists domesticate the WPS language into community-embedded logics of security: the Peace Huts become institutions of moral authority and

dispute resolution. Local actors thus transform the meaning of participation—not as representation in elite forums, but as guardianship of the social fabric. Through this lens, 1325 becomes a way to legitimise practices that predate international intervention and often exceed donors’ imaginative horizons.

Militarisation and the Use of Force

The Security Council has long been criticised for instrumentalising feminist discourses to justify the use of force while ignoring anti-war feminist perspectives (Heathcote, 2011). As Otto notes, “While there is much to celebrate about the Security Council’s WPS agenda in terms of policy and institutional developments, admission into the inner sanctum of the Security Council’s work has come at some cost to feminist goals” (Otto, 2016: 1). In practice, the WPS agenda has been used to legitimise militarist practices: women are framed as vulnerable and in need of protection, while their “participation” is channelled into security institutions and military operations (Nikoghosyan, 2017). Feminist scholars have repeatedly warned that this formulation bifurcates the political subject: women are either post-conflict beneficiaries of protection or technocratic contributors to security infrastructures, rather than political agents capable of contesting militarism.

Despite the agenda’s strong rhetorical potential to transform militarised and patriarchal norms, it has failed to dismantle the structures that underpin the legal and operational use of military force (Cockburn, 2013; Cohn, 2008; Heathcote, 2011). The sequencing of resolutions illustrates this drift. Resolutions 1820, 1888, and 1960 denounce sexual violence in conflict and condemn violations of women’s human rights, yet none hampers the use of arms or coercive security measures. Instead, they express the Council’s willingness to counter “systematic” and “widespread” sexual violence, authorising militarised responses under the logic of humanitarian rescue (UNSCR 1820, para. 1; UNSCR 1888, para. 1; UNSCR 1960, para. 1). As Heathcote argues, if sexual violence is defined as a threat to international peace and security, the Council may treat it as a justification for force under Article 42 of the UN Charter (Heathcote, 2011: 41). The question then becomes urgent: can the use of force be considered a feminist solution to the maintenance of peace? (Heathcote, 2011: 25).

The absence of substantive engagement with disarmament further reveals the Security Council's prioritisation of military power over feminist visions of permanent peace (Otto, 2015). Rather than challenging the global arms market or the war economy, the WPS agenda has shifted from condemning armed conflict to regulating the conditions under which wars become safer for women (Shepherd, 2016). As Cohn asks, how could the Security Council denounce warfare when its permanent members constitute the major exporters of weapons globally? (Cohn, 2008: 18). Otto pushes this argument further, contending that feminist discourses have been "manipulated to support the expanding exercise of unaccountable power" by the Council and legitimise a militaristic, carceral approach in the name of protecting "women and their rights" (Otto, 2016: 2). Under this configuration, protection is not a feminist norm but a mechanism of Western geopolitical authority.

The argument that militarism has been repackaged as feminism is reinforced by recent research on the bureaucratisation of peace. Lyytikäinen and Yadav (2022) demonstrate that the day-to-day implementation of WPS policies transforms peace into an administrative problem to be solved through risk assessments, indicators, reporting templates, and compliance metrics. Bureaucratisation does not merely formalise processes; it produces what the authors call militarised peace: a regime in which militarism is not only physical force but also the logics that govern "safe" programming, disciplined behaviour, and professionalised femininity. Under these conditions, feminist agendas are domesticated into administrative labour: trainings, monitoring forms, and donor-compliant activities. Women are enrolled not as political subjects, but as compliant implementers of a security apparatus designed elsewhere.

Crucially, this bureaucratic peace is not experienced uniformly. Luna and Whetstone (2022) show that women at the grassroots level operate outside these institutional frameworks. Rather than internalising militarised logics, activists often treat 1325 as a flexible repertoire: a vocabulary to mobilise resources, negotiate space, or avoid state repression. Here, peace work is not primarily about satisfying reporting requirements but about sustaining communal resilience, mediating disputes, performing mother-work, or mobilising spiritual and historical memory. Their findings highlight the limits of institutional feminism: norm diffusion from above cannot extinguish the endogenous feminist practices that pre-exist the resolution and persist regardless of donor attention.

It is precisely in this tension that this book intervenes. I trace how women in Liberia interpret, resist, adapt, or bypass UNSCR 1325 in the course of everyday peacebuilding. The Peace Huts, religious mediation, and communitarian dispute resolution reveal a feminist politics that is neither militarised nor bureaucratically domesticated. Local actors do not simply “receive” the agenda; they work through and beyond it, generating alternative ideas of peace in which 1325 may be central, peripheral, or irrelevant. By relocating the analysis from the arena of institutional power to the terrain of grassroots agency, the book reframes feminist participation not as performative compliance with militarised structures, but as collective world-making grounded in local histories and relationships.

Women as Victims

Other feminists, sometimes referred to as ‘Governance feminists’, criticise the Security Council’s strong emphasis on women as victims of armed conflict (Heathcote, 2011). The Council’s masculine approach often categorises women in protective terms rather than recognising them as combatants and equal actors in peace processes. Systematic references to women’s sexual vulnerability and women in need of protection can undermine women’s agency as essential actors promoting social change. In parallel, framing women primarily as victims reinforces men’s role as protectors rather than perpetrators of violence (Heathcote, 2011; O’Connor, 2014). Sexual violence, while critical to address, has been condensed into a central focus of the WPS agenda, reducing the broader experiences of women in conflict to this aspect and shaping policies that may legitimise military interventions (Nikoghosyan, 2017; Otto, 2014). Shepherd (2020) further notes that this victimisation narrative can overshadow local women’s leadership and decision-making capacities, while Kunz (2021) highlights how women’s agency is often constrained within externally defined protection frameworks. Consequently, the WPS agenda promotes a fixed, universal representation of gender that requires women to be subordinated and weak, reinforcing essentialist notions of femininity (Santos et al., 2013).

This book situates itself within these debates by focusing on Liberian women’s experiences, showing how they navigate the tension between international narratives of victimhood and local agency. While UNSCR 1325 frames women’s roles in protective and subordinated terms, Liberian women strategically engage with these norms to advance their

own peace and security agendas. By centring grassroots practices, the study demonstrates that top-down narratives of victimhood coexist with vibrant bottom-up peacebuilding initiatives, revealing both the limitations of international frameworks and their potential to support meaningful women's participation in conflict resolution.

Women as Natural Peacebuilders

The need to consolidate women's protection is complemented by calls for their increased participation in conflict prevention and peacebuilding processes (S/RES/1325, paras. 2, 3, 4, 8a & 15). However, the portrayal of women as natural peacemakers has been widely critiqued for essentialism, framing women as inherently peaceful, moral, and nurturing actors, rather than as equal political and security actors (Santos et al., 2013; Cohn et al., 2004; Kapur, 2013). While UNSCR 1325 nominally foregrounds women's agency, it often depicts them "for their chastity and honour, rather than for their humanity" (Otto, 2016: 8), creating a utopian vision of women as global peacebuilders that leaves little room for critical, local, or intersectional perspectives (Gibbins, 2011). The WPS agenda thus risks reinforcing gendered hierarchies by neglecting masculinities and the broader structural inequalities shaping conflict (Santos et al., 2013), though men's engagement as peacemakers remains essential to challenge these norms (Otto, 2014: 164).

Singh (2020) adds that local actors may adapt and reinterpret WPS norms in ways that diverge from the global UN framing. In Afghanistan, women negotiate between international prescriptions and local socio-political realities, creating "everyday" translations of UNSCR 1325 that can empower but also constrain women depending on local power structures. Similarly, Luna and Whetstone (2022) highlight grassroots women in Nepal and Sri Lanka who actively produce new gender norms within peacebuilding, challenging the top-down, "saviour" logic embedded in the WPS agenda. Both studies demonstrate that women's agency often emerges through localised, context-specific practices rather than as a direct product of UN mandates, illustrating the importance of bottom-up approaches.

This debate also intersects with critiques of militarisation: while women's inclusion in peace processes and security institutions is promoted, it may reproduce existing masculinised hierarchies, risking the militarisation of feminism rather than transforming it (Nikoghosyan,

2017; Shepherd, 2016). Gender mainstreaming within the UN frequently reduces women's participation to tokenistic roles or symbolic representation at peace tables, without addressing structural inequalities such as poverty, limited access to education or employment, and patriarchal norms (O'Connor, 2014; Pratt & Richter-Devroe, 2011). As a result, UNSCR 1325 often privileges a limited vision of women's agency, emphasising their "add women and stir" inclusion while leaving hegemonic power relations intact.

Postcolonial and Intersectional Critiques

While earlier critiques highlight how hierarchies of expertise and legitimacy operate within WPS practice, postcolonial and intersectional feminist scholarship situates these dynamics within longer histories of colonial power, racialised governance, and epistemic domination. Postcolonial feminists argue that UNSCR 1325 is aligned with dominant security discourses post-9/11, normalising the use of force for security purposes and redefining the interrelationships between gender, race, and sexuality (Pratt, 2013). By calling for the inclusion of women in security institutions and military operations, UNSCR 1325 contributes to "the process of re-sexing gender" or making "females acting like men" without challenging masculine dominance in peace processes (Eisenstein, 2007: xiii). Postcolonial feminists consider that UNSCR 1325 reflects a "white Western heterosexual feminism", reproducing racial-sexual hierarchies rooted in colonialism (Santos et al., 2013: 9). The failure to articulate gender with other social intersections such as race, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality affects how women's agency is understood and how gender is incorporated into conflict and post-conflict processes (Santos et al., 2013; Pratt & Richter-Devroe, 2011; Otto, 2014). Haastrup and Hagen (2020) further emphasise that WPS norms are embedded in global racial hierarchies, showing how Western-led interventions reproduce colonial patterns of authority and knowledge production. In practice, the prevalence of Western actors in peace and humanitarian institutions contributes to reproducing Western approaches in contexts such as Africa, where militarised men dominate over traditional and religious leaders and local women (Kezie-Nwoha, 2020).

Therefore, although the WPS agenda provides "productive 'footholds' for continuing feminist activism", the Security Council has often manipulated feminist discourses "to present itself as a champion of feminist

goals and a creator of international law” and “enhance the legitimacy of its post-Cold War, and post-9/11, expanding exercise of unaccountable power in the name of protecting women and their rights” (Otto, 2014: 158, 161). In this context, my research situates itself at the intersection of postcolonial and local feminist critiques, examining how Liberian women appropriate and contest WPS norms in ways that reveal both the constraints and possibilities of locally grounded feminist peacebuilding.

From a postcolonial and intersectional perspective, UNSCR 1325 fails to challenge militarised masculinities as historically produced forms of power that are entangled with race, hierarchy, and colonial governance (Cockburn, 2013). Dominant security frameworks continue to privilege particular models of authority and discipline, while conservative and traditional constructions of masculinity normalise xenophobic, misogynistic, and racist discourses that undermine rights-based policy-making (Taylor & Baldwin, 2019). These patriarchal formations do not only structure relations between men and women; they also compel men to perform authority through coercion and violence towards other men, reinforcing broader systems of inequality that shape women’s insecurity across conflict, post-conflict, and so-called “peacetime” settings (McMinn, 2015).

Within international institutions, these gendered and racialised hierarchies are reflected in the marginalisation of women from decision-making spaces. Security debates remain dominated by male elites, while women’s contributions to peace and security are frequently minimised or underfunded (McMinn, 2015). Bureaucratic instruments such as National Action Plans often reproduce this imbalance by prioritising formal compliance over substantive empowerment, sidelining local women’s priorities (Shepherd, 2020).

It is within these intersecting structures of militarism, patriarchy, and bureaucratic governance that this book intervenes. By examining how grassroots women navigate the top-down prescriptions of the WPS agenda, the study highlights the tension between essentialist, institutional understandings of women’s agency and localised practices grounded in social legitimacy and everyday authority. In doing so, it contributes to both the critique of UNSCR 1325 and its transformation in practice.

LOCALISATION & NORM TRANSLATION: FROM GLOBAL MANDATES TO LOCAL PRACTICE

A significant body of research has highlighted the challenges of translating UNSCR 1325 into local contexts. Anderlini's (2010) report, based on six case studies, emphasises the lack of knowledge about the resolution among governments, UN personnel, and civil society, as well as weak financial support and minimal consultation with local women. Under pressure to “do something”, civil society organisations often repurpose existing programmes under the UNSCR 1325 banner, although these interventions are not always well adapted to local needs or policy processes (Anderlini, 2010: 43). Similarly, Heathcote (2011) critiques the concentration of gender issues in the hands of specialised experts, which leads to the “blindness” of non-specialised actors and constrains the institutionalisation of meaningful change. Otto (2014, 2016) frames this gap between discourse and practice as ritualistic: states formally commit to gendered goals without translating them into substantive outcomes, risking a betrayal of feminist activism.

Lyytikäinen and Yadav (2022) provide a complementary perspective by showing how bureaucratised WPS implementation often produces “militarised peace”, yet also identify instances of local best practices where WPS norms have been adapted meaningfully, demonstrating that institutional structures can both constrain and enable transformative interventions. Hamilton et al. (2020) extend this analysis across 20 years of National Action Plans, revealing patterns of adaptation and compliance, and highlighting how international pressures interact with local political realities. Luna and Whetstone (2022) further underscore the agency of grassroots women's groups, who negotiate and transform global WPS norms into locally relevant practices, showing that localisation is an active, context-sensitive process rather than passive adoption.

Situated within this debate, this book contributes by examining how local women in Liberia engage with the WPS agenda, translating global mandates into strategies that address both structural inequalities and everyday peacebuilding needs. This approach illustrates the potential of bottom-up processes to challenge ritualistic top-down implementations, highlighting how local actors engage with the dominant norms embedded in UNSCR 1325. Through these locally driven initiatives, the resolution's principles acquire practical significance, demonstrating that meaningful

change requires attention to context, resource allocation, and sustained engagement with grassroots actors.

Thus, it appears fundamental to analyse how and for what purposes the WPS agenda promotes women's participation as civil and political agents. One should question: will women's participation be limited to making "feminised" contributions, for example by assuming domesticating and pacifying roles in the immediate post-conflict period or contributing to the design of "civilised" rules aimed at saving or protecting women in the Global South? Or will women be admitted as full and equal participants in conflict prevention and resolution and in peacebuilding, able to challenge militarism and promote the positive peace envisaged by the women's peace movement? (Otto, 2016: 5).

Research shows that local contexts play a crucial role in shaping how WPS norms are interpreted and operationalised. Singh's analysis of Afghanistan (2020) demonstrates that, despite formal commitments, women's participation often remains symbolic, constrained by local political and cultural structures. Similarly, Luna and Whetstone's studies in Nepal and Sri Lanka (2022) emphasise the importance of civil society and grassroots actors in translating global norms into context-sensitive initiatives that genuinely empower women. De Almagro and Bargués' work (2022) on Liberian Peace Huts illustrates how women-led local spaces enable meaningful engagement in conflict resolution, outside formal UN frameworks. Shepherd (2020) further stresses that the effectiveness of WPS implementation depends on aligning global norms with local realities, warning against top-down imposition that can obscure local priorities and reinforce tokenistic participation.

Within this framework, the calls for increasing women's participation in peacebuilding have often been perceived as strategies to improve the UN's effectiveness in conflict prevention, resolution, and peacebuilding rather than as genuine empowerment for women (Otto, 2014). Even when women act as peacemakers, their agency is constrained by UN discursive norms, masking anti-militarist and anti-imperialist perspectives (Heathcote, 2011; Otto, 2014). The specific norms of speech within the UN system have curtailed feminist critiques of militarisation, instead promoting a positive, "utopian" image of women as bridge-builders and peacemakers (Pratt & Richter-Devroe, 2011: 493). As this book demonstrates, effective WPS implementation requires attention to these localised practices, showing that bottom-up approaches—led by women in diverse

cultural and political contexts—can foster transformative participation, rather than reproducing essentialist roles.

Why These Critiques Make the Local Level Crucial

This critical assessment of UNSCR 1325 shows that while the WPS agenda often frames women as naturally peaceful or primarily as victims in need of protection, spaces of feminist agency persist, particularly at the local level. Patriarchal norms and militarised power structures continue to limit women's access to formal decision-making, and gendered interpretations often confine them to informal roles in peacebuilding and care. Yet, recent scholarship, including this book, demonstrates that local women and civil society actors do not passively absorb global mandates as they are given.

As Haastrup (2025) argues, local actors resist and strategically engage with UNSCR 1325 in ways that prevent its full co-optation. Rather than automatically empowering women, global norms are negotiated in practice. Women draw on the WPS framework selectively to defend local priorities, expand their room for action, and challenge assumptions built into international policy. These dynamics show that even within patriarchal and militarised systems, locally grounded forms of agency remain possible and politically meaningful.

In Liberia, these processes are particularly visible. Women-led initiatives such as the Peace Huts and other grassroots networks demonstrate how UNSCR 1325 is reworked to fit local realities and support meaningful participation in peacebuilding. These practices challenge top-down, technocratic approaches to implementation and point instead to context-sensitive pathways towards gender justice and empowerment (de Almagro & Bargués, 2020; Kunz, 2021).

While UNSCR 1325 has clear limits as a tool for transforming global power structures, it nevertheless provides a resource that local actors can use strategically. This book therefore situates feminist activism in Liberia as a critical site where the political potential of the WPS agenda is realised, linking global norms to local practice through the empirical analysis that follows.

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The Women, Peace and Security Agenda (WPS) in Liberia

Abstract This chapter addresses the legal framework promoting gender equality as a global principle, including the mechanisms adopted to shift from awareness-raising to effective policy implementation at all levels. This part acknowledges the efforts and progress made towards women's protection and empowerment since the adoption of UNSCR 1325, by analysing the strategies for implementation adopted in Liberia, including the collaborations between national and local levels.

Keywords Women · Peace and Security agenda · Liberia · UNSCR 1325 · Gender equality · Legal framework

Adopted in 2000, UN Security Council Resolution 1325 is the first legal policy document by the Security Council to explicitly recognise the importance of women's equal participation in matters of international peace and security. It emphasises women's roles in conflict prevention, peace negotiations, humanitarian efforts, and post-conflict recovery, underscoring their participation across all stages of conflict and peace processes. This resolution also marked a turning point in integrating gender and human rights perspectives within the broader UN system. UNSCR 1325 calls upon states to promote women's full involvement in decision-making processes, to protect women and girls from conflict-related sexual violence, and to incorporate gender perspectives

into peacebuilding processes. The Security Council urges governments and other parties to take concrete steps across five pillars: participation, protection, prevention, relief, and recovery.

UNSCR 1325 IN LIBERIA

The fourteen years of civil war that affected Liberia led to significant human losses, infrastructural damages, and political instability. In October 2003, the signature of the Accra Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA) gave hope to rebuild the country and establish long-lasting peace. Before this agreement, Liberian women had already mobilised across the country. Networks such as the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) and the Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET) were instrumental in organising mass protests and uniting women from diverse communities in their efforts to end the war. Since then, Liberia embarked on the road to peacebuilding through development, security, reconstruction, poverty reduction, and gender equality initiatives and programmes.

Following the adoption of UNSCR 1325, Liberia began incorporating its principles into national efforts. Gender issues and the security of women became central themes both globally and within Liberia's post-conflict reconstruction. Liberia's experience offers a valuable basis to evaluate the resolution's real-world impact.

In 2005, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf became Africa's first elected female president. Not long after, Ellen Margethe Løj was assigned as the first female Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia (2008–2012). Meanwhile, the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), established in 2003, sought to foster long-term peace, protect civilians, and support security sector reform. With a force of 15,000 peacekeepers, UNMIL was mandated to implement a ceasefire and safeguard the rights of women and children. One of its key initiatives, the Disarmament, Demobilisation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (DDRR) programme, began in 2003. By March 2005, over 100,000 former combatants had been disarmed, including more than 22,000 women, 8523 boys, and 2440 girls (United Nations Security Council, 2005, Article VI (22)). However, the absence of targeted disarmament efforts for women and children revealed limitations in UNMIL's engagement with women in the post-conflict period.

Liberia embraced the objectives and principles of UNSCR 1325 by launching a vigorous National Action Plan (LNAP) for 2009–2013

(Government of Liberia, 2009). Developed through a consultative and bottom-up approach involving government agencies, civil society, and international partners, the LNAP served both a monitoring and implementation tool. The creation of a Civil Society Monitoring Observatory (CSMO), including women's groups, the 1325 National Steering Committee (NSC), and a Technical Monitoring and Evaluation Task Force composed of experts from ministries, ensured that civil society and community voices informed the process (Government of Liberia, 2009: 9–10). Several consultations, forums, and regional dialogues were held with Liberians and key stakeholders, reinforcing the plan's ownership and relevance. Particularly, several groups like WIPNET and MARWOPNET played a significant role in LNAP's development and oversight.

The plan is structured around four pillars aligned with UNSCR 1325: protection, prevention, participation, and empowerment. These core themes were designed to guide actions across government and non-government sectors. The implementation strategy supports existing frameworks such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), alongside national policies like the Gender-based Violence Plan of Action and the Poverty Reduction Strategy (Government of Liberia, 2009: 8).

The Action Plan constitutes an instrument to enhance cooperation among stakeholders by establishing clear timelines, performance indicators, and responsibilities, thereby reinforcing transparency and shared accountability in the post-war reconstruction agenda. It prioritises gender equality by promoting women's inclusion across political, economic, and security sectors, and is tailored to address the specific needs of Liberians.

The launch of the LNAP in 2009 was the result of collaboration between the Ministry of Gender and Development, the UN International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (UN-INSTRAW), the UNMIL Office of the Gender Advisor (OGA), and CSOs (Schia & de Carvalho, 2009). Despite formal CSOs involvement, grassroots women were often excluded from decision-making processes. Several CSOs later criticised the limited inclusion of local women's groups in the LNAP and noted weak community ownership of the UNSCR 1325 agenda. The implementation of the LNAP was primarily perceived as the responsibility of the government and international partners, rather than of local women's organisations (IFP, 2010: 13). This dynamic reflects a significant gap between grassroots women—the intended beneficiaries of

UNSCR 1325—and the policymakers in charge of its execution. Ryan and Basini (2017) identify these patterns of centralised and elite-driven policy processes. Consultations with rural women’s organisations tended to translate into technocratic deliverables rather than structural change, and community priorities were reframed into donor-legible categories of “capacity-building” or “prevention”. In this sense, Liberia illustrates how NAPs may institutionalise participation without redistributing power.

The national implementation of 1325 in Liberia unfolded through donor-civil society partnerships that privileged a small cohort of professionalised NGOs. These “local intermediaries” become the gatekeepers of participation, translating community claims into projectable outputs. In Liberia, women’s networks in Monrovia absorbed resources and visibility, while grassroots groups without administrative capacity were pushed to the margins. This localisation politics did not merely shape who was funded; it shaped which problems were intelligible to donors and which remained invisible.

A UN Women Peace and Security Specialist in Liberia noted that limited public awareness of the NAP hindered progress, particularly in achieving women’s representation targets within the security sector. She acknowledged that while some advances had been made, overall outcomes fell short of expectations (Online interview, April 19, 2021).

The broader challenges of implementing UNSCR 1325 initiatives were compounded by the fragility of Liberia’s post-conflict institutions, particularly the collapsed judicial system and persistent issues within the security sector, including corruption and inefficiency (Schia & de Carvalho, 2009). These weaknesses undermined efforts to prevent and address sexual and gender-based violence, especially in rural areas.

In November 2019, Liberia adopted its second National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2019–2023), which draws from the experiences of the first phase, particularly by prioritising awareness-raising efforts—an area identified as a major shortcoming during the first NAP. Structured around five pillars, the second NAP seeks to (1) prevent all forms of violence against women and girls; (2) ensure their physical and mental security; (3) enhance women’s participation in conflict resolution and decision-making; (4) address the specific needs of women and girls; and (5) strengthen the institutional capacity to implement and monitor UNSCR 1325 principles (Government of Liberia, 2019: 7). Its development involved cooperation among governmental bodies, local authorities, traditional leaders, women’s organisations, NGOs, and community

groups such as the Peace Huts (Government of Liberia, 2019). To support the plan's implementation, the Government of Liberia established several coordination mechanisms, including the UNSCR 1325 Secretariat, the Civil Society Observatory Group, the Technical Working Group Committee (TWG), and the National Steering Committee (Government of Liberia, 2019). The TWG includes representatives from diverse sectors, such as the National Peace Huts women of Liberia and WIPNET, providing technical guidance on action plan design and operational coordination. A national civil society leader emphasised her organisation's active role in the second NAP's development, describing the plan as a key roadmap for raising awareness and mobilising resources for UNSCR 1325 initiatives (Online interview, April 14, 2021). She also highlighted the Ministry of Gender's leadership monitoring and evaluating SGBV intervention projects, underscoring the importance of ensuring that allocated funds achieve tangible results (Online interview, April 14, 2021). These efforts aim to advance gender equality and challenge traditional norms that limit women's empowerment. Additionally, the Peace Hut network, Palava Hut Committees, the Federation of Liberian Youth, and the Ministry of Education have collaborated to create 'Peace Clubs' in public schools, fostering non-violent conflict resolution and preventing violent extremism among young people (Government of Liberia, 2019).

The revised NAP also includes a logical framework and a clear reporting mechanism to ensure transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness throughout its implementation. Through multi-level collaboration and coordinated efforts, it seeks to bridge grassroots experiences with national strategies. A key focus of the document is to raise awareness of UNSCR 1325 and to strengthen grassroots ownership of its implementation agenda (Government of Liberia, 2019).

In addition, Liberia has advanced the domestication of UNSCR 1325 by adopting national laws and policies aimed at preventing discrimination against women and promoting gender equality. Notable examples include the Rape Law (2005), the Inheritance Law (2007), the Gender Equity in Politics Act (2010), and the Domestic Violence Act (2019) (Government of Liberia, 2019). In 2020, the government declared rape as a national emergency and established 'One Stop Centres' across the country to address the needs of survivors. These centres provide services including medical examination and treatment, psychosocial counselling, protection, law enforcement support, and temporary shelter. This model has gained

recognition as a promising approach to ensure ethical, survivor-centred care.

Civil society organisations have also played a critical role in advancing the protection framework, notably through their contribution to the establishment of the fast-track Criminal Court ‘E’, which holds exclusive jurisdiction over cases involving sexual offences. Further significant achievements include the creation of a Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) Unit within the Ministry of Justice, a UNSCR 1325 Unit within the Ministry of Gender, and a Women and Children Protection Division within the National Police Force (AUC, 2016). To further promote women’s protection and empowerment, the Liberian government institutionalised a National Gender Policy and National Security Strategy and established Community Protection Committees, Gender Offices, Regional Security Hubs, and Women’s Peace Committees across the counties (AUC, 2016).

With respect to women’s participation, the government launched several campaigns aimed at creating opportunities for women in leadership and political roles. Following the deployment of an all-female peacekeeping unit to Liberia in 2007, a training programme was introduced for women aged 18 to 35 who wished to join the local police forces (UN Women, 2014). In this context, the government made notable efforts to mainstream gender within the Security Sector Reform (SSR) process and adopted a 20% quota to increase women’s representation in the security sector (Government of Liberia, 2019). In parallel, more opportunities for training and access to loans were made available to women to support their empowerment. By 2018, women accounted for 7.7% of the Judiciary, 19% of the Liberian National Police, and 3% of the Armed Forces (Government of Liberia, 2019: 36). Although these figures reveal that significant challenges remain, the initiatives and sustained efforts of the Government of Liberia represent important examples of good practices in the implementation of UNSCR 1325 and in advancing women’s participation in post-conflict reconstruction. The case of Liberia illustrates the critical importance of engaging local women’s organisations in the implementation of the 1325 NAP, both to mainstream gender and to strengthen grassroots awareness of UNSCR 1325. This dynamic is further analysed in the next chapter through the case study of Liberia’s grassroots Peace Hut initiative.

More broadly, the regional, sub-regional, and national dimensions of women, peace, and security issues highlight the complexities involved in

operationalising UNSCR 1325 across Africa. It is therefore essential to move beyond acknowledging the contributions of international, regional, and national institutions and to critically examine the role of local actors. Initiatives led by peacekeeping institutions, centres of excellence, women's networks, and community-based organisations should receive adequate support and recognition as fundamental structures for translating the women, peace, and security normative framework into meaningful action.

A MULTI-LEVEL COOPERATION WITH CIVIL SOCIETY AND WOMEN'S NETWORKS

Civil society actors have actively collaborated and engaged with governments and regional institutions in the adoption and monitoring of NAPs and related initiatives. The vibrancy of civil society in Africa and the strong tradition of community rooted in African culture are reflected in the philosophy of *ubuntu*. This concept, deriving from the proverb "*Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu*" (literally translated as "I am because *other people are*"), aspires to mutual help, compassion, and cohesion. *Ubuntu* became a symbol of social utopia and community-union, especially after it was used by Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela in the fight for national reconciliation in South Africa. Given how deeply *ubuntu* is embedded in African beliefs, it is essential to connect these values to the role of grassroots communities and civil society in promoting peace and gender equality.

While governments, as signatories to global and regional commitments, bear ultimate responsibility, it is equally important to document the grassroots initiatives and good practices. Beyond advocacy and support for the formulation of 1325 NAPs, civil society organisations have proactively undertaken actions to strengthen the principles of UNSCR 1325 and create a favourable environment for African women to take part in conflict resolution, mediation, and peacebuilding (AUC, 2016).

Research centres, think tanks, and CSOs have significantly contributed to capacity-building efforts for African women in the field of peace and security. Increasingly, training and educational initiatives on peacebuilding and conflict resolution are becoming available within local communities (ACCORD, 2011). These efforts aim to mainstream gender and amplify local women's contributions to peacebuilding. Centres of excellence and research institutes, such as the Pan Africa Centre for Gender and Development in Senegal and the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping

Training Centre (KAIPTC) in Ghana, have supported the operationalisation of UNSCR 1325 by enhancing female mediators' expertise and providing platforms for women to share experiences in conflict-affected settings. Several capacity-building training programmes have been developed in partnership with international actors, including Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Nduwimana, 2008). For example, the E-Learning programme for African peacekeepers (ELAP) was launched in 2005 by the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR POCI), in collaboration with the Integrated Training Service of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (ITS/DPKO) (Nduwimana, 2008). In Ghana, KAIPTC specialises in conflict prevention and peacekeeping training, incorporating a gender dimension, for both civilians and military personnel preparing for peacekeeping missions. In Southern Africa, the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD) stands out as a major research institute focused on conflict management and peacebuilding. In partnership with DPKO, ACCORD launched the 'Training for Peace programme' in 1995, which has benefited several Southern African Development Community (SADC) member states. Further, a joint ACCORD-UNIFEM training programme in conflict mediation and peace negotiation targeted women from the Darfur and South Sudan regions. ACCORD has also collaborated with the AU Conflict Management Division (AU CMD) on initiatives such as the creation of the Peace and Security Department (PSD) (ACCORD, 2011). These initiatives exemplify the interconnections between different levels of engagement, from grassroots women's participation to higher decision-making structures. Nonetheless, despite efforts to increase women's participation in training programmes and workshops, their underrepresentation remains a major challenge (Nduwimana, 2008).

Besides, UNSCR 1325 calls for training peacekeeping personnel on women's rights and increasing women's roles and responsibilities in peacekeeping operations. To ensure equal participation and access to capacity-building opportunities, partnerships between training institutes, countries, and donors must be strengthened (AUC, 2016). The development of programmes and the establishment of institutions dedicated to WPS research provide crucial opportunities to enhance local knowledge and foster engagement between grassroots actors and policymakers. In the Opening Remarks of the volume *Resolution 1325 in 2020: Looking Forward, Looking Back*, Graça Machel declared:

We are presented here with a unique opportunity, where leading practitioners, intellectuals, academics and policy makers are seated side-by-side to forge stronger relations and consolidate the web of networks to attain the key principles and objectives that are already set-out in the resolutions. Our experiences must be institutionalised and our strategies analysed. Our practices must be questioned and the type of society – the type of Africa we seek – must be ultimately promoted. (ACCORD, 2011: 57)

In this regard, cooperation between the AU and CSOs is fundamental for raising awareness and promoting women’s socio-economic and cultural rights at the local level. Since 1988, the AU Commission has granted observer status to NGOs meeting specific criteria, allowing them to participate in public sessions, report abuses, and contribute to human rights initiatives. Recognised as partners, these organisations are mandated to align with the Commission’s objectives and report on their human rights activities and progress. Additionally, the AU Special Rapporteur on Women’s Rights collaborates with women’s organisations and local groups to advance the implementation of laws focused on preventing sexual violence and empowerment women (Maiga, 2004).

The AU Peace and Security Department (PSD) has promoted the implementation of UNSCR 1325 by increasingly focusing on local dimensions, particularly in relation to women’s protection in conflict and their participation in peacebuilding (UN Women, 2014). The Peace and Security Council (PSC) Protocol encourages the active engagement of CSOs and women’s groups in peace and security initiatives (PSC Protocol, Article 20). Notably, the ‘Livingstone Formula’, established in 2008, sought to strengthen collaboration between the PSC and the civil society sector by institutionalising annual open session dedicated to women and vulnerable groups in armed conflicts, with the aim of assessing progress and identify ongoing challenges (African Union, 2008, i(5)). This mechanism provides CSOs with a vital platform to contribute to the AU’s peacebuilding efforts, ensuring that women’s experiences in conflict situation are acknowledged and addressed. Further support of the WPS agenda came with the launch of the AU Strategy for Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment (GEWE) in 2019, which aims to reinforce dialogue among the AU, Member States, and civil society to ensure collective progress (African Union, 2019).

Women’s associations have leveraged UNSCR 1325 to secure important advances, including the creation of joint platforms, increased female

representation at negotiation tables, and the promotion of legal reforms advocating women's rights (UN Women, 2014). An important example is *Femmes Africa Solidarité* (FAS), an NGO that established a Regional Office in Dakar, a Representative Office in New York, and an International Secretariat in Geneva. FAS is also part of the Working Group on WPS based in New York. Through these strategic connections, the organisation has successfully elevated African women's concerns within the AU Commission, the Human Rights Commission, and the UN Security Council. In May 2000, FAS, in collaboration with the AU, ECOWAS, the African Economic Community, UNDP, and the Nigerian government, convened a meeting with the African Women's Committee for Peace and Development (Nduwimana, 2008). This gathering served as a catalyst for mobilising African women in conflict prevention and resolution efforts and led to the launch of a peacebuilding project for the Mano River region. Out of this initiative, MARWOPNET was created, contributing significantly to peacebuilding efforts across Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone (UN Women, 2014). MARWOPNET's influence extended to national policy: in Liberia, it contributed to the creation of the Ministry of Gender and Development in 2003 and played a role in the adoption of the 2014 Electoral Law, which mandates 30 per cent of female representation among electoral candidates (Nduwimana, 2008).

On issues of prevention and participation, the Women's Situation Room (WSR) was initiated in 2011 by the Angie Brooks International Centre (ABIC) for Women's Empowerment, in collaboration with the Liberian government. The WSR operates as a peacebuilding mechanism that empowers women and youth to take ownership of peace processes within their communities. The organisation uses elections as a strategic entry point into communities to address electoral violence against women voters and candidates (In-person interview, Monrovia, August 27, 2021). Electoral violence is seen as a significant barrier to women's political engagement and, more broadly, a threat to sustainable peace and security. Additionally, the AU and its partners are developing rosters of qualified women to facilitate their participation in mediation and leadership activities (AUC, 2016). These rosters aim to provide the AU, Regional Economic Communities (RECs), and Member States with access to experienced women professional who can contribute to conflict management processes.

WSRs have been replicated in different countries, including Senegal, Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau, and Liberia, with activities adapted to

the local context. As explained by a key informant, each intervention is designed based on needs assessments conducted within communities to ensure relevance and effectiveness (In-person interview, Monrovia, August 27, 2021). Activities typically include training sessions, consultations, and community dialogues aimed at promoting women's meaningful political participation. During Liberia's 2017 elections, the Women's Peace March mobilised approximately 15,000 women across the country (In-person interview, Monrovia, August 27, 2021). The WSR has established itself as a trusted institution for conflict resolution during elections, with its call centre serving as a vital source of real-time information for security agencies and electoral commissions (In-person interview, Monrovia, August 27, 2021). Thus, the WSR is viewed as a practical means of implementing UNSCR 1325 at the community level.

A 2008 study by the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women found that awareness of UNSCR 1325 across eight African countries was primarily driven by civil society actors rather than government initiatives. The 'Needs Assessment Report for Africa' indicated that CSOs effectively used the resolution as a legal tool to address post-conflict challenges through networking and dialogue. Furthermore, the level of awareness appeared closely tied to the political stability of each country, with post-conflict states such as Sierra Leone and Liberia exhibiting higher levels of civil society engagement with UNSCR 1325 (Ekiyor & Wanyeki, 2008). At the national level, awareness was generally higher within ministries responsible for gender affairs, although not uniformly across government institutions. In Sierra Leone, for example, the Ministry of Gender and Women's Affairs only became familiar with UNSCR 1325 in 2005, five years after its adoption (Ekiyor & Wanyeki, 2008: 20).

Across the continent, other initiatives have similarly demonstrated the transformative potential of UNSCR 1325. In Sudan, the Sudanese Women's Association in Nairobi (SWAN) and other women's organisations incorporated the resolution into their advocacy against sexual and gender-based violence (Nduwimana, 2008). In Somalia, women formed the 'Sixth Clan' to ensure their participation in the Nairobi Peace Agreement negotiations of 2004, enabling greater representation and advocacy efforts. In Rwanda, women played a crucial role in post-genocide reconstruction by contributing to legislative reforms. The Rwandan Constitution set a global example for gender parity, particularly in succession law. As of 2018, Rwanda led the world in women's

parliamentary representation, with 61.3% of seats occupied by women, alongside strong representation in the Cabinet (42%), Senate (32%), local councils (43.5%), and judiciary (50%) (UN Women, 2018). In Burundi, the 2000 All-Party Burundi Women's Peace Conference brought together women from various political and social backgrounds, including refugees and displaced women (Nduwimana, 2008). The conference's recommendations were incorporated into the peace agreement, and the new Constitution and Electoral Law formally recognised the principle of gender parity (Articles 13, 22). These legal changes mandated a minimum of 30% women's representation across the Government, the Senate, the National Assembly, and the Judiciary (Articles 128, 169, 185, 213). By 2020, women held 38% of parliamentary seats and 31% of executive positions (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2021; Nzoyisenga, 2020). In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the collective 'Synergies 1325' was created to coordinate provincial and regional organisations in raising awareness of UNSCR 1325 and lobbying for its implementation (Nduwimana, 2008). Women's groups also formed the Congolese Women's Caucus, which significantly contributed to ensuring women's inclusion in the Inter-Congolese Dialogue. This initiative led to the Nairobi Declaration and the Women's Common Platform for Peace, influencing the drafting of the 2005 Congolese Constitution, which recognises gender parity principle (Article 14) and commits to eliminating all forms of sexual discrimination (Article 15).

Civil society and women's organisations have played an essential role in advancing the implementation of UNSCR 1325 in Africa. National and regional networks have been establishing within the civil society sector to mobilise and involve women in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. Women's groups have proactively engaged with the African Union and RECs to create peace networks, and have reinforced their partnerships with international institutions. This increased mobilisation has elevated African women's presence and influence on the global stage, prompting the UN and other international organisations to pay greater attention to women's issues in Africa.

Across the continent, women's peace networks have actively promoted women's engagement in conflict prevention, disarmament, peacebuilding, and post-conflict recovery. Nevertheless, a study by Cordaid and the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP) pointed out the persistent lack of financial resources reaching CSOs. Although 14 out of the 24 governments surveyed claimed to channel funds directly

to CSOs, detailed information about these allocations remains scarce (Cordaid & GNWP, 2014). The study stresses the importance of funding women's rights groups, especially grassroots and community-based initiatives, which often lead efforts to advance the Women, Peace and Security agenda and provide essential services in post-conflict settings, despite facing major obstacles in accessing financial support (Cordaid & GNWP, 2014: 20).

Yet, women's participation in peace processes has shown uneven results. In Sudan, women were largely excluded from the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement negotiations. Uganda's Juba Peace Process (2006–2007) included only two women participants. While women played a significant role in shaping the 2000 Arusha Accords in Burundi, their representation in follow-up structures was limited: only three women joined the 29-member Implementation Monitoring Committee, and just one woman served among the eight delegates negotiating the ceasefire (UN Women, 2014). These examples illustrate that although some progress has been made, women's full and equal participation is still far from being achieved.

More than twenty years after the adoption of UNSCR 1325, gender inequality persists. A decade ago, several attempts sought to create an effective strategy for Africa to address women, peace, and security issues. While overall progress has been limited, key achievements include the establishment of a strong normative framework at regional, sub-regional, and national levels. Some of the most relevant policies include the African Charter on People and Human Rights (1981), the Maputo Protocol to the African Charter on the Rights of Women (2003), and the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (African Union, 2004). Various countries have also implemented mechanisms to enhance women's protection, participation, and empowerment in peace and security.

As expressed by Moussa Faki Mahamat, Chairperson of the African Union Commission, achieving gender equality and empowering women remains a core priority for the African Union and is vital for the continent's future. After more than two decades, the four pillars of UNSCR 1325 still require thorough attention. While government institutions are pivotal in the adoption of policies and in promoting women's rights, grassroots engagement is equally critical to ensure that policies translate into real-world outcomes. This book considers that CSOs should be recognised as equal partners and indispensable actors in building peace,

security, and stability across Africa. Their ability to interact with both high-level decision-making bodies and local communities positions them strategically to drive change. Moreover, it is crucial to underscore the shared responsibility of international actors, governments, civil society, and grassroots groups in implementing UNSCR 1325 and advancing the WPS agenda. It is crucial to view UNSCR 1325 not only as a symbolic resolution but as a practical tool for change. Although establishing a robust legal framework is a significant milestone, greater emphasis must be placed on grassroots-driven strategies that foster local ownership of the WPS agenda and bridge the gap between policy and reality. Local structures are especially vital in addressing core needs such as healthcare, economic support, justice, and other essential services. Given the important role that African civil society has played in amplifying women's voices in peacebuilding processes, the next chapter will examine the case study of Liberia.

Rather than reading these dynamics as evidence of local weakness or donor capture, this book approaches them as the terrain on which Liberian women articulate their own understandings of peace, agency, and justice. It is in markets, community spaces, and informal political networks that the transformative promise of 1325 becomes legible. The following chapter traces these practices from the ground up, focusing on grassroots Peace Hut initiative and its role in shaping the WPS agenda locally.

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The “Peace Huts” Initiative: Towards Reconciliation and Reintegration in Liberia’s Post-Conflict Process

Abstract This chapter further details the role of civil society engagement in Liberia’s peacebuilding process, focusing on the emergence of the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) that led the Peace Huts, before entering more deeply into the initiative’s objectives, internal organisation, and funding landscape. I emphasise that the Peace Huts represent a crucial community-based mechanism for peacebuilding, mediation, and reconciliation, but also point out the limits of this mechanism.

Keywords Liberia’s peacebuilding process · Peace Huts · Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) · Community-based peace

The SCR1325 fundamentally changed the image of women from being exclusively victims of war to being participants as peacemakers, peacebuilders and negotiators. Women at the grassroots level (...) have used this resolution to lobby for their voices to be heard in peacebuilding processes, in post-conflict elections, and in the rebuilding of their societies.

Rachel Mayanja

Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women,
Abuja, Nigeria, November 28, 2006.

Patriarchal traditions and the marginalisation of women in decision-making processes remain persistent issues in West Africa and across the

continent more broadly. These forms of gender-based exclusion have been further entrenched by the impacts of armed conflict, which have often undermined women as equal partners in peacebuilding and conflict resolution. This chapter examines the role of grassroots civil society actors in implementing UNSCR 1325, drawing on a detailed analysis of survey responses, group discussions, and in-depth interviews. The section begins by highlighting the significant contributions of the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) in fostering peace and promoting women's inclusion in Liberia.

THE WOMEN IN PEACEBUILDING NETWORK IN THE SEARCH FOR PEACE AND GENDER EQUALITY

In 2001, the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) convened a consultative meeting with women across the region to discuss the urgent need for their inclusion in peace processes. This led to the creation of WIPNET in November 2001, envisioned as a platform to promote peace and stability for vulnerable and marginalised people (WANEP, 2017). Beginning in 2003, WIPNET mobilised large-scale public demonstrations in Monrovia, calling on President Charles Taylor and other conflict parties to engage in peace talks held in Accra, Ghana (ACCORD, 2011). These efforts included sustained peace protests aimed at pressuring negotiators to prioritise women's concerns in the resulting agreements.

A particularly important example of mobilisation was when WIPNET members, led by Leymah Gbowee, physically blocked the hotel exit during the negotiations in Accra, preventing participants from leaving until an agreement was signed. Liberian women also initiated the Golden Tulip Consultative and Strategic Planning Meeting during the peace talks. This platform advocated for the direct participation of women at the negotiation table and contributed to shaping the terms of the peace process (ACCORD, 2011).

These sustained civil society efforts resulted in the signing of the Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), which established a transitional government through a power-sharing arrangement involving the Taylor administration, former warring parties, and civil society representatives. Women's activism significantly influenced the content of the agreement and brought them increased visibility both regionally and internationally. Their campaign received strong support from women-led organisations and media throughout West Africa. Across Liberia, women mobilised in

their communities dressed in white as a symbol of peace, to publicly call for an end to the war. With messages demanding peace, protection, and justice, these tens of thousands of women created a powerful collective voice.

When the war took place, we gathered about 40 thousand women to make sure they meet and use the non-violence approach, by using placards written on it ‘we need our peace’. Liberia is the only country that we have, we want peace, no more war, stop raping our girls, we need security. (In-person interview, Monrovia, August 26, 2021)

Driven by their growing anger and suffering from the atrocities of the war, Liberian women built a nationwide movement. Despite the risks they faced in a context marked by gender-based violence and entrenched patriarchy, those women found in their despair the strength and unmeasurable determination and courage to push for peace and social transformation.

After the war, WIPNET and other civil society organisations launched a large-scale civic mobilisation campaign during the 2005 presidential elections. These efforts contributed to the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as Liberia’s President—the first elected female head of state in Africa (ACCORD, 2011). Since 2003, women have benefited from targeted capacity-building programmes focused on peace and security, many of which were initiated under the leadership of Thelma Ekiyor, WIPNET’s first Coordinator (WANEP, 2017). According to WANEP-Liberia, these interventions have reached roughly 1000 women and 500 men annually (Online interview, April 14, 2021). WIPNET’s training programmes have been designed to reflect women’s lived experiences and offer sustainable solutions to their challenges. This grassroots-oriented approach has also contributed to strengthening women’s organisations across West Africa through various peacebuilding-related initiatives. In 2003, the organisation launched the Annual Women in Peacebuilding course at the West Africa Peacebuilding Institute (WAPI), bringing together both women and men from around the world and reinforcing gender-inclusive peacebuilding education (WANEP, 2017). By 2020, WANEP-Liberia had invested US\$156,000 in activities related to women, peace and security (Online interview, April 14, 2021). WIPNET’s work is supported by funding from various UN agencies and international donors, facilitated via WANEP-Liberia. This support enables the continuation of their initiatives in line with the Women, Peace and Security agenda. However, internal

divisions among women-focused groups have occasionally hindered the mobilisation of funding and limited the scope of interventions (Online interview, April 14, 2021).

Nowadays, WIPNET is engaged in a broad array of advocacy and peacebuilding initiatives. These include responding to incidents of violence, providing psychosocial support, and facilitating mediation and dialogue sessions, particularly through community-based structures like the Peace Huts. Staff members follow up on reported violence cases from the police level through medical and legal systems to ensure justice is pursued (Focus group discussion with community members, August 26, 2021). Community dialogues are central to their methodology. By identifying issues and developing action points, they help foster social cohesion and conflict resolution. Youth and students, especially in school settings where tensions are frequent, are also involved in peace education efforts (Focus group discussion with community members, August 26, 2021).

WIPNET intervenes across multiple levels—from grassroots communities to local leadership—to build capacities for inclusive peacebuilding. They train local actors to better engage with vulnerable populations and help raise the voices of marginal groups. This approach was evident in a workshop for Community-Based Organisations (CBOs), where WIPNET facilitated sessions on conflict resolution and knowledge dissemination within communities.

Beyond peace advocacy, WIPNET also promotes women's economic empowerment by offering training focusing on savings, financial independence, and entrepreneurship for both rural and urban women. Political participation is another focus area, with programmes designed to equip women with the skills and confidence to pursue leadership roles and secure community support. These roles include positions such as town chief, Palava chief, market leader, county superintendent, and city mayor. Such training has been ongoing and continues to expand as long as funding from donors remains available (In-person interview, Monrovia, August 26, 2021).

WIPNET has consistently played a pivotal role in advancing peacebuilding efforts in West Africa. Among its initiatives, the organisation hosts the Annual Women in Peacebuilding Regional Conference, which serves as a platform for sharing experiences and discussing regional and national actions related to the implementation of UNSCR 1325 and broader peacebuilding strategies (WANEP, 2017). In recognition of her

leadership in the Liberian Women’s Mass Action for Peace, a key grassroots movement, one of WIPNET’s leading figures Leymah Gbowee was co-awarded the Nobel Peace Prize alongside the then-President of Liberia Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (WANEP, 2017).

WIPNET also launched the Voices of Women radio programme, which broadcasts across the West Africa region, providing rural women with an opportunity to express their views and engage in public discourse (WANEP, 2017). In order to enhance community-level understanding of peace and security frameworks, UNSCR 1325 and other legal instruments were translated into six local languages. In collaboration with the ECOWAS Gender Unit, WIPNET contributed to the development of a legal framework aimed at mainstreaming women’s concerns in regional peace and security policy. Their advocacy and lobbying efforts played a significant role in the establishment of a Special Criminal Court ‘E’ for prosecuting sexual offences, and the creation of ‘One Stop Centres’ in seven counties to support survivors of SGBV through integrated services.

These achievements underscore the importance of grassroots-driven peacebuilding approaches that prioritise local needs and voices. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) highlighted in its final report the importance of the ‘National Palava Hut Programme’ for communities across Liberia, affirming that “the nation must engage traditional authority structures, civil society and human rights organizations, religious institutions and local communities to ensure that justice and reconciliation are more than rhetorical phrases” (Republic of Liberia, 2009: 364). The traditional ‘Palava Hut’ system itself incorporates elements of transitional justice such as truth-telling, forgiveness, and in some cases, punitive or symbolic reconciliatory actions like communal meals between victims and perpetrators (Lawson & Flomo, 2020). The recommendations included enabling rural participation by appointing trusted community members to resolve local disputes, with decisions considered binding (Republic of Liberia, 2009).

However, concerns have been raised by women regarding the Palava Hut system, which often reproduces patriarchal norms and gender biases. Despite these limitations, women continued to organise community meetings to process trauma and foster healing. Some women emerged as leaders by hosting informal gatherings to release their frustrations from the atrocities of war, initially seating under a tree, before they decided to build a hut dedicated to post-conflict healing (Douglas, 2014).

While the effects of war exacerbated gendered social inequalities and structural violence, women became active political subjects in pursuit of a peaceful and decent future for their families. This political engagement has been termed as ‘motherwork’, a form of maternal activism aimed at protecting families and reclaiming dignity (Lawson & Flomo, 2020). This concept situates women’s activism at the intersection of familial, communal, and national responsibilities. Thus, while women’s political responsibility is crucial, to a certain extent, Liberian women’s participation in transitional justice is also located in the framework of their role as mothers and caregivers for the nation.

One grassroots woman activist recounted how, despite lacking formal education, she became a key point of contact for survivors of gender-based violence in her community. In the absence of official reporting systems, she often mediated multiple cases daily and engaged with families directly to help rebuild peace (Focus group discussion with Peace Hut members, August 14, 2021).

To support such grassroots initiatives, WIPNET co-developed the ‘Peace Hut’ project as community-based spaces where women could continue their peacebuilding efforts and de-escalate local tensions. The idea stemmed partly from the marginalisation of women ex-combatants during the disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) process, which often excluded or marginalised them for defying conventional gender norms (Gbowee, 2011). Anchored in the principles of UNSCR 1325, the Peace Huts serve as a gender-sensitive mechanism for empowering women and integrating them into peace and security frameworks through targeted support and capacity-building.

The Liberian experience demonstrates the critical role women play in both peacemaking and long-term peacebuilding. Their sustained efforts to confront the violence and injustices of the civil conflict significantly influenced the country’s transition from war to peace. As Liberia continues to rebuild, women’s organisations and grassroots networks have expanded, becoming increasingly central to peacebuilding efforts across the country. This section presents insights from the fieldwork that highlight the role of the Peace Hut initiative as a practical mechanism linking the global Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda with community-level action.

The data presented comes from a range of sources including semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and survey conducted

between April 2019 and September 2021. Participants included representatives from international organisations, government institutions, the United Nations, women-led groups, academic researchers, civil society actors, and community members. In August 2021, group discussions were held at seven Peace Huts across Liberia, in the communities of Gbarma (Gbarpolu County), Malema (Bomi County), Bo-Waterside (Grand Cape Mount County), Weala (Margibi County), Totota (Bong County), Ganta (Nimba County), and Schieffelin (Montserrado County). Additional engagement included participation in a conflict resolution workshop hosted by WIPNET in the Lakpazee Community, Monrovia, and a community dialogue led by the Lutheran Church Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Program in District 1, Grand Bassa County.

THE ‘PEACE HUT’ INITIATIVE: A BOTTOM-UP AND INCLUSIVE APPROACH TO PEACEBUILDING

We no longer have interstate or inter-cultural conflicts; we have intra-state conflicts. Some of these conflicts are at the community level: it is at the community level that we have issues of kids’ pregnancy, we have issues of land conflict, we even have issues of climate change that has brought the farmers in a conflict; all these things are taking place at the community level. [...] So, because of that, the community is essential, it holds the key to sustainable peace and development. (In-person interview, Monrovia, April 19, 2021)

Community-level peacebuilding is foundational to the broader peace and security framework. From this perspective, it is imperative to value community engagement and empower grassroots actors to implementing the Women, Peace and Security agenda. The Peace Hut initiative in Liberia exemplifies a bottom-up, inclusive approach and has been recognised internationally as a good practice in advancing WPS principles.

The Origins and Idea Behind the ‘Peace Huts’

Under the peace huts we do dialogue, we do mediation, we do psychosocial counselling, we give support package to rape survivors or children who are abandoned.

(Focus group discussion with Peace Hut members, August 26, 2021)

Since its inception in 2006, the Peace Hut initiative has emerged as an influential platform to enhance women's inclusion, empowerment, and leadership across Liberia. It has provided safe and trusted spaces for addressing a broad spectrum of social challenges affecting women. In some cases, the work being done in these spaces has drawn the attention of national leaders, including high-level government officials who have visited to observe their impact.

The Peace Huts function as alternatives to the traditional Palava Huts—indigenous systems used for centuries for community dispute resolution. However, women leaders intentionally sought to create a new model. One participant recalled,

We said no, we can't be coming from a war and be in a palava hut. Then the women said, we will build a peace hut. [...] We built the first peace hut very fast, in Totota. And so, when we did that, I set up the committee that would carry on the mediation in the peace hut. I was really leading it and it was working well for the community. People used to travel for 4/5 hours to come to us with their cases. And I was working in line with the police. (Focus group discussion with Peace Hut members, August 14, 2021)

The primary goal was to settle conflict without relying solely on formal legal institutions and to empower women to become active peacebuilders and mediators in their communities. In this model, women were trained as peace ambassadors, handling cases locally with the support of field officers (In-person interview, Monrovia, August 18, 2021). The Peace Hut initiative was envisioned as a grassroots project to dismantle patriarchal structures from within communities. These spaces offered support and mediation resources, particularly for women who experienced violence or rights violations, to provide a place of refuge, 'a kind of heaven', for those in need of protection and justice (Online interview, April 3, 2021). Thus, the Peace Huts reflect both the spirit and substance of UNSCR 1325, offering a community-based mechanism for conflict resolution, healing, and empowerment that focuses on women's agency and leadership in post-conflict recovery.

In July 2018, Nobel Laureate Leymah Gbowee identified three core motivations behind the establishment of the Peace Hut initiative: (1)

to institutionalise the legacy of women’s activism in ending Liberia’s civil conflict; (2) to create dedicated spaces for peacebuilding and the promotion of gender equality; and (3) to facilitate intergenerational knowledge-sharing and mentorship among women (Lawson & Flomo, 2020: 8).

In addition to these foundational aims, the Peace Hut system aims to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence, report cases to the relevant authorities, raise awareness, and engage communities on political and peace-related issues (UN Women, 2019a). These local structures serve “as a caveat to other men, to show that women are not their drums to be beaten on. It is not just about physical abuse; it is also about psychological and emotional abuses” (Online interview, April 3, 2021). Beyond their role in transitional justice, the Peace Huts have also become community hubs for dialogue, education, economic collaboration, and collective problem-solving.

(a) *Internal Organisation and Issues Addressed*

Since 2006, Peace Hut members have worked to mediate local disputes and support reconciliation. At first, they focused on cleansing women from their traumas through rituals and reintegrating former child-soldiers within the community. Over time, the initiative evolved to include collaboration with police and security forces in addressing SGBV issues, advocating for justice, and providing essential services at the community level (Nobel Women’s Initiative, 2013).

The organisational structure of the Peace Huts varies from one community to another. Typically, members are divided into groups that meet on designated days. Some Peace Huts convene multiple times per week, while some gather biweekly or monthly. For example, in the Peace Hut of Ganta, all groups meet on the last Saturday of each month to review community developments. Discussions commonly revolve around pressing issues such as rape, youth pregnancy, domestic violence, child abandonment, business development, and farming. In the community of Gbarma, meetings on Fridays focus specifically on women’s economic activities, including cassava farming, alongside efforts to combat violence against children and women. One member reported that their collective action has helped bring perpetrators of rape to justice through successful court referrals (Focus group discussion with Peace Hut members, August

9, 2021). In the Peace Hut of Weala, where the membership exceeds 200 members, not all attend every session. However, the group's impact extends beyond the local area. When cases of abuse arise in neighbouring communities, Peace Hut members travel to intervene, often alerting law enforcement and exerting public pressure to ensure accountability. One research participant declared:

We feel very important and not only in Weala, but also in other communities. There was a rape case beyond the bridge. We put our uniform and went to get the case. We called the police and put pressure, so they caught the guy. I told him it's not for me, it's about women's rights and about Liberia. (Focus group discussion with Peace Hut members, August 12, 2021)

Confidential cases, such as family disputes or divorce, are handled in a restricted committee of five or six women to ensure privacy and community trust. In Totota, for instance, when violence occurs, members wear their uniforms and confront the alleged aggressor, bringing the matter either to the Peace Hut for mediation or to the police if needed (Focus group discussion with Peace Hut members, August 12, 2021). Membership in the Peace Hut is a source of pride and respect for these women, who are seen as protectors and leaders in their communities.

Each Peace Hut is led by trained mediators or chair ladies, whose terms of leadership may vary from six months to a year, depending on local rules. Meetings usually begin with songs and prayers to foster a peaceful and inclusive environment. The mediators then listen to complaints from both women and men, ensuring fair resolution regardless of gender (Douglas, 2014). In Bo-Waterside, where the Peace Hut was more recently established, decisions are made collectively by all members rather than by a leadership group. One interviewee noted that this inclusivity—extending to women, widows, and people with disabilities—distinguishes the Peace Hut from the traditional Palava Hut, where decisions rest with a paid Town Chief (Focus group discussion with Peace Hut members, August 11, 2021).

The Peace Huts employ a variety of conflict resolution techniques aimed at restoring relationships and promoting justice. For example, in cases of child abandonment, mediators negotiate compensation to support the child's education and welfare (Douglas, 2014). In Gbarma, the local coordinator expresses their commitment to confronting issues of

domestic abuse by bringing people together, talking, intervening, and, if necessary, involving the police (Focus group discussion with Peace Hut members, August 9, 2021).

Sexual assault and rape are among the most frequently reported crimes in Liberia,¹ and they represent a major concern addressed within the Peace Huts. These community-based structures have institutionalised support mechanisms for survivors, often working to integrate formal legal frameworks into their activities. Through awareness-raising and sensitisation campaigns, the Peace Huts have become effective platforms for holding perpetrators accountable and educating women on the importance of reporting sexual violence (Online interview, April 19, 2021). Additionally, Peace Huts women provide support to survivors in overcoming stigma and gaining confidence to speak out and seek justice (Online interview, April 19, 2021).

Despite the essential advocacy work carried out by Liberia’s women’s movement, particularly in lobbying for anti-rape legislation, such crimes must be addressed within the formal criminal justice system (Lawson & Flomo, 2020; Medie, 2013). A senior figure from a trauma healing programme emphasised that certain issues, including rape and murder, fall strictly under the jurisdiction of the state and are therefore referred directly to law enforcement. In contrast, more minor disputes, such as personal disagreements or unpaid debts, are often handled through community mediation to avoid lengthy legal proceedings (In-person interview, Monrovia, August 18, 2021).

However, supporting survivors of sexual violence can place Peace Huts women at personal risk, including potential threats to their families (Lawson & Flomo, 2020). The proximity of some Peace Huts to police station has helped to foster cooperation between local mediators and formal security institutions, especially in cases of rape and homicide. In practice, the Peace Huts women often act as intermediaries: they report offences to the police, support victims in navigating the legal process, and sometimes receive referrals from law enforcement for cases considered suitable for community resolution. This reciprocal relationship has generally been effective in the communities observed. According to one

¹ A 2019 report from USAID entitled “Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and Trafficking in Persons in Liberia” recognises the widespread culture of impunity around rape and the persistent barriers holding victims from reporting cases of sexual and gender-based violence or rape.

national-level Peace Hut leader, collaboration with law enforcement is an ongoing and active process. There are instances where Peace Hut members personally ensured suspects were brought to the police. The women's sustained advocacy efforts contributed to the establishment of specialised protection units for women and children in areas like Totota county. The region has seen a high number of cases involving sexual violence, domestic abuse, and even murder (Focus group discussion with Peace Hut members, August 14, 2021).

In some communities, the Peace Huts also serve as a preventive function. Mediators gather to identify early warning signs of potential conflict—such as inflation, increasing poverty rates, or unemployment—and take proactive steps to engage community leaders in containing and preventing conflict escalation in places identified as 'hot spots' (Lawson & Flomo, 2020).

Lead mediators undergo specialised training in human and women's rights, trauma healing, peacebuilding, and conflict resolution. Following the training, those who wish to continue mediating must first go through a personal trauma healing process (Douglas, 2014). According to a gender expert working with the United Nations, local NGOs, often in partnership with the UN, play a crucial role in identifying community leaders for training. One such leader, heading a major Peace Hut, was supported through a mentoring initiative that enabled her to train and guide women across different communities (Online interview, April 16, 2021).

In this regard, education is another foundational aspect of the Peace Huts' work and is considered vital to transitional justice processes (Lawson & Flomo, 2020). Participants in several focus groups indicated that the Peace Huts serve as important platforms for sharing knowledge on relevant legal and policy frameworks, including Women, Peace and Security agenda and UNSCR 1325, giving them a means to voice their concerns. However, every community is unique, with different perspectives on what peace and security mean. Some disparities were observed among the Peace Huts; while some are active, well-resourced, and regularly trained—such as in Bo-Waterside—others have not received new training in years and hold meetings less frequently.

Since 2009, with the support of UN Women, the Peace Huts have expanded their focus to include economic empowerment through Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs). These community-based financial groups, similar to the widespread 'Susu' schemes and credit unions,

consist of 15 to 30 members who contribute to a collective fund. Members can borrow from this fund to engage in entrepreneurial and income-generating activities and repay loans with modest interest (UN Liberia, 2019; UN Women, 2019b). In the community of Ganta, for instance, participants contribute L\$ 5000 (Liberian dollars) weekly to the VSLA.² At the end of the year, the total fund is divided among members, with borrowers repaying their loans at an agreed 10% interest. However, both the frequency of the contributions and the interest rate differs across communities.

Peace Huts members generally view the VSLA system as more effective than other financial mechanisms available to them. In addition to supporting personal business development, some profits are allocated to a community fund, sometimes used for infrastructure improvement—such as repairing or painting Peace Hut buildings damaged by weather—and to support vulnerable women. For example, funds have helped relocate survivors of domestic violence to safe spaces such as guesthouses or hotels (Online interview, April 19, 2021).

The introduction of VSLAs has significantly enhanced women’s financial literacy and economic independence in rural Liberia. In six of the seven Peace Huts visited, participants reported that the common fund helped them generate income through activities like cassava farming, tailoring, and sales. As a result, the Peace Huts have evolved from conflict resolution platforms to hubs for economic networking and entrepreneurship. Based on survey data, Figure 4.1 shows that 63% of Peace Huts members have started their own business through the initiative, while 59.5% reported increased capacity to pay for their children’s education.

In addition to economic empowerment, some Peace Huts have attempted to respond to gaps in public health services. During the 2014 Ebola crisis, Peace Huts were used as sites for healthcare support and public awareness campaigns. Women involved in these community structures played a significant role in disseminating health information and helping to contain the spread of the virus (UN Women, 2016). A key informant noted that in the absence of effective state institutions in many rural areas, it was women peacebuilders who stepped in to provide essential services. Their grassroots mobilisation during this crisis contributed to maintaining social cohesion and prevented a return to violent conflict

² L\$ 5000 (Liberian dollars) represents € 0,25 (Euro).

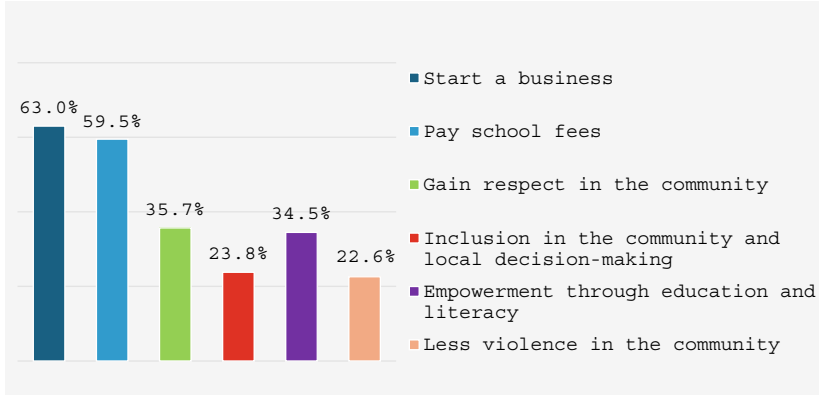


Fig. 4.1 What benefits do you get from being a member of the Peace Hut?.
Source Chart by the Author. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

in countries like Liberia and Sierra Leone (Online interview, April 16, 2021).

Field observations revealed parallels between the Ebola crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, though the latter had fewer reported fatalities. In Gbarma, local coordinators indicated that both outbreaks severely disrupted their businesses due to movement restrictions and social distancing. In Scheffelein, one participant shared that COVID-19 halted Peace Hut meetings and damaged her bakery business due to a complete stop in activities (Focus group discussion with Peace Hut members, August 14, 2021). In response, some Peace Huts conducted prevention work including hygiene awareness campaigns, promoting practices such as handwashing and mask-wearing. Support was provided in some areas by the Ministry of Gender and UN Women, who distributed government-approved COVID-19 prevention materials developed in collaboration with UNICEF and other partners. These materials enabled Peace Hut members to conduct outreach and install basic hygiene facilities in their communities (Focus group discussion with Peace Hut members, August 19, 2021). Nonetheless, this support was not consistent across all communities. During a visit to the Peace Hut in Weala, hand sanitisers and a water barrel for handwashing were placed at the entrance, and members confirmed receiving supplies at the onset of the pandemic.

However, in most other sites visited, little to no external support was reported. The pandemic significantly disrupted Peace Huts activities, as regular meetings and group activities were suspended.

Overall, the Peace Huts in Liberia serve as grassroots mechanisms to solve local conflicts, monitor security and justice institutions, and discuss peacebuilding and development priorities within communities. In several instances, local police authorities have acknowledged the impact of these structures in reducing community-level violence and preventing conflicts (United Nations & World Bank, 2018). Beyond their original peace-keeping role, these initiatives empower women to overcome the legacies of war and poverty by addressing structural violence and promoting inclusive peace.

Women engaged in the Peace Huts provide a range of community services—from education and healthcare to shelter and economic opportunities. These initiatives have also guaranteed psychological and medical assistance for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. In doing so, the Peace Huts have not only responded to immediate post-conflict needs but also challenged discriminatory social norms and practices, contributing to the broader agenda of sustainable development. As noted by one regional coordinator working on WPS, the Peace Huts represent a rare success story in community-led peacebuilding (Online interview, April 19, 2021).

Despite their significance, the Peace Huts remain undervalued within formal peacebuilding frameworks. Local women-led efforts are often overlooked in national and international agendas, especially those aligned with militarised understandings of peace and security. This reflects major challenges faced by grassroots initiatives in fragile states, where funding is scarce and institutional support often limited. The following section further analyses how financial and strategic cooperation between stakeholders supports—or fails to support—these efforts.

(b) *Financial Support and Cooperation between Actors*

The Peace Hut initiative is grounded in multi-level partnerships that bring together local communities, civil society organisations, security forces, government institutions, regional actors, and UN agencies (UN Women, 2019a). This section analyses how these collaborations influence

the implementation of the WPS agenda, particularly UNSCR 1325, by assessing grassroots perspectives on the effectiveness of such engagements.

Despite the predominance of patriarchal norms in most rural communities, men's involvement has proven vital to the success of the Peace Huts. The national leadership of the initiative consistently emphasises that collaboration with men is non-negotiable, arguing that sustainable peace cannot be achieved without their inclusion (Focus group discussion with Peace Hut members, August 14, 2021). According to a regional peacebuilding expert, "men are our greatest allies, they are our biggest allies. So, we work with them, and we have been achieving success through that" (Focus group discussion with Peace Hut members, April 19, 2021). Numerous training programmes have been developed to address gender norms and masculinity, with the aim of encouraging men to actively support women's participation in peacebuilding. Men involved in these efforts are often designated as 'gender champions' or 'He for Shes', reflecting their commitment to promoting gender equality (Online interview, April 19, 2021). In the communities of Totota and Weala, men support the Peace Huts' activities through the UN "He for She" campaign. In the Peace Hut of Malema, a male participant reported that his involvement stemmed from a desire to challenge domestic violence and promote women's full integration in the community. He noted that, in the past, women's voices were largely ignored, but that the Peace Huts had transformed this reality by empowering women to seek justice and participate in public life (Online interview, August 10, 2021).

In the community of Bo-Waterside, five men are active members of the Peace Hut, including the Town Chief's Secretary. Women involved in the initiative report that their opinions are now included in town hall deliberations, highlighting a growing recognition of their role in decision-making processes. According to several women, men's support is indispensable for expanding women's representation and preventing violence. In deeply patriarchal environments, collaboration with male religious, political, and community leaders is often a necessary condition for engaging effectively with local women (Online interview, April 19, 2021).

This collaborative approach has permitted significant achievements. For instance, a partnership between UN Women and male leaders from the private sector led to the donation of a hotline by a mobile phone company. This line enables Peace Huts members to communicate with each other and with the police to report incidents of violence (Online interview, April 16, 2021). Moreover, public awareness campaigns such

as ‘Real Men Don’t Rape’, developed in collaboration with faith-based organisations, have aimed to shift male attitudes on gender-based violence (Online interview, April 16, 2021).

However, engagement between community women and traditional authorities remains complex. In the Peace Hut of Weala, a Peace Hut coordinator described a strained relationship with traditional leaders, attributing this tension to certain cultural practices that undermine women’s rights. One woman recounted being rejected by her family and community after refusing to undergo Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), eventually finding refuge within the Peace Hut network (Focus group discussion with Peace Hut members, August 26, 2021). Overcoming such deeply embedded practices requires long-term, community-centred approaches. As one informant explained, “people have been living with this practice for more than a hundred years in Liberia [...] So, you cannot just cut it off at once. You have to train people and their minds to see their needs, to listen about the harmful practice of the culture” (In-person interview, Monrovia, August 26, 2021). Despite these challenges, several communities have successfully integrated the Peace Huts into traditional systems. In Schieffelin, for instance, women have built constructive relationships with both traditional and religious leaders. The local pastor regularly participates in Peace Hut gatherings, demonstrating interfaith cooperation, as the group includes both Christian and Muslim women. According to one community member, traditional authorities have come to see the Peace Huts as complementary to their work, helping to resolve conflicts and maintain peace (Focus group discussion with Peace Hut members, August 14, 2021).

Importantly, these interactions have also enhanced women’s participation in community governance. In Malema, a male community member confirmed that women’s representatives must now be present in town meetings for decisions to be considered valid. This shift points to the broader institutional impact of the Peace Hut model, which is examined in further detail in the next section.

According to the United Nations, the Peace Huts have received support from NGOs, INGOs, and, to a limited extent, from government sources (Online interview, April 16, 2021). However, field interactions with grassroots women reveal a contrasted picture: while some Peace Huts—such as in Bo-Waterside—have received occasional training and materials from UN Women and selected NGOs, most communities report

receiving no support or only sporadic assistance, such as basic COVID-19 supplies. In Gbarma, for example, women stated that they receive no support from either government institutions or civil society organisations. In several locations, women voiced concerns about their inability to sustain their families without external assistance. In contrast, in Totota—where the first Peace Hut was established—despite a lack of governmental support, women reported positive relationships with local authorities due to their shared community bonds.

Initially, UN Women played a critical role in supporting WIPNET through infrastructure development and training programmes. Over time, they also introduced an economic empowerment component, aiming to equip women with income-generating skills. For example, initiatives like village savings groups were introduced to teach women financial management. A representative from UN Women explained that current efforts include piloting a women's digital centre, in collaboration with a telecommunications company, to enable rural communities to access digital and financial services—such as mobile money transactions and email usage—which are otherwise scarce in these areas (Online interview, April 19, 2021).

In the Peace Hut of Schieffelin (established in 2016), women receive regular training coordinated by UN Women, including sewing skills and the provision of 25 sewing machines. Similarly, in the Peace Hut of Bo-Waterside (established in 2018), women benefited from literacy, banking, and business management training, facilitated by UN Women, UNDP, and the Rights & Rice Foundation. In Ganta (2019), women received some training on peacebuilding and finances but expressed a desire for additional courses in areas such as tailoring, soap-making, and farming. In Weala, the training included tailoring, baking, sales, and VSLAs, which enabled women to launch small businesses and support community needs such as healthcare. However, much of the support from UN Women was reported as material, such as the donation of masks and hand sanitiser during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite these limitations, this support is highly valued, as it provides women with hope and motivation.

In contrast, in older Peace Huts such as those in Malema and Gbarma, women reported receiving only initial training and structural support when the huts were first established, with no follow-up support since. These variations in support reflect UN Women's approach of designing interventions based on community assessment. In partnership with the

Ministry of Gender and local NGOs, UN Women conducts evaluations using criteria such as leadership capacity and educational levels to prioritise communities for investment. Their engagement shows national-level coordination with government and security institutions, as well as local-level collaboration with women’s groups and community leaders.

Despite UN Women’s involvement in the initiative—through infrastructure development and empowerment programmes—the sustainability of the Peace Huts has faced significant challenges. The 2014 Ebola outbreak, for example, severely depleted women’s resources, eroding years of progress. While efforts have been made to revive the initiative, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic further delayed ongoing projects. A national Peace Hut representative recommended a shift in focus: instead of constructing new Peace Huts, efforts should concentrate on strengthening existing ones, many of which are underutilised or in poor condition.

Therefore, while UN Women has played a central role in supporting the Peace Huts, there is room to enhance collaboration and strengthen the initiative’s long-term impact. To this end, it is essential to conduct a thorough evaluation of the Peace Huts’ effectiveness and assess their tangible contributions to women’s empowerment and the implementation of UNSCR 1325. As one academic expert on conflict transformation emphasised, the initiative should be evaluated as a mechanism, with a focus on its real contributions and value to the communities it serves. The Peace Huts therefore emerge not as extensions of state-led policy, but as sites where women negotiate the meaning of peace, safety, and authority on their own terms.

PROMOTING WOMEN AND UNSCR 1325 AT THE GRASSROOTS LEVEL

The Peace Hut system was envisioned as an inclusive peacebuilding mechanism, designed to empower and strengthen peace at the community level. It aligns closely with the founding principles of UNSCR 1325, particularly regarding the full and meaningful participation of women in peacebuilding processes. This section draws on research participant insights regarding how the Peace Huts contribute to the four pillars

of UNSCR 1325: Prevention, Protection, Participation, and Relief and Recovery.³

The establishment of the Peace Huts has been described by a former Minister of Gender as a community-based strategy for implementing UNSCR 1325 in Liberia. The initiative extends the Women, Peace and Security agenda to the grassroots level through workshops and training that disseminate the resolution's principles across local communities. The goal is to ensure that the Peace Hut model is contextually adapted to reflect Liberia's specific needs and realities.

However, Liberia's experience with UNSCR 1325 also illustrates a broader tension in peacebuilding policy. While the National Action Plan is often celebrated as a landmark of early post-conflict engagement, its rollout reproduced the centralised and elite-driven implementation patterns that scholars such as Ryan and Basini (2017) identify. Consultations with rural women were translated into donor-oriented outputs—workshops, trainings, indicators—rather than into structural reforms addressing land access, livelihood insecurity, or indigenous justice practices. In this sense, Liberia demonstrates how National Action Plans may institutionalise “participation” without redistributing power.

While some Peace Hut leaders have formal education and are able to advocate directly for the WPS agenda, in other cases the language is intentionally simplified to ensure accessibility for women with limited literacy. One national leader of the Peace Huts explained that this simplification enabled her—and others like her—to understand and share the core messages of UNSCR 1325, regardless of their educational background (In-person interview, Monrovia, August 14, 2021). She described the resolution as foundational to their activities, highlighting their ongoing advocacy against domestic violence and the marginalisation of women.

Training and awareness-raising activities led by UN Women and other implementing partners have further ensured that most women involved in the Peace Huts are familiar with UNSCR 1325, even when they are unable to read or write. However, the dissemination and implementation

³ The fourth pillar, ‘Relief and Recovery’, calls Member States and UN agencies to adopt gender mainstreaming strategies in peacekeeping operations and conflict resolution interventions and include women and girls in the recovery phase. Although this is a fundamental aspect of UNSCR 1325, this analysis does not address it as it is directed to higher decision-making institutions rather than grassroots actors. In this sense, I consider that the community-based Peace Hut initiative has limited power of influence on that specific pillar.

of the resolution have not been uniform across all Peace Huts. As one informant highlighted, each Peace Hut functions differently, shaped by its specific community context, with varying levels of resources and engagement. As mentioned earlier, the Peace Huts therefore operate within a localisation politics in which the most “projectable” actors are rewarded, and the most embedded community actors remain structurally undervalued. Despite these structural obstacles, from the perspective of a UN official involved with the initiative, the Peace Huts offer an effective, bottom-up mechanism for advancing the objectives of UNSCR 1325.

Overall, the Peace Huts are widely seen as structures that empower women and consolidate community-level peacebuilding. Participants in group discussions reported a range of benefits from their involvement, including increased capacity to support their families, greater involvement in local governance and conflict resolution, and a perceived reduction in community-level violence. These insights suggest that the Peace Huts have made meaningful contributions to advancing the WPS agenda at the grassroots, particularly through the lens of UNSCR 1325’s core pillars.

(a) *Prevention*

The Peace Huts women play a vital role in preventing violence and promoting peace within their communities. One of their key contributions lies in raising awareness about sexual and gender-based violence, particularly around the importance of reporting rape and other forms of abuse. According to a regional coordinator working on WPS, the Peace Huts have made significant progress reducing stigma associated with sexual violence. Victims and survivors are now more likely to seek support, partly due to the presence of community-based hotlines, access to medical and psychological treatment, and the involvement of legal practitioners who assist with cases (Online interview, April 19, 2021). These outcomes are attributed to the consistency and dedication of the women leading the Peace Huts.

Through their involvement, many women reported feeling more empowered and respected as leaders and peacebuilders. In the community of Gbarma, each Chairlady engages in awareness-raising activities within her village or neighbourhood, promoting women’s rights and supporting the empowerment of women and girls. UN Women and WIPNET have also facilitated opportunities for these women to share their experiences

across counties, using local dialects to engage broader audiences in discussions on peacebuilding. One WIPNET leader observed that even though many women involved may not be formally educated, they nonetheless have a strong understanding of peacebuilding principles. In addition to mediation and conflict resolution skills, Peace Huts members have been trained in entrepreneurship, financial literacy, trauma healing, and early warning mechanisms. In Bo-Waterside, several women emphasised that their lives have significantly changed since joining the Peace Hut—they are now recognised and respected as community leaders. The initiative places strong emphasis on raising grassroots awareness about the WPS agenda and the principles enshrined in UNSCR 1325. Training sessions also include discussions on gender roles and masculinity, aiming to foster collaboration between women and men in leadership spaces and to challenge traditional gender norms.

Overall, by equipping women with leadership skills, enhancing their understanding of gender dynamics, and building community trust, the initiative strengthens local responses to violence. Moving forward, it is essential to examine not only how the Peace Huts contribute to prevention but also how effectively they support the prosecution of perpetrators and the protection of survivors of sexual violence.

(b) *Protection*

Research participants consistently emphasised the significant impact the Peace Huts have had in reducing violence, particularly domestic and gender-based violence, across multiple communities. In Totota, for instance, local women reported that the creation of the Peace Hut brought a decline in physical abuse within households. The sense of community surveillance and accountability contributed to changing social norms around domestic abuse.

Similarly, a representative from a national healing and reconciliation programme explained that cases typically reported to police stations and courts had declined due to the effectiveness of local conflict-resolution mechanisms embedded in the Peace Hut model (In-person interview, Monrovia, August 18, 2021). In his view, these grassroots engagements play a critical role in addressing injustice, particularly in areas where formal institutions fail to deliver adequate redress for issues like land disputes, theft, and even violent crime.

The Peace Huts have also improved relationships between communities and formal security institutions. According to UN staff involved in peace and security issues, women and girls are increasingly able to access police and justice services to report abuses, which has led to measurable improvements in safety and protection. In some communities, the Peace Huts have facilitated partnerships with the security sector to create direct and preventive mechanisms for protecting vulnerable populations. In the community of Weala, community members reported a decrease in domestic violence since the establishment of their Peace Hut in 2013. Several women stated that they now feel empowered to stand up against abuse, and that men are more likely to respect their rights. One participant declared: “before, this place was full of violence. Now, men don’t beat women or children anymore. They respect us. Before, if men beat us, we did nothing, but now we are strong. We are at peace and able to bring peace” (Focus group discussion with Peace Hut members, August 12, 2021).

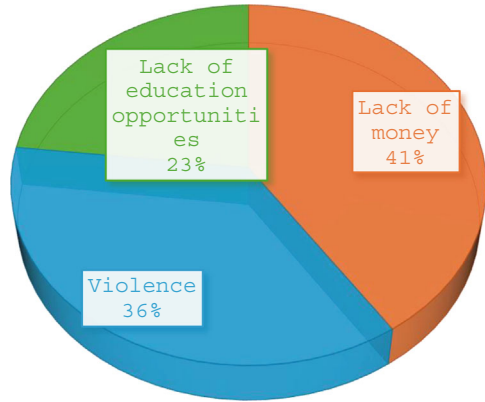
Women have also become more proactive in pursuing justice. They collectively mobilise resources to support survivors through the legal process, ensuring that cases are followed up and perpetrators held accountable. One peacebuilding specialist described the Peace Hut system as “a very effective platform in convicting perpetrators” (Online interview, April 19, 2021). Personal testimonies from multiple women highlighted how their lives have improved since the establishment of the Huts—some noted that they now live peacefully in their homes and communities.

In addition to providing services and support, the Peace Huts offer women symbolic and social recognition. In Totota and Weala, women explained that wearing the Peace Hut shirt confers a sense of authority and respect. The uniform is widely seen as a symbol of power and community trust, often deterring potential abusers. Membership in the Peace Hut is thus not only functional but transformative, allowing women to assert their rights and intervene when violence occurs.

However, despite these successes, many communities continue to face persistent challenges. The survey conducted across several Peace Hut communities found that 36% of participants identified violence as a major issue. Additionally, 23% cited a lack of access to education or training, and 41% reported insufficient financial resources as major obstacles to their well-being (Fig. 4.2).

Although it remains challenging to establish a direct quantitative correlation between the establishment of Peace Huts and a reduction in

Fig. 4.2 What are the main challenges that women face in your community?. *Source* Chart by the Author. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License



violence, qualitative evidence strongly suggests that the initiative plays a significant role in enhancing the protection of women and girls. Testimonies gathered during the fieldwork indicate that the Peace Huts serve as empowering spaces where women receive training in conflict resolution and assume leadership roles in peacebuilding efforts at the grassroots level. As women acquire new skills and gain respect within their communities, it becomes essential to assess the extent to which the Peace Hut mechanism has contributed to enhancing female participation in peacebuilding at the local level.

(c) *Participation*

The Peace Hut mechanism serves as a vehicle for capacity-building by delivering training and interventions aimed at empowering women and promoting their participation in local decision-making processes. Increased involvement in income-generating activities has strengthened women's ability to support their households and elevated their influence within their communities. According to a civil society leader, initiatives such as small loans and skill development through the Peace Huts have enhanced women's financial independence, contributing to improved self-esteem and greater respect at the community level (Online interview, April 14, 2021).

Field observations revealed a high level of enthusiasm among women regarding the opportunities made available through the Peace Huts.

Village Saving Loans Associations (VSLAs) have allowed participants to mobilise resources, engage in economic activities, fund their children’s education, and acquire new skills. These developments have significantly boosted women’s economic empowerment. One woman declared, “The Peace Hut changed my life. I learnt how to make 10\$ out of 5\$. My husband used to beat me, but now, we are good at home. I feel at peace” (Focus group discussion with Peace Hut members, August 14, 2021). In Weala, another expressed her gratitude to the Peace Hut for supporting her when she was broke and for allowing her to afford school fees for her children (Focus group discussion with Peace Hut members, August 12, 2021).

In the community of Malema, a male participant joined the Peace Hut to promote women’s rights and empowerment, considering that women’s participation is essential in the community, especially since the establishment of the Peace Hut in 2015 (Focus group discussion with Peace Hut members, August 10, 2021). The participants further declared,

Men are more aware of women’s roles now. We manage our money; we can send our children to school. Village savings, discuss and settle problems, that’s our benefit. Now we feel empowered. We learnt how to plant cassava and rice, but we need more training. (Focus group discussion with Peace Hut members, August 10, 2021)

The Peace Hut model appears to bring greater inclusivity within the community, providing women a sense of purpose and the tools needed for a more hopeful future. One participant from Gbarma shared how the Peace Hut environment helped her overcome financial difficulties and pursue education for her children and business opportunities (Focus group discussion with Peace Hut members, August 9, 2021).

The Peace Huts also host awareness-raising activities related to UNSCR 1325, helping women understand and engage with the WPS agenda. Training in monitoring and evaluation was described by a WANEP representative as a fundamental component of their activities to track progress in implementing UNSCR 1325 (Online interview, April 19, 2021). Nonetheless, a gap remains in reporting achievements due to limited awareness of the resolution, particularly in rural areas. In rural communities,

Women often sit at the back while men make the decisions, so we said ‘no’. Our peace and security matter. You have to be a part of decision-making processes. You have to participate. You have to speak up for your voices to be heard. You have to take part and negotiate, for good governance’s sake. You can’t be left behind. And because of that, we have been able to form smaller groups where we feel women are functioning, gradually they are coming above most men who don’t give the room for women to be in leadership positions. (Focus group discussion with Peace Hut members, August 26, 2021)

Focus group discussions with grassroots women further confirmed this trend. Participants advanced that both women and men should have equal access to leadership roles and acknowledged an increasing presence of women in community dialogues. In Malema, a Peace Hut member observed that it is now easier to gather and deliberate on community matters, reflecting women’s growing awareness and active participation (Focus group discussion with Peace Hut members, August 10, 2021).

Despite the persistence of cultural norms that often hinder women’s participation and influence in decision-making at various levels, the Peace Hut initiative has contributed to a gradual transformation of traditionally assigned gender roles. One notable outcome, as highlighted by a leader of WANEP, is the increased visibility and vocal engagement of women in matters affecting their lives. While the number of women in the national legislature has decreased, more women are now running for office, participating actively in political discussions, and reporting cases of sexual and gender-based violence—trends that were far less common a decade ago (Online interview, April 14, 2021).

At the community level, there has been a marked increase in women’s involvement in public meetings and conflict resolution efforts. According to a founding member of MARWOPNET, while “before it was a cultural thing, women did not participate in political activities, now, we see women stepping forward. [...] Women play a bigger role in solving conflicts” (In-person interview, Monrovia, August 19, 2021). Women feel more confident speaking up for their rights and are willing to participate in decision-making, both in the public and private spheres. Many of the women who have participated in Peace Hut training now hold leadership positions and collaborate with government officials, including ministers and directors (In-person interview, Monrovia, August 26, 2021). A leader of the Peace Huts emphasised this shift, noting that women—especially

those from grassroots communities—are now speaking out in ways previously thought impossible for anyone without formal education. The platform has significantly increased women’s capacity to engage in public discourse (In-person interview, Monrovia, August 14, 2021).

In the communities visited, women consistently affirmed that the Peace Hut gatherings have improved their participation in decision-making both at the community and household levels. They also reported a growing sense of respect from their peers and local authorities. In areas such as Weala, Totota, Ganta, and Malema, women now actively contribute to decisions alongside local leaders, including the Town Chief. One male participant from Malema affirmed that women’s inclusion has become a necessary component of local governance, as no major decisions are made without their input (Focus group discussion with Peace Hut members, August 10, 2021). These qualitative findings are supported by survey data, with 91.6% of women participants reporting active involvement in women, peace, and security-related work within their community (see Fig. 4.3).

Considering this aspect, 45.2% of respondents declare being involved through local decision-making processes, 33.3% acknowledge their engagement in WPS efforts via the Peace Hut, and 11.9% highlight their collaboration with the local police (see Fig. 4.4).

Overall, the Peace Hut system has contributed to building women’s confidence to speak publicly, raising awareness of their rights, and

Fig. 4.3 Have you been involved in the work related to Women, Peace and Security in your local community?.

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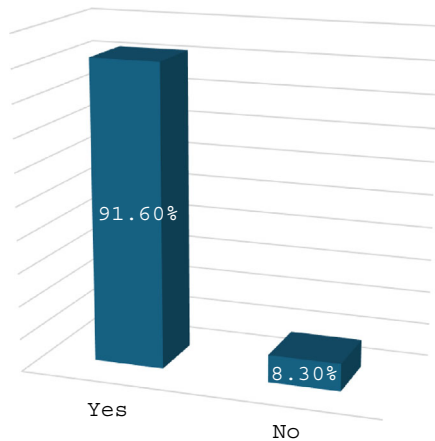
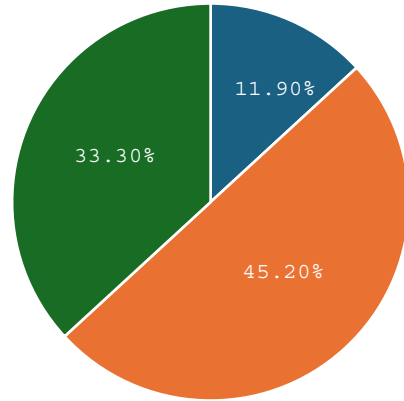


Fig. 4.4 How have you been involved?.

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- Collaboration with the police
- Local decision-making processes
- Participation through the peace Hut

enhancing their social standing within both community and family contexts. According to a UN perception survey, areas where Peace Huts are located show a higher level of female participation in governance, leadership, and peacebuilding when compared to other regions (UN Women, 2021). This suggests that the Peace Hut initiative is a valuable mechanism for advancing women's involvement in local decision-making.

However, despite the existence of a National Action Plan promoting women's full participation across all sectors, significant obstacles persist—particularly in communities lacking Peace Huts. One informant highlighted that, even following the Local Governance Act's gender mainstreaming provisions, women's representation in local government remains notably low (Online interview, April 19, 2021). This reflects a persistent gap between policy commitments and actual implementation, which continues to hinder gender equality outcomes. Another expert from a UN agency pointed out that although having a female President has contributed to changing gender perceptions among younger generations, Liberia remains largely male-dominated. Men continue to

outnumber women in high-level positions, such as ministers, superintendents, and other public offices. Increasing and improving women’s representation across sectors remains a key priority for the Ministry of Gender and its partners.

Some interviewees expressed scepticism about the tangible progress achieved since the adoption of UNSCR 1325 in 2000. One respondent questioned the overall impact of the resolution, noting that only a small number of women have reached top leadership roles across Africa. While recognising the significance of figures such as Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Joyce Banda, and Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, she emphasised that progress remains limited to a select few, which undermines the resolution’s broader goals.

These insights indicate that there is still room for improving Liberian women’s participation in decision-making and peacebuilding. While the Peace Hut system plays an important role in the grassroots implementation of UNSCR 1325, its reach and impact are still constrained. The next section analyses the specific challenges impeding more widespread effectiveness.

The Peace Huts therefore complicate mainstream assumptions in the WPS literature that “participation” is delivered through institutions, quotas, or sensitisation trainings. Their practices foreground a form of embodied participation rooted in mediation, economic reciprocity, and face-to-face accountability. In doing so, they challenge the donor logic that privileges measurable outputs over relational labour, and demonstrate how grassroots women enact 1325 not by invoking its language, but by materialising its goals through daily dispute resolution.

Challenges of the Peace Hut Initiative

Throughout the fieldwork, several limitations hindering the full potential of the Peace Hut mechanism in empowering women and sustaining peace became apparent. Major challenges include a lack of financial resources, insufficient collaboration, and limited implementation and government recognition.

(a) Funding sources

The Peace Hut initiative has been supported through a range of donor and institutional mechanisms. The UN Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) has

played a critical role in funding community-based projects such as the Peace Huts, Palava Huts Programme, and Peace Committees. A 2017 evaluation report demonstrated that the support provided by the PBF in Liberia significantly accelerated community-level peacebuilding efforts and opportunities for women and youth to engage in conflict resolution and decision-making processes at the local level (Nordic Consulting Group, 2017). Between October 2013 and December 2016, a PBF-funded initiative titled “Community-based Conflict Management –Women as Peace-Makers and Nation Builders” was implemented in collaboration with UN Women, the Ministry of Gender and Development (MoGD), the Development Education Network (DEN), and the Rights and Rice Foundation (RRF). With a budget of US\$1,000,000, the project aimed to increase women’s participation in local and national decision-making and improve Peace Hut infrastructure in 22 rural communities. While the initial beneficiaries of the project were women, it also focused on men’s engagement as advocates of women’s empowerment. The project enabled the establishment of 22 Peace Huts among which five were newly built and 17 renovated. Besides, over 3000 women received training on leadership and conflict resolution, and about 250 men were trained as gender equality advocates. The final report affirmed that the project contributed to women’s increased civic participation, lower percentages of domestic violence, and improved cooperation with local police forces. However, the project faced several obstacles. Seasonal flooding disrupted construction efforts, and the 2014 Ebola outbreak constrained implementation. Moreover, structural challenges such as high poverty rates and low educational levels among women significantly limited the initiative’s broader impact. The final evaluation highlighted the need for enhanced engagement between local authorities and governance institutions and for targeted support to illiterate women and girls (Nordic Consulting Group, 2017).

By 2019, there were 38 operational Peace Huts across Liberia. That year, six new huts were established with support from the PBF in counties such as Maryland, Lofa, Grand Bassa, and Nimba (UN Liberia, 2019). UN Women also reported that between 2009 and 2018, the Peace Huts received infrastructure and equipment support (e.g., cassava processing machines and rice mills), as well as training on mediation, literacy, women’s rights, and access to finance (UN Women, 2019b). UN agencies such as UN Women, UNDP, and the Peacebuilding Fund have an important role in these interventions, alongside other major donors such

as the European Union, the Swedish Embassy and International Development Agency, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), the UK Department for International Development, the Australian Agency for Development, and the Liberian Ministry of Gender and Development (UN Women, 2019a, 2019b).

Nonetheless, funding remains inadequate. A joint UN and World Bank report titled *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict* noted that the estimated annual investment that would be needed for the Peace Huts to be effective, including training and monitoring services—around US\$1.5 million per year, or approximately US\$62,000 per hut per year—is negligible compared to the US\$95 million allocated yearly to the domestic justice sector (United Nations & World Bank, 2018). In this sense, a UN official acknowledged:

The biggest obstacle is the continued lack of funding. So much of the work that the peace hut women did was volunteer-based, or they got a little tiny stipend, and very little support by way of the government or donors. Even some of the projects in which UN Women provided support, we are only talking about a few hundred thousand dollars here and there [...] The investment was so tiny compared to the billions of dollars that went into Liberia to do other things. (Online interview, April 16, 2021)

Interviews with key informants consistently cited limited funding as a primary constraint. While UN Women has attempted to support self-sustaining activities, interviewees noted that these efforts have only ensured basic survival rather than long-term empowerment. No subnational funding mechanisms currently exist for the Peace Huts, and the initiative does not receive support from county-level development funds. While seed money helped launch some initiatives, sustainability has remained a concern, with stakeholders stressing the need for innovation and diversified income sources.

Economic barriers further constrain women’s ability to participate effectively. Many interviewees noted that while women show enthusiasm and initiative, lack of education and financial resources prevents them from advancing. One respondent pointed out: “Some want to start farming, substance-farming, mechanised-farming, but how do they get money for the equipment? [...] They may be able to plant the crops, but how can they preserve the crops?” (Online interview, April 3, 2021).

In practice, the Peace Huts operate through the voluntary efforts of their members, whose contributions to a communal social fund cover operational costs. This self-reliance has gained them credibility, particularly during crises like the Ebola outbreak. However, civil society actors highlighted the need for greater government support, including gender-responsive budgeting—a strategy that has seen little progress despite previous training initiatives. A CSO representative further stated,

When I participated in this training for women in government, the idea was to be able to get the government to do something called ‘gender-responsive budgeting’. That is, wherever the budget comes from at the beginning of the fiscal year, it must reflect the issues of women. We did the training, but that just never got off the ground. My worries are, will it ever be possible to get off the ground? If it did not get off the ground with a woman as president, how much more can it be with a man as president? (Online interview, April 3, 2021)

Focus group discussions reaffirmed that, apart from members’ contributions, the Peace Huts currently lack regular institutional funding. While some Peace Huts are well-managed and operate local savings schemes with efficiency, most depend on external support, particularly for infrastructure maintenance. Women in several communities cited damaged facilities and lack of electricity and water as major obstacles. Transportation challenges were also mentioned, particularly the need for motorbikes to respond promptly to incidents outside their villages. Some communities expressed specific needs, such as tailoring training and equipment in Schieffelin, or computers for case management in Totota. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated existing vulnerabilities. Many women reported that their savings were depleted during the pandemic, reversing decades of efforts and progress. In Totota, the village saving group became inactive due to loan defaults and lack of external support. One leader explained,

A lot of village savings have come down because of COVID-19. People borrowed money and were not able to pay back. They are not able to do anything now because of this COVID-19. You know, we have suffered so much in Liberia. After Ebola, we were trying to pick up, then COVID-19 came and made it worse for us again. Some of the women groups are trying to start again with their village savings but many of the groups are

not doing well because there is no support coming from anywhere right now. Not at all. (Focus group discussion with Peace Hut members, August 14, 2021)

Despite these hardships, community members continue to express commitment to their roles. Some support was provided during the pandemic in collaboration with professional associations such as the Female Lawyers’ Association. However, broader and more consistent financial backing is needed to sustain and scale their impact. Stakeholders emphasised that women perform valuable conflict mediation and peace-building work, yet insufficient support hinders long-term motivation and limits outcomes.

According to some civil society leaders, the creation of an economic empowerment fund would help women start businesses and take ownership of the process. They argue that civil society can initiate activities, but long-term sustainability requires local ownership and stronger institutional backing. Without it, progress remains fragile and dependent on intermittent donor funding.

Government representatives and former officials agreed that while the Peace Huts have proven to be effective, there is a need for greater integration of these initiatives into national budgeting frameworks. Despite their role in early warning conflict systems, the Peace Huts are underutilised by state structures due to weak coordination and insufficient resource allocation. While the Government of Liberia has acknowledged the Peace Huts as key to connecting community, county and national efforts on peace and security, greater collaboration is needed (UN Women, 2019a). Women involved in the initiative consistently express a desire to strengthen partnerships with governmental and non-governmental actors to expand their access to empowerment programmes and improve their contributions to sustainable peace.

These constraints cannot be understood as merely logistical. They reflect the broader donor economy in which women’s peacebuilding becomes legible only when translated into project formats. As Kunz (2021) shows, NGOs monopolise access to funding streams, leaving informal community networks, such as the Peace Huts, at the margins. Liberia’s case illustrates this dynamic clearly: while women mobilise their own relational capital, sustainability ultimately depends on external actors who prioritise programmatic deliverables over social infrastructures.

(b) *Lack of collaborations and partnerships*

In 2018, UN Women and the Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia (AFELL) collaborated to formally register the Peace Hut initiative as a national CSO. A constitution was developed to define a framework for the Peace Huts' governance and structure (UN Women, 2019b). Consequently, in 2019, the National Peace Huts Women of Liberia won the 2019 UN Population Award and was officially registered as a national Community-Based Organisation (CBO). In an official communication, UN Women committed to supporting the initiative and urged states "to learn from their transformative example and support the replication of the Peace Huts in similar contexts as an effective women-led conflict prevention and peacebuilding initiative that yields vital peace dividends" (UN Women, 2019a).

Despite the commitments, the Peace Huts continue to operate in relative isolation. Field interviews reveal a widespread sentiment of abandonment, as women in local communities express frustration saying: "The UN comes here asking what we need, NGOs come here asking what we need. We tell them that we got nothing. But so far, no one has helped our needs. Will you take our concerns to the right people? Would you do that?" (Focus group discussion with Peace Hut members, August 10, 2021)

While members overwhelmingly express a desire for greater collaboration, particularly with NGOs and governmental bodies, actual engagement remains limited. The women of Weala advance, "We need more collaboration. Our goal is to get larger, to spread out. If I have rights and not my sister, we are not going anywhere" (Focus group discussion with Peace Hut members, August 12, 2021). Internal frictions further complicate potential partnerships, especially between the Ministry of Gender—coordinating the Peace Huts—and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, often due to tensions between women's empowerment efforts and traditional patriarchal structures. According to a former International Committee of Red Cross Officer, fostering inclusive dialogue and establishing shared ownership of initiative, particularly with traditional power structures, is essential to enhance legitimacy and effectiveness of the Peace Huts (In-person interview, Monrovia, August 14, 2021). Thus, forming inclusive alliances and working cooperatively with local authorities and cultural leaders will contribute to reinforcing women's grassroots peacebuilding efforts. Indeed, transformative change requires multiple engagements committed to the implementation and oriented towards common objectives.

(c) Weak implementation

Implementation remains a major challenge in Liberia’s post-conflict landscape. A former senior representative of the International Committee of Red Cross noted that while UN agencies—mainly UNDP—arrive with structured intervention strategies, they often lack sustainable follow-up plans. This results in many initiatives collapsing once international actors withdraw, leaving communities without the resources or capacity to sustain them. In this context, continued guidance and support are vital for ensuring grassroots ownership among women. A civil society representative stressed that building confidence, especially among individuals recovering from trauma, requires consistent follow-up and counselling mechanisms (Online interview, April 3, 2021).

The implementation gap also limits the empowerment dimension of the Peace Huts. Although training programmes and workshops are part of the initiative, their long-term impact is uncertain. A Liberian legal expert questioned the extent to which these efforts truly empower women, explaining that while some Peace Huts have launched informal vocational programmes—such as tailoring, backing, and crafts—it remains unclear whether these initiatives have endured or produced tangible outcomes (Online interview, April 3, 2021).

Interviews revealed that Peace Huts members are willing to expand their knowledge and receive more training. They expressed a strong motivation to enhance their peacebuilding skills and become more effective in resolving community-level conflicts. One participant highlighted the importance of ongoing capacity-building, stating that each training opportunity helps women become more vocal and active on various issues (Online interview, April 19, 2021).

(d) Lack of government recognition

Although the Peace Huts have achieved significant progress in peacebuilding, mediation, and reconciliation, these grassroots platforms remain largely absent from formal national frameworks. A UN Women Peace and Security Specialist in Liberia acknowledged that although the government has committed to integrating the Peace Huts into national peace infrastructures, this recognition has yet to be formally endorsed. The informant noted that while steps have been taken—such as registering the Peace

Huts under the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning to enable direct funding—governmental support remains limited (Online interview, April 19, 2021).

A regional coordinator from a civil society peace network pointed out: “oftentimes, these politicians make key commitments that they know they will never carry out. So oftentimes, we also have to advocate them and make them remember their manifestos when they are seeking for public office” (Online interview, April 19, 2021).

This lack of institutional recognition continues to marginalise grassroots efforts in national policy implementation. A community member from Totota expressed frustration at the absence of government acknowledgement, stressing the need for external actors to emphasise the value of local work to decision-makers (Focus group discussion with Peace Hut members, August 12, 2021). Similarly, a national leader of the Peace Huts highlighted the difficulty of maintaining momentum without meaningful support, noting that despite ongoing efforts, the lack of outcomes has been deeply discouraging for many women involved (In-person interview, Monrovia, August 14, 2021).

This analysis illustrates that, although grassroots mechanisms like the Peace Huts effectively manage community-level conflict resolution, they struggle to gain the recognition and resources required to thrive. As one former humanitarian official remarked, the core issue may lie in the government’s prioritisation: while the Peace Huts may be acknowledged as beneficial, they do not seem to be regarded as a policy priority, which significantly hinders implementation efforts (In-person interview, Monrovia, August 16, 2021).

In summary, the findings of this study point to both the benefits and the ongoing challenges facing the Peace Huts, as further illustrated in Table 4.1.

This chapter argues that the Peace Hut system in Liberia, while vital, requires further strengthening and institutional support. As a community-based mechanism for peacebuilding and reconciliation, the system is inherently diverse, with variations in structure and operation across different communities. Despite these differences, all Peace Huts share a common objective: to foster equitable, peaceful, and sustainable relationships at the local level. This approach stems from the belief that relational fragmentations pose a serious threat to social cohesion and security (United Nations & World Bank, 2018). In a context where access to formal justice and security mechanisms remains limited, the

Table 4.1 Benefits and disadvantages of the peace huts mechanism

<i>Benefits of the peace hut system</i>	<i>Challenges to the efficacy of the peace huts</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A community-based and decentralised instrument that embraces local norms while promoting women’s rights and autonomy • Headed by trusted community members, it enhances the legitimacy of decisions and promote inclusive participation, challenging patriarchal norms and the traditional Palava Hut system • Meetings are held within communities and often conducted in local dialects, ensuring accessibility and active participation for all members • The system emphasises the interdependence of peace and justice, seeking to restore social cohesion and manage disputes without reliance on formal police and justice services • It strengthens women’s role in local peacebuilding and decision-making processes, and supports their economic empowerment • It has contributed to a reduction in community-level violence and promoted respect of women’s rights • Women have gained conflict resolution and business skills, increasing their agency and resilience • It aligns with the principles of UNSCR 1325 and related frameworks on women, peace and security, offering strong potential for localised implementation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Peace Huts are predominantly established in rural areas, with limited presence and applicability in urban contexts such as Monrovia • Its scope remains limited to resolving local disputes and has not extended to addressing more serious crimes or human rights violations • The uneven development of Peace Huts across regions results in disparities in support and functionality • Many Peace Huts operate without stable funding, infrastructure, or sufficient access to training and capacity-building opportunities • Lack of institutional recognition and formal partnerships limits the Peace Huts’ ability to scale and sustainably implement programmes

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grassroots and women-led Peace Huts have emerged as critical actors in mediating disputes and raising awareness on key social issues. One interviewee described the initiative as vital spaces for early warning and conflict prevention, where disputes are addressed promptly to avoid escalation into violence (In-person interview, Monrovia, August 26, 2021).

The analysis demonstrates that the imposition of Eurocentric models of justice often fail to resonate with or effectively serve rural communities of Liberia. In contrast, the Peace Hut system represents a meaningful grassroots alternative that contributes to restoring peace, justice, and reintegration during Liberia's transitional process. It demonstrates how local peace mediators adapt and negotiate legal frameworks to promote social harmony. This bottom-up approach places the community at the centre of the process to meet local needs and foster inclusive peace. According to a practitioner from a trauma healing and reconciliation programme, Peace Hut women are powerful advocates for social justice and women's rights, and they actively engage with local authorities to make a change (In-person interview, Monrovia, August 18, 2021). Their work highlights the potential of the Peace Hut model as a source of inspiration for post-conflict peacebuilding efforts in other contexts—particularly where community engagement and social cohesion are already strong. Nevertheless, despite its promising contributions, the initiative continues to face challenges related to sustainability and institutional support. The next chapter further explores the connections between the Peace Huts and UNSCR 1325, assessing how the resolution supports and empowers grassroots women in Liberia. Taken together, the Peace Huts reveal how UNSCR 1325 is implemented in an uneven way on the ground. They thrive not by following NAP indicators, but by relying on local ideas of justice, kinship, and mutual support. In this sense, Liberia challenges the assumption that WPS norms simply trickle down from the top; instead, grassroots women build peace from below, often without full recognition from state and donor systems.

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Implementing UNSCR 1325 from the Bottom-Up

Abstract This chapter observes the articulations between UNSCR 1325 and the Peace Hut mechanism. Based on the analysis of the Liberian context and the insights retrieved from the fieldwork, this chapter analyses how the Peace Huts initiative contributes to the implementation of UNSCR 1325, while also identifying the direct contributions that UNSCR 1325 brings to grassroots women, especially in terms of their social, economic, and political inclusion.

Keywords UNSCR 1325 · Peace huts · Liberia · Grassroots women

UNSCR 1325 makes women brave to speak for their rights. Before, women use to be shy. Now we can speak.
Member of the Peace Hut, Bo-Waterside, August 11, 2021.

Achieving gender equality and empowering women requires the implementation of rigorous, context-specific approaches and mechanisms. Drawing on the Liberian experience and insights from the fieldwork, this chapter identifies the contributions of UNSCR 1325 to grassroots women's empowerment. The concluding section presents major findings and policy recommendations based on the research outcomes.

As previously discussed, UNSCR 1325 underscores the critical need to amplify women's voices in peacebuilding processes at all levels—local,

national, regional, and international. The resolution reaffirms “the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building, and stressing the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security” (UNSCR 1325, 2000:1). Furthermore, it calls on stakeholders to adopt “measures that support local women’s peace initiatives and indigenous processes for conflict resolution, and that involve women in all of the implementation mechanisms of the peace agreements” (UNSCR 1325, para. 8(b)). In this regard, the principles guiding the Peace Hut initiative are undoubtedly aligned with the objectives of the resolution.

Liberian women have played a decisive role in national peacebuilding, often with limited resources. One national practitioner recalled how women mobilised with simple but powerful symbols, such as white clothes, to demonstrate unity and resistance. Another interviewee recalls that there is a national imperative to honour and institutionalise women’s contributions to peace, recognising their sacrifices and leadership (In-person interview, Monrovia, August 18, 2021). Liberia was among the first countries to adopt a National Action Plan on 1325, largely in recognition of the pivotal role that women played in ending the civil conflict. A former government official noted:

Women were very instrumental in making sure that peace came to Liberia and that the war ended. The war that was so devastating, took a lot of lives, over 220,000. Women were being abused, women were being misused, and the women of Liberia came together and decided that enough is enough, we need to do something to help. (In-person interview, Monrovia, August 18, 2021)

Substantial progress has been made, particularly through the NAP and the efforts of the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection. The NAP includes components aimed at strengthening the Peace Huts by providing capacity-building training on countering violent extremism and conflict resolution, while also defining coordination roles with local authorities and civil society actors (Government of Liberia, 2019). The fulfilment of these engagements will be crucial to assessing the efficacy of the Peace Huts as a viable tool for peacebuilding. However, while Liberia’s commitments to UNSCR 1325 enable citizens to hold the

government accountable for the implementation of the strategic plan, this analysis shows that national duties have not been executed so far.

GRASSROOTS PERCEPTIONS OF UNSCR 1325

This study examined how grassroots women perceive and experience the impact of UNSCR 1325 in post-conflict Liberia. Through interviews, focus group discussions, and survey data, the research assessed the extent to which the resolution has contributed to women's protection, participation, and empowerment. Informants were asked whether the combination of strong local activism and the adoption of UNSCR 1325 has produced benefits for women at the community level. A UN Women official noted that since the passage of the resolution, there have been visible improvements not only in women's status but also in peace, security, and development more broadly (Online interview, April 16, 2021). Women are increasingly speaking out on issues that affect them, and there has been a rise in the reporting of sexual and gender-based violence. Despite gaps in formal education or literacy, many grassroots women—including those in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps—are aware of UNSCR 1325 and understand it as a tool that affirms their right to participate in decision-making.

Fieldwork results show that 66.6% of participants reported being familiar with UNSCR 1325. Among Peace Hut members, 52.3% indicated that they learned about the resolution through UN Women, followed by NGOs (20.2%), training sessions (17.8%), radio broadcasts (16.6%), and information shared by the National President of the Peace Huts (14.2%) (see Fig. 5.1).

One peace network coordinator emphasised that UNSCR 1325 provides women with a stronger voice in society—one that cannot easily be dismissed by men. It enables women to better understand and claim their rights, so that “men will not just beat women and sit as citizens” (Focus group discussion with Peace Hut members, August 26, 2021). It is viewed as a tool for empowerment, granting women the confidence and legitimacy to participate more fully in decision-making processes.

Similar sentiments are echoed across different communities. In Gbarma, some linked the resolution with women's eligibility for public office, including positions such as mayor or president. Participants expressed that the visibility of women in high-level leadership—referencing Liberia's past female presidency—demonstrated what was possible

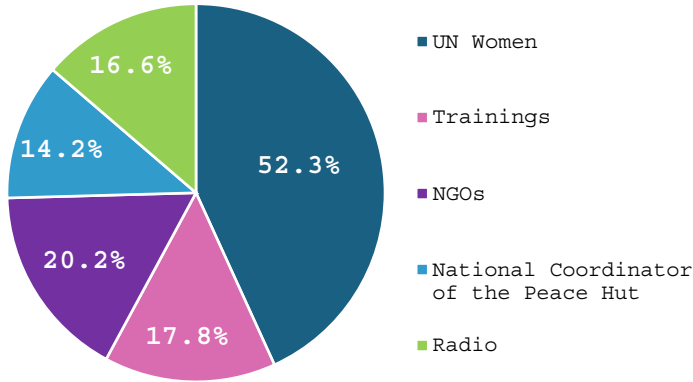


Fig. 5.1 How did you hear about UNSCR 1325?. *Source* Chart by the Author. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

through sustained advocacy and empowerment. In Malema, a male participant recognised the resolution's contribution to women's political engagement and its role in educational and leadership development. In Ganta, Peace Hut members highlighted that the resolution has contributed to raising awareness of women's rights and expanded their participation in peacebuilding and community governance. Despite ongoing challenges, many respondents believed that the resolution has initiated important shifts in perception regarding gender equality and leadership. According to another civil society coordinator working on WPS, while the number of women currently serving the legislature may have declined, the number of women running for office has increased (In-person interview, Monrovia, April 14, 2021). This growing political engagement is seen as a sign of change compared to a decade ago. As of 2018, women made up 20% of county superintendents and approximately one-third of mayors (VYWL, 2018). Survey findings also support this trend. Around 82% of participants indicated they were aware of women in their communities who participate in formal decision-making processes or hold leadership roles. Specific examples included women serving as town chiefs or parliamentary representatives. In one case, a participant noted that her mother held a leadership position in a neighbouring village.

These observations suggest that UNSCR 1325 has had a measurable impact on women's political participation and representation at the

community level. While progress remains uneven and further efforts are required, the fieldwork points to an increased awareness of the connection between women's inclusion and sustainable peace. This is further reflected in the survey responses, outlined in Fig. 5.2: 28.6% of participants associated UNSCR 1325 with women's involvement in decision-making, 19% mentioned women's rights in general, 17.8% referred specifically to the right to run for elected office, and 44% did not answer the question.

Although most participants have heard of UNSCR 1325, 42% report having limited knowledge of its content, compared to only 20.2% who demonstrate good understanding and 1% with very good knowledge (see Fig. 5.3).

Similarly, while nearly 70% affirm that UNSCR 1325 and the NAP are important for their communities, 25% are unable to explain why.

One community leader involved in women's empowerment initiatives explained that she was trained to support other women in asserting their rights. Her work focuses on raising awareness about fundamental freedoms, including the right to education, free expression, and participation in decision-making. She noted that the rights gained during the presidency of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf continue to serve as foundation

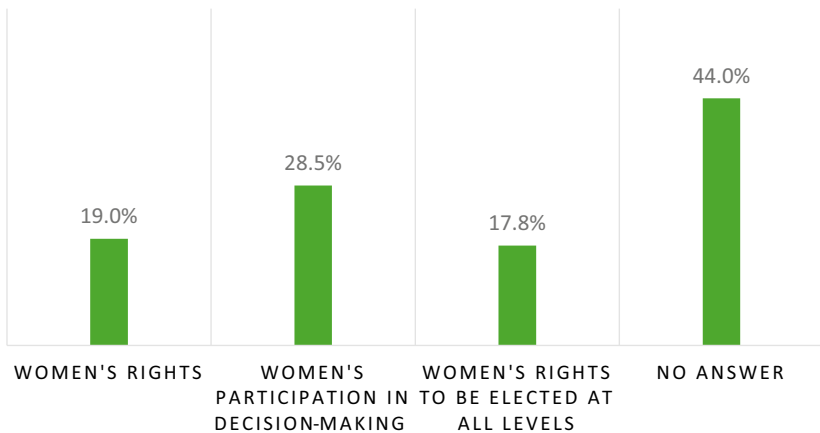


Fig. 5.2 What does UNSCR 1325 mean to you?. *Source* Chart by the Author. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

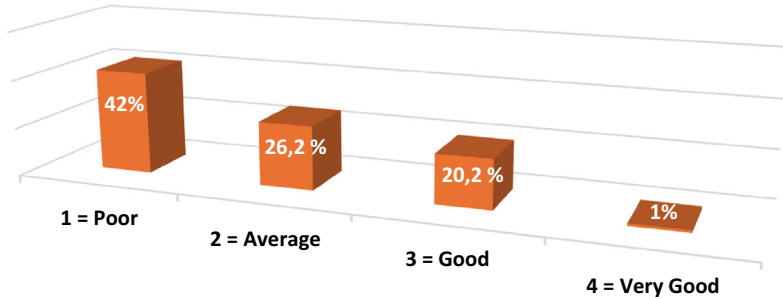


Fig. 5.3 Rate your knowledge of UNSCR 1325 on a scale from 1 to 4. *Source* Chart by the Author. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

for ongoing efforts (Focus group discussion with Peace Hut members, August 26, 2021).

However, disparities in support for Peace Huts persist. A local activist observed that while the stated goal of the resolution is to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and girls, actual progress has been slow and inconsistent. She cited ongoing issues such as child marriage, female genital mutilation, HIV, poverty, limited access to education, and forced marriage. In her view, despite public claims of action, tangible results remain lacking, and much more could be achieved if the political will existed (Online interview, April 3, 2021).

In the same line, a former Minister of Gender acknowledged that although some structures were established to implement UNSCR 1325, they have not been maintained as expected (In-person interview, Monrovia, August 18, 2021). The findings suggest that the resolution's transformative potential remains only partially realised. While its adoption has helped challenge traditional patterns on women, peace and security, its concrete impact on the lives of local women is still limited. In this context, it is argued that UNSCR 1325 is only partly effective in fulfilling its core pillars—prevention, protection, and participation. Understanding the barriers to effective implementation is therefore essential to closing this gap.

CHALLENGES TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF UNSCR 1325

Several barriers continue to hinder the full and effective implementation of UNSCR 1325. These have been identified throughout the research and are outlined here.

(a) *Limited awareness of UNSCR 1325 at the grassroots level*

One of the key challenges that we have had in the course of the implementation of 1325 is the fact that grassroots, local or community women are basically lost in that equation. (Online interview, April 19, 2021)

Local and community-level actors often remain disconnected from the broader Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. UNSCR 1325 is often perceived as an elitist policy document, largely because most related initiatives take place in urban centres, leaving rural communities aside. As a result, the contributions of community women to peacebuilding often go undocumented, making it difficult to assess their alignment with the resolution's goals. While much of their work supports the principles of UNSCR 1325 in practice, the lack of explicit recognition or understanding of this link creates a disconnect. Without adequate knowledge of the resolution, many grassroots women do not identify their peacebuilding efforts as part of its implementation. This knowledge gap is deepened by limited outreach and capacity-building initiatives. Civil society actors play a critical role in bridging this divide by raising awareness about UNSCR 1325 and helping community women see how the resolution supports their work. However, their efforts require broader visibility to foster strong connections between local initiatives and national or regional frameworks. Despite the resolution's potential, more concerted efforts are needed to translate its principles into positive outcomes for women.

(b) *The language of UNSCR 1325*

The perceived elitism of UNSCR 1325 is further reinforced by its technical and formal language, which poses a challenge for women with limited access to education. In Liberia, the female literacy rate is only

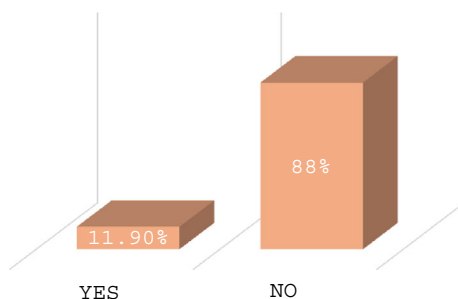
34.09%, making it difficult for many women to comprehend the resolution and engage with its implementation (World Bank Database, n.d.). While some efforts have been made to translate the document into local dialects and simplified English, significant gaps in understanding remain. This language barrier not only limits awareness but also hampers meaningful participation in WPS initiatives. During the fieldwork, in some Peace Huts, communication challenges have constrained the interactions with women. Addressing this issue requires inclusive communication strategies, increased educational initiatives, and sustained capacity-building efforts. Education remains a fundamental tool for enhancing women's roles in peace and security and for promoting gender equality. As a regional civil society advanced,

Being a woman does not make you a gender expert. [...] we have been working with them in terms of advocacy, in terms of building capacities, and also generating awareness. And bringing out the relevance of why 1325 should be implemented effectively, why should women issues be put on the front burner, because of issues of disparity, issues of discrimination against women, and the fact that if you let women, you are letting a huge population of the world from development (Online interview, April 19, 2021)

(b) *Weak coordination across implementation levels*

Although multiple structures have been established to coordinate the implementation of UNSCR 1325—including the National Steering Committee, Technical Working Group, and Monitoring and Evaluation Working Group—coordination across these bodies remains inconsistent. Despite the presence of local mechanisms such as the ‘Contact Task Force’ and ‘District Champions’ in charge of piloting the implementation of the resolution, the NAP has not been effectively disseminated to the county level (Online interview, April 19, 2021). Survey data indicated that only 11.9% of Peace Huts members are aware of the NAP, and none reported being actively involved in its implementation (Fig. 5.4). This disconnect between national frameworks and local actors undermines the effectiveness of the resolution and highlights the need for stronger linkages and coordination mechanisms to ensure that implementation efforts reach all levels of society.

Fig. 5.4 Did you hear about the Liberian National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325?. *Source* Chart by the Author. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License



In many African countries, the implementation of UNSCR 1325 has yielded limited outcomes at the grassroots level, largely due to the challenges of reaching rural communities (AUC, 2016). Weak decentralisation frameworks further hinder the effective involvement of local institutions in carrying out the resolution. In some rare cases, localisation roadmaps have been adopted to guide local administrations in the implementation of 1325 NAPs (AUC, 2016). Nonetheless, the lack of coordination among stakeholders, coupled with a lack of clear, context-specific implementation guidelines for local actors, has contributed to persistently low levels of awareness about UNSCR 1325. This gap significantly impedes progress on the WPS agenda across the continent.

(d) *The issue of funding*

Despite the cross-sectorial nature of the Women, Peace and Security agenda and the involvement of multiple ministries, a major constraint to implementing UNSCR 1325 is the absence of gender-responsive budgeting. While governments often develop ambitious action plans, these frequently lack dedicated funding, rendering them largely symbolic. In some cases, funds intended for WPS initiatives are even redirected to other government priorities. As acknowledged by a UN Women specialist, competing national concerns have forced a shift in focus towards advocating for gender-responsive budgeting and exploring alternative, innovative financing mechanisms to support NAP implementation (Online interview, April 19, 2021).

Non-governmental organisations and community-based actors—critical drivers of the WPS agenda—also face underfunding and lack of

technical resources. Civil society representatives note that there is little to no financial support from government sources, and external donor funding is usually short-term and misaligned with the needs identified at the grassroots level (In-person interview, Monrovia, August 17, 2021). This fragmentation not only weakens the long-term sustainability of programmes but also impedes develop effective practices. Moreover, even though international organisations such as the UN attempt to fill these resource gaps, the fragmented landscape of women’s organisations creates additional barriers to coordinated and impactful action. Building stronger partnerships, ensuring predictable funding, and aligning donor priorities with local realities are critical to overcoming these financial challenges.

(e) *Limits of external interventions*

Some of the kids were born during the war, they grew up and joined the revolution. They have not experienced normal life, peace, and you say you want to rehabilitate them for two weeks, two months...it doesn’t work. And it didn’t work. [...] Most of the ex-combatants would prefer selling their slot to get cash instead of going through the process. (In-person interview, Monrovia, August 18, 2021)

External-driven interventions, particularly in post-conflict recovery, have often failed to produce sustainable outcomes. Disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) programmes led by organisations such as ECOWAS and the UN were designed to remove weapons from combatants and support their rehabilitation. However, many of these initiatives were short-term and lacked the depth required to address the long-term psychological and socio-economic impacts of war (In-person interview, Monrovia, August 18, 2021). The design of these initiatives often failed to consider the ongoing nature of trauma recovery and the necessity of sustained interventions. The disarmament process, for example, typically involved turning in a weapon in exchange for money and a brief counselling session, with little to no follow-up. A key informant expressed:

When you go to the UNDP camp, you give your gun, they give you cash, send you to counsellors who talk to you for a few minutes, and then you

never see them again. So, the process was not effective, and today we have a lot of people on drugs, involved with crimes, robberies, etc., because it was not done properly. (In-person interview, Monrovia, August 18, 2021)

The shortcomings of these programmes highlight the need for more comprehensive, long-term approaches to reintegration that go beyond symbolic efforts. Effective peacebuilding requires not only removing weapons but also addressing the underlying social and psychological wounds of conflict through sustained investment in people and communities.

(f) *Weak political will*

‘Big stone, and no rain’. You have the stone, but no rain behind it. That’s what you see. You find a lot of big talks here. But sometimes the implementation is not happening. (In-person interview, Monrovia, August 17, 2021)

Despite the widespread consciousness about the limited implementation of UNSCR 1325, major challenges remain unresolved. A significant obstacle is the lack of political will among governments that have formally endorsed the resolution. Although international frameworks and grassroots activism have pushed the WPS agenda forward, there remains a disconnect between policy and local-level action. The non-binding nature of the WPS resolutions and the absence of enforcement mechanisms further weaken the domestication of NAPs. As a result, Liberian women’s concerns are inadequately addressed, and their vital contributions to peace often go unacknowledged. Several informants noted that issues related to gender equality and women’s rights are frequently discussed in policy spaces but rarely lead to meaningful action. Participants also criticised decision-makers for their passive attitudes and highlighted the lack of public awareness and accountability structures as major barriers to progress. Consequently, despite robust grassroots mobilisation, weak institutional support, insufficient funding for gender-focused initiatives, and persistent socio-economic and security vulnerabilities continue to undermine the effectiveness of UNSCR 1325 across both national and local contexts.

(g) *The participation gap between women and men*

While UNSCR 1325 urges Member States to enhance women's roles in peace and security processes, full gender parity remains elusive in Liberia and across the continent. Though there have been some advancements and numerous capacity-building initiatives, only a few educated African women meet the set criteria to be appointed as formal mediators to lead peace processes on the continent (ACCORD, 2011). Women's inclusion needs to go beyond presence; they must have influence in shaping policies and implementing the WPS agenda. An interviewee noted that although government institutions have established Gender Desks, gender officers are often excluded from senior-level decision-making and management discussions, which indicates a broader misunderstanding of their purpose and role (Online interview, April 14, 2021). Conflict mediation continues to prioritise government officials or professionals with substantial work experience, resulting in the marginalisation of most women, particularly those without elite status. As highlighted in previous research, the dominance of a masculine majority in peace processes and the instrumentalisation of select women undermine broader goals of empowerment and representation (Machakanja, 2016). In this sense, structural and cultural barriers, including patriarchal attitudes, further entrench women's underrepresentation.

(h) *The persistence of patriarchal norms*

Cultural traditions in many African societies continue to justify discriminatory behaviours that marginalise women. These patriarchal norms reinforce stereotypes that women are less capable or too passive to lead, considering women's involvement in peace processes as "symbolic" (Machakanja, 2016). Interviews revealed that despite Liberia's gender-responsive policy framework, such misconceptions remain common, especially in rural areas. A formal humanitarian official suggested that deeply embedded traditions are among the greatest obstacles to advancing gender equality.

A Liberian academic emphasised that prevailing cultural norms still dictate restrictive gender roles, where women are primarily seen as caretakers, not decision-makers. Another participant explained that for generations, Liberian women were denied education, silenced in public discussions, and confined to domestic roles. These deep-seated views

continue to shape societal expectations and limit women's participation in public life.

Although there is a growing awareness of the importance of including women in leadership and political decision-making, progress is slow. A former government official lamented the lack of meaningful gains in women's political representation despite the symbolic milestones of having a female president and vice-president. Others noted positive developments, such as efforts to engage traditional leaders and support young girls' education, suggesting that social norms are gradually shifting. Collaborative efforts between civil society, international actors, and government institutions are viewed as essential to dismantling gender biases.

(i) *The fragile post-conflict context*

Peace is not necessarily the silence of the guns. If from this morning until 5 pm this evening, I am not able to feed my child, I am not at peace. If I am not able to send my child to school, I am not at peace. [...] Right now, we have an incidence with so many children going to the streets and taking drugs. (Focus group discussion with Peace Hut members, August 3, 2021)

The post-war landscape in Liberia remains marked by instability and mistrust in public institutions. Peace extends beyond the absence of violence—it includes access to food, education, and security. The legacy of civil war left Liberians disillusioned with governance, particularly given that many former warlords transitioned into political leadership roles. A religious leader pointed out that “Too many of those who are in leadership are not interested in the majority of the people” (In-person interview, Monrovia, August 18, 2021).

High levels of corruption and a dysfunctional judiciary have further eroded public trust. Several respondents shared that people avoid dealing with the court and police services but instead tend to “take matters into their own hands [...] to directly deal with criminals as a way of getting justice, getting revenge” (In-person interview, Monrovia, August 18, 2021). A Liberian lawyer further expresses that “People who went through hell during the war, they are still very angry that people who

hurt people, who killed people, are still walking free” (In-person interview, Monrovia, April 3, 2021). This gap between communities and state institutions hampers both the rule of law and the broader peacebuilding process in the country.

Additional challenges—such as poverty, unemployment, poor health-care, and gender-based violence—exacerbate women’s vulnerability. In many communities, women face immense responsibility without support, often serving as caregivers while managing livelihoods under precarious conditions. These intersecting forms of disadvantage restrict the capacity of CSOs to deliver gender-sensitive programming and advance the WPS agenda effectively. In many ways, current challenges reflect unresolved legacies of the war that require sustained, long-term strategies.

Overall, this analysis highlights that UNSCR 1325 has played a central role in advancing women’s rights and enabling their participation in peacebuilding in Liberia. The intersection of grassroots activism and global policy frameworks offers a valuable model for linking local realities with international agendas. Liberian women have been instrumental in driving and sustaining peace efforts. However, the persistence of institutional, cultural, and socio-economic barriers limits the resolution’s transformative potential. The implementation gap between policy and practice remains wide, especially in rural areas. As such, UNSCR 1325 often functions more as symbolic recognition than as a tool for structural change. Beyond these practical and structural challenges, it is important to rethink what implementation itself entails and how local actors creatively engage with global norms.

RETHINKING IMPLEMENTATION: BEYOND COMPLIANCE TOWARDS NORM TRANSLATION

To ask whether Peace Huts “implement” UNSCR 1325 already assumes that norms are fixed, transportable, and measurable. In a procedural understanding of implementation, success is determined by visible indicators: the number of mediation trainings completed, the existence of reporting mechanisms for SGBV cases, or the incorporation of 1325 language in community rules. In this view, Peace Huts function as local delivery points, translating the agenda into quantifiable activities that can be reported to donors, government agencies, or UN country teams. Such a compliance-oriented model values what can be counted.

However, this procedural reading misses how norms actually operate in everyday life. The empirical evidence in this book shows that Peace Huts translate norms rather than just receive them. Women mediate domestic conflict, manage market disputes, and maintain social relations according to moral principles that existed long before UNSCR 1325. When they adopt elements of the WPS agenda—such as emphasising participation or prevention—they do so to strengthen their authority, protect vulnerable neighbours, or expand their space of influence. These practices do not replicate the international agenda; they reinterpret it in ways grounded in kinship, elder authority, customary law, and community expectations. Norm translation is therefore not a weaker form of implementation, it is the process through which global norms acquire meaning and durability.

This distinction matters because substantive implementation should not be measured by whether Peace Huts use the 1325 language. Rather, it depends on whether their practices alter gendered hierarchies, redistribute power, or open political space for women to act autonomously. Many Peace Huts change who can speak, intervene, or be listened to—effects that remain invisible in donor reporting frameworks. These outcomes are not “services” for women, but reconfigurations of authority that challenge the monopoly of male elders, religious leaders, or chiefs over public decision-making. In this sense, the Peace Huts produce a feminist politics of peace that is not linear, not uniform, adaptive, and not always visible to institutions.

The central dilemma “Are Peace Huts implementing 1325 or just following custom?”, assumes a simple yes-or-no answer. The findings presented here reject this framing. Peace Huts do not simply adopt or reject the Resolution; they integrate it into their existing practices of social repair. When international actors present mediation as a learned skill, women often treat it as a moral responsibility grounded in communities. Implementation, then, is neither imitation nor continuity: it is a strategic negotiation.

What emerges from this analysis is a different metric for success: the capacity of local actors to reshape feminist norms from below, even when they are constrained by external agendas. Peace Huts whose practices do not resemble UN templates may still perform the most radical work: redistributing authority, empowering women to resolve conflict, and sustaining everyday peace. These forms of peacebuilding challenge the assumption that 1325’s legitimacy derives from policy compliance. Instead, they suggest that the agenda’s transformative potential is strongest where

translation goes beyond implementation, and where women use global norms as tools to adapt and act.

This perspective has important implications for how we understand success in implementing UNSCR 1325. If the transformative potential of the resolution emerges most vividly where local actors adapt and reshape its principles, then measuring impact solely through compliance indicators is insufficient. Effective implementation must also be understood as the empowerment of grassroots women to exercise authority, influence, and sustain peace in ways that matter to their communities.

Recognising the strategic and context-sensitive work of the Peace Huts highlights the need for policies and programmes that support local ownership, strengthen women's agency, and foster spaces where global norms can be creatively translated. The following recommendations build on this understanding, showing ways to enhance bottom-up implementation of UNSCR 1325 in Liberia.

RECOMMENDATIONS: TOWARDS THE LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION OF UNSCR 1325

Based on an in-depth analysis of reports, interviews with stakeholders, and encounters with grassroots women, several priorities emerge to advance the local implementation of UNSCR 1325. The global outcomes prioritise the need to shift from global and national commitments towards bottom-up approaches that enable effective actions on the Women, Peace and Security agenda at all levels.

- (a) *Strengthening bridges between global, national, and local levels to foster the grassroots ownership of UNSCR 1325*

Linking the different tracks is fundamental to enhance women's involvement in peacebuilding processes. Building partnerships and networks among governments, international and regional organisations (including UN and AU bodies), research institutions, civil society, and community leaders is key to closing the gap between policy and practice.

Networks of women's mediators—such as FemWise-Africa, the Mediterranean Women Mediators, the Nordic Women Mediators Network, and the Commonwealth Women's Network—have emerged to support women's engagement in peacemaking at both formal and

informal levels. These platforms also facilitate cross-cultural dialogue and mutual learning, reinforcing the importance of locally rooted, yet globally connected initiatives. Already in the 1990s, Elise Boulding advanced that these networks “open up the two-way learning process and inspire new visions of possible futures for the whole of humankind” (Boulding, 1991: 789–801).

Moreover, effective implementation requires reliable monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to hold governments accountable. While legal reforms remain necessary, enforcement is equally vital. Alternatively, local justice mechanisms must be supported to enhance women’s access to justice and ensure their protection.

To operationalise UNSCR 1325 locally, National Action Plans (NAPs) should be simplified and decentralised. This includes the development of Local Action Plans that integrate community structures, such as the Peace Huts, into strategic implementation. Dedicated budgets for these local plans would strengthen community ownership, raise awareness, and contribute to tangible outcomes.

Ultimately, operational clarity is needed to define the roles and responsibilities of all actors involved. While increasing the number of women mediators is necessary, inclusive and consultative negotiation processes must also be prioritised.

(b) *Rethinking the Implementation of UNSCR 1325 as a Cross-Cutting Mandate*

Women’s issues are cross-cutting, making it essential to mainstream UNSCR 1325 across governmental departments and not limit its implementation to gender-specific institutions, which often lack the necessary resources. A whole-of-government approach—integrating gender perspectives into foreign affairs, security, and finance—is needed for effective and cohesive implementation (United Nations Security Council, 2020: 26).

At the national level, legal frameworks aligned with UNSCR 1325 principles should be adopted and enforced. In Liberia, for example, laws such as the Inheritance Law (2007) and the Gender Equity in Politics Act (2010) reflect efforts to address gender disparities. Liberia’s NAP has also been coordinated with instruments like CEDAW, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Liberia’s Poverty Reduction

Strategy (PRS), and the National Gender-based Violence Plan of Action (ACCORD, 2011: 22). While contexts differ, ensuring coherence and integration among legal and strategic frameworks remains a key priority. In the 2019 Report on women, peace and security, the UN Secretary-General calls for “strengthened consideration of gender equality as a cross-cutting mandate, concerted support for the participation of women in peace and political processes, the conduct of more robust gender analyses and stronger and more explicit reporting on such progress” (United Nations Security Council, 2019: 33).

(c) *Defining gender-responsive budgeting dedicated to the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda to ensure long-term and sustainable change*

Post-conflict reconstruction involves multiple priorities, but women’s needs are frequently left behind other competing interests. To counter this, governments and international institutions should adopt gender-responsive budgeting practices. This entails allocating targeted funding to the WPS agenda and supporting national civil society organisations and women’s groups working on peacebuilding and development. Sustainable financing mechanisms would ensure long-term impact and address systemic barriers that hinder women’s full participation in peace processes.

(d) *Promoting dialogue among stakeholders, including donors and partners, to enhance flexibility and adequacy in the design of programmes*

While the financial aspect is a driving force for the implementation process, constant follow-up and evaluation mechanisms are fundamental to avoiding pre-designed programmes with few outcomes. As an example, a key informant expresses,

If I give Mary 10\$ for her to start her small peanuts-selling business, she goes to the training, and I just leave her. Do I follow up on Mary to find out how is the business doing? Is it doing well? Why? What are the challenges? But that is not happening. (Online interview, April 3, 2021)

Without ongoing guidance, interventions often fail to generate lasting impact. Programmes must therefore include counselling, monitoring, and community engagement to build capacity and raise awareness. Donors

and partners should adopt flexible approaches that allow CSOs to shape interventions that respond to community realities. Long-term and collaborative programming is more likely to yield meaningful results on women, peace and security.

- (e) *Including civil society actors as intermediaries to ensure that the linkages between communities and decision-making institutions are being made*

Civil society actors play an essential intermediary role between local communities and national governance institutions. They act as advocates, watchdogs, and service providers, helping to translate high-level commitments into grassroots action. For these reasons, CSOs should be recognised as equal partners in WPS implementation and involved in all levels of decision-making. In Liberia, the Peace Huts—registered under the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning—are one such example of grassroots civil society initiatives that would benefit from further institutional support and visibility.

- (f) *Focusing on the empowerment of grassroots women and raising awareness on the legal framework on women, peace and security*

A critical mass of women professionals in peace and security issues should be fostered through capacity-building efforts, training on mediation, conflict resolution, and post-conflict reconstruction. These initiatives aim to increase women's influence in discourses and enable overcoming the barriers that prevent their full involvement in peace processes. Almost a half-century ago, John Stuart Mill emphasised the need to give women the free use of their capabilities,

through the better and more complete intellectual education of women, which would then improve *pari passu* with that of men. Women in general would be brought up equally capable of understanding business, public affairs, and the higher matters of speculation, with men in the same class of society; (Mill, 1975: 526)

Increasing women's technical expertise in sectors such as health, security, or economics is equally important, as it enables them to engage

alongside male counterparts in diverse arenas. Education and access to information are foundational to this process.

Awareness-raising about UNSCR 1325 and related mechanisms must reach all communities, both rural and urban. In many cases, women—especially in rural areas—are unaware of the existence of the NAP or other relevant frameworks. Collaboration among governmental institutions, NGOs, and local leaders is needed to promote educational initiatives that foster grassroots ownership. Skill training in areas such as agriculture can provide women with sustainable livelihoods and improve their ability to contribute meaningfully to community development and peacebuilding efforts.

(g) *Strengthening social cohesion among women and reducing gaps between rural and urban settings*

Divisions between urban-based women leaders and rural grassroots women often weaken collective advocacy. Strengthening solidarity and collaboration across these groups is essential to ensure that concerns of marginalised women are addressed. Interviewees consistently stressed the need to prioritise the community level, where the impacts of conflict and harmful traditional practices are most deeply felt. Peacebuilding initiatives should therefore begin at the grassroots, where change is most urgently needed. Structures like the Peace Huts play a vital role in connecting rural voices to national decision-making platforms and should be further supported. Spirituality and shared values can also help in foster mutual respect and social cohesion among diverse women's groups, contributing to collective mobilisation and peace.

(h) *Recognising women as local peacebuilders and agents of change and ensuring their participation at the decision-making table*

When women stood up, peace came. I don't ascribe this peace to the rule of men in this country. That's my position, and I stand for it. The peace we enjoy today, I don't ascribe it to any man. I ascribe this peace to the role these women played in this country. If they had not stood up, we would still be in crisis at this point. (In-person interview, Monrovia, August 18, 2021)

Liberian women have played a central role in achieving and sustaining peace. Yet, their contributions are often overlooked in formal peace-building processes. Their work in identifying early warning signs and supporting community resilience should be systematically recognised and documented.

Women's participation in governance and decision-making structures—from local community assemblies to national institutions—must be expanded. This includes appointing women as Special Envoys and Representatives and assigning them to high-level mediation roles. It is also crucial to promote the work of grassroots women-led organisations and their contributions to women's leadership. Supporting these pathways will enable women to gradually move into more formal decision-making roles and expand their influence across all levels of society.

(i) *Overcoming traditional patriarchal norms to enable transformative change*

Some people will say a woman is subordinate to men because it is our culture. But culture is constantly changing. [...] Culture does not make people. People make culture. If it is true that the full humanity of women is not our culture, then we can and must make it our culture. (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, 2015)

Persistent patriarchal norms and discriminatory practices continue to obstruct women's rights, participation, and leadership. While UNSCR 1325 and related resolutions have been adopted, impunity for sexual violence remains widespread in conflict-affected contexts. Despite women's demonstrated capacity for peacebuilding, leadership is still widely perceived as a male domain.

Transformative change requires a shift in sociocultural attitudes and traditional gender roles. To dismantle these entrenched beliefs, partnerships must be established between grassroots structures and security institutions to monitor violence against women and promote accountability. It is crucial to enhance CSOs' advocacy for gender equality and expand educational opportunities for girls. Community-based initiatives such as the Peace Huts illustrate the potential for locally driven peacebuilding mechanisms to advance gender-inclusive governance. These

structures should be recognised and integrated into broader peace infrastructures to foster sustainable and peaceful societies, in line with the objectives of UNSCR 1325.

UNSCR 1325 has yet to be fully acknowledged and implemented to its fullest potential. At the local level, its impact remains constrained by enduring patriarchal norms, limited awareness of WPS initiatives, and the chronic underfunding of gender-focused programmes. These barriers continue to restrict grassroots engagement and impede the transformative goals of the resolution.

Yet, despite these challenges, UNSCR 1325 remains a vital instrument for legitimising local peacebuilding efforts and guiding the work of women activists and organisations. Its adoption has offered women both a language and a framework to claim their place in peacebuilding and political processes. Significant efforts have emerged at international, regional, national, and local levels to develop peace and security architectures that address the specific needs and contributions of women in conflict and post-conflict settings.

The mobilisation of women's movements, particularly in local contexts, represent powerful achievements framed in the implementation of UNSCR 1325. In Liberia, grassroots women have played a central role in peace efforts through peaceful protests, songs, prayers, and other culturally rooted forms of resistance. Local movements have gone a long way in the struggle for peace, with a clear and powerful message.

*Every day at the fish market, women gathered and sang:
We want peace, no more war.
Our children are dying—we want peace.
We are tired [of] suffering—we want peace.
We are tired [of] running—we want peace.¹*

Such actions reflect the deep emotional and political resonance of grassroots mobilisation in advancing peace. While the international community has often prioritised structural investments—such as building courts and prisons—this approach alone has not effectively addressed the needs of women and girls, who continue to face exclusion and discrimination (Douglas, 2014). Smaller, community-driven initiatives like the Peace

¹ Extracted from the documentary film “Pray the Devil Back to Hell” that retraces the history of the Women of Liberian Mass Action for Peace.

Huts demonstrate that relatively modest investments can yield significant progress in empowering women and fostering reconciliation at the local level.

This research has highlighted the essential role of grassroots women in peacebuilding and emphasised the importance of partnerships and bottom-up strategies to promote collective ownership of UNSCR 1325. Ensuring effective implementation requires stronger coordination among all actors, from local communities to national institutions and international bodies. Such efforts must be sensitive to the unique cultural, historical, and social contexts in which they unfold, supporting diverse pathways towards gender equality and peace.

In conclusion, this chapter underscores the vital importance of community engagement and capacity-building in achieving sustainable peace. The Peace Hut initiative stands out as a compelling example of locally driven mechanism for advocating women's rights and promoting women's social, economic, and political empowerment. Despite ongoing challenges, the interactions with communities have confirmed that the Peace Huts play a meaningful role in transforming gender stereotypes and fostering community resilience. This book affirms the continued relevance of the Women, Peace and Security agenda as a tool to empower women and raise awareness of their rights. Although obstacles remain, the existence of a strong normative framework provides a crucial foundation for women's emancipation and full participation in peace and governance processes.

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Conclusion

Abstract This chapter serves as a conclusion, exposing the challenges faced in the implementation of UNSCR 1325 and opening on possible recommendations for the inclusion of local women in peacebuilding processes. I emphasise the need for greater involvement of grassroots actors in collaboration with regional, national, and international entities. Additionally, the conclusion highlights related research avenues that deserve further study.

Keywords Implementation of UNSCR 1325 · Recommendations · Local women's participation · Multi-level collaboration

Freedom cannot be achieved unless the women have been emancipated from all forms of oppression [...] and [...] empowered to intervene in all aspects of life as equals with any other member of society.
Nelson Mandela (May 24, 1994)

This book has explored the local implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 through the efforts and contributions of a grassroots initiative in Liberia. The concepts of civil society and peacebuilding, central to this analysis, have been defined, theorised, and applied in the Liberian context with the aim of recognising and promoting women's engagement in peace processes. Through a

case study of the Peace Hut initiative, situated in Liberia's post-conflict reconstruction process, the book presents findings based on fieldwork conducted in 2021. This empirical basis has enabled the investigation of critical questions regarding the efficacy, limitations, and transformative potential of local mechanisms implementing UNSCR 1325.

Liberia offers a particularly relevant case study. As a country still recovering from the devastation of civil war, it exemplifies both the challenges and opportunities of post-conflict peacebuilding. Contrary to essentialist assumptions about women's passivity in wartime, Liberian women played a decisive role in ending the conflict and rebuilding the nation—most notably through grassroots mobilisation, including the mass actions of the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) and the establishment of the Peace Huts across the country.

By tracing the evolution of women's activism from the end of the civil war to the present, this book has examined the mechanisms by which grassroots women's groups contribute to peace and how their efforts intersect with UNSCR 1325 and broader WPS frameworks. It has analysed both the outcomes of this engagement and the explanatory factors that influence it.

Women's grassroots engagement in Liberia has significantly shaped peacebuilding in the country. The 2003 protests led by WIPNET and the subsequent establishment of Peace Huts represent successes of civil society's role in post-conflict reconstruction. Since the early 2000s, multiple legal frameworks—at both international and national levels—have institutionalised the importance of women's inclusion in peacebuilding and decision-making. The legislation does not only frame women's engagement but also promotes it and advocates for more efforts. Thus, theoretically, grassroots women have an institutionalised vehicle to voice their concerns.

However, political institutions often (mis)appropriate or fail to act on WPS-related legal norms, limiting their reach and impact. That is also applicable for UNSCR 1325, which implementation is framed at the national, regional, and local levels, but whose applicability remains fragile. In Liberia, women's rights and empowerment are mostly channelled by the civil society sector, rather than by state-led initiatives. Yet, grassroots women's groups continue to face significant structural challenges. Particularly, their effectiveness is shaped by institutional openness, access to resources, and the strength of their networks.

All things considered, the findings of the study indicate that, in Liberia, UNSCR 1325 has contributed meaningfully to awareness-raising and to increasing women's willingness to engage in peacebuilding. However, these gains remain uneven and fragile.

On the prevention pillar, UNSCR 1325 has supported interventions from international organisations and NGOs aimed at preventing violence against women, promoting conflict resolution at the grassroots level, and providing educational empowerment. Community structures have emerged to address women's concerns and increase their participation in peace efforts. As the linkage between women's participation and sustainable peace becomes more apparent and evident, local leaders and security forces increasingly recognise women as crucial actors in building peace.

On the protection pillar, progress has been made in reducing sexual and gender-based violence. More than 20% of participants in the study identified the Peace Huts' role in lowering violence in their communities. These local conflict-resolution bodies have also contributed to the reporting and prosecution of violent crimes.

On the participation pillar, a majority of respondents had heard of UNSCR 1325 and expressed engagement with WPS issues—primarily through their involvement in the Peace Huts. Since the resolution's adoption, there has been a marked increase in the number of women occupying leadership roles within local governance.

The Peace Hut initiative emerges as crucial grassroots mechanism for advancing UNSCR 1325. It not only facilitates women's participation in peacebuilding but also connects local experiences to the broader normative framework of WPS. Despite the absence of an inclusive national platform for political dialogue, civil society has enabled some communities to voice their concerns in public life. Nonetheless, many participants noted a persistent gap between political elites and local communities, and a general lack of responsiveness from decision-makers. Furthermore, decentralised strategies for implementing UNSCR 1325 remain inconsistently applied. Ongoing challenges—such as poverty, recurring violence, and limited educational opportunities—continue to hinder broader participation by women in peace and security governance.

So, what do Peace Huts teach us about WPS implementation? The Liberian Peace Huts show that **implementation cannot be reduced to policy compliance, institutional alignment, or formal monitoring indicators**. In international debates, progress on 1325 is most often measured by the number of women at negotiation tables, the existence

of National Action Plans, or the capacity of state institutions to formally include women. The Peace Huts, however, teach us that implementation is a **social practice embedded in everyday relations**, not a bureaucratic exercise. Their mediation of domestic conflicts, regulation of community spaces, and capacity to mobilise women reveal forms of feminist action that operate outside state structures.

Rather than transmitting the WPS agenda from the top-down, the Peace Huts enact **bottom-up norm translation**: they appropriate international discourses of protection and participation, not to reproduce institutional frameworks, but to reinforce existing moral legitimacy and extend their authority over social disputes. This process does not look like standardised implementation, yet it may be more transformative. The Peace Huts challenge male dominance over conflict resolution, and they expand everyday political space for women who have long been excluded from formal structures. In this sense, the Peace Huts demonstrate that **the most meaningful feminist impacts of 1325 may appear in locations that international institutions rarely consider “implementation sites”**.

Through these insights, **Liberian women do not merely “receive” WPS norms, they reshape them**. Their practices invite us to abandon a narrow interpretation of 1325 based on outputs (trainings, representation quotas, formal inclusion) and instead evaluate **outcomes in terms of redistribution of authority, reconfiguration of gendered practices, and the endurance of non-violent social arrangements**.

This book contributes to WPS scholarship by **reframing the agenda not as a set of institutional rules but as a contested political field**, where feminist agency emerges in unpredictable ways. Existing critiques have identified the agenda’s militarisation, its emphasis on sexual violence, the essentialisation of women as natural peacebuilders, and its incorporation into Western security strategies. While these critiques remain crucial, they often focus on **state and UN structures**, reinforcing an analytical centre that mirrors the top-down view of 1325 itself. By contrast, the Liberian case demonstrates that **the most creative feminist politics occur outside these formal structures**. The Peace Huts reveal that normative change is uneven, negotiated, and adapted locally. This perspective moves beyond the binary “success vs. failure” model of implementation and challenges the assumption that transformative power lies primarily in formal institutions. In doing so, the book speaks directly to contemporary debates on **localisation, norm translation, and resistance to co-optation**. It shows that while community structures are shaped by

patriarchy, hierarchy, and historical power relations, **local actors possess the capacity to adapt and repurpose global norms**, revealing feminist potentials that institutional frameworks often overlook. The contribution, then, is not simply empirical, it is conceptual: the WPS agenda must be evaluated **where it is lived**, not merely where it is administrated.

In the Liberian context, this study advances three core contributions. First, it **decentres international peacebuilding** and emphasises women's grassroots infrastructures as primary actors in the production of everyday peace. Rather than treating the Peace Huts as secondary projects, the research approaches them as **autonomous political institutions** that predate and exceed the WPS agenda. This perspective challenges narratives that frame Liberia as a testing ground for external interventions and instead emphasises **Liberian women as knowledge holders in peacebuilding**. Second, the empirical chapters document how the Peace Huts operate **within the contradictions of post-war society**, handling disputes among community members, chiefs, families, and businesses. These accounts reveal a form of peacebuilding grounded in relational accountability rather than bureaucratic procedures. They underscore the significance of **local legitimacy**, which international mandates cannot create, and which is central to the sustainability of non-violent practices. Finally, the book enriches Liberia-specific scholarship by **bridging the historical and the contemporary**: it connects women's wartime mobilisations and early post-conflict activism with their current engagement in community mediation and political negotiation. The Peace Huts are not static representations of "women's empowerment", they are dynamic arenas where women contest state authority, reinterpret international norms, and reconfigure social expectations. In doing so, they **extend Liberia's long tradition of women-led resistance and peace action**.

The findings of this research lead to two major policy recommendations. Rather than reversing the bottom-up logic identified throughout this book, they aim to address the conditions under which grassroots feminist infrastructures can survive without being absorbed, neutralised, or instrumentalised by formal institutions. First, while robust institutional frameworks exist for promoting women's participation, these are often underfunded, poorly implemented, or little known among the communities they are intended to serve. Greater investment is needed not only in financial resources but also in awareness-raising campaigns and community outreach. The analysis identified the disjunction between existing

legal commitments and the realities of implementation, underscoring the need to bridge this gap.

Second, a set of recommendations would focus on the institutional basis of civil society under which women's groups engage in peacebuilding. Given the structural limitations of the Peace Hut mechanism, the study calls for stronger multi-level collaboration through a network of actors driven by the mutual goal of implementing the normative framework. Empowering grassroots civil society actors requires diversification of resources—both financial and human—as well as the development of durable networks within and across communities. Capacity-building and leadership development programmes should be supported to enhance social capital and facilitate broader participation. Crucially, grassroots organisations need stronger linkages to formal political and decision-making spaces if they are to move from symbolic inclusion to substantive influence.

In Liberia, as evidenced throughout this book, grassroots actors face serious constraints. To prevent the erosion of these crucial civil society initiatives, empowerment must be accompanied by strategic support and realistic implementation plans. Only by reinforcing both the normative and practical dimensions of UNSCR 1325 can the WPS agenda fulfil its transformative potential.

Overall, this study has highlighted grassroots women's involvement in peacebuilding in Liberia as a relatively successful example of local implementation of UNSCR 1325 in Africa. Notwithstanding, such a scenario can only be admissible if top-down policies envision strengthening grassroots civil society actors and align with the goal of promoting women as essential contributors to peace processes. These elements should also contribute to diminishing gender-based violence and bringing more peaceful relationships, not only in Liberia but also in neighbouring countries or regions that display similar post-conflict dynamics.

Importantly, this book has also intended to explain the persistent gaps in the implementation and progress of UNSCR 1325 in Liberia. In this regard, an important caveat must be noted. Gender equality is a long-term, non-linear process subject to setbacks and slow gains. Thus, even modest or incremental changes should be viewed as meaningful victories that bring us closer to a fully inclusive and equitable society. The case of Liberia demonstrates that grassroots women's organisations can play a pivotal role in conflict and post-conflict settings, even under constrained conditions.

Several limitations emerged during this research. Initially, the case study was intended to cover all fifteen counties of Liberia. However, financial constraints, time limitation, and particularly climatic challenges—such as heavy rains and climate-related insecurity—rendered large parts of Southern Liberia inaccessible. Consequently, the fieldwork was conducted in only eight counties. While these sites provided a broad range of contexts and insights, the inability to reach more remote communities limited the scope of analysis and may have left out additional peacebuilding initiatives and practices worth documenting.

Data collection also presented significant challenges. While interviewed and questionnaires provided valuable insights, access to official statistical data—whether from government bodies or international organisations—was extremely limited. This scarcity of data complicated efforts to track the grassroots-level impacts of UNSCR 1325 and define reliable indicators for assessing outcomes. In peacebuilding contexts, where multiple actors interact and outcomes are often diffuse, attributing specific policy changes to particular interventions (e.g., trainings or awareness campaigns) is inherently difficult. Therefore, while this study offers insights into trends and perceptions, it does not attempt to establish causal relationships. A comprehensive assessment of the local implementation of UNSCR 1325 in Liberia would require a long-term research design, ideally developed in close collaboration with local communities.

Besides, the fieldwork itself presented logistical and methodological challenges. Access to interviews with government officials and representatives from international organisations was often limited due to their time and constraints. The geographical spread of communities required extended travel, and language barriers occasionally complicated communication. Fortunately, with the assistance of local translators—especially my driver—most of these obstacles were overcome. A more delicate issue was ensuring that participants, particularly women, felt comfortable responding openly during discussions. Initially, some responses appeared guarded, but as mutual trust developed, conversations became more fluid and sincere. Feedback from the questionnaires confirmed that the focus group discussions were conducted in an atmosphere of honesty and trust. These qualitative insights form the core of this study's findings and were made possible through a fieldwork approach centred on listening and respect.

The final assessment of the local impact of UNSCR 1325 presented here is therefore based on a limited number of interactions and the

conclusions outlined constitute a partial contribution to a broader debate. Given the vast cultural, political, and social diversity of African countries, this study does not seek to present Liberia as a representative case. Rather, following Yin's (2003: 91) view, this research should only be seen as "one component of the overall assessment" of the subject. The detailed analysis of the Peace Hut initiative and its observed outcomes provide a focused lens through which to examine the local dimensions of WPS implementation.

Taken together, the findings of this study point towards a reframing of both peacebuilding and the WPS agenda. If the transformative potential of 1325 lies anywhere, it is in the spaces where women act without waiting for institutional permission. The Peace Huts are neither idealised alternatives nor imperfect imitations of UN directives; they are **living laboratories of feminist practice**, revealing how peace is made through daily acts, community ties, and persistent negotiation. They remind us that peace is not merely the absence of war or the integration of women into militarised structures, it is a form of social reproduction grounded in dignity, justice, and mutual accountability. To understand the power of the WPS agenda, we must therefore focus **not on strict compliance**, but on **how creatively it is reimagined**. Liberia's Peace Huts demonstrate that such reimagination is already happening, and that feminist change can emerge in places where international norms did not expect it.

As this journey concludes, I wish to express my deepest gratitude. The experience of full immersion in Liberian culture, combined with the demanding yet rewarding process of conducting doctoral research and producing this book, has left an indelible mark on my personal and professional life. While at times, it felt like an endless road, I reach this final chapter with profound appreciation and pride. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi: "Every worthwhile accomplishment, big or little, has its stages of drudgery and triumph: a beginning, a struggle and a victory". This research has encompassed all three—and it is with a sense of both completion and beginning that I turn the page.

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