

IN BRIEF

CORPORATE EVALUATION OF UN WOMEN'S SUPPORT TO WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN PEACE PROCESSES

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The corporate evaluation of UN Women's support to women's participation in peace processes was conducted by UN Women's Independent Evaluation Service (IES) of the Independent Evaluation, Audit and Investigation Services (IEAIS) as part of the UN Women Corporate Evaluation Plan (2022–2025). This corporate evaluation covered the period from 2018 to 2023. It was initiated in December 2023 and completed in October 2024. Findings, conclusions and recommendations are presented in this report.

BACKGROUND

This evaluation assessed UN Women's support to women's participation in peace processes between 2018 and 2023, to understand what types of support worked, in which contexts and in what ways it worked, and for whom. The evaluation also examined the different factors that enabled or hindered UN Women's support for women's participation in peace processes and identified lessons learned. The evaluation provides recommendations to solidify UN Women's work in this area.

The evaluation was intended to inform strategic decisions, organizational learning and accountability, and future development of UN Women's Women, Peace and Security portfolio. The overall scope of the evaluation was informed by extensive internal and external stakeholder interviews, detailed portfolio reviews of UN Women's programmes and desk reviews of relevant evaluations, strategic documents and other key reports.

EVALUATION APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

The uniqueness, complexity and dynamic nature of conflict contexts and peace processes, and the need for work in this area to be highly tailored to context, meant that standard evaluation approaches were not suitable for evaluating UN Women's support to women's participation in peace processes.

The evaluation therefore adopted a realist approach, which is based on a recognition that interventions function within complex and dynamic political and social systems that are subject to constant negotiation, resistance and adaptation. To address this complexity, the realist approach focuses on understanding an intervention's underlying generative mechanisms; the surrounding contextual factors that mediate the mechanisms; and the resulting pattern of outcomes. Using a realist approach, this evaluation went beyond simply assessing whether UN Women's support contributed to the desired impact, and instead sought to answer more specifically "Which elements of UN Women's support worked for whom, in what circumstances, and how?"

The evaluation employed a theory-informed, mixed methods approach and drew on primary and secondary data. It involved contribution analysis, comparative analysis, thematic analysis and applied a gender-responsive and human rights-based approach throughout the evaluation. The evaluation team carried out six country case studies and five issue-focused case studies looking at UN Women's work within a small universe of peace processes on which the Entity engages.

The evaluation was “utilization focused” so that the findings and the process itself are as useful as possible for UN Women’s personnel and work. It is important to acknowledge that the evaluation has drawn from a rapidly changing context in all case studies. For that reason, it has mainly drawn from the past, as in the case of Sudan and Syria¹.

CONTEXT

Advancing women’s participation in peace processes is a core element of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, and UN Women seeks to do this by supporting gender equality, women’s rights and women’s meaningful participation in all stages and levels of peace processes. However, this is also a particularly challenging element of the WPS agenda as peace processes are highly sensitive and political, and UN Women’s access to such processes has often been limited. Moreover, current global trends of backlash on gender equality and rejection of multilateral frameworks mean that, in many contexts, efforts to advance women’s participation in peacemaking face ever greater challenges. It is against this background that the evaluation assessed UN Women’s support in this area, seeking to understand how the Entity contributes to results across different contexts to deepen understanding about “what works” in advancing women’s participation in peace processes.

FINDINGS

Drawing on the realist evaluation concepts of context, mechanism and outcome, the evaluation investigated the most common mechanisms through which UN Women’s work contributed to change; how and why these mechanisms operated differently in different contexts; and which mechanisms are best suited to generate outcomes in different contexts. IES identified five broad mechanisms through which UN Women contributed to results. These were:

- **Convening multiple stakeholders and fostering collaboration:** A central element of such convening was bringing together diverse groups of women, resulting in the development of common agendas and action. This added value was visible in all contexts, but especially where women’s movements were weak and divided. UN Women also used convening to increase women’s access to key peace process duty bearers, a mechanism that was particularly effective where duty bearers already had commitments on WPS that could be leveraged.

This type of convening was often undertaken in relation to National Action Plan processes and gave duty bearers greater understanding of women’s experiences and priorities; provided opportunities for women to influence duty bearers; and created channels for duty bearers to provide information and be held accountable by women.



Increasing awareness, changing attitudes and building commitment on women’s participation in peace processes:

The most substantive outcomes from these mechanisms were found at national level, with various case studies illustrating how UN Women fostered awareness, commitment and ownership on women’s participation with government stakeholders, resulting in concrete actions. This awareness and commitment building often happened through UN Women’s wider WPS work, including through support to the development of National Action Plans and the establishment of national WPS structures and processes. At global level, UN Women’s work with the UN Security Council raises awareness about women’s experiences and perspectives in conflict and keeps these issues on the international agenda. UN Women also contributed to outcomes by raising awareness and shifting norms and attitudes at local level. However, work to address discriminatory gender norms that prevent women from participating in peacemaking was often ad hoc rather than as part of a comprehensive strategy. The impact of UN Women’s work to increase awareness and commitment was seen at regional and international level and within the UN system, for example in UN Women’s work with the African Union, and through engagement with the United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) and Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPO) that resulted in a Secretary-General commitment for the UN to advocate for minimum one third of women in peace processes. It was also seen at country level, with some UN Women Country Offices playing a strong leadership role within the United Nations Country Team on women’s participation in peace, although other Country Offices lacked capacity to undertake such advocacy and leadership.

¹ After the 2019 coup that overthrown President Omar al-Bashir, the Sudanese military took control. The same year, peace negotiations started in Juba, and a peace negotiation agreement started to be implemented in 2022. However, in April 2023, conflict relapsed with a civil war between Sudanese Army and Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which led to a humanitarian crisis. The evaluation analyzed the work that UN Women undertook between 2018 and 2023, therefore mostly capturing the phase of the conflict prior to the most recent civil war. Please refer to Annex 8 for more details on the Sudan peace process.

➤ **Supporting and accompanying women's mobilization:** This mechanism generated results most consistently across all contexts. The evaluation found that such support to women's civil society was most likely to contribute to change when it supported women to engage across different phases of conflict, including preparing in advance of any possible peace negotiations; engaging when peace negotiations are under way; maintaining pressure between rounds of negotiations; and influencing implementation of any peace agreement. This support was also more effective when it developed the capacities of women's organizations to effectively influence peace processes, something that was a strong focus across UN Women's work, often involving technical, organizational and leadership capacity development. The evaluation also found that support to women's civil society was more valuable when it linked women to opportunities for influence and empowered them to develop their own peace agenda.

➤ **Embedding WPS and women's participation within institutional structures and processes that shape peacebuilding.** This mechanism was particularly effective in contexts where implementation of a peace agreement was under way. Such implementation tends to involve intensive institution building, thereby providing opportunities for UN Women to support the development of gender-responsive institutions and processes that are inclusive of women.

➤ **Developing strategic relationships and partnerships for UN Women's work.** This was an important mechanism for results, which was most successful in contexts where UN Women had strong political understanding and was perceived as a valuable partner. Establishing relationships of trust has been critical for UN Women to gain access and influence for its work on women's participation in peace processes, while in some cases its failure to build effective relationships was said to have contributed to backlash. Collaboration with UN partners was an important pathway for results in some contexts, enabling UN Women to ensure greater outreach, scale and impact. However, in other contexts, collaboration with UN partners has not been effectively utilized. In particular, UN Women's engagement with the United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) on the ground would benefit from being more consistent to more effectively have impact.

Sustainable policy environment for women's participation in peace processes. In terms of sustainability, the evaluation found that results were most likely to be sustained, even in the face of significant setbacks, where UN Women contributed to developing the institutions, policies and capacities that can support women's participation. Support for development of National Action Plans was a main way in which UN Women supported a sustainable policy environment for women's participation in peace processes, as well as support to institutional structures for women's participation. However, the most sustainable results came from UN Women's capacity development work with government and civil society, as these capacities remained in place and could be applied to emerging peace-related processes and opportunities over time. The evaluation found a strong focus on engaging young women in civil society WPS work which contributes to the long-term sustainability of this work.

The value added of UN Women's unique mandate. The evaluation found that UN Women's added value in supporting women's participation in peace processes comes from its unique mandate and leadership role and its strong relationship with women's civil society. This mandate gives it a special role to play in advancing women's participation in peace processes at all levels and means that it maintains a consistent focus on WPS, even in the most challenging contexts. Another central added value of UN Women was its unique relationship with civil society that allows it to bring women's voices to peace processes in a way that no other agency can.

UN Women applied the leave no one behind principle to amplify voices of diverse, marginalized and conflict-affected women in peace processes. In terms of the leave no one behind principle, the evaluation found that inclusion was advanced through local consultations with women's organizations, and proactive engagement with diverse groups such as young women, ethnic groups and groups with diverse gender identities. UN Women personnel were aware of the exclusionary patterns that result from working in capital cities and with established "elite" women's rights organizations, and some Country Offices reflect on how to meaningfully engage with a wider diversity of women.

Political and diplomatic skills and a decentralized presence. Lastly, the evaluation found that politically skilled personnel, senior representatives, a decentralized presence and enabling procedures are the most critical elements for UN Women to work effectively on peace processes. Given the political complexity involved, personnel require strong political, diplomatic and analytical skills, and in-depth knowledge of the context. Where Country Offices have such personnel, they can position themselves strategically in relation to peace processes, while the absence of such personnel results in weak outcomes. The presence of a senior level Country Representative, regional WPS adviser and sub-national offices in collaboration with women, peace and security experts at UN Women headquarters, are all valuable in enabling UN Women to operate with authority, expertise and context relevance to advance women's participation in peace processes. However, the evaluation heard that at times the limited clarity on how to apply UN Women's procedures related to working with partners in conflict-affected contexts are said to be a barrier to operate in volatile and restrictive contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

CONCLUSION 1:

There were five broad mechanisms through which UN Women contributes to results: building relationships; convening multiple stakeholders; developing awareness and commitment; supporting women's civil society influence; and embedding WPS and women's participation within institutions. Although these mechanisms looked very different in different settings, together they contributed to most positive results from UN Women's work in this area.

There was significant variation in how effectively UN Women supports change through these mechanisms. In some cases, UN Women's engagement built on existing dynamics, processes and opportunities to successfully foster change through a given mechanism. However, in two case studies, UN Women faced challenges in fully accounting for existing local dynamics and interests while promoting change. These experiences highlight valuable lessons for more effective engagement. Excellent context awareness, strong networks, relationships of trust,

political skills and ongoing information gathering and analysis are crucial for UN Women to identify the most effective mechanisms for change in each context.

The extent to which the results fostered through these different mechanisms were sustained depended highly on context, and particularly on trajectories of conflict and peacebuilding. However, patterns did emerge in terms of what types of results were most likely to be sustained. Notably, where UN Women strengthened capacities within government and civil society, or where UN Women embedded WPS and women's participation within nationally owned policies and institutions, results were more likely to be sustained.

CONCLUSION 2:

UN Women's approach to leave no one behind in terms of women's participation within the women, peace and security context has been somewhat successful in engaging diverse, marginalized, conflict-affected and grassroots groups, and in employing participatory and bottom-up approaches.

UN Women's geographical presence at local levels; scale up of funding from the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF) to women's grassroots peace efforts; and resourcing for women's networks, coalitions and alliances has contributed to amplifying more diverse women's voices. However, efforts to facilitate bottom-up consultations and amplify diverse women's voices at national, regional and global levels need to be accompanied by purposeful follow-up to ensure that women's contributions are both considered and acted upon by peace process decision makers.

CONCLUSION 3:

UN Women's widely recognized capacity, mandate and leadership on women, peace and security combined with its strong relationships with women's civil society, mean that the Entity, in partnership with DPPA and DPO, has the potential to lead² where it has a presence and to develop the agenda on women's participation in peace processes.

² It is important to note that DPPA and DPO are the UN's peace and security pillar; therefore, UN Women must work in partnership with DPPA and DPO on women's participation in peace processes.

UN Women is living up to this potential and delivering added value in some areas. For example, in keeping the issue of women's participation on the agenda at every level and across multiple spaces and processes; and in developing strong relationships with and support for women's civil society and acting as a trusted broker for women's civil society to engage with a range of stakeholders and duty bearers. UN Women is also providing thought leadership to advance the WPS agenda and connect it with different and emerging issues such as climate resilience, land rights, social justice and civil unrest, particularly at local level, although the Entity could do more on this or make its work in this area more visible.

However, there were areas where UN Women has potential to add value but was not doing so. In particular, UN Women does not systematically facilitate the sharing of learning and experiences, or always offer the technical expertise on gender and peace processes that others expect of it.

CONCLUSION 4:

UN Women has effective ways of working to support women's participation in peace processes. Politically skilled personnel, senior representatives, a decentralized presence and enabling procedures were the most critical corporate elements for effective work to support women's participation in peace processes. Navigating backlash against gender equality initiatives should be further explored.

Some elements of UN Women's structures were particularly conducive to producing results in conflict contexts, such as the presence of senior representatives and WPS regional experts. However, other elements hindered results, such as limited operational flexibility in fragile settings; limited guidance on security protocols for partners in volatile and restrictive contexts; and limited presence on the ground. In some cases, personnel were operating under severe limitations due to inadequate resourcing in relation to the complexity of settings, as well as lack of clarity on organizational processes that impede operations required for effective WPS delivery. Limited ability to navigate backlash undermine UN Women's ability to negotiate risk in conflict settings.

RECOMMENDATIONS



RECOMMENDATION 1:

UN Women should maintain and strengthen its support for women's capacity in relation to peace processes, while increasing its efforts to build appetite for women's participation among key peace process actors in close coordination with other relevant UN entities.



RECOMMENDATION 2:

UN Women should ensure it has strong political and diplomatic capacities at country level to advance women's participation in peace processes and engage in effective partnerships.



RECOMMENDATION 3:

UN Women should continue to build on its WPS leadership role to share new lessons, approaches and models on women's participation in peace processes that others can take on and develop. This should be coupled with strengthening the production of data on WPS and monitoring its use for building a strong evidence base on women's participation and influence in peace processes.



RECOMMENDATION 4:

UN Women should continue operationalizing the leave no one behind principle and sharpen efforts to engage with marginalized groups in peace processes. By being more open to engaging with those that have critical or contrary positions, UN Women could strengthen and broaden its partnerships and increase the diversity of the women's voices that it supports.



RECOMMENDATION 5:

UN Women, in close coordination with other relevant UN entities should document analytical practices across offices to unpack "resistance to gender equality" and develop concrete action plans in line with the Push Forward Strategy and the UN System-Wide Gender Equality Acceleration Plan.