

# FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE

## How Women's Networks foster the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda

*Reflection paper building on the experiences of the OSCE Gender Issues Programme and the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network*



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*As we mark the 25th Anniversary of the historic UNSC Resolution 1325, women and girls continue to bear the brunt of conflict and instability. They are disproportionately affected by sexual violence, trafficking, and economic marginalization. Yet, their voices remain largely absent from the decision-making tables. The OSCE is determined to break this cycle and has created women's mediators and peacebuilders networks to empower and support women active in conflict prevention and management'.*

**Feridun H. Sinirlioğlu,**  
*Secretary General of the OSCE*



*Women's mediator and peacebuilder networks aren't just important—they're game changers. They unlock women's expertise and give them the power to shape peace, both at the negotiation table and beyond. The OSCE is proud to stand behind these networks, championing inclusive peace processes that truly leave no one behind.*

**Dr Lara Scarpitta,**  
*OSCE Senior Adviser on Gender Issues and Head of the Gender Issues Programme*



*The implementation of the WPS Agenda requires a collective effort. Women mediators' networks are a strategic tool bringing inclusivity, knowledge, expertise for a common goal: peace and security."*

**Loredana Teodorescu,**  
*President, Women In International Security Italy & Head, Mediterranean Women Mediators Network*

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the last decade, regional, national and global women's networks have played an increasingly important role in peace processes, conflict prevention, humanitarian diplomacy and post-conflict reconstruction. Their flexibility, local expertise and adaptability have turned them into central actors of soft diplomacy, capable of bridging divides and fostering trust where traditional, mostly male-dominated processes fall short. Mediation efforts driven by women have grown in relevance in addressing the root causes of conflict, building social cohesion, and responding quickly to crises. This can be witnessed most vividly in many of the recent conflicts of our time—for example, in Syria, Ukraine and Yemen, as this reflection paper will demonstrate.

This paper aims to analyse the role women's networks play in advancing security and thereby contributing to the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. At a time when the world is afflicted by a dramatic increase of conflicts, the work of women's networks continues to mitigate their impact

by playing vital roles in conflict prevention and de-escalation of tensions as well as supporting peacebuilding efforts. While their full potential is still not fully leveraged, experience shows that they can be a central element in finding sustainable peaceful solutions that build bridges between communities. Although the awareness of the challenges these networks face has increased, at this point in time there is also an opportunity for multilateral organizations, national governments and mediators' actors to reach out and help them overcome these obstacles. This study is aiming to contribute to these efforts by identifying concrete actionable recommendations to further strengthen the networks' contributions to the WPS agenda. Providing more recognition as well as institutional and financial support will enable them to drive innovation, resilience and gender equality in peace efforts worldwide. It will unlock their full potential, translating commitments into concrete results and fostering inclusion—an essential foundation for lasting peace and security, as explicitly recognized by United Nations Security Council resolution (UNSCR) 1325/2000.

*[...] an understanding of the impact of armed conflict on women and girls, effective institutional arrangements to guarantee their protection and full participation in the peace process can significantly contribute to the maintenance and promotion of international peace and security [...]*

*UNSCR 1325, 31 October 2000*



# KEY RECOMMENDATIONS<sup>1</sup>



## For national stakeholders, donors and multilateral organizations

For national stakeholders, donors and multilateral organizations

- ✓ **Integrate women's networks into formal peace and security frameworks**
  - elevating women's expertise and influence in institutional decision-making
- ✓ **Facilitate intersectoral and intergenerational collaboration**
  - fostering partnerships across sectors, generations and communities
- ✓ **Support sustainable and flexible funding mechanisms to women's networks**
  - to enable strategic planning and strengthen capacities



## For women's networks

For national stakeholders, donors and multilateral organizations

- ✓ **Build coalitions and strategic partnerships**
  - to expand outreach and harmonize strategies
- ✓ **Develop long-term funding and human resource strategies**
  - transitioning to sustainable investment models
- ✓ **Strengthen expertise and advocacy in formal processes**
  - to influence policy and institutional reforms

<sup>1</sup> See the full set of recommendations on page 23

# INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, many women's networks have been established to tackle the persistent challenges and obstacles that exclude women from peace processes or fail to recognize their contributions to peace and security, including through humanitarian diplomacy, conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction efforts<sup>1</sup>.

Among these networks are regional women mediator and peacebuilder networks, which are often launched under the auspices of governments or regional organizations in recognition of the indispensable role women play in peacebuilding and conflict resolution. For example, in 2019, four regional networks of women mediators—the Nordic Women Mediators, Women Mediators Across the Commonwealth, FemWise-Africa, and the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network—launched a Global Alliance, which today consists of eight regional networks in total.<sup>2</sup> In 2021, the OSCE had launched the *Networking Platform for Women Leaders, including Peacebuilders and Mediators*.<sup>3</sup>

These networks have critical functions, including to facilitate knowledge-sharing, foster intergenerational dialogue, strengthen capacities, advocate for women's meaningful participation in peace processes, document women's experiences in conflict situations, promote gender-responsive peace and security policies, and monitor the implementation of

United Nations Security Council resolution (UNSCR) 1325, as well as subsequent resolutions.<sup>4</sup> They play a vital role in holding stakeholders accountable for these commitments. They are also essential actors in translating the WPS agenda from policy into practice. These networks fulfil all these tasks despite the many challenges they face, from limited inclusion in key important decision-making processes to the lack of sustainable financial support.

This paper aims to investigate the pivotal role of women's networks in advancing peace and security, based on desk research, multi-stakeholder consultations and semi-structured interviews with key informants, and drawing extensively on the experience the OSCE has gained with leveraging the power of such networks to promote women's leadership and inclusion in peace and security efforts.<sup>5</sup> It first examines the contribution of women's networks to the broader WPS agenda. It then delves into a case study analysing the role of women's networks in humanitarian diplomacy. It highlights their contributions in frontline responses during conflicts and their ability to navigate and bridge various levels of decision-making. In its conclusion, the paper explores strategies to make full use of the potential of women's networks and amplify their impact, by advancing in detail concrete recommendations for donors, multilateral organizations and women's networks themselves.

# 1 THE CONTRIBUTION

## of women's networks to the implementation of the WPS agenda

The ultimate objective of women peacebuilders, mediators and negotiators' networks is to support the agency of women and their inclusion and influence in peace and security efforts at all levels, thereby strengthening the impact of their engagement to achieve sustainable peace. By connecting local women's organizations with national and international stakeholders, networks act as crucial bridges between grassroots initiatives and policymaking processes.

The OSCE has recognized this central role and has tapped over the years into their potential by launching several initiatives to further the implementation of the commitments under the WPS agenda. At the core of this is the *OSCE Networking Platform for Women Leaders, including Peacebuilders and Mediators*, which has developed into a catalyst for promoting women's active participation in peace and security efforts. "A leading role for women at the peacebuilding table is not a benefit, it is a necessity. They are half the population and peace processes cannot be successful without them. This networking

platform will provide safe spaces where women leaders, including peacebuilders and mediators, can share experiences and feel supported", Helga Maria Schmid, former OSCE Secretary General and founder of the platform.

Under this platform, one of the flagship initiatives is the OSCE Women's Peace Leadership Programme (WPLP), which offers tailor-made opportunities to women to engage with concepts and skills relevant to peacebuilding work, providing increased professional visibility, better career opportunities, stronger professional networks, and improved self-confidence.

The linkage between local organizations and national and international stakeholders facilitates a multi-track approach to peacebuilding while amplifying women's voices in conflict prevention and resolution, as well as post-conflict reconstruction efforts. All these features place women's networks in a unique position when it comes to acting and strengthening the implementation of the WPS agenda. They achieve this by using five specific pathways, namely by:

- ✓ establishing secure spaces for connection, knowledge exchange and access provision;
- ✓ enhancing visibility, fostering recognition and reshaping prevailing narratives;
- ✓ facilitating connections across local, regional and global levels while serving as a bridge between them;
- ✓ empowering emerging and existing generations of peacebuilders and mediators; and
- ✓ utilizing soft diplomacy to address intersecting challenges, such as the nexus of climate change and security.



# Creating safe spaces to connect, share and access decision makers

By definition, networks create a space for exchange and collaboration, facilitating effective connections among their members and providing access to different levels of decision-making. These spaces enable women to share their knowledge and expertise, making meaningful contributions to global peace efforts, enhancing the understanding of specific contexts, and further developing skills and capacities. Networks also help bridge the gap between professionals working in mediation and peacebuilding and the WPS agenda, promoting the integration of a gender perspective at all levels. In addition, they provide a space for interaction and communication between different generations, which has shown to have considerable potential for synergy between life experiences and learning.

Many initiatives illustrate the essence of networks in action. As mentioned above, one notable example is the OSCE *Networking Platform for Women Leaders including Peacebuilders and Mediators*, which since 2021 connects women mediators and peacebuilders active in the OSCE region for learning, networking and sharing

best practices, with the aim to enable them to meaningfully engage in and influence peace processes at all levels.

Under the umbrella of the Platform, the OSCE organizes the Women's Peace Leadership Programme, a participant of which was interviewed for this paper, reporting on the experience gained while working on the Programme—for instance in the areas of human rights, democracy and the rule of law in South Eastern Europe—or being invited to the revived Berlin Process<sup>6</sup>.

While not built as a network as such, a good example for the capacity of OSCE initiatives to create safe spaces to connect and share is a project from 2023 that brought together human rights activists from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Ukraine.<sup>7</sup> Through a series of exchanges, participants developed concrete recommendations to improve protection and response mechanisms for violence against women and girls in conflict and post-conflict settings, based on their insights and analyses.



*One of women's greatest strengths is the ability to come together. That is why, in today's world, it is crucial that women from across generations co-lead and ensure that intergenerational co-leadership is at the heart of peacebuilding and peacemaking. This, I believe, is one of the greatest strengths of networks like MWMN—by working together across generations, we can build true collective influence."*

**Hajer Sharief, MWMN member and Co-founder of Together We Build it**



This initiative is an important example because it demonstrates how women-led civil society organizations are vital for effective prevention and response to gender-based violence (GBV) in conflict settings, emphasizing their active role in decision-making and accountability. Key factors include the recognition of women's contributions, the implementation of such international conventions as the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence during conflict, and the collaboration between states and civil society to ensure comprehensive protection for survivors.

Another example is the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network (MWMN), which facilitated rich exchanges with a group of Syrian women, including members of the UN Syrian Women Advisory Board (WAB).<sup>8</sup> These women, coming

from conflict-affected areas and crisis-stricken countries, gathered in a protected space to reflect on strategies for empowering women and addressing the specific challenges they face. Topics discussed included the safe and dignified return of refugees, sanctions, education and strategies to mitigate the effects of ongoing conflicts in neighbouring countries. This included advancing analysis and research on such issues as de-radicalization efforts and refugee crisis management.

By establishing a reliable community, such initiatives serve as a means for women to demonstrate solidarity, provide mutual support and draw attention to the distinct challenges they encounter in conflict. In this way, "they feel they are not forgotten".<sup>9</sup> Four factors contributed to the initiative's success:

- 1. It effectively highlighted the complexity of the Syrian context by incorporating diverse perspectives from women participants, demonstrating that actionable solutions are possible despite these differences.**
- 2. It connected the UN-led Syria peace process and other conflict resolution efforts promoted by MWMN members with think tanks, academia and diplomatic circles, thereby amplifying its reach and impact.**
- 3. It leveraged existing structures, such as the WAB and MWMN, enabling them to implement the action points agreed during the discussions.**
- 4. Finally, the support from UN member states, including Italy, which launched the MWMN, enhanced the legitimacy of the issues addressed.**

These factors resonate with the experience of the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP), a coalition of over 100 women's organizations from countries around the world that are experiencing humanitarian crises or conflict.<sup>10</sup>

Networks have a marked connecting power that is key to creating a strong and co-ordinated base. This base is then able to access and influence

stakeholders in key decision-making spaces. For example, a delegation of Libyan women was able to join the Palermo Conference on UN policy in Libya thanks to the connections built within the MWMN and their thoughtfully planned advocacy and lobbying efforts.<sup>11</sup> This not only enabled the delegation to contribute to the discussions concerning UN policy in Libya but also provided them with an entry point into a process that was excluding women.

A final important example is the role of regional women mediators' networks in acting as external focal point for decision-making processes.<sup>12</sup> They support conveners of dialogues and peace-making events by identifying expert women mediators to enrich discussions. Being able to attend those discussions provides them with a unique opportunity to give them insights and diverse perspectives, a message that repeatedly emerged in interviews with the mediators who repeatedly expressed their view that women do not only want a seat at the table but also contribute to designing it.<sup>13</sup>

## Increasing visibility and recognition for changing the narrative



*In places where the state has failed, I've mediated between former fighters, extremist groups, and public institutions. Networks like ours don't just demand inclusion—we prove why women need to be at the core of mediation and peacebuilding: for the skills we bring and the results we deliver.”*

**Lea Baroudi,**  
MWMN Member, Founder and Director of March Lebanon



Reflecting the spirit of the WPS agenda, women networks have made great strides in portraying women not only as victims but as actors of change. They use various tactics, acting at different levels, to achieve this:

**1. By showcasing qualified and experienced women who are available to take part in peace and security processes.** Recognizing that the low number of women achieving high-level positions in peace processes and mediation positions “is symptomatic of a broader trend whereby women’s contribution to the field of peace and security is not recognised”<sup>14</sup>, networks provide concrete evidence of qualified and experienced women who are ready to play a bigger role in key processes related to peace and security, making it difficult to claim that there are no competent women available.

**2. By increasing the visibility of women’s contributions and roles.** Networks extend their activities beyond merely increasing the number of women in high-level international processes, focusing on making women’s contributions and roles more visible across different levels. This includes recognizing informal efforts, which frequently support formal processes. Situated within the broader WPS agenda, women’s networks and their members employ a holistic approach, which facilitates a multi-level strategy for mediation and leadership.

On the one hand, networks highlight women’s valuable potential in conflict contexts as they bring trust-building, flexibility, collaboration and inclusivity to the processes.<sup>15</sup> (This aspect will be explored further below in the case study on humanitarian diplomacy.)

On the other hand, belonging to a network of women mediators recognizes the value of members' contributions to peace. This confers a sense of legitimacy to women and can help them position themselves professionally in the field, opening doors. This is the case for many programmes promoted by the OSCE. For example, several of the participants of the OSCE Women's Peace Leadership Programme, reported that "the visibility the programme offered, how it connected them professionally with the OSCE, and the opportunities it provided them with, were some of the most impactful aspects of the programme".<sup>16</sup>

**3. By amplifying women's voices, visibility and reach.** Access by women to the international arena provides opportunities to network, share insights and gain global perspectives. However, to "change the narrative", it is essential that stories of women who made it to the international arena, are brought to the attention of the public. Social media, podcasts and other such communication products serve as "powerful advocacy tools, influencing public opinion, driving policy change, and inspiring more women to take on leadership roles in peace and security efforts".<sup>17</sup> An example is a podcast series produced by the MWMN, #HerStories<sup>18</sup>, which uses the art of storytelling to showcase women's contribution to peace and security and the lessons they learnt.

## Connecting local, regional and global levels, and building bridges

The contributions of women to peace and stability at the grassroots and local levels are significant, even though they are underrepresented in formal peace processes and high-level decision-making. These women peacebuilders work outside of formal structures, facilitating community dialogue, building resilience, engaging civil society, and addressing the root causes of conflict. They offer a vision of peace that extends beyond negotiations, contributing to a more peaceful international order. Their efforts include providing humanitarian aid, advocating for negotiations, using cultural and social influence, mobilizing communities, and leading reconciliation activities.<sup>19</sup> Recognizing and investing in the tireless work of these women working at the grassroots level is essential for achieving sustainable peace.

For example, in Lebanon women like MWMN member Lea Baroudi are mediating at the community level to bridge divides, restore trust among people and foster reconciliation processes<sup>20</sup>. After many years of civil war, this is essential to avoid further internal escalation of tensions and violence, and to foster a positive peace.

To bridge the gap between women's local work and often-inaccessible international processes, women's networks function as vital connectors. They link local women's organizations with national and international stakeholders, creating essential pathways between grassroots initiatives and policymaking.

By supporting multi-track diplomacy, these networks connect different levels of mediation and both formal and informal spaces. This is of central importance for ensuring perspectives, aspirations and experiences excluded from formal processes can still inform decision-making. Ultimately, they provide vital communication

channels, fostering synergies and collaboration between local actors and global processes<sup>21</sup>. They also move across the whole spectrum of conflict escalation and de-escalation, by displaying a consistent and coherent presence. In practice, the activities of women's networks in this process take various forms:

**1. Connecting different levels of decision-making.** Women's networks recognize, leverage and give value to the often unseen and overlooked work done by women at grassroots and local level, also in terms of conflict prevention. For example, the 2024 OSCE Regional Networking and Capacity Building Conference to support domestic violence survivors in Central Asia aimed at reinforcing the vital connections between women's resource centres, civil society organizations and other stakeholders and marked a significant milestone in the Organization's efforts to support domestic violence survivors in the region.

**2. Connecting with decision-making actors during times of conflict.** For example, women mediators were involved—behind closed doors—in challenging situations in South Eastern Europe and Syria, engaging with law enforcement actors and non-state armed groups, among others.<sup>22</sup>

**3. Accompanying the post-conflict recovery phase as well as reform and reconciliation processes.** Women in mediation and dialogue processes have a role in the conflict settings and post-conflict phases in different contexts, for example in the Republic of Moldova and the Transdniestrian settlement process. There, the OSCE had implemented a project that introduced a number of informal processes that brought together women with different backgrounds from both sides to discuss conflict-related matters. In the period from 2022 to 2023, the OSCE Mission to Moldova implemented a capacity-building project aimed at enhancing the negotiation and mediation skills of female members of the Joint Expert Working Groups (WG) involved in the settlement process. The project sought to strengthen women's effective participation in WG discussions and promote gender-sensitive approaches to conflict resolution.

Women mediators have also engaged with governments and international organizations to implement reforms in the justice system and reconciliation processes, while working at the local level to de-polarize the public narratives, moving beyond history and politics. Young women from Belgrade and Prishtinë/Priština involved in these activities join every year the Dialogue Academy for Young Women, a unique programme focused on confidence-building measures, which enhance their capacities to become leaders of change.<sup>23</sup>

Women's networks are also a place where human rights defenders and peacebuilders working at the grassroots level can get together to challenge preconceptions and transcend geopolitical tensions, an assessment made for example by two participants of the second

cohort of the OSCE Women Peace Leadership Programme, Ani, Armenian and Gul Khanim from Azerbaijan. Committed to drive change in their own communities, they use networks to support and empower one another on their individual paths towards peace.<sup>24</sup>



*Within the framework of this programme, we have created a nurturing environment that fosters open communication, personal and collective growth, and unwavering mutual support. We have become living bridges illuminating paths towards peace for one another and for our communities. Together, we exchange ideas, amplify our platforms, devise strategies, work together, and speak up against bigotry, inequality, and exclusion.”*

**Gulkhanim Mammadova and Ani Papyan,**  
*participants of the OSCE Women’s Peace Leadership Programme*



In conclusion, the success of these initiatives shows the impact of small-scale, often community-based mediation initiatives. This is particularly important in the current changing

global context, with shrinking space for mediation and a reduced number of formal peace processes led by states or international/regional organizations.

## Empowering the new generation of peace-builders and mediators

The enhanced dialogue and exchange facilitated by women’s networks cuts across generations. The views and perspectives of peacebuilders and mediators of every age group are needed—before, during and after a conflict. An intergenerational approach, built on the

collective effort of women from both older and younger generations, plays an essential role in rebuilding peace, taking into consideration societies’ individual contexts and how to improve them compared with the past.<sup>25</sup>



*When people say there are no qualified women mediators, they are obviously very, very wrong”.*

**Annika Söder,**  
*Special Representative of the Swedish 2021 OSCE Chairperson-in-Office  
for the South Caucasus and Co-Chair of the Geneva International Discussions  
on the aftermath of the 2008 conflict in Georgia*





In many situations, however, young women face the double discrimination of being young and being female, and the emphasis on their vulnerability denies them agency and a potentially transformative role in peacebuilding. Exchanges and dedicated initiatives promoted by networks can help overcome these challenges, empowering new generations to lead change and promote peace and security, and amplifying the impact of their actions.

Encountering gender-based discrimination has pushed such young courageous women as Anna Popsui to take the lead for the needed change. Despite the fear and uncertainty caused by the war in Ukraine, her Young Peacebuilding Leaders (YPL) network gave Anna the strength and courage to make every effort to support young women in Ukraine and transform adversity into advocacy.<sup>26</sup>



*What stood out most for me in the Women's Peace Leadership Programme was the space it created—genuine, open, and grounded in mutual support. The network became a quiet but steady force—people to turn to for insight, perspective, or just encouragement when needed most.”*

**Anna Popsui,**  
*SWPLP Alumni and Young Peacebuilding Leaders network<sup>27</sup>*



Another undertaking, the Young Women for Peace Initiative, promoted under the WIN project and funded by the European Union, addresses young women in Central Asia and Afghanistan. There is an urgent need to develop and implement special policies supporting them, considering that more than half of the region's population is below the age of 30, and Afghanistan's neighbours in Central Asia host many Afghan women who had to flee their home following the 2021 Taliban takeover.

The initiative is dedicated to nurturing young women who are fervently advocating for positive change across crucial sectors, including development, peacebuilding, mediation and comprehensive security. It offers them “a safe space where women can express their ideas and fulfil their leadership potential, equipping them with the skills, connections and opportunities to bring changes in their communities”.<sup>28</sup> At the closing even in Vienna in September 2025, the young leaders met with OSCE Secretary General Feridun H. Sinirlioğlu, who reaffirmed the Organization's commitment to women's empowerment in peacebuilding. In a similar vein, mentoring programmes between more

senior and younger mediators are another powerful tool for intergenerational exchange. These programmes enable senior mediators to guide, inspire and serve as role models for younger mediators, raising their confidence, strengthening solidarity and fostering the intergenerational dialogue essential for innovation and resilience. For example, the mentoring programme promoted by Women In International Security Italy (WIIS Italy) pairs young Afghan women with MWMN mediators, taking them on a journey of self-awareness and strengthening their skills in mediation, negotiation techniques and advocacy. The programme aims to help the participants play a bigger role in the future of their own countries. Many young Afghan women in the diaspora have indeed become the voice of the voiceless, and their work can benefit from the expertise of other professionals and the power of networks to achieve greater impact.

A further added value of women's networks is to bring women together from different generations in times of crisis, an issue that will be explored in a later chapter of this paper.

# Addressing intersecting challenges

Overall, women's networks contribute to strengthening safety, security and stability by leveraging and empowering women. Data and research show a positive relationship between gender equality and national security: more gender-equal societies are less likely to engage in internal and external violence.<sup>29</sup> For instance, the Regional Association of Women in Border and Law Enforcement Agencies in Central Asia established in 2024, encourages greater participation of women to enhance the effectiveness of border and law enforcement agencies in detecting and preventing crimes, and to build public trust.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, in countries like Tunisia, women mediators in law enforcement have worked with municipalities to ensure families of fighters that had left the country to join terrorist groups are not isolated and stigmatized in their societies, which may lead to their potential radicalization.

Amid rising global insecurity and societal polarization, networks are vital soft diplomacy tools. They maintain dialogue, build bridges and foster trust, helping to mend societal divisions and offering alternatives to hard power. In this complex diplomatic landscape, no longer limited to states, civil society, women's networks and international organizations provide crucial multilateral tools. Networks possess a comparative advantage through their flexible and agile approach, adapting to diverse contexts and addressing transnational conflict drivers, using rich local expertise. Crucially, they also highlight the gendered impacts of war, vital for creating holistic responses that address the varied experiences of conflict and security crises and incorporate women's needs, interests and views.

A good example is the increasing relevance of women mediators' networks in addressing intersecting crises—including those triggered by climate change—and acting across the humanitarian-development-peace triple nexus. Leveraging the work done by women mediators and peacebuilders, who “cannot afford to be working on a single issue”<sup>31</sup>, the networks often facilitate collaboration between sectors and help bridge gaps between humanitarian aid and long-term development.

As women are among the first impacted by climate change, they are also the first respondents to it. The role of women and their networks was acknowledged as instrumental in addressing such disasters as the Hunga volcanic eruption in Tonga in January 2022. They mobilized their regional and national networks to ensure that immediate humanitarian assistance reached girls and young women while bearing in mind longer-term consequences for the development and stability in Tonga.<sup>32</sup> The MWMN promoted a series of exchanges with the Pacific Network of Women Mediators to allow women mediators to share those kinds of experiences.

The OSCE Networking Platform of Women Leaders is building the capacity of women as leaders in the realm of climate and security. The 2024 OSCE Women's Peace Leadership Programme, for example, focuses on the gendered impacts of climate change. It provides sessions with experts, peer exchanges and opportunities to engage with decision makers and other networks. The Programme's goal is to empower women to lead climate action in the OSCE region and beyond.



## 2 CASE STUDY:

# Women's networks as catalysts for change through humanitarian diplomacy

Humanitarian diplomacy is a largely uninvestigated area of research, and so is its contribution to the advancement of the WPS agenda.<sup>33</sup> This chapter seeks to contribute to fill this gap by exploring how women's networks helped advance the WPS agenda during humanitarian action, including through humanitarian diplomacy efforts.

This paper defines humanitarian diplomacy as the engagements and negotiations aimed at promoting and safeguarding humanitarian actions while adhering to humanitarian principles—neutrality, impartiality, humanity and independence, as well as humanitarian law.<sup>34</sup> The primary objective of humanitarian diplomacy is to create a supportive environment that enables effective humanitarian response. It focuses on fostering dialogue with key stakeholders, including governments, non-State actors and civil society, to ensure the protection of individuals in crisis and facilitate their unimpeded access to humanitarian assistance.

Humanitarian diplomacy shaped and led by women and their networks plays a central role in advancing the WPS agenda, particularly in war-torn countries. It promotes gender equality, women's rights, and their meaningful participation in conflict prevention, management and resolution, as well as peacebuilding efforts. This includes advocating for the inclusion of gender perspectives in humanitarian responses and ensuring that women's needs and priorities, as well as their specific challenges, are addressed in humanitarian action. In 2021, these priorities gained additional focus and strength thanks to the launch of the Compact on Women, Peace

and Security and Humanitarian Action (WPS-HA)<sup>35</sup>. Since its inception, this Compact has welcomed more than 235 signatories, including states, regional organizations such as the OSCE, UN entities and civil society.

The contributions of women and women's networks in shaping humanitarian diplomacy efforts are frequently overlooked in crisis contexts. This is evident not only in academic literature and media reporting but also in the public discourse, where their role often remains in the background.

Practitioners interviewed for this study refer to the fact that this is partially due to the intrinsic nature of humanitarian diplomacy<sup>36</sup>. In fact, most humanitarian diplomacy efforts are intended to remain confidential—predominantly for security reasons—and are executed discreetly, as they deal with very sensitive issues. These issues include the protection of civilians, the prevention and response to GBV, local ceasefire negotiations, and even humanitarian engagement with actors sanctioned by the UN and by states<sup>37</sup>.

In addition to that, however, women frequently encounter systemic biases regarding their roles in humanitarian diplomacy because “practices place men as the norm and women as the exception”<sup>38</sup>. According to practitioners interviewed for this study, these biases reinforce gender stereotypes and exclusion of women from humanitarian diplomacy efforts, particularly when it comes to security and humanitarian access, which are key elements for the implementation of the WPS agenda.<sup>39</sup>

In addition to this, traditional narratives primarily portray women as the main ‘victims’ of conflict. This stereotype hinders the recognition of women as active agents in humanitarian diplomacy, additionally placing on them the burden of demonstrating their credibility, solidity and value. This, coupled with a higher level of political violence against women, can result in their lower participation in decision-making roles and positions.

Notwithstanding these considerations, there exists substantial evidence of women, alongside their networks, serving as crucial frontline responders in humanitarian efforts in war-torn countries. Moreover, they actively engage in humanitarian diplomacy through frontline negotiations and responses amid conflict. Their roles encompass navigating and bridging various levels of decision-making, thereby laying essential foundations for peacebuilding in times of crisis.



*Women mediators are the frontline agents of the humanitarian response in conflict zones—yet their contributions are often invisible. Networks like MWMN are essential in bringing together diverse expertise—including on legal frameworks, water and sanitation, food security, engineering. In emergency contexts, these skills are not just valuable—they are indispensable. Ignoring them risks failure; embracing them could be the key to lasting peace.”*

**Anna Cervi,**  
*MWMN member and Co-Founder of the Italian Initiative  
for International Mediation*



## Frontline response during war

*By bringing diverse perspectives and their specific capacities to situations of humanitarian crises, women’s networks have made great strides to ensure that humanitarian action is not only inclusive and timely but also advances the WPS agenda.*

**1. Women’s networks are uniquely positioned to steer the humanitarian response in conflict to effectively address community needs.** They can verify these needs in a timely fashion and connect directly with those affected by conflict. For example, in Ukraine, the women’s network Mozhu conducted a monitoring activity in late 2021, assessing the preparedness capacities of over 1,500 territorial communities<sup>40</sup>. Further on, in the immediate aftermath of the war, the network reached out to its members to assess urgent needs. This allowed them to identify specific requests pertaining to women and girls, ensuring the humanitarian action would prioritize comprehensive GBV prevention and response initiatives<sup>41</sup>.

Similarly, based on the priorities identified by women’s networks across Ukraine, the OSCE Gender Issues Programme, through the WIN project, supported efforts to strengthen the gender sensitivity of rescuers involved in Ukrainian humanitarian response and to build the skills and knowledge of the State Emergency Services of Ukraine (SESU)<sup>42</sup>. This initiative was launched in 2023 to integrate gender-responsive and disability-inclusive approaches into crisis management and recovery processes in Ukraine.

This example resonates with the experiences of women's networks in Yemen. A few months before the onset of the 2014 military conflict in the country, Yemeni women came together to form the Women Solidarity Network<sup>43</sup>. Its main objective was to co-ordinate actions to provide protection to women and to promote their proactive role in supporting their communities, and it continued to operate throughout the conflict. In Northern Syria, the EU established a network of women with diverse backgrounds in 2017—lawyers, teachers, engineers, humanitarians, etc.—that facilitated communication and co-ordination among women, directly impacting how humanitarian aid was planned and delivered in the region<sup>44</sup>.



*A lot has changed in the emergency service's approach. Previously, no one understood how it was related to gender equality and why gender equality was essential. Now Ukrainians... are paying more attention to it; they try to... understand how the SESU works and how we ensure equal rights and opportunities in our work.*

**Yulia Malihonova,**  
*Head of the Gender Unit in the State Emergency Service of Ukraine (SESU)*



**2. Women's networks facilitate the meaningful participation and collective agency of women in humanitarian negotiations.** In Syria, for example, women's networks provided strategic backup to women engaged in humanitarian access negotiations in the north-west of the country, which strengthened their bargaining power and influence within traditionally conservative, male-dominated security and humanitarian spaces<sup>45</sup>. This enabled them to gain direct access to all segments of Syria's population in the region, and in particular to women and girls. Similarly, "Syrian women have incrementally succeeded in positioning themselves in localised peace efforts, which included playing a key role in brokering local ceasefires and prisoner swaps across the country"<sup>46</sup>. Building on these experiences, and thanks also to the backup of regional multilateral actors, such as the EU and the UN, Syrian women have progressively strengthened their role in promoting an inclusive dialogue throughout Syria's humanitarian crisis<sup>47</sup>.

In Yemen, women who were part of larger women's networks, used their leverage to mediate between armed groups to achieve, for example, the release from detention of cancer patients and orphans<sup>48</sup>. Furthermore, Yemeni civil society female leaders navigated complex cultural norms, negotiating the access to natural resources, the reopening of key roads, and local ceasefires, strengthening at the same time confidence-building measures between warring factions<sup>49</sup>.

These examples demonstrate how women's networks have empowered female humanitarian workers—those operating on the frontlines of some of the worst crises of our time, including in Yemen, Syria and Ukraine—by providing critical backup and confidence. By fostering inclusion in humanitarian diplomacy, these networks are driving progress beyond traditional aid delivery. They are reshaping realms historically dominated by men, such as humanitarian access and negotiations on security arrangements, setting new standards for gender equality in crisis response.

# Navigating and bridging different levels of decision-making

Especially when time is of the essence, such as in humanitarian crises, the key to the success of humanitarian diplomacy initiatives lies in the capacity to navigate and bridge different levels of decision-making.

All the practitioners interviewed for this study highlighted how women rapidly organized informal networks at the onset of conflict, which later became more structured, also thanks to the support of the UN, the OSCE and the EU<sup>50</sup>. These networks facilitated communication, information exchange and collaboration across technical sectors and regions in complex environments, such as in Yemen, Syria and Ukraine. Through these connections, women deepened their understanding of local dynamics and gained stronger access points, both at the community level and the central level, with authorities and warring factions.

In Syria and Yemen, for example, informal networks enabled women to transcend territorial divisions often depicted in “colourful territorial control maps” that illustrate wartime power dynamics<sup>51</sup>. As a result, women were able to navigate contested areas in which they otherwise would have had only restricted movement, and influence critical humanitarian decision-making<sup>52</sup>, including regarding the establishment of humanitarian corridors, approvals and the delivery of humanitarian aid across conflict lines<sup>53</sup>.

In Ukraine, women's networks actively engaged with local government bodies to advocate for the needs of vulnerable populations and to shape municipal decision-making. Simultaneously, these networks maintained ongoing engagement with central government institutions, ensuring that advocacy efforts were informed through the input from members across different regions of

the country. These co-ordinated efforts led to the signing of several memorandums of co-operation between Ukrainian women's networks and various government sectors, particularly in defining roles within the security and defence sectors. The ability of women's networks to operate simultaneously at multiple decision-making levels allowed for more strategic investments in critical training—such as those supported by the OSCE for law enforcement personnel—and in the promotion of women's leadership<sup>54</sup>. Similarly, co-ordinated action between local, regional and national members of the women's networks contributed to significant changes in Ukraine's National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 for the implementation period 2022–2025<sup>55</sup>, demonstrating the networks' influence in shaping policy and response strategies<sup>56</sup>.

The reach of women's networks transcends the boundaries of countries at war, by also influencing international policies and decision-making. For example, Yemeni women were able to strengthen transnational collaboration and global awareness through advocacy campaigns and collaboration with international media<sup>57</sup>. This increased their visibility and positively influenced the perception of their role in humanitarian responses and policies. Syrian women were able to connect with other women who were part of the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network and inform co-ordinated behind-closed-door advocacy on durable solutions to the Syrian crisis<sup>58</sup>. Similarly, Ukrainian women, who were part of larger networks or initiatives<sup>59</sup>, were involved in projects promoting women's empowerment and leadership through international exchanges between Ukrainian and German feminist movements<sup>60</sup>.

These examples demonstrate how women's networks bridge grassroots and institutional decision-making—both nationally and internationally—through collaborative, multi-level engagement, enhancing the effectiveness and inclusivity of humanitarian diplomacy in crises.

The increased involvement of women in humanitarian diplomacy efforts can function as a stepping-stone for making progress on the meaningful inclusion of women in peace negotiations and recovery efforts.

For example, Yemeni and Syrian women's networks contributed to the development of a roadmap for peace that reflects women's voices and experiences in the context of conflict<sup>61</sup>. Such roadmaps have been also instrumental in UN-led peace mediation efforts. Women networks in Ukraine, for example, contributed text material to several networks, advocating for the inclusion of women in peace negotiations and recovery efforts in the country<sup>62</sup>.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## for national stakeholders, donors and multilateral organizations

### 1 • Support Long-term and Flexible Funding Mechanisms

*Provide, in a predictable manner, sustained resources to women's networks to enable strategic planning and strengthen capacities*

Moving away from short-term cycles will allow women's networks to effectively scale efforts, retain human resources, and keep engaged youth and marginalized groups facing economic vulnerabilities. Providing longer-term support to the initiatives of women's networks should not have to wait for the end of conflicts since it is exactly when a crisis erupts that women need to be able to pave the way that leads to conflict resolution and peace.

### 2 • Integrate Women's Networks into Formal Peace and Security Frameworks

*Support efforts to elevate women's expertise and influence in institutional decision-making*

By endorsing their participation in formal processes and reform initiatives, donors, national stakeholders and multilateral organizations—such as the OSCE—can help embed gender perspectives into peacebuilding and security efforts. This requires continuing to champion systemic change to address discriminatory policies and unequal resource and power distribution while recognizing networks as vital interlocutors and partners and providing them with institutional support. By leveraging international frameworks and advocating for equitable representation in decision-making roles, women's networks can reshape institutional norms and create pathways for meaningful participation in recovery efforts.

### 3 • Facilitate Intersectoral and Intergenerational Collaboration

*Promote initiatives that foster partnerships across sectors, generations and communities*

Encouraging co-ordinated donor strategies and coalition-building will enhance the influence of women's networks and ensure their voices are integrated into formal peace and security processes.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## for women's networks

### 1 • Build Inclusive Coalitions and Strategic Partnerships

*Expand outreach to grassroots and informal groups, youth-led movements and non-affiliated women through intentional coalition-building and harmonized strategies*

Fragmentation and siloed operations have historically limited the impact of women's networks. Fostering collaboration across generations, sectors and communities will amplify influence, legitimize initiatives, and ensure that diverse perspectives inform policy and peacebuilding efforts.

### 2 • Develop Long-Term Funding and Human Resource Strategies

*Transition from short-term funding models typical of humanitarian action to sustainable investment models that support ongoing activities and youth engagement*

Most women's networks rely on unpredictable and short-term funding cycles<sup>63</sup>. Their human resources are predominantly based on voluntary action, which makes it difficult for younger generations to become and stay involved. Seeking sustainable resources will enable scaling of initiatives, retain human resources, and allow for the active participation of younger generations in peace and security efforts.

### 3 • Strengthen Expertise and Advocacy in Formal Processes

*Cultivate specialized knowledge in critical areas, such as security, de-radicalization, reconciliation, financial issues, engineering, and humanitarian access, to influence formal processes and institutional reforms*

Women's networks possess strong advocacy expertise, particularly on the WPS agenda as a whole. By further strengthening technical expertise in these critical areas, women's networks can take part more effectively to decision-making processes and institutional reforms that prioritize gender-inclusive leadership, gender-inclusive policies and systemic policy changes. This, in turn, could bridge gaps in traditional humanitarian, security and peace processes.



## 3 CONCLUSIONS

Women's networks play a critical role in advancing the WPS agenda by fostering women's inclusion and leadership in peacebuilding efforts worldwide. These networks serve as bridges between grassroots initiatives and policy-making processes, amplifying women's contributions to conflict prevention, resolution and recovery.

By creating safe spaces for knowledge-sharing and access to decision-makers, women's networks empower their members to make meaningful contributions to peace initiatives. Several examples, such as the OSCE's Women's Peace Leadership Programme and the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network, demonstrate how these spaces facilitate solidarity and generate impactful solutions to complex issues.

Women's networks also challenge traditional narratives, showcasing women as active agents of change rather than passive victims. Their involvement in humanitarian diplomacy—addressing such pressing issues as climate change and security—underscores their ability to adapt and collaborate effectively in diverse contexts.

These networks are well suited to connect on local, regional and global levels, ensuring that grassroots perspectives inform high-level decision-making processes. They also play a vital role in empowering new generations

of peacebuilders, fostering mentorship and intergenerational dialogue to drive innovation and resilience.

In addition to that, the work of women's networks highlights the importance of gender equality in achieving sustainable peace and security. By addressing intersecting global challenges and advancing the WPS agenda, they continue to be indispensable in the quest for a more inclusive and peaceful world.

Ultimately, the combined effects of these efforts are contributing to move increasingly from a pyramidal model of leadership towards a more circular approach, where actors work together for a shared purpose<sup>64</sup> and play different roles, with local mediation work being recognized as instrumental.

Moving forward, further empowering women's networks is key to advancing peace and security. Investing in strengthening women's networks can unlock their potential and add value, directly contributing to advancing the WPS agenda. Adequately supporting them, and turning governmental and institutional commitments into concrete actions, will allow them to strategically leverage their unique experiences and expertise. Achieving this requires increased collaboration among national and international stakeholders and donors in support of the recommendations set forward in this paper.



# End notes

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