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Designing Peace: Perspectives on Addressing Power Asymmetries in Peace Process Design

Addressing Power Asymmetries in Peacebuilding & Process Design

This briefing explores two perspectives on peace process design. Through analysis of power asymmetries, gender inclusion, and locally grounded approaches to peacebuilding, it highlights how inclusive and legitimate processes can contribute to more sustainable peace. Together, the briefings argue that effective peacebuilding requires participation, local ownership, and process design that actively addresses structural inequalities.

As conflicts become increasingly fragmented, protracted, and characterised by multiple state and non-state actors, negotiated settlements have become more difficult to achieve and even more challenging to sustain. While peace agreements remain essential for ending violence, experience increasingly demonstrates that durable peace depends not only on the substance of negotiated settlements but also on the design of the processes through which they are negotiated, implemented, and sustained. Process design is inherently political, determining who participates, whose voices are included, how decisions are made, and ultimately whose interests shape the future political order. This briefing shares two diverse perspectives on peace process design. Although grounded in different contexts and analytical traditions, both contributions in this briefing argue that sustainable peace depends not only on negotiated outcomes but on the legitimacy, inclusivity, and transformative potential of the processes that produce them. Together, they challenge approaches that treat participation as symbolic or procedural and instead position peace process design as a strategic tool for addressing structural inequalities, building local ownership, and creating the conditions for lasting peace.

The first paper approaches peace process design from the perspective of local legitimacy and normative frameworks, exploring how Islamic principles of justice, consultation, reconciliation, and shared responsibility can strengthen inclusive peacebuilding. Rather than presenting religious frameworks as alternatives to international peacebuilding norms, it argues that culturally grounded approaches can complement existing practice by increasing legitimacy, strengthening community ownership, and fostering more participatory forms of governance. Drawing on Islamic concepts such as shura, sulh, adl, and rahma, alongside historical examples including the Charter of Medina, the paper demonstrates how indigenous frameworks can contribute to positive peace by addressing not only the cessation of violence but also the structural conditions that sustain conflict, including exclusion, inequality, and social fragmentation. It further argues that these principles provide important foundations for advancing women's participation and broader social inclusion within peace processes.

The second paper examines peace process design through the lens of power asymmetries, drawing on contemporary and historical experiences from Colombia. It argues that process design itself constitutes a field of political contestation that can either reproduce or transform existing inequalities. Using examples from the Havana peace negotiations and more recent territorial peace processes, the paper demonstrates that expanding participation alone does not redistribute power. Rather, meaningful participation requires deliberate institutional choices that connect participatory mechanisms to decision-making, recognize gender as a structural dimension of power, and challenge historically exclusionary practices that continue to shape negotiation processes. The paper ultimately reframes participation not as an end in itself, but as a means of enabling genuine political influence and more equitable peacebuilding.

Author Bios

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I. Addressing Power Asymmetries through Peace Process Design: Participation and Gender Perspectives from Colombia

Karen Arteaga Garzón

Executive Summary

Peace processes and political negotiations unfold in contexts marked by profound power asymmetries. Traditionally, these inequalities have been analysed through factors such as military capabilities, territorial control, or the political legitimacy of the parties involved. This chapter starts from a different premise: the design of peace processes is, in itself, a deeply political act that can either contribute to balancing power asymmetries or, conversely, reinforce them.

Drawing on both recent and past experiences in Colombia, the analysis shows that expanding participation, on its own, does not guarantee an effective redistribution of power. Across the cases examined, persistent gaps remain between the formal inclusion of diverse actors and their actual capacity to influence strategic decision-making. These gaps do not manifest in homogeneous or stable ways; rather, they are continuously negotiated and contested throughout the process.

From a gender perspective, the chapter highlights that women's participation continues to face structural constraints. Although Colombia has been internationally recognised for normative advances in the incorporation of a gender perspective, these have not consistently translated into sustained transformations of power relations. The inclusion of women in negotiation spaces has coexisted with historically masculinised forms of authority that privilege rigid hierarchies and closed leadership styles, and that tend to devalue the relational and care work that sustains peace processes. At the same time, these tensions have opened up concrete disputes over legitimate modes of participation, illustrating how the integration of a gender perspective intensifies the conflictual and agonistic character of peace processes, without rendering them any less real or politically consequential.

This chapter draws on practical experience in the design, facilitation, and accompaniment of dialogue and negotiation processes in Colombia, as well as on the existing literature on peacebuilding, participation, and gender. Rather than offering replicable models, it advances a critical reflection on how process design may—or may not—contribute to addressing power asymmetries, recognising that such efforts are often tense, imperfect, and shaped by disputes that extend beyond the formal negotiation phase.

Ultimately, the chapter argues that balancing power in peace processes is not an automatic outcome inherent to their design, but a continuous practice that requires conscious decisions and a sustained commitment to redistributing power beyond symbolic inclusion. It assumes that such transformations are built over time and through tensions that are integral to the process itself.

1. Introduction: Peace process design as a space of power

Over recent decades, process design has become a key field within peacebuilding, offering tools to structure participation, organise interaction among different actors, and facilitate decision-making in highly polarised contexts. Nevertheless, design is often assumed to be a technical or neutral exercise, primarily oriented towards ensuring efficiency, inclusion, or legitimacy. This briefing departs from a different premise: the design of peace processes is, in itself, a deeply political act that can either contribute to balancing power asymmetries or, conversely, reinforce them. [1]

This discussion is particularly relevant when analysing women's participation in peace processes. At the global level, the Women, Peace and Security agenda has succeeded in positioning the inclusion of women as a widely accepted normative principle. However, a significant gap persists between women's formal presence in negotiation spaces and their actual capacity to influence decision-making. This gap cannot be explained solely by a lack of political will or by the absence of women at the table, but rather by deeper dynamics related to how power is exercised, which forms of participation are considered legitimate, and which types of political work are recognised.

Drawing on the analysis of concrete experiences, the text offers a critical reflection on how process design may—or may not—contribute to balancing power asymmetries, with a particular emphasis on gender inequalities.

2. Power Asymmetries and Process Design: A Practice-Based Perspective

From a practice-based perspective, the design of peace processes is neither a technical nor a neutral exercise.

Design determines who participates, at what moments, under which rules, with what levels of authority, and through which mechanisms decisions are made. [2]

In this sense, process design does not merely organise interaction among actors; it produces concrete political effects by establishing hierarchies, rhythms of work, legitimate languages, and specific ways of exercising power. Depending on how it is structured, design can contribute to balancing existing power asymmetries or, conversely, reinforce and normalise them.

A frequently underestimated aspect is that many of these rules operate implicitly. Decisions such as accelerated negotiation timelines, the prioritisation of agreements deemed strategic, or the fragmentation of participatory spaces tend to favour actors with greater institutional capacity and prior experience in formal arenas of power, while community-based actors and historically excluded groups face greater barriers to exerting substantive influence, even when they are formally included. These dynamics do not eliminate conflict; rather, they channel it into specific forms, delimiting who is able to sustain it and with what effects.

These internal asymmetries are not accidental but rather reflect and reproduce pre-existing power relations within the broader social and political context. [3] In countries such as Colombia, marked by a long history of armed conflict, social inequality, and political exclusion, peace processes condense structural tensions that cut across the state, political elites, and territorial dynamics. Process design thus becomes a key space in which these tensions are not only managed, but also expressed, contested, and, in some cases, reconfigured.

Understanding design as a field of power is therefore essential for analysing how certain forms of participation are enabled and perpetuated, while others are relegated to a symbolic or consultative role. This analytical perspective makes it possible to move beyond questions of formal inclusion and instead focus on the quality of participation, understood as the real capacity to influence decisions, priorities, and outcomes.

It also opens up space to examine how these dynamics affect women and other historically excluded groups in differentiated ways, not only through their presence or absence in formal spaces, but through the explicit and implicit rules that structure the process and define the margins of conflict, negotiation, and legitimate influence.

3. Women's Participation in Peace Processes: Between Symbolic Inclusion and Real Influence

In Colombia, as in many other contexts of armed conflict and political transition, women's participation in peace processes has advanced significantly at the normative and discursive levels, yet it continues to face structural limits when it comes to exerting effective influence over decision-making. This tension—between formal inclusion and real influence—is not unique to the Colombian case, but it acquires particular relevance in a country that has been internationally recognised for the gender-related advances of the 2016 Final Agreement. Rather than a static gap, this tension constitutes a permanent field of contestation over the terms, scope, and legitimate forms of exercising power within peace processes.

The peace process between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP (2012–2016), commonly referred to as the Havana process, marked a global milestone by explicitly incorporating a gender perspective both in the content of the Agreement and in its institutional architecture.

The creation of a Gender Subcommission and the active participation of women's organisations contributed to making historically excluded demands visible and to broadening understandings of peace beyond the silencing of arms.[4] At the same time, subsequent analyses have shown that these normative advances did not always translate directly or sustainably into deep transformations of power relations in the spaces where key decisions are made, revealing tensions between an innovative design and the challenges of implementation within pre-existing institutional contexts.

One of the main critical issues identified is that women's participation has tended to unfold more intensively in consultative, pedagogical, thematic advocacy, or accompaniment spaces, while the most closed cores of decision-making continue to reproduce traditional hierarchies. However, this configuration should not be interpreted solely as an absence of power, but rather as a constant contestation over which spaces, practices, and forms of participation are recognised as politically influential. These limitations do not derive exclusively from the numerical predominance of men in decision-making positions, but from historically masculinised ways of exercising authority, [5] characterised by hierarchical leadership styles, accelerated decision-making timelines, technocratic languages, and a rigid separation between the "political" and the "emotional". Such logics can be reproduced by both men and women when operating within institutional frameworks that privilege particular modes of political rationality and the exercise of power.

The peacebuilding literature on Colombia has documented how these dynamics are deeply intertwined with structural inequalities present in everyday life. Women disproportionately assume care work, emotional labour, and relational sustainment roles—functions that are fundamental to the continuity and viability of peace processes, particularly in contexts of high conflict. While these practices are often devalued or treated as peripheral to formal decision-making, in practice they constitute key spaces of informal influence, everyday negotiation, and the mediation of tensions, even when they are not recognised as legitimate exercises of political power.

From this perspective, the gender asymmetries observed in peace processes should not be understood as isolated or anecdotal failures, but as condensed expressions of a broader political order that reproduces hierarchies of power, knowledge, and recognition. The difficulty of advancing towards participation with real influence reflects not only design or implementation deficits, but the persistence of explicit and implicit rules that define who decides, how decisions are made, and which forms of political work are valued within peace processes.

Overcoming this tension requires moving beyond a purely numerical increase in women's presence at negotiation tables and opening up a structural reflection on the practices, incentives, and cultural frameworks that sustain these inequalities. This approach allows the debate to shift away from a binary logic—men versus women—towards a more complex understanding of the redistribution of power as a conflictual and non-linear process. It also opens up the possibility of thinking about men not as inevitable obstacles, but as actors who may reproduce or transform these logics, depending on process design, institutional incentives, and the cultural changes that accompany them.

4. Experiences from Colombia: Participation, Gender, and Process Design in Peace Processes

Recent and past experiences of negotiation and peacebuilding in Colombia provide fertile ground for analysing how process design can contribute to—or constrain—the balancing of power among actors, and particularly the effective participation of women. The cases discussed below are not presented as models to be replicated, but as situated experiences that offer relevant insights for other negotiation and dialogue contexts.

4.1 Regional Peace Co-construction in Nariño-Colombia [6]

The Regional Peace Co-construction in Nariño, launched in 2024 between the Colombian government and the armed group Comuneros del Sur, is framed within the "Total Peace" policy and constitutes a recent negotiation experience with a strong territorial emphasis. Unlike previous national-level processes, this negotiation is explicitly conceived as an exercise in peace co-construction rooted in local dynamics, oriented towards territorial transformation and the de-escalation of violence.

From its design, the process has sought to articulate negotiation with the armed actor alongside a broad commitment to citizen participation, understood as a central component of the process's legitimacy and territorial embeddedness. This combination introduces inherent tensions between the relatively closed logic of armed negotiation and the opening towards social and community actors in a context marked by deep historical, social, and gender inequalities.

The participatory architecture has been deployed across multiple levels, including spaces for dialogue and pedagogical engagement, mechanisms of oversight and social accountability, and forms of direct participation in actions promoted by the negotiation. This approach recognises communities as political subjects and holders of territorial knowledge, and seeks to enable their influence through multiple channels, beyond direct representation at the negotiation table. At the same time, this multiplicity of spaces produces a complex field of interaction in which the boundaries between deliberation, influence, and decision-making are not always clear and remain in constant contestation.

While there is a specific agenda item devoted to "everyday peace, gender and diversities", the translation of women's demands into substantive agreements or institutional change has been uneven. Rather than evidencing an absence of participation, this dynamic reveals the limits and frictions inherent to a process that seeks to contest—rather than simply reproduce—the traditional rules of political negotiation.

At the level of formal negotiation, the participation of women negotiators unfolds within a scenario shaped by persistent asymmetries, where margins of influence are neither homogeneous nor stable, but are constantly negotiated.

Numerical minority does not imply an absence of power, but it does configure a more exposed form of participation, subject to higher political costs and to a permanent struggle for the recognition of authority and legitimacy to exert influence. In parallel, a substantial share of the work that sustains the process—including technical advice, strategic accompaniment, and the relational maintenance of the negotiation—is carried out largely by women and becomes a relevant space of political intervention. However, the status of these practices as a full exercise of power remains contested within institutional frameworks that privilege hierarchical and confrontational styles of leadership.

From a broader perspective, the Nariño case shows that the incorporation of a gender perspective into process design does not produce automatic consensus or linear trajectories of transformation. On the contrary, it intensifies the agonistic character of the process by making visible disputes over roles, legitimate forms of authority, and the very criteria of political decision-making. These tensions, far from constituting a design failure, are part of its transformative potential: they open fissures in historically masculinised negotiation practices and project changes that extend beyond the specific moment of negotiation, even when these changes manifest in incomplete, conflictive, and internally contradictory ways.



Ceremony for the destruction of war materials during the Regional Peace Co-construction process in Nariño, Colombia (April 5, 2025).
Pasto, Nariño, Colombia. Colombian President Gustavo Petro (left) receives an indigenous staff of authority from Royer Garzón, head of the Comuneros del Sur delegation.
Photo: Raul Arboleda / AFP.
Source: AFP.



Indigenous women leader harmonization ceremony during the Second Cycle of Regional Peace Co-construction negotiations in Nariño, Colombia (August 15, 2024).
Bogotá, Colombia. Photo: Colombian National Government.

4.2 Civil Society Participation in the Havana Peace Process [7]

The peace process between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP), conducted between 2012 and 2016 in Havana, Cuba, was a nationally scoped negotiation aimed at ending more than five decades of internal armed conflict [8]. Its design followed a classical negotiation logic, in which the table was conceived as an exclusive space for political decision-making, while civil society participation was channelled through parallel mechanisms.

Citizen participation was not part of the initial design of the process but was progressively incorporated as a result of sustained mobilisation by social organisations, political pressure, and the accompaniment of national and international actors. This incorporation was neither linear nor consensual; rather, it emerged from ongoing political disputes that challenged the closed logic of the negotiation and expanded—albeit in limited ways—the boundaries of what could be negotiated. The model adopted maintained a clear differentiation between the negotiation table—where decision-making power was concentrated—and participatory mechanisms, which were conceived as spaces for consultation, deliberation and social legitimation.

These mechanisms included regional and national thematic forums, as well as the collection and systematisation of thousands of proposals from social organisations, victims' groups, ethnic communities, and women's organisations. While these spaces significantly broadened the range of voices engaged in the process, the information generated was channelled to the negotiation table through technical intermediaries, without direct interaction between participants and the negotiating delegations.

The incorporation of the gender approach followed a similar trajectory. Although the Final Agreement is internationally recognised for its innovative character in this area, gender was not initially central to the negotiation.

Its inclusion was the result of sustained collective action by women's and feminist organisations, which succeeded in positioning the need to recognise the differentiated impacts of armed conflict and women's political agency.

The creation of the Gender Subcommission and the incorporation of specific gender-related provisions in the Agreement represented important milestones. Rather than resolving gender inequalities within the negotiation, these mechanisms opened a field of dispute that partially reconfigured the process and left installed capacities for future political struggles, both within and beyond the Agreement.

However, subsequent analyses of implementation show that these normative advances have not translated uniformly into structural transformations. Eight years after the signing of the Agreement, the implementation of the gender approach shows some specific advances, but also significant delays, particularly in those components requiring deep and sustained institutional change. [9]

The Havana experience highlights a recurring tension: women's participation was robust during the consultation and thematic advocacy phases but encountered greater obstacles when attempting to influence the core arenas of decision-making. Although the gender approach permeated the text of the Agreement, its translation into implementation practices has depended largely on political will and institutional capacity, thereby reproducing pre-existing inequalities.

This case reinforces the idea that even highly innovative designs may see their transformative effects constrained if they are not accompanied by clear mechanisms for monitoring, accountability and power redistribution throughout all phases of peacebuilding. It also underscores that the inclusion of a gender approach can generate significant transformations, but that such transformations are inherently partial, contested and dependent on political struggles that continue beyond the agreement itself.

"Even highly innovative process designs may have limited transformative effects if they are not accompanied by clear mechanisms for monitoring, accountability, and the redistribution of power throughout all phases of peacebuilding."



Signing of the Final Peace Agreement between the Government of Colombia and the FARC-EP in Cartagena (2016).
Cartagena, Colombia. Photo: Colombian National Government.
Source: BAPP – Banco de Programas y Proyectos de Paz

5. Design lessons for addressing power asymmetries through a gender perspective

The analysis of these cases makes it possible to identify a set of relevant lessons on how the design of peace processes can contribute to—or constrain—the addressing of power asymmetries, particularly those related to gender. These lessons do not emerge from ideal designs or linear trajectories, but from processes shaped by tensions, disputes and ongoing adjustments between design, practice and implementation. In this sense, rather than offering replicable recipes, the cases analysed provide situated insights into how power is negotiated in real-world peacebuilding contexts.

- **Political clarity about what participation entails**

A first central lesson is the need to define explicitly the scope and purpose of participation from the outset of the process design. Both cases show that a lack of clarity between informative participation, consultative participation and participation with decision-making power generates expectations that are difficult to manage and can translate into frustration and fatigue, particularly among women and social organisations. In negotiation contexts, not all decisions can or should be opened up; however, failing to make these distinctions tends to shift the costs of ambiguity onto those participating from historically subordinated positions, particularly women. Early clarity does not eliminate conflict, but it allows disputes over power to unfold in a more explicit and politically productive manner, often generating greater legitimacy than implicit promises of influence that do not materialise.

In

- **Effective articulation between social participation and real decision-making arenas**

In both national and territorial processes, the existence of broad participatory architectures does not, in itself, guarantee a redistribution of power. The Colombian experience shows that when decision-making spaces remain closed and highly masculinised, social participation tends to be pushed towards the margins of the process. Peace process design must therefore include concrete mechanisms that connect territorial, community and technical spaces with the arenas where strategic decisions are made. This articulation does not eliminate asymmetries or tensions, but it can render them visible as sites of contestation, allowing social inputs to challenge—albeit partially—the priorities, rhythms and decisions of the process. These mechanisms do not require the permanent opening of the negotiation table, but rather deliberate designs that translate social conflict into political decision-making without undermining the viability or confidentiality of the process.

- **Context-sensitive and territorially grounded design**

A territorial approach can broaden inclusion and strengthen local ownership of peace processes, but it is not neutral from a power perspective. Designing context-sensitive processes requires recognising that territories also reproduce social and gender hierarchies. The challenge lies not in the territorial approach per se, but in the mistaken assumption that it is, by definition, more inclusive or transformative. Experience shows that territorial processes often intensify the agonistic character of negotiation, by bringing into direct interaction competing visions, interests and historical inequalities. Without an explicit reflection on these dynamics, territorial participation may reinforce traditional roles, assigning women responsibilities related to care, mediation and the day-to-day sustaining of the process, while decision-making power remains concentrated among predominantly male actors.

- **Recognising the political —non-neutral— role of design and facilitation**

The design and facilitation of peace processes are not neutral technical exercises. Through seemingly procedural decisions—such as who participates, how the agenda is structured, what timeframes are set and which voices are prioritised—concrete political effects are produced that shape the distribution of power.

- **Integrating a gender approach as a structural principle of the process**

Finally, both cases confirm that the gender approach cannot be reduced to an additional component of the process, a specific agenda item, or the symbolic inclusion of women in negotiation spaces. Addressing power asymmetries from a gender perspective requires integrating this approach as a structural principle of design, which entails a real redistribution of power, transformations in organisational cultures and changes in institutional incentives. This process is inherently conflictive and is not resolved solely at the design stage; it unfolds in practice, through disputes that reconfigure—often incompletely and contradictorily—existing power relations. In this sense, the gender approach does not "soften" negotiation, but rather intensifies its agonistic character, challenging in particular men in decision-making positions not as symbolic allies, but as actors called upon to yield, negotiate and redistribute power.

6. Beyond design: limits, tensions and lessons from practice

From practical experience, it becomes evident that peace process design, while fundamental, is not sufficient on its own to transform power asymmetries. Even the most sophisticated designs face structural limits when operating in contexts marked by deep inequalities, hierarchical political cultures and competing expectations about what it means to "participate". In this sense, design does not resolve power disputes, but rather organises them, makes them visible and, in some cases, intensifies them.

One key lesson is that many of the most significant transformations take place in informal and relational spaces that lie outside formal design frameworks. Care work, the emotional management of conflict and the everyday construction of trust—frequently undertaken by women—sustain peace processes during moments of crisis yet are rarely recognised or institutionally protected. [10] This systematic lack of recognition not only reproduces gender inequalities but also obscures a central dimension of the political struggle that enables processes to endure in contexts of high conflict, thereby weakening their long-term sustainability.

Second, practice shows that power is not redistributed solely through new rules or institutional architectures, but also—and decisively—through cultural change that challenges dominant forms of leadership and authority.[11] These changes are often slow, contested and non-linear, unfolding amid resistance, setbacks and partial advances. Far from being a harmonious process, the transformation of power relations occurs in a terrain of friction and requires sustained commitment from those who design, facilitate and participate in peace processes. In this sense, men are not external actors in transformation, but constitutive of it: depending on the incentives and frameworks that shape their participation, they may reproduce existing logics or actively contribute to unsettling and reconfiguring them.

Third, a practice-based perspective invites recognition that peace processes are themselves spaces of collective learning. Rather than seeking "correct" designs or closed solutions, the challenge lies in creating processes capable of adapting, correcting course and learning from their own tensions. Fractures, persistent disagreements and unresolved dissatisfactions do not necessarily signal failure; they may instead constitute the terrain from which longer-term political transformations emerge, extending beyond the specific moment of negotiation. From this perspective, balancing power is not a result achieved once and for all, but a continuous practice that demands critical reflection, flexibility and sustained attention to the inequalities that permeate peacebuilding.

At the same time, adopting a gender perspective from practice implies recognising that it is not implemented simply by incorporating women into formal spaces, but by transforming the rules, practices and organisational cultures through which power is concentrated. This entails revisiting who sets the agenda, how decisions are made and which forms of leadership are valued. This process is inherently tension-filled and cannot be depoliticised: in practice, it requires explicitly challenging men who occupy decision-making positions, not as symbolic allies, but as actors responsible for ceding, negotiating and redistributing power in contexts of real political dispute.

Finally, designing and facilitating peace processes is a political act. Recognising this dimension —and reflecting continuously on its effects—is a necessary condition to prevent process design from reproducing, in new forms, the very inequalities it seeks to transform. In practice, redistributing power through design is neither a one-off event nor a definitive achievement, but an accumulative, fragile and reversible process, built—or eroded—decision by decision, amid tensions that are constitutive of peacebuilding itself.



Installation of the Gender Subcommission of the Havana Peace Talks (2014). Havana, Cuba. Photo: Omar Nieto Remolina / Colombian National Government. Source: BAPP – Banco de Programas y Proyectos de Paz

7. Conclusions

This chapter has argued that peace and negotiation processes not only unfold in contexts marked by profound power asymmetries, but that the design of these processes itself constitutes a central arena in which such asymmetries are reproduced, contested or potentially transformed. The rules that organise participation, timing, legitimised languages and decision-making mechanisms are not neutral technical devices, but political decisions and practices that shape who influences outcomes, how and under what conditions, and that structure the very field of political contestation within peace processes.

The experiences analysed in Colombia show that expanding participation does not, in itself, guarantee an effective redistribution of power. In both national-level negotiations and territorial peace processes, a structural gap persists between the formal inclusion of diverse actors and their real capacity to influence strategic decisions. This gap should not be understood solely as a failure of design or implementation, but as the result of processes that maintain rigid separations between participatory spaces and decision-making arenas, channelling political conflict into more controlled or marginal forms and thereby reproducing pre-existing hierarchies.

From a gender perspective, the analysis demonstrates that the inequalities observed in peace processes are neither isolated anomalies nor accidental deviations, but concentrated reflections of broader power relations present in the social and political context. Women's participation continues to be constrained not only by their numerical minority in decision-making spaces, but also by historically masculinised ways of exercising power that privilege hierarchical authority, competition and closed decision-making, while devaluing relational work, care and emotional labour. These dynamics are not exclusive to men and may be reproduced by women operating within institutional frameworks that reward such leadership styles, reinforcing the need to address gender as a structural dimension of process design rather than merely as a criterion for inclusion.

From practice, it is clear that there are no "correct" designs capable of automatically balancing power asymmetries. However, there are design choices that expand or restrict the margins for transformation: clarity regarding the political scope of participation, effective connections between participatory spaces and decision-making, explicit recognition of the political character of facilitation, and the integration of a gender perspective as a structural principle of the process. These decisions do not eliminate conflict, but shape how it is expressed, who can sustain it and with what transformative effects. In this sense, design and facilitation cannot be understood as neutral technical functions, but as situated practices requiring continuous critical engagement with power, context and inequality.

Finally, this chapter suggests that balancing power in peace processes is a continuous practice rather than a discrete outcome. It requires processes capable of learning, adapting and correcting course through their own tensions, while acknowledging that the transformation of power relations is necessarily incomplete, contested and long-term. In complex and evolving negotiation contexts, the sustainability of peace will depend largely on the capacity of processes to protect and sustain these disputes, to question the rules that structure them, and to create real conditions for influence for those who have historically been excluded from decision-making, beyond the specific moment of agreement or negotiation.

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II. Islamic Approaches to Peacebuilding: From Inclusive Processes to Shared Responsibility

Dr. Houda Abadi

Introduction

Contemporary peacebuilding is confronted by escalating violence, increased militarism, geopolitical fragmentation, and deepening political repression. Violence is now more fragmented, with a growing number of conflicts involving external actors and transnational networks. The world is facing the largest forced displacement, and violent conflicts have increased to the highest level over the past three decades. [1] A global structural shift is evident in the evolution and resolution of conflicts. Peace agreements and decisive military victories have become rare. According to the Global Peace Index, the percentage of conflicts ending with clear military victories declined from 49% in the 1970s to 9% in the 2010s, while only 4% of conflicts ended through negotiated peace agreements, compared to 23% over the same period. [2] These dynamics undermine efforts towards lasting peace and complicate meaningful engagement in peace processes.

Peacebuilding has increasingly shifted toward transactional, short-term approaches, as evidenced by the prevalence of resource-driven negotiations, the erosion of longstanding international human rights norms, and lack of accountability. Western peacebuilding methodologies are frequently characterized by an individualistic focus, an emphasis on neutrality, and a tendency to remain static despite evolving conflict dynamics. [3] For instance, the situation in Gaza/Palestine has exposed significant accountability gaps and further highlighted the erosion of multilateral norms. These developments emphasize the need to move beyond temporary, transactional arrangements and short-term solutions toward bottom-up, inclusive engagement.

The MENA region ranks last in global assessments of gender equity and equality. [4] The persistent exclusion of women from peace and security processes continues to constitute a major structural challenge.

Gender bias is particularly pronounced in the MENA region, especially regarding women's political participation. [5] For example, women hold only 17.7% of parliamentary seats across the Arab region. [6] Patriarchal social norms remain among the most substantial obstacles to gender equality, and restrictive cultural norms further undermine the effectiveness of peacebuilding efforts. Despite the critical importance of women's inclusion in peace and security, only seven national action plans have been adopted as of 2019. These challenges highlight the urgency of adopting approaches that move beyond transactional arrangements and externally imposed models, which often lack legitimacy and fail to achieve durable peace.

Given the changing nature of conflicts, there is a pressing need for peacebuilding strategies that are more inclusive, context-sensitive, and transformative in nature. Existing approaches often fall short of addressing the deep-rooted issues that continue to ignite violence. [7] Prioritizing a holistic peace framework is essential to achieving lasting, transformative outcomes. Understanding diverse peacebuilding frameworks is critical to elevating local voices, addressing the structural drivers of violence, and advancing long-term social reform. A transformative peace paradigm emerges when local indigenous practices are integrated with international frameworks, thereby enhancing legitimacy, relevance, and resilience. Such integration not only acknowledges local realities and fosters connections with the global North but also strengthens community ownership and ensures sustainable impact.

Although religion is often perceived as a source of conflict, it also plays a positive role in peacebuilding. The Arab Barometer Survey indicates that religion continues to play an important role in Muslim-Majority societies, with the vast majority of citizens identifying as religious. [8]

In these contexts, peacebuilders should consider not only how Islam is instrumentalized to influence violent conflict, but also how Islamic principles can contribute to conflict resolution.

The primary objective of this paper is to address the complexities of contemporary conflicts by drawing on indigenous approaches that foster transformative change, reconciliation, and restorative justice. This paper analyzes peacebuilding processes rooted in Islamic frameworks, aiming to reimagine strategies that prioritize local ownership, inclusive participation, and positive peace outcomes. The paper will examine how Islamic peacebuilding frameworks address power asymmetries and advance positive peace. These approaches provide practical tools for designing peace processes that emphasize local ownership and participatory governance, while aligning with universal human rights norms.

The goal is to change the systems that lead to conflict so that peace can last. This approach promotes positive peace, one that is transformative and grounded in social justice, inclusion, and participation.

This perspective aligns with transformative approaches to peacebuilding, which extend beyond models that focus exclusively on negative peace or the mere absence of violence. Transformative peace aims to address the underlying structures and relationships that perpetuate conflict. [10] This approach necessitates the systemic transformation of social, political, and economic institutions to advance inclusive and sustainable peace.

Islamic Approaches to Peacebuilding and Promotion of Positive Peace

The complexity of contemporary conflicts underscores the need to explore peacebuilding grounded in principles that align with a positive peace orientation, actively promoting social harmony, equitable governance, and social justice. Prioritizing a holistic framework enables peacebuilding initiatives to pursue lasting and transformative outcomes that address the root causes of conflict and foster enduring peace and security.

The term Islam is etymologically rooted in the concept of peace, as referenced numerous times in the Quran. This highlights the centrality of peace within Islamic faith and practice. Islam's conception of peace extends beyond the mere absence of violence, emphasizing justice, mercy, inclusion, and equity. [9] These principles illustrate Islam's principled approach to peacebuilding.

The conception of peace in Islam is intersectional, addressing the political, social, and economic spheres. Instead of just aiming to stop violence or end conflicts, Islamic principles of peace look at the deeper causes of instability, such as social injustice, political exclusion, gender inequality, and economic gaps.

Key Elements of Process Design:

The process of achieving peace is as significant as the outcome itself. The active participation of individuals affected by conflict in peacebuilding initiatives fosters greater trust and legitimacy, empowering them to act as agents of change and influence their own futures. Prioritizing participatory approaches allows peacebuilding initiatives to better address the specific needs of communities. Therefore, it is crucial to focus on both the process and the attainment of a peace agreement. In Islamic teachings, peace is considered both a moral collective responsibility and a religious obligation. Community members are regarded as active participants in peacebuilding, where communal cooperation in the pursuit of shared values is encouraged. [11] According to Islamic principles of peacebuilding, restoring and repairing communal ties is essential to maintaining social harmony.

Islamic teachings emphasize the importance of fostering peace among individuals and within communities. As illustrated in a well-known hadith, the Prophet Muhammad stated: "Shall I inform you of a better act than fasting, alms, and prayers? Make peace between one another." This highlights the elevated status of reconciliation and harmony, equating peacemaking with acts of worship. The Quran provides explicit guidance on resolving conflicts among believers with justice and fairness. In Surah Al-Hujurat (Q49:9), it is stated: "If two parties among the believers fall into a fight, make ye peace [sulh] between them [...] make peace between them with justice, and be fair; for Allah loves those who are fair (and just)."

Furthermore, the Quran emphasizes the importance of making peace (2:224; 2:213, 3:105, 49:9) and equates act of reconciliation between people with acts of charity (4:114). This scriptural foundation reinforces the Islamic imperative to end conflict in a manner rooted in justice and equity (Quran 5:8). The Quran identifies the pursuit of justice as a fundamental obligation for all individuals and the broader community. Islamic scripture instructs Muslims to address injustice through activism, third-party involvement, and, where appropriate, divine intervention (Abu-Nimer, 234). Peace and justice are inherently interconnected, as peace is unattainable without justice.

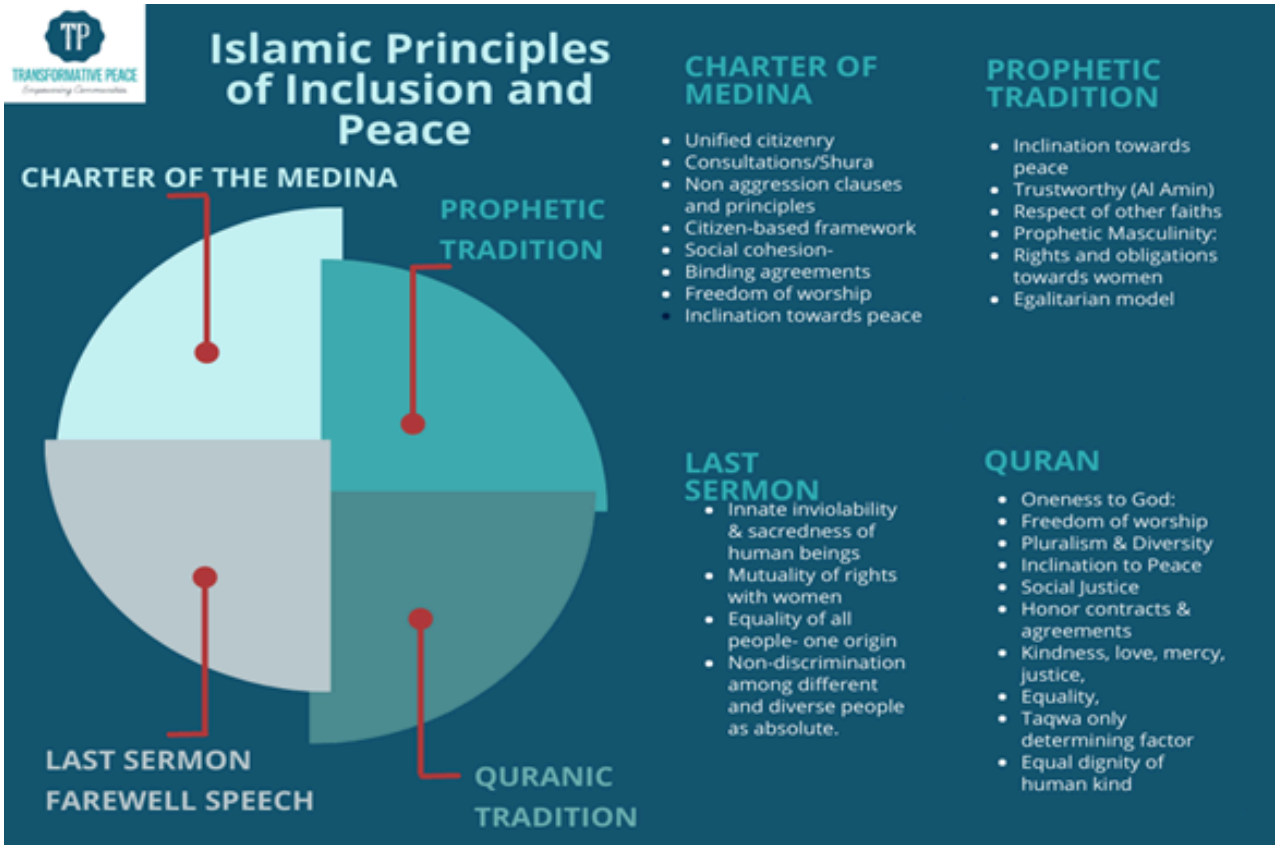
Islam places considerable emphasis on relational networks and social cohesion, incorporating principles such as wasata (mediation), sulh (reconciliation), hewar (dialogue), adl (justice), rahma (mercy) shura (consultation and popular will), and hudna (truce/ceasefire), which form the foundation of core peacebuilding frameworks. [12] The aim of peacebuilding extends beyond the cessation of violence to include the restoration of societal unity, equality, and justice. [13] These values inform the methods used to address and resolve disputes, ensuring that the process remains meaningful and contextually appropriate.

Inclusion and Participatory Processes: Lessons from the Prophetic Tradition

The founding of the new nation in Medina by the Prophet Mohammed illustrates the importance of inclusion and participatory processes in state formation. The approach in Medina prioritized the involvement of diverse community members in governance, decision-making, and social cohesion. This participatory model enabled the creation of foundational agreements, such as alliances, pacts, and treaties, which included both Muslims and non-Muslim communities. These mechanisms protected the interests and rights of various groups, fostering trust, respect, and social cohesion. The practice of shura, or mutual consultation, was an inclusive participatory process of governance that was expected from the whole community. [14]

The Charter of Medina, written in 622 CE, was a pioneering document that established guidelines for governance and social relations in the early Muslim community. It promoted inclusion through a citizen-based framework that overcame tribal affiliations, supported religious freedom, and encouraged people to live together with justice and compassion. The Prophet's actions helped build a society focused on justice, shared responsibility, and collective well-being. The charter starts by stating that everyone is part of one ummah, or nation. This approach demonstrated that participatory processes are essential for lasting unity and stability in a multiethnic and multireligious society. Alongside inclusion, the Charter stressed fairness, justice, equality, and peace.

When examined within its historical context, the Prophet's last sermon can be interpreted as an early articulation of human rights and social justice. The sermon emphasizes principles such as women's dignity, opposition to racism, reduction of economic disparities, the cessation of violence, and warns against injustice.



Visual Representation of Islamic Principle, Taken from Abadi H. Seeking an Islamic framework towards peacebuilding and Women's Inclusion [Internet]. 2022 [cited 2025 Dec 24].

The Role of Women in Peace Processes

The arrival of Islam brought major changes to the status and rights of women in seventh century Arabia. Before this time, practices like femicide showed a strong disregard for women's dignity and existence. Islam challenged these customs by restoring dignity to women and ensuring that their rights were recognized and protected in social, political, and economic life. The early history of Islam demonstrates women's active involvement, including their active participation in selecting the Prophet as a leader through formal acts of allegiance.

The Quran teaches justice and equality, making it clear that men and women have the same rights. It says both are equal before God and share the same spiritual responsibilities. For instance, verse 49:13 states: "O mankind, indeed, We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you...". This passage identifies righteousness as the only criterion for distinction between men and women. Subsequent chapters further reinforce that men and women are religious equals (4:124; 9:71).

The Prophet exemplified an egalitarian model of masculinity by performing household chores, mending his clothes, and his private life was characterized by cooperation and consultation. [15] From the early days of Islam to the present, Muslim women have played prominent roles in political, religious, and public spheres. Aicha, the Prophet's wife, was a major political leader and an astute scholar whose knowledge was sought by both men and women. Her contributions to Islamic law are foundational to the Islamic legal tradition. Other women who actively participated in politics include Hind bint Yazid al Ansariyah and Akrashah bint al Utroush. Some of the heads of state include Shajarat al Durr of Egypt and Queen Arwa of Yemen. [16] Female companions also fought in battle, such as Ṣafiyya bint ʿAbd al-Muttalib , Umm al-Fadl, and Nuṣayba bint Kaʿb who defended the prophet in battle. [17]

The Quran also references the Queen of Sheba, Bilqis, as an exemplary leader who demonstrated courage, leadership, and wisdom. These uncontested historical examples serve as valuable references in discussions regarding Muslim women's rights to participate in public life.

Although the Quran advocates for equality, many local sociocultural norms that restrict women's rights in Muslim-majority countries are frequently justified on religious grounds. These restrictions often arise from human interpretations of religious law that is influenced by tribal and patriarchal traditions. These limiting interpretations perpetuate patriarchal conceptions of women's roles and shape the understanding and applications of their rights. The persistence of these perspectives highlights the challenges in advancing women's rights. Nevertheless, addressing these interpretations from within the religious framework may facilitate the reclaiming and strengthening of women's rights. This approach calls for a critical examination of prevailing norms and offers a pathway to fostering gender equity grounded in Islamic principles. [18] For instance, in Morocco, Islamic principles were used by women's advocacy groups to promote changes within the current family law code and gain public support. The King of Morocco Mohammed VI leadership on gender equality provided space for such reforms stating in his speech, "The question here is not about giving women unwarranted privileges; rather it is about giving them their legal and legitimate rights. Today, in Morocco, women cannot be deprived of their rights." [19] Islamic jurisprudence can be mobilized to support women's participation and advance women's rights when framed through legitimate Islamic principles.

In my work across the MENA region, deploying local and Islamic frameworks to get buy-in and advance women's rights is critical. It also opens an entry point to engage male faith-based leaders who have moral legitimacy within their communities, making them allies and advocates for the renegotiation of restrictive gender norms.

This was especially powerful in my work in Iraq, where tribal leaders were open to discussing these issues and became advocates, knowing that change would come from within and be in accordance with Islamic law. Given the convergence between Islamic frameworks and international norms, adopting a framework that speaks through religious frames that resonate with target audiences can be the difference between success and failure.

In many regions, Muslim women have played an important yet often overlooked role in local mediation and peace processes. In Yemen, for instance, despite being excluded from formal negotiations, women played an instrumental role in local peacebuilding. These peacebuilding activities included mediating disputes and negotiating ceasefires, negotiating access to natural resources, and halting the recruitment of children by armed groups. [20]

Implementation and Current Challenges

Islamic principles of peacebuilding can contribute to a comprehensive peacebuilding framework that is locally relevant, is consistent with international standards, and prioritizes sustainable, long-term transformation over short-term negotiations and technocratic peacebuilding. By drawing from religious traditions and local values, these frameworks have the potential to resonate more deeply within communities, focusing on creating lasting and transformative change.

However, the role of religion in peacebuilding remains highly contested. The instrumentalization of religion for negative purposes and the rise of Islamophobia have raised concerns about the compatibility of religious frameworks with international human rights norms. Some scholars contend that these developments contribute to increased Islamization and a reduction in secular spaces. However, integrating Islamic principles into peacebuilding initiatives does not necessarily undermine fundamental human rights or diminish secular spaces. Rather, these concepts can serve as complementary tools that expand the peacebuilding toolkit. As Said and Funk argue, new frameworks that recognize the powerful role of religion in conflict and conflict resolution are needed. [21]



Another significant challenge is the patriarchal and restrictive tribal norms, which are often maintained under the guise of religious doctrine and hinder the adoption of inclusive peace frameworks. These norms are frequently justified by referencing vague religious texts, thereby reinforcing exclusionary practices. For example, the Taliban exemplifies the use of restrictive gender norms, justified through ambiguous religious references, to limit women's participation in public life. The Taliban insisted that they respect women's rights according to the Shari'ah. Nonetheless, they did not define shari'ah or explain what specific Islamic references prohibit women's rights and access to education. [22]

Addressing these barriers requires engaging all stakeholders in constructive dialogue, establishing robust accountability mechanisms, and developing a shared vocabulary. The diversity of theological debates concerning gender equality underscores the significance of framing and procedural approaches. The multiplicity of interpretations within Islamic jurisprudence shapes the ongoing articulation and negotiation of gender. Recognizing the politicization and the emotional weight of certain terms requires stakeholders to clearly articulate their positions on women's rights and explicitly reference Islamic sources to reduce ambiguity and promote mutual understanding. Using precise and contextually appropriate vocabulary is essential for building consensus and fostering dialogue among groups with differing perspectives. Islamic frameworks may be utilized to transform customary and cultural practices that perpetuate gender biases and inequalities, thereby advancing women's inclusion and reclaiming rights. This approach enables a focus on substantive issues, builds trust, and promotes collective benefits for inclusion.

In contexts where state authority is weak or contested, religious actors frequently serve as trusted and reliable intermediaries. They mediate disputes, negotiate humanitarian access, influence armed groups compliance with international humanitarian law.[23] For instance, the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue highlighted the role of faith-based leaders in preventing violent extremism, conducting local mediation, and raising awareness on social cohesion and peacebuilding through radio messages in Mali.[24]

Their authority is rooted in their moral credibility, their capacity to translate political or humanitarian messages into culturally resonant Islamic terms that are relevant and widely accepted, and their access to local and transnational networks. For instance, in Mali, religious leaders possess a greater degree of legitimacy than state officials and play a critical role in conflict mediation. [25] Traditional authorities, imams, and customary chiefs in the Centre-Nord and Sahel regions have contributed to regional stability by mediating tensions between Mossi and Fulani communities and preventing cycles of retaliation following terrorist attacks. [26]

Faith-based leaders play a critical role in preventing and countering violent extremist organizations, especially in fragile states. In the greater Lake Chad region, faith-based organizations played a crucial role in countering Boko Haram propaganda and deterring recruitment.[27] Imams and customary chiefs in the Sahel region have leveraged radio and mosque networks to challenge extremist narratives and advocate for nonviolence.[28] However, there is a need to integrate all these local conflict-resolution mechanisms into a holistic peacebuilding approach so that it operates on the principles of complementarity.[29] The Carter Center has also partnered with faith-based leaders to address Daesh propaganda in Morocco, Tunisia, France, and Belgium. In these contexts, Islamic principles have been emphasized to empower and equip youth to resist violent radicalization.

Although these initiatives play an important role in fostering sustainable peace at the community level, there is a clear need to map out these dispersed local peace efforts. This would help to better understand how they work, what makes them successful, what challenges they face, and how they are connected to Track I peace processes. By documenting and analyzing these local efforts, we can see how they can connect with formal Track I peace processes. This can help identify opportunities for synergy, ensuring that grassroots perspectives and indigenous conflict resolution methods inform and strengthen national and international peace negotiations. Bringing local peace initiatives and Track I processes together will make peacebuilding frameworks more effective, relevant, and responsive to the local communities' needs.

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