



WOMEN'S INCLUSION IN PEACE PROCESSES: GLOBAL LESSONS FOR MOLDOVA



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*Mural painted to showcase that professions have no gender, implemented by UN Women with the financial support of Sweden.
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SETTING THE STAGE: MOLDOVA'S 30-YEAR PATH TOWARD PEACE

The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 triggered numerous ethnic and political flash-points across its former territories, such as a civil war in Tajikistan from 1992 to 1997 as well as cross-border conflicts in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, including a war between Russia and Georgia and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In Moldova, tensions emerged as the predominantly Russian-speaking population in the Transnistrian region sought to secede from Moldova and maintain closer cultural, security and political ties to Russia. The outbreak of war from 1991 to 1992 between Russian-backed pro-Transnistrian forces and Moldova's armed forces resulted in significant casualties and widespread displacement.

Although the active conflict in Moldova ended in 1992, the country has been unable to find a solution for what has become a protracted, “frozen” conflict. In 2005, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) initiated a process to support a settlement through the 5+2 format, diplomatic negotiations between representatives of Moldova, de facto structures from the Transnistrian region, the OSCE, Russia and Ukraine as core negotiating parties, and the European Union (EU) and the United States (U.S.) as observers. However, progress toward a settlement has been uneven. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, moreover, has effectively stalled the formal process. While negotiating parties seek a way forward amid heightened regional tensions, the continued separation of the Transnistrian region from the rest of the country has hampered Moldova's efforts at sustaining peace, promoting stability, and developing a shared vision of prosperity for all citizens. Resolving this protracted conflict, then, is paramount for Moldova to advance social cohesion, build confidence in institutions and develop the cross-cutting social ties necessary to animate healthy democratic institutions and processes.

Lessons learned from around the world indicate that supporting women's meaningful leadership and participation through a variety of formal and informal mechanisms has proven to be a catalyst for unlocking stalled processes and securing a longer lasting and more equitable peace. To encourage a reinvigorated peace process in Moldova, and in keeping with its mandate, UN Women's Moldova Country Office has commissioned this

analysis to provide actors in Moldova with a set of recommended practices – and those that are not recommended – from across the globe to promote women's meaningful participation in the settlement process.

UN Women and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda

At the global level, UN Women's work on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and closely related areas is guided by 10 UN Security Council resolutions as well as a set of normative frameworks. UN Women's work in over 50 contexts supports Member States, United Nations colleagues, development partners, media and civil society actors to translate these global policy and legal commitments into meaningful, pragmatic actions on the ground.

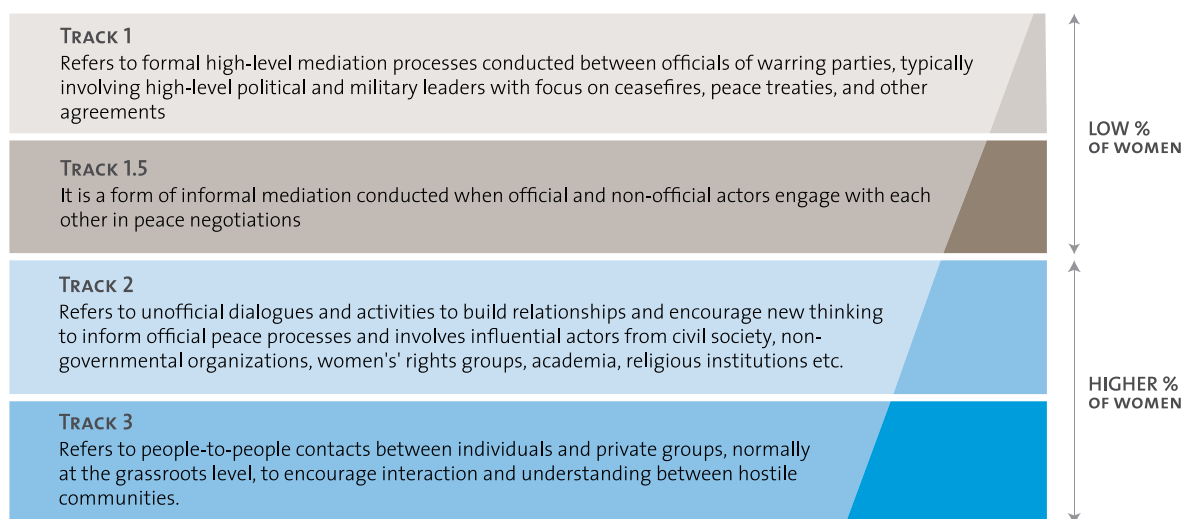
In Moldova, UN Women's strategic priorities focus on amplifying the gains that Moldovan women have made in political, economic, and social inclusion and leadership since the early 2000s, ensuring that these advancements are equally enjoyed by women from all parts of society. With respect to the WPS agenda, UN Women supports policy improvement, capacity development and advocacy for women's leadership and meaningful participation within Moldova's peace process, security institutions and humanitarian efforts.

WOMEN'S MEANINGFUL INCLUSION IN PEACE PROCESSES IS ESSENTIAL

The term “peace process” typically refers to three stages that define the course of finding a solution to conflict, including: I) pre-negotiations that build confidence and establish the procedures and agenda for the actual negotiations, II) negotiations on the substantive terms of the settlement document or peace agreement, and III) implementation of the agreement, which often includes principles and commitments to guide reconstruction and recovery efforts, as well as the return and reintegration of people displaced during the conflict.

Within the first two stages, talks and other exchanges may take place at the formal level, often referred to as “Track 1” diplomacy, or at a more informal level involving a broader range of civil society actors, designated as “Track 2.” Multi-track diplomacy may also include so-called Track 1.5 processes, which involve formal actors engaging in informal processes, whether they be back-channel negotiations or civil society-led peace talks. “Track 3,” which is often referred to as people-to-people diplomacy, engages grassroots actors, individuals or private groups who play no official role in formal processes.

FIGURE 1. Tracks of Peace Processes



These tracks, and especially Track 1 and 2, are all essential to peace negotiations and can be held in parallel. Track 2 peace processes can support and complement, directly or indirectly, Track 1 peace negotiations. While they serve different purposes and involve different actors, making sure that the diplomacy tracks are connected is essential to the peacemaking and peacebuilding process.

Today, women remain largely excluded from formal Track 1 peace processes, while they play a major role in Track 2 and informal peace processes.

Source: Women Influencing Multi-Stakeholder Peace Dialogue, Processes and Policy Spaces, UN Women, 2023, page 6.

The basis for women’s inclusion within peace processes has been clearly defined and agreed to by most Members States of the United Nations. The landmark **UN Security Council Resolution 1325** on Women, Peace and Security (UNSCR 1325) affirms that the participation of women in peace processes is as much a right as it is a contributor to a more sustainable and fairer peace.

From a rights-based perspective, the resolution recognizes that women possess different experiences of conflict and peace from men, have unique perspectives based on these different experiences, and possess a range of goals and capacities. Provisions within peace agreements dramatically affect their lives, and women have a fundamental right to contribute their views, capacities and



On the International Day of Peace, the Moldovan Parliament hosted a “Women for Peace” round table, organized with CALM, UN Women, and funded by Sweden. Photo: UN Women/ Stela Donțu

needs and see them reflected in agreements and beyond. Recognition of women’s rights and positive roles are foundational to the **Women, Peace & Security and Humanitarian Action Compact Framework**, which sets meaningful targets for all actors to ensure women’s meaningful participation and leadership within peace processes, among other commitments¹. Peace processes that exclude women all too frequently reach agreement without necessarily taking the diverse views of women into account. Peace in these situations is, by definition, a partial, unequal peace, as affirmed by UN Secretary General António Guterres in his 2023 annual WPS report: *“Nearly a quarter of a century after Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000 was adopted, women’s full, equal and meaningful participation in building peace should be a norm, not an aspiration or an afterthought.”*²

Because of its exclusionary nature, statistics show that such partial peace is more likely to fail than processes that have included women as negotiators, mediators, observers and other official and unofficial roles.³ When women are included in a meaningful way, peace agreements tend to better reflect the views and goals of a broader range of communities and social groups, which analysts believe contributes to the staying power of these agreements.⁴ Women’s political leadership more broadly has been shown to also contribute to sustained peace. While most peace agreements fail within the first five years of implementation, empirical evidence shows that when women constitute at least 35 per cent of legislatures, the risk of relapse into conflict after

an agreement is reached falls to nearly zero.⁵ While women frequently possess the same cultural, class or social biases as their male counterparts, examples from Colombia, Guatemala, Liberia, Northern Ireland, Somalia, Sri Lanka and other hot spots demonstrate that women more readily extend their support and work across political and social divisions, thus smoothing the way for more open dialogue and cooperation that can lead to a longer-lasting agreement.⁶

Despite these strong reasons to include women in peace processes, women’s participation and leadership has remained frustratingly low.⁷ In 2022, women constituted 16 per cent of conflict party delegations in UN-led or co-led peace processes, down from 19 per cent in 2021 and 23 per cent in 2020. With few exceptions, there is **continued exclusion or stark underrepresentation of women** in processes led by other actors. Processes still take place with no women as mediators, negotiators or signatories. Also, there is a **significant lack of funding** toward supporting women’s meaningful participation in peace processes and implementing gender-related provisions in peace agreements. This was acknowledged most recently in the Secretary-General’s 2022 Report on Women, Peace and Security: *“Bilateral aid supporting feminist, women-led and women’s rights organizations and movements in conflict-affected countries and those identified as ‘fragile’ according to OECD⁸ remained at a low level of \$148 million (0.3 per cent of bilateral aid) in 2021, a decrease from \$176 million in 2020.”*⁹

1 Women, Peace & Security and Humanitarian Compact Framework (2021).
 2 Women, Peace and Security: Report of the Secretary-General (S/2023/725), p.1.
 3 Jana Krause, Werner Krause, and Piia Branfors. “Women’s Participation in Peace Negotiations and the Durability of Peace.” *International Interactions*, Vol. 44, No.6, pp. 985-1016 (2018).
 4 “Making Women Count: Women’s Inclusion in Peace Processes at a Glance.” Graduate Institute of Geneva. Briefing Note (January 2016).

5 Marie O’Reilly. “Why Women? Inclusive Security and Peaceful Societies.” *Inclusive Security Report*, p. 10 (October 2015).
 6 Marie O’Reilly. “Why Women? Inclusive Security and Peaceful Societies.” *Inclusive Security Report*, p. 8 (October 2015).
 7 Neven Ahmad and Pinar Tank. “Women’s Participation in Peace Processes.” *Gender and Mediation Background 1*. PRIO (2020).
 8 OECD refers to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.
 9 Women, Peace and Security: Report of the Secretary-General (S/2023/725), p. 3.

Commonly cited barriers to women's participation include patriarchal attitudes about women's roles in society; security concerns, including outright threats to women's lives or the lives of their family members; lack of support from international actors or allies; and lack of confidence to demand a role or push an agenda.¹⁰ In addition, women often face a higher bar of entry into official talks than men, needing to not only justify their seat at the table but also outperform men in terms of substantive preparation and readiness for conciliation.¹¹

Even when women secure a role in formal processes, the ways in which they are included may still present barriers to their meaningful participation. For example, vertical inclusion may take place, in which women are formally at the table but subordinated to men or shut out of closed-door sessions or sidebar talks where the real negotiations happen.

This dynamic may be detrimental to women's participation, since their presence in formal processes provides the appearance of inclusion but without the actual power to influence any agendas.¹²

To effectively overcome continued marginalization and exclusion, women from a variety of contexts have relied on strong linkages between formal Track 1 negotiations and informal Track 2 processes, capitalizing on the networks and skills developed through their historically strong activism within civil society and social movements. As detailed below, the clear lesson learned from these contexts is that women's meaningful participation and leadership within peace processes and agreements must be a multi-pronged, multi-disciplinary effort through which diverse women and their allies advocate for more inclusive processes, outcomes and implementation.

Northern Ireland Women's Coalition and the Belfast Agreement

Following decades of violence and stalled negotiations, parties to the conflict in Northern Ireland committed to a peace process in 1996. Disappointed with the lack of women's representation in pre-talks, women activists from across the conflict divide formed the bi-communal Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) and won two seats at the negotiating table. Despite fierce and at times misogynistic resistance to its participation, the NIWC is credited with having secured important provisions within the final agreement that generated broad public support and led to the agreement's ratification by 77 per cent of the vote in a public referendum.

From the outset, the NIWC recognized the mutually reinforcing relationship between securing inclusive procedural mechanisms within formal negotiations and advocating for substantive provisions within the agreement. Because the NIWC was the only bi-communal group among the negotiating teams, it was in a unique position to develop proposals that were acceptable to actors across the conflict divide and mobilize its network to support the referendum. By sustaining a principled approach that stressed inclusivity, the NIWC maintained communication with grassroots community groups as well as potential spoilers, enabling them to propose solutions that were amenable to both sides of the conflict. As a result, the NIWC secured provisions within the final agreement to include transitional justice commitments and establish a Civic Forum within the Northern Ireland Assembly, initiatives that resonated with the broader public but had been omitted or ignored by previous, all-male negotiating teams.

10 See, for example, Promoting Women's Participation in Peace Negotiations and Peace Processes, GiZ (Aug 2014). and Neven Ahmad and Pinar Tank, Women's Participation in Peace Processes, Gender and Mediation Backgrounder 1, PRIO (2020).

11 "Women's Participation in Peace Processes: Modalities and Strategies Across Tracks." UN Women. Meeting Report, 29-30 November 2018, (2021).

12 Andreas Schadel and Veronique Duouet. "Incremental Inclusivity: A recipe for effective peace processes?" Berghof Foundation Research Report (2020).

WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY IN MOLDOVA

Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Moldova

FIGURE 2.

AT A GLANCE: gender equality in Moldova

Female President(s):

Maia Sandu (17 Nov 2020 – Present)

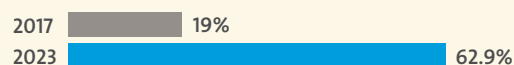
Female Prime Ministers:

- Zinaida Greceanîi (31 March 2008 – 14 Sept 2009)
- Natalia Gherman (22 June – 30 July 2015)
- Maia Sandu (8 June 2019 – 14 Nov 2019)
- Natalia Gavrilita (6 Aug 2021 – 16 Feb 2023)

% of women in parliament*



% of women's financial inclusion*



* Data source for parliament figures: Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security – Moldova Country Profile, accessed 27 February 2024.

Historically, women in Moldova have faced substantial barriers to their meaningful participation and leadership in economic, social and political spheres. While Moldova has achieved important advances in gender equality and women's empowerment in recent years, particularly with respect to political participation, Moldovan women continue to face significant challenges, including discrimination and high levels of domestic violence and sexual abuse.¹³ These challenging conditions stem from widespread patriarchal attitudes that are reflected in public perceptions of women's roles. A 2018 survey conducted for the Gender Barometer in Moldova revealed that 38.3 per cent of men and 29.4 per cent of women believe that

13 According to the Moldova Comprehensive Gender Assessment (2021), women in Moldova are at higher risk of poverty, have a much higher degree of unpaid domestic labor, have lower rates of employment than men, and nearly 40 per cent of women report having experienced physical or sexual violence.



The Platform of Women Deputies (Legislature XI) launched the National Campaign "Women are running for election", encouraging women nationwide to participate in local decision-making and run in the 2023 local elections.

Photo: Courtesy of the Moldovan Parliament

women are afraid to take on serious responsibilities.¹⁴ Such attitudes span both banks of the Nistru River. In a 2019 Gender Barometer poll in the Transnistrian region¹⁵, 25 per cent of male respondents agreed that the main obstacle to women's participation in politics is their inability to make decisions because of their gender. Most recently, a study conducted on the right bank shows that perceptions regarding women's participation in politics and decision-making processes worsened from 2021 to 2023, with 27 per cent of respondents agreeing that women have no place in politics, while 18.4 per cent stated that women are less capable than men and should not be promoted to leadership positions.¹⁶ A gender monitoring report on local general elections conducted by the Partnership for Development Centre (CPD) revealed that only 8 per cent of respondents believe that women should serve as mayors.¹⁷

These social and cultural factors persist as barriers to women seeking political office.

14 "Gender Barometer: How do Women and Men Participate in Politics and Decision-Making?" UN Women (2018), p. 49.

15 Gender Barometer on the left bank of the Nistru River during the period 4-22 March 2019.

16 Descoperirea unui status quo patriarhal. Încotro ne îndreptăm? Studiu privind percepțiile populației cu privire la rolurile de gen în procesul decizional, Center Partnership for Development in partnership with the Civic Coalition for free and fair elections, Chisinau, 2023.

17 Ibid.



Maia Sandu, President of the Republic of Moldova, participating at the Women4Security Forum, aimed at fostering joint security initiatives between Moldovan and Romanian societies and state institutions. The forum was organized by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Moldova in partnership with UN Women and DCAF – Geneva Center for Security Sector Governance with financial support of Sweden.

Photo: Courtesy of Ministry of Internal Affairs

Moldova's 1325 National Action Plans

Moldova's 1325 National Action Plans Since 2018, the Government of the Republic of Moldova has been implementing UNSCR 1325 by developing and enacting its first National Action Plan (NAP) on WPS for 2018–2021, with support from UN Women Moldova. The second-generation NAP on WPS for 2023–2027 aims to enhance the representation of women across all sectors of security and defense by achieving six key objectives. The plan is intended to improve violence prevention mechanisms and facilitate the equal involvement of women and men at all stages of conflict resolution. Additionally, it focuses on engaging local governance institutions and integrating refugee response into local development, emphasizing a top-down agenda for localization. The implementation of these NAPs sets a solid foundation for women's inclusion and participation in decision-making processes more generally. It will also encourage lawmakers to align relevant national legal frameworks to international standards, thus promoting greater and more meaningful participation of Moldovan women in leadership positions.

Despite these regressive attitudes toward women’s leadership, Moldovan women have, in fact, made significant advances in political representation in recent years due to legal provisions. As a result of a double quota system that was reinstated in 2019, requiring that women constitute at least 40 per cent of candidates within the top ten positions of a party’s candidates’ list, women won 40.6 per cent of seats in the parliamentary elections in 2021.¹⁸ Though violations of the provisions on the double quota system during the 2023 local elections, which affected both women and men, were registered, Moldova inched closer to 50/50 representation of women and men candidates in the electoral process. Under this electoral cycle, political parties nominated at least 40 per cent women on their lists of candidates for councilors, although women occupied the last positions on the lists of candidates. As of the 2023 elections, women constitute 33.3 per cent of councilors in district/municipal councils and 40.3 per cent of seats in local councils.¹⁹ Data on women contesting mayoral elections showed a small increase in 2023, with women winning 216 seats in local elections, or 24.1 per cent, which was an increase of 2 per cent from previous elections.²⁰

When women are elected, their contributions also tend to improve the overall perception of women’s leadership among the population. Citizens living in districts or municipalities with female mayors, for example, report high levels of satisfaction with their work and profess twice the degree of confidence in women’s local leadership than citizens in localities where men hold the mayoralty.²¹ Such shifts in levels of confidence signal that the more women are elected to positions of leadership, the greater the public’s perception will be not only of women’s leadership ability but also in governance institutions more generally. The increasing number of women elected to office presents opportunities to mobilize support networks that can promote a gender-responsive agenda for peace. It could also lead to policy

changes in key sectors, especially those in which women face widespread discrimination such as the economy and employment.

These gains notwithstanding, negative or limiting perceptions of women’s fitness for elected office and leadership persist and can be tied, in part, to how traditional print and social media report on women. Over the years, media outlets have portrayed women primarily as victims of the 1990s conflict and more recent crises, which in turn shapes public perception. This belies the long-standing proactive roles women have played in addressing conflict and crises in Moldova, especially at the community level, both within organized civil society groups and through more informal community action.²² This local and civic activism continues into the present, as women’s organizations and activists lead the way in addressing Moldova’s triple crisis triggered by Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine: responding to the influx of refugees, increased economic hardship and unreliable energy access.²³



Tatiana Badan, Mayor of Selemet Village and President of CALM, shared her personal experience and the story of her community’s mobilization during the refugee influx following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Photo: UN Women/ Stela Donțu

18 “Moldova Comprehensive Gender Assessment.” Partnership for Development Center (2021).

19 “The triumph of the double quota system or how we have achieved fair representation. A study on the representation of women and men in councilor positions.” Partnership for Development Center (2023).

20 Ibid.

21 “Gender Barometer: How do Women and Men Participate in Politics and Decision-Making?” UN Women (2018), p. 40.

22 Women have higher rates of participation in the civic sphere than men and are more than two times more likely to launch petitions or protests at the local level to advance or protect their demands or visions, according to UN Women’s 2018 study “Gender Barometer: How do Women and Men Participate in Politics and Decision-Making?”

23 “Conference Report. Women Lead the Way: Strengthening a Localized and Gender Responsive Approach to Refugee Response and Peacebuilding.” UN Women Moldova Country Office (2023).

WOMEN'S MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP IN MOLDOVA'S SETTLEMENT PROCESS

As noted in the introduction, Moldova has been locked in a so-called frozen conflict since 1992. Since October 2005, the OSCE-facilitated 5+2 format, **an example of formal Track 1 diplomacy**, has been the only formal settlement process in Moldova. Under the 5+2 format, talks between Chief Negotiators from Chisinau and Tiraspol (i.e., “the Sides”) have been convened by the OSCE’s Head of Mission in Moldova, who acts as a mediator, along with other formal mediators from Russia and Ukraine and the EU and U.S. as observers. In parallel to the 5+2 format, the OSCE also facilitates informal dialogues between Chief Negotiators from the Sides, referred to as the 1+1 format. These two platforms for talks are supported by 11 Thematic Working Groups, which are composed of political and administrative actors from the Sides. Following Russia’s invasion of Crimea in 2014 and Ukraine in 2022, the 5+2 format talks have been effectively suspended, leaving the 1+1 format and Working Groups as the only remaining viable official dialogue platforms.

Since the establishment of formal talks, only three women have acted as Chief Negotiators from either side. Cristina Lesnic (January 2018 – June 2019 and March – November 2020) and Olga Cebotari (November 2020 – August 2021) represented Chisinau, and Nina Shtanski (January 2012 – September 2015) represented Tiraspol.

Given the stalled nature of the formal settlement process, as noted above, most work toward a common agenda takes place either within the 1+1 informal talks between the Sides or within the Working Groups. Historical data on women’s participation within these Working Groups is not currently available; however, participants and observers report that the groups have far fewer female members than male. Since spring 2021, for example, women from the Tiraspol side have served as the Chairpersons of five Working Groups focused on primarily “feminized” areas, including such as Healthcare, Social Protection and Humanitarian Aid, and Education. Women representing Chisinau in the Working Groups are also associated with similar thematic areas, and

three of the 14 Thematic Working Groups were co-chaired by women in 2023, up slightly from 2022. Thus, the combined share of women from both banks in leadership roles of the Joint Working Groups constituted 28.5 per cent in 2023.

Chief Negotiators and Working Group members are appointed by government of the Republic of Moldova and de facto structures of Transnistrian region and thus reflect deeply entrenched political dynamics and party affiliations. The political nature of appointments has contributed to women’s historical marginalization in politics and limited their leadership opportunities over time. Recent gains by elected women officials, though, may bode well for women’s future representation both as Chief Negotiators and Working Group members and Chairs.

The experiences of past Chief Negotiators, however, should signal the need to ensure that appointed women can work more freely and without bias. Over the years, female Chief Negotiators have faced deeply gendered backlash in the press meant to undermine their legitimacy and confidence, including references to their appearance and fitness as mothers based on their negotiating positions.²⁴ Experience from other contexts suggests that as women begin to gain a foothold of power, gendered backlash like this is a common strategy and one that should be planned for and countered.

Within the substantive agendas of the Working Groups, women’s rights and meaningful participation are now being addressed through the Human Rights Working Group, which began as a subgroup but was eventually elevated to the level of a Working Group. The Human Rights Working Group’s remit covers the protection of the rights of persons with disabilities; protection of the rights of children at risk; repatriation of child and adult victims of human trafficking; prevention of internet-facilitated violence; prevention and combating of domestic violence; and protection of persons living with HIV/AIDS against discrimination/segregation and promotion of their social inclusion.

²⁴ Interview with Cristina Lesnic, 17 January 2024.

The Human Rights Working Group has faced long periods of dysfunction, however, having once remained dormant for approximately five years. The Bureau for Reintegration Policies, which convenes the Working Groups, reported that the Human Rights Working Group held five meetings between 2019 and 2021, without resulting in any major breakthroughs. Since the Working Group is dedicated to human rights in general, it does not always focus on women's rights specifically. During the Group's last meeting on 10 October 2023, for example, the agenda was silent on women's rights issues.²⁵

The absence of women extends, as well, to the formal teams of mediators and observers. Since the 5+2 format began in 2005, the OSCE Mission in Moldova has had two female heads of Mission, including Jennifer Brush (April 2012 – July 2014) and Kelly Keiderling (October 2022 – present). And since the format's establishment, no woman has ever been appointed as OSCE Special Representative for the Transnistrian settlement process. Nonetheless, key international actors have positively influenced and advocated for greater women's inclusion. During her mandate as OSCE Chairperson-in-Office from September 2019 to October 2022, for example, Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs Ann Linde prioritized concrete progresses on gender equality and the WPS agenda in Moldova. Additionally, the appointment of Liliana Palihovici, former Moldovan politician and currently active civil society representative, as the Special Representative of the OSCE Chair-in-Office on Gender in January 2021, has contributed to raising gender issues higher on the governmental and public agendas.

In parallel to official negotiations, several informal mechanisms exist to document the needs and experiences of citizens. Operating on the margins of the formal settlement process, these major and small-scale initiatives focus on ensuring women's rights and meaningful participation in building peace. They include confidence-building measures launched by the OSCE, such as the 'Support to Confidence Building Measures' (2019-2024) project implemented by UNDP with EU assistance; the Transnistrian dialogues: Women's Edition, supported by several EU and non-EU member states; and other projects conducted by

local civil society organizations (CSOs). Collectively, these initiatives have offered the opportunity for women and men from both Sides to communicate and express their concerns, work on concrete local problems, create networks and exchange good practices in different areas of activity. These initiatives, however, have typically been at a very localized level and on a scale not capable of reaching the public.

Expanding on these earlier efforts, in October 2022, UN Women in consultation with the OSCE Mission in Moldova helped organize a new group, the Women's Advisory Board (WAB) for Sustainable Peacebuilding, which is **meant to serve as an informal Track 2 mechanism** accompanying the Transnistrian settlement process and engage in peacebuilding efforts more generally. From its inception, the WAB's key objective has been to promote the equal inclusion of women and men's rights and perspectives in the negotiations as well as on substantive issues under discussion within the Working Groups. As such, the WAB is meant to serve as a bridge between grassroots constituencies and actors engaged in high-level talks. As noted above, however, the stalled or possibly defunct formal settlement process presents both challenges as well as opportunities for the WAB's work that will need to be confronted as it matures into a robust, self-sustaining platform.

Against this backdrop of women's incremental progress amid lingering patriarchal bias, Moldova has been contending with a severe triple crisis triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine: the refugee response, increased economic hardship and unreliable energy access. As of June 2023, approximately 110,000 refugees from Ukraine had settled in Moldova, a figure representing 4.5 per cent of the total population. This unprecedented regional humanitarian crisis has considerably impacted citizens on both banks of the Nistru River, highlighting the need to develop a more inclusive and gender-responsive policy framework. Women's humanitarian needs, along with their capacity to respond to these crises, has defined the Moldovan government's response and opens the possibility to build upon a growing acceptance of gender-responsive policies on both banks of the river.

Moldovan women, then, stand at a potentially historic turning point, with opportunities to not only advance women's rights and meaningful participation in public life but also act as a catalyst

25 "Human rights sectoral experts meeting held in Bender.": "Ședința experților sectoriali în domeniul drepturilor omului s-a desfășurat la Bender." Bureau for Reintegration of the Republic of Moldova, October 10, 2023.

for a reinvigorated peace process. Lessons learned from around the world inform us that to move forward, Moldovan women activists must bridge existing societal divides and build upon key alliances with grassroots networks, local commu-

nities and international actors to transform the possibility for change into reality. The remainder of this analysis provides examples of women's engagement in peace processes globally to inform recommendations for the Moldovan context.



*WAB members approving a position paper at the working meeting on 4 October 2023.
Photo: UN Women/ Aurel Obreja*

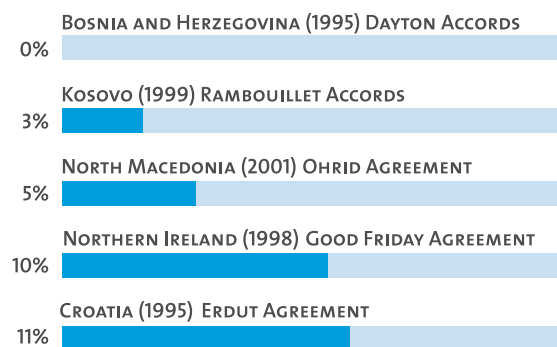
GOOD LESSONS AND CAUTIONARY TALES FROM PEACE PROCESSES ACROSS THE GLOBE

Given the prominent role that many countries from the Northern Hemisphere play in championing the WPS agenda, it is perhaps ironic that statistics from peace processes in Europe paint an even dimmer picture for women's inclusion than the notably low rates globally. A scan of peace processes in Europe since the mid-1990s makes clear that despite rhetorical and financial support for women's meaningful participation in peace processes, governments in Europe have been unable to translate commitment into action. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, women were notably absent from formal negotiations during the Dayton Peace Accords in 1995, despite their significant contributions to peacebuilding efforts on the ground. This exclusion reflected broader patterns of marginalization, sidelining the voices of women who played critical roles in humanitarian aid, community reconciliation and post-conflict reconstruction. Their absence from decision-making tables not only hindered the effectiveness of peacebuilding efforts in the region but also perpetuated gender disparities in governance and leadership that have stymied sustainable, positive peace for more than 25 years. In Georgia, women have faced barriers since the formal talks, called the Geneva International Discussions, were established in 2008, when only one woman was a member within a 10-person negotiating team.²⁶ Since then, women have struggled to achieve the 40 per cent target outlined in Georgia's 2017 WPS Action Plan, instead hovering around 20 per cent representation between 2018 and 2020.²⁷

Similarly, in Cyprus, women's involvement in formal peace negotiations to resolve the island's 50-year-long dispute have been limited. Despite grassroots activism and advocacy by organizations such as the bi-communal Gender Advisory Team and the earlier civil society movement Hands Across the Divide, women's representation in for-

mal peace talks has remained low. This exclusion overlooks the perspectives and expertise of women who have been actively engaged in promoting intercommunal dialogue, reconciliation and confidence-building measures across the divided communities. Their marginalization undermines the inclusivity and sustainability of peace efforts, reinforcing entrenched power dynamics that hinder progress towards a lasting resolution.

FIGURE 3. Participation of women from Europe in peace processes (1992-2011)



Source: Women Influencing Multi-Stakeholder Peace Dialogue, Processes and Policy Spaces, UN Women, 2023, page 9.

In contrast, the Northern Ireland peace process offers a near singular example of women's active participation and influence in peacebuilding in Europe. As noted above, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition played a crucial role in advocating for gender equality and inclusivity in the negotiations leading to the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Their efforts led to provisions within the agreement that addressed women's concerns and emphasized the importance of their involvement in shaping the future of the region. Their direct engagement demonstrates women's invaluable contributions in fostering dialogue, reconciliation and community building in conflict and post-conflict environments.

Contexts where women have successfully won seats at the formal negotiating table all share one thing in common: they rely on close partnerships between women engaged in formal Track 1 peace

26 "Women's Participation in Peace Negotiations: Connections between Presence and Influence, 2nd edition." UN Women (2012).

27 Chaira Minora. "Women, Peace and Security in Georgia." Rondeli Foundation (2023).

processes and women grassroots activists. Such collaborations leverage the unique strengths and perspectives of both groups, ensuring that peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstruction efforts address the diverse needs and experiences of affected communities. Grassroots women's organizations often possess intimate knowledge of local dynamics and networks, enabling them to engage directly with communities and mediate conflicts at the grassroots level. Meanwhile, women involved in formal peace processes bring expertise in diplomacy, negotiation and policymaking, providing avenues for incorporating grassroots perspectives into high-level decision-making. Together, these partnerships facilitate dialogue, build trust and promote gender-sensitive approaches to peace-building, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness and legitimacy of peace processes, even in the most patriarchal societies.

In **Liberia**, partnerships between women engaged in formal peace processes and grassroots organizations played a pivotal role in ending the country's civil war. Alliances between the Mano River Women's Peace Network, which had formal observer status at the peace talks, and grassroots initiatives not only ensured that gender-sensitive provisions were included in the agreement but exerted pressure on negotiators to remain at the table until the agreement was reached.²⁸ Organizations like the Women in Peacebuilding Network and the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace, led by Leymah Gbowee, mobilized grassroots movements for peace and reconciliation, while organizations like the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) engaged in Track 2 diplomacy and local mediation initiatives. This collaboration amplified the voices of women at all levels of society, leading to the eventual cessation of hostilities and the election of Africa's first female head of state, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

Similarly, in **Burundi**, women's organizations such as the Union des Femmes pour la Paix et le Développement (UFPD) worked alongside women participating in formal peace negotiations to promote inclusive dialogue and reconciliation. Grassroots women's networks, supported by organizations like Femmes Africa Solidarité, facilitated community-level mediation efforts and advocated for women's rights in the peace process.

This partnership helped address the underlying causes of conflict, fostered trust between communities and contributed to the successful implementation of the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement in 2000.

In deeply patriarchal **Guatemala**, where Peace Accords were signed in 1996 after decades of civil war, women won unprecedented representation, constituting 11 per cent of signatories and 10 per cent of negotiating teams. Their presence in the formal Track 1 process was achieved through collaboration with grassroots actors. Organizations like the National Union of Guatemalan Women (UNAMG) advocated for gender-inclusive peace agreements and supported grassroots initiatives aimed at healing the wounds of war. Women from indigenous communities, represented by organizations like CONAVIGUA, played crucial roles in local mediation efforts and transitional justice processes. By working in tandem with formal peace negotiators, women grassroots activists successfully advocated for the inclusion of historic gender-sensitive provisions in the peace accords, including recognition of targeted sexual violence against indigenous women as a war crime.

In addition to the strong partnerships between women formally engaged in Track 1 negotiations and their sisters working more informally at the grassroots level, these successful examples originated from self-motivated, organized women who demanded a seat at the table and a peace agreement that reflected their concerns and lived realities. Support from international actors such as UN Women and powerful Members States have amplified these women's efforts, but the impetus for action originated with courageous women fighting for the future of their own countries.

Reflecting on the experiences of women in other contexts, the remainder of this analysis will outline two key recommendations for women's engagement in Moldova's path to peace. These recommendations, targeting the WAB and the technical Working Groups facilitated by the Bureau for Reintegration Policies, assume the active commitment and desire of Moldovan women and their male allies from both Sides to not only work toward a solution to the country's decades-long division but to ensure that women's voices and perspectives are reflected in that solution.

28 "Women in Peace and Transition Processes. Liberia (2003-2011)." Inclusive Peace & Transition Initiative (April 2018).



The International Conference "Women Lead the Way" organized in Chisinau with financial support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and the Government of Sweden. Photo: UN Women/ Stela Donțu

RECOMMENDATIONS TO MOLDOVA

Recommendation 1:

UN Women may facilitate WAB members to develop a three-to-five-year vision, and accompanying capacity strengthening plan with clear milestones, to activate the WAB as a viable, legitimate and effective actor.

Currently in **Moldova**, the WAB exists as the only organized civil society coalition or group dedicated to informally accompanying the settlement process and leading actions to promote a conducive environment for cross-community dialogue and action. This affords the WAB and its supporters a unique advantage to promote the leadership of women in the broader settlement process and beyond. Established in October 2022, the WAB is still in its inception phase and the next several years present an opportunity to apply lessons from other contexts to strengthen its role, ensuring that when it engages in the process, it speaks on behalf of diverse women throughout the country.

The WAB is modeled on the Women's Advisory Board launched in **Syria** in 2016, and it also echoes UN Women's efforts to form a Technical Advisory Group (TAG) in **Yemen** in 2018. In Syria and Yemen, these mechanisms were joint initiatives of UN Women and the respective Offices of the Special Envoys of the Secretary-General (OSE) that convened formal negotiations involving parties to the conflict. From the outset, both the Syrian WAB and Yemeni TAG were advisory bodies to the OSEs and were established to provide an avenue for the views and needs of women to be heard and included within otherwise all-male negotiation processes. While Moldova's WAB does not necessarily share the same close relationship with the lead convenor of the formal settlement process, several lessons from Syria and Yemen can still be instructive for the WAB in Moldova.

Transparency and inclusivity.

While Syria's WAB and Yemen's TAG are both recognized as mechanisms that seek to address an important gap within their respective peace processes, both have been sharply criticized for their lack of transparency in the membership selection process and perceived exclusion of traditionally marginalized women's groups and activists.²⁹ In Syria, consternation and suspicion about the selection of the WAB's initial 12 members began from the first press statement announcing its establishment. Although the statement stressed that the membership had been chosen by Syrian women's organizations, the absence of details about the actual mechanism of inclusion and the relatively small number of members eroded the WAB's legitimacy and led excluded groups to conclude that it was an organ of international actors rather than a Syrian-led body.³⁰ More serious forms of critique suggested that selected members were not vetted beforehand, resulting in accusations that WAB membership included supporters of extremist groups, corrupt actors and those who defended the government's violence against civilians – critiques that were all fueled by the lack of transparency in the selection process.³¹ In response, the United Nations opened its process to public application, most recently issuing a call for applications to the WAB in July 2023. With this call, the OSE-Syria selected 15 new members within two cohorts that will gradually replace earlier cohorts from 2016 and 2018. The gradual, rotating nature of membership is designed to sustain the WAB's work and accumulated knowledge while also allowing for the infusion of a more diverse set of actors and viewpoints.

29 Rula Asad, "Syrian Women's Advisory Board – lessons to be learned," Heinrich Boll Stiftung (January 2022); Kholoud Mansour, "Syrian Women and their Participation in the Peace Process," The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship; "Transfer from Track Two Peacebuilding to Track One Peacemaking: Insights from Yemen and Syria," Inclusive Peace Policy Brief (November 2022); and Fatma Jaffar, "Speaking up: The Role of in Building Peace in Yemen" Oxfam (March 2023).

30 Rula Asad, "Syrian Women's Advisory Board – lessons to be learned," Heinrich Boll Stiftung (January 2022); "Controversy over the Syrian Women's Advisory Board," Syrian Justice and Accountability Center (April 2016); and Kholoud Mansour, "Syrian Women and their Participation in the Peace Process," The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship.

31 "Controversy over the Syrian Women's Advisory Board." Syrian Justice and Accountability Center (April 2016).

Given that Moldova's WAB was established through the initiative of UN Women and the OSCE Mission in Moldova, UN Women may consider how to both broaden the WAB's membership and ensure that it is seen as a legitimate actor on behalf of women within Tracks 1, 1.5 and 2 of Moldova's erstwhile settlement process.

Sub-recommendation 1.a.:

As it embarks on its own development, the WAB may consider growing its membership through a transparent and participatory process open to CSOs, individual activists, human rights groups and other interested parties. If sufficient interest in participation is generated, WAB members should consider a rotating membership similar to Syria's WAB. If a rotating membership is pursued, capacity-building efforts should remain open to all.

Diversity of opinion and position.

The composition of Syria's WAB included pro-Assad and pro-opposition women that were brought together by UN Women and the OSE-Syria. For some, this created a perception that the WAB was an organ of international actors seeking to drive an agenda, rather than an outlet to provide access for already organized Syrian women. This perception was amplified by the push to have the WAB speak with a unified voice and develop demands or agenda items that bridged the political divide.³² By conditioning women's role in the peace process on their ability to carve out joint positions – a litmus test never required of men – well-meaning international actors present women with a much higher hurdle for inclusion. Instead, analysts have postulated that Syria's WAB could have been more effective and seen as more legitimate by a broader segment of the population if participating women were given the leeway to hold diverse opinions. In fact, a year after the WAB was established, Syrian women activists from diverse backgrounds collaborated to create the Syrian Women's Political Movement (SWPM). Since 2017, the SWPM has produced policy papers and held contentious but productive debates on topics considered taboo among their male counterparts. Listening to diverse opinions requires a degree of acceptance to a set of operating principles, trust among members, and commitment to engagement despite

32 Rula Asad. "Syrian Women's Advisory Board – lessons to be learned." Heinrich Boll Stiftung (January 2022).

differences in order to advance understanding and, eventually, reach compromise and agreement. This same kind of commitment can be seen in Northern Ireland and Colombia, where women from opposing sides of the conflict managed to engage each other for the benefit of the respective peace processes. In all instances, the power of women's actions for peace stemmed from a pre-existing, organic movement by women to demand a seat at the table, movements that were then supported by international actors.

Beware of informal advisory roles.

In **Syria** and **Yemen**, the WAB and TAG did not participate directly in each respective peace process; instead, their involvement was restricted to purely advisory roles to the OSEs. While the WAB and TAG helped sensitize the OSEs on a broader range of issues and perspectives important to women and other marginalized populations, observers note that the nature of their involvement also took pressure off the parties to include women in a formal role. This common phenomenon, in fact, was recognized by UN Women in a 2021 report on women's meaningful participation in peace processes, which cautioned practitioners that establishing commissions or advisory boards may relegate women to advisory roles on the margins of talks.³³ In both contexts, the OSE had sought a formal role for women within official talks but faced strong resistance from all-male negotiating teams unwilling to include women in their ranks. The inability of OSEs to carve out an official role for women hints at the limits of bodies such as Syria's WAB and Yemen's TAG (both of which were established by external actors) and limits on the power of external mediators to secure a formal role for women. While both groups have provided important and otherwise missing perspectives to help shape the OSEs' agenda and approaches, neither group has segued from an informal body to a formal one. In this sense, Syria's WAB and Yemen's TAG can be viewed as necessary but insufficient means for women's meaningful participation.

33 "Women's Participation in Peace Processes: Modalities and Strategies Across Tracks." UN Women. Meeting Report, 29-30 November 2018, (2021).

Ensure open communication with the public.

Analysts have observed that even with the suspicion that shrouded the establishment of Syria's WAB, its members might have been able to overcome initial resistance if they had more effectively communicated their positions and working methods to other civil society actors and the public at large.³⁴ Evidence from Northern Ireland supports this assumption. Women who were involved in the Northern Ireland peace process highlight that part of their strength and legitimacy within negotiations stemmed from their strong connections to CSOs and community leaders, which enabled them to float potentially controversial ideas and desensitize contentious points that could have escalated into barriers to public acceptance of the agreement.³⁵ Instead, the two-way communication between women engaged in the peace process and the public allowed key constituencies outside of the process to be informed of emerging issues and turning points while also preserving discretion about sensitive matters that could derail the talks.

While negotiators need a measure of privacy to hammer out difficult compromises, too much secrecy can undermine the legitimacy of the process and generate backlash that can stymie hard-won agreements. The case of Northern Ireland underscores the importance of striking this balance and the perhaps unique role that women can play as a result of their traditionally strong ties to local activism and community support.

34 Kholoud Mansour. "Syrian Women and their Participation in the Peace Process." The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship (2020).

35 Kate Fearon, "Northern Ireland Women's Coalition: Institutionalizing a political voice and ensuring representation," *Accord*, Issue 13 (2002); and Monica McWilliams, "Women at the Peace Table: The Gender Dynamics of Peace Negotiations," in *Gender and Peacebuilding: All Hands Required*, Maureen Flaherty (ed.) (2015).

Failing to Communicate and Almost Losing the Peace in Colombia

For decades, women from across the conflict divide in Colombia fought hard to get seats at the negotiating table and see key social and gender-responsive issues reflected in an agreement. Their dedication resulted in a 2016 agreement that some analyses have called the most comprehensive peace agreement in history, one that contained bold provisions for gender equality, inclusion of LGBTQI+ protections, and recognition of women's roles in all aspects of conflict and peace. This historic peace agreement, however, came close to failing, as citizens voted it down by a slim margin in a country-wide referendum. The agreement was eventually adopted by Congress, after negotiators made concessions to conservative camps that watered down some of the strongest gender provisions. Reflecting on the near collapse of the 2016 Peace Agreement, Claudia Mejia, an activist from the women's organization Sisma Mujer, concluded that broad public acceptance depends on "...the necessity of 'improbable dialogues': either we speak to all sectors, or we will continue to be surprised by people's responses." Her observation reflects the reality that while negotiators, mediators and others involved in talks have time to gradually shift their positions and accept compromise, the public is often not brought along on this journey. The consequences, as illustrated in Colombia, can impede, or even upend acceptance of a hard-won agreement, sending negotiators back to the table or, worse, back onto the battlefield.

During stalled processes, seek alternatives for influencing opinions and honing skills.

As in Moldova, stalled negotiations in Syria and Yemen raised challenges for the WAB and TAG to demonstrate their effectiveness to other peace process actors as well as the public. Facing such challenges, women in a variety of contexts have turned to local action to build credibility, strengthen networks, and hone important mediation and negotiation skills. In Iraq, amid a lagging peace implementation, WABs were established through the National Democratic Institute with funding from the Canadian Government. Set up in five provinces most affected by occupation by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, these WABs set their locus of action away from the national level to the local. Through these WABs, women activists worked with local governments to implement projects that benefited whole communities, such as spearheading the rehabilitation of parks, increasing accessibility for people with disabilities in public buildings, and pushing education reforms. In addition to gaining important credibility, skills and knowledge, implementing these tangible local projects brought the women, who came from a diverse range of sects and backgrounds, closer together.³⁶

Similarly, after a round of failed talks in Colombia from 1998 to 2002, amid broad public disillusionment with peace efforts and growing calls for a military solution to the decades-long conflict, women's groups worked hard to keep pressure on the government, guerrillas and international actors to return to the negotiating table and find a political solution. In the absence of talks, they held mass rallies and marches to promote peace and negotiated local ceasefire agreements as well as the release of hostages. These efforts were instrumental in keeping the peace process in the collective consciousness and prepared women to engage forcefully and demand a role when negotiations eventually resumed in 2012.³⁷

Tapping women to engage in local peace and social cohesion efforts has been critiqued for relegating women to local action while preserving national action for men, especially in contexts marked by dysfunctional or stalled peace processes. Still, women's engagement at the local level is widespread, and it may offer a path forward to boost acceptance and appreciation for women's leadership.

³⁶ "Women's Advisory Boards Celebrate Progress in Iraq." National Democratic Institute (October 2022).

³⁷ Virginia M. Bouvier. "Gender and the Role of Women in the Colombian Peace Process." UN Women Background Paper (March 2016).

Recommendation 2:

The Bureau for Reintegration Policies and UN Women should consider establishing a Women's Caucus among members of the Thematic Working Groups supporting the settlement process.

In the absence of a dedicated Working Group on Gender, UN Women may consider encouraging women members across the various Working Groups to form an informal Women's Caucus. The caucus could provide a platform for women and their male allies to advocate for gender mainstreaming across all workstreams of the Working Groups, and perhaps to identify common ground on substantive issues. While recognizing that the deeply politicized nature of appointments presents potential barriers to common action, global experience indicates that such barriers are possible to overcome.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, women activists and elected officials have been crossing political and ethnic divides since the earliest days of peace implementation. A multi-ethnic, cross-party coalition of women was instrumental in securing changes to the first post-war election law to include a women's quota on party candidates' lists in 1999. With support from influential international actors, these women bound together to lobby for change, in spite of their individual political agendas.³⁸ Later, in 2013, 36 women parliamentarians in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, one of Bosnia's two state entities, crossed party lines to establish a parliamentary Women's Caucus with the aim of shifting discourse away from a male-dominated, nationalistic rhetoric to one that seeks common ground.³⁹ Women's Caucuses have since been formed in Albania, Kosovo,⁴⁰ Northern Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia and frequently support each other on supra-national or regional issues.

If there is sufficient interest among Working Group members to form a Women's Caucus in Moldova, UN Women could consider working with the Bureau for Reintegration Policies to identify necessary inputs to launch the caucus as a viable group. This may include adopting a capacity-building plan to boost gender analysis, public outreach and negotiation skills among members. Once established, the caucus could partner with the WAB to facilitate public awareness on the importance of reaching a settlement. It could also partner with universities or external actors to develop research and position papers on policy changes or proposals that caucus members could promote in their respective Working Groups. While members from the Sides may not develop unified positions, a Women's Caucus could establish an evidence base that is mutually recognized and serve as a platform in which differences of policy or programme can be debated.

38 Tanya L. Domi. "Advancing Women's Political Rights in Bosnia and Hercegovina: Making a difference early in the peace process." *The Harriman Review*, p. 40, (2002).

39 "First Multi-Party Women's Caucus formed in Bosnia and Hercegovina." *International Republican Institute* (April 2013).

40 This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

CONCLUSION

Key Recommendations:

1. UN Women to facilitate the WAB in developing its own five-year vision and development strategy,
 2. WAB to consider expanding its members in a transparent manner,
 3. The Bureau for Reintegration Policies and UN Women to support the development of a Women's Caucus within the Working Groups supporting the settlement process.
-

The current settlement process in Moldova is at an impasse, without a clear pathway forward, given regional tensions and the central role of Ukraine and Russia as formal mediators within the 5+2 format. As in other contexts that have experienced stalled or defunct peace processes, the inability of negotiators and mediators to formally meet presents a challenge for securing women's increased participation in the formal process and ensuring that negotiating positions and agreements reflect the views, goals and needs of women and other historically excluded groups. While lack of progress on formal talks presents a barrier, it also opens up opportunities to prepare women's groups and elected or appointed officials to effectively engage the public, as well as each other, in promoting inclusive processes and sustainable peace outcomes.

Given the current impasse, there may be no better time to promote public dialogue, which may afford opportunities to raise awareness on the most pressing needs facing Moldovan women and also activate public demand for a Transnistrian conflict settlement.

In this scenario, the WAB could serve as both a convenor and a good example of active engagement of civil society in advocating for constitutional settlement formulas aimed at providing social and economic opportunities for women and men, girls and boys residing on both banks of the Nistru River. Considering the current regional security environment, using this time to generate public demand for a settlement while challenging existing stereotypes and divisive narratives may be the only way forward.

If an energetic public outreach campaign to demand peace is the way forward, all concerned actors would do well to heed lessons from elsewhere. Of all the global learning outcomes for how to support such campaigns, perhaps the most important tenet is that **demands for gender-inclusive peace must originate from and be promoted by self-motivated women representing the diverse spectrum of Moldovan society.** In other words, external actors cannot build someone else's peace. Moldova's WAB stands as a uniquely well-situated body of civil society actors from both sides of the Nistru River that can potentially act as an effective catalyst to generate public demand for peace. The clear message from global experience, however, is that the desire to play this role must come from WAB members themselves. UN Women and other external actors can play a vital role in supporting members to define a common vision of the WAB's role, but if the WAB is to be viewed as legitimate and meaningful, its vision and action plan must be developed and owned by its members, not external actors. This will require a revised approach to the WAB's organizational development, one that – by its very nature – is full of contingency and uncertain outcomes. But the process of reaching agreement on a common vision and action plan, however contentious or difficult, may itself generate closer bonds as WAB members learn to trust in joint processes and accept that differences in opinion or position exist even within healthy organizations.

The WAB cannot go it alone, however. Alliances are critically important – both between national actors as well as with international ones. If the WAB decides to step into the role of public convenor, global experience indicates that they will need a broad range of support across different sectors to be successful. Allied women within the Working Groups afford one possible avenue toward coalition building, one that is embedded in the formal process and can act as a bridge between 1+1 negotiators meeting informally and the WAB. By pairing the WAB with a new Women's Caucus within the Working Groups, international actors such as UN Women can provide critical assistance to the two groups by supporting the development of jointly recognized research and position papers on key thematic priorities or topics of interest that are mutually agreed upon

by the groups. This can prove effective for generating debate on key issues, regardless of whether the formal process is reinvigorated or if a political solution is found through different channels.

If forward movement is to happen, it will likely be because of public pressure, ideally although not necessarily from both sides of the Nistru River. Tapping into the close ties and broad public satisfaction enjoyed by women mayors and other locally elected officials on the right bank can help embed public outreach and dialogue platforms within trusted networks of existing leadership. Partnership between the WAB and a network of women elected officials may help advance the policy agendas of both sets of actors and generate public interest in demanding a solution.

While the regional situation has impeded Moldova's settlement process, it has also generated greater awareness about the need to support re-

fugees and marginalized populations in a gender-responsive way. Instead of fighting for a seat at an upended – and perhaps increasingly irrelevant – table, WAB members, women elected officials and allied women within the Working Groups have an opportunity to generate demand for the construction of an entirely new table. If successful, women will be spearheading a new movement to reach a sustainable solution to Moldova's protracted, frozen conflict. In doing so, they will have greater opportunities to ensure that the newly built processes and mechanisms emerging from this movement reflect their concerns, ways of working and visions for the future. In this sense, the defunct formal process may be a blessing in disguise for an inclusive, gender-responsive peace. The question is whether organized women and their male allies in Moldova are prepared to seize the moment.



UN Women Executive Director Meets with Representatives of Moldovan Government. Photo: UN Women/ Aurel Obreja

UN WOMEN IS THE UN ORGANIZATION DEDICATED TO GENDER EQUALITY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN. A GLOBAL CHAMPION FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS, UN WOMEN WAS ESTABLISHED TO ACCELERATE PROGRESS ON MEETING THEIR NEEDS WORLDWIDE.

UN Women supports UN Member States as they set global standards for achieving gender equality, and works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to ensure that the standards are effectively implemented and truly benefit women and girls worldwide. It works globally to make the vision of the Sustainable Development Goals a reality for women and girls and stands behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life, focusing on four strategic priorities: Women lead, participate in and benefit equally from governance systems; Women have income security, decent work and economic autonomy; All women and girls live a life free from all forms of violence; Women and girls contribute to and have greater influence in building sustainable peace and resilience, and benefit equally from the prevention of natural disasters and conflicts and humanitarian action. UN Women also coordinates and promotes the UN system's work in advancing gender equality.



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