

PEACEBUILDING STRATEGIES OF UN WOMEN IN THE ILEMI TRIANGLE: EVIDENCE FROM A CONTESTED AFRICAN BORDERLAND (2010–2025)

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of Study: The study examined the peacebuilding strategies adopted by UN Women in the Ilemi Triangle between 2010 and 2025.

Problem Statement: Peacebuilding remains a priority in conflict-prone border regions where recurring insecurity undermines human security, socio-economic development and regional stability. The Ilemi Triangle, shared by Kenya, South Sudan and Ethiopia has experienced perennial conflicts driven by competition over natural resources, cross-border insecurity, weak governance structures and socio-cultural dynamics.

Methodology: Guided by Feminist Peace Theory and Political Ecology Theory, the study adopted a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. Data was collected from 144 respondents through semi-structured questionnaires, key informant interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis.

Result: The study established that UN Women has implemented diverse peacebuilding strategies, including promoting women's participation in peacebuilding processes, strengthening the capacity of women leaders, supporting community dialogue and mediation, addressing gender-based violence and fostering institutional partnerships. However, the recognition of cross-border collaboration and the degree to which socio-economic drivers of conflict were addressed remained comparatively moderate.

Conclusion: Although UN Women has adopted a comprehensive strategic framework for peacebuilding in the Ilemi Triangle, sustainable effectiveness requires stronger institutional collaboration, greater political commitment, more consistent implementation across communities and integrated approaches that address both the structural and gender dimensions of conflict.

Keywords: *Peacebuilding Strategies, UN Women, Ilemi Triangle, Women Peace and Security, Gender-Based Violence, Community Dialogue*

INTRODUCTION

Peacebuilding has increasingly become a key pillar of contemporary international relations, particularly in conflict-affected and post-conflict societies. Over the past two decades, global peace and security frameworks have recognized that sustainable peace cannot be achieved without the proper inclusion of women in conflict prevention, resolution and post-conflict recovery processes (UN Women, 2015; True, 2020). This understanding is strongly anchored in the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, which positions women not merely as victims of conflict but as active agents of peace. UN Women, as the United Nations entity mandated to promote gender equality and women's empowerment, has emerged as a key institutional actor translating these global commitments into practice across different conflict settings (Mama, 2011; Khadiagala, 2007; Aning & Atuobi, 2011). The normative architecture underpinning UN Women's peacebuilding mandate draws from a series of United Nations Security Council resolutions beginning with Resolution 1325 of 2000, which formally recognized the gendered dimensions of conflict and the importance of women's leadership in peace processes.

At the global level, UN Women has been involved in peacebuilding initiatives in several conflict-affected states, including Afghanistan, Liberia, South Sudan and Colombia (UN Women, 2015; True, 2020; Paffenholz, 2018). These interventions have focused on strengthening women's participation in peace negotiations, supporting gender-responsive post-conflict governance and addressing structural inequalities that fuel recurrent violence. While global discourses often present UN Women as a normative success in advancing inclusive peace, African scholars caution against treating peacebuilding models as universally applicable, noting that global frameworks frequently interact with complex local political economies and socio-cultural realities in uneven ways (El-Bushra, 2012; Olonisakin, 2015; Richmond, 2010; Enloe, 2000). This depicts the importance of examining how globally designed peacebuilding strategies are adapted, contested or reshaped at lower levels of analysis, a concern that is especially pertinent in peripheral border regions where state presence and governance capacity remain limited.

Regionally, Africa continues to experience protracted conflicts that expose the gendered nature of insecurity. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), UN Women has supported women's protection mechanisms, transitional justice initiatives and community-based peace structures in a context marked by chronic violence and weak state authority (UN Women, 2015; Tripp, 2015; Olonisakin, 2015; True, 2020). African feminist scholars argue that peacebuilding on the continent must be understood within histories of colonial disruption, state fragility and militarized masculinity, which often limit the transformative potential of externally supported gender interventions (Mama, 2011; Olonisakin, 2015; El-Bushra, 2012; Tripp, 2015; Tickner, 1992; Enloe, 2000; AU, 2018). The DRC experience illustrates both the possibilities and constraints of UN Women's peacebuilding mandate in environments where insecurity is deeply entrenched and multidimensional, underscoring the need for locally sensitive approaches that go beyond technical programming.

The Horn of Africa represents one of the most volatile yet strategically significant regions in Africa, characterized by cross-border conflicts, fragile states and persistent humanitarian crises (El-Bushra, 2012; Mkutu, 2019; AU, 2018; Saferworld, 2017; True, 2020). In Sudan and Somalia, UN

Women has been involved in supporting women's participation in peace talks, post-conflict constitutional processes and grassroots peace initiatives. However, scholars from the region note that peacebuilding efforts often operate alongside entrenched clan politics, militarization and contested state legitimacy, which complicate gender-inclusive interventions (El-Bushra, 2012; Mkutu, 2019; Olonisakin, 2015; Paffenholz, 2018). These dynamics underscore the need to critically assess how regional insecurity and political instability shape the effectiveness of UN Women's peacebuilding strategies, particularly in peripheral borderland regions where governance deficits are most acute.

The Ilemi Triangle a historically contested and marginalized border region involving Kenya, South Sudan and Ethiopia presents a particularly challenging environment for peacebuilding (Mkutu, 2019; Saferworld, 2017; Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987; El-Bushra, 2012; Aning & Atuobi, 2011; Khadiagala, 2007; Mama, 2011). The area has long been characterized by overlapping territorial claims, weak border governance and porous boundaries that facilitate cross-border movement of pastoralist communities. Conflict in the Ilemi Triangle is largely manifested through recurrent inter-communal violence driven by competition over grazing land and water resources, cattle rustling and the proliferation of small arms dynamics that are intensified by environmental stress, climate variability and political marginalization. Understanding peacebuilding in the Ilemi Triangle thus requires attention to the lived realities of communities across Kenya, South Sudan and Ethiopia, rather than a narrow focus on bilateral state relations (Mkutu, 2019; Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987; AU, 2018; True, 2020; Olonisakin, 2015; Paffenholz, 2018; Lederach, 1997).

Work-life balance considerations and the broader aspect of total rewards are useful analogies for understanding how peacebuilding strategies must comprehensively address the needs of conflict-affected communities. Just as organizations must integrate financial and non-financial incentives to retain employees, peacebuilding actors must combine security interventions with social, economic and gender-responsive programs to sustain communities in fragile environments (Lederach, 1997; Galtung, 1996; Richmond, 2010; Paffenholz, 2018; O'Reilly et al., 2015; True, 2020; Hudson, 2009). The Ilemi Triangle exemplifies how borderland insecurity is shaped by historical exclusion, contested authority and locally embedded conflict management practices. This local-level analysis provides a critical foundation for examining how UN Women's peacebuilding strategies interact with grassroots realities between 2010 and 2025, with specific attention to the peacebuilding strategies the organization has adopted in the region.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

UN Women is a key global actor in promoting the Women, Peace and Security agenda by promoting gender-responsive and inclusive peacebuilding in conflict-affected contexts. Through advocacy, institutional support and community-level programming, the organization has contributed to increasing women's participation in peace processes, strengthening local peace structures and mainstreaming gender considerations in post-conflict recovery (UN Women, 2015; True, 2020; AU, 2018). Despite these normative and operational advances, peacebuilding outcomes in fragile and marginalized border regions such as the Ilemi Triangle remain fragile and inconsistent. The area continues to experience recurrent inter-communal violence, cross-border insecurity and competition over natural resources, exacerbated by weak state presence and limited cross-border governance coordination between Kenya, South Sudan and Ethiopia (Mkutu, 2019; Saferworld, 2017). Although UN Women has implemented peacebuilding-related interventions within the study period, limited empirical evidence documents how these strategies have been

operationalized specifically in the Ilemi Triangle. This study therefore sought to examine the peacebuilding strategies adopted by UN Women in the Ilemi Triangle between 2010 and 2025.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

To examine the peacebuilding strategies adopted by UN Women in the Ilemi Triangle between 2010 and 2025.

RESEARCH QUESTION

What peacebuilding strategies has UN Women adopted in the Ilemi Triangle between 2010 and 2025?

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study focused on the Ilemi Triangle, a contested tri-border region involving Kenya, South Sudan and Ethiopia. Geographically, the study was confined to communities within the Ilemi Triangle to enable an in-depth examination of peacebuilding strategies as implemented and experienced at the local level. The timeframe covered the period between 2010 and 2025, commencing with the formal establishment of UN Women following General Assembly Resolution 64/289 in 2010 and extending to 2025 to capture recent developments in gender-responsive peacebuilding. Thematically, the study focused specifically on peacebuilding strategies adopted by UN Women, including women's participation, community dialogue, capacity building, gender-based violence programming, institutional partnerships and cross-border collaboration initiatives.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was guided by two complementary theories: Feminist Peace Theory and Political Ecology Theory. These theories provided analytical tools for understanding both the gendered nature of peacebuilding and the environmental and livelihood dynamics that shape conflict in pastoral borderlands such as the Ilemi Triangle.

Feminist Peace Theory

Feminist Peace Theory originated from feminist international relations scholarship that critiques the traditional security paradigm for marginalizing women's experiences in conflict and peace processes. Early contributions by scholars such as Enloe (2000) and Tickner (1992) challenged the assumption that international politics is primarily shaped by state actors and military power. Instead, feminist scholars argue that security must be understood through everyday experiences of violence, inequality and social exclusion. Tickner (1992) contend that conventional security theories often portray war and peace as gender-neutral phenomena while ignoring the ways in which power relations are structured through gender hierarchies.

Tripp (2015) further note that women activists across Africa have historically played key roles in grassroots peace initiatives even when excluded from formal negotiations. African feminist scholars, particularly Mama (2011) and Olonisakin (2015), argue that peacebuilding in Africa must consider the structural inequalities produced by colonial governance and post-colonial state formation. In the context of this study, Feminist Peace Theory helped explain why the Women, Peace and Security agenda emphasizes women's leadership in peace processes and provided a framework for assessing whether UN Women's interventions genuinely empower women or reproduce existing gender hierarchies within community and institutional structures.

Political Ecology Theory

Political Ecology Theory provided another theoretical framework for understanding conflicts that emerge from competition over natural resources and environmental pressures. Blaikie and Brookfield (1987) argue that environmental conflicts cannot be understood solely as ecological problems but must be examined in relation to political power, governance structures and socio-economic inequalities. Political ecology scholars emphasize that resource scarcity, environmental degradation and climate variability often interact with social and political factors to generate conflict. In pastoral regions of the Horn of Africa, access to grazing land and water is a central determinant of livelihood survival (Mkutu, 2019). Applying Political Ecology Theory allowed this study to analyze how peacebuilding efforts must address not only social reconciliation but also resource governance challenges that underpin recurring conflicts in the Ilemi Triangle. The theory is especially relevant in the context of cross-border pastoral mobility, seasonal drought and the proliferation of small arms that transform traditional livelihood practices into highly militarized activities with devastating consequences for community security.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study was anchored on the assumption that peacebuilding outcomes in conflict-affected borderland regions are shaped by the interaction between institutional interventions and localized socio-political realities. UN Women's peacebuilding strategies constituted the independent variable, operationalized through policy advocacy, capacity building, support for women's participation in peace and conflict resolution mechanisms and community-based peace initiatives. The dependent variable was peacebuilding in the Ilemi Triangle, understood as a dynamic and long-term process reflected through reduced inter-communal violence, strengthened community cohesion, enhanced cross-border cooperation and sustained participation of women in peacebuilding structures. The relationship between UN Women's interventions and peacebuilding outcomes was moderated by insecurity, patriarchal norms, weak border governance and competition over natural resources, as summarized in Figure 1.

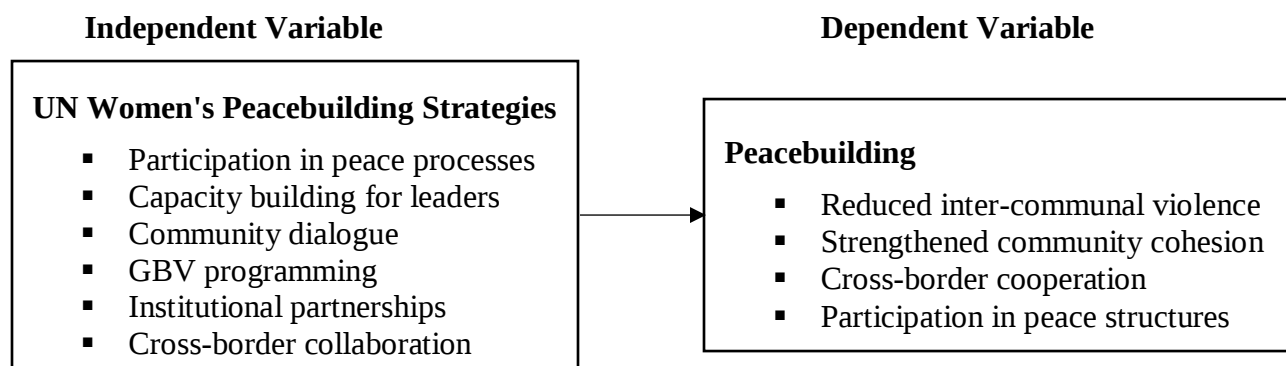


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

LITERATURE REVIEW

International organizations increasingly recognize that sustainable peace requires the participation of community actors rather than reliance solely on elite political agreements (Paffenholz, 2018; True, 2020). According to Olonisakin (2015), grassroots peace initiatives often play a decisive role in preventing the recurrence of violence in fragile societies. Within the United Nations system,

UN Women has been tasked with advancing gender-responsive peacebuilding under the Women, Peace and Security agenda. True (2016) observes that UN Women has focused on strengthening women's leadership in peace processes, supporting gender-sensitive policy reforms and promoting community-based dialogue initiatives. These strategies are designed to ensure that women participate actively in decision-making processes that affect peace and security outcomes.

In African conflict, international peacebuilding strategies often interact with existing community institutions. Khadiagala (2007) indicate that traditional authorities, elders' councils and women's networks continue to play important roles in mediating disputes in many parts of Africa. Studies conducted in northern Kenya demonstrate that local peace committees have become central mechanisms for addressing inter-communal conflicts. These committees often bring together elders, administrators, religious leaders and women's representatives to negotiate ceasefires and manage disputes. However, Mkutu (2019) argue that the effectiveness of such structures depends heavily on sustained support from both government institutions and international partners. Despite growing recognition of the importance of grassroots peacebuilding, scholars caution that international interventions sometimes fail to align with local conflict dynamics. Aning and Atuobi (2011) argue that externally designed peacebuilding frameworks may prioritize technical solutions while overlooking deeper socio-political drivers of violence, causing peace programs to become short-term interventions that fail to produce lasting transformation (Paffenholz, 2018; Richmond, 2010).

Research on women's participation in peace processes suggest that gender-inclusive initiatives can strengthen the sustainability of peace agreements. Tripp (2015) contend that women's organizations have played influential roles in peacebuilding efforts in countries such as Liberia and Sierra Leone, contributing to reconciliation initiatives, community dialogues and post-conflict reconstruction programs. O'Reilly et al. (2015) further argue that proper inclusion of women enhances the legitimacy and durability of peacebuilding initiatives because women frequently facilitate dialogue across divided communities and advocate for non-violent conflict resolution. However, other scholars caution that increased participation alone does not necessarily translate into proper influence. Olonisakin (2015) add that women may be included in peace initiatives symbolically without gaining real decision-making power, thereby limiting the transformative potential of gender-focused peace programs. These concerns are especially relevant in pastoral societies where leadership roles are traditionally dominated by male elders (Mama, 2011; El-Bushra, 2012).

Most of the existing studies point to the role of capacity building in strengthening women's peacebuilding capacities. UN Women (2022) reports that strengthening women's leadership capacity contributes significantly to local conflict prevention by increasing women's participation in decision-making structures. Similarly, True (2020) argue that addressing gender-based violence is fundamental to sustainable peacebuilding because conflict disproportionately affects women and girls. In the Horn of Africa, peacebuilding initiatives often encounter additional challenges arising from weak governance structures and cross-border mobility of pastoral communities. Mkutu (2019) observes that peace agreements negotiated in one locality may collapse when armed groups move across borders or when competition over grazing resources intensifies during drought periods. These findings suggest that the effectiveness of peacebuilding strategies depends on their ability to address both social relationships and structural drivers of conflict, a point reinforced by Political Ecology Theory (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987; Lederach, 1997; Richmond, 2010; Galtung, 1996).

METHODOLOGY

The research adopted a descriptive and longitudinal research design with mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. A descriptive research design was appropriate because it enabled the researcher to systematically describe existing conditions, institutional strategies and observable peace outcomes without manipulating variables (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003). The longitudinal dimension enabled examination of developments and patterns across the fifteen-year study period, which was necessary given that peacebuilding is an evolving and cumulative process (Creswell, 2014). The study was conducted in the Ilemi Triangle, a disputed and historically marginalized tri-border region involving Kenya, South Sudan and Ethiopia, characterized by pastoralist communities, porous borders, weak state presence and recurrent inter-communal conflicts.

The target population consisted of individuals and institutional actors directly or indirectly involved in peacebuilding processes within the Ilemi Triangle, including community members, women leaders, local administrative officials, security personnel, representatives of non-governmental and community-based organizations and officials affiliated with UN Women programs. The sample size was determined using the Taro Yamane (1967) formula, yielding 144 respondents for the quantitative survey. Stratified random sampling was employed to ensure adequate representation across institutional strata, while purposive sampling was used for qualitative key informants and focus group participants. The distribution of respondents across strata is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample Distribution and Sampling Technique

Target Population	Frequency	Percentage	Sampling Strategy
Government official/administrator	59	41%	Purposive & Stratified
Security agency (Police, Military, etc.)	30	21%	Purposive
NGO/Civil society	29	20%	Purposive
Community leaders	17	12%	Purposive
Other	9	6%	Stratified Random
Total	144	100	

Data was collected through semi-structured questionnaires, key informant interview guides, focus group discussion guides, document analysis guides and observation checklists. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics including frequencies and percentages, while qualitative data from interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis were analyzed thematically (Creswell, 2014). Reliability was ensured through pilot testing and Cronbach's Alpha assessment, while validity was achieved through expert review, instrument alignment with study objectives and methodological triangulation (Kothari, 2004; Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study administered questionnaires to 144 respondents, achieving response rate of 100%. The demographic results revealed that the majority of respondents were female (53.47%), reflecting

the gender dimensions of both the study population and the peacebuilding landscape in the Ilemi Triangle. The largest age group was 36–45 years (30.56%), indicating a predominance of mid-career professionals with direct experience of peacebuilding dynamics in the region. Government officials and administrators constituted the largest occupational category (39.29%), followed by security agency personnel (20.83%), NGO and civil society representatives (20.14%), community leaders (11.81%) and respondents from other categories (6.25%). These characteristics demonstrate that the study engaged a professionally diverse and experienced sample capable of providing informed perspectives on UN Women's peacebuilding strategies in the Ilemi Triangle.

Descriptive Analysis of Peacebuilding Strategies

Respondents were requested to indicate their level of agreement with statements relating to the peacebuilding strategies adopted by UN Women in the Ilemi Triangle between 2010 and 2025 using a five-point Likert scale where 1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Disagree and 5 = Strongly Disagree. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Peacebuilding Strategies Adopted

Statement	SA f (%)	A f (%)	N f (%)	D f (%)	SD f (%)
UN Women has promoted women's participation in peacebuilding and conflict resolution processes in the Ilemi Triangle.	50 (34.72)	20 (13.89)	66 (45.83)	5 (3.47)	3 (2.08)
UN Women has strengthened the capacity of women leaders to participate in local peacebuilding initiatives.	25 (17.36)	19 (13.19)	71 (49.31)	22 (15.28)	7 (4.86)
UN Women has supported community dialogue and mediation initiatives among communities in the Ilemi Triangle.	28 (19.44)	21 (14.58)	29 (20.14)	57 (39.58)	9 (6.25)
UN Women has promoted cross-border collaboration among women and community peace actors in the Ilemi Triangle.	23 (15.97)	27 (18.75)	46 (31.94)	31 (21.53)	17 (11.81)
UN Women has implemented programs aimed at addressing gender-based violence as part of peacebuilding efforts.	45 (31.25)	25 (17.36)	30 (20.83)	36 (25.00)	8 (5.56)
UN Women has partnered with local institutions, government agencies and civil society organizations to promote sustainable peace.	50 (34.72)	23 (15.97)	37 (25.69)	30 (20.83)	4 (2.78)
UN Women's peacebuilding strategies have addressed the underlying socio-economic factors contributing to conflict in the Ilemi Triangle.	20 (13.89)	13 (9.03)	47 (32.64)	15 (10.42)	49 (34.03)

The findings presented in Table 2 demonstrate that UN Women has adopted a diverse range of peacebuilding strategies within the Ilemi Triangle, although respondents expressed varying perceptions regarding the extent to which these strategies have been implemented. The responses generally indicate stronger recognition of interventions that promote women's participation, institutional partnerships and gender-based violence programming, while community dialogue, cross-border collaboration and addressing the socio-economic drivers of conflict received

relatively mixed assessments. These findings suggest that UN Women's peacebuilding strategy has largely emphasized gender inclusion and institutional collaboration, with comparatively less visibility in broader structural peacebuilding interventions.

Women's participation in peacebuilding and institutional partnerships emerged as some of the most visible strategies adopted by UN Women in the Ilemi Triangle. Nearly half of the respondents (48.61%) agreed that UN Women has promoted women's participation in peacebuilding and conflict resolution processes, while only 5.55% disagreed, with 45.83% remaining neutral. Similarly, 50.69% agreed that UN Women has partnered with local institutions, government agencies and civil society organizations to promote sustainable peace, compared to 23.61% who expressed disagreement. These findings indicate that UN Women has successfully positioned women and local institutions as central actors in peacebuilding initiatives within the region. These findings corroborate studies by UN Women (2023), which emphasize that increasing women's participation in peace processes improves the sustainability of peace agreements and strengthens community resilience. Similarly, O'Reilly et al. (2015) argue that proper inclusion of women enhances the legitimacy and durability of peacebuilding initiatives because women frequently facilitate dialogue across divided communities and advocate for non-violent conflict resolution. The findings also align with research by Tripp (2021) who observed that institutional partnerships between governments, civil society organizations and women's groups significantly improve the implementation of local peacebuilding programmes in fragile regions.

The findings contribute to Feminist Peace Theory, which states that sustainable peace cannot be achieved through militarized approaches alone but requires proper participation of women in peace processes, decision-making and community leadership (Enloe, 2000; Tripp, 2015; Mama, 2011; Olonisakin, 2015). The prominence of women's participation and institutional collaboration observed in this study demonstrates that UN Women has largely operationalized the principles advanced by Feminist Peace Theory by creating spaces for women's leadership while strengthening partnerships with local peace actors. During key informant interviews, one respondent observed that "women have increasingly become respected mediators in community disputes because UN Women continuously equips them with negotiation and leadership skills." Similarly, focus group participants acknowledged that women's groups have become more visible in local peace dialogues than in previous years. Document analysis further showed that UN Women's country programmes consistently prioritize women's political participation, leadership and institutional partnerships as core peacebuilding strategies.

The study further established that gender-based violence programming constitutes an important component of UN Women's peacebuilding approach. Approximately 48.61% of respondents agreed that UN Women has implemented programs addressing gender-based violence as part of its peacebuilding interventions, compared to 30.56% who disagreed. These findings support those of True (2020), who argue that addressing gender-based violence is fundamental to sustainable peacebuilding because conflict disproportionately affects women and girls. Similarly, UN Women (2022) reports that GBV prevention programs create safer environments that enable women to participate more actively in peace processes. During key informant interviews, respondents confirmed that UN Women has facilitated awareness campaigns and support services targeting survivors of gender-based violence within the Ilemi Triangle, although the geographic reach of such programs was noted as inconsistent. These findings demonstrate that peacebuilding extends beyond ending violence to transforming unequal gender relations that often perpetuate conflict and

insecurity a central proposition of Feminist Peace Theory (Tickner, 1992; Enloe, 2000; Mama, 2011; Olonisakin, 2015).

Capacity building for women leaders received more moderate recognition, with nearly half (49.31%) of the respondents remaining neutral and only 30.55% agreeing that UN Women has effectively strengthened the capacity of women leaders for local peacebuilding. This relatively large proportion of neutral responses suggests that although capacity-building interventions exist, their visibility and reach vary across different communities within the Ilemi Triangle. These findings partially align with UN Women (2022), which reports that strengthening women's leadership capacity contributes significantly to local conflict prevention, though implementation remains uneven in remote pastoral regions. The high proportion of neutral responses may also reflect the limited awareness of UN Women's programs among communities in more geographically isolated areas, consistent with broader challenges of programming in peripheral borderlands identified by Aning and Atuobi (2011), El-Bushra (2012), Mkutu (2019), Paffenholz (2018) and Richmond (2010).

Community dialogue and mediation initiatives received notably divided responses, with 34.02% of respondents agreeing and 45.83% either disagreeing or remaining neutral. This indicates that community dialogue strategies, while present, have not achieved uniform visibility across the study area. Khadiagala (2007) notes that community-based peace committees combining elders, religious leaders and women's representatives are important conflict management mechanisms in the Horn of Africa, and their effectiveness depends on sustained institutional support. The findings suggest that although UN Women supports dialogue mechanisms, community members in some localities may not have directly participated in or benefited from such initiatives. Document analysis revealed that dialogue programs tend to be concentrated in more accessible areas, a pattern also noted by Mkutu (2019) regarding the geographic unevenness of peacebuilding programs in borderland regions (Paffenholz, 2018; Richmond, 2010).

Cross-border collaboration among women and community peace actors received the most dispersed responses, with 34.72% agreeing, 33.34% disagreeing and 31.94% remaining neutral. These findings reflect the significant logistical, political and security challenges associated with implementing cross-border peacebuilding initiatives within the Ilemi Triangle. Blaikie and Brookfield's (1987) Political Ecology Theory illuminates these constraints by highlighting how competition over shared natural resources, combined with differing national priorities and security governance arrangements, complicates collaborative interventions across international boundaries. Mkutu (2019) similarly notes that cross-border pastoral mobility and armed conflicts create conditions where peace initiatives negotiated in one locality may rapidly collapse due to dynamics originating across borders. These findings suggest that cross-border collaboration, while recognized as a priority by UN Women, remains one of the most difficult strategies to sustain within the complex tri-border environment of the Ilemi Triangle (Saferworld, 2017; AU, 2018; El-Bushra, 2012).

Addressing the underlying socio-economic drivers of conflict received the weakest endorsement, with 44.44% of respondents disagreeing and only 22.92% agreeing that UN Women's peacebuilding strategies have adequately addressed these structural factors. This finding highlights a significant gap in UN Women's peacebuilding approach within the Ilemi Triangle, namely the need for more robust integration of livelihood and economic empowerment programs into peacebuilding strategies. Political Ecology Theory underscores that structural conflicts rooted in resource competition and livelihood insecurity cannot be resolved through dialogue and

participation alone but require sustained attention to the economic conditions that drive communities toward violence (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987; Galtung, 1996; Lederach, 1997; Richmond, 2010). These findings extend earlier studies such as Aning and Atuobi (2011), who caution that externally designed frameworks often prioritize technical interventions while overlooking deeper socio-economic causes of violence. Key informants similarly noted that without addressing poverty and resource competition, peace gains achieved through dialogue and capacity building are likely to remain fragile and reversible.

Thematic Analysis

Interview responses revealed that UN Women has taken deliberate yet uneven steps to promote peacebuilding within the Ilemi Triangle through gender-responsive strategies. Several key informants confirmed that women's participation programs had been rolled out across communities, equipping women with negotiation skills, leadership training and platforms for engagement in local peace committees. One respondent noted: "Women have increasingly become respected mediators in community disputes because UN Women continuously equips them with negotiation and leadership skills". However, such programs were not consistently available across all communities within the Triangle, suggesting selective implementation that limits broader impact. Another informant observed that "while UN Women works to create spaces for women in peace processes, the shortage of resources and logistical challenges in reaching remote communities often undermine the scope of these interventions."

Capacity-building initiatives were described as impactful in communities where they were implemented, with participants in focus group discussions acknowledging increased confidence among women leaders in addressing conflict. However, the geographic unevenness of program delivery was consistently mentioned as a limitation. One NGO representative observed that "training programs often target the same group of women leaders in accessible areas, while communities deeper within the Triangle rarely benefit." Document analysis of UN Women's program reports similarly confirmed that capacity-building activities were predominantly conducted in peri-urban border communities with relatively better access, while more remote pastoral settlements received limited programmatic attention.

Institutional partnership strategies were acknowledged as one of the more visible dimensions of UN Women's approach. Key informants from government institutions confirmed that UN Women had collaborated with local administrative structures, NGOs and community-based organizations to facilitate peacebuilding activities. However, several informants noted that the depth of these partnerships varied significantly, with some characterized as coordinative and sustained while others remained superficial and event-driven. One government official observed: "UN Women brings important resources and expertise, but the partnerships sometimes lack the follow-through needed to create lasting institutional change." Focus group participants similarly expressed that the impact of institutional partnerships was more visible at formal governance levels than at the community level, where many women continued to navigate entrenched barriers to participation in peace processes.

On gender-based violence programming, key informants confirmed that UN Women had supported awareness campaigns and referral services within selected communities. However, the scope of GBV programming was described as insufficient relative to the scale of need, with one health worker noting that "the number of women seeking support after conflict incidents far exceeds the capacity of available services." Document analysis further revealed that GBV

programs tended to focus on response mechanisms rather than primary prevention, which limited their contribution to addressing the structural drivers of violence against women in conflict settings. These insights suggest that while UN Women has established important GBV initiatives within the Ilemi Triangle, more sustained, preventive and community-embedded approaches are needed to translate programmatic inputs into durable behavioral and structural change.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that UN Women has adopted a comprehensive and gender-responsive approach to peacebuilding in the Ilemi Triangle between 2010 and 2025 through strategies that promote women's participation in peace processes, strengthen the capacity of women leaders, facilitate community dialogue and mediation, address gender-based violence and foster institutional partnerships. Women's participation and institutional collaboration emerged as the most visible and consistently recognized strategies, with approximately half of the respondents acknowledging these dimensions of UN Women's work. These findings affirm the relevance of Feminist Peace Theory in explaining the organization's strategic orientation and its commitment to positioning women as central actors in conflict resolution and peacebuilding processes.

However, the implementation of these strategies has not been uniform across the Ilemi Triangle. Cross-border collaboration and the integration of socio-economic drivers of conflict into peacebuilding programming received comparatively limited endorsement, indicating significant gaps in UN Women's strategic reach and depth. Community dialogue initiatives and capacity-building programs, while present, remain unevenly distributed across the region, with communities in more remote and inaccessible areas receiving disproportionately fewer programmatic interventions. The large proportion of neutral responses across several survey items further indicates that awareness and direct experience of UN Women's programs remain limited among significant segments of the study population.

These conclusions suggest that although UN Women has established an appropriate strategic framework for peacebuilding in the Ilemi Triangle, greater emphasis is required on addressing structural conflict drivers, strengthening cross-border cooperation mechanisms and ensuring more equitable geographic distribution of peacebuilding programs across all communities within the region. Sustainable peace in a complex tri-border environment such as the Ilemi Triangle requires integrated strategies that simultaneously address the gender, institutional and ecological dimensions of conflict a conclusion that resonates with both Feminist Peace Theory and Political Ecology Theory.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that UN Women should strengthen the implementation of its peacebuilding strategies in the Ilemi Triangle by expanding the geographic reach of women's participation programs to ensure that communities in remote and inaccessible areas benefit equitably from peacebuilding interventions. Targeted outreach mechanisms, including mobile facilitation teams and community-based peace networks, should be developed to bridge the gap between more accessible border towns and isolated pastoral settlements. Addressing geographic unevenness is essential for ensuring that UN Women's peacebuilding mandate translates into tangible outcomes for all communities within the Ilemi Triangle.

UN Women, in collaboration with the governments of Kenya, South Sudan and Ethiopia, should develop and institutionalize cross-border peacebuilding mechanisms that bring together women

leaders, community representatives, local administrators and security actors from all three countries. Strengthening these trilateral platforms would create structured spaces for coordinating responses to cross-border pastoral conflicts, sharing information on conflict early warning and promoting joint resource management agreements. Such mechanisms would contribute significantly to addressing the political ecology dimensions of conflict within the region.

UN Women should also integrate livelihood and economic empowerment programs more systematically into its peacebuilding strategy within the Ilemi Triangle. Given that a majority of respondents disagreed that UN Women had adequately addressed the socio-economic drivers of conflict, the study recommends that future peacebuilding programs explicitly incorporate income-generation activities, vocational skills training, savings and credit support and natural resource co-management initiatives targeting women and youth. Addressing economic vulnerabilities reduces dependence on conflict-driven survival strategies and strengthens community resilience against recurring inter-communal disputes. Additionally, the study recommends strengthening monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track program outcomes across diverse communities, improve institutional accountability and enable continuous learning for program adaptation within the dynamic conflict environment of the Ilemi Triangle.

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