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Institutionalizing Women, Peace, and Security: Lessons Learned from FemWise–Africa

During 2023, 18 peace processes and negotiations took place on the African continent. According to a 2024 study by Milián and colleagues, 10 were related to armed conflict, with 2 agreements being reached during the year. None of these conflict resolution processes were led, or even co-led, by a woman. The African Union (AU) Network of African Women in Conflict Prevention and Mediation (FemWise–Africa) was created in 2017 to bring women to the mediation table and enable more sustainable and inclusive conflict resolution. In May 2023, the coordination team of the network initiated a restructuring process. Looking at a young and adaptable continental institution, this brief describes the evolution of the network and suggests ways forward to further enhance its impact.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The African Union Commission (AUC) chairperson and the commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security must continue to place gender equality at the top of their agenda and treat it as an integral part of peacebuilding. Harmonization with the diverse offices, directorates, and programmes working hard towards that goal, as well as the empowerment and appointment of more female special envoys and high-level mediators, are key to this endeavor.
- In order to provide members and coordinators of FemWise–Africa with a sustainable working environment, external partners of the AUC and Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS) should ensure long-term contracts and flexible budgets for seconded experts.
- The momentum for restructuring the network could be used by the FemWise–Africa steering committee and secretariat to develop a digital communication strategy. Assembling a digital roster of experts would make the importance and potential of the network publicly visible and enable all stakeholders to connect with each other.
- FemWise–Africa members who are currently building up or starting to conceptualize their national chapters should reach out to a diverse range of local actors in order to involve as many stakeholders as possible into gender inclusion and peacebuilding activities in the institutionally anchored national chapters.

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The year 2025 will mark the 25th anniversary of the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 (2000), which called for the inclusion of gender perspectives and the participation of women in conflict prevention, their protection during conflict, and the provision of humanitarian assistance. Looking at high-level mediation processes on the African continent and beyond, the representation of women still has a long way to go. The UNSCR 1325 has led to different strategies and projects to include a Women, Peace and Security (WPS) perspective in the security agendas of national, regional and continental institutions. One of the channels for inclusion and participation has been the institutionalization of women mediator networks. The AU Network of African Women in Conflict Prevention and Mediation, commonly referred to as FemWise–Africa, has been connecting, training, and deploying women experts since 2018.

On 23 July 2024, the AU PAPS published a post on the social media platform X about a continental meeting taking place to reflect on FemWise–Africa.¹ The post informs readers of the preparation of a new call for applications, calling on experienced women mediators and negotiators to apply and get involved in AU-led non-military conflict intervention missions. After seven years of operations, the network is being restructured. This represents an opportunity to look at the achievements and challenges of a continental

institution dedicated to the WPS agenda and created in a bid to show the expertise, experience, and leverage of African women.

This brief is based on empirical data gathered during 53 interviews conducted between October 2022 and May 2024 at the AU headquarters in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), in Oslo (Norway), and online. Looking at the decisions taken to strategically rethink the network and its activities, this text focuses on the institutionalization and practices of FemWise–Africa and highlights the opportunities to further strategically strengthen the network. Which steps have been taken by the network to optimize its activities? Which lessons can be learned from FemWise–Africa? What are the ways forward to further enhance the visibility and impact of the network?

A brief history of FemWise–Africa

Building on global and continental commitments and resolutions on WPS, such as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), UNSCR 1325 (2000), and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (known as the Maputo Protocol, 2003), the AU has institutionalized and promoted its engagement for gender equality and women’s rights.

¹ African Union Political Affairs Peace and Security (@AUC_PAPS). 23 July 2024. https://x.com/AUC_PAPS/status/1815779487012794636 [viewed on 15 September 2024].

Against a background of various initiatives and policies, FemWise–Africa was conceptualized as a platform for capacity–building, strategic advocacy, and the inclusion of women across all mediation tracks as well as at local and supranational levels. FemWise–Africa was approved by the AU Assembly of Heads of State and Government in July 2017. As a subsidiary mechanism of the AU Panel of the Wise, it is institutionalized as part of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). The network was welcomed by the AU PAPS and its partners as a highly promising institution for making mediation processes more inclusive.

On 5 October 2017, the FemWise–Africa steering committee was established at the AU headquarters in Addis Ababa. The steering committee, supported by a secretariat hosted by the PAPS Mediation and Dialogue Division, reports to an assembly made up of all accredited members. Women from all over the continent have applied for FemWise–Africa membership after a call for applications was published and disseminated widely by the AU. FemWise–Africa membership represents the five African regions, offering diverse professional and thematic expertise, including experienced conflict managers, as well as civil society actors eager to be trained as mediators.

At the first general assembly of the network on 13 December 2017 in Constantine (Algeria), a target was set to accredit 500 women to join mediation processes all over the continent.² The aim was to showcase the number of women engaged in conflict resolution in African member states, to tackle the lacking visibility of women in leadership and conflict management roles, and to pool the existing experience and expertise. Additionally, the mentoring and training of young women was also planned. The last published number of members by the AU records 462 women in 2020.³

Activities of FemWise–Africa

At the annual general assembly of the network, FemWise–Africa members are invited to discuss, validate, and adopt the annual work plan, drafted

by the secretariat, with input from the steering committee. The members are part of a roster through which they can be contacted by the secretariat and get access to call–outs for deployments as well as working and training opportunities. Deployments have been part of the operationalization of FemWise–Africa since it was established. As with other AU organs, their deployments are dependent on the context of the mission, the authorization by the AUC chairperson and the PAPS commissioner, the awarded budget, as well as the willingness of the member state to host and welcome an AU mission. According to interviewees at the AU PAPS, the current PAPS commissioner, Nigerian ambassador Bankole Adeoye, made the deployment of FemWise–Africa members one of his top priorities, requiring the inclusion of at least one member of the network in election observation and technical support missions.

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While most of the deployments are short-term appointments, there have been long-term deployments to AU liaison offices, such as to Sudan, South Sudan, and Chad in 2023. As Mediation and Advocacy Officer or Political Officer, seconded FemWise–Africa members take on many responsibilities. AU Liaison Offices are often understaffed and depend on the employment of seconded team members who take on various responsibilities. A seconded employee is an experienced professional whose salary is paid by a trusted external partner of the African Union, while their responsibilities and work assignments

² African Union (2017). FemWise–Africa Convenes first General Assembly and Launches Accreditation Process for 500 African Women Mediators, in Constantine, Algeria. Media Advisory. 13 December 2017.

³ African Union (2020), “FemWise–Africa”, Quarterly Newsletter, vol. 1, no. 1.

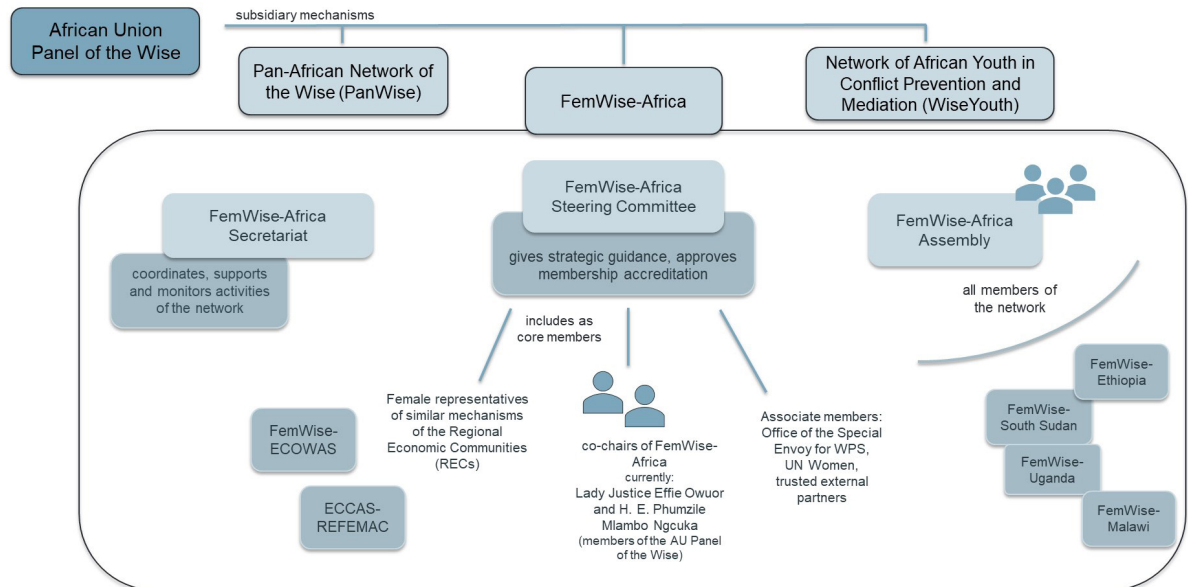


Figure 1: Structure of FemWise-Africa. Organigram by the author.

are determined and directed by the AU. Tasked with advising the heads of mission on mediation, negotiation, and the inclusion of women, FemWise-Africa members have also gained important insights, influencing the management of lessons learned, the documentation of operations, and capacity-building initiatives. Contributing to the gender mainstreaming of all activities of the AU Liaison Offices and amplifying women's voices, they are a valuable link between civil society actors, ministry officials, and the AU.

Visibility and networking are key aspects of political engagement, especially when fighting for access to restricted, confidential, and often high-level spaces.

Enhancing the visibility of FemWise-Africa

Given the vast potential and array of activities rolled out by FemWise-Africa, the network does not receive the attention it deserves in the literature on

and policy analysis of WPS in Africa. The network is well known by AU insiders and experts; however, little is known by AU outsiders about its activities and strategies. FemWise-Africa represents a unique channel to broaden women's participation in peace processes.⁴ Visibility and networking are key aspects of political engagement, especially when fighting for access to restricted, confidential, and often high-level spaces.

While only targeting representation bears multiple risks, such as the tokenist inclusion of women and the perpetuation of elitist structures, women's rights activists are still advocating for greater visibility and involvement, as it is a crucial step towards empowerment and representation. Learning from experienced leaders, recognizing the footsteps one can step into, and adapting successful strategies are key resources for female peacebuilders. One way forward to make the most of this network and the capacities of all of its members would be to make the work of FemWise-Africa more visible.

If there is no or limited access to the political community surrounding the AU, Regional Economic Communities (RECs), or national governments, the call for applications for the second cohort of the network may go unnoticed. Using strategies similar

⁴ Thania Paffenholz (2014). Broadening participation in peace processes. Dilemmas & options for mediators. Mediation practice series. Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.

The Global Alliance of Regional Women Mediator Networks

FemWise–Africa and the Nordic Women Mediators network are part of the Global Alliance of Regional Women Mediator Networks. They bring together six networks and advocate for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 and the inclusion of women in peace processes. FemWise–Africa took over the secretariat role of the global alliance for the period 2023–2024. For more information on the alliance, see <https://www.globalwomenmediators.org/>

to the Women Expert’s Network or the Nordic Women Mediators network⁵, which publish the names and profiles of their members on their websites, the FemWise–Africa secretariat could publish a roster, demonstrating the diversity, expertise, and capacity of their network. This would enable current members and partners to keep in touch with the network, share lessons learned from their activities, and inspire others to contribute to FemWise–Africa and its broad activities. Aspiring members and potential new partners could learn more about the rich expertise of African women and engage with stakeholders to build new projects, ask for advice, and advocate jointly for gender inclusion.

Using the potential of hundreds of women across Africa

Building on critical voices within academia and civil society⁶, questioning who actually benefits from agendas coined as Feminist Foreign Policy

or gender mainstreaming, I want to highlight the potential of a network like FemWise–Africa. The broad membership of the network poses challenges to the inclusion of and outreach to everyone, making sure there is an actual community and sense of purpose among members. It does, however, also represent an opportunity to reach women who do not have access to the AU and, in turn, include their local perspectives in continental policy-making and build the capacities of community leaders who can inspire and mentor others.

The decentralization strategy of the network, going back to the launch of the network, seeks to involve and build upon these experts and grassroots experiences. After the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) created their own regional networks of women mediators (FemWise–ECOWAS and the Network of Women Mediators of ECCAS (REFEMAC)), further efforts of localization came to fruition in 2023 with the launch of national chapters in Uganda,

Engagement with local advocates and stakeholders

The Ethiopian national chapter was developed around national FemWise–Africa members and the local organization Mothers for Peace, which has been active in preventing violence by talking to students at universities all over the federal state. The secretariat established relations with the Ministry of Peace, enabling a national institutional anchoring of the initiative. This example shows how national chapters involve diverse stakeholders, adapting to each governmental context and creating a stepping stone for women to be involved in national decision-making.

⁵ The Women Experts Network was created and is managed by the Berlin-based Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy (CFFP). <https://www.woxnetwork.org/home>. The Nordic Women Mediators network was established in 2015 and provides a networking platform for mediators from the five Nordic countries. <https://www.nordicwomenmediators.org/>.

⁶ Eryn Papworth (2024). Advancing Feminist Foreign Policy in the Multilateral System: Key Debates and Challenges. Issue brief, March 2024. International Peace Institute. Ana Velasco & Daniela Philipson Garcia (2024). Solidarity or Coloniality in the Feminist Foreign Policy Knowledge Market? Lessons from Mexico. Notes from the field [draft presented at ECPG 2024, 10 July 2024, Ghent, Belgium].

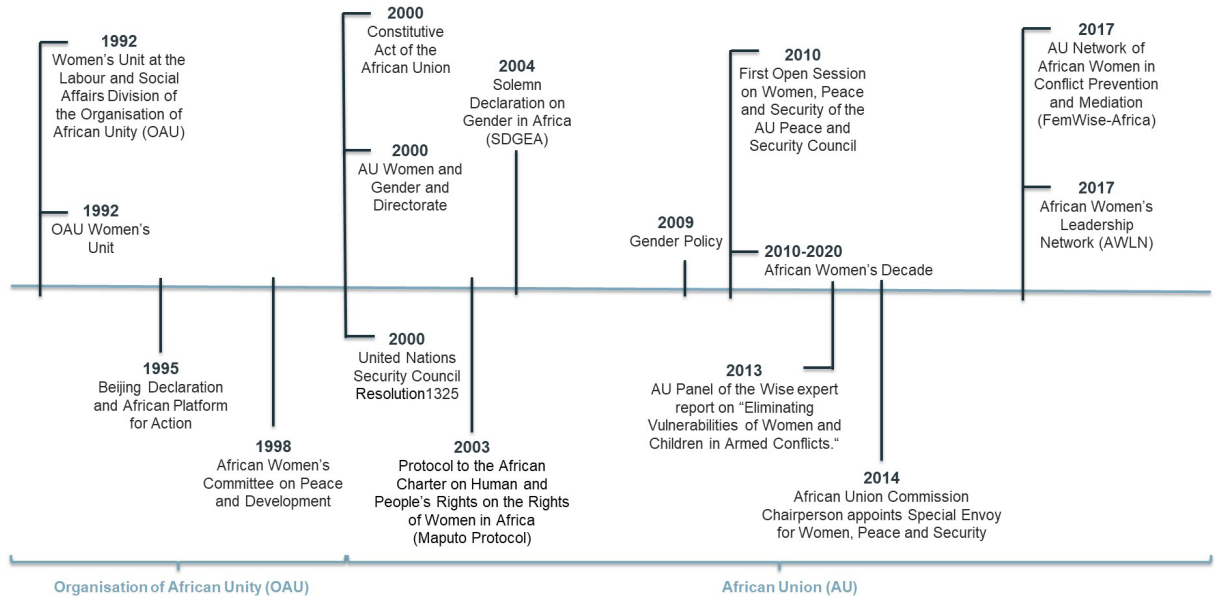


Figure 2: Declarations and frameworks of the Organisation of African Unity and the African Union related to Women, Peace and Security. Compilation by the author.

Malawi, and Ethiopia in collaboration with local governments. In July 2024, another national chapter was launched in South Sudan, capitalizing on the work of the FemWise-Africa member deployed to the local liaison office.⁷ The contextualization and localization of FemWise-Africa represents a crucial step towards capacity-building and equipping tomorrow's leaders with the political network and leverage to engage in high-level conflict resolution.

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Enabling a sustainable impact

The ongoing restructuring of the network shows that the steering committee and secretariat are aware of and acting upon the potential for change and improvement. The shift toward a smaller cohort of women with the experience and expertise to support high-level peace processes while institutionalizing national chapters shows an ability to adapt and react to the political context at the AU, as well as the needs of women on the continent. FemWise-Africa is a unique institution owing to its continental approach whose policies trickle down to individual women, providing them access to the political organization, training them, and equipping them with resources to build up their own networks and have an impact in their own communities.

Representing and being part of an organ of the AU, the FemWise-Africa members and secretariat are faced with broader challenges of the institution. Since 2016, the AU has been undergoing reforms to address the challenges of financing, coordination, and structure of the institution. One of the measures

⁷ AU PSC, Report of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union on its Activities and the State of Peace and Security in Africa. 37th Ordinary Session of the AU Assembly. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 17–18 February 2024, Assembly/AU/4(XXXVII). §IV[iii]150. African Union Political Affairs Peace and Security (@AUC_PAPS). 31 July 2024. https://x.com/AUC_PAPS/status/1818681268022001958 [viewed on 15 September 2024].

taken by the Institutional Reforms Unit was to freeze the budget for human resources, hindering AU departments to hire new employees. This makes the AU PAPS dependent on trusted external partners to finance the work contracts of political officers, experts, and advisors, as well as fund deployments, missions, and capacity-building activities.

To continue the crucial work of gender inclusion, a permanent budget should be secured to enable long-term commitments. External partners that have supported and continue to support FemWise-Africa should uphold their commitments to Feminist Foreign Policy, gender mainstreaming, and sustainable peacebuilding. Some ways to do so could be ensuring long-term contracts, exceeding the usual renewable one-year contract, and flexible budgets to provide a sustainable and stable working environment for FemWise-Africa coordinators and members.

Working across silos

The initial and remaining guiding principle of FemWise-Africa to have women lead mediation processes continues to be a crucial and valid goal to ensure women's needs are included into conflict resolution processes. The mediation process in Ethiopia, leading to a Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA, 2 November 2022) was a reminder of the work ahead. The former South African deputy president and co-president of FemWise-Africa, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, was the only female signatory of the agreement. She became the ward of women's rights during the process, challenging the parties through their male-only delegations and providing a channel for Ethiopian women to make their interests and needs known by meeting with them during the negotiations.

Mediation processes remain political, confidential, and high-level spaces that are accessible to only a few. Using all of the political leverage of women across the continent, it is crucial to work across AU institutions and organs. The AU Special Envoy for Women, Peace and Security, Bineta Diop, is doing crucial work to enable the participation of women in peace processes. Her efforts to establish national

and regional action plans on UNSCR 1325 could be used and joined by national FemWise-Africa members.

The African Women Leader's Network (AWLN) represents another strategic partner. The recent flagship initiative on WPS by AWLN, in partnership with the Special Envoy and FemWise-Africa, could become a first milestone in pooling resources and making sure women leaders with mediation experience are reached and empowered to be appointed by the AUC chairperson.⁸

Conclusion

The current restructuring of the network represents an opportunity to address certain aspects of the network that could be improved. With considerable experience based on the lessons learned from the past cohort and a robust strategy to enable equal regional representation and a broad range of political authority, expertise, and experience, the new cohort of FemWise-Africa members will soon amplify women's voices and needs in mediation and negotiation processes. To that end, several strategic steps can be taken to enhance the network's visibility, institutional sustainability, and connection to grassroots levels and to sustain political support within AU structures.

First, by publishing a roster of members and making it available to a larger audience, the FemWise-Africa steering committee and secretariat would enable stakeholders on the continent and beyond to engage with each other, contributing to a stronger, better connected global community of activists for inclusive peacebuilding. It would also help partners of the AU and potential new members to grasp the extent of the networks membership and activities.

Second, in order to create a sustainable working environment with an experienced staff, external partners of the AU should uphold their commitments to gender equality and ensure long-term contracts for the coordinators and flexible budgets for the activities of the network.

Third, FemWise-Africa members can contribute to the development of effective national chapters

⁸ African Women Leaders Network (@AWLNetwork), Post on X, 12 March 2024. <https://x.com/AWLNetwork/status/1767587667946930493> [viewed on 15 September 2024].

by sharing local knowledge and contacts of stakeholders involved in conflict prevention and gender inclusion. Launching 55 national chapters would make FemWise-Africa a best practice of top-down resource trickling coupled with bottom-up experience and activism. Such an exhaustive reach would provide members with the flexibility and framework to self-deploy and use the continental authority of the AU in a contextually adapted manner.

Finally, gender inclusion must stay at the top of the political agenda of the AUC chairperson and the PAPS commissioner. For many actors, gender constitutes an add-on and not an integral part of peacebuilding. FemWise-Africa is a unique institutional channel to empower those who want to have an impact on national, regional, and continental stages.

FemWise-Africa is a young initiative operating in a constantly changing context. As part of APSA, it has to engage in ad-hoc conflict resolution while pursuing a long-term strategy. Women are agents of peace every day in their communities. Carrying the label of the AU Network of African Women in Conflict Prevention and Mediation is no precondition for their work; however, it entrusts them with a political and institutional authority. Networks and collectives are crucial platforms for expanding and amplifying one's voice. There are many peace tables to consider, and FemWise-Africa is fighting for women's inclusion into all of them. With a strong network and institutional backing, women will slowly get a seat at the many tables, including the political, high-level peace processes.

Further reading

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About the author

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The Competence Network “African Non-military Conflict Intervention Practices”

The competence network African non-military conflict intervention practices combines empirical basic research with theory building and strategic policy advice. Funded by the German Ministry for Education and Research for the period 2022–2026, the collaborative project will (1) establish an online database of non-military interventions by AUs and RECs (from 2004 onwards), (2) empirically reconstruct non-military intervention practices and routines by specific African actors, and (3) advance the theoretical debate as well as strategic policy advice on these issues.



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