



AGENCY FOR
PEACEBUILDING



MUSLIM WOMEN
ADVANCEMENT OF
RIGHTS AND PROTECTION

Webinar Proceedings Report on

Women at the Peace Table: Regional Learning, Solidarity and Advocacy in the Horn of Africa

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Women at the Peace Table: Regional Learning, Solidarity and Advocacy in the Horn of Africa

April 1, 2026

02:30-04:00 PM (EAT)

I. Introduction

The Horn of Africa (HoA) has long faced complex conflicts, political transitions, and humanitarian crises, highlighting the region's fragile peace and security environment. In response, regional mediation and peacebuilding efforts led by the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) have sought to address these challenges, yet women's participation in these processes remains limited.

Building on earlier initiatives, the Horn Center for Democracy (HCD), in partnership with the Agency for Peacebuilding (AP) and the Muslim Women Advancement of Rights and Protection (MWARP), is implementing the project "*Promoting the Participation of Women in Mediation Processes in the Horn of Africa*", which aims to strengthen women's engagement in peace and mediation at local, national, and regional levels. As part of this project, HCD is hosting an online webinar titled "*Women at the Peace Table: Regional Learning, Solidarity, and Advocacy in the HoA*" on 1 April 2026. The webinar will bring together women peacebuilders, mediators, researchers, and regional partners from Sudan, South Sudan, and the broader HoA to discuss women's leadership, share lessons, and explore practical pathways for meaningful participation in peace processes. The session is conducted in English with Arabic interpretation to ensure inclusive participation.

II. Webinar Objectives

The primary objective of this online session is to strengthen women's roles in peacebuilding and mediation by:

- Presenting key findings of the Policy Analysis Group (PAG), providing an updated conflict analysis from Sudanese and South Sudanese women peace experts to inform context-sensitive peace engagement.
- Highlighting concrete entry points and strategies for women's meaningful participation in ongoing and emerging peace processes at both local and national levels, including Track I processes.
- Strengthening cross-border learning, solidarity, and peer exchange between Sudanese and South Sudanese women peacebuilders.
- Creating structured linkages among FemWise members across the Horn of Africa to promote sustained regional knowledge-sharing and coordinated advocacy.

- Engaging regional and international partners to reinforce their responsibility in ensuring women’s representation and influence in formal peace negotiations and decision-making spaces.

III. Participants Composition

The webinar reached 78 participants from diverse sectors, including civil society, academic and research institutions, regional and international organizations, and government bodies. Attendees represented organizations such as FemWise Africa / African Union, GIZ, Berghof Foundation, Addis Ababa University, University of Hamburg, and other CSOs in Ethiopia and the HoA. Participants were invited through email utilizing HCD’s existing networks, social media promotion, and outreach by partner organizations AP and MWARP, ensuring a broad representation of expertise and perspectives on women’s engagement in mediation and peacebuilding in the HoA.

IV. Welcoming and Opening

a. Welcoming Remarks

The session commenced with welcoming remarks by **Yemisrach Kebede**, Program and Partnerships Director at the HCD. She welcomed participants and introduced the webinar as part of a broader initiative focused on advancing the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda in the Horn of Africa.

She explained that HCD, a regional think tank based in Addis Ababa, works to promote democratic governance and nurture a culture of democracy across the region. The webinar series forms part of an ongoing project aimed at promoting women’s participation in mediation and peacebuilding processes in the Horn of Africa, implemented in partnership with the Agency for Peacebuilding and a Kenya-based women’s organization.

Yemisrach highlighted that the initiative emphasizes regional learning, stakeholder engagement, and policy influence, with a strong focus on movement building and advocacy. She stressed that facilitating structured dialogue and supporting women’s participation; especially at grassroots level; is central to HCD’s work.

She underscored that the WPS agenda should be understood as a political and normative framework rather than a technical exercise. In the current geopolitical context of the Horn of Africa, she noted that structural challenges such as militarization, shrinking civic space, and erosion of democratic norms are undermining its transformative potential. She emphasized that gender equality and human security cannot be sidelined and must remain integral to sustainable peace.

She concluded by reiterating HCD's commitment to documenting and sharing knowledge, noting that proceedings from this and previous webinars would be made available on the Center's website.

b. Opening and Setting the Scene

Bernardo Venturi, representing the AP, provided introductory remarks and set the tone for the session. He noted the success of the webinar series so far, describing previous sessions as highly attended and rich in content.

He introduced the Agency for Peacebuilding as a "think-and-do" organization headquartered in Italy and actively engaged in the HoA. He emphasized the importance of the partnership with HCD and regional actors in advancing women's participation in peace processes.

Bernardo framed the discussion around two key dimensions: mediation and advocacy. He stressed that while women's inclusion is widely recognized in principle, the challenge remains ensuring their meaningful participation at decision-making tables.

He also highlighted the broader global context, noting a crisis in peace processes characterized by declining trust in mediation, funding constraints, and limited political attention. Despite these challenges, he emphasized the need to persist.

The session aimed to focus on Sudan and South Sudan, offering real-time conflict analysis from women-led perspectives. He noted that discussions would explore engagement with regional peace and security architectures, particularly IGAD and the African Union, and examine what meaningful participation of women looks like in Track I negotiations and formal decision-making spaces.

He emphasized that the objective was to move beyond theoretical discussions and instead focus on concrete political dynamics, lessons learned, and practical strategies for enabling women's access to negotiation spaces.

Session 1: Reflections on South Sudan Peace Processes

Speaker: Rita Lopidia

Rita Lopidia provided an in-depth reflection on the political and conflict dynamics in South Sudan, drawing from both analytical and personal experience in peace processes.

a. Political and Conflict Dynamics

Rita explained that South Sudan is currently implementing the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (2018), intended to guide the country toward democratic transition through elections. However, she noted that implementation has been significantly delayed.

She attributed this to selective implementation of provisions and a lack of political will among parties to the agreement. Despite the existence of a unity government, key provisions; such as

the unification of armed forces; remain incomplete. As a result, the country continues to experience recurring and localized conflicts, particularly in Upper Nile and Equatoria regions.

She highlighted recent escalations in violence, including clashes involving the White Army and government forces, and noted the political implications such as the house arrest and trial of opposition leader Riek Machar. These developments have contributed to shrinking political and civic space, with increased restrictions on political actors and civil society.

Although elections are scheduled, she expressed uncertainty about their feasibility given ongoing insecurity and lack of conducive conditions for credible democratic processes. She noted increasing regional and international pressure for dialogue, including engagement by the African Union and other actors.

b. Lessons from Women's Engagement in Peace Processes

Drawing from her experience since 2014, Rita emphasized that women's participation in peace processes has required sustained effort and strategic engagement.

She identified several key lessons:

- **Numbers matter:** Initial inclusion of a few women can be leveraged to advocate for broader representation. Increased participation improves the likelihood of women's issues being reflected in outcomes.
- **Diverse and credible representation is critical:** Effective engagement requires a mix of younger women and respected senior figures who command trust and can access political actors more easily.
- **Preparation and timing are essential:** Peace processes evolve rapidly, requiring continuous monitoring and readiness to respond to shifting agendas.
- **Proactiveness and responsiveness are necessary:** Dedicated technical teams play a key role in monitoring developments, conducting research, and supporting real-time engagement.
- **Advocacy is continuous and multi-level:** Engagement must occur across different platforms and actors throughout the process.

She also reflected candidly on the emotional and political challenges of operating in negotiation spaces, describing them as "ruthless" environments that require resilience and preparedness. She shared a personal experience of being publicly accused during negotiations, highlighting the intensity of such spaces and the need for emotional strength.

c. Strategies for Accessing Negotiation Spaces

Rita outlined practical strategies that have enabled women to access and influence peace processes:

- Persistent advocacy and visibility, including mapping and engaging key stakeholders;

- Building alliances, particularly with political actors who may adopt and advance women's positions;
- Strategic communication, including knowing when and how to engage effectively;
- Leveraging media engagement to create pressure and accountability;
- Establishing strong technical support systems for research, coordination, and communication;
- Securing financial and logistical support from partners, which is essential for participation in negotiations often held outside the country.

She emphasized that without such support, women's participation would have been significantly limited, including their ability to travel and engage effectively in peace negotiations.

Session 2: Policy Analysis Findings from Sudan Peace Processes

Speaker: Manal Taha

The discussion then shifted to Sudan, where Manal Taha provided a stark and deeply contextualized analysis of the country's conflict dynamics and peace process trajectories.

Manal began by situating the current war within Sudan's long history of conflict. She emphasized that war is not a new phenomenon in Sudan, describing it as a continuous reality spanning approximately seventy years. According to her, conflict in Sudan has never fully ceased; rather, it shifts geographically, subsiding in one area while emerging in another.

She noted that Sudan has experienced numerous peace agreements and initiatives; estimating around fifteen agreements and between thirteen to fifteen peace initiatives; yet none have resulted in sustainable peace. She explained that both the root causes of conflict and the nature of peace agreements revolve around struggles over power, legitimacy, and control of economic resources.

Manal highlighted a recurring pattern in Sudan's political trajectory. Armed groups and political elites, often implicated in corruption, enter peace agreements and subsequently become part of transitional governments. These arrangements frequently collapse, leading to renewed alliances with military actors, coups, and the re-establishment of hybrid regimes combining civilian and military elements. This cycle of "coup, transition, and coup" has persisted for decades.

Turning to the current conflict, she described it as particularly severe due to its impact on central regions, including Khartoum, unlike previous wars that were largely confined to peripheral areas. She emphasized that the war is deeply embedded in regional and international power dynamics, involving neighboring African countries, Gulf states, and North African actors. This external involvement has contributed to a fragmented security sector and a collapsing authoritarian system.

Manal painted a "gloomy picture" of the humanitarian and social consequences. She pointed to massive displacement, with millions of refugees, widespread collapse of agricultural systems, and over three million children out of school. She described this as a collapse of the country's future,

where civilian space has significantly diminished and many of the strongest civilian voices are now in the diaspora.

A key critique she raised was that peace negotiations consistently fail to address the real issues that drive conflict. Instead, negotiations remain focused on power-sharing arrangements, while underlying governance challenges remain unreformed. She described what she called an “evil line” that runs from war to peace agreements and back into governance, continuously benefiting the same elites and perpetuating the cycle of conflict.

a. Rethinking Peace Processes: A Trauma-Centered Approach

In response to these limitations, Manal proposed a shift toward what she termed a trauma-centered peace process. She argued that current peace processes are overly focused on power, money, and legitimacy, neglecting the lived experiences of civilians.

A trauma-centered approach, in her view, would prioritize healing, rebuild social systems such as health and education, and address the psychological and societal impacts of prolonged conflict. She emphasized that this approach creates a meaningful entry point for women’s participation, as women are often closely connected to community-level experiences of conflict and recovery.

b. Opportunities and Constraints for Women’s Participation

Manal identified both emerging opportunities and persistent barriers for women’s engagement in peace processes.

She noted that regional frameworks developed under the African Union and IGAD now provide a formal basis for women’s inclusion in mediation processes. She highlighted that these frameworks, developed with input from women peacebuilders in the region, create a form of obligation for these institutions to ensure women’s participation.

However, she stressed that the existence of frameworks alone is insufficient. The critical challenge lies in enforcement. She emphasized the need to build advocacy around these instruments and to develop mechanisms that ensure their implementation.

She pointed to the importance of strengthening institutional structures, such as gender offices within regional organizations and special envoy offices, arguing that these entities need both political backing and sustained support from women’s movements to effectively advocate for inclusion.

At the same time, she identified a significant knowledge gap among Sudanese women regarding regional mechanisms. She noted that, due to Sudan’s historical disengagement from some regional processes, very few women have a deep understanding of how institutions like the African Union or IGAD operate, including their decision-making structures and entry points. She emphasized the need to build this capacity to enable effective engagement. The importance of

connecting different peace processes and ensuring coherence across local, national, and international efforts. She also stressed that existing global frameworks, including commitments to women's participation in peace processes, are often not implemented in meaningful ways.

c. Key Reflections and Recommendations

Manal's intervention highlighted several critical priorities for advancing women's participation:

- The need to move beyond consultation roles toward full inclusion in Track I negotiations and decision-making spaces;
- The importance of institutionalizing women's participation through clear mandates, quotas, and formal mechanisms;
- The necessity of accountability, ensuring that commitments to women's inclusion are visible and enforced; advisory or consultative roles rather than as full participants in formal negotiations.

Session 3: Regional Mediation Perspectives

Speaker: Dr. Rabab Baldo

Dr. Rabab Baldo provided a complementary perspective on Sudan, emphasizing regional and continental mediation frameworks and strategies to enhance women's participation in peace processes. Drawing on her experience as a senior gender and inclusivity advisor for IGAD, and her involvement in both Sudanese and South Sudanese mediation processes, she framed her intervention around lessons learned, institutional approaches, and actionable recommendations.

a. Regional and Continental Mediation Frameworks

Dr. Baldo highlighted the importance of mediation support units at regional and continental levels, which provide technical guidance, capacity-building, and operational frameworks for mediators. She noted that these units have worked to integrate women, youth, and other stakeholders into mediation processes and to establish guidelines that inform the terms of reference for special envoys.

She emphasized that the AU and IGAD mediation frameworks have made strides in incorporating the WPS agenda. These guidelines aim to ensure meaningful participation of women in both strategic and operational aspects of peace processes.

b. Challenges in Mediation Design

Despite these frameworks, Dr. Baldo identified persistent challenges:

1. **Process-Oriented Mediation:** Many mediators focus narrowly on reaching a signed agreement between armed parties, often neglecting people-centered approaches that prioritize civilian perspectives and inclusive engagement.

2. **Traditional Power-Sharing Models:** These models typically recognize only armed groups, systematically excluding women, youth, civil society, and other stakeholders. She noted that such arrangements not only undermine sustainable peace but may also incentivize militarization, as groups perceive holding arms as a route to political recognition.
3. **Limited Transformative Approaches:** Current mediation templates are often externally developed and insufficiently adapted to African contexts. Dr. Baldo called for **transformative, localized peace processes** that prioritize accountability, inclusivity, and civilian perspectives over mere power distribution.
4. **Leadership Representation:** Most mediators and special envoys are men, which diminishes the credibility of calls for women's participation. She argued that regional institutions must lead by example, placing women in visible, high-level roles in mediation.

c. Inclusion Across Tracks

Dr. Baldo stressed the importance of multi-track engagement in mediation:

- **Track I:** High-level negotiations remain essential but insufficient.
- **Track II:** Includes informal dialogue and advisory engagement.
- **Track III:** Grassroots women, civil society, and local actors are frequently neglected, despite their critical role in translating agreements into meaningful, community-level outcomes.

She highlighted examples from South Sudan where inclusive mediation design successfully integrated women, youth, civil society, business leaders, and media, even into ceasefire discussions; traditionally dominated by armed actors.

d. Mechanisms for Women's Participation

Dr. Baldo emphasized several practical avenues for increasing women's agency in peace processes:

- **Networks of Female Mediators:** Initiatives like Femwise provide continental and national platforms for women to access mediation processes.
- **Dedicated Gender Advisors:** Assigning gender and inclusivity advisors to mediation teams ensures continuous engagement with women's perspectives and civil society input.
- **Localized Leadership:** Sudanese women contributed to ceasefire negotiations in Geneva (August 2024), penning gender-responsive agreements and codes of conduct grounded in local realities. Their work was recognized by IGAD, AU, and international mediation teams, demonstrating the critical value of local expertise in mediation outcomes.

Dr. Baldo stressed the importance of stakeholder mapping to ensure no group is left behind, and cited examples where women created their own mediation tables when excluded, asserting agency to influence negotiations from the bottom up.

e. [Lessons Learned and Recommendations](#)

Dr. Baldo distilled key lessons for Sudan and similar contexts:

- Mediation frameworks must move beyond traditional power-sharing toward inclusive and transformative models.
- Mediators and institutions must lead by example, showing that women can hold high-level mediation and negotiation roles.
- All tracks of mediation; especially track III grassroots engagement; must be integrated to ensure agreements are durable, legitimate, and community-owned.
- Women's networks and gender advisors are crucial for bridging the gap between local realities and high-level negotiations.
- Agency is critical: marginalized groups should be empowered to create their own platforms when formal inclusion is denied.

Her intervention underscored the practical and political importance of women's participation in both shaping the design of mediation processes and influencing decision-making at the highest levels, reinforcing and extending Manal Taha's earlier points about Sudanese women's crucial role in trauma-centered and inclusive peacebuilding.

[Session 4 Regional Exchange: Practical Pathways for Women's Engagement in Peace Processes](#)

a. [Reflections on South Sudan Peace Processes](#)

Bernardo Venturi, raised the issue of implementation challenges in South Sudan. He noted that although the peace agreements have been revitalized, concrete steps, such as the unification of armed forces, have not been fully implemented. He asked the panel to share strategies to support the implementation process.

Rita Lopidia, responded by highlighting several key measures. She emphasized the need for the parties to return to the table for open dialogue, reviewing the agreement and agreeing on a timeline for elections, ensuring that the process is inclusive. She stressed the importance of continued advocacy at the African Union (AU), IGAD, and Troika levels to guarantee that any dialogue remains inclusive.

Lopidia further noted that a major challenge for peace implementation is the lack of funding. While the international community has requested the government to fund the peace process,

including elections, she emphasized that the government alone cannot ensure free, fair, and credible elections. International support is necessary but must include clear accountability measures. She called on the international community to consider the plight of South Sudanese citizens and provide funding to enable them to choose their leaders. Additionally, Lopidia highlighted the lack of strong accountability for violations of the peace agreement and called for robust measures to ensure timelines are respected and political will is demonstrated. She concluded by stressing that inclusive processes are critical, as repeated extensions of transitional periods benefit politicians while ordinary citizens bear the brunt.

b. Policy Analysis Findings from Sudan Peace Processes

Bernardo asked about trauma-centered peace processes and the role of women's participation. He inquired how such approaches could be made actionable. Manal Taha, advocated for a shift from conventional peace processes to ones that center human suffering and needs. She highlighted Sudan's history of trauma, including two genocides within 20 years, wars in Nuba Mountains, Darfur, South Sudan, and atrocities in Khartoum, noting the profound psychological impact on the population. Taha stressed that trauma continues to perpetuate cycles of conflict and emphasized that women, as key caregivers, play a critical role in sustaining families.

She noted the lack of trauma healing centers and programs across Sudan, which contributes to under-documented sexual violence. Taha recommended leveraging regional mechanisms to provide platforms for Sudanese women to voice their perspectives and participate as mediators, particularly in Track I negotiations, with support from regional actors and neighboring countries such as Egypt.

a. Regional Mediation Perspectives

When asked how Track III (community-level) initiatives can be included in peace processes, Dr. Rabab Baldo, former Senior Gender and Inclusivity Advisor at IGAD, highlighted that peace agreements in Sudan have often failed to address root causes, including identity issues, diversity management, governance, privilege, and resource allocation. She emphasized the need for bottom-up community engagement and people-centered approaches, moving away from elite-driven processes.

Baldo advocated for popular consultations to precede political dialogues and mediation, ensuring that ordinary citizens' priorities, such as safety, schools, hospitals, and markets, are incorporated. She further stressed that inclusive peace requires coordinated partnerships among regional, international, and continental organizations, ensuring women's meaningful participation across ceasefires, peace processes, and political negotiations. Strengthening regional platforms with wider membership is crucial to avoid exclusion and ensure sustainable peace.

Session 5: Question and Answers

Bernardo invited participants to pose questions via chat or by unmuting themselves. One audience question directed to Rita Lopidia asked about the effectiveness of regional mechanisms in creating frameworks for women's participation.

Lopidia emphasized that peace without women is unsustainable. She noted that women, representing nearly half the population, experience conflict differently, including displacement, gender-based violence, loss of livelihoods, and community breakdown. She highlighted that mechanisms such as IGAD's Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security and the AU's Office of the Special Envoy for Women, Peace, and Security are critical for advocating women's inclusion in negotiations, though more work is needed to ensure meaningful engagement.

Manal Taha addressed funding and ethical risks, emphasizing that Sudanese women have achieved progress even without donor support. She called for champions within regional institutions to advocate for women's inclusion, moving beyond repeated training to real decision-making opportunities. Taha also highlighted the experiences of women and girls with disabilities, who face heightened risks during conflict and displacement, noting that their inclusion is vital to inform human security and humanitarian initiatives.

On accountability, panelists observed that South Sudan's transitional government has consistently violated women's quotas. They emphasized the need for stronger oversight and enforcement at both national and regional levels. Responding to Leonie Abela's question about collaboration among women mediators in Sudan and South Sudan, panelists highlighted the importance of coordination, shared strategies, and cross-learning to strengthen meaningful participation in peace processes.

Closing and Key Takeaways

Bernardo summarized the discussion by noting that the speakers presented a clear, concrete perspective on the challenges facing civilians, particularly women, in conflict-affected areas. He highlighted the critical lessons shared on transforming peace processes to be more people-centered, addressing not only power-sharing structures but also grassroots needs, Track III engagement, and the systemic inclusion of women mediators.

He concluded the session by thanking the HCD for convening the webinar and reminded participants that all materials would be uploaded on the HCD's and the AP's website for further reference.