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Women, Peace and Security



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**SUMMARY**

# Building Women's Coalitions for Peace and Security:

## Strategies, Tactics, and Lessons Learned

*With Case Studies from the Philippines and Sudan*



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# Executive Summary

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Women's coalitions are central to the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda, an effort rooted in the understanding that women are critical to all aspects of building lasting peace and security. These coalitions, or collectives of women and women's organizations working to advance shared agendas, take on diverse forms, but at their core, they link women together to strategically build alliances and advocate for shared priorities. Women collectively push for peace while conflict is ongoing, before negotiations begin, during moments of political opening, and long after peace agreements are signed.<sup>1</sup> They connect grassroots insights and legitimacy to formal decision-making, translate women's lived experiences of conflict into political priorities, and carry forward crucial activities to support peace and security when institutions falter or collapse.<sup>2</sup>

**Despite their critical contributions to durable peace, women's coalitions face persistent and structural barriers to their full participation in peace processes.**

Despite their critical contributions to durable peace, women's coalitions face persistent and structural barriers to their full participation in peace processes. Too often, they are supported hastily by external actors in moments of crisis or engaged in tokenistic ways shaped by top-down or donor-driven priorities.<sup>3</sup> Efforts to build and sustain women's coalitions remain chronically underfunded and under-recognized, even as these groups play central roles in mediating conflict, delivering lifesaving assistance, and advancing security, relief, and recovery.<sup>4</sup>

Based on original interview research and consultations with policymakers, civil society, and practitioners in two conflict-affected settings—the Philippines and Sudan—this report explores how women's coalitions operate in practice to drive important gains despite systematic barriers, and draws lessons and best practices on the key strategies, tactics, and factors that enable them to exert influence. The Philippines and Sudan were selected as two distinct conflict settings that, despite many differences, similarly involve diverse women's coalitions whose operations span political groups and geographies. The report offers concrete insights for women's coalitions and those seeking to support them, drawing on analysis of how these networks have operated to advance peace and security.

“Some only realize they need this work when it becomes too late.”  
- Key Informant Interview (KII), Sudan

## Identifying Coalitions: A Kaleidoscope of Actors

This study captures the diverse and nuanced forms of women’s organizing by grounding its analysis in participants’ own experiences of the power and promise of coalitions to advance peace and security. To reflect the breadth of women’s contributions in complex conflict environments, the study adopts a broad, participant-guided understanding of women’s coalitions, recognizing a diverse patchwork of formal and informal organizations broadly working across peace, security, development, and humanitarian action deemed salient to impacting women’s participation in peace and security by those interviewed (see box 1). While research initially focused on formal policy moments linked to peace agreements, it later expanded—based on participant feedback—to examine a wider time horizon that encompasses the formation and operation of women’s coalitions before, during, and after formal peace processes.

These coalitions are like muscles that require use, conditioning, and strengthening. They are not easily imposed or engineered from the outside; they must be nurtured with an appreciation for their organic role within the social and political ecosystem and sustained through purposeful investment in their longevity and resilience.

Box 1. Examples of Women’s Coalitions		
 <p><b>Parliamentary women’s caucuses</b> or <b>other caucuses for women in formal policy settings</b></p>	<p><b>Formal civil society organizations</b> focused on women’s issues</p> 	 <p><b>Informal networks and collectives</b> of WPS- or women-focused civic organizations and/or individuals, often organized through digital platforms or loose affiliations</p>
 <p><b>Networks of women participants</b> or <b>negotiators</b> engaged in political negotiations or peace talks</p>	<p><b>WPS- or women-focused groups within broader civic organizations</b></p>  <p><b>Women-led cooperatives</b> providing support or services within communities</p> 	 <p><b>Project-based organizations</b> or <b>networks</b> formed around specific WPS or women-related initiatives and activities</p>

## Exercising the Mobilization Muscle: The Contributions of Women's Coalitions in the Philippines and Sudan

Women's coalitions in conflict settings take on a various forms, broadly constituting strategic alliances across identity, class, ideological, or geographic differences to advance common goals related to gender equality, peace, and justice.<sup>5</sup>

In the Philippines, women's networks, organizations, and collectives have played a fundamental role in advancing peace, including amid the conflict examined closely in this study: a decades-long separatist conflict in Mindanao.<sup>6</sup> The mobilization and influence of women's coalitions contributed to the passage of the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB). The crucial leadership of prominent female figures at the negotiating table also helped secure key gains for women, including provisions for women's participation and protection. Today, many of the same women's groups lead efforts to monitor and implement the agreement, even in the face of challenges, including sporadic continued violence, delayed elections, and ongoing work to mediate community differences and integrate former combatants.

In Sudan, women have a long history of mobilizing, including during the revolution that led to the ousting of President Omar al-Bashir in 2019.<sup>7</sup> As conflict has escalated in the years following the revolution, women have continued to bear some of the heaviest burdens of violence while also being advocates for peace.<sup>8</sup> In a more recent example of women's collective mobilization, in 2024, a multigenerational group of 14 Sudanese women sought to influence internationally facilitated track 1 peace negotiations in Geneva through a track 1.5 process that engaged civil society representatives.<sup>9</sup> Although establishing legitimacy was challenging, the group worked to develop a shared agenda that balanced differences while focusing on common priorities. Although the talks in Geneva ultimately stalled, and the conflict has since escalated into war, the case illustrates how women sought to advance shared priorities and support security and humanitarian efforts amid worsening violence.

The conflict dynamics and experiences of violence in the Philippines and Sudan differ in important political and temporal ways, yet the examples drawn from these contexts offer valuable cross-cutting insights into what supports and strengthens women's coalitions. Despite differences in context, women's contributions—from grassroots action to national-level engagement—have been essential for promoting peace and sustaining communities in both settings amid persistent insecurity. Taken together, the cases highlight the strategies and tactics women's coalitions use to advance peace, humanitarian response, and political inclusion, offering transferable lessons on how coalitions build platforms, mobilize across levels of society, and seize moments of opportunity for influence.

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# Strategies and Tactics:

## How women leverage collective action

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Based on more than 50 virtual and in-person interviews and consultations with women leaders and those who support them in the Philippines and Sudan, this report offers cross-cutting insights about how women's coalitions operate. Revealing a vibrant patchwork of organizing in both settings, the study shows that coalitions cannot be understood solely through moments of formal negotiation or crisis; it is also necessary to examine the diverse actions and activities that collectively shape women's capacity to influence peace when formal policy windows emerge.

The report focuses in particular on recent organizing efforts: in the Philippines, around and following the 2014 CAB, and in Sudan, following the 2018-2019 revolution and women's organizing in peace efforts following the subsequent outbreak of war in 2023. These experiences did not unfold in isolation; rather, they were shaped by decades of earlier organizing, salient history that is reviewed in the report as it was shared by the participants.

To interpret the myriad ways women's coalitions operate, we developed a framework that defines the core **strategies** women's coalitions use to pursue change and the **tactics** through which they operationalize these goals under specific conditions.

### Insights from Women's Coalitions in the Philippines and Sudan: Five Critical Findings

1. Coalitions are most effective when they form organically out of **existing organizing and relationships**, rather than being imposed or designed by external actors.
2. Influence depends on both **grassroots legitimacy** and **access to formal institutions**—one without the other is insufficient.
3. Coalitions must be **flexible**, allowing for difference and re-formation of strategies and tactics over time around **discrete sets of shared priorities**. Loose and even temporary forms of organizing often complement more structured forms.
4. Women leaders who can **bridge civil society, government, and mediation spaces** are essential translators of coalition priorities into policy outcomes.
5. **Long-term investment in dialogue, convening, and core organizational capacity** enables coalitions to activate at critical moments instead of being hastily assembled in crisis.

## Women’s Coalitions for Peace: Strategies and Tactics

Core Strategy	Associated Tactics	Illustrative Insights from the Cases
<b>Build coalitions before high-stakes moments</b>	Long-term convening, ongoing trust-building, shared agenda setting	In the Philippines, decades of sustained organizing underpinned women’s influence in the 2014 peace agreement. In Sudan, limited early investment constrained coalition-building during the 2024 talks, although women drew on legacies of organizing from earlier moments, including their pivotal role in the 2018-2019 revolution.
<b>Anchor influence in grassroots legitimacy</b>	Community dialogues, local organizing, federated models, inclusive consultation	Coalitions in the Philippines drew legitimacy from grassroots organizing, leveraging the concept of <i>bibingka</i> (“heat from the top and heat from the bottom”). Sudanese women benefited from federated institutions that allowed autonomous organizing at the state level.
<b>Bridge formal and informal power</b>	Deliberate movement between grassroots and elite spaces; women leaders operating across civil society and government	Women leaders in the Philippines translated coalition demands into formal peace provisions while navigating internal disagreement. Sudanese women struggled for access to formal politics and resisted confinement to separate “women’s spaces.”
<b>Prioritize minimum consensus over full agreement</b>	Processes to identify a limited set of shared priorities	In the Philippines, sectoral groups aligned core priorities ahead of policy processes to amplify collective voice. Sudanese women focused on two priorities in the Geneva peace talks—humanitarian access and gender-based violence accountability—to maintain cohesion amid difference.
<b>Use flexible, adaptive organizing models</b>	Loose networks, federated coalitions, informal coordination mechanisms	Both cases show rigid structures can fracture coalitions, while flexibility enables participation across diverse identities and contexts.
<b>Leverage identity and symbolism</b>	Creative advocacy, cultural and gendered forms of mobilization	From symbolism related to women’s hair and dress in the Philippines deployed by the WOMB collective and student activists to <i>Kandaka</i> (“strong woman/warrior”) identity and the use of kitchen tools during protest in Sudan, women used visibility and symbolism to claim political space.
<b>Sustain coalitions beyond high-stakes moments</b>	Pivoting activities and leveraging existing relationships to address emerging needs or opportunities	In the Philippines, women’s coalitions have remained active post-peace agreement, adapting as needs evolve. In Sudan, women pivoted from sit-in activities during the revolution to providing lifesaving humanitarian and protection work amid war.

# Implications for WPS

Across both cases, women's coalitions emerge not as peripheral actors, but as foundational political infrastructure. Their work cuts across WPS priorities—broadening opportunities for community input into decision-making, helping societies withstand and recover from violence, and leading implementation efforts responsive to community needs.

“What the comprehensive peace agreement is now is because of civil society.” - KII, Philippines

The coalitions explored in the Philippines illustrate how work to maximize women's influence builds over decades through layered organizing, trusted bridge-builders between civil society and the state, and culturally resonant advocacy that accommodates both alignment and difference. The examples from Sudan reveal a similar dynamic despite escalating and devastating violence: Even as formal talks falter and humanitarian systems collapse, women's networks forged over decades are working to generate collective priorities, accountability standards, and lifesaving responses.

**Coalition strength depends not on perfect unity but on durable coordination rooted in organic organizing that is supported over time.**

Together, these findings demonstrate that coalition strength depends not on perfect unity but on durable coordination rooted in organic organizing that is supported over time. As coalitions form and re-form across sectors, geographies, and moments of crisis, their effectiveness is shaped by the broader enabling environment. While conflict dynamics, civic space, economic conditions, and resource competition all influence coalition operations, sustained efforts to bolster their resilience increase the likelihood that they can act effectively when conditions shift and windows of opportunity arise.

For the WPS field, the message is clear: Durable peace depends on long-term investment in coalition-building that equips women's networks to act when opportunities emerge and endure in the face of conflict and exclusion. The cases examined in this report demonstrate that such coalitions are forged not just in isolated moments of crisis but also through sustained, often messy, and nonlinear work to navigate differences and build alliances rooted in shared values and priorities. When coalitions are empowered to maintain their mobilization capacity, women are better positioned to exert influence at critical junctures and contribute to more effective peace outcomes

“We need to do the groundwork...[which requires] time to develop our network and have the dialogue on our differences ” - KII, Sudan

Recognizing the pivotal role policymakers, donors, and international partners play in supporting women's coalitions, participants emphasized the following priorities:

- Funding **coalition infrastructure**, not just projects
- Supporting **early convening and consultation**, long before peace talks begin
- Valuing **grassroots legitimacy** and channeling local input without intermediaries
- Focusing on discrete issues and **minimum areas of agreement** across diverse groups, tolerating differences while facilitating the identification of shared priorities
- Fostering **flexible, nonlinear organizing**, especially in volatile contexts

## Recommendations

This study identifies a number of recommendations for funders, practitioners, and civil society actors seeking to strengthen women's coalitions as a core pillar of peace and security.

### Funders

- **Support organic organizing:** Meet women's movements where they are by investing in locally driven approaches to building and sustaining networks, rather than imposing externally defined coalitions and donor-driven priorities.
- **Enable flexible and informal structures:** Use adaptive funding modalities that can reach unregistered groups, groups with diffuse leadership and membership, groups with limited digital access, issue-based social movements, and those operating outside capital cities.
- **Fund work to identify shared priorities:** Support coalitions in organizing around a small number of shared, high-impact priorities rather than requiring comprehensive consensus platforms.
- **Recognize temporary coalitions:** Value short-term or issue-specific coalitions as legitimate and strategic, alongside longer-term network-building.
- **Bridge sectors and levels:** Fund cross-sectoral convenings (e.g., spanning peace, humanitarian work, development, governance) and leaders who can operate across national and grassroots spaces.
- **Rethink success metrics:** Measure impact not only through policy outcomes but also through sustained relationships, trust-building, and coalition-formation processes.

- **Invest beyond crisis moments:** Maximize coalition effectiveness by committing to sustained resources before, during, and after conflict, including support for coalition-building in low-conflict settings, regular convening, and intergenerational knowledge transfer.
- **Support documentation and memory:** Fund efforts to document coalition histories and lessons in local languages, including the role of diaspora networks in moments of crisis.

### ***Civil Society Organizations and Women’s Coalitions***

- **Build from what already exists:** Anchor coalition-building in trusted networks, including those not explicitly labeled as “WPS” or “feminist” but engaged in peace- and security-relevant work.
- **Leverage informal coordination:** Use flexible mechanisms—such as secure digital chat groups, rotating leadership, or community-based meeting spaces—to sustain engagement beyond capital cities and in safe environments (e.g., women-only spaces when preferred by members).
- **Balance formality and autonomy:** Weigh the benefits of formal registration (access, recognition, funding) against risks of political exposure, constraint, or co-optation.
- **Make space for difference:** Acknowledge diversity among women’s groups, including differences in political views and goals, and prioritize alignment on specific shared priorities rather than full agreement.
- **Strengthen grassroots feedback loops:** Use federated or networked models that ensure local priorities meaningfully inform collective positions and decisions.
- **Engage across sectors:** Organize through multiple entry points—including health, livelihoods, education, or humanitarian work—where peace and security concerns are embedded.

### ***Policy and Development Practitioners***

- **Map existing women’s networks:** Identify and engage women’s groups already contributing to peace and security outcomes to avoid duplication of efforts and maximize input from existing constellations of local actors rather than relying on ad hoc or one-off consultations.
- **Enable direct engagement:** Reduce reliance on intermediaries and create pathways for grassroots women to engage directly with policy processes.
- **Institutionalize participation:** Build structured, sustained mechanisms for coalition input into policy design and programming, avoiding reactive or symbolic inclusion.

- **Bridge policy silos:** Develop strategies that link humanitarian, development, and security agendas, including through aligned budgeting and programming frameworks, to avoid women's coalitions having to spend the majority of their time administering small sums of funding from a range of funding streams. Consider the use of pooled funds.
- **Support sustained partnerships:** Move beyond crisis-driven consultations toward longer-term relationships that strengthen trust and influence over time.

### **Global Women's Networks**

- **Foster informal transnational networks:** Support spaces for informal dialogue, peer exchange, and rapid lesson sharing among women leaders from conflict-affected settings.
- **Support cross-national learning:** Facilitate exchanges, conferences, and training that center grassroots leadership and practice-based learning.
- **Amplify diaspora engagement:** Document and share lessons on how diaspora women's movements can effectively support domestic coalitions during moments of crisis.
- **Strengthen connective infrastructure:** Act as bridges across regions, sectors, and levels to support alignment, solidarity, and collective power.

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## Notes

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