

# Localizing Women, Peace, and Security



Search for  
Common  
Ground

Investing in equitable partnerships

DECEMBER 2024

## Context

Women are largely excluded from peace and reconciliation processes, despite clear evidence that their participation increases the sustainability of peace agreements. When women are involved in negotiations, [peace agreements are 20 percent more likely to last at least two years and 35 percent more likely to last at least 15 years](#). Women-led civil society organizations and groups, often the primary avenue for women to participate in peace processes, tend to be small, underfunded, and fragmented. The women, peace and security (WPS) agenda, tied to the UN Resolution 1325 National Action Plans, is chronically underfunded across the world. [In 2021–2022, only 0.3% of all bilateral aid to conflict-affected regions was allocated to support women-led, and women’s rights organizations and movements](#). In many cases, donor funding unintentionally fosters competition rather than collaboration, and reaches organizations that are more well-connected to the international space. However, a highly localized, diverse, and well-funded landscape of women-led organizations is essential to peace and security. Women’s organizations possess in-depth knowledge of community contexts, priorities, and needs, acting as early warning systems to equally address emerging threats to peace as well as opportunities for peace. To effectively support local women peacebuilders and increase their access to and participation in decision-making, **we need tailored funding models that meet their specific needs.**

Over the past three years, Search’s SHE WINS project has supported **over 100 women-led organizations**, ranging from highly localized women-led CBOs to larger women-serving NGOs, with funding tailored to their specific needs. Through these efforts, we have demonstrated a funding model that also works for small women-led groups, especially those that never or rarely received international donor funding and do not have strong internal systems and capacities. This support demonstrates the case for reaching a more diverse group of actors in the local WPS space: small grants can catalyze big changes at the local level, revitalize or broaden a WPS space, and lead to better networks and support among women’s groups for collective action. Complementing WPS efforts to nationalize and localize the UN Resolution 1325 into National Action Plans, this work demonstrates that small-scale and localized wins can create momentum for gains which contribute towards an overall realization of the 1325 agenda at the local level.

### SHE WINS Program

Search for Common Ground implements the **SHE WINS** ([Supporting Her Empowerment: Women’s Inclusion for New Security](#)) initiative, supported by the [U.S. State Department’s Secretary’s Office of Global Women’s Issues](#). This 5-year program provides **specific funding and technical assistance to local women-led groups to grow and sustain local capacities for peacebuilding**. Alongside initiatives led by local partners in eight countries - Cameroon, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Guatemala, Lebanon, Somalia, Central Asia (through Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan) and Yemen - the program includes a global **Rapid Response Fund (RRF)** for local Women, Peace, and Security in over 70 countries. By elevating the voices of local women peacebuilders in global policy discussions, SHE WINS ensures their leadership in peer-to-peer and international dialogues on peace and security.

# Key learning for supporting women peacebuilders and localizing WPS

Through implementation of the SHE WINS Program, we have identified **key lessons for effectively supporting local women-led organizations and increasing their access to decision-making** on peace and security.

## 1. Small-Scale Support to Local Groups

Local women peacebuilders, particularly smaller and more marginalized groups, face **chronic underfunding** and need specialized capacity support. Traditional funding from international bilateral and multilateral donors often favors well-established organizations with the ability to manage larger grants and organizations that demonstrate an effective track record of donor engagement, financial management, and communication. In addition to track record, organizations often need to be registered with a national authority (complex in closed civic spaces); well-versed in navigating hundreds of pages of required documents and internal organizational policies; and be able to write effectively in the preferred language of the international donor. The trend towards projectization of international donor funding, where core organizational costs are sidelined and implementation timeframes are short, has harmed organizations' ability to invest in internal systems and capacities. SHE WINS tested a funding model pairing project support with core funding, prioritizing access to networks that increase organizational visibility and open new funding opportunities, and tailor capacities towards basic minimum organizational capacities and internal systems.

### Small grants have big impacts

In the **Central African Republic**, many of the organizations we worked with had never received any external funding - they had been completely self-financed. In those cases, a grant of \$5,000 went a very long way to support the organizations' operations, particularly those working in very rural or remote areas. Some organizations were able to build their capacity to manage these funds, leading to securing additional funding from other sources, a step towards sustainability of small-scale WPS work in remote areas in CAR, some of which were inaccessible to the international community.

In **Yemen**, the Siaq Organization for Youth and Development, used its small grant to address the urgent need for quality psychological support in Taiz Governorate. The SHE WINS grant of \$20,000 was accompanied with tailored training and institutional strengthening on financial management. Building upon the success of this grant and the stronger internal systems and capacities, the organization is now establishing the region's **first women-led center** for psychological support and rehabilitation, largely benefiting vulnerable populations.

## 2. Collaboration Rather than Competition

Especially in conflict affected societies, it is not enough to simply channel more support more quickly to locally-led organizations. An influx of funding directed at a single community, ethnic group, or region can escalate tensions. Women's movements are not monolithic, and introduction of outside funding in these highly fragmented environments can sometimes drive wedges between groups, rather than fostering healthy competition. This is why collaboration should be prioritized over negative forms of competition. We support a **diverse array of organizations** and ensure their **collective inclusion in decision-making processes**, which **strengthens social cohesion** rather than undermining it. We map and pre-select organizations to co-design program ideas, and signal that all organizations would be funded because they were invited, rather than be put into competition with each other. This model is largely successful in fostering collaboration.

## Mentorship and collaboration

In **Uzbekistan** in the Ferghana Valley where we worked with very small women's groups, most of the projects were jointly implemented between 2-3 organizations, where a more well capacitated organization mentored the others who were smaller. These projects resulted from a collaborative design process, where the women's groups identified priorities together and determined the best ideas to support through subawards. The joint programming came about via conversations among organizations that happened during the design sessions. This particular model led to more dialogue and discussions among the participating organizations throughout implementation, leading to a still-existing network of organizations working on WPS in the Ferghana Valley.

### 3. Quick Response to Changes in Context

Understanding that emerging conflicts and crises are a major consideration in the WPS space, we complement ongoing programmatic funding with rapid, flexible funding. This funding helps raise visibility for urgent, real unmet needs, enabling women's groups to adapt and take prompt actions in urgent and unfolding crises or take advantage of changes in the context to advance WPS. Such support is particularly important, as local women's groups act as early warning systems in their communities, identifying emerging threats and preventing new conflict lines from opening. In 2022, amid escalating conflict in Kyrgyzstan's Batken region, we supported 30 women peace activists to launch four peacebuilding initiatives that strengthened community resilience and social cohesion; in the Eastern DRC, we funded women's participation in inter-community dialogues and local peace negotiations, establishing a network of trained women peace ambassadors who successfully mediated conflicts and are now in high demand for further interventions; and in the Nagorno-Karabakh region in Armenia, we are supporting urgent mental health and psychosocial support for thousands of women and girls forcibly displaced by the recent escalation of the conflict.

#### Flexible funding

During **Guatemala's** 2023 crucial elections, the Plataforma de Mujeres Indígenas, quickly leveraged funding from the SHE WINS RRF to enhance the political participation and leadership of Indigenous women. This support was essential in addressing the discrimination and exclusion that Indigenous women experience within Guatemala's electoral and political spaces.

In **Kyrgyzstan**, with rapid response funding, several organizations provided trauma healing and reintegration for women and children returning from post-ISIS detention camps in Iraq and Syria. The Kyrgyz women's groups were able to quickly scale up community reintegration and trauma-informed care for returnees.

### 4. Enabling Access to Further Resources

The lack of small-scale funding for local women's groups is the most significant barrier to women's participation in the WPS space. However, the international donor and civil society community must not only dedicate funding for first-time micro-grantees but also **enhance their capacity** to secure additional funding in the future. By providing targeted capacity-building support, we can empower women's organizations to manage larger funds while also allowing them to remain highly localized and operate more effectively through improved institutional practices and programmatic capacities. In consultations with local groups, the top request for additional **training** was not in WPS, but in fundraising and business development so that they could access additional resources in the future. Additionally, many small local organizations **lack experience with financial audits and do not have established institutional policies** - often required by donors as part of funding proposals to prove an organization's capacity to manage financial resources. Providing audit support and institutional capacity building give organizations a formal track record of financial

management and policies, which improves their chances for securing future funds. Finally, it is essential to **foster connections and support network building** among local organizations, both with peers and potential donors, as this enables longer term sustainability and impact.

### Financial management

In **Yemen**, 88% of women-led organizations reported improved performance as a result of capacity building support they received through the SHE WINS project. This directly resulted in one organization obtaining further funding to open their region's first women-led psychosocial support clinic in collaboration with local authorities in Taiz.

A **Cameroon** WLO secured three years of funding for a sexual and reproductive health project because the organization was able to show documented financial management and internal policies that it did not have prior to involvement in SHE WINS. The documented results greatly improved the WLO's credibility in the eyes of the donor.

## 5. Addressing Mental Health Needs

A survey conducted with over 20 local groups engaged in the SHE WINS program in the Central African Republic revealed alarming levels of psychological stress, including PTSD, suicidal thoughts, and grief among women peacebuilders. **Mental health support is often focused on beneficiaries, but the women working in these organizations also demonstrate a significant need for such support.** Similar trends have been observed in Uzbekistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, where mental health and psychosocial support sessions were met with profound interest by participants, who expressed a clear need for additional support. It is critical to incorporate mental health resources and support into capacity-building initiatives. This helps prevent burnout, encourage women peacebuilders to remain engaged, ensure they are able to continue providing similar support themselves, and establish support systems that enhance the longevity of their peacebuilding careers. By prioritizing the well-being of these women alongside their organizational development, we can foster more resilient and sustainable peacebuilding efforts.

### Psychosocial support

In **Uzbekistan**, we conducted psychosocial training sessions for frontline staff members of partner WLOs. The training aimed to alleviate fatigue, enhance psychological resources, and equip staff with practical methods for self-help and group support. These interventions were so effective that additional sessions were included beyond those planned in order to meet the need expressed by WLO staff.

In the **Central African Republic**, in response to identified needs, we implemented training sessions alongside individual psychological support for WLO staff members disproportionately affected by conflict and trauma. This integrated approach addressed immediate concerns while fostering long-term resilience and well-being among WLO staff.

Equitable partnerships that emphasize inclusive decision-making and collaborative approaches are more likely to result in effective projects and longer-term peacebuilding outcomes because they will respond to the realities of challenges on the ground.

## Recommendations

Donors, international implementers, and national governments can take action to support equitable partnerships with women-led organizations in order to increase programming impact and durability. Our grounded experience lead us to recommend the following to international donors:

- **Approach equitable partnerships with women-led organizations as an investment.** Short-term efforts by donors to (i) simplify application and reporting processes; (ii) accept applications in a broader range of languages; (iii) publicize funding opportunities through easy-access channels, such as email, social media, and newsletters targeted to women peacebuilders; (iv) emphasize long-term relationship-building; and (v) maintain transparent, regular communication with these partners all provide concrete dividends. Further long-term efforts, such as expansion of multi-year flexible funding options, produces an even greater and lasting impact.
- **Dedicate a portion of funds every funding cycle to women peacebuilders and women-led organizations.** To ensure impact, this funding should include opportunities for first-time grantees and develop their capacity to handle medium and large grants. Designate some funding as rapid-response, allowing for quick application processes and approval processes, which further enables the activation of local women's groups and organizations as early warning actors. Increasing this percentage of funding over time for WPS will produce greater, more sustainable results.
- **Include organizational and operational technical skills in capacity support provided to women and women-led groups.** This includes key skills in absorption and management of large funds. Building the capacity of women to participate in peace and political decision-making should include supporting the sustainability of local women-led organizations and their ability to operate in a way that is context-specific and responsive to local needs and emerging issues, not only serving the purposes or standards of international donors.
- **Ensure meaningful representation and inclusion of women peacebuilders and women-led organizations.** This is especially important in multilateral and international fora, including peace processes, political negotiations, and crisis response plans. This means not just numerical quotas of female participants, but quality roles and responsibilities in these spaces. Work with and listen to women peacebuilders and women-led organizations to define what meaningful inclusion looks like in their context. These may be actions such as (i) including women from smaller-scale groups; (ii) provision of interpretation and other accessibility measures; and (iii) creating linkages between local women's organizations and official negotiation channels for feedback and contextualization.
- **Collaborate with local women's organizations and women peacebuilders to develop WPS National Action Plans (NAPs).** Taking ownership of implementing NAPs across all levels of governance, from local to regional to national and financing women-led organizations to do this ensures meaningful inclusion, participation, and representation of women from all backgrounds. This can include information sessions for smaller women-led organizations about localizing UN Resolution 1325 and holding consultations with civil society on NAPs, with a particular focus on women-led civil society.



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