



DRG Learning Digest

Turning Barriers into Breakthroughs: Exploring Strategies for Gender-Inclusive Governance in Democratic Transitions

February 2024



USAID's PEACE III activity supports key actors, including local leaders, women, and youth, in cross-border cluster areas to deepen and broaden transformative social reconciliation processes. [Photo](#): Tine Frank/USAID East Africa Regional

Current global trends in conflict and democratic backsliding make one thing very clear: [we need to do things differently](#). Is the answer advancing gender-inclusive democracy by empowering

women, girls, and gender-diverse leaders in times of transition? Research suggests that yes, [diverse women leaders make vital contributions to peace and stability in post-transition democracies](#). The 2023 [United States Strategy and National Action Plan \(NAP\) on Women, Peace, and Security](#) (WPS) states, “The status of women and the stability of nations are inextricably linked: higher levels of equality make countries more prosperous, secure, and democratic; conversely, lower levels of gender equality result in greater instability, corruption, and conflict.”

While peacebuilding and democratic transition processes are often viewed separately, and often programmed separately by donors (including by USAID), they in fact occur in parallel and are mutually reinforcing. The 2023 WPS Strategy brings together the two and recognizes the critical role that women’s inclusion plays in U.S. national security strategy and USAID’s democracy, human rights, and governance (DRG) work around the world. Echoing this, [USAID’s 2023 Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Policy](#) (Gender Policy) emphasizes the importance of supporting democratic governance through advancing gender equality. And if the WPS Strategy and USAID’s Gender Policy are not enough to convince you, maybe this month’s edition of the Learning Digest will!

This edition of the DRG Learning Digest examines the following topics:

- Women’s Participation in Transition Processes is Critical to Sustained, Peaceful Post-Transition Democracies
- The Power of Participation: Gender-Inclusive Transition Processes Lead to Increased Degrees of Gender Equality in Post-Transition Governing Bodies and Systems
- From Transition to Transformation: Transitions Present Opportunities for Transforming Pre-Transition Levels of Gender Inequality
- So Now What? Strategies to Advance Gender-Inclusive Transition in Peace and Democracy Programming

Please make use of DRG Evidence and Learning Team resources! (See text box at the end.)

Women’s Participation in Transition Processes is Critical to Sustained, Peaceful Post-Transition Democracies

A strong and growing body of research on this topic has shown that women’s participation in peace processes and transitions improves outcomes for peace and security. Countries with higher levels of gender equality are less likely to engage in violent conflict – including a [lower likelihood of using military force to resolve conflict with other countries](#). And, when women are engaged in peace processes, the resulting peace agreements are more stable and parties are less likely to engage in violence. **Peace agreements are [64 percent less likely to fail](#) and, according to the International Peace Institute, “[35 percent more likely to endure at least 15 years](#)” when women are meaningfully involved in their conception.** So what is the problem,

you ask? Well despite this evidence, women's participation in peace processes remains shockingly low; approximately [seven out of ten peace negotiations globally do not involve women as mediators or signatories](#).

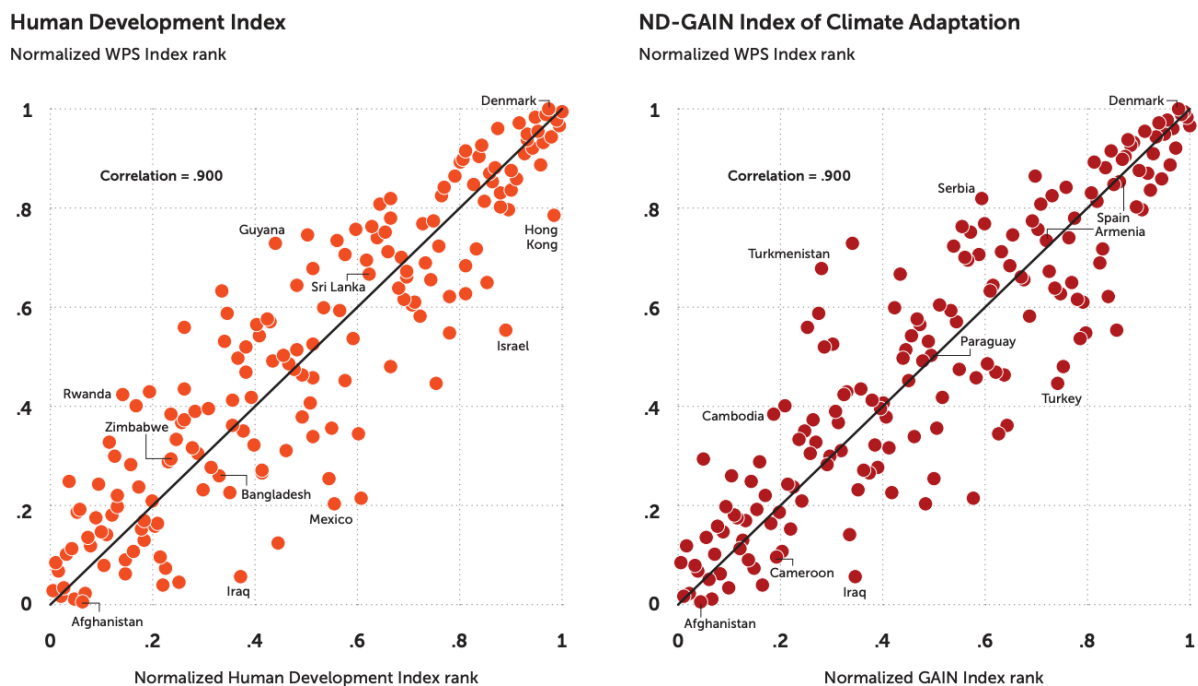


Figure 1: *Strong correlations between rank on the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Index and rank on indices of human development and climate change preparedness,” from the [Women, Peace, and Security Index 2023/2024](#), by Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security and Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) Center on Gender, Peace, and Security.*

The Power of Participation: Gender-Inclusive Transition Processes Lead to Increased Degrees of Gender Equality in Post-Transition Governing Bodies and Systems

Transitions from conflict to peace or from dictatorship to multiparty democracy offer critical, but time-bound, opportunities for transforming pre-existing inequalities that could otherwise re-exacerbate conflict and undermine social cohesion. Those involved in the reconciliation and reform process are likely also those involved in post-transition democratic institutions. **Involving women in these processes allows their views and priorities to be [integrated into subsequent democratic institutions and better predicts their participation and leadership post-transition](#)**. The results are greater [representation of women in positions of power](#), more political participation among women, and more gender-inclusive legislation.

Transitions can be unsettling and the upheaval of transition periods often necessitates the creation of new political parties, as well as changes to existing rules and frameworks. That said, **transitions also [create openings to transform the status quo and overcome the barriers of entrenched political entities, whereby women can become political leaders](#)**. For example, Colombia's peace process has received global recognition for its inclusivity and [has some of the highest numbers of women in political leadership](#). Moreover, changing gender norms during conflict when women take on more decision-making roles allows women [to tap into their leadership and experience](#) during transitional contexts, as Colombia demonstrated [in the 2016 Peace Agreement, which is considered to be one of the most gender-sensitive in history](#). This work was key to integrating gender equality into transitional justice and land reform efforts, laying the groundwork for improved gender equality and women's empowerment.

But wait, there's more! Women's participation in the political process has positive impacts on other democratic outcomes as well, including [social cohesion, working across party lines, and economic recovery in post-conflict and transition contexts](#). And, [women's political inclusion and security is more strongly correlated with measures of justice, security, and resilience than is GDP!](#)



Zulia Mena, Mayor of Quibdó, Colombia, at the International Summit of African and Afro-descendant Mayors and Leaders. She became the first Afro-Colombian congresswoman and has served as an advisor to many Afro-Latina women, nationally and internationally advocating for the rights of African descendant women. USAID/Colombia.

From Transition to Transformation: Transitions Present Opportunities for Transforming Pre-Transition Levels of Gender Inequality

Transitions present an opportunity to [challenge and reshape the formal rules that contribute to gender inequality](#) and significantly hinder and obstruct women from fully engaging with political processes. Changes to these rules that occur before and during transitions can result in more robust democracies. Women who actively participate in combat or leadership roles during conflict or political transitions may experience great shifts in traditional gender roles. Women's engagement with peace movements, for example in Egypt, [can challenge the accepted views of women's roles in society and create space for further political engagement](#).

But like with most changes, there is often resistance to that change and transitions can be a [precarious or even a dangerous time for women's participation and leadership](#). Women can be subject to gender-based violence (GBV), backlash, and harassment from taking on public leadership roles or disrupting entrenched gender norms. Given this potential risk and heightened vulnerability, it is all the more critical to advocate for women to be included in peace processes and ensure their rights are promoted and protected.



As an example of “future political engagement,” children sing during an awareness-raising campaign on Ending Violence Against Women organized by community volunteers in Ezbet El Haggana, Cairo, Egypt, in February 2016. The Safe Cities project is a global grassroots initiative supported by USAID that promotes safe public spaces for men, women, and children free of gender-based violence and harassment. [Photo](#): UN Women

During transitions, women may take on non-traditional leadership roles, for example in moving from civil society to formal political leadership, that challenge existing gender norms and contribute to transformational change. While these changes may revert to the status quo or even backslide after the transition, the changes exemplify what is possible! These short-term norm changes present a critical opportunity to effect more lasting change through formal rule changes. To sustain these changes, advocates and development practitioners must support the development of gender-inclusive governing bodies that institutionalize this type of rule change. Women are disproportionately affected by violence during conflict, and therefore frequently best positioned to discuss transition efforts if measures are taken to ensure their safety, participation, and leadership. Women have been deeply involved in transitional justice movements around the world. In Guatemala’s peace process for example, [women’s grassroots organizations had access to novel resources and allies to contribute to more equitable justice outcomes](#).

[Women's participation in peace and transitional processes leads to more diverse issues being raised, leading to larger reforms – such as constitutional and electoral reforms that](#)

[enable greater equity, all of which benefit broader society](#). Political and peace transitions may open time-bound opportunities for gender equality advocates to push for and enact targeted gender equality mechanisms aimed at ensuring women's representation, such as electoral gender quotas. However, to be successful, these efforts often require [women leaders inside the formal decision-making bodies and outside in civil society to adequately apply enough pressure to make these mechanisms possible](#). For example, women's ability to participate in formal decision-making processes played a key role in gender quotas getting [implemented during Colombia's peace process](#). Similarly, in Tunisia, a [gender quota law was implemented during the democratic transition](#), although this has since been reversed. In South Africa, [gender quotas were introduced beginning in 1994 during the transition from apartheid](#). **Gender quotas are frequently cited as a valuable tool for increasing women's participation and leadership, and [there is evidence that gender quotas, coupled with other gender equality strategies, can be effective](#). Nonetheless, it is important to remember there is also great variation in their [implementation and efficacy](#) and [those with sanctions, rewards, minimum percentages, etc. are the widest reaching, but almost always require additional reform](#).**

So Now What? Strategies to Advance Gender-Inclusive Transition in Peace and Democracy Programming

Operationalizing gender equality and women's empowerment in transitional contexts (including post-conflict or political transitional contexts) is challenging and rarely fully executed. This challenge exists in many mature multi-party democracies and despite the evidence that gender equality is key to sustaining peaceful democracies. The following **ten strategies** can help to ensure that post-transition governing structures benefit from improved gender equality:

1. Actively and meaningfully include women in the decision-making process of the transition, particularly in leadership roles, to represent their priorities, enhance the inclusivity of institutions and policies, and contribute to gender-equitable outcomes. [Early engagement of women in this process is most effective](#). We've seen this in practice in Armenia, where USAID's Katarine Community Bridgers program has elevated a cadre of 27 women to serve as peacebuilding leaders, undergoing leadership, consensus-building, and mediation training.
2. [Utilize informal spaces where women frequently operate](#), when involving women in formal peacebuilding and conflict-resolution processes.
3. Explicitly integrate women's participation and leadership into post-transition governing structures to safeguard gains made during the transition and prevent the removal of women from positions of influence. This may involve implementing gender quotas at the national or local level, in party membership, or in elected positions, along with enforcement mechanisms.
4. Ensure representation and protection for [women from various communities, identities, and backgrounds](#), to mitigate potential backlash or gender-based violence (GBV). Recognizing the [diverse experiences and priorities of groups](#) with intersecting identities in negotiations and governance fosters a more [equitable society](#). In Egypt, USAID works

with local partner El-Nidaa Foundation to promote intercommunity cooperation and dialogue between young women and girls from different social, religious, and cultural backgrounds to promote social cohesion, tolerance, and inclusion. The program also works to combat GBV and child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM) through awareness campaigns and educational and economic support.

5. Monitor women's priorities and gender provisions in peace agreements to [ensure adherence to commitments](#) and facilitate the transition of women's meaningful participation from peace and security decisions to leadership roles in post-transition democratic governance.
6. Support the development of women's leadership across multiple roles, including peacebuilders, negotiators, civil society advocates, political and elected leaders, entrepreneurs, etc. Explore methods to sustain women's leadership positions following conflicts or contextual shifts that previously restricted their access to such roles. In Guatemala, USAID has supported the training and education of more than 80 female community leaders, who have obtained diplomas on "Violence and Irregular Migration Prevention, Human Rights, and Indigenous Peoples' Rights," enabling them to serve on community-based violence prevention councils (COCOPRES) in 21 municipalities.
7. Advocate for peace, security, and democratic institutional reforms that prioritize equity, thereby creating an environment conducive to women's leadership and meaningful addressing of gender issues.
8. Engage men and boys in efforts to prioritize gender equality and women's empowerment, recognizing the need for strong leadership from those in existing positions of power in these contexts.
9. Implement programming that builds upon social cohesion initiatives to reinforce shifts in gender norms during conflicts and prevent regression as countries undergo transitions. USAID's Yemen Community Resilience Award promotes women as community leaders to build resilience to recruitment by armed groups, reintegrate former combatants, and assist victims of violent conflict. The activity delivers educational, vocational, mental health, and psychological support through Local Advisory Councils (LACs), and in 2023 has established pilot LACs with 50 percent female participation in Abyan and Aden.
10. Strengthen gender analyses in conflict assessments, as well as assessments related to democracy, human rights, and governance, to better inform programming and policy interventions.

Further Assistance

USAID's DRG Bureau's Gender Team is available to support USAID Missions to address barriers to women's participation in politics and public life at drg.gender@usaid.gov, or reach out to the WPS team in the Bureau for Conflict Prevention and Stabilization (CPS) to learn more about their technical assistance, programming, and funding mechanisms at wps_task@usaid.gov.

DRG Learning Events

- [Annual Learning Forum](#): The DRG Learning Forum is an annual event taking place from February 15-28, supporting the generation, curation, and dissemination of DRG evidence and technical methods for DRG practitioners. The forum followed two closely-related

tracks. The Findings track focused on what we have learned from the DRG Learning Agenda and focused on evidence and learning that can inform program design and implementation. The Process track focused on sharing through a series of salons how we learn and share evidence, best practices, skills and resources on key topics of interest in the DRG space. Do not miss the recap in next month's Digest!

- **Global Virtual Help Desk for Activists Under Threat:** On February 13, the DRG Bureau's Civil Society, Labor, and Media (CLM) Office hosted a Tuesday Group session featuring Nathan Freitas of the Guardian Project (GP) and Lobsang Gyatso Sither of the [Tibet Action Institute \(TAI\)](#). The GP and TAI have worked together for over 15 years, focusing on how best to utilize technology to benefit non-violent activists, journalists, and human rights defenders around the world. This has resulted in a now successfully proven model of the Secure Help Desk, which comprises the LINK ticketing service, and the CONVENE chat service, all built on free and open-source software. LINK+CONVENE allows for people to ask for help through multiple channels and receive that support in a safe, reliable manner without compromising security and privacy. Learn how GP and TAI will together bring their experience and solutions to bear on the Powered by the People community. Slides [here](#).
- **[Next Fireside Chat on WPS and Women's Political Participation](#): March 13, 8AM EDT**

Upcoming Fireside Chat

Please join us for the monthly Fireside Chat! The Chat provides an opportunity for Missions and OUs across the agency to share learning and experiences on the DRG / Evidence and Learning Team's monthly topic. The Chat is intended for an internal audience, to create an informal space for cross-Mission learning and collaboration.



Use Our Resources!

Welcome to the DRG Learning Digest, a newsletter to keep you informed of the latest learning, evaluation, and research in the Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) sector. Views expressed in the external (non-USAID) publications linked in this Digest do not necessarily represent the views of the United States Agency for International Development or the United States Government.

Check out past editions of the Learning Digest [here](#). Want the latest DRG evidence, technical guidance, events, and more? Check out the new DRGLinks website: <https://www.drglinks.org/>.

Don't forget to check out our DRG Learning [Menu of Services](#)! (Link only accessible to USAID personnel.) The Menu provides information on the learning products and services the Evidence and Learning Team offers to help you fulfill your DRG learning needs. We want to help you adopt learning approaches that emphasize best fit and quality.

The Evidence and Learning Team is also excited to share our [DRG Learning, Evidence, and Analysis Platform \(LEAP\)](#) with you. This Platform contains an inventory of programmatic approaches, evidence gap maps, the DRG Learning Harvest, and inventories of indicators and country data portraits - all of which can be very useful in DRG activity design, implementation, evaluation, and adaptation. Some of these resources are still being built, so check back frequently to see what has been newly added.

The DRG Learning Harvest on LEAP is a searchable database of DRG learning products, including summaries of key findings and recommendations, drop-down menus to easily find documents related to a particular country or program area, and links to the full reports on the DEC.

Our friends at the [Varieties of Democracy \(V-Dem\) Institute](#) are also seeking to expand their research partnership with USAID on the complex nature of democracy by inviting research questions from you for V-Dem to work on. If there's a DRG technical question you've been wondering about, please email the Evidence and Learning Team at drg.el@usaid.gov.

Each month the DRG Bureau will be sharing with Missions and practitioners a wealth of evidence and learning resources on **the themes** below. These themes are scheduled a month ahead of international days or months of commemoration in order to get evidence and learning to Missions

and practitioners in time to apply it during the month/day being celebrated or honored. In the month following the monthly theme, there will be a Fireside Chat for Missions to engage with the resources shared throughout the month and provide an opportunity for Missions and OUs across the Agency to share and exchange learning and experiences. If you are interested in contributing to one of the monthly themes or would like to be invited to the Fireside Chats, please reach out to drg.el@usaid.gov.



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

DRG EVIDENCE AND LEARNING 2024 THEMES

JANUARY

Countering
Violent Extremism



FEBRUARY

International Women's Day



MARCH

Annual Learning Forum



APRIL

Labor



MAY

Pride



JUNE

Metrics



JULY

Youth



AUGUST

Democracy and Elections



SEPTEMBER

Cities and Urbanization



OCTOBER

DRG and Climate



NOVEMBER

Justice and Rights



DECEMBER

Data Privacy



We welcome your feedback on this newsletter and on our efforts to promote the accessibility, dissemination, and utilization of DRG evidence and research. Please visit the [DRG Bureau's website](https://www.usaid.gov/our-work/drg) for additional information or contact us at drg.el@usaid.gov.

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DRG AtA: Shannon Green	Info	
LPA/StratComms: Tessa Wick	Info	
DRG/A-DAA: Mark Billera	Info	
DRG/Comms: Jessica Benton Cooney	Clear	2/29/2024
DRG/PLI: Stephanie Molina	Clear with edits	3/1/2024
DRG/PLI: Blair King	Clear with edits	2/28/2024
DRG/PLI/EL: Laura Berger	Clear with edits	2/20/2024
CPS/PO: Robert Lopez	Clear	2/20/24