The Exclusion of Women from Formal Peace Negotiations: The Case of Liberia

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Abstract

This study critically examines the persistent exclusion of women from formal peace processes. Through an in-depth case study of Liberia's peace negotiations and analysis of global peacebuilding literature, it challenges the assumption that women are excluded because they lack the capacity to meaningfully participate. The study reveals that even when women possess significant conflict-resolution experience and leadership skills, as evidenced by Liberian women's instrumental role in ending the civil wars in their country, they remain relegated to observer status in formal negotiations. The research also demonstrates how patriarchal power structures systematically limit women's participation despite their demonstrated peacebuilding competencies. The paper proposes concrete policy recommendations, including enforceable participation quotas and gender-sensitive peacebuilding guidelines, to transform symbolic inclusion into substantive participation.

Keywords: Liberia, capacity building, meaningful participation, women, formal peace processes

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1. Introduction

The persistent underrepresentation of women in formal peace processes remains one of the most glaring contradictions in contemporary conflict resolution. Despite overwhelming evidence that women's participation strengthens peace agreements and their implementation (Krause, Krause and Bränfors, 2018; True and Riveros-Morales, 2019), women often take part as mere observers and rarely as active participants in major peace processes. This disparity persists even after two and a half decades of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 and subsequent resolutions explicitly calling for women's equal participation in peacebuilding.

This study interrogates the disconnect between policy commitments and practice by asking: Why does women's exclusion persist despite demonstrated peacebuilding competencies? Through a critical analysis of Liberia's peace process and broader peacebuilding literature, we challenge the assumption that women are excluded from formal peace processes because they do not have the capacity to meaningfully participate. We chose Liberia as a case study because Liberian women are credited with ending civil unrest and war in that country, and their work is considered as the best example of women's "effective leadership in times of crisis" (Yayboke and Abdullah, 2020:7). The Liberian case offers a powerful paradox – while women's grassroots movements were instrumental in ending the civil wars, they were systematically excluded from formal negotiations. This contradiction provides a crucial lens for examining structural barriers to inclusion.

The paper proceeds as follows: after reviewing relevant literature on women's participation in peace processes, the subsequent sections analyse Liberia's peace process, in particular the role played by women. Thereafter, we discuss the dynamics surrounding the Liberian women's exclusion and present recommendations on how to ensure the inclusion of women and their meaningful participation in formal peace processes. The final part concludes the study.

2. Literature review

Twenty-six years ago, on 31 October 2000, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted Resolution 1325 (2000) at its 4 213th meeting. Resolution 1325 affirms the role of women in peacebuilding and stresses the importance of their equal participation in the promotion of peace. This resolution also encourages actors to adopt measures that support women's peace initiatives when negotiating

and implementing peace agreements. Resolution 1325 has, however, been criticised for its inability to bring about greater participation of women in peacebuilding. For instance, Basini (2013:536) observes:

> Regrettably, in spite of the positive rhetoric expressed in UNSCR 1325, the promise of substantive changes in gender equality in conflict and postconflict settings has never been realized and women still do not participate equally in peace and security initiatives.

The lack of participation is more evident in formal peace negotiations often referred to as Track I peace processes aimed at resolving civil wars or intrastate and interstate wars. As previous studies show, the number of women participants in formal peace negotiations remains a cause for concern. For instance, in a study of 31 major peace processes between 1992 and 2011, it was found that only 4% of signatories, 2.4% of chief mediators, 3.7% of witnesses and 9% of negotiators were women (Diaz and Tordjman, 2012:3). A later study showed that between 1990 and 2014 women signed 13 peace agreements out of a total of 130 agreements (Krause, Krause and Bränfors, 2018:987). More recently, it has been observed that in all the major peace processes around the world between 1992 and 2018, only 3% of mediators, 4% of signatories and 13% of negotiators were women (Yayboke and Abdullah, 2020:2).

In contrast, women's participation tends to be higher in Track II processes or informal peace processes surrounding the resolution of both intrastate and interstate wars. As research has shown, women's groups have been involved in nearly three quarters (27 out of 38) of peace processes between 1989 and 2017 that had identifiable informal initiatives (Dayal and Christien, 2020). These statistics show that women have largely been excluded from formal peace processes. This has led many to question whether Track II "has effectively become a 'glass ceiling' for women's participation" (UN Women, 2021:5).

Three reasons are often advanced for the exclusion of women in formal peace negotiations. First, women are not regarded as "essential key players" (Puechguirbal, 2012:5). This belief stems from the perception that war is the domain of men. By extension, the argument goes, negotiations to end war are therefore men's business. Second, women are often classified as victims of conflict, in the same category as children, the elderly and disabled (Puechguirbal, 2012:9). As Whitman (2006:31) warns us, labelling women as mere victims of war means

they will not be taken seriously at the negotiation table since, as victims of conflict, women are powerless, without a voice and in need of protection. Third, military leaders and the groups they command are predominantly male and as such, men become participants in peace processes by default (Haynes, Cahn and Aolain, 2011:516). Even where women are part of armed groups, few, if any of these female combatants hold high-ranking positions (Rinck, 2024:5). The result is that women are "automatically" excluded, because peace negotiations often require the participation of the leaders of warring parties.

Research, however, shows that these reasons do not hold water. Women play diverse roles in violent conflict. For instance, in the Nigerian conflict against jihadist group Boko Haram, women have been observed participating as frontline fighters, local knowledge intermediaries, friskers, investigators and inventors of vigilante technologies (Agbiboa, 2022:1013). In Kashmir, Kashmiri women have played a part in the conflict by helping militants financially and logistically through distributing and delivering weapons and ammunition and the provision of food and water (Zeeshan and Aliefendioğlu, 2024:11).

While women may be victims of violent conflict, they are also resistors and perpetrators (Chatterjee 2016:207). Again, while women may be disproportionately affected by conflict, sometimes they have encouraged and even participated in conflict, highlighting the complex relationship between conflict and women (Mohammed, Barrett and Afesha, 2025:16). For instance, it is estimated that in the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), women constituted about 40% of its membership (Thomas, 2024:831). In the Middle East, women have also fought as members of groups such as Al-Qaeda, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, the Islamic State (ISIL), Jabhat al Nusra and the Kurdish Peshmerga (Darden, 2015:454). Women's direct participation in violent conflict demonstrates that they are capable of using violence, serving in militarised organisations and defending their families (Huber and Karim, 2018:266). These diverse roles that women play in conflict should act as the basis for their inclusion in formal peace negotiations. Their inclusion is likely to ensure that a wide range of issues such as their reintegration, disarmament and rehabilitation are considered during the negotiations.

The arguments put forward for the need for women to participate in formal peace processes are often centred around the benefits that flow from their participation

and the belief that women have certain attributes that are indispensable to the peace process. Concerning attributes, according to Zetes (2016:1319) women are in general recognised as neutral peacemakers. Women are also considered capable or better suited to find common ground in the face of socio-political divides and that this ability increases their likelihood of resolving disputes (Klein, 2012:304).

Concerning benefits, Shepherd (2015:54) argues that the inclusion of women in peace negotiations enables issues that affect them to be addressed. Similarly, according to McGuinness (2007:64), the inclusion of women in peace processes ensures that the resulting peace agreements address issues pertaining to women before and after the conflict. It has been argued that without women's participation, challenges facing women and children may never be brought to light (De Silva, 2013:93). Moreover, at the negotiating table, men are considered to focus only on issues that affect them, whereas women in general are considered to focus on family and the community at large (Whitman, 2006:33). Significantly, an analysis of 98 peace agreements between 2000 and 2016 by True and Riveros-Morales (2019) showed that peace agreements are more likely to contain gender provisions when women participate at all levels of the peace processes. Klein (2012:305) is of the view that peace agreements where a large number of women take part are likely to be complied with, since women are more inclined to produce balanced agreements. Finally, a statistical analysis by Krause, Krause and Bränfors (2018) reveals that peace agreements signed by female delegates are more likely to lead to durable peace.

All this is problematic, because while women may possess certain attributes that are critical to the peace process, and their participation in peacebuilding has its advantages, such attributes and perceived benefits of their participation should not be the primary basis for their involvement. Such an approach to the problem of women's participation implies that women are important only as far as their participation brings certain advantages to the peace process. This implies that if women did not have the said attributes and if their participation does not bring certain benefits, a case for their increased participation in peace negotiations would be difficult to argue. The inclusion of women should, however, be a matter of "simple justice" – women must have a say in the decision made at the peace negotiations regarding their lives (Gardam and Charlesworth, 2000:165).

A number of resolutions reiterating the need for increased women's participation in peacebuilding have been adopted by the United Nations Security Council since

Resolution 1325. These resolutions are 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009), 1889 (2009), 1960 (2010), 2106 (2013), 2122 (2013), 2242 (2015), 2467 (2019) and 2493 (2019). Resolution 2493 (2019), the latest among these resolutions, identifies capacity building as one of the efforts member states need to support to ensure equal representation and participation of women in the peace processes.

Women are often considered to be lacking the capacity to participate meaningfully in peace negotiations. Iwilade (2011:32) argues:

> Whether conflict is ended by a military victory or a negotiated settlement, the capacity of women to effectively engage its aftermath is a major challenge. Even when women get invited to peace talks, like in South Africa, they are often incapable of articulating their views in the legalistic terms that peace talks are conducted or in fact understanding the very thrust of those talks.

It is therefore not surprising that apart from Resolution 2493(2019), previous studies have also emphasised the need for building the capacity of women to (meaningfully) participate in formal peace processes. O'Reilly, Súilleabháin and Paffenholz (2015:29) opine that capacity-building programmes targeting women have an important role in increasing the influence and effectiveness of women in peace processes. Kouvo and Levine (2008:367) suggest that in addition to ensuring the equal representation, we have to focus on the political capacities of women if we want them to make a difference at peace negotiation tables. More recently, Mejía (2024:94) recommended that the United Nations (UN) should support resolutions such as UNSCR 1325 with comprehensive implementation guidelines and context-specific capacity-building assistance.

The emphasis on capacity building presupposes that women are excluded from peace processes because they lack the capacity to take part and meaningfully contribute to peace processes. Embedded within the idea of capacity building is the assumption that there are no prior skills or resources to draw upon (UNDP, 2009:53). What this implies is that since women supposedly lack the skills or legitimacy to meaningfully contribute, they must be "empowered" by external actors. As the example of Liberian women shows, such framing obscures the wealth of experience women already bring from grassroots organising, informal mediation and civic activism during conflict. Significantly, it deflects attention from the structural and institutional barriers that systematically constrain women's participation.

Participation is often measured in quantitative terms as the number of women present at the negotiation table, without interrogating the quality, influence, or autonomy of that involvement. In many cases, women are included symbolically, occupying seats without meaningful decision-making power, which reduces participation to tokenism. Inclusion and meaningful participation are, however, inextricably linked. Increasing the number of women at the peace table without ensuring that those women are able to meaningfully contribute to the peace process is akin to what Datzberger and Mat (2018) describe as a "just add women and stir" approach. In terms of this approach, the presence of women at the table is prioritised more than their meaningful participation. The problem, as researchers have shown, is that it is not the number of women that increases the likelihood that the resulting peace agreements will contain provisions that address women's concerns but whether they have the power to influence outcomes (Good, 2025).

Meaningful participation can be defined as "the capacity to influence processes and outcomes" (Ensor, 2022:290). It describes a multidimensional set of requirements aimed at ensuring that women's involvement in peace processes goes beyond mere presence. It involves ensuring that women's participation results in the acknowledgement and integration of their concerns, that they are provided with genuine opportunities to articulate their contributions and expertise, that gender perspectives inform negotiations and that the resulting agreements produce outcomes that advance the interests of society as a whole (UN Women, 2018:11).

3. Liberia: A case study on women's participation in peace processes

3.1. The Liberian civil wars

Liberia was founded by emancipated formerly enslaved Americans (commonly referred to as Americo-Liberians) who for many years segregated themselves from native Liberians and governed the country. In 1980, Samuel Doe, a native Liberian overthrew the government of William Tolbert Jr in a coup, marking the end of over 100 years of Americo-Liberian rule over Liberia to the exclusion of native Liberians (Sirleaf, 2014:236). When Doe came to power, he, however, appointed his kinsmen to key government positions and ruled the country with impunity (Farrall, 2012:315).

In 1989 the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPLF), a rebel group led by Charles Taylor, invaded the country from Côte d'Ivoire, marking the beginning of the first civil war. Its objective was to overthrow Doe's corrupt and repressive government. In the same year, a military rebellion ousted Doe's government, but still the war carried on. The interventions by the international community to end the civil war in the form of brokering ceasefires were fruitless because of their blatant disregard by the warring parties (Mahieu, 2007:215).

About 14 peace accords were signed before the first civil war came to an end in August 1996 (Heaner, 2008:463). The 1 peace accord was the Abuja II Accord, which led to the 1997 elections. Charles Taylor won the elections with 75% of the votes (McDonough, 2008:365). Taylor's regime, however, did little to address the concerns that had sparked the first civil war, choosing instead to use state resources to advance private interests. The country was soon plunged into another civil war in 1999, which raged until 2003. Some scholars observe that the civil war was protracted because of the benefits it brought to warlords and ordinary fighters (O'Connell, 2004:214; Beevers, 2015:229). NPLF fighters, for instance, looted and plundered natural resources, some of which were sold to finance the war (McDonough, 2008:361).

During the Liberian civil wars, women and girls were raped and tortured (Liebling-Kalifani et al., 2011:7). Husbands and relatives were often forced to watch while rebels and government forces raped their women and girls (Jalloh and Marong, 2005:56). Liberian women and girls were also forced into sex slavery (McDonough, 2008:364). Many girls were forcibly recruited as child soldiers and wives of combatants (Liebling-Kalifani et al., 2011:6). Rebel and government forces terrorised civilians by using tactics such as forced amputations (McDonough, 2008:364). Despite this, women were at the forefront of the peacebuilding activities that led to the end of the civil wars in Liberia.

3.2. Peacebuilding efforts by Liberian women during the civil wars

In 1994, Mary Brownell, in collaboration with a group of Liberian women, formed the Liberian Women's Initiative (LWI) in Monrovia (Press, 2010:26). This organisation was responsible for publicising the plight of women and children during the civil wars to the international world. As a result of their strategic use of the media, the women of the LWI were allowed to take part in the 1994 Accra peace talks (to end the first civil war) in Ghana as observers (Press 2010:26). In 1996,

Ruth Sando Perry, an LWI leader, became the first female head of state in Africa. This was after she became the chairperson of the Transitional Council of State from August 1996 to August 1997, when Charles Taylor was inaugurated as president (Pham, 2006:82).

The Concerned Women of Liberia and a number of Liberian women's organisations came together and drafted a ten-point plan of action aimed at encouraging civilians to move to rebel-controlled areas to persuade rebels to cease fire (Aning, 1998:19). The Liberian Women for Reconstruction and Peace (LIWORP) conducted programmes that promoted vocational skills for women and children, since the war had brought to a halt education and economic activity (Aning, 1998:21). On the other hand, the Federation of Liberian Women (FLW) was involved in empowering Liberians with conflict resolution skills. The FLW strived to ensure that conflict resolution skills were attained by a large proportion of the Liberian population through sponsoring training sessions (Moran and Pitcher, 2004:507). The Women's Peace Initiative (WPI) took part in the demobilisation programme under the Abuja Treaty II, which led to the 1997 elections (Aning, 1998:14).

Non-violent protests were a key feature of the women's peacebuilding efforts. The Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET), together with other organisations, organised mass peace protests and vigils (Press, 2010:28). WIPNET was made up of women of all religions and women with different socio-economic backgrounds (Zanker, 2014:72). Liberian women in exile held demonstrations during the meetings that took place between faction leaders to resolve certain issues regarding the Akosombo Agreement Clarification talks (Aning, 1998:18). On one occasion, they confronted General Hezekiah Bowen, Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), at the Golden Tulip Hotel where faction leaders had gathered for informal discussions and refused to let him leave unless he promised to bring peace (Aning, 1998:18).

By 1999, the civil war had become a regional conflict. Charles Taylor accused Sierra Leone and Guinea of sponsoring Liberian rebels who were fighting his government, while Sierra Leone and Guinea accused Taylor of supporting rebels in their respective countries (Moran and Pitcher, 2004:508). In 2000, the women of Liberia, together with those of Sierra Leone and Guinea formed a regional women's peace organisation called the Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET). In 2001, MARWOPNET convinced the Liberian, Sierra

Leonean and Guinean presidents to meet and discuss the conflict between Liberia and Guinea, something that the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) had failed to do (Isike and Uzodike, 2011:48). However, when the presidential summit took place in 2002, the women of MARWOPNET were relegated to participants as observers (Faedi, 2009:55). Furthermore, MARWOPNET drafted the 2003 Golden Tulip Declaration, which set out MARWOPNET's political position during the peace talks to end the second civil war and made provision for the greater participation of women in Liberian institutions and post-conflict peacebuilding processes (2009:55).

The Liberia Mass Action for Peace (LMAP), under the leadership of Leymah Gbowee, succeeded in bringing together women from both the Christian and Muslim faiths to pray for peace on a weekly basis in Monrovia (Prasch, 2015:193). On 14 April 2003, Gbowee and a group of about 2 000 women staged a sit-down protest in a strategically located soccer field in Monrovia (2015:193), where Taylor's motorcade passed daily. As the motorcade approached, the women brandished a large banner inscribed with their demand: "The Women of Liberia Want Peace! Now!" (2015:194). As a result of their actions, Taylor agreed to meet with the women to listen to their concerns. During that meeting, the women convinced Taylor to attend the Accra peace talks (2015:194). Taylor reportedly asked the women to approach the rebel leaders and persuade them to attend the talks as well (2015:195).

During the peace talks, which began on 4 June 2003, the women of the LMAP held sit-ins on a daily basis outside the venue where the negotiations took place (Prasch, 2015:195). The women also erected barricades around the venue of the peace talks when the parties reached a deadlock (Dunn, 2011:12). At one stage, the LMAP women entered the venue, sat down and linked arms. On another occasion, Gbowee threatened to strip naked (an act traditionally considered a curse to see a married or elderly woman naked) if the parties did not reach an agreement (Prasch, 2015:196). These strategies and threats were intended to exert pressure on the warring parties to reach an agreement.

MARWOPNET was subsequently granted observer status and participated in the 2003 negotiations leading to the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement that resulted in the end of the second Liberian civil war. Disappointingly, the final

agreement does not have a strong emphasis on women, as evidenced by the following articles on women: Article XVI provides that the membership of the Governance Reform Commission shall include women. Article XVIII requires members of the National Elections Commission to be men and women of integrity. Article XXXI requires the National Transitional Government of Liberia to pay particular attention to the rehabilitation of vulnerable groups or war victims severely affected by the war, which include women.

4. Discussion

As shown above, women-led civil society organisations were the primary channels through which women coordinated and participated in both the formal and informal peace processes that ended the Liberian civil wars. A key aspect of these organisations is that they were led by seasoned and experienced female leaders, such as Mary Brownell, Ruth Sando Perry, Myrtle Gibson, Nohn Kidau, Mona Wureh, Leymah Gbowee and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. Apart from providing these organisations with financial and logistical support, international actors such as the United Nations (UN) shared their expertise with women leaders to equip them with the required leadership, specialised vocabulary and discursive skills for peace negotiations (Saiget, 2016:34).

Thus, at the commencement of the formal peace negotiations, there was a pool of women capable of meaningfully contributing to the discussions. They brought their experience in participating in informal peace processes, occupying leadership roles in various organisations and training received from international organisations. Despite their eminent credentials, women were yet again relegated to attendees with observer status during the formal peace negotiations. This clearly indicates that the women's exclusion cannot be attributed to a lack of capacity to meaningfully contribute to the vital peace negotiations. This unfortunate reality is mirrored across Africa – while there are many initiatives training women as mediators, considering the statistics on peace-making processes, it is clear that this training does not guarantee inclusion or participation in mediation processes (Hendricks, 2017:85). For example, during the civil wars in Sudan, many women became refugees in other countries, where they participated in training and international conferences focused on peacebuilding skills (Arostegui, 2013:545). Despite this, women were excluded from the peace negotiations that led to the

signing of the Sudan Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). Westendorf (2018:441) notes:

> This exclusion and marginalisation within the talks was not because women lacked relevant skills, knowledge or positions in their communities. … women had extensive peacemaking experience and capacity to bring to the table but were largely prevented from doing so as their roles, perspectives and experiences were not considered relevant to the resolution of the conflict.

Another case in point is the outcome of the peacebuilding project "Women's Leadership for Peace and Security in the Greater Horn of Africa" undertaken in Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somaliland, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda. Writing on her experience while participating in the project, Hendricks (2015:51) notes:

> [W]e learned that we were working with a false assumption about why women were not participating in peace processes (broadly defined). It was not their lack of knowledge and skills, their capacity to participate, or their invisibility that were the inhibiting factors ... Training and delivering capable women leaders to peace processes that had, no real interest in their participation, despite the agreed to frameworks, proved to be a rather futile exercise.

It is, however, our view that even if the Liberian women had participated in the peace negotiations as an equal party and not as observers, they would not have made any significant contribution to the peace negotiations. We concur with Yayboke and Abdullah (2020:2): "Even when women are included in peace processes, their presence is rarely acknowledged, and their roles are of a more symbolic rather than substantive nature." Following Ellerby (2016:143) and Shepherd (2011:509), we argue that giving competent women a seat at the peace negotiations table may not necessarily result in the consideration of issues that affect women, because women may be marginalised during the peace negotiations to the extent that their presence becomes a mere token.

This marginalisation can be traced to the system of patriarchal domination prevalent in many societies. As contended by Chitando (2019:122):

Patriarchy has emerged as a major impediment to women's participation in peace processes, globally and in Africa. Patriarchy is a global system which places men in positions of power and authority, while placing women in subordinate positions. In the specific case of women and peacebuilding, patriarchy has had the effect of promoting men's participation, while relegating women to less important roles.

Zuckerman (2019:231) defines patriarchy as:

> … a social system in which power [that] is disproportionately controlled by men through the maintenance of cultural norms and customs that favor men and restrict opportunity for women. These socially compelled expectations include the ideals of the selfless, silent woman and the autonomous, unemotional man, which insure a loss of self-assertion by those below and a loss of empathy by those on top.

The existence and influence of patriarchal beliefs in the context of Liberia can be clearly seen in the relegation of women to attendees with observer status in the formal peace negotiations. In the aftermath of the civil wars, Johnson Sirleaf was elected president of Liberia; many women voted for her because of her femaleness. Conversely, many men voted for her because they perceived her as possessing male leadership traits. Hence, as observed by Garnett (2016:109), she was considered by many in Liberia as "our man". These seemingly contradictory reasons for voting for her show that suitability for leadership or political office is socially constructed. Johnson Sirleaf's electoral success arguably depended on her ability to straddle gendered expectations. On the one hand, she projected traits that conformed to patriarchal norms of political leadership, while simultaneously embodying the symbolic breakthrough of female political authority. Her election thus illustrates how women leaders often navigate and sometimes strategically embrace multiple and even conflicting gendered identities to secure broad-based support. Conner (2008:207) laments:

> If President Johnson Sirleaf could only be elected on the basis of her supposed male characteristics, it is conceivable that an equally capable African woman who is not recognized as having those same characteristics might experience severe difficulties or an outright denial of election to an executive office.

This is not surprising, because gender stereotypes are an integral part of patriarchal systems. These stereotypes assume that unlike women, men possess traits that are necessary to make them better leaders (Lizotte and Meggers-Wright, 2019:245).

5. The way forward

We propose that international, continental and regional actors encourage warring parties to ensure that more women participate meaningfully in formal peace processes. For inclusion, these actors must require, as a precondition of their participation in and support of the peace process, a gender quota for women at the

peace table. Moosa, Rahmani and Webster (2013:470) suggest a minimum of 30% representation for women in all peace processes. We disagree with a fixed percentage, as each peace process is unique and does not need a quota cast in stone.

The proposal for gender quotas as a prerequisite for participation is largely informed by the role of influential and powerful external figures. Peace processes are often supported by international actors who provide political, financial and military support, without which the resulting peace agreements are unlikely to last (Wolff, 2018:67). In many instances, international, continental and regional actors are also responsible for brokering the peace. Even in the aftermath of conflicts, these actors play a pivotal role in the rebuilding process. They thus yield immense power and influence over the outcome of the peace process, and parties are likely to surrender to the request for the adoption of gender quotas.

Contrarily, opponents of gender quotas regard them as a Western feminist project with little relevance to the everyday concerns of "grassroots" women (Goetz and Jenkins, 2016:227). Evidence from countries that have applied gender quotas as a way to ensure the equal participation in politics shows that there is a strong perception that women elected by way of gender quotas are less competent and dependent on institutional provisions rather than merit to attain office (Lambert and Moquete, 2025:209). Moreover, while gender quotas result in women appointed to ministerial positions, they are rarely appointed to important government ministries (Ndayiragije, Vandeginste and Meier, 2023:150). This is not surprising, because gendered practices and values in institutions dominated by men for long periods are unlikely to disappear overnight, even as the number of women participants increases (Fernandes, Da Fonseca and Won, 2023:918). To counter this trend, decision makers are encouraged, through awareness raising, learning and shaping of expectations, to change their attitudes and behaviour towards women's participation (Lorentzen, 2025:5). This may require international actors to invest in initiatives that promote women's participation directed at key actors in the conflict resolution process during the period leading to the adoption of gender quotas.

Worryingly, researchers have observed a link between the increased participation of women in politics and political violence targeting women (Matfess, Kishi and Berry, 2023). Violence against women appears to be a backlash for challenging male dominance (Matfess, Kishi and Berry, 2023:518). It is, therefore, important

that the implementation of gender quotas is accompanied by measures to ensure that women are protected against all forms of violence.

Moreover, some states and insurgent groups are known to promote tokenistic inclusion of women rather than inclusion for meaningful participation (Jopson, 2023:161). Parties may thus be willing to adopt gender quotas in response to pressure from international actors as an attempt to enhance their image in the international community as promoters of gender equality to attract development assistance or donor funding (Agerberg and Kreft, 2020:294). As stated earlier, while quotas may result in an increase in the number of women participating in formal peace negotiations, there is no guarantee that they will be able to participate meaningfully (Moore and Talarico, 2015:223). It therefore begs the question: How can we ensure that women brought to the negotiation table by virtue of quotas are able to participate meaningfully?

This article asserts that meaningful participation goes beyond mere presence and requires: (a) the acknowledgement and integration of women's concerns, (b) the provision of genuine opportunities for women to articulate their contributions and expertise, (c) that gender perspectives inform negotiations, and (d) that peace agreements produce outcomes that advance the interests of the whole of society. In practical terms, the acknowledgement and integration of women's concerns can be secured through formal consultation mechanisms, such as gender working groups and the inclusion of women's civil society organisations in agenda-setting. The provision of genuine opportunities to articulate contributions and expertise necessitates that women are positioned as negotiators, mediators and technical experts with equal speaking and decision-making rights instead of being relegated to mere observers. To ensure that gender perspectives inform negotiations, peace agreements should be subjected to gender analysis throughout the drafting process and the gender provisions adopted should be specific and enforceable. To ensure that outcomes advance the interests of society as a whole, peace agreements must explicitly address issues such as justice, socio-economic inclusion and protection from gender-based violence, through the consultation and participation of a broad section of society, including civil society and women's organisations.

6. Conclusion

This study has shown that the persistent exclusion of women from formal peace processes cannot be explained by their supposed lack of capacity to meaningfully

participate, but rather by entrenched patriarchal power structures that actively constrain women's roles, regardless of their demonstrated peacebuilding expertise. While capacity-building programmes remain important, the Liberian case makes clear that women's exclusion persists even when they possess significant peacebuilding experience and expertise. This study proposes that international, continental and regional actors encourage warring parties to ensure that more women participate in formal peace processes and require, as a precondition of their participation in and support of the peace process, a gender quota for women at the peace table.

Despite their demonstrated leadership in conflict resolution and mobilisation, Liberian women were relegated to observer roles during critical negotiations. Their status as mere observers meant that they could not meaningfully participate or contribute to the peace process, as evidenced by the few provisions on matters affecting women in the resulting peace agreement. We argue that meaningful participation requires moving beyond numerical representation to create genuine opportunities for women to contribute their expertise, ensuring that gender perspectives shape negotiations, and securing peace agreements that advance the interests of society as a whole.

All these efforts, however, require international, continental and regional actors to play a part in various ways, such as developing gender-sensitive peacebuilding guidelines, providing material and technical support to women civil society organisations, monitoring compliance with gender quotas and conducting advocacy on gender issues. We remain hopeful that these combined interventions will enhance not only the presence of women in formal peace processes but also their meaningful participation.

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