

Research Article

Women's participation in peace and security efforts in East Africa: Challenges and opportunities

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the progress and gaps in women's participation in political leadership and security sector integration across the East African Community partner states. It draws specifically on the status of implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 in East African Community partner states. It follows from a baseline survey that analyzed the National Action Plans (NAPs) of partner states, the 2014 Regional Action plans and conducted Key Informant Interviews with 31 experts from the Peace and Security department of the EAC structure and Ministries, Departments and Agencies responsible for implementing the NAPs in the EAC partner states. The findings suggest that while some partner states have made progress in establishing positions that women occupy in the peace and security sectors, others continue to face resistance due to entrenched patriarchal norms, religious belief systems, and limited resources. Drawing on this study, the paper argues for a more intentional and coordinated regional approach to advancing gender-responsive Security sector reforms and inclusive governance.

KEYWORDS

*participation;
prevention; protection;
relief and recovery;
women; peace;
security.*

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Introduction

The adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) in 2000 marked a significant moment in acknowledging the vital contributions of women to peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and governance globally. With the surge of conflicts that had erupted in the world following the end of the Cold War and the sudden increase in their protracted nature the need to have more women in conflict resolution and peace building became urgent and was articulated in the UN Security Council of 2000. The UNSCR 1325 initiative presented four foundational elements of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda-participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery-designed to reshape the understanding and implementation of peace and security. In East Africa, a region characterized by protracted conflict situations, intra-state political instability, and mass population displacement, the application of UNSCR 1325 was especially significant. Historically, by 2000, the EAC comprised of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. But by 2025, it has expanded to include other partner states, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, South Sudan and Somalia. Each Partner State has established a National Action Plan (NAP) to operationalize the UNSCR 1325 as well as take oversight role in ensuring its effective implementation in the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda. Through the NAPs, national frameworks, the Partner States have through the Peace and Security Department of the EAC set up the the EAC Regional Action Plans (RAPs) to facilitate the coordination of regional commitments towards the UNSCR 1325 (East African Community, 2014; 2024). The current status of the UNSCR 1325 within the Partner States stands at varied level. In the figure below, it is evident that commitment to the establishment of the NAPs has been strong, what remains is to establish the operationalization of the UNSCR 1325 by these NAPs in the respective Partner States.

Even with these advancements, the figure indicates that the implementation varies significantly throughout the region. The variation is attributed to Partner States intra-states characteristics that have hindered the progress by entrenched patriarchal norms, religious limitations, insufficient financial resources, and fragmented institutions. Research indicates that when women are involved in peace processes, the resulting agreements tend to be more lasting and inclusive (Hudson et al., 2012). However, in reality, their participation often appears to be more symbolic, characterized by token representation that does not effectively lead to meaningful influence on policy or security reform results (Waylen, 2014). For example, while Rwanda has achieved over 60% representation of women in parliament, the challenge lies in converting this representation into meaningful influence within the security sector, which continues to evolve.

Table 1
Partner States Status of National Action Plans of UNSCR 1325:

<u>Serial No.</u>	<u>Partner State</u>	<u>Blocs of NAP</u>	<u>NAP1</u>	<u>NAP2</u>	<u>NAP3</u>	<u>Domesticating the UNSCR 1325 (2000)</u>
1	Republic of Burundi		2012-2016	2017-2021	2022-2027	Ministry of National Solidarity Human Rights and Gender
2	Democratic Republic of the Congo		2016-2018	2020-2024		Ministry of Gender Family and Children
3	Republic of Kenya		2016-2018	2020-2024		Ministry of Public Service Gender and Affirmative Action
4	Republic of Rwanda		2008-2012	2018-2022		Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion
5	Federal Republic of Somalia		2022 to date			Ministry of Gender Child and Welfare
6	Republic of South Sudan		2015-2020	2023-2027		Ministry of Gender Child and Social Welfare
7	United Republic of Tanzania		2020 to date			Ministry of Community Development Gender and Special Groups
8	Republic of Uganda		2008-2010	2011-2015	2021-2025	Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development

Source: Compiled from the Base line Survey of the EAC implementation of the UNSCR 1325.

This paper explores how EAC Partner States have put UNSCR 1325 into practice, the challenges they encounter, and the possibilities for strengthening women's roles in security.

To attempt these questions, we ground the paper in feminist institutionalism theory, which suggests that gendered norms are intricately woven into the rules, practices, and culture of institutions (Waylen, 2014). Feminist security studies challenge the conventional male-centric perspective of security institutions, highlighting that peace processes and security sector reform frequently overlook the contributions of women and do not adequately address security issues that are specific to gender (Hudson et al., 2012). These frameworks play a crucial role in comprehending the formal structures, such as laws, quotas, and action plans, alongside the informal barriers, including norms and stereotypes, that influence the execution of WPS commitments in the region.

We utilize a Mixed-Methods design and a qualitative approach that integrates document analysis of the baseline survey of the status of implementation of UNSCR 1325, expert interviews, and a comparative review of Partner States security and gender policies. An analysis of documents was carried out on the National Action Plans (NAPs) from Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, South Sudan, Burundi, and the DRC, as well as the 2014 EAC Regional Action Plans, the EAC Treaty, the Gender Policy (2018), and the Gender Equality and Development Act (2016). This also included reports from the EAC, United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA)-UN Women workshop that took place in December 2023. Between July and November 2023, we conducted 31 semi-structured interviews with a diverse group of individuals, including policymakers, civil society

leaders, representatives from the security sector, academics, and experts in Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) across six East African Community (EAC) Partner States. Participants were chosen through purposive sampling of officials from, the Multisectoral Experts Working Group (MEWG), East African Partner States, Civil society organizations, Government agencies and departments directly concerned with the implementation and operationalization of the UNSCR 1325 from each Partner State and the EAC respective departments of Gender and Peace and Security.

Results

The findings highlight five important themes regarding the implementation of the WPS agenda throughout the EAC region: (1) the development and institutionalization of policies; (2) the presence of structural and socio-cultural barriers; (3) the challenges of financing and resource mobilization; (4) the role of innovation and localized practices; and (5) the need for regional coordination and integration.

The Process of Creating and Establishing Policies

Many EAC Partner States have created National Action Plans, with some advancing to their second or third NAPs. Rwanda and Uganda are notable for incorporating gender-responsive elements into their national security strategies and legal frameworks. Rwanda's constitutional quota guarantees that more than 60% of parliamentary seats are held by women, a strategic move that has been utilized to advance legislation and policies that are sensitive to gender issues. Uganda has established gender desks within its security forces, complemented by budgeting mechanisms that are responsive to gender considerations in its third National Action Plan.

The data shows that in all Partner States, the NAPs were in ministries directly relevant to women's and youth problems. The NAPs have also been incorporated implicitly into each Partner State's overall national development goals. Except for one, none of the Partner States have a clear framework in place to offer oversight, monitoring, and assessment of NAP implementation.

Table 2
Women in EAC Partner States in National Assemblies/Parliaments

Rank In the World	Partner State	Lower or Single House				Upper Chamber			
		Elections	Seats*	Women	% W	Elections	Seats*	Women	% W
37	Burundi	5.2020	123	47	38.2	7. 2021	39	16	41
155	Democratic Republic of the Congo	12.2018	500	64	12.8	3.2019	109	26	23.9
1	Kenya	8.2022	350	81	23.1	8.2022	68	21	30.9
57	Rwanda	9.2018	80	49	61.3	9.2019	26	9	34.6
57	South Sudan	5.2021	550	178	32.4	8.2021	84	27	32.1
50	Uganda	1.2021	556	188	33.8	-	-	-	-
40	United Republic of Tanzania	10.202	388	143	36.9	-	-	-	-

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union Open Data via Gender equality (ipu.org): Ranking as of 1/9/2022

From the table above, there has been varied progress in improving the participation of women in peace and security, and in governance structures across the East Africa region. For instance, the table shows the status of women in national assemblies of East African states as of 2022. According to the data above, Rwanda is the world leader in empowering women to make legislative decisions. Rwanda leads the EAC, followed by Burundi, Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The most recent data on women in the world's legislative institutions present a positive picture. Different partner countries have different gender laws, representation quotas, and rationales. These figures are not used to assess decision-making capacities, as this is entirely the responsibility of the Partner States.

In terms of capability and participation in peacemaking, including arbitration and talks, the number of women participating in official discussions as negotiators, mediators, signatories, or witnesses remains exceptionally low in the region, reflecting a global trend with a local twist. Women have not received adequate recognition for their ability to contribute to conflict prevention, act as active peacemakers, and participate in armed combat. Some of the few data available will demonstrate this.

Table 3.

Women Participation in Region's Peace Processes

Peace Process	Women Signatories	Women Mediators	Women Witnesses	Women in the Negotiating Team
Burundi (2000) – Arusha Accord / CSF / CPA	0%	0%	-	2%
Somalia (2002) - Eldoret Coh / CSF	0%	0%	-	-
DRC (2003) - Sun City CPA	5%	0%	0%	12%
Sudan (2005) - Naivasha CPA	0%	0%	9%	-
Darfur (2006) – Abuja CPA	0%	0%	7%	8%
DRC (2008) - Goma - North Kivu CSF	5%	20%	0%	-
DRC (2008) - Goma - South Kivu CSF	0%	20%	0%	-
Uganda (2008) – Juba Coh / CSF / IAG	0%	33%	0%	9%
Kenya (2008) – Nairobi	0%	33%	0%	-
South Sudan (2015) Agreement on Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan	No	No	No	15%
South Sudan (2019) Current Peace Effort	No Data	1%	-	25%

Source- UNIFEM 2010

In this table, we evaluate data from Christine Bell and O' Rourke, who studied 585 peace accords between 1990 and 2010, as well as UNIFEM's later data collection, to provide an overview of the levels of women's involvement in recent peace processes in the region after the 1325 (2000) resolution. It is clear that the average percentage of women signatories to men in ten peace processes was 1.0%, while women mediators constituted 10.7%. Women witnesses averaged 1.6%, while women negotiators averaged 7.1%, indicating that they were the true peacemakers.

Barriers Related to Structure and Socio-Cultural Factors

Even with these formal advancements, deeply rooted patriarchy, cultural restrictions, and conservative religious views still hinder women from actively engaging in peace and security governance. In Burundi and South Sudan, cultural resistance is evident through the prevalent exclusion of women from public life and leadership roles. In nations such as Kenya and Tanzania, where quotas are

implemented, the evolution of institutional culture continues to progress at a gradual pace. Gender stereotypes persist in framing women as passive recipients instead of active contributors to peace, reducing their agency in both community-based and formal peacebuilding efforts.

These cultural dynamics not only constrain women but also negatively influence the attitudes and behaviors of boys and men. In many communities, traditional gender norms discourage men from participating in domestic responsibilities such as household chores, viewing such tasks as inherently feminine. This reinforces gender hierarchies that associate leadership and authority with masculinity, while relegating caregiving and emotional labor to women. Such constructions make it difficult for women to be perceived as capable actors in conflict mediation or security governance.

Additionally, cultural stereotypes are often reinforced within families, where women themselves may play a role—consciously or unconsciously—in socializing children into traditional gender roles. As mothers, aunts, and caregivers, women are sometimes complicit in discouraging daughters from pursuing leadership roles or in upholding beliefs that men are naturally suited for public life while women belong in the private, domestic sphere. This intergenerational transmission of norms contributes to the resilience of patriarchal values, even in contexts where gender-sensitive policies exist on paper.

The normalization of such gender norms presents a significant barrier to WPS implementation, particularly at the community level. Without active cultural transformation alongside legal and institutional reforms, gender-responsive policies risk becoming performative. As several interviewees in Uganda and Rwanda noted, “Even when the law says we should be included, society still says we should not speak.” This quote captures the disjuncture between normative change and lived realities—a central challenge in operationalizing UNSCR 1325 in East Africa.

Securing Funding and Mobilizing Resources

Financial constraints present a significant and pervasive challenge to the effective implementation of the WPS agenda across East African states. Many Partner States do not have specific budget allocations for WPS-related programming, making it difficult to transition from policy to practice. The lack of dedicated funding hampers efforts to build institutional capacity, establish gender-sensitive data systems, and implement effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks. Outreach, awareness-raising, and community mobilization activities—crucial for transforming societal attitudes—also suffer from chronic underfunding.

In Kenya and Burundi, for example, national stakeholders have identified resource scarcity as a major impediment to progress. While precise comparative financial data is often unavailable or inconsistently reported, it is evident that WPS initiatives receive disproportionately lower funding compared to broader national security or governance portfolios. For instance, while security budgets in Kenya and Uganda run into hundreds of millions of dollars annually, allocations for gender-focused peacebuilding or protection services are often marginal and reliant on ad hoc donor support.

This heavy reliance on external donors, although helpful in jumpstarting projects, raises concerns about long-term sustainability. Donor-driven programs can be subject to shifting geopolitical interests and short funding cycles, resulting in fragmented interventions and weak ownership by national institutions. Furthermore, dependence on foreign funding can undermine the political accountability of governments to invest in and prioritize the WPS agenda from their own domestic resources.

Creative Approaches and Community-Specific Methods

A number of Partner States are experimenting with innovative approaches that show promise. Contingent upon the increase in women in peace and security directly, Burundi set up a bank specifically for women to be able to obtain manageable loans that can address their socio-economic needs. These are critical because, commitment to WPS can only be feasible if women are assured of a successful wellbeing of their families. Those that are survivors of the protracted conflicts are also provided with relief and recovery interventions for post conflict transformation.

Kenya's "Policare" one-stop centers for gender-based violence response bring together medical, legal, and psychosocial services in a cohesive manner. Rwanda has implemented gender-responsive banking, providing financial incentives to businesses led by women that play a vital role in post-conflict recovery. Kenya's "Policare" one-stop centers for gender-based violence response bring together medical, legal, and psychosocial services in a cohesive manner. In Uganda, the National Action Plans have been adapted to local contexts by establishing district-level Women, Peace, and Security committees and implementing awareness campaigns that are sensitive to cultural nuances. These innovations demonstrate tailored responses to specific contexts and a capacity for adaptive learning that improve both ownership and effectiveness. In Uganda, the National Action Plans have been adapted to local contexts by establishing district-level Women, Peace, and Security committees and implementing awareness campaigns that are sensitive to cultural nuances. These innovations demonstrate tailored responses to specific contexts and a capacity for adaptive learning that improve both ownership and effectiveness.

Collaboration and Integration at the Regional Level

Although many WPS initiatives tend to concentrate on national levels, the EAC RAP of 2014 and the proposed EAC's 2024-2034 RAP indicates an increasing dedication to fostering regional integration. The RAP highlights the importance of being sensitive to cross-border conflicts, utilizing digital monitoring and evaluation via the EAC-RAPIMS platform, and ensuring the inclusion of youth and marginalized groups. The recent inclusion of Somalia in the EAC has initiated discussions on how to adapt regional frameworks to suit fragile and post-conflict environments. Nonetheless, the lack of a strong regional accountability system still hinders coherence and shared learning among states. The EAC region has no reporting framework nor a Monitoring and Evaluation agreed system. The EAC RAP 2024-2034 has been intentional and built in this M&E framework that clearly articulates

the parameters that will be used in the overall process of assessing the UNSCR 1325 implementation and operationalization.

Discussion

This paper highlights the intricate relationship between advancements made by institutions and the ongoing structural challenges that affect the implementation of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda within the East African Community (EAC). Understanding these dynamics requires a comprehensive approach that takes into account institutional capacity, socio-cultural norms, political will, and the mechanisms of regional integration. Although considerable progress has been achieved in establishing gender-responsive peace and security policies, the real effects of these frameworks on the everyday lives of women and their institutional empowerment are still inconsistent and frequently superficial.

The strong policy frameworks observed in countries such as Rwanda and Uganda highlight how institutional reform can foster environments that support women's participation. Nonetheless, feminist institutionalism highlights that merely having formal rules in place does not ensure meaningful change unless those rules actively challenge established gender hierarchies. Rwanda's achievement in implementing quotas and Uganda's integration of gender desks is noteworthy; however, their impact remains influenced by informal norms and the prevailing patriarchal cultures within security institutions. Therefore, it is essential that formal mechanisms are paired with deliberate initiatives aimed at confronting discriminatory practices and fostering women's leadership.

The ongoing presence of structural and socio-cultural obstacles, especially in nations like Burundi, South Sudan, underscores the importance of tackling entrenched gender beliefs. In these situations, gender stereotypes continue to be widespread, restricting women's opportunities to participate in decision-making positions and diminishing the impact of WPS programs. This aligns with current academic discussions indicating that merely changing policies is not enough for true inclusion unless there are also transformations in cultural narratives and power dynamics. It is essential to adopt a more comprehensive intersectional approach to understand how factors such as ethnicity, religion, class, and geographic location uniquely contribute to the marginalization of women across different states.

Resource limitations present a significant challenge to the successful execution of initiatives. The absence of sustainable funding hinders the establishment and oversight of Women, Peace, and Security frameworks. Many Partner States depend significantly on donor funding, which frequently entails limited timeframes and priorities that are driven by external factors. This results in interventions that are both fragmented and unsustainable. The collaboration between Uganda and academic institutions to create cost-effective monitoring and evaluation frameworks represents a hopeful approach to improving accountability and impact through the utilization of local knowledge and skills. The EAC states might benefit from exploring financing models that engage multiple stakeholders, including civil society, the private sector, and international development partners.

It is encouraging to see that a number of innovative and context-responsive practices are starting to transform the landscape. The initiatives include localized awareness campaigns and district-level Women, Peace, and Security committees in Uganda, gender-responsive banking in Rwanda, and integrated gender-based violence service centers in Kenya. These practices illustrate that adjusting to local contexts can lead to more sustainable and meaningful results. The innovations presented here act as gateways for expanding effective models throughout the region, emphasizing the importance of participatory policy design that is grounded in the real experiences of women from various communities.

Viewing it through the lens of regional governance, the 2024–2034 EAC Regional Action Plan emerges as a significant and well-timed chance to align national initiatives and encourage collaborative learning across borders. The RAP's focus on digital tools, engagement with youth, and the consideration of fragile states like Somalia reflects a progressive approach. Nevertheless, the absence of strong enforcement and coordination mechanisms at the regional level persists as a barrier to the RAP's ability to bring about meaningful change. To enhance regional implementation, the EAC should focus on developing institutional frameworks that foster mutual accountability, facilitate data harmonization, and encourage dialogue on policies across nations.

Insights drawn from other African regional blocs provide valuable perspectives on potential strategies to enhance the WPS agenda in East Africa. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has shown a more centralized and directive method in its coordination of regional Women, Peace, and Security initiatives. The ECOWAS Gender Development Centre (EGDC) has played a pivotal role in promoting the alignment of National Action Plans (NAPs) and fostering discussions across nations regarding the involvement of women in peace processes. Furthermore, ECOWAS has taken the initiative to incorporate gender advisors into peace support operations, a strategy that the EAC might consider adopting to strengthen the involvement of women in regional conflict resolution efforts.

In a similar vein, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) has implemented tailored mechanisms aimed at tackling gender and security challenges within the region. The Regional Action Plan for 2023–2030 thoughtfully integrates the connections between climate security and migration dynamics, addressing two vital issues that significantly impact the EAC region. The focus of IGAD on establishing gender focal points within the peace and security framework, along with the development of a regional network of women mediators, provides important insights for the EAC. East Africa stands to gain from tailoring these innovations to its unique circumstances, especially in incorporating Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) into strategies addressing environmental stress and cross-border displacement.

In summary, the progress of the WPS agenda in East Africa relies not just on the formal adoption of policies, but also on addressing informal norms, ensuring sustainable resources, and establishing regional accountability. Future advancements will rely on ongoing political determination, inclusive and participatory implementation methods, and a dedication to confronting the

fundamental power dynamics that sustain gender inequality in the realms of peace and security. Through the enhancement of localized innovations, the encouragement of regional collaboration, and the utilization of comparative insights from ECOWAS and IGAD, the EAC stands to exemplify a model for other regions aiming to implement gender-transformative peace and security frameworks.

Conclusion

The Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda has become an essential framework for promoting gender-equitable governance, inclusive peacebuilding, and sustainable development within the East African Community (EAC). This study shows that although significant advancements have been achieved—especially with the creation of National Action Plans (NAPs) and the initiation of the EAC Regional Action Plan (2024–2034)—the implementation process continues to face ongoing structural, financial, and socio-cultural obstacles.

The comparative analysis indicated that certain states, including Rwanda and Uganda, have made noteworthy progress in institutional advancements, such as implementing gender quotas, establishing gender desks, and adopting gender-responsive budgeting practices. At the same time, other regions like South Sudan and Burundi are facing ongoing challenges related to instability fueled by conflict, limited resources, and deeply rooted patriarchal traditions. Throughout the region, it is essential to move beyond merely adopting policies to truly transformative implementation that changes institutional cultures, guarantees accountability, and promotes women's leadership.

The regional framework, especially the EAC RAP, provides a valuable opportunity for aligning strategies, coordinating cross-border efforts, and utilizing shared strengths. Nonetheless, the findings suggest that the success of this framework hinges on strong political will, sustainable funding, inclusive engagement with stakeholders, and a steadfast dedication to gender justice.

This paper highlights the crucial point that the implementation of WPS should not be confined solely to gender institutions. A comprehensive approach involving both government and society is essential, incorporating ministries such as security, defense, justice, and finance, alongside education, civil society participants, traditional leaders, and women's organizations. Furthermore, drawing on comparative insights from other African regional organizations like ECOWAS and IGAD underscores the opportunity for the EAC to embrace innovative and proven strategies tailored to its unique context.

Ultimately, the WPS agenda in East Africa embodies both a policy commitment and a transformative vision aimed at fostering inclusive peace. By prioritizing the perspectives and leadership of women, addressing systemic obstacles, and embedding gender equality into peace and security frameworks, EAC states can progress from mere words to significant and enduring transformation. Achieving this vision will necessitate intentional, collaborative, and ongoing efforts at both national and regional levels. Through sustained investment, innovative approaches, and a commitment to accountability, East Africa has the potential to serve as a global model for gender-responsive peacebuilding and regional unity. In the greater

scheme of security planning, the EAC Partner States should be cognizant of the African Peace and Security Architecture in which regional undertakings are clearly aligned to the continental role of women, peace and security.

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