

The nexus between the WPS agenda and elections unpacked:

Women's participation in elections in the DRC, South Sudan and other contexts

While women's full, equal and meaningful participation in peace processes has become a key component of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda at the UN, women's meaningful participation in elections, particularly in fragile states, is often overlooked or even neglected. Electoral processes form an important peacebuilding opportunity, particularly during transitional processes from less to more democratic governance in conflict-affected countries. The timing, regularity, inclusiveness and credibility of the elections can determine if elections contribute to or undermine peace. Ensuring a participatory and gender-sensitive approach in supporting elections is crucial for the further implementation of the WPS agenda. More attention needs to be placed on the participation pillar, especially with upcoming and ongoing election processes in countries that are impacted by conflict such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and South Sudan.

In the margins of the Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security women activists and Permanent Missions discussed the current situation of shrinking civic space and challenges around women's participation in electoral processes. They explored opportunities to promote women's political participation, building on lessons learned from peace processes in DRC, South Sudan and Iraq. The panel speakers zoomed in on the role that UN member states and governments can play in supporting women's equal, full and meaningful participation in elections.



Expert panel with speakers from amongst others South Sudan and the DRC

"We try to sensitise communities to explain the advantage of involving women in the electoral process, but it is not enough. We live in patriarchal societies, dominated by men."

Claudine Tsongo - Founder and Coordinator of Dynamique des Femmes Juristes (DFJ) in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Claudine underscored the challenges women confront in position themselves on electoral lists, noting that political parties represent the sole avenue for such alignment. However, even when women secure victories, they often face exclusion afterward.

In addressing the obstacles faced by women in insecure and remote areas, Claudine emphasised efforts to identify potential participants in electoral processes and establish safe spaces for them. As a structural solution, Claudine refers to electoral law to increase the meaningful participation of women and ensure

that disparity is not accepted. Given the low literacy rates in the DRC and insufficient information about the voting process, it's vital to disseminate easily understandable election-related information and provide sustained capacity-building programs for women aspiring to run for office. Also, since youth participation in politics is limited, continuous investment in civic education remains crucial. There is still a lack of effective strategies to engage both young men and women, thereby hindering their active involvement in the political sphere.



Bahia Tahzib-Lie, Deputy Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to the UN stressed the importance of partnership with civil society and their crucial role for social change and sustainable peace as they are the ears, eyes and arms of the people on the ground.

Rasha Al Aqeedi addressed the challenges of quotas in Iraq. In 2020, Iraq adopted a quota of at least 25% women in electoral processes. This quota was created to guarantee women's participation in law drafting and policymaking. However, the ruling political parties abused the quota by mainly including women who only upheld the party line and defended, promoted, and encouraged the patriarchy.

"We must avoid jargon and semantics that might imply, directly or indirectly, that values of freedom, democracy, and progressiveness are "Western". This could backfire on candidates. Instead, remind people that women have played an essential role in policymaking and community life since the establishment of the state."

Rasha Al Aqeedi - Consultant at the Foreign Service Institute

Because of the election framework in Iraq, the big parties dominate the political scene and new parties struggle with funding and campaigning. Women wish to join political parties that encompass their values in advocating equality but are often forced to compromise. Their only option is to join the bigger parties that struggle to fill the quota. In most cases, the parties do not fulfil their promises and the female candidates only serve the party's agenda without real political influence of their own.



Albana Dautllari, Deputy Permanent Representative of the Republic of Albania to the UN, stressed that women's participation in elections is crucial as women more often than men include other aspects of life such as children's needs.

Esther Soma explained the conflicts in South Sudan and the difficult peace process. What we can learn from the South Sudan peace process is the need for civil society engagement and coordinated advocacy before, during and after elections. Peace processes will be unsustainable unless inclusion at all levels goes beyond the warring parties and incorporates women and youth. For women to participate in decision-making spaces, women groups need to focus on strategizing together and building coalitions. In South Sudan, women's coalitions went beyond women's groups and involved other civil society actors. Together they negotiated and agreed their priorities and non-negotiables. Their joint key issues were shared with international stakeholders, who would then echo their demands at other decision-making fora. International solidarity and coordination to support these locally led processes and adequate funding is required.

"In your solidarity, we need the boomerang effect: When civil society actors in countries are unable to speak to our political leaders, let the civil society actors in neighbouring countries, through influencing their political leaders, speak on our behalf. Let Women's Rights Organisations lead the agenda. Keep inviting South Sudanese women to these conferences. It is crucial. We understand the fatigue of international actors on South Sudan, but do not give up on us!"

Esther Soma - Deputy Country Director at PAX South Sudan

Esther also emphasised the importance of civic awareness programmes that increase participation of women and youth, particularly in the run up to electoral processes. Women at all levels in society need to be meaningfully engaged.



Sonia Farrey, Foreign & Commonwealth Development Officer and UK WPS Focal Point, in her closing remarks, emphasised the importance of translating the gains on the normative framework to the ground. Supporting civil society means investing in multi-annual and flexible funding as well as invitations to decision-making spaces.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Support equal and just elections and election monitoring in terms of funding and security. The election process is a highly fragile context, requiring a focus on preventive actions. Strengthen the implementation of electoral laws that allow for parity and create an open environment for women to participate as respected candidates in elections.
- Facilitate female candidates with proper training on how to conduct election campaigns, set agendas, do community outreach and other campaign strategies. As part of this, minimise illiteracy, as an illiterate population gives room for corruption.
- Invest in programs that stimulate women and youth to participate politically, such as civic awareness programs. Enable the implementing organisations such as women-led organisations to localise the program according to local needs and set their own agenda.
- Invest in long-term aid and fund programs beyond the common 5 years. Radical change in society requires longer periods of support and programs of 15 to 20 years are more likely to achieve long-term goals that sustain themselves after funding is severed.
- Avoid jargon and semantics that might imply, directly or indirectly, that values of freedom, democracy, and progressiveness are "Western". This could backfire on candidates and activists. For example Iraq, it has often, resulted in violent attacks by militias who accuse activists of carrying out a "Western agenda". Instead, use nostalgia and memory to remind people that women have always played an essential role in policymaking and community.
- Cooperate and coordinate initiatives between international stakeholders to support women's organisations and women's coalitions more effectively and efficiently.
- Improve access for activists to the UNSC, conferences, and events by facilitating a better visa process. The WPS agenda stresses the importance of the inclusion of women at (international) decision-making tables. Therefore, ensure women activists can obtain visas to the United States or Europe to participate in these events.

On the 24th of October 2023, [WO=men](#), [PAX](#) and [Cordaid](#) together with the Permanent Missions of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the Republic of Albania and the United Kingdom Mission to the UN in New York organized an event featuring women activists from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Sudan and other countries discussing crucial issues, lessons learned and offering necessary recommendations on gender, peace and security before, during and after elections. The event was supported under the umbrella of the [Just Future](#) and [Leaders of Peace](#) projects.

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