

---

CSSF Women, Peace and Security Helpdesk

# Mapping of Women, Peace and Security initiatives, actors and opportunities in Ethiopia

---

Submitted: 30/05/22

Assignment Code: WPS009

The Women Peace and Security Helpdesk, managed by Saferworld in partnership with Conciliation Resources, Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS) UK, the University of Durham and Women International Peace Centre (WIPC), was established in December 2021 to increase capability across the UK Government on WPS policy and programming in order to make its work on conflict and instability more effective. If you work for the UK Government and you would like to send a task request, please email us at: [wpshelpdesk@saferworld.org.uk](mailto:wpshelpdesk@saferworld.org.uk). If you do not work for the UK Government but have an enquiry about the Helpdesk or this report, please email us at: [enquiries.wpshelpdesk@saferworld.org.uk](mailto:enquiries.wpshelpdesk@saferworld.org.uk)

Direct audience:

Members of the Governance, Peace and Human Rights team at the British Embassy in Addis Ababa, including the Gender and GBV Adviser.

Confidentiality status:

Not confidential.



# Acronyms

CEDAW Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (of the UN)

CSO civil society organisation

CSP Charities and Societies Proclamation (law)

EWLA Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association

EPRDF Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front

Ezema Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice

IDPs internally displaced people

KII key informant interviews

NAP National Action Plan

NDC National Dialogue Commission

NEBE National Election Board of Ethiopia

NEWA Network of Ethiopian Women's Association

NGO non-governmental organisation

TPLF Tigray People's Liberation Front

UNSCR United Nations Security Council Resolution

WPS Women, Peace and Security

WRO women's rights organisation

# Table of Contents

Introduction and background .....	5
Background and country context .....	6
Conflict and crisis in Ethiopia .....	6
Women's rights in Ethiopia .....	7
Current peace process in Ethiopia .....	8
Findings and analysis .....	11
Current status of WPS initiatives in Ethiopia .....	11
Key actors in WPS work in Ethiopia .....	15
Challenges/barriers to WPS work in Ethiopia .....	17
Recommendations for opportunities for WPS work in Ethiopia .....	20

# Introduction and background

## Introduction

The British Embassy in Addis Ababa commissioned the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Helpdesk to undertake a scoping study to map WPS initiatives, actors and opportunities in Ethiopia through desk-based research and consultation with civil society, including women's rights organisations (WROs), and UN Women. The task was assigned to Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS), which is a partner in the Helpdesk, with the support of an external expert consultant, Aster Birke Asfaw.

These consultations with civil society took place in the form of nine key informant interviews (KIIs) conducted with in-country experts and representatives from civil society in Ethiopia. These key partners were agreed between the commissioning staff and research team, with the interviews taking place in May 2022. With the expert consultant based in Ethiopia, eight of the KIIs were undertaken as in-person interviews, with one stakeholder responding to the questions in written form over email. The specific findings and quotes have been anonymised.

This report highlights important findings and analysis from the in-country consultations, identifying common themes and setting out the priorities, successes, challenges and concerns around WPS initiatives in Ethiopia. The findings are intended to inform the British Embassy Addis Ababa team and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) on WPS initiatives, actors and opportunities to use in support of WPS through policy and programming.

## Research team

**Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS)** is the UK's Women, Peace and Security civil society network. We are a membership organisation of 19 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and experts in the field of development, human rights, humanitarian aid and peacebuilding. We were founded to progress United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. Our role is to promote and hold the UK Government to account on its international commitments to women in conflict areas worldwide

**Aster Birke Asfaw** has more than 25 years of multisectoral experience in the civic sector in Ethiopia and Lesotho. She has co-designed and managed diverse programmes in sectors related to: governance, conflict mitigation and peacebuilding, women's empowerment and gender inclusion, HIV/AIDS, reproductive health, livelihood, vulnerable children and education. She has worked on system strengthening – developing the skills of civil society organisations (CSOs), government institutions and communities at the federal and regional levels in Ethiopia, and in foreign countries.

# Background and country context

## Conflict and crisis in Ethiopia

Ethiopia has been impacted by various conflicts over many decades, including the recent civil war in the North. This started in November 2020 and has been marked by human rights violations and atrocities perpetrated by all parties. Due to the conflict, coupled with and contributing to an ongoing food crisis, the Ethiopians are also experiencing a severe humanitarian crisis, exacerbated by over a year of restricted access for international humanitarian and human rights organisations to Tigray. International NGOs report that this de facto blockade of aid and critical supplies was due to the Government of Ethiopia. The government refuted this and instead placed blame on the opposition, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).<sup>1</sup> Due to restrictions on communications, banking, freedom of movement and administrative barriers, it has been difficult to get regular, direct information from the region. The regions of Amhara and Afar, bordering Tigray, have also been affected by the conflict, with increases in internally displaced people (IDPs), the presence of armed groups and destruction of infrastructure.

Food insecurity is a serious concern for Ethiopia and neighbouring countries due to climate change, successive years of drought affecting harvests and livestock, locust swarms, and the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>2</sup> It has worsened through the conflict, with 5.2 million people in need of food assistance<sup>3</sup> and 1.7 million facing emergency levels of hunger.<sup>4</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected women and girls, especially those who were already living at or near the poverty line, while access to health services and education has reduced as risks of gender-based violence have increased.<sup>5</sup>

Ethiopian women have been disproportionately affected by conflict and have held various roles in the recent war. KII participants described the voluntary, unpaid war-related work that women were doing: fighting, preparing food items for armed groups and mobilising for the war effort. Women IDPs, including those living in displacement camps, have experienced loss of livelihoods and lack of access to food, shelter, water and sanitation.<sup>6</sup>

---

1 Council on Foreign Relations (2022), 'Ethiopia Truce an Uncertain Prospect', March (<https://www.cfr.org/blog/ethiopia-truce-uncertain-prospect>)

2 Council on Foreign Relations (2022), 'East Africa's Growing Food Crisis: What to Know', March (<https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/east-africas-growing-food-crisis-what-know>)

3 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) (2022), 'Northern Ethiopia – Humanitarian Update', June (<https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/ethiopia/>)

4 World Food Programme (WFP) (2021), 'WFP completes first round of food distributions in Afar and Amhara; still lacks necessary supplies to reach targeted populations in Tigray', October (<https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/wfp-completes-first-round-food-distributions-afar-and-amhara-still-lacks-necessary>)

5 CARE (2021), 'Impact of COVID-19 on women and girls in Ethiopia', June (<https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/study-impact-covid-19-women-and-girls-ethiopia>)

6 CARE (2021), 'A study on the impact of COVID-19 on women and girls in Ethiopia', November (<https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/study-impact-covid-19-women-and-girls-ethiopia>)

The disproportionate and gendered impact of conflict globally on women and girls is well documented<sup>7</sup> and Ethiopian women are experiencing this, compounded by food insecurity, violence, especially sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and the COVID-19 pandemic. All parties to the conflict have perpetrated sexual violence; women, men and children have been targeted by the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) and Eritrean Defence Force (EDF), and by the TPLF and regional militias in the Afar and Amhara regions, although this has been largely denied or ignored by political leaders.<sup>8, 9</sup>

## Women's rights in Ethiopia

With the assumption of power of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in 2018, gender parity was achieved at the executive level, where women constituted 50 per cent of the cabinet positions and Sahle-Work Zewde was elected by parliamentarians to be the country's first female President.<sup>10</sup> Currently, women occupy 40 per cent of seats in the House of People's Representatives (HoPR).

Despite being a signatory to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Maputo Protocol, Ethiopia's progress on women's rights has not been consistent. As an example, UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on WPS was adopted in 2000, yet more than 20 years later Ethiopia has only started the process to draft a National Action Plan (NAP) on WPS, while neighbouring countries are in their second or third revision. In 2021, the government established the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs, replacing the previous Ministry of Women, Children and Youth and subsuming some of the responsibilities of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.<sup>11</sup> This newly established ministry holds the responsibility for the preparation of a WPS NAP. It has been working with UN Women and national stakeholders on the development of the plan, by holding workshops, establishing oversight and technical bodies, and undertaking reviews and a baseline study.

Gender inequality is a root cause of violence and instability and is exacerbated by conflict. There is a direct link between increased militarism and increased inequalities, as has been seen in Ethiopia and highlighted on a global level by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres at the 2021 Open Debate on WPS.<sup>12</sup> Patriarchy and gender inequality is widespread in Ethiopia, where there are high rates of child marriage, sexual violence, disproportionate burdens of unpaid and domestic care work, and high maternal mortality rates. In the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security's (GIWPS) 2021 index of 170 countries, Ethiopia was ranked 113. Since 2017, the country has seen a decrease of women's perception of community safety<sup>13</sup> and a seven-fold increase in organised

---

7 UN Women (n/d), 'Peace and security' (<https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/peace-and-security>)

8 The New Humanitarian (2022), 'Ethiopia launches a national dialogue, but divisions run deep', April (<https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2022/04/18/ethiopia-launches-national-dialogue-divisions-run-deep>)

9 British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) (2022), 'Women Building Peace', February (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3ct3f1c>)

10 BBC (2018), 'Sahle-Work Zewde becomes Ethiopia's first female president', October (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-45976620>)

11 DMLO (2022), 'Latest executive organs powers and duties: the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs', April (<https://dmethiolawyers.com/latest-executive-organs-powers-and-duties-the-ministry-of-women-and-social-affairs/>)

12 UN Security Council (2021), 'Meeting on Women, Peace and Security'.

13 From GIWPS Index: "Security and safety in the community affect women's mobility and opportunities outside the home. Our Index captures the percentage of women ages 15 years and older who report that they 'feel safe walking alone at night in the city or area where you live'."

violence (measured by battle deaths), while most other gender equality markers are static or seeing slight improvements.<sup>14, 15</sup>

Women disproportionately face the impacts of conflict, displacement, poverty and food insecurity in Ethiopia that have worsened during the current war – and this must be recognised in all peace processes and through any reconciliation efforts, at the local, regional and national levels. Yet implementing the WPS Agenda has not been a consistent priority for government or CSOs in Ethiopia. CSOs have not been able to prioritise WPS for many years for various reasons. These include and are especially due to the Charities and Societies Proclamation (CSP) law, which between 2010 and 2019, prohibited or restricted the work of CSOs – including work on women’s rights and related rights-based work. Since then, some women’s rights organisations (WROs) and CSOs have been able to re-engage in human rights-focused advocacy and programming. The CSP now allows CSOs to work in any sector, including human rights, advocacy and governance, and assures CSOs of right to challenge suspension in a court of law. The CSO Authority has eased the registration process and as a result, there have been many new CSOs established, including in previously restricted sectors like women’s rights and governance. There is also a positive relationship between the sector and this regulatory authority.

However, KII participants spoke of a diverse and divided civic sector, echoed within the polarised women’s or feminist movement that held different and sometimes opposing views on the Tigray conflict. KII participants’ responses indicated that the women’s movement in Ethiopia is currently not strong or cohesive, despite the gains made in some areas, such as SGBV in the private sphere, which has been a political priority. Yet women’s rights issues at the national level are not being adequately addressed by the government. Nor is there consensus among the women’s movement of what these issues are. There is no culture of critically raising rights-based issues (land, economic, and sexual and reproductive health rights) nor of holding the government to account. KII participants said that women did not feel safe to engage in political debates and had safety concerns for themselves and their families.

### Current peace process in Ethiopia

In a move toward peace and reconciliation, the National Dialogue Commission (NDC) was established in December 2021. Despite coordinated appeals from Ethiopian women’s organisations at multiple stages of the process for equal representation and participation<sup>16</sup> within the NDC, only 3 out of 11 commissioners are women. Women’s organisations continue to offer recommendations, including on the need to hold consultations with underrepresented groups, keeping the public informed and engaged through public messaging, and ensuring that any future appointments of staff and experts are representative of the diversity within the population, with equal representation of women.<sup>17</sup> Equal representation of women is not a new concept to the Government of Ethiopia, as the Prime Minister appointed women to half of the cabinet after his election.

---

<sup>14</sup> Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security (2021), ‘Ethiopia’ (<https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/ethiopia/>)

<sup>15</sup> UN Women (n/d), ‘Ethiopia’ (<https://data.unwomen.org/country/ethiopia>)

<sup>16</sup> African Arguments (2022), ‘Ethiopia’s national dialogue commission: where are the women?’ March (<https://africanarguments.org/2022/03/ethiopias-national-dialogue-commission-where-are-the-women/>)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.



There have been many vocal critics and scepticism<sup>18</sup> about the National Dialogue process; this is particularly because it does not include the TPLF or the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA).<sup>19</sup> Its purpose and potential impact have been questioned, yet few groups beyond Ethiopian women's organisations and networks have highlighted the lack of gender representation in the NDC. Coalitions of women's rights organisations and networks have been advocating for more inclusion for women within the peace process and all political movements.

Recently, a coalition of CSOs set up a Steering Committee – the interface with the NDC – to represent women and women's issues in the National Dialogue. Steering Committee members include TIMRAN (Chair), the Network of Ethiopian Women's Association (NEWA), the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA), Benishangul Women's Association, Amhara Women's Association and organisations from Oromia and Somali. The membership is diverse and represents women from grassroots to elite communities.

The Steering Committee is expected to influence NDC agenda setting and ensure inclusion in dialogue processes. It is crucial that women's presence in these spaces is not tokenistic, but that they can meaningfully influence the whole process and be part of the formal dialogue. Within the National Dialogue process, the conversation includes a focus on the traditional justice system, which can compound discrimination against women as it is grounded in patriarchal socio-cultural norms. Previous consultations by national organisations identified shared priorities and objectives, including women being engaged in all discussions from the start, women's organisations working collaboratively in coalition, and ensuring international support is led by civil society and is needs-based.<sup>20</sup> The Steering Committee is building skills, crafting women-specific agendas, and pushing for 50 per cent women in the National Dialogue structures. The Steering Committee has submitted its written requests to the NDC and a meeting has been scheduled. The Steering Committee also envisages ensuring grassroots women's involvement, if possible as a structure of the formal dialogue process and, if not, for CSOs to hold parallel consultations to feed back into the dialogue processes.

In March 2022, the government unilaterally declared a humanitarian truce and the TPLF followed this with a statement of support for this ceasefire,<sup>21</sup> signalling the possibility of openness to peace negotiations.<sup>22</sup> The government has since allowed some restricted humanitarian access to the Tigray region, although this has been slow paced.<sup>23</sup> The NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security has called for an independent international investigation into human rights abuses and war crimes in Tigray, Afar and

---

18 Aljazeera (2022), 'Ethiopia's new "national dialogue" cannot deliver inclusive peace', January (<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/1/27/can-ethiopias-national-dialogue-deliver-inclusive-peace>)

19 The New Humanitarian (2022), 'Ethiopia launches a national dialogue, but divisions run deep', April (<https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2022/04/18/ethiopia-launches-national-dialogue-divisions-run-deep>)

20 Inclusive Peace (n/d), 'Ethiopia: How women are influencing the National Dialogue process' (<https://www.inclusivepeace.org/ethiopia-how-women-are-influencing-the-national-dialogue-process/>)

21 Reuters (2022), 'Ethiopia's Tigray region says it will observe humanitarian ceasefire', March (<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/ethiopias-tigray-region-say-committed-observing-humanitarian-ceasefire-2022-03-25/>)

22 Reuters (2022), 'Ethiopia government declares unilateral truce to allow aid into Tigray', March: (<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/ethiopia-government-declares-truce-allow-aid-into-tigray-2022-03-24/>)

23 OCHA (2022), 'Northern Ethiopia – Humanitarian Update', June (<https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/ethiopia/>)

Amhara to, “ensure ongoing scrutiny, investigate and report on violations, collect and preserve evidence for future trials, and facilitate genuine accountability”.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> UN working group on WPS (2021), ‘Monthly Action Points (MAP) for the Security Council: December 2021’, December (<https://www.womenpeacesecurity.org/map/map-december-2021/>)

# Findings and analysis

## 1

### Current status of WPS initiatives in Ethiopia

#### The WPS agenda in Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, economic, human and security rights are traditionally addressed separately, and while the WPS agenda is an opportunity to link these, WPS is not comprehensively promoted by the government and CSOs. There may have been some progress on the WPS agenda; however, it is difficult to gauge the level of implementation and effectiveness of any initiatives without a NAP and a related baseline assessment. The contributions from KII participants provided us with insight on the current situation and opportunities for progress.

While the peace and security crisis, including targeted killings, gender-based violence, displacement, the humanitarian crisis and women's rights violations, has forced WPS to be prioritised by the women's movement, the violent conflict and the war in the North have simultaneously regressed WPS on the national agenda. Conflict has also contributed to reversing gains made in the promotion and protection of women's rights; the war has relegated women's issues to those of basic safety, security and livelihoods, rather than the strategic needs of women related to equality and ending patriarchal norms. KII participants explained that as a country, they had regressed from discussing strategic and structural aspects of the WPS agenda to having a focus on issues such as SGBV. In addition, the government had struggled to report on international women's rights conventions and there was an absence of shadow reporting from civil society as a result of the former restrictive laws.

Within the WPS agenda, SGBV, which has previously been considered a taboo topic for public discussion, is being brought to the forefront. A KII participant voiced her concern that while soldiers at war were considered heroes, SGBV survivors were side-lined and stigmatised with the implication that they invited the violence upon themselves.

Previously, police showed a negative response to women seeking support through formal justice mechanisms, which was one factor that deterred women from taking SGBV cases to the police. More recently, a KII participant revealed that they were aware of a Women and Children Department that had been set up with women investigators and a focus on women's issues, which had allowed for better filing of cases and accountability measures. Government offices from a variety of levels now have Gender Departments, which means that there are now structures to interact with – although it is not clear how effective or survivor-centred these are.

There are also changes in terms of powerful traditional community-level institutions like *edirs*<sup>25</sup> and their role in preventing SGBV and addressing harmful social norms. For

---

<sup>25</sup> The *edir* (or *iddir* or *idir*) is a community-based, informal, social insurance institution that provides financial and social assistance, originally to give support during bereavement, and now provides a wider range of support.

example, in Adama, the Association for Women's Sanctuary and Development (AWSAD) is working with *edirs* to support them to change their bylaws to ensure that perpetrators are held to account. If this proves effective, this model could be replicated in other communities to sustain positive actions.

Overall, WPS is not given special attention as a priority sector. For example, the governing Prosperity Party has a substantial number of women in leadership positions, but it cannot be assumed that they will prioritise the WPS agenda. Some KII participants questioned the existence of the WPS agenda in Ethiopia at all, given that the NAP had not yet been developed at the time of the interviews. If the agenda has been set by the government, then it has not been clearly communicated through the usual way of setting and communicating policy priorities. This has contributed to the ineffectiveness of any existing WPS initiatives because of a lack of knowledge and buy-in from the public.

### UNSCR 1325 and the development of the NAP

After the adoption of UNSCR 1325, women's rights organisations such as the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA) worked on awareness raising and promotion of the resolution. However, this took place decades ago, and there has been an advocacy and implementation gap since that time. Following a government commitment in 2019, UN Women started working with national partners to develop a NAP. The Ministry of Women and Social Affairs and UN Women held a consultation workshop, established a high-level Steering Committee, a Technical Committee and hired consultants to conduct a normative review, context assessment and institutional audit to support the establishment of the baseline for the NAP. Given that the ministry has only recently been tasked with developing the NAP, it is unclear which other ministries will be involved in NAP implementation. It is assumed that the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs will also lead on coordinating and reporting nation-wide NAP implementation, but this is a challenging role and the ministry may require additional resources to do this effectively.

Three CSOs are participating in the work of the Technical Committee, including NEWA representing the women's rights movement. The majority of KII participants were not aware that preparations were underway to develop the NAP, supported by UN Women. Even the few CSOs that were engaged in creating awareness on UNSCR 1325 did not have clear information on the status of NAP development. Also, when the government invites CSOs and WROs for consultations, this usually occurs with very short notice, making it difficult to read drafts and make substantial contributions.

KII participants noted an apparent resistance to implementing UNSCR 1325 by the government. One cited this was because of the perceived risk that it would make perpetrators of sexual violence in conflict and other war crimes more vulnerable to being reported to the International Criminal Court (ICC), even though Ethiopia is not a signatory. One KII participant questioned the soundness of giving responsibility for the NAP preparation to the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs, stating:

*I believe the women's ministry is being given every other assignment that reads 'women' and they are not in a position to do [all this work]. The ministry seems to be saddled with a lot of important tasks that it can't possibly accomplish. This is a perfect recipe for developing policies but shelving it with no impact.*

Women's rights are widely seen as an imposition of Western values and agenda. Where there is some local awareness of UNSCR 1325, there seems to be negative bias and a knowledge gap about its relevance to and prioritisation in the Ethiopian context. Due to the hostile relationship between the UN Security Council with the Government of

Ethiopia in recent times, both government officials and civil society are questioning the intention of UNSCR 1325. Some prefer not to engage with a resolution that was developed by a body that has been perceived to be working against the country. There is suspicion as to why the implementation of UNSCR 1325 and the development of a NAP is a focus for the international community now, when that community has been supporting the government for the last 20 years without being seen to push this issue. There are questions within civil society as to whether the development of the NAP has become a priority for international partners because of the security situation and its disproportionate effects on women, or if there is an ulterior motive by international partners to put undue pressure on the government.

UN resolutions in Ethiopia, are not well understood, owned or implemented, and therefore are not contextualised or made 'Ethiopian'. This may be surprising given Ethiopia's status as being one of the original signatories of the 1945 UN Charter, and one of the first signatories for CEDAW and the Maputo Protocol. This lack of institutionalised ownership of international instruments and conventions is compounded by the fact that many government officials are not conversant on these international mechanisms. While there were occasionally conversations on CEDAW and the Maputo Protocol following the reforms that the Prime Minister embarked on in 2018, UNSCR 1325 is still not widely considered to be relevant in Ethiopia. To support a contextualised understanding of UNSCR 1325 along with its intended spirit, CSOs are raising awareness with the public.

KII participants noted that international organisations had also contributed to the negative perceptions of UNSCR 1325. The way it was packaged – linguistically and practically – has made it inaccessible to the average person and seems to have had particularly burdening effects on CSOs. They considered that UN Women also bore responsibility for this outcome. It should have played a more active role in creating understanding, packaging the resolution and distributing it in a way that made sense to national actors. UNSCR 1325 should have also been translated into Amharic and other local languages at an earlier stage, and packaged in a more compact, palatable and easier way for countries to understand at the national level.

### Women's political participation in Ethiopia

The National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) has a draft directive that would stipulate a minimum percentage of women to be included in political parties. This builds on an existing directive that incentivises inclusion by focusing on political parties' financing, with provisions for advancing inclusion beyond just women. This means parties should consider additional identity characteristics of women representatives to increase diversity, such as whether they are from a rural area, have a disability or are younger. If this directive can be passed and properly implemented, it would provide legal impetus to improve women's political participation.

Some political parties in Ethiopia have already set quotas on a minimum number of women members and women holding positions within their party. For example, the former Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) instituted a 30 per cent quota in 2004, which has since been adopted by its successor, the Prosperity Party. KII participants noted that this was a good mechanism to increase women's political participation in high-level decision-making spaces. However, in practice the outcomes have varied depending on the party. For example, the Prosperity Party had facilitated women's participation more than others, but reasons for this were not identified through these consultations and could be explored in further research.

Women from opposition parties were concerned for their safety, particularly when they went outside their local areas for campaigning, as they had faced attacks and intimidation. Additionally, KII participants believed that beyond meeting quotas, there was no meaningful engagement of women in politics, which prevented women raising awareness of women's issues or determining political direction. Instead, the limited influence of women often decreases as they go higher up the political ladder. The highly patriarchal system imposes restricted gender roles on women, where additional economic, social and cultural barriers limit women's political participation.

To encourage participation, the NEBE provides financial incentives to political parties that demonstrate improved participation of women. One criterion set by the NEBE for additional monetary support is a 20 per cent minimum of women candidates registered, or as party leaders. This is a good step that forces political parties to meet minimal standards in terms of women's representation. Further incentivisation by the NEBE could also be effective in encouraging institutional change.

The work by civil society on women's political participation has been more proactive. During the sixth national election in 2021 in Ethiopia, NEWA worked to promote the participation of women in politics by awareness creation, developing the capacities of women candidates and by holding consultations with political parties on the importance of women's political participation. NEWA believes that its interventions were effective: where previously parties were resistant and had biases, a number made changes to promote women's political participation. Some opposition parties, like Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (Ezema), have established women's forums to further facilitate their political participation. Women politicians have also been active, demonstrating their value and that they cannot be ignored.

KII participants raised the issue of the instrumentalisation of women's political participation. For example, the Prosperity Party has clear commitments to women's participation and there seem to be genuine efforts to create gender parity in the party and the government, as evidenced by the Prime Minister's cabinet. Nonetheless, the reasons stated for wanting women's equal participation in politics are usually because women are perceived to be less corrupt, more committed and peacemakers, and promoting these attributes benefit the political party and the public. One man KII participant stated:

*Women are civil in nature, they don't like argument, debates, fights, wars. So they don't want to engage in politics. Because they believe politics is dirty. Women don't have ethnic questions and prefer the national agenda. Women like peace, which is why they don't want to enter politics.*

This romanticised narrative of femininity has also been widely used by previous political parties and regimes. It is crucial to shift the focus from the instrumentalisation of women's political participation, to enabling women to meaningfully participate in politics in a safe and conducive environment.

The Joint Council of Women Political Party Members was formed in September 2021. This has been a promising development, as it has brought together women politicians across party lines. Some CSOs are linking up with the Joint Council and providing support, such as assisting with the development of establishment documents and providing women with training on campaigning and important policy issues. KII participants were encouraged to see vibrant women politicians from lower-level governance structures (that is, *woredas*) take advantage of the training provided, showing promise to lead political parties and ensure women's future political

engagement. Young women are also emerging on the political scene, demonstrating strength and commitment and that with proper support, they can be active participants in political leadership.

NEWA prepared a women's manifesto for the last election in consultation with and with support from regional and national women's organisations. The manifesto was used to push political parties to include issues pertinent to women and the WPS agenda, and to advocate for women candidates, voters and observers to increase women's voices. There was also an attempt to provide women politicians in federal and regional parliaments with skills development on post-election support.

According to KII participants, the recent conflict had proved a threat to the country's unity and encouraged individuals and institutions to become alert, engaging and working for peace within their communities. Even though some of the efforts might not be organised, citizens, CSOs and the private sector were rallying to support Ethiopians in need. It is also important to note the outstanding, if sometimes partisan, work the Ethiopian diaspora has been undertaking, particularly after the start of the war in the North, where they are actively making their voices heard, advocating, lobbying and supporting in terms of finance.

## 2

### Key actors in WPS work in Ethiopia

Key WPS sector actors identified by KII participants included local WROs, peacebuilding and feminist organisations such as TIMRAN, NEWA, the Ethiopian Institute of Peace (EIP) and EWLA, and various task forces and steering committees established by the government, some of whom were interviewed as part of this consultation. UN Women was also seen to be at the forefront of supporting the WPS agenda and leading on the NAP development process. Other stakeholders include the British Council (particularly the Civil Society Support Programme 2 [CSSP2]), the USAID Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), the embassies of Canada, the UK, France, Germany, Finland, Sweden, Ireland, the Netherlands and the USA, and CARE International. Interest has been shown by other European embassies, but KII participants were not sure as to the level of engagement to date.

KII participants stated that the National Dialogue process had generated a lot of 'buzz' and there was broad interest by the international community to support the process. Given the sensitivity of the process and to ensure success and national ownership, the international community's support must be well thought out and scrutinised, as the engagement and support of certain governments might be more harmful than beneficial. A KII participant stated:

*I think USAID is interested in the National Dialogue, but I see that as a problem. A body that openly talks about regime change isn't impartial.*

There are initiatives by local CSOs and networks to implement WPS projects. One example is NEWA's work that brings together women at all political levels to develop their capacities in peacebuilding. It is hoped that these women can then engage in



peacebuilding activities and also participate in national dialogue activities, when the opportunity presents itself.

Before the 2010–19 Charities and Societies Proclamation restricting CSOs' work, EWLA had undertaken initiatives to create awareness on UNSCR 1325. Even with the prohibitive legal regime that disallowed advocacy and work on women's rights and gender equality, WROs have been working on women's issues without drawing public attention to their work. They have managed to survive as organisations and cleverly raised women's issues 'under the radar'.

Now that the legal context has shifted, these organisations are working openly and other CSOs and new women's rights and feminist organisations such as TIMRAN, a local CSO that focuses on increasing women's political participation, are now taking the initiative to build understanding of the WPS agenda. The Executive Director of Progyinist, a women's rights organisation, personally translated UNSCR 1325 into Amharic and gave training on it because she saw its relevance in Ethiopia. There has been advocacy undertaken by Ethiopian WROs to amend the Domestic Violence Act to ensure that the burden of proof falls on the perpetrator rather than on the victim/survivor, as it currently does. This is relevant, because 'victim blaming' is common and the resulting stigmatisation prevents women from reporting or receiving services.

The women's rights movement's best allies are human rights organisations, particularly those established after the CSO law changed in 2019, as they are bold, focused and collaborative. Civil society organisations, like Pact Inc. and its local CSO partners, have experience delivering women's empowerment initiatives. Their approach to establish self-help groups to change harmful social norms could be adapted to support WPS work. Local women's rights organisation and other politically organised groups like women's federations can be supported to carry out and expand the WPS work that they have already been doing.

*The political space is more open than it has ever been. This is appreciated and not to be taken for granted. For example, I would be afraid to have such conversations with you five years ago. But now I do it openly, in public.*

In 2018 and 2019 a women's group called Mothers for Peace travelled through the country to promote peace using customary conflict management or meditation processes, which were normally only done by older men. This approach was seen as effective at promoting peace and was recognised by the government for its potential role in deradicalisation. The work was underpinned by the women's assumption that they, as mothers, wanted to try and resolve issues peacefully more than others. Although there were positive outcomes, the group did not include young women. They also used tactics that included kneeling and begging leaders and, according to one KII participant, this behaviour reinforced gender norms that expect mothers and women to be subservience.



# 3

## Challenges/barriers to WPS work in Ethiopia

### Low prioritisation of WPS

Very little is being done to support systemic implementation of the WPS agenda. Post-conflict recovery and humanitarian support is being prioritised over WPS, with limited understanding of the importance of WPS within this work. Advocacy and strategic issues are seen as being a luxury. There are limited safe spaces for women to effectively engage in the peacebuilding and security arena. There also do not appear to be tailored programmes for women to engage in WPS at the institutional level within the government and CSO sectors.

### Civic space in Ethiopia and civil society's role in peace

With the repeal of the restrictive Charities and Societies Proclamation in 2019, and the more enabling Organisation of Civil Societies Proclamation, this period of reform brought an expanded political space. This legal provision, combined with the increased efficiency of the registration process for CSOs, ensures freedom of association. Unfortunately, these positive changes cannot make a difference overnight, as a thriving civil society takes some time to build. In fact, many governance and human rights organisations that suffered under previously restrictive laws have found it difficult to quickly readjust and use civic space again effectively. There are also some gaps, such as journalists continuing to be imprisoned. KII participants were still hopeful about the improvement in civic space, despite the slow adjustment to exploit this change.

The other issue is a divided civil society sector that is reflective of the broader society. These divisions prevent CSOs from having a common ground based on principles and values. This has limited the ability of the sector to be influential and engage in dialogue on WPS. There has been and remains divisions among CSOs, reflecting contextual polarising factors, namely ethnicity. In particular, the establishment of regional CSOs by the government has contributed to the 'ethnicisation' of some CSOs, which has prevented their cooperation on shared agendas. KII participants highlighted that this could be a lost opportunity if CSOs did not engage collectively on WPS.

KII participants stated that CSOs should have a firm position and clear agenda supporting peace and amplifying community views, needs and experiences. The opinion of some KII participants was that if CSOs did not provide clear advocacy, it would be tantamount to failing the public and the civic sector at a time when voices for peace were unequivocally much in need.

WROs' efforts on the WPS agenda have also been interpreted and communicated by the media differently from other CSOs' work. An example found in this consultation was when women's organisations made several joint statements related to peace and the cessation of hostilities concerning the war in the North and violent conflicts elsewhere, but a similar announcement from a male-led group was aired and popularised more. The media called this statement the 'first CSO statement', completely ignoring the work and public messaging by the women's groups. To KII participants, this indicated the reduced value given to women activists and the women's agenda by broader civil society and the media.

The CSO sector is also dominated by men, especially in more influential and senior roles. One KII noted how this was a challenge, stating:

*We can't expect a woman that is not aware, knowledgeable and prepared to do public speaking, represent herself and others, and be effective just because we gave her last minute training.*

KII participants also noted the overlap of the support that CSOs provided to women political candidates with electioneering posed a challenge and was burdensome. This was due to the increased time required of women candidates compared to their male counterparts – to run their campaigns, while attending and engaging in training and capacity building. This could have been avoided if the support to candidates was done earlier; CSOs only started working on women's political participation when elections neared through awareness creation, skills development and networking. This last-minute support and expecting women to improve their abilities and influence change was a tall order. Those few women that are elected may then find it difficult to execute their jobs. The ineffectiveness of some prominent women leaders, in turn, closes doors for other women, and feeds into the self-fulfilling stereotype that women are not able to use the opportunities provided to them. Improving women's political participation should ideally be carried out throughout and across the electoral cycle.

### Gender inequality and patriarchal norms in politics

Currently politics in Ethiopia is male dominated and women are considered to be 'set up to fail'. KII participants noted that Ethiopian women lacked political role models and had been discouraged from taking part in politics due to a hostile environment within families and the broader community and targeted violence against candidates. One KII participant believed that there was no genuine political will from incumbent and opposition parties to support women in politics. Another factor preventing women from entering politics is that many are not confident they deserve political positions and/or struggle with economic and cultural barriers that prevent them from demanding their rights to meaningful participation. Once they have been appointed, it is also unlikely for women to gain seniority; for instance, women ministers are rarely promoted to higher positions. Some of the internal challenges that prohibit women from fully participating in the political arena include harassment and competing demands of paid and unpaid labour.

Women that publicly state their ambition and right to participate in politics transgress existing social norms on gender roles. Those women that participate in politics are generally measured against different standards than men and are often harassed, objectified, labelled, bullied and put down, risks many women are not willing to take. One KII participant stated:

*In terms of number of women in politics and assuming position, there are positive changes. In terms of substance, I remember 1997 election era, we had strong, vocal, feared (because they had substance) women including Bertukan Mideksa. But now which women politicians are really powerful beyond just being bureaucrats? So, I see women politicians as being in the bureaucracies but not in the politics.*

Patriarchal systems make it difficult for women to exercise leadership and they are often restricted to holding roles based on acceptable socially proscribed gender roles. The portrayal of women involved in politics in the mainstream media and social media is generally hostile.

The gender-equal cabinet (with women ministers holding 50 per cent of cabinet positions) that was achieved when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power in 2018 had dropped to 30 per cent in 2021. In addition to the problem of backsliding, this phenomenon sends the wrong message that women cannot effectively participate in politics. Women make up 40 per cent of the House of People's Representatives, but at the *woreda* and *kebede* levels,<sup>26</sup> women's representation is low.

Beyond quotas, KII participants found that there was not much work being done by the government and national bodies to support women's political participation. Although there have been encouraging steps taken to increase women's political participation at high levels, such as the appointments of former politician Bertukan Mideksa to lead the NEBE and of Meaza Ashenafi as the President of the Federal Supreme Court of Ethiopia, improved participation is not systematic. There is also the question of the amount of political influence these women wield and the changes they are able to make, as prevailing social norms in Ethiopia don't encourage women to take up executive roles. As outlined by one KII participant:

*Still, what I see is that parties have included women, including ruling party, but I don't believe it is with conviction and seems more like filling quota requirement; so more symbolic.*

Political parties often begin talking about women's political participation during elections, indicating that women's participation is being used for political gain and not necessarily to address women's genuine needs, issues and interests.

### Policy areas restricted to women

Women that do enter the political arena are not necessarily represented in thematic areas and other work that is considered the domain of men. For example, women are given responsibility for social and cultural issues which, although important, are not generally infrastructure, justice, security or economic portfolios. Some of this changed with Prime Minister Abiy's assumption of power, but KII participants said that it still seemed to be a matter of optics and was not supported by any policy framework:

*Having a former woman Minister of Defence that was an engineer, we were told that it wasn't because of her capacity, but to fulfil quota. In essence, the change is in numbers which the government gets political mileage out of.*

There are promising women emerging in formal politics, including women in opposition parties like Ezema, while some opposition parties have set a minimum percentage as women's political participation target. Yet within the leading Prosperity Party, and prior to that the EPRDF, the women's political agenda seems to be co-opted.

### Legislation and policy development to support WPS in Ethiopia

Legal tools to promote women's involvement in the WPS agenda have not been promoted; for instance, a quota for women parliamentarians was taken to parliament but was not accepted. Policies and laws to support women's engagement in peacebuilding are symbolic and do not shape and improve women's political participation ideologies and practice. Therefore, women's roles become about implementing laws and policies

---

<sup>26</sup> *Woredas* or districts are the third-level of the administrative divisions of Ethiopia – after zones and the regional states. These districts are further subdivided into several wards called *kebele* neighbourhood associations, which are the smallest unit of local government in Ethiopia.

that have been promulgated by patriarchal systems. For the most part, women (and men who are not part of the elite) do not have opportunities to be part of the legislative process.

A recognised problem with Ethiopian policy development processes is that they typically take place between a consultant and the commissioning organisation, rather than being broad-based and truly participatory. The consultations are rarely methodical and there is not sufficient time given for CSOs to read, digest and prepare feedback.

### Intersectionality and excluded groups

Women with low socio-economic status are vulnerable to the negative effects of violent conflicts, both prior to and during conflict. This also reduces their resilience and post-conflict opportunities. The political participation of women in Ethiopia is also dependent on the predominant ethnic group and/or religious group that is in power. Young women, women with disabilities, rural or pastoralist women, women with diverse sexual orientation and gender expression, and other marginalised ethnic groups and minorities are not well represented in the WPS sector in general and politics in particular.

Urban women are better represented in politics and therefore there is a bias towards their needs and interests in policy dialogue. Women with disabilities are not represented in the political nor the broader WPS sphere. KII participants noted that youth of all genders were often tools for political change, but were not represented nor included in mainstream politics. Save Your Holy Land Association (SYHLA), a local CSO whose predominant constituency is youth, noted that young Ethiopians were very active in social and related spheres, but did not participate during elections, engage with political leaders, nor were they able hold them accountable:

*We talk about voters' education etc. but we don't engage politicians on what their agenda is for women and youth and don't believe it is worth the risk.*

## 4

### Recommendations for opportunities for WPS work in Ethiopia

#### Recommendation 1: Increase women's political participation and participation in WPS processes

**Women and girls' meaningful participation at all levels of socio-economic and political life should be supported by the UK Government, including in local, national and international peacebuilding; local, regional and national politics; economic policy and empowerment; security and justice; and peace processes.**

- A. The UK should prioritise and enhance conflict prevention and women's meaningful participation in conflict and post-conflict spheres in Ethiopia. Women should drive the conflict prevention and peacebuilding agenda, participate in initiatives, and lead processes to identify solutions. The UK should collaborate with CSOs and WROs who work on UNSCR 1325 to ensure women's representation in all critical sectors and that they can influence decision-making.

- B. The UK should provide support to internal party mechanisms in Ethiopia on the importance and rights of women to be engaged in politics and high-level decision-making. Women's participation in opposition parties is particularly low, and therefore efforts should be made with these organisations. The UK could provide technical and capacity support to the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) to strengthen its work creating legal frameworks and incentives to include more women in political parties.
- C. The UK should work with the NEBE and relevant WROs and CSOs to provide strategic training, networking and skills strengthening for prospective women candidates early in the electoral cycle. Building a talent pool, including younger and rural women, could ensure greater diversity over time. Women who are elected should be provided with support and mentoring. Further incentivisation by the NEBE could also be effective in encouraging institutional change.
- D. The UK should focus efforts not just at individuals through training, but also at the structural level, making systematic and sustainable changes in terms of policies, laws and infrastructure that are responsive to women's interests and needs. In particular, the UK could support the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs and the new Steering Committee and Technical Committee in their work to develop the WPS NAP and in establishing a baseline for monitoring progress. The UK could also provide targeted support to the three CSOs participating in the work of the Technical Committee.
- E. The UK should ensure and support that women from all backgrounds and political spheres are able to meaningfully participate in all peacebuilding and humanitarian initiatives, not only as beneficiaries, but also as decision makers on matters that directly affect their lives. The UK could embed the use of the Beyond Consultations tool into government policy and programming for conducting consultations in Ethiopia.<sup>27</sup>
- F. The UK should continue to fund and support girls' education programming within Ethiopia, working with local CSOs to strengthen their work to improve the delivery of education.
- G. The UK should strengthen wider support of WPS and other women and girls, and peacebuilding, initiatives, by making sure relevant information related to the Ethiopian NAP is translated into Amharic and other relevant languages at an early stage, and packaged in easy-to-understand language and format.

## Recommendation 2: Support the development of Ethiopia's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security

### The UK Government should support the development of the Ethiopian NAP.

- A. To complement the national dialogue process, the development of a NAP on WPS is key to implementing the WPS agenda in Ethiopia. The development of the NAP should meaningfully include regular, inclusive consultations with women's rights organisations, women peacebuilders, civil society organisations and marginalised communities in Ethiopia, and must represent the needs and rights of women and girls. Relevant stakeholders should be made aware of the NAP and UNSCR 1325, while dissemination of information in local languages and using accessible media

<sup>27</sup> Beyond Consultations (<https://beyondconsultations.org/>)

should be prioritised. The UK should support CSOs and WROs with flexible funding to carry out consultations within their communities and to engage with hard-to-reach or remote communities.

### Recommendation 3: Conduct gender-sensitive conflict analysis and meaningful consultation

**Gender-sensitive conflict analysis and meaningful consultations with women's organisations and civil society should form the basis of all WPS, conflict prevention, peacebuilding, humanitarian and development policy and programming in Ethiopia, as a first and priority step to address the gendered drivers of conflict and responding to the gendered dynamics and impact of conflict.**

- A. Gender-sensitive conflict analysis that has been conducted should be the starting point; it needs to inform and be integrated into the UK's diplomatic and defence engagements, as well as UK aid-funded programme design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. This means making sure this analysis is disseminated and available to bilateral, multilateral and I/NGO partners, and across the UK Government.
- B. The UK Government should provide funding for interventions that address the gender norms, practices, and systemic and structural dynamics that drive conflict, violence and exclusion as a key priority for effective and equitable programming, policy and action in Ethiopia.

### Recommendation 4: Support the National Dialogue process

**The UK should support the National Dialogue to be independent and impartial, and encourage WPS and gender equality to be considered within the process.**

- A. The UK could provide technical support to the Members of the Commission (and their advisers) to support mainstreaming of the WPS agenda within the National Dialogue Commission. This could include process design support to ensure the meaningful participating of women in all decision-making bodies related to the Commission. It could also include technical support to integrate the WPS agenda into all thematic areas under discussion. Given the sensitivity of the National Dialogue process and to ensure success and national ownership, this support could be through trusted third parties and experienced local experts.
- B. The UK could provide targeted support to the newly formed Steering Committee to the National Dialogue Commission. It could provide technical support, training and accompaniment to key individuals and funding to support their organisations to strengthen the integration of WPS and gender equality within the process.

### Recommendation 5: Support women's rights organisations and networks to build institutional capacity through flexible funding

**The UK should target support to CSOs and WROs implementing the WPS agenda, including flexible funding for institutional capacity building.**

- A. The UK should support local women-led coalitions, CSO networks and coalition building on the WPS agenda. Understanding context and local capacities matter for sustained buy-in, and external people and organisations cannot bring needed change. In order to bring about better impact and ensure sustainability, projects

supported should be long term, of at least two years and preferably five or more years in duration.

- B. Where peace is fragile or has broken down, conflict prevention and community reconstruction work is needed, including providing mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services, education and health facilities, and economic rehabilitation. The UK should work with CSOs and WROs that can provide these services, particularly in areas affected by recent violence.
- C. To counter the widespread assumption that international donors are not impartial and do not work in coordination, the UK could lead a regular donor coordination mechanism to ensure support is strategically provided across the WPS agenda. This process could regularly consult with government and CSOs, particularly WROs, to inform funding for locally led programming and partnerships.

### Recommendation 6: Address the root causes and drivers of sexual and gender-based violence

**The UK should ensure accountability for all rights violations, including sexual and gender-based violence. Gender-based violence within armed conflict should be prioritised in terms of prevention, protection and rehabilitation. Protection of civilian women in conflict-prone locations needs to be a top priority for government, the international community and local CSOs. The UK should adopt and fund an integrated approach to addressing SGBV protection and response that cuts across its humanitarian, development, conflict prevention and peacebuilding policies and programming.**

- A. The UK could provide priority support to community-based trauma healing and mental health and psychosocial support, particularly for women and children. Women survivors of violence should be at the forefront of GBV interventions – being role models, leading and supporting other women and the women’s agenda. As a disproportionately affected group, women with disabilities should be provided with targeted support to engage in such activities.
- B. Ethiopia has the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) to report on human rights violations. The UK could provide technical support and skills strengthening to this body, and to the CSOs that work closely with it.
- C. Legislation and access to justice are essential to uphold women and girls’ rights, and should be advocated for, developed, passed and implemented by the government and supported by the UK. Accountability needs to be instituted; state and non-state actors on all sides of the conflicts who have perpetrated crimes against humanity need to be held to account. The UK could provide technical support on transitional justice – particularly on the viability of different judicial and mechanisms.