



The gender-resilience nexus in peacebuilding: the quest for sustainable peace

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Published online: 29 July 2022
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Abstract

Resilience and gender have become new buzzwords for expressing renewal in peacebuilding. This article unpacks the gender-resilience nexus in theory and analyses global trends and variation in peacebuilding policy and practice. It advances an analytical framework based on three central pillars of peacebuilding: process, outcome, and expertise. A comprehensive analysis of 49 international peacebuilding handbooks, produced by leading international organisations for policymakers and practitioners in the field, is conducted. The results show how the integration of the gender-resilience nexus signals new ways of understanding conflict dynamics and peacebuilding. Yet, gender peace expertise is ‘thin’ with regard to policies and practices of resilient conflict transformation. By way of conclusion, we suggest three directions to be taken in research to advance and refine the gender-resilience nexus. First, the politics and contestation of peacebuilding need to be problematised and explored further. Second, the understanding of resilience in peacebuilding needs to shift emphasis from conflict management to conflict transformation. Third, the positionality of peacebuilding actors and local contexts need to be probed further.

Keywords Conflict · Gender · Peacebuilding · Resilience · Sustainable peace · Women

Introduction

In the last decades, resilience and gender have become new buzzwords for expressing renewal in international policy making and peacebuilding. The field of peacebuilding evolved in the early 1990s as a response to the increasing number of intrastate conflicts and their devastating humanitarian consequences. Taking an early lead, former United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali launched a new agenda for peace in 1995 where peacebuilding was redefined

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as actions taken to support, strengthen and consolidate peace in order to avoid relapses to violence. Hence, conflict prevention aimed at resolving structural root causes to conflict was emphasised. As such, peacebuilding became closely associated with a positive notion of peace (Galtung 1969; see also Mani 2002) with a stated ambition to build a sustainable peace beyond the cessation of direct and organised violence (negative peace).

Since the 1990s, peace support operations have swiftly expanded both in number and in mandates. Yet, many contemporary peace processes are struggling with a whole range of challenges and have been criticised for their top-down and hegemonic interventions that result in hybrid forms of peace (Mac Ginty 2010; Richmond 2011). Consequently, peacebuilding stands at a crossroads and various attempts have been taken to reconceptualise peacebuilding both in theory and in practice. Some policy studies and reports focus on evaluating past peacebuilding efforts with the aim of identifying lessons learned and best practices to produce practical handbooks and prescriptive toolboxes on peacebuilding (Reychler and Schirch 2013; Keating and Knight 2004). These attempts seek to professionalise peacebuilding practices due to the increasing demands of global peace expertise, but also to manage the complexities of contemporary conflict dynamics (Chandler 2014; Mac Ginty 2012). At the same time, there is widespread recognition that there is no overarching universal blueprint to the practice of peacebuilding. Hence, rethinking peacebuilding is centred on internally driven, people-centred and participatory approaches and practices, which better reflect local values, aspirations and expectations (George 2016: 166). In this spirit, a number of peacebuilding handbooks are now increasingly stressing the importance of resilient actors, empowerment, local ownership and capacity building as decisive factors of building a sustainable peace (Juncos and Joseph 2020). Likewise in academia, such reasoning corresponds with a growing interest to study local peacebuilding (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013; Chandler and Richmond 2015).

The overarching aim of this article is to explore critically the gender-resilience nexus in peacebuilding theory by advancing an analytical framework based on three central components of peacebuilding: process, outcome, and expertise. It analyses empirically how the gender-resilience nexus is conceptualised in different ways in a large number of policy handbooks on peacebuilding. We argue that there are two major recent trends of rethinking peacebuilding among policy-makers and practitioners. First, the notion of resilience is used as an argument to strengthen the ambition of building a sustainable peace. However, it is also used to modify the ambitious goals set in liberal peacebuilding. Resilience is seen as inserting greater pragmatism in peacebuilding by recognising complexities and challenges posed to resolving conflicts (Barnett et al. 2014; Paris 2014). As such, resilient peacebuilding underlines the need to conduct realistic assessments and foster flexibility in the management of risks. Improving capacity building, such as strengthening the efficiency and legitimacy of governments, institutions, systems and individuals, is central to meet the unforeseen challenges posed by building a sustainable peace. In other words, resilience in peacebuilding is understood as 'the risk management strategy par excellence' as it requires practitioners to



be prepared for the unknown systemic risks based on uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity that characterise contemporary conflicts (Juncos 2018: 559–62).

Thus, the notion of resilience is used as an alternative to the dominant liberal peacebuilding paradigm, moving away from top-down approaches to statebuilding and externally imposed liberal peace towards prevention, resilience and risk management (Chandler 2015; Juncos 2018: 560*f*). States and societies should now embrace complexities and adjust strategies accordingly to prevent and manage recurrent cycles of violence. Such an understanding of conflict dynamics signals a major shift in the expectation and willingness to engage in peacebuilding, as well as how to assist in peacebuilding without imposing a specific model or agenda (Chandler 2015; Van Metre 2014; de Coning 2016). It also alters the focus of peacebuilding from direct intervention towards facilitation by international actors whose overarching aim is to strengthen the existing national and local capacities to better manage unpredictable conflict dynamics (Chandler 2015). In other words, resilient peacebuilding is a new way of supporting individuals, societies and states to better absorb and cope with the challenges of violent conflicts and to manage risks through local socio-political capacities. In short, it reflects the extent to which local communities are able to prevent and cope with conflict based on their capacities and adaptation to external shocks (Juncos 2018: 559).

Second, gender inclusion, particularly women's participation in peace processes, is stressed. In a similar vein to resilience, a gender-sensitive approach to peacebuilding highlights the need to empower women to sustain peace at the local level (UN 2016) as part of wider efforts of building robust political, institutional and local capacities. This corresponds to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly number 5 (on gender equality) and number 16 (on peace). Hence, gender inclusion is associated with efforts of redesigning the peacebuilding architecture, design and its processes to make them more resilient, inclusive and gender-sensitive. The landmark resolution 1325 adopted by the UN Security Council on Women, Peace, Security (WPS) constitutes a significant milestone in the advocacy work to enhance women's participation in peace processes (George and Shepherd 2016; Weiss 2021). Women have a long-standing track record of global political activism in the field of war and peace (e.g. Cockburn 2008; Sharp 2013; Kaufman and Williams 2013). Yet, global politics has historically been the domain of men while women's participation has been marginalised by states. This reflects the gendered nature of peacebuilding and the presence of gendered dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, which prevail in peace negotiations (Aggestam 2019; Paffenholz 2018). As such, the WPS agenda serves as a salient normative framework arguing for change in the practices of peacebuilding. Interesting to note, nearly all UN bodies and agencies have now formally endorsed gender mainstreaming as a methodology in global politics (Charlsworth 2005; Davies and True 2019). Some countries, such as Australia, Sweden, Norway and Canada, have even made the WPS agenda a central part of their foreign policies (Aggestam and True 2020; Thomson 2022).

In academia, a number of studies have probed the correlation between gender equality, women's security, and sustainable peace. Valerie Hudson et al. (2009: 1) have found that the degree of gender equality within a state affects the peacefulness of this state towards other states (see also Melander 2005). However, the relevance



of UN resolution 1325 has also been criticised for ‘window-dressing’ in terms of gender equality advancements. Feminist scholarship warns of the tendency to essentialise women as inherently peaceful since such an understanding ignores gendered power structures and the fact that women also partake in violence (Aggestam and Bergman Rosamond 2021; Sjoberg 2006). Brittain (2003: 48), for example, argues that having women participate in peace negotiations does not in itself change the gendered nature of the process. Others argue that the WPS agenda has been accepted for ‘the limited purpose of contributing to “saving” or “protecting” women in the Global South (Otto 2006: 144). Hence, peacebuilding is intrinsically a gendered concept and its processes and outcomes therefore take on specific gendered meanings in terms of participants, design and results.

The article proceeds as follow. The first part critically examines how the gender-resilience nexus in peacebuilding is conceptualised and understood in theory. An analytical framework is advanced based on three central components of peacebuilding: process, outcome, and expertise. These distinct dimensions highlight how the gender-resilience nexus can be understood in different ways. While process and expertise relate to efforts of rethinking peacebuilding practices, outcome centres on the type of peace that is strived for. The second part conducts an empirical study, which examines 49 handbooks on peacebuilding published between 2006 and 2020 and produced by four leading international and regional organisations: the UN, African Union (AU), European Union (EU) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). These handbooks guide a large number of international actors, agencies and institutions in their policies and practices of peacebuilding. As such, the empirical analysis provides powerful insights into contemporary global trends and variation in the field of peacebuilding. The software programme NVivo has been used to analyse and assess how gender inclusion, resilience, women and sustainable peace are understood and inter-related to peacebuilding. By way of conclusion, we suggest three directions to be taken in research to advance and refine the gender-resilience nexus. First, the politics and contestation of peacebuilding needs to be problematised and explored further. Second, the understanding of resilience needs to shift emphasis from conflict management to conflict transformation. Third, the positionality of peacebuilding actors and local contexts need to be probed further.

The gender-resilience nexus and the quest for a sustainable peace

Without the full participation of women in society, neither peace nor prosperity can be ensured over the long term. The meaningful participation of women measurably strengthens protection efforts and deepens the effectiveness of peacebuilding. Research also points to the direct relationship between gender equality, on the one hand, and resilience to and prevention of conflict, on the other. The women and peace and security agenda is therefore essential for all the work of the United Nations system in support of Member States. (UN 2018: 7–8)



The quote above illustrates how the gender-resilience nexus is associated to conflict prevention and peacebuilding. As such, contemporary policy discourses draw on the gender-resilience nexus to suggest new ways of thinking about peacebuilding and to overcome barriers in peace processes. The nexus is also reflected in the SDG-agenda and expressed in a number of different ways. First, both gender and resilience are concepts associated with conflict transformation. Strengthening capacity building and empowering local actors are seen as effective practices to build a sustainable peace (Leonardsson and Rudd 2015). As women are more engaged and present at the local level they also are identified as crucial agents for peaceful change. Second, the gender-resilience nexus is linked to the advancement of sustainable peace; thus, resilient peace is often used interchangeably with sustainable peace. Likewise, gender and women's participation in peace processes are often associated with sustainable peace (Adjei 2019), which can be noted in international advocacy campaigns. The underlying assumption that women's participation leads to sustainable peace is also reiterated in several peacebuilding handbooks, which will be assessed in the next section. Third, conflict prevention is central to the UN SDG-agenda and resilience plays a decisive part in the understanding of preventive strategies to manage conflict dynamics, resolving gender inequalities and combatting violence against women (Hudson et al. 2012). Finally, the gender-resilience nexus stresses the complexities and uncertainties in conflict processes, and the non-linearity of building a sustainable peace (Chandler 2014). This signals a new alternative way of understanding conflict dynamics and peacebuilding that tends to contradict the often-used notion of 'post-conflict peacebuilding'. Post-conflict peacebuilding indicates linearity and an end to conflict, but as observed in many post-conflict settings, violence and conflict cycles often continue (El-Bushra 2017). As such, the gender-resilience nexus moves beyond the notion of post-conflict peacebuilding and its linear understandings of conflict dynamics which do not reflect women's everyday lives that are often marked by a continuum of violence (Cockburn 2004; Wibben 2020). The continuation and new forms of violence that women experience in the aftermath of war can instead be seen as a 'post-war backlash' (Pankhurst 2008: 3). Additionally, in most transitions from war to peace, political systems tend to 'remain gendered to men's advantage' and, as such, elite male control is reasserted in ways that ouster women (Brown and Ní Aoláin 2015: 135). As such, issues perceived to lie outside the central grievances of conflict, such as gender equality, are often marginalised or completely ignored (Eitrem Holmgren 2020: 47). In the next section, we will unpack the gender-resilience nexus further by elaborating on rethinking peacebuilding in terms of outcome (the peace that is strived for), process and expertise (peacebuilding practices).

Gender inclusion and resilient peaceful outcomes

As stated above, the gender-resilience nexus in peacebuilding is frequently associated with the outcome of sustainable peace. As such, it corresponds with the notion of 'positive peace', which is distinguished from negative peace (the cessation of physical violence). Positive peace rests on a forward-looking approach to building



peace and emphasises social justice, empowerment and human security (Funk and Said 2010: 105; Mani 2002). In a similar vein, UN resolution 1325 underlines that women are central to ‘the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction’ (UN Security Council 2000). Transitions from war to peace represent a ‘a critical moment in the shifting terrain of gender power’ (Meintjes 2001: 64), which is why it is central that women are represented at the negotiation table. This is also the reason why the WPS agenda puts a strong emphasis on transformative change to reduce gendered violence, and enable women to participate actively and meaningfully in peace processes that are assumed to lead to a sustainable peace.

Such an assumption is commonly articulated in global advocacy discourses on gender inclusion. For instance, the UN argues that ‘mediation strategies that systematically include women, and civil society more broadly, are more likely [...] to lead to a more sustainable peace’ (UN DPA 2017: 8). By increasing women’s participation in negotiations, it is assumed that the chances of adopting gender-specific provisions in peace agreements will be enhanced (UN Development Fund for Women 2010: 5; UN Women 2012; Bell 2015; Bell and O’Rourke 2010). This is also why the WPS agenda now plays an integral part in 67 percent of all the peace agreements in all UN-sponsored peace processes (Bell 2015). The assumed correlation between the gender-resilience nexus and sustainable peace is also supported by academic scholarship. Some studies have shown how states with poor records on gender equality are more likely to be involved in intrastate conflicts whereas more gender-equal states tend to be more resilient and manage conflicts peacefully (Caprioli 2000; Melander 2005). These kinds of academic studies are also increasingly used to support ‘evidence-based gender mainstreaming’ in international advocacy campaigns and policy promotion of peacebuilding. However, as Christine Bell (2015: 1) notes, the major challenge for gender-sensitive peace outcomes is to be fully implemented. References to women and gender issues are often made with holistic interpretations, which tend to reflect the absence of shared understandings on gender among the negotiating parties. Moreover, even when women are present in peace negotiations, it does not guarantee the inclusion of key issues for gender-just and peaceful outcomes. For example, despite a high number of women participating in the Philippine peace process, the high rates of sexual violence directed at minority women was not discussed in the formal negotiations (Davies et al. 2016: 463). As Gina Heathcote (2019: 380) underlines, the WPS agenda tends to disregard the prevalence of gender-based violence in peacetime states as well as sexual violence suffered by men. As such, the strong emphasis on women in the WPS agenda, and the conflation of women and gender continue to ignore the structural underpinnings of gendered violence.

Gender-inclusive and resilient peace processes

Process-oriented perspectives and bottom-up approaches are today favoured by both scholars and practitioners when rethinking peacebuilding in theory and practice (see, for example, Mac Ginty 2013). Resilience is here understood more as a



process than an end in itself (Bourbeau 2018) where local peacebuilding actors gain capacity to adapt, maintain and transform conflict processes. As such, gender inclusion and women's participation become a way of furthering the communities' resilience and adaptation. For instance, it is interesting to note that during the Covid-19 pandemic the UN and other international organisations frequently emphasised how resilience can be enhanced by increasing women's participation in order to cope with and manage the pandemic's unforeseen consequences. As stated by the UN Secretary-General António Guterres:

The world needs a new push to advance women's leadership and equal participation. And it's clear that such action will benefit for all. The COVID-19 response has highlighted the power and effectiveness of women's leadership. Over the past year, countries with women leaders have had lower transmission rates and are often better positioned for recovery. Women's organizations have filled crucial gaps in providing critical services and information, especially at the community level. Across the board, when women lead in government, we see bigger investments in social protection and greater inroads against poverty. When women are in parliament, countries adopt more stringent policies on climate change. When women are at the peace table, agreements are more enduring. [...] As we recover from this crisis, we must chart a path to an inclusive, green and resilient future. (Guterres 2021)

As the quote states, women's leadership is crucial and often contrasted to hyper-masculine populist leadership to show how women build resilience for collective action. As such, women are identified as 'agents for change' in diverse areas and for enhancing resilient processes based on a set of qualities that women possess. Such essentialist assumptions about women can be detected in several international and national programmes on international development assistance and peacebuilding, for example, in Canada's feminist international development assistance programme (Parisi 2020). At the same time, essentialist understandings of masculinities continue to be present in peacebuilding policy discourses, reflecting that patriarchy itself is highly resilient and adaptive as well as underlining the temporal nature of gender identities and roles (Myrntinen 2019: 563).

In sum, the gender-resilience nexus in peacebuilding tends to reflect an instrumental logic, which is used in a strategic fashion based on strategic essentialism. Women are often portrayed in a homogenic way as peaceful by nature, holding different sets of qualities than men. The UN, for instance, often states that women's participation strengthens political processes and that women advocate for different issues than men and therefore 'broaden the scope of issues addressed to include humanitarian needs related to the underlying causes of conflict' (UN Department of Peace Operations 2020: 62). To include women and new practices in peace processes is therefore viewed as a 'smart policy' since it is assumed to enhance more resilient and sustainable local peace processes. Yet, such an instrumental approach risks prioritising women's agency within a particular framework, restricting participation to a certain kind of woman (Hudson 2012; Shepherd 2011). For example, in the Bougainville peace process, women's participation was accepted because of



their ‘gender-appropriate nature [...] supported by matrilineal cultural, as well as faith-based protocols emphasising gendered duty and virtue’ (George 2016: 167).

Contemporary policy discourses also focus to a large extent on counting women and entry points at the negotiation table, whereas much less attention is put on changing deeply rooted gendered dynamics of the peace processes themselves. As discussed above, the presence of women at the peace table is no guarantee for post-war gender justice for all (Davies et al. 2016: 469). Strategic essentialism is therefore criticised by feminist scholars who point to the danger of stereotypically assigning peacefulness and care to women (Duncanson 2016: 52; Cohn 1987). While recognising that women tend to hold different perspectives than men on questions of war and peace, given their distinct experiences (Wibben et al. 2019), essentialist identity constructions may reinforce gender-based exclusion and obstruct women from being taken seriously as political actors (George 2016: 169). Hence, transformative practices can only be advanced by challenging gendered power relations and deconstructing how masculinities and femininities are related to war and peace (Alison 2007).

Resilience and gender expertise

In the last decades, we can note a growing trend to professionalise peacebuilding by advancing expert knowledge (see Mac Ginty 2012; Goetschel and Hagmann 2009). In parallel, we can note how gender expertise and training have been put into practice through gender mainstreaming and is now widely adopted in international policies as norm governing international institutions and global governance (True and Mintrom 2001; Tryggstad 2010; Lorentzen 2020). As mentioned, nearly all UN bodies and agencies have formally come to endorse gender mainstreaming as a methodology (Charlesworth 2005) and, interestingly, it has faced little contestation. Key to success has been the technical and expert-led approaches to global gender mainstreaming, which reflects a de-politicised and consensual discursive understanding of the WPS agenda and efforts of building a sustainable peace (Charlesworth 2005). Some argue that technocratic approaches to gender mainstreaming reflect a liberal logic that is focused more on women’s descriptive representation, inclusion and participation in peacebuilding processes rather than seriously challenging prevalent gendered power relations and structures in global politics (see Hudson 2012; Nakaya 2004: 145ff). This tension is seen across a range of key WPS related documents, which tend to downplay the relationality of gender identities, gendered power relations and intersectional categories, such as class, religion, sex, race and geographical location (Shepherd 2017). Consequently, global gender expertise has been criticised for its lack of a transformative political framework and for failing to address prevailing gendered power structures and inequalities.

At the same time, the professionalisation of peacebuilding is an attempt to reduce complexities by relying on technocratic methodology and ‘non-political’ peace expertise (Mac Ginty 2012; Goetschel and Hagmann 2009). Such technical peacebuilding assistance is often combined with bottom-up approaches that emphasise resilience in the form of local ownership and capacity building among local



peacebuilders who should stand ready to cope and manage with the unforeseen in conflicts. Hence, the emphasis is now placed on international facilitation of expertise and training of local peacebuilding actors and other civil society actors as crucial components of building resilient processes and sustainable peace. International assistance and facilitation of training women as negotiators and peacebuilders are a widespread practice to counter the homosocial dominance of men in peace negotiations (UN Women 2018). For example, the UN Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) supports women in leadership and diplomacy and pushes for gender expertise and the appointments of more women to peace negotiations. Likewise, the UN Security Council has restated and passed a new resolution (Resolution 2122) in 2013, requesting the UN Secretary-General to mobilise support for an increase in appointments of women as chief mediators. Since 2015, we have also seen a diffusion of regional women mediation networks, such as the Nordic Women Mediators, FemWise-Africa,¹ Mediterranean Women Mediators Network, Women Mediators Across the Commonwealth and most recently the Arab Women Mediators Network. These networks share the ambition to make senior women mediators more visible so they can be used as a resource pool of experts for international peacemaking as well as for mentoring and training other women engaged in local peacebuilding efforts.

In sum, the gender-resilience nexus is articulated in a number of ways in relation to outcome, process and expertise. First, resilience in peacebuilding is strongly linked to the outcome of sustainability. Thus, resilient peace is often used interchangeable with sustainable peace. As a process, resilience entails empowering actors to adapt and cope with risks, for instance through capacity building programmes for local actors, such as women's civil society groups. Second, women's meaningful participation is central to the gender-resilience nexus in peacebuilding. Gender equal states are emphasised as more resilient to cope and prevent conflict. Here, women's leadership plays a crucial role to enhance the resilience of their local communities. Yet, women's inclusion in peacebuilding tends to be understood in a restrictive and essential way. Strategic, technical and instrumental reasons are often put forward for including women in peace processes, which are based on gendered ideas about women's peacefulness. Third, despite the focus on gender mainstreaming and gender expertise in peacebuilding, there is still a tendency to focus more on women's descriptive than substantive participation and representation. This partly explains why gender provisions in peace agreements often lack implementation, demonstrating the difficulties of challenging and transforming resilient gendered power relations. In the next section, we analyse more specifically how the gender-resilience nexus is reflected in a large number of international handbooks on peacebuilding.

¹ The African Network of Women in Conflict Prevention and Peace Mediation, FemWise-Africa, was established in 2017 by the AU Assembly (AU 2018a: 73).



The gender-resilience nexus in international handbooks on peacebuilding

In this section, 49 international handbooks on peacebuilding published by the AU, EU, OSCE, and the UN are analysed. These international documents were selected since they guide a large number of international actors, agencies, and institutions in their policies and practices of peacebuilding. What we are particularly interested in analysing is if and to what extent the gender-resilience nexus advances a transformative notion of peacebuilding. The handbooks were published between 2006 and 2020 and are freely accessible on the organisations' websites. Approximately 10 to 15 handbooks were selected from each organisation, addressing the WPS agenda, guidelines on peacebuilding, mediation, and manuals on sustainable peace and gender-sensitive security sector reform (see Table 1). The analysis provides us with an overview to assess the existing dominant policy trends in international organisations. As such, the analysis does not strive to evaluate peacebuilding efforts in specific empirical cases or to explore in-depth context-based factors, but rather to highlight similarities and variation in policy documents.

For the content analysis, we used the software programme NVivo. First, a general word frequency search was conducted to generate an overview of the most frequently used words of each organisation's handbooks. The usage of key concepts, such as resilience, gender and conflict, are summarised in Table 2. Second, several word searches were conducted for each organisational set of handbooks with exact matches and stemmed words (words with the same stem, but different conjugations).

Table 1 Subjects of handbooks

Subject area	AU	EU	OSCE	UN
Mediation	3	3	1	3
Peace, conflict and security	1	7	1	1
Women, peace, security and gender equality	4	5	11	6
General	3	0	0	0

Table 2 Frequency of key concepts in handbooks

Organisation	Ranking of word usage		
	Resilience	Gender	Conflict
AU	> 50	15	11
EU	> 50	> 50	2
OSCE	> 50	1	7
UN	> 50	2	4



The search used the following concepts: resilience, gender inclusion, gender participation, women's inclusion, women's participation, peacebuilding, and SDGs 5 and 16.² Each concept was then analysed in relation to context and framing.

As Table 2 shows, the concept of resilience is not addressed as often as gender in any of the handbooks. At the same time, the usage of resilience varies widely in the organisations. Somewhat surprisingly, the EU handbooks, which frequently refer to resilience, rarely do so in relation to women or gender. This stands in sharp contrast to AU handbooks where it is much more commonly applied. It is also interesting to note that the OSCE and the UN very rarely use the concept of resilience (12 and 3 times respectively) in relation to peacebuilding, but rather with reference to women and/or gender.

Gender and women's inclusion in peacebuilding is widely referenced in all handbooks, but their understandings of these terms vary. The AU, for instance, states that enhancing women's inclusion in peacemaking is best made comprehensively through 'the promotion of women in conflict resolution, from a leadership to grassroots level, and aims to contribute to gender-sensitive and inclusive approaches to mediation and conflict prevention' (AU 2019: 78). Similarly, the EU commits to promoting, leveraging, supporting or funding women's participation and addressing gender issues in mediation at Track 1, 2 and 3 levels (European External Action Service [EEAS] 2014: 1f). The UN Department of Peace Operations (UN DPO) is mandated, in accordance with the WPS agenda, to integrate 'women's participation at all levels of decision-making in peace processes and peacebuilding' (UN DPO 2020: 3). Hence, gender inclusion and women's participation and leadership in conflict prevention, resolution and peacebuilding must also be supported and implemented by the UN and all member states (UN DPO 2020: 79; UN Department of Political Affairs [UN DPA] 2017: 10). The OSCE calls for women's inclusion in conflict prevention, crisis management and post-conflict reconstruction and proposes ways of increasing their participation in peace processes (OSCE 2019: 1, 6). However, these comprehensive statements provide us with limited information how the gender-resilience nexus is more precisely put into context and to what extent the suggested peacebuilding strategies are promoting the transformation of conflict. Hence, in the section below, we scrutinise more closely how the gender-resilience nexus relates to outcome, process and expertise.

The quest for transformative outcomes

The interplay between women's participation and the outcome of sustainable peace is reiterated in all the handbooks. The WPS agenda is also frequently referred to in relation to peacebuilding in the handbooks, particularly by the EU and the AU (81 and 73 percent of the time peacebuilding is mentioned respectively) while the

² Variants of these terms were used to include different spellings, such as 'peacebuilding', 'peace building' and 'peace-building'.



OSCE and the UN do so less frequently (60 and 55 percent respectively). Moreover, the OSCE and the UN³ tend to take a more encompassing approach to women's inclusion, which includes post-war elections, administrations, and reforms of the security forces. Overall, there is a strong emphasis on descriptive rather than substantive representation of women, which indicates a lack of a thick gender analysis. For instance, most of the handbooks produced by the AU argue for a comprehensive approach by broadening, strengthening and increasing women's participation in decision-making, peace processes and conflict prevention, but they rarely argue for the need to integrate gender perspectives in peacebuilding (AU and African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes [ACCORD] 2014: 75; AU et al. 2010: 28; AU and UN Women 2017: 9; AU 2015: 60). It is women, not gender, that is central to peacebuilding. At the same time, as we noted in the discussion above, the lack of implementation of peace agreements is a key challenge in terms of sustainable outcomes in the post-agreement period.

In a similar vein to the AU, the EU handbooks stress the importance of women's participation as the vehicle for achieving sustainable outcomes of peace. Women's participation is seen as crucial in peace negotiations 'as they add a different perspective to discussions, thereby bolstering the comprehensiveness of agreements and the sustainability of peace' (Dietrich and Quain 2014: 4). As such, there is a strong emphasis particularly in the EU and the AU handbooks on women as individual peace actors, which will enhance resilience and sustainable peace. However, this may trigger what Caitlin Ryan (2022, in this issue) calls 'a gendered and racialised logic of responsabilising women [...] as empowered subjects for better peace outcomes through resilience-building'.

Ana Juncos and Philippe Bourbeau state in the introductory article of this special issue that resilience has the potential of conflict transformation (Juncos and Bourbeau 2022, in this issue). However, this entails the adoption of a gender-sensitive approach to peacebuilding that highlights not only the descriptive representation of women but also substantive representation, that is, women's capacity and ability to exercise power and influence to advance women's interests and ideas, which is related to gendered power structures and relations (cf. O'Rourke 2014). In this regard, there are few of the handbooks that elaborate on such gender-specific peacebuilding strategies. The OSCE and the UN handbooks are the ones who come closest to a more nuanced understanding of the gender-resilience nexus. The OSCE states explicitly that gender equality is intimately linked to both resilience and conflict, and requires 'a robust gender analysis' and without gender inclusion and the participation of women's civil society groups the sustainability of the peace may be at stake (DCAF et al. 2019b: 8). Such reasoning is more firmly anchored within a rights-based approach that stresses gender equitable access to justice and rights as a way to advance gender equality outcomes and 'more peaceful, resilient, and prosperous societies' (DCAF et al. 2019a: 26). This is also why the OSCE recommends

³ For instance, women can participate as: mediators or as members of mediation teams; delegates of the negotiating parties; all-female negotiating parties representing a women's agenda; signatories; witnesses; representatives of women's civil society with an observer role; in a parallel forum or movement; gender advisers to mediators, facilitators or delegates; and members of technical committees, or a separate working-group dedicated to gender issues (UN 2010: 5-9).



mediators to ‘take advantage of the transformative potential of gender responsive measures on social relations and peace-building’ (Beham and Dietrich 2013: 12). The UN handbooks stress explicitly the transformational potential of women to achieve sustainable peace outcomes. They argue for integrated gender analysis that can address the gendered power dynamics and the impact of militarised notions of masculinity (UN DPO 2020: 28).

However, to unpack the gender-resilience nexus further in peacebuilding handbooks we need to probe intersectionality as well by incorporating other facets of identity, such as age, ethnicity, ability and class. Women are not only acting as peace agents of change, but also as ex-combatants, victims of violence, refugees, community activists, etc. Women are also not the only gender that is included in an intersectional approach. In this regard, the UN and the EU refer explicitly to men and boys as well as women and girls. By way of illustration, one EU handbook identifies resilient peacebuilding practices in terms of ‘recognising the distinct rights, needs, capacities and coping mechanisms of women, girls, boys and men’ (Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development et al. 2015: 18).

In short, all four organisations stress the interplay between gender, women’s participation and resilient outcomes of peace. Yet, they differ with regard to how much emphasis and how elaborative the handbooks are with regard to questions of gender, women and resilience. As such, there are obvious risks that rather than nurturing conflict transformation some of the suggested peacebuilding practices may instead result in a maintenance of status quo.

Gendered peace agents and resilient peace processes

In all the handbooks, women and the WPS agenda frequently appear together with discussions of resilient and effective peace processes. As argued by Basini and Ryan (2016, quoted by Medie 2022, in this issue) women’s participation ‘is consistently justified on arguments of operational effectiveness and a bureaucratic approach’. However, this is much less the case in the EU handbooks, which instead associate women and gender to state-building and development. Hence, in the section below, we elaborate on the conceptualisation of gender and women’s participation in peace processes and their transformative potential as peace agents.

The handbooks reflect a diversity of peacebuilding strategies to make peace processes gender-responsive. The OSCE handbooks recommend tracking the percentage of women and men in delegations, the number of meetings with women’s organisations and funds allocated to projects on gender equality (Beham and Dietrich 2013: 24). This reflects a strong emphasis on descriptive representation and gender is mainly understood in binary terms of men and women whereas LGBTQ communities and intersectional understandings of gender identities are lacking. As such, the focus tends to be restricted to the question of increasing women’s descriptive representation at the negotiation table. At the same time, both the EU and the OSCE handbooks underline that the inclusion of women should not automatically be understood as them addressing only gender issues or as ways of guaranteeing a gender-responsive process (EEAS 2014: 5; Beham and Dietrich 2013: 30). Similarly,



the EU and UN handbooks state that ensuring women's participation should be both meaningful and effective, and women's participation should not be seen as tokenism (UN DPO 2020: 70; EEAS 2014: 3).

To explore the transformational potential of gender inclusion also requires an understanding of women's peace activism in civil society more broadly. The UN handbooks underline in particular the inclusion of women's movements and argue that it is decisive for resilient peace processes, and even argue that women should advance 'to become a peacebuilding role model for men' by establishing a culture of unity among them (UN Development Fund for Women 2010: 5; UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations [UN DPKO] et al. 2007: 35). But this requires, it is stated, a peace architecture that ensures organised women's groups and their demands to 'systematically find their way to the peace table' (UN Development Fund for Women 2010: 5). Likewise, the OSCE handbooks call on states to develop policies to encourage the full and equal participation of women's organisations in conflict prevention, resolution and rehabilitation by 'linking official processes and informal peace initiatives and integrating a gender perspective' (OSCE 2019: 6–7) while also cautioning that 'civilian groups should not consist only of women to avoid reinforcing stereotypes' of women as being innately more peaceful than men (OSCE 2019: 18f). The EU and AU handbooks recommend member states to regularly consult and engage with local civil society organisations that focus on issues related to women's rights in all conflict phases (Directorate-General for Internal Policies of the Union 2019: 9; FemWise-Africa: 2018: 5).

However, specific mechanisms to empower women as transformative peace agents are often lacking. Yet, the UN handbooks provide several examples how potential obstacles can be resolved and overcome. For instance, in one of them it is recommended that mediators should 'assess how culture or local traditions affect opportunities for women's participation in mediation' as well as how family obligations and security needs may be met to ensure consistent political and financial support for women's participation (UN DPA 2017: 18). The EU handbooks also elaborate on different obstacles to women's participation, such as violence against women, the silencing of female politicians through slander and persistent political exclusion (EEAS 2014: 3; Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development et al. 2015: 123).

Women as a group are often associated with vulnerability and victimhood, but it is interesting to note how this is countered by an emphasis on resilience. The AU, for instance, frequently describes women as showing 'tremendous resilience' despite being the 'the majority of the poor, the dispossessed, the landless, the unemployed' (AU 2018b: 25). It is even argued that women's resilience should be explored further in situations of displacement in the African context to better understand how they cope and adjust (AU and UN Women 2017: 26). Here, women's agency and resilience are used in tandem with words such as 'strong', 'patient' and 'courageous' in situations of violence, conflict and war (AU and UN 2020: 29, 36, 59). In the UN handbooks, women's resilience is often referred to in the context of victims and survivors of sexual violence that demonstrates how women are praised for their resilience despite their vulnerability and victimhood during and after armed conflict. (UN 2020: 8). As such, the gender-resilience nexus is here primarily understood as



the maintenance of status quo. As Ana Juncos and Philippe Bourbeau write in the introduction to this special issue, when resilience is understood in terms of the logic of persistence, there is a risk of reproducing gender stereotypes, specifically about women in the Global South.

In short, the empirical analysis reveals an inherent tension between transformative change through the design of gender-responsive peace processes (as elaborated upon in the OSCE and UN handbooks in particular) and the maintenance of status quo focusing more on descriptive representation of women in peace processes. For example, while the AU handbooks underline the need to foster and mobilise women's movements, their overall approach to resilient peace processes tends to reproduce conservative gender stereotypes of women.

Gender expertise and training resilience in peacebuilding

The professionalisation of peacebuilding and the quest for peace expertise is expressed in a number of ways. Gender expertise is frequently mentioned although its content varies. Gender expertise can be expressed in terms of incorporating women and integrating their gendered ideas and experiences as well as addressing gendered power dynamics in peace processes. However, more often it is interpreted as including experts (women or men) on issues related to the WPS agenda, gender mainstreaming and gender-responsive mediation. For instance, the OSCE handbooks underline that it is crucial to recognise a broad spectrum of women's agency, including their 'specific mediation expertise acquired outside the traditional diplomatic or political arenas' (DCAF et al. 2019c: 7f) since women are 'untapped resources' with the potential of assuming leadership roles (OSCE 2019: 13). Similarly, the AU handbooks recognise the expertise by women 'in the multitude of leadership roles that they assume particularly in the area of conflict prevention and peacebuilding' (AU and UN Women 2017: vii). As such, 'lived' gender expertise and women's participation are portrayed as a resource that is instrumental for building sustainable peace. As Lydia Gitau (2022, in this issue) argues, programmes focusing on women and war are 'often structured around cultivating individual women's strength and leadership, positioning women as sources of stability whose adaptability helps make their communities "more resilient"'. As such, the focus is placed on individual resilience, rather than recognising the need to reform the 'dominant systems [that] are often the root of [...] harm' as well as 'the explicitly communal and relational ways in which resilience is cultivated' (Gitau 2022: 10, 24f, in this issue).

To make peace processes gender-sensitive most of the handbooks explicitly make recommendations on integrating gender expertise and mainstreaming gender issues in all aspects, including in the training of mediators. The EU recognises that the lack of gender expertise in many peace processes 'seriously limits the extent to which women's experience of conflict, and consequent needs for justice and recovery, are addressed within these processes' (EEAS 2012: 1, 5). Most of the handbooks therefore recommend bringing in gender experts who are skilled, for instance, to interview victims of gender-based sexual violence, address human trafficking, and sexual assault of men (Valasek 2008: 16; see also Beham and Dietrich 2013: 19, 30; UN



DPA 2017: 12, 14, 18). In this way, gender experts are ‘acting as go-to experts on questions and specialized tasks related to gender’ (DCAF et al. 2019c: 34; EEAS 2012: 5).

The OSCE also suggests capacity building, which targets women and women’s organisations in areas such as Security Sector Reform (SSR) to enable them to ‘participate fully in local, national and regional debates on complex issues related to security’ (Valasek 2008: 16; Bastick and de Torres 2010: 8f, 25). The aim is to support women and women’s organisations, which seek to participate in peace processes (OSCE 2006: 22). The AU also expresses the need for capacity-building, arguing that ‘women’s capacity in mediation and negotiation skills needs to be improved and extended to all areas of work’ (FemWise-Africa 2018: 1). FemWise-Africa offers such training, networking, advocacy and capacity-building work, ‘aimed at enhancing the implementation of the commitments for women’s inclusion in peacemaking in Africa’ (FemWise-Africa 2018: 1). However, the emphasis on training tends to send mixed signals to women that they do not ‘qualify’, for instance, as peace negotiators. The EU therefore underlines that ‘there is no evidence to indicate that men engaging in mediation and negotiation are more qualified [than women]. However, this does not mean that additional capacity building, training, support for networking and exposure to peer experience is not valuable for women’s participation’ (EEAS 2012: 3).

Hence, while the inclusion of gender expertise and training of mediators may be a necessary step to build gender-just peace, it is not a sufficient one. As Caitlin Ryan (2022, in this issue) argues: ‘The assumptions that sensitisation training and capacity building is sufficient to overcome local, national and global power inequalities puts much of the burden on women’. In other words, such a strategy risks placing the burden of building resilience on women rather than reforming oppressive structures (such as gender relations) or recognising the importance of communities to build resilience. Moreover, the technocratic approach of emphasising gender expertise and training while ignoring wider gendered power dynamics runs the risk of depoliticising the process of building sustainable and gender-just peace.

In sum, the empirical analysis demonstrates how the gender-resilience nexus is played out differently with regard to process, expertise and outcome. As mentioned before, resilience is often associated to sustainability, which is enhanced through the involvement of local actors and communities. All the handbooks stress capacity building, which specifically focuses on local women groups and women’s civil society organisations. As such, there is a strong emphasis on training individual women to harness their expertise so that they can act as vehicles for resilience and sustainability. At the same time, women’s participation in peacebuilding is frequently restricted by essentialist gender norms and gender is often conflated with women. Most of the handbooks also lack an intersectional approach since they tend to focus solely on women as a group without taking into account other facets, such as class, ethnicity and sexuality. Moreover, women are often depicted as resilient victims and as sources of stability in their communities.

Still, there is a growing awareness in the EU and OSCE that women’s inclusion offers no guarantee for a gender-responsive process. The UN even warns of the danger of tokenism and stress instead the importance of promoting women’s



participation beyond peace processes in post-war institutions and of resolving underlying power dynamics. However, none of the handbooks address explicitly the mechanisms and implementation strategies towards transformative change, which address unjust and unequal gendered power dynamics.

Conclusion

In recent years, peacebuilding has been hotly debated both in academia and among practitioners. In this article, we have conceptually unpacked and empirically examined how the gender-resilience nexus is utilised as a way of rethinking peacebuilding in relation to outcome, process and expertise. To capture global trends and variation, we advanced a theoretical framework for the comprehensive empirical analysis, taking stock of the existing international handbooks on peacebuilding produced by leading international and regional organisations. The analysis generated a number of potentially transformative insights to the gender-resilience nexus in peacebuilding. It was evident in all handbooks that the integration of the nexus signals a new way of thinking about conflict analysis in a non-linear and comprehensive way. Based on pragmatism, lessons learned, and from previously failed peacebuilding efforts, the handbooks now stress the importance of gender inclusion, resilience and locally anchored processes and practices in the quest of achieving a sustainable peace.

Moreover, the WPS agenda is consistently referred to in all handbooks, which reflects its normative impact. There is also a strong emphasis on framing women as peacebuilding actors with ‘untapped’ resilient skills and resources, which generate a multitude of leadership styles in times of conflict and violence. In addition, most of the handbooks have over time begun to formulate more explicit strategies of promoting women’s ‘meaningful’ participation and thus move beyond descriptive towards substantive representation. Several handbooks have also adopted intersectional approaches as part of gender-responsive measures. Yet, while gender analysis is frequently referred to and described holistically, most handbooks remain vague on how to practically integrate it in peace processes and therefore avoid specifying how gendered barriers and power structures may be transformed. Instead, gender peace expertise tends to emphasise and combine strategic essentialism (women’s peacefulness) and resilience (capacity for coping with and managing violence and conflict) to empower peacebuilding actors at the local level. This fits with the overarching trend of professionalising the field of peacebuilding. There is today a growing interest in training and promoting resilient leadership of women in peace processes, negotiation and mediation whereas much less attention is given to their lived experiences and structural conditions. This becomes problematic in the context of peacebuilding interventions by powerful actors from the Global North in conflicts that mostly take place in the Global South and in countries that tend to have the weakest institutional capacity and governance.

By way of conclusion, we suggest three directions to be taken in research. First, more attention needs to be given to the politics of peacebuilding in the analysis of the gender-resilience nexus. All the handbooks reflect depoliticised and technocratic practices of peacebuilding, which is why gender peace expertise tends to be ‘thin’



and vague on specific transformative gender analysis. Moreover, when gender in peacebuilding is conceptualised in depoliticised technocratic terms there is a risk of underestimating the resilience of conservative gender relations and the entrenchment and adaptation of patriarchy. Second, the gender-resilience nexus in peacebuilding needs to be developed in relation to conflict transformation. Despite the rhetorical emphasis on sustainable peace, the concept remains vague and abstract in the handbooks. Peacebuilding practices are instead centred on the processes of conflict management that stress resilience, often by individuals, to cope and adapt with the unforeseen dynamics of armed conflicts. Hence, there is much less focus on developing concrete strategies that centre on eliminating the root causes of violence and building transformative peaceful outcomes. Consequently, peacebuilding efforts risk ending up in a counterproductive outcome and in the maintenance of a destructive status quo. Third, to refine the gender-resilience nexus the positionality of peacebuilding and local contexts needs further problematisation. The common reference and understanding of resilience in peacebuilding tends at times to be removed from the everyday realities of local communities. This is why Hajir et al. (2021) argue that resilience in peacebuilding needs to be understood both as micro-level empowerment as well as macro-level systemic change, which recognises the power inequalities in the politics of peacebuilding (see also Ryan 2022, in this issue; Clark and Ungar 2021).

Acknowledgement The research was funded by the Strategic Research Area: Middle East in a Contemporary World (MECW).

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