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DECOLONIZING THE ROLE OF AFRICAN WOMEN IN PEACEBUILDING: FROM BEIJING '95 TO AGENDA 2063

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Abstract

Despite decades of global and continental frameworks promoting gender inclusion, African women's meaningful participation in peace processes remains limited, often constrained by colonial legacies and imported gender norms. This paper traces the evolution of women's peace roles from the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action to the African Union's Agenda 2063, with particular attention to UNSCR 1325, the AU Gender Strategy and Aspiration 6 of Agenda 2063. Anchored in decolonial feminist theory, the study critiques the marginalization of indigenous African peace traditions and examines how global gender norms have shaped African policy frameworks, frequently side-lining community-based, woman-led practices. Using a comparative analysis of Uganda, South Africa and Liberia, the paper draws on civil society reports, policy documents and oral histories to assess grassroots resistance to elite-driven, formal peace processes. The analysis shows that African women's peace participation often remains performative, lacking substantive engagement or institutional support. The paper advances a decolonial feminist model that centres indigenous justice systems, communal decision-making and oral traditions led by women. It concludes by recommending policy reforms that institutionalize grassroots women's peace structures and validate traditional mechanisms within continental and national peace frameworks.

Keywords: Decolonial Feminism, Women and Peacebuilding, Agenda 2063, Indigenous Peace Practices, UNSCR 1325.

Introduction

The global gender and peacebuilding agenda has evolved through significant international frameworks, beginning with the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), which recognized women's role in conflict prevention, resolution and peacebuilding. This landmark declaration elevated women's agency in peace and security, laying the groundwork for subsequent international initiatives, particularly the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 in 2000. UNSCR 1325 was a watershed moment as it formally mandated the inclusion of women in peace processes, highlighting four key pillars: participation, protection, prevention and relief and recovery (Coomaraswamy, 2015). Despite these formal commitments, women's participation especially African women, has often remained symbolic, limited to token representation in elite spaces rather than genuine empowerment in peacebuilding processes. The African Union (AU), inspired partly by global developments, has attempted to localize

these efforts through instruments like the African Women's Decade (2010–2020), the AU Gender Strategy (2017–2027), and Aspiration 6 of Agenda 2063, which envisions "an Africa whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth" (AU Commission, 2015). However, the normative frameworks imported from the Global North frequently overlook indigenous African peace practices and woman-led community initiatives that have long functioned as conflict resolution mechanisms. This gap between imported gender norms and indigenous traditions forms the core tension explored in this paper.

The study interrogates the historical and contemporary roles of African women in peacebuilding from a decolonial feminist lens, emphasizing the transition from the Beijing Platform for Action to Agenda 2063. It highlighted how international discourses, though well-meaning, often marginalized community-based and culturally rooted peace practices led by women. Through a comparative analysis of Uganda, South Africa and Liberia, the paper assessed how grassroots actors challenge elite-led peace structures and proposed alternative, decolonized peace frameworks rooted in African epistemologies.

While Nigeria offers relevant experiences in women-led peace initiatives, particularly in the Niger Delta and the North-East insurgency contexts, this paper limits its comparative analysis to Liberia, Uganda, and South Africa. These countries were selected based on the availability of well-documented, policy-referenced and academically analyzed cases that align with the study's focus on grassroots women's movements, institutional engagement and the interplay between global gender frameworks and indigenous peacebuilding traditions. The choice reflects the need for empirical depth and conceptual clarity, as Nigeria's experiences in this area, though important, remain less systematically documented within decolonial feminist frameworks. Future research is proposed to interrogate Nigeria's evolving peacebuilding dynamics from a decolonial perspective.

This establishes the rationale for the research, situating it within the broader literature on feminist peacebuilding, decolonial theory and African political thought. The analysis critically examined the persistent exclusion of women at formal negotiating tables and questions the legitimacy of peace processes that disregard localized systems of justice and reconciliation (Arnold, 2021; Nhengu, 2022).

This study draws on Decolonial Feminism to reframe peacebuilding beyond UN-brokered negotiations to include indigenous rituals, female elders' councils and moral diplomacy. As well as to analyze case studies in Uganda, Liberia and South Africa where grassroots peacebuilding is often dismissed in formal reports but deeply effective. Likewise, to advocate for epistemic justice by validating community women's practices not as "informal" but as legitimate political contributions. Following decolonial theorists like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Fricker, the paper posited that peace without epistemic justice is unstable because it denies the social and spiritual grammars that make peace meaningful in African communities.

Statement of the Problem

Despite decades of global and continental advocacy for gender equality, exemplified by the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) and Agenda 2063 of the African Union, African women's participation in peacebuilding processes remains largely symbolic rather than substantive. Women are frequently included to fulfil gender quotas or donor expectations but are rarely empowered to influence the content, direction or outcomes of peace negotiations (Komane, 2022). Their roles are often confined to the margins, with little institutional support, decision-making power or cultural legitimacy within formal frameworks.

This problem is not only one of representation, but also of epistemic exclusion. Existing peacebuilding models remain heavily informed by liberal Western feminist paradigms, which prioritize formal participation in state-centric systems while neglecting the indigenous, spiritual and community-based peace practices long led by African women, such as those upheld by Queen Mothers, Iyalode, Omu and market women councils. These systems, though resilient and deeply embedded in African cosmologies, are routinely dismissed as informal or traditional, and thus, unworthy of institutional recognition.

The persistence of colonial government structures and imported gender norms continues to shape peace policy design, reinforcing the erasure of indigenous African knowledge systems. Scholarly and policy literature has yet to adequately address this disjuncture or provide models that integrate decolonial feminist frameworks into peacebuilding theory and practice. If this gap is not addressed, African peace processes risk remaining technocratic and externally driven, lacking legitimacy, sustainability and grassroots ownership. Despite the proliferation of global and continental gender frameworks, African women's participation in peacebuilding remains largely symbolic with indigenous, community-based peace practices systematically marginalized. This persistent disconnect between formal policy commitments and grassroots women's peace agency raises critical questions about whose knowledge counts in peace processes and how peacebuilding in Africa can be genuinely decolonized. Therefore, there is urgent need to rethink peacebuilding from a decolonial feminist perspective; one that centres African women not just as participants, but as producers of knowledge, custodians of peace traditions and architects of future peace frameworks.

Research Questions

1. How do global and continental gender frameworks shape African women's participation in peacebuilding?
2. How can a decolonial feminist approach re-centre indigenous African women's peace practices within formal peace processes.

Historical Background: Women's traditional and Political Roles in South Africa, Liberia and Uganda

Before colonial intervention, many African societies were not organized along rigid patriarchal lines, and women played critical roles in politics, spirituality and conflict resolution. Societies such as the Akan in Ghana and the Bakongo in Central Africa featured dual-sex systems of governance, where women held parallel or complementary institutions of power (Amadiume, 1987; Oyěwùmí, 1997). In many African communities, for instance, the omu (queen-mothers) and Ndi Ichie (female elders) had authority in trade, conflict mediation and spiritual leadership. Similarly, among the Ashanti, the Queen mother (ohemaa) shared power with the king and was responsible for war decisions and dispute arbitration. Women's participation was embedded not in quotas or policy but in cultural cosmology and communal responsibility. Colonialism ruptured these organic power structures. European administrators, missionaries and anthropologists imposed Victorian gender norms, which viewed governance as a male domain and consigned women to the domestic sphere (Lugones, 2008). Colonial governance thus erased, marginalized or domesticated women's authority, replacing matrilineal inheritance, communal landholding and woman-to-woman marriage practices with Western legal codes and patrilineal hierarchies (Oyěwùmí, 1997). As Maria Lugones (2008) described, "Colonialism did not just exploit, it reconfigured. It invented new categories of gender, race and power that were alien to precolonial societies". This gendered coloniality remains embedded in African political and bureaucratic structures today.

Also, British indirect rule, particularly in Nigeria and Uganda, entrenched male authority by recognizing male chiefs as legitimate intermediaries. Female leaders and traditional councils were systematically excluded from the colonial bureaucracy. In many Igbo communities, for instance, where leadership had been more horizontal and dual-gendered, colonial authorities refused to engage with female elders, leading to widespread resistance like the 1929 Aba Women's Riot. That protest, led by thousands of Igbo women, was a response to colonial taxation and the exclusion of women from political life. It was a moment of feminist resistance to colonial gender politics, yet the administrative system remained unaltered (Van Allen, 1976). Colonial missionaries, therefore provided education disproportionately to boys, arguing that educating women was unnecessary since their role was to serve men and manage households. Girls who received education were trained in domesticity, not governance. This educational apartheid disrupted indigenous forms of women's knowledge transmission, such as oral storytelling, initiation rituals and midwifery leadership, relegating them to informal or "backward" status.

Customary legal practices where elder women adjudicated disputes or performed ritual mediation were replaced by Western-style courts governed by written codes and dominated by male judges. Colonial legal systems viewed orality and spirituality as illegitimate, thus dismantling the spiritual-moral authority of female diviners, priestesses and custodians of communal order. In places like Malawi, Ghana and parts of South Africa, colonial rule disrupted matrilineal inheritance and governance, replacing them

with patrilineal models aligned with European norms. This fundamentally altered the economic and political status of women, as they lost control over land, lineage and succession (Keller, 2011).

a. **South Africa**:

Before colonization and apartheid, South African societies such as the Zulu, Xhosa and Basotho practiced forms of dual leadership, where women acted as spiritual leaders, healers and advisors in royal courts. Women were custodians of social balance, mediating inter-family conflicts and enforcing community morality through ritual ceremonies. Under apartheid, however, Black women's roles were institutionally suppressed, and they were rendered politically invisible. Yet, South African women emerged as powerful agents of resistance. Organizations like the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW) led anti-apartheid campaigns and helped build a feminist consciousness rooted in liberation struggle. After apartheid, women pushed to be part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) but were often sidelined or tokenized. Their testimonies were limited to their roles as mothers or victims, not as political actors or peacebuilders.

b. **Liberia**

Pre-colonial Liberian societies, especially among the Kru, Bassa and Vai, had matrilineal systems and women's secret societies such as the Sande society, which played key roles in conflict mediation and moral arbitration. Women also held authority in economic spheres through market councils, which could boycott goods or shut down markets to express political dissent. During the Liberian civil wars, women reactivated these traditional structures. Leymah Gbowee's Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace built on the moral-spiritual authority of women. Through non-violent protest, prayers and public lamentation, they compelled warlords to negotiate. Despite their central role, formal peace processes often excluded these women from leadership seats, reducing them to symbolic figures of unity.

c. **Uganda**

In Uganda, particularly in Acholi, Baganda and Langi cultures, women were ritual mediators and keepers of collective memory. Practices such as Mato Oput (Acholi) and Okouba rituals relied heavily on women's roles in preparing peace offerings, advising on moral restitution and spiritually cleansing returning combatants. The Queen Mothers in Buganda and Namasole (King's mother) held political and spiritual significance, often advising kings and influencing governance. During the LRA conflict, women, especially former abductees, emerged as community healers and advocates for reintegration. However, despite their cultural authority and moral leadership, they were rarely consulted in formal post-war reconstruction frameworks like the Justice, Law and Order Sector as initiated by the government of Uganda in 2001 to enhance justice, rule of law and security or international donor initiatives.

Literature Review

The recognition of women's roles in peacebuilding evolved gradually through major global platforms, starting with the Beijing Platform for Action (1995). It articulated, for the first time at a global level, the

necessity of women's full participation in conflict resolution, peacekeeping and reconstruction. The platform underscored that "peace is inextricably linked with equality between women and men" (UN Women, 1995). This momentum culminated in UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), which legally recognized the gendered impacts of conflict and emphasized women's inclusion in all aspects of peacebuilding, from prevention to post-conflict recovery. According to Coomaraswamy (2015), UNSCR 1325 was revolutionary in scope but slow in implementation, particularly in patriarchal and postcolonial societies where the idea of female negotiators remains radical. While both frameworks inspired many national action plans, African feminist critiques have questioned the extent to which these instruments address the lived realities of African women, many of whom operate within community-based peace systems. As Hudson (2018) argued, global frameworks often operate on Eurocentric assumptions that neglect the epistemologies and social structures underpinning indigenous peace strategies.

Agenda 2063, particularly Aspiration 6, envisioned an Africa where development is people-driven, unleashing the potential of its women and youth. The AU Gender Strategy (2017–2027) and the African Women's Decade (2010–2020) reinforce this commitment. However, critics contend that these frameworks mirror UN models without sufficiently indigenizing their methodologies.

Mukalazi (2023) critiqued Agenda 2063's gender commitments, noting that continental policies remain more aspirational than operational, especially in rural and conflict-affected areas where indigenous women's leadership structures persist without formal recognition. Komane (2022) echoed this sentiment, asserting that the SADC Regional Strategy on Women, Peace and Security fails to sufficiently engage women's traditional roles in dispute mediation, which remain vibrant at community levels but invisible in regional protocols. As Nhengu (2022) emphasized, the AU's 50/50 gender benchmark is misleading if it equates presence with power. We must interrogate how and whether women influence outcomes in peace processes.

African women have historically served as peace envoys, ritual specialists and moral authorities in their communities. This is well-documented in ethnographic work from Liberia, Uganda, South Africa and beyond. For example, in Liberia, the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace, led by Leymah Gbowee, used religious rituals, sit-ins and interfaith dialogue to compel armed factions to negotiate. According to Gbowee, "We used the only weapons we had-our voices, our prayers, and our unity" (as cited in Gbowee, 2011). In northern Uganda, Acholi women elders known as "Rwodi Okoro" played a key role in mediating between families and reintegrating ex-combatants through ritual cleansing ceremonies. These roles, while deeply effective, are rarely recognized in formal peace accords. In South Africa, women have historically led peacebuilding initiatives through stokvels (community savings groups), church networks and civic organizations. Chitando (2023) observed that African women's peace work is often rendered invisible by elite-driven, technocratic negotiations that prioritize formal over functional legitimacy. These case studies demonstrate that indigenous and culturally embedded peace practices, led by women, often produce more durable and context-sensitive outcomes than formal treaties alone. Yet,

such contributions are overlooked due to colonial hangovers that define legitimacy through Westernized institutions.

While UNSCR 1325 catalyzed important gains, many feminist scholars have voiced concerns about its "instrumentalist deployment" across the Global South. Arnold (2021) noted that the logic of including women only to fulfill international benchmarks undermines the transformative goals of the resolution. In Rwanda, for instance, women's representation in post-genocide institutions rose dramatically, yet many of these women were co-opted into patriarchal structures without genuine decision-making authority. Scheyer and Fröhlich (2023) highlighted a disconnect between donor-driven inclusion efforts and actual empowerment, especially in post-conflict societies where trauma, economic inequality and illiteracy intersect. As they wrote, it is not enough to put women at the table; we must ask who sits there, who put them there and who listens to them? Moreover, localization efforts often result in the replication of elitist peace models that do not resonate with grassroots communities. Nhengu (2022) critiqued this practice, rather than grounding WPS in local epistemologies, most national action plans become donor tick-boxes with minimal grassroots consultation. A recurring limitation in mainstream peacebuilding literature is the failure to apply intersectional analysis. Most frameworks treat "women" as a homogeneous group, ignoring how ethnicity, age, class, disability and rural–urban divides shape experiences of conflict and peace. Arnold (2021) called for intersectional decolonial strategies that recognise that women in refugee camps, informal settlements or rural villages experience conflict and peace differently than urban elite women who attend peace summits. Such distinctions must be central to designing inclusive, just peace architectures.

Despite these advances, critical gaps remain, reinforcing the need for this study. While liberal feminist frameworks (gender quotas, women's inclusion in formal negotiations) have gained prominence in peacebuilding discourse, they often fail to resonate with the lived realities of African women. Most literature conceptualizes inclusion through institutional access- parliament seats, national action plans or peace negotiation presence. However, this ignores culturally rooted, non-formalized systems of peace in which African women have long played central roles. For example, the role of Queen Mothers in Ghana, Omu in Nigeria or market women councils is largely excluded from theoretical peacebuilding models that prioritize state-centric governance. The absence of decolonial feminist theory which interrogates colonial legacies and epistemic hierarchies means that African perspectives remain under-theorized and peripheral in mainstream peacebuilding literature. This lacuna limits the potential of academic discourse to imagine peace beyond the narrow confines of Western liberal institutions.

Also, frameworks like the UNSCR 1325, the African Union Gender Strategy and Agenda 2063 articulate strong commitments to gender inclusion in peacebuilding. However, scholarly analyses often fail to probe how these policies translate or fail to translate into real power and protection for African women, particularly at the grassroots level. The literature is saturated with normative optimism, assuming that if women are present in peace talks, they are empowered. There is insufficient interrogation of how women

are selected for such roles (elite capture versus grassroots legitimacy); whether women have agenda-setting power or are simply "present". The extent to which these frameworks address structural violence, not just representational gaps.

Consequently, there is a gap between the celebration of women's formal inclusion and an analysis of what such inclusion actually achieves on the ground.

Furthermore, although some ethnographic accounts reference rituals like Mato Oput in Uganda or cleansing ceremonies in Liberia, these are typically mentioned in policy grey literature or NGO reports, not systematically theorized in peacebuilding or feminist academic work. Most scholarly studies focus on Western-style mediation, conflict resolution workshops or formal post-conflict institutions. What remains underexplored are the spiritual dimensions of women's peace roles; the communal arbitration models women sustain through song, storytelling, public ridicule or spiritual sanctioning and the intergenerational transfer of peace knowledge through non-formal education. Without theoretical development around these indigenous practices, they remain invisible knowledge, viewed as informal or backward, despite their proven resilience and cultural legitimacy.

Also, Western epistemology favours the written over the spoken, the legal over the spiritual and the individual over the communal. As a result, peacebuilding literature, even feminist literature, often fails to take seriously the epistemic structures through which African women have built peace for generations. Practices such as public lamentation, spiritual cleansing rituals, proverbial arbitration, intercessory fasting and communal libation are considered non-rigorous or anecdotal, rather than legitimate systems of peace and justice. These forms of knowledge are rarely cited in peer-reviewed journals, absent from academic conferences and excluded from UN or AU documentations. Their erasure is not just cultural, it is epistemological. Therefore, these gaps perpetuate epistemic injustice, as African women's peace wisdom is neither recorded, cited, nor funded in the ways that Western conflict resolution models are.

Theoretical Framework

In the table below are several theories that examine the role of women in peacebuilding and gendered experiences of conflict. Each offers valuable insights but also presents limitations, especially when applied in African contexts shaped by coloniality, cultural pluralism and hybrid governance systems.

Table 1: Comparative overview of theoretical approaches to African women's peacebuilding

Theory	**Proponents**	**Year**	**Core Focus**
Liberal Feminism	Mary Wollstonecraft, Betty Friedan, Martha Nussbaum	1792, 1963, 2000	Equality in rights, legal reforms, access to power and representation
Postcolonial Feminism	Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gayatri Spivak	1984, 1988	Intersection of gender, race, colonialism; critique of Western feminism

Conflict Transformation	Johan Galtung, John Paul Lederach	1969, 1995	Structural violence, relational change, grassroots participation in peace
Feminist Peacebuilding	Carol Cohn, Cynthia Cockburn	1990s–2000s	Gender-sensitive peace processes, women's agency in conflict/post-conflict
Ubuntu Feminism	Gertrude Fester, Grace Khunou, Pumla Gqola	2000s	Indigenous African ethics of care, community, and harmony
Decolonial Feminism	María Lugones	2008	Coloniality of gender, epistemic resistance, indigenous knowledge validation

Source: Author's synthesis based on scholarly literature.

This table summarizes key features, proponents and core focus of liberal feminism, liberal peacebuilding and decolonial feminism in the context of African women's participation in peace processes.

The liberal peacebuilding model, promoted by institutions like the UN, World Bank and major donors, emphasizes post-conflict reconstruction through democratization, institution-building and the inclusion of women, primarily in formal, elite-based settings. Its feminist derivative, liberal feminism, prioritizes gender quotas, legal equality and women's representation in decision-making. While influential, these models have faced strong critiques for being superficial, performative and epistemically colonial in the African context. As Hudson (2018) argued, liberal peace operates on a Cartesian separation of reason and emotion, state and society, public and private categories that fail to align with African communal ontologies. Similarly, Arnold (2021) highlighted that gender inclusion often stops at descriptive representation, not substantive power, especially when women are parachuted into negotiations with no ties to community structures.

Nhengu (2022) critiqued Western feminist prescriptions for assuming a universal womanhood while ignoring the diversity of African women's roles, spiritualties and governance practices. In her opinion, what passes for global gender policy is often blind to the ways African women have always done peace; from the firewood market to the spiritual shrine. Additionally, liberal peace models valorize legal rationality and proceduralism, sidelining non-written traditions, rituals, oral negotiations and other non-Western peace practices. This creates a hierarchy of legitimacy that invalidates grassroots women's contributions to sustainable peace. Among these, Decolonial Feminism is adopted as the analytical anchor for this study, due to its capacity to challenge the structural epistemic exclusions inherent in both liberal peace and mainstream feminist frameworks, as well as its relevance to African contexts.

Decolonial Feminism was introduced by María Lugones (2008) in her seminal work, "The Coloniality of Gender". It builds on the decolonial turn in Latin American and African thought, particularly the work

of Aníbal Quijano, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Walter Mignolo. At the heart of this paper is the notion of decolonial feminism, which interrogated both the colonial legacies of exclusion and the contemporary liberal feminist discourses that often universalize women's experiences. Decolonial feminism asserts that feminist theory must be rooted in local histories, indigenous knowledge systems and contextually grounded struggles (Hudson, 2018).

Hudson introduced the idea of "border thinking" as a strategy of decolonial resistance, arguing that a feminist decolonial lens has the potential to change the way we look at peacebuilding, particularly when it embraces African cultural and spiritual frameworks. This contrasts sharply with liberal feminist models that emphasize quotas, gender parity in institutions and individual agency over collective, community-rooted decision-making. Similarly, Du Plessis (2019) advocated ubuntu feminism, which embraces the African philosophy of interconnectedness, care and relational justice, thus challenging the individualist underpinnings of many feminist peacebuilding paradigms. These approaches shift the discourse from women's inclusion in male-designed systems to reclaiming traditional African peace mechanisms where women were central actors. Gender roles in Africa were reconfigured under colonial rule, imposing Western patriarchal binaries and erasing indigenous gender complementarity (Lugones, 2008). It calls for "delinking" from Eurocentric thought and re-centering subaltern epistemologies. It affirms the co-existence and legitimacy of diverse knowledge systems, including oral histories, ritual practices and spiritual epistemes. It recognizes race, colonialism, gender and geography as interconnected axes of subjugation.

Unlike Western feminist theories that may generalize women's experiences, decolonial feminism insists on contextuality and groundedness in African cosmologies. It does not merely critique colonial violence but also aims to restore what was lost- dignity, spirituality, memory and authority. It shifts the focus from individual empowerment to collective, community-based liberation, particularly in peace processes. For Tamale (2020), decolonial feminism calls for dismantling of colonial knowledge systems and reclaiming our indigenous epistemologies, including those embodied by African women through rituals, storytelling and non-literate traditions. As Hudson (2018) explained, "A decolonial feminist approach does not seek to add African women to existing structures; it seeks to remake the structures in line with African women's lived realities. This aligns directly with the paper's goal of decolonizing continental peace policies like Agenda 2063. In African peacebuilding, epistemic injustice occurs when oral traditions are dismissed as informal; women's spiritual authority is excluded from formal negotiations; colonial languages become the sole medium of policy discourse and ritual reconciliation is replaced by legalistic transitional justice.

Thus, decolonial feminism, as theorized by Lugones (2008), emerged as the most potent framework for explaining and challenging the systemic exclusion of African women in peace processes, past and present. It enables this paper to not only critique policy instruments like UNSCR 1325 and Agenda 2063

but also to reimagine peacebuilding from below, rooted in indigenous justice systems, oral traditions, communal ethics and women's lived leadership. Therefore, the paper calls for the institutional integration of oral narratives, matriarchal councils, clan-based arbitration and spiritual cleansing into national and continental peace strategies. These are not relics of the past, they are resilient and living systems of African peace epistemology.

Methodology

This paper adopted a qualitative, comparative case study design guided by decolonial feminist methodology. It focuses on three African countries- Liberia Uganda and South Africa, selected for their diverse post-conflict experiences and the presence of grassroots women-led peacebuilding initiatives. The paper is interpretive and exploratory, seeking to illuminate indigenous knowledge systems and challenge the epistemic dominance of liberal peace models. The methodology is grounded in the work of Sylvia Tamale, Amina Mama and Miranda Fricker, emphasizing epistemic justice, oral histories and communal knowledge as valid sources of insight. Data were gathered through document analysis of global and continental frameworks (e,g, UNSCR 1325, Beijing Platform, AU Gender Strategy, Agenda 2063) national policies (NAPs) and civil society reports (UN Women). Data was also retrieved from review of published oral histories, feminist narratives and testimonies from African women peacebuilders, including Leymah Gbowee and post-conflict women's collectives. Data were thematically analysed using a framework analysis approach, identifying recurring patterns around symbolic versus substantive participation, indigenous peace practices and policy co-optation. While no primary interviews were conducted, this is addressed through extensive use of authentic narrative accounts and decolonial literature. This methodology affirms that peace is not only a policy process but also a cultural and epistemic practice; and that African women's voices, rituals and leadership must be central to any meaningful peace framework.

Presentation and Analysis of Data

Despite decades of gender-focused frameworks, from the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) to Agenda 2063, African women's roles in peacebuilding remain largely rhetorical. This section examines how global and continental instruments have influenced practice, using a decolonial feminist lens, as well as colonial legacies and imported gender norms. It will also interrogate the historical rupture of women's authority under colonialism, the institutionalization of imported governance models and the lingering effects of these frameworks in contemporary gender and peacebuilding policies.

a. *Beijing Platform for Action (1995)*

The BPfA was pivotal in placing women's roles in peace on the global agenda. It called for women's inclusion in disarmament, peacekeeping and conflict resolution. However, as Du Plessis (2019) observed, while it opened doors, it did not dismantle colonial and patriarchal structures. The framework reflected

a liberal feminist paradigm, emphasizing formal institutions but overlooking African women's ritual, spiritual and communal peacebuilding roles.

b. *UNSCR 1325 (2000)*

UNSCR 1325 mandated women's inclusion in all aspects of peace and security. Yet, implementation across Africa has been shallow. Nhengu (2022) noted that National Action Plans (NAPs) are often donor-driven and poorly connected to grassroots realities. The resolution privileges women's roles only within formal state-centric frameworks, marginalizing traditional, non-state peace actors like female elders, spiritual mediators and ritual healers. As Arnold (2021) argued, presence has often been mistaken for power.

c. *The AU Gender Strategy (2018–2028)*

The AU Gender Strategy aims for gender-responsive governance. While progressive on paper, Komane (2022) and Mukalazi (2023) argued that it mirrors global models without sufficiently contextualizing African realities. Local female-led institutions like the Omu, Iyalode or Queen Mothers are seldom mentioned and implementation is hampered by weak state capacity and elite co-optation.

d. *Agenda 2063, Aspiration 6*

Agenda 2063 envisions people-driven development, especially through women and youth. Yet, it largely draws from neoliberal development templates and lacks concrete mechanisms for integrating indigenous peace practices into continental policy. Aspiration 6 of the African Union Agenda 2063 of the AU Commission (2015) reads as follows; "An Africa whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential offered by African people, especially its women and youths, and caring for children". Article 6 directly aligns with the spirit of UNSCR 1325, particularly around participation and equity, but it falls short on specifics. It does not directly reference indigenous systems, traditional leadership or epistemic justice, which is where this paper makes a critical contribution. Nhengu (2022) critiqued its elite focus, noting that grassroots women's spiritual and communal leadership is still excluded. Chitando (2023) argued that unless traditional women-led peace practices are institutionalized, Agenda 2063 will remain symbolic.

The Beijing Platform for Action (1995) marked the global acknowledgment that women's participation in peace and conflict resolution is not optional but essential. This was revolutionary in its framing of gender justice as a peace issue. It laid the conceptual groundwork for UNSCR 1325, but did so using Western liberal feminist language, with a focus on equality, rights and institutional access. In many African contexts, this global framework arrived into spaces where women already played complex peace role; as spiritual leaders, memory-keepers, arbitrators and economic anchors. However, because these were not formally codified or recognized by colonial or postcolonial states, the WPS framework often failed to capture their influence.

By the time UNSCR 1325 (2000) was adopted, African countries including South Africa, Liberia and Uganda had embraced its pillars- participation, protection, prevention and recovery, but largely through elite NAPs (National Action Plans) that emphasized formal political roles and donor-led interventions. This disconnect deepened with the AU Gender Strategy (2018–2028), which although continentally focused, still mirrored Western technocratic gender metrics. Indigenous peace mechanisms, oral traditions and community-based leadership were scarcely mentioned.

Therefore, Agenda 2063, specifically Aspiration 6, commits to gender equality and women-led development, but its language remains developmentalist, offering little in terms of epistemic inclusion. It speaks of "empowerment" but not of restoring traditional leadership roles or decolonizing peace policy. Hence, this paper offers a thick analytical bridge: it shows that while the trajectory from Beijing to Agenda 2063 reveals rhetorical gains in visibility, African women's indigenous peace agency remains structurally side-lined. The frameworks adopted these women, but not their worldviews, traditions or epistemologies.

Discussion of Findings

Contemporary gender policies, both global (e.g., UNSCR 1325) and continental (e.g., AU Gender Strategy), still reflect the architecture of colonial governance, even when they seek to empower women. This manifests in several epistemic and structural ways which includes:

a. *Legibility and formalism over local legitimacy*

Most gender policies in Africa favour formal inclusion in state institutions over recognition of informal or traditional structures. Women's councils, ritual healers and maternal mediators are rarely institutionalized because they do not fit Western metrics of governance. This reflects the colonial habit of recognizing only what is legible to the state, a practice rooted in indirect rule and European legalism (Scott, 1998).

b. *Technocratic gender mainstreaming*

Gender strategies often promote technocratic inclusion through gender desks, action plans and training workshops without dismantling the underlying patriarchal and colonial logics of state power. Nhengu (2022) argued that "gender mainstreaming in Africa has become a box-checking exercise, often funded by external donors and divorced from the reality of women's lives". For example, increasing the number of women in parliaments does not necessarily shift decision-making power if these women are socially constrained, co-opted or disconnected from grassroots movements.

c. *Imposition of binary gender norms*

Colonialism imposed binary, heteronormative gender categories (man/woman) onto African societies that previously had fluid and pluralistic understandings of gender and social roles. This continues to shape gender programming today, which assumes uniformity in women's needs and ignores intersectional realities including widows, spirit mediums, non-binary persons and clan-based

women's networks. As Oyěwùmí (1997) noted, "The category 'woman' is not universal and its application in African contexts must be decolonized to reflect indigenous realities".

d. *Policy language and external benchmarks*

Most gender frameworks in Africa are written in colonial languages (English, French, Portuguese) and are assessed using Western benchmarks, such as quota systems or institutional presence. This reinforces a hierarchy of knowledge, where oral, spiritual and cultural peace work by women remains invisible or 'unofficial'. Mukalazi (2023) critiqued Agenda 2063 for being "rhetorically transformative but structurally conservative," noting that it continues to rely on imported metrics and governance paradigms. Therefore, colonialism did not merely conquer territories, it restructured African gender orders, delegitimized indigenous female authority and implanted governance models that continue to shape modern policy. The disruption of dual-sex systems, erasure of matrilineal governance and replacement of oral spiritual authority with bureaucratic institutions resulted in a displacement of African women from their rightful place in peacebuilding systems.

Today, gender policies in Africa, while progressive in language, still carry the colonial imprint of exclusion, formality and epistemic violence. To genuinely decolonize peacebuilding, it is imperative to recognize and institutionalize indigenous, community-led and spiritual peace mechanisms, many of which are still upheld by African women despite centuries of suppression.

Indigenous African Peace Traditions and Women's Roles

African societies long upheld peacebuilding traditions rooted in spiritual, communal and restorative justice systems. These systems, often dismissed as "informal" by state-centric models, prioritized consensus-building, ritual reconciliation and social harmony. Through a decolonial feminist lens, such traditions are not peripheral but foundational to authentic African peace processes. They include:

a. *Indigenous Peace Mechanisms*

These mechanisms emphasize dialogue over punishment, restorative over retributive justice and spiritual healing over legalism. As Murithi (2006) explains, African justice is "relationship-based," involving all parties in a moral restoration process. Practices such as the "Mato Oput" in Uganda, "Palaver" in West Africa, and "Imbizo" in South Africa showcase these systems' durability. Its features includes:

i. Consensus-building through open dialogue
ii. Spiritual rituals for atonement (e.g., libations, cleansing)
iii. Elder councils composed of both men and women
iv. Reintegration of offenders through apology and restitution

b. *Women as Custodians of Peace*

Women traditionally held authoritative peace roles such as:

i. Namasole (Buganda Kingdom of Uganda) was the King's mother who played a ceremonial and advisory role with real political influence.

ii. Sande Council Mothers (Vai/Mende/Kru communities) of Liberia were the spiritual, social instructors and mediators within initiation and justice rites.
iii. Rain Queen or Modjadji (balobedu society) of South Africa held spiritual rainmaking power and a sacred figure influencing regional affairs.
iv. Queen Mothers (e.g., Ohemaa of the Akan) legitimized chiefs and led moral diplomacy
v. Omu (among the Igbo) governed markets and women's councils, convening courts and enforcing communal sanctions.
vi. Iyalode (Yoruba) acted as spokespersons for women and mediators in social conflict.
vii. Market women councils wielded economic and moral influence in public life.

These roles were embedded in dual-sex systems, not as token representation, but as structurally essential components of governance. South Africa, Liberia and Uganda have unique but parallel traditions of women's peace leadership, often erased by colonial patriarchy and modern state structures. With each country having its own lineage of female authority, has only validated our call for decolonial feminist peace models.

c. Oral Traditions and Rituals

African women sustained peace through oral storytelling, lamentation, chants and rituals tools used to:

i. Teach moral values
ii. Publicly sanction offenders
iii. Spiritually cleanse communities
iv. Preserve intergenerational peace knowledge.

These performative forms of justice were communal, symbolic and spiritually charged, often conducted by women priestesses, elders or mothers' councils.

Comparative Case Studies

The efficacy and legitimacy of peacebuilding frameworks in Africa cannot be fully understood without examining how grassroots women's initiatives interact with both global prescriptions (like UNSCR 1325) and continental ambitions (like Agenda 2063). This paper explored three country-specific case studies: Liberia, Uganda and South Africa, each with a unique post-conflict trajectory but a common thread: the enduring power of women-led, community-rooted peace work.

It also assessed the interaction between global peace norms and local women-led practices, highlighting both resistance and adaptation at the grassroots level.

i. **Liberia**: Grassroots Women's Movements and Peace Negotiations

Liberia is globally recognized for the role of Leymah Gbowee and the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) during the Civil War. Their tactics were mass prayers, white dress symbolism, sex strikes and public fasting; as well as how they merged spiritual protest with strategic nonviolence. However, despite their central role in brokering peace, most women remained excluded from the actual peace negotiation

table. As Gbowee later noted, "We were seen as peacemakers, not policymakers". Civil society advocacy created visibility, but institutional power remained elusive and international frameworks like UNSCR 1325 were referenced but not structurally embedded.

ii. **Uganda**: Post-Conflict Healing and Cultural Mechanisms

Uganda's recovery after the Lord's Resistance Army's (LRA) conflict demonstrated the continued relevance of indigenous, woman-led reconciliation practices. The Acholi women played key roles in reviving the "Mato Oput" ritual, where forgiveness is enacted through symbolic acts like drinking a bitter herb and public confession. Women also facilitated ritual cleansing, homecoming ceremonies and spiritual healing, especially for abducted children and former combatants. Yet these practices were seldom institutionalized by official transitional justice mechanisms, which prioritized formal Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)-style structures and donor-driven programming.

iii. **South Africa**: Gendered Silences in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)

South Africa's TRC is often celebrated for its progressive aims, but feminist critiques point out its blindness to gendered violence. While women were called to testify, their stories were framed as mothers or wives of victims, rather than as "political actors or survivors of sexual violence". Grassroots groups like the Khulumani Support Group emerged to push back, documenting alternative narratives and demanding reparations and truth-telling that reflected women's lived experiences. However, these movements were underfunded and institutionally marginalized.

Table 2: Comparative insights on Women's grassroots peacebuilding across Liberia, Uganda and South Africa

Country	Grassroots Role	Global Norms Engagement	Policy Impact
Liberia	Led peace activism; mobilized women as moral force	Used UNSCR 1325 rhetorically; minimal structural change	Peace talks excluded most women from decision-making |
Uganda	Ritual-led community healing by women	Indigenous methods overlooked in formal recovery	Cultural practices not integrated into policy
South Africa	Post-TRC civil society activism	Gender frameworks applied unevenly	Structural neglect of women's justice claims

Source: author's synthesis (2025).

This table summarizes how global peace norms interact with indigenous women-led practices in three post-conflict African countries. It contrasts grassroots activism, engagement with international frameworks and policy impacts. Data is based on secondary sources, oral narratives and civil society reports

Performance vs. Participation

Despite decades of global and continental advocacy for women's inclusion in peacebuilding, ranging from the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) to UNSCR 1325 (2000) and Agenda 2063, the role of African women in peace processes often remain symbolic rather than substantive. Here, we will look at

the distinctions between performative presence and meaningful participation, interrogating how women are integrated into peace frameworks and how feminist voices are co-opted into bureaucratic routines devoid of transformative power.

a. *Distinction between symbolic and substantive participation*

The conceptual distinction between symbolic and substantive participation has become central in feminist peacebuilding literature. Symbolic participation refers to surface-level inclusion, such as appointing women to delegations or panels without actual influence over outcomes. Substantive participation, by contrast, implies decision-making power, agenda-setting and structural agency. As Hudson (2018) wrote, inclusion is not enough; it matters whether that inclusion is transformative or merely decorative. Similarly, Arnold (2021) called attention to "ghost participation", where women appear in peace processes without the power to disrupt patriarchal norms

Table 3: Distinction between symbolic and substantive participation of women in peacebuilding

Dimension	**Symbolic Participation**	**Substantive Participation**
Representation Basis	Women are present primarily to fulfil appearance or quota requirements	Women are involved due to legitimacy, expertise and leadership credibility
Roles Assigned	Assigned to marginal roles (e.g., rapporteurs, observers or protocol positions)	Women are involved in core roles at all stages. From agenda-setting, negotiations, implementation and oversight.
Community Linkages	Inclusion is individualistic and disconnected from grassroots or community mandates	Inclusion reflects and channels voices from grassroots and community-based constituencies
Epistemological Recognition	Women's knowledge systems (oral, spiritual, indigenous) are not acknowledged	Indigenous and lived experiences are central to framing and resolving peace issues
Power and Influence	Minimal influence over outcomes, participation is largely ceremonial	Women shape decisions, set priorities and hold stakeholders accountable
Institutional Commitment	No real accountability to women's contributions, often used to legitimize elite agendas	Institutional mechanisms support and enforce women's participation at all peacebuilding stages

Note: This is an original table created by the author based on conceptual analysis.

b. *How African women are included in peace talks: Presence without power*

Across many African peace processes, women's inclusion is framed as a symbolic gesture that fulfills international visibility criteria but fails to change the architecture of peace negotiations. This has been observed in cases such as Sudan, South Sudan, Mali, DRC and Ethiopia, where women were listed as delegates but lacked access to closed-door negotiations; roles in shaping post-conflict governance and

recognition of their informal and spiritual peace contributions. Below are key patterns of exclusion despite "presence":

i. Token Appointments: Governments and peace facilitators appoint a few elite women to peace panels without community ties. These individuals often lack the mandate to represent grassroots women or challenge male-dominated institutions.
ii. Marginal Positions: Women are asked to serve as rapporteurs, cultural advisors or in observer roles excluded from core negotiations.
iii. No Recognition of Community Knowledge: Peace talks remain state-centric, refusing to incorporate women's traditional knowledge systems such as ritual cleansing, maternal diplomacy or oral reconciliation practices.
iv. Time-Limited Visibility: Women are invited only during ceremonial stages, not during key phases like pre-negotiation, ceasefire drafting or power-sharing debates.

Case Reflections

In Liberia, the movement led by Leymah Gbowee pressured warlords into negotiations, yet women had no seat at the actual Accra negotiation table until they forced their way into the room. In South Africa, women were politically active but were underrepresented in the formal structures of the TRC, and their experiences of gender-based violence were marginalized as "private harms" (Gqola, 2007). In Uganda, women led community healing through Mato Oput but were not included in state-led DDR (Disarmament, Demobilization, Re-integration) planning or resource allocation. This reflects a persistent logic of presence without power, where women's participation is curated for international optics but not structurally embedded.

Many feminist leaders, NGOs, and activists are absorbed into state and donor ecosystems, which redefine their agendas through technocratic procedures; demand data collection, monitoring and compliance metrics over community-led accountability. As Nhengu (2022) explains, Feminist peace networks risk becoming complicit in the very structures they were created to transform. Co-optation takes several forms:

i. Donor dependency, where funding priorities dictate which "feminist" projects get supported.
ii. State appointments of feminist figures to gender commissions, where they become beholden to bureaucratic red tape.
iii. NGO-ization of grassroots movements, replacing organic organizing with grant cycles, proposals and KPIs (key performance indicators).

These creates what Srilatha Batliwala (2007) terms "hollow empowerment," where feminist voices echo within institutions but no longer disturb patriarchal or colonial orders.

Impact on Grassroots Women

a. Traditional peace actors (e.g., Namasole, Sande Council Mothers, Modjadji) are bypassed because they do not fit Western NGO formats.
b. Spiritual diplomacy, rituals and oral justice systems are excluded from formal peacebuilding strategies because they lack quantifiable outcomes.
c. Feminist critiques of land dispossession, militarism and donor hegemony are dulled to ensure continued access to resources.

As Du Plessis (2019) wrote, "When peace becomes a project, it ceases to be a process. African women's peacebuilding is relational, spiritual and messy. Donor frameworks cannot capture that". Hence, we continually see a central paradox in African peacebuilding: women are increasingly visible but structurally invisible. Their roles are often curated, constrained and co-opted within frameworks that favour performance over transformation. Global norms and national policies have emphasized the presence of women, yet they have failed to ensure their power voice and cultural legitimacy. Decolonial feminist analysis demands a shift:

i. From presence to power.
ii. From symbolic roles to structural influence.
iii. From technocratic feminism to epistemic justice.

Only then can African women move from being featured in peacebuilding to actually shaping peace on their own terms.

A Decolonial Feminist Peace Model

Peacebuilding in Africa has often been defined by top-down models, rooted in Western liberal frameworks and global development discourse. These models marginalize the spiritual, communal and indigenous peace mechanisms that have historically sustained African societies and within them, African women's leadership. From the foregoing, this paper has proposed a Decolonial Feminist Peace Model (DFPM) that will restructure peacebuilding from below, re-centring African epistemologies, gendered traditions and indigenous institutions in national and continental policy. This model is not merely oppositional to liberal frameworks; it is constructive, offering policy pathways that formally integrate African women's knowledge systems, validate their leadership and reimagine peace as a cultural, moral and spiritual practice, not just a bureaucratic or legalistic one.

The Decolonial Feminist Peace Model (DFPM) reimagines peacebuilding in Africa by shifting away from externally imposed liberal frameworks and focusing on indigenous, women-led systems. This model is rooted in epistemic justice, communal leadership and cultural legitimacy. Its features includes;

a. Centring on Indigenous Women-Led Institutions: Institutions like the Namasole (Uganda), Sande Council Mothers (Liberia), Modjadji (South Africa) historically exercised spiritual, judicial and diplomatic authority. The DFPM calls for legal and constitutional recognition of these bodies;

reserved representation in peace commissions and traditional councils, as well as, consultative roles in national and AU-level peace processes.

b. Recognizing Oral and Communal Knowledge Systems: Peace in many African societies is sustained through oral storytelling, rituals, symbolic acts and spiritual diplomacy. The DFPM affirms that practices such as ritual cleansing, storytelling and ancestral consultation are valid conflict resolution methods. Women's use of memory, lamentation and communal arbitration should be documented and formally integrated into peace programming.

Conclusion

This study traced the historical, theoretical and empirical dimensions of the role of African women in peacebuilding, highlighting the disjuncture between their practical contributions and formal recognition in policy and governance frameworks. The paper examined global and continental peace instruments such as the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), UNSCR 1325 (2000) and aspiration 6 of the African Union's Agenda 2063; and assessed their effects and limitations in the African context by exposing the disjuncture between global gender frameworks and indigenous African realities. Colonial legacies disrupted traditional gender systems, marginalizing African women's authority in governance, justice and diplomacy. While progress has been made in recognizing women's roles, inclusion often remains symbolic rather than transformative, limited by colonial legacies, liberal peace paradigms and donor-driven policies. Drawing on case studies from Liberia, Uganda and South Africa, the study shows that grassroots women remain powerful agents of peace, yet they are frequently marginalized from formal processes. Their contributions- ritual, spiritual, oral and communal, are sidelined by frameworks that prioritize elite engagement and written policy tools. A key argument throughout this study is that African women are not merely stakeholders in peace, they are epistemic agents. Their peacebuilding traditions predate and often outperform imported models, yet their ways of knowing remain structurally excluded from peace policy. This reflects a deeper form of epistemic injustice, as theorized by Fricker (2007) and extended by Tamale and Santos in decolonial feminist thought. The proposed Decolonial Feminist Peace Model (DFPM) offers a corrective. Decolonizing peace is not about rejecting modern frameworks but redefining peace through African feminist epistemologies. It means restoring the oral, spiritual and communal systems that have long sustained African societies and placing African women not at the margins, but at the moral and political centre of peace.

Recommendations

To address the disconnect between global policy and grassroots realities, this paper proposed a decolonial feminist reorientation of peacebuilding frameworks in Africa. The following actionable recommendations aim to integrate indigenous women's leadership, oral knowledge systems and epistemic justice into national and continental peace structures:

1. Governments and the AU should formally recognize women-led indigenous institutions, such as the Namasole, Sande Council Mothers, Modjadji, Omu, Iyalode, Queen Mothers, among others,

within constitutional and peacebuilding frameworks. These bodies should be granted consultative status in national peace commissions, receive legal protection and budgetary allocations to function effectively and participate in AU structures like the Panel of the Wise and FemWise-Africa.

2. Most National Action Plans (NAPs) on UNSCR 1325 focus narrowly on formal participation. These should be revised to include a section on local peace systems and indigenous knowledge, reflect non-written practices such as storytelling, ritual cleansing and ancestral diplomacy, as well as, be developed through consultation with grassroots women's groups, not just national elites.
3. Donor agencies and states should ensure that a significant share of peacebuilding funds is directed to community-based women's organizations. They should establish low-bureaucracy grant windows that accommodate oral proposals, fund ritual-based, spiritual and communal peace initiatives, not just workshops or trainings and also support women's peace huts, traditional arbitration circles and healing spaces.
4. To preserve and honour oral traditions and peace epistemologies, AU and national actors should establish archives and digital libraries documenting women's rituals, chants and reconciliation practices. Young women should be trained as oral historians and cultural peace educators. And the Women's Peace Knowledge should be integrated into peace education curricula and civic awareness programs.

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