

Performing Peace: How Masculine Norms Shape Negotiation and Undermine Inclusion

2025 Gendered Security Policy Essay Submission

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Introduction

For all their gravitas, peace negotiations are often little more than war by other means – carried out in tailored suits and cloaked in masculine restraint. Behind the formalities and diplomatic choreography lies a performance shaped by power, posturing, and deeply gendered expectations. In most modern peace processes, men dominate not only the room but also the unwritten rules of how negotiation is done.

Much of the existing discourse on gender and peace has rightly emphasized the importance of women's inclusion at the table. But the inclusion alone does not address a deeper problem: the way peace itself is performed through a masculine lens. Drawing on R.W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, this essay defines masculinity not merely as a collection of traits – toughness, intransigence, stoicism – but as a system organized through domination: domination of women, of other men, and of those perceived as subordinate.¹ In the context of conflict and diplomacy, this logic becomes especially pronounced, as strength is equated with control, and cooperation is dismissed as weakness. These norms are not gender-neutral; they reward behaviors that prioritize victory over resolution and hierarchy over healing.

To meaningfully integrate gender into peace processes, we must go beyond who is present and interrogate how masculine-coded behaviors shape negotiation dynamics, marginalize key issues, and limit strategic imagination.

Masculinity in Peace Negotiations

Peace negotiations are framed as rational and pragmatic, but they're also deeply performative – and the performance is often masculine. In this context, masculinity doesn't just refer to men as participants, but to a set of behaviors, norms, and values that signal credibility and authority in high-stakes diplomatic settings. These include the general vernacular, but more so emotional restraint, assertiveness, hierarchical thinking, and a tendency toward zero-sum logic – all traits frequently valorized in negotiation but rarely acknowledged as gendered.²

Political Scientists and feminist scholars have long pointed to the concept of hegemonic masculinity – the dominant form of masculinity that legitimizes male authority by associating it with control, toughness, and rationality.³ But at its core, hegemonic masculinity is structured around domination: over women, over other men, and over perceived “weaker” ideas, behaviors, and actors.⁴ In conflict negotiations, this logic translates into a preference for confrontation over dialogue, control over collaboration, and power over empathy. The result is a style of leadership wherein refusing to concede is seen as strength, and relational approaches are sidelined as naïve or unserious.

Hegemonic masculinity also operates through self-perception. Leaders don't simply act dominant – they seek to be seen as dominant. In this way, masculinity becomes both a personal identity and a political currency. As Bayard de Volo shows in her analysis of the Cuban Missile Crisis, certain diplomatic

¹ R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, (2005) “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender & Society*, Vol. 19 No. 6 pp. 829-859 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27640853>

² Cohn, Carol (Summer, 1987). “Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals.” *Within and Without: Women, Gender, and Theory*, Vol. 12 No. 4 pp. 687-718 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3174209>

³ R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, (2005) “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender & Society*, Vol. 19 No. 6 pp. 829-859 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27640853>

⁴ Ibid

strategies – such as negotiation, compromise, or even hesitation – are coded as feminine and therefore politically risky for male leaders to adopt.⁵ The pressure to maintain an image of “strong man” leadership, discourages flexibility and narrows the strategic foresight. This is especially dangerous in peace processes, where credibility is often measured not by one’s capacity for inclusion, but by one’s ability to command, resist, and appear unyielding.

The structures of most peace processes further reinforce this performance. Closed-door negotiations, elite-only participation, and rigid formalities create an environment that privileges elite men – who are often former military commanders, political strongmen, or factional leaders – over grassroots voices or alternative models of peacemaking. In many cases, this masculine-coded environment actively discourages relational or community-centered approaches to dialogue, framing them as soft.

These dynamics are rarely named but have real consequences. When masculine norms dominate the process, topics like sexual violence, education, healthcare, or post-conflict trauma – issues often championed by women’s groups and civil society – are sidelined.⁶ The tone becomes adversarial rather than collaborative, and the resulting agreements tend to reflect the interest of powerholders rather than the broader population. In short, masculine norms don’t just shape how peace is negotiated – they shape what kind of peace is possible.

Consequences of Masculine Norms

Masculine-coded behaviors don’t just distort negotiation rooms – they shape the entire arc of the peace process. During armed conflict, hegemonic masculinity rewards escalation, and domination, delaying dialogue. In negotiations, performative toughness narrows the vision for resolution. And in post-conflict phases, male-dominated governance structures often replicate the hierarchies that fueled violence in the first place. These behaviors do more than shape who gets to speak – they shape what is on the agenda, how compromise is defined, and which forms of harm are considered legitimate. The result is a vision of peace that often prioritizes order over justice, elite bargains over inclusive governance, and short-term political stability over long-term social transformation.

Adversarial, zero-sum approaches to negotiation tend to marginalize relational and community-centered forms of peacebuilding. Topics such as conflict-related sexual violence, trauma healing, education, and health care – often raised by civil society and women’s groups – are depolarized as “non-core” issues.⁷ In Colombia, for example, while the 2016 peace agreement was hailed for its gender sub-commission, key issues like rural land rights and gender-based violence were initially treated as peripheral, only included after sustained pressure from women’s coalitions such as Ruta Pacifica, the Red Nacional de Mujeres, and Coalicion 1325 Colombia.⁸ Similarly in Sudan, peace deals have consistently elevated armed actors

⁵ Lorraine Bayard de Volo, Masculinity and the Cuban Missile Crisis: gender as pre-emptive deterrent, *International Affairs*, Volume 98, Issue 4, July 2022, Pages 1211–1229, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iia121>

⁶ Buchanan, C & UN Women (2022) Guidance Note: Gender-Responsive Conflict Analysis, *UN Women Afghanistan* https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/ap-UN-Women-AFG_Gender-responsive-conflict-analysis-en.pdf

⁷ United Nations Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on Women, Peace and Security*, S/2022/740, October 2022. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S-2022-740.pdf>

⁸ Council on Foreign Relations (December 15, 2017) Women’s Participation in Peace Processes: Colombia <https://www.cfr.org/blog/womens-participation-peace-processes-colombia>

into formal political roles (i.e., the Sudan Revolutionary Front, and the Sudan Liberation Movement) while sidelining grassroots women's networks that had been central to de-escalation – including the Peace for Sudan Platform, (PSD) the Women Against War Network, (WAAR) the Cease Fire Initiative of Darfur, (CFID) and the Mothers of Sudan Network, (MOSN). During the negotiations leading up to the JUBA Peace Agreement in 2020, women's participation was marginal at best as they were blatantly excluded from the formal peace process.⁹ These omissions are not incidental – they are the product of negotiation spaces shaped by masculinized values of control, hierarchy, and perceived strength.

In many cases, the very traits that helped male elites rise through violent systems are carried directly into the peace process, where they become tools of negotiation rather than objects of reform.

Ultimately, by failing to interrogate masculinity as a driver of both conflict and its resolution, peace processes risk reproducing the very conditions that made war possible in the first place.

Policy Recommendations

To produce durable and inclusive peace, negotiation processes must not only diversify who is at the table, but also reform how the table is structured and what is allowed on the agenda. This section outlines concrete reforms for mediators, policymakers, and practitioners to dismantle the dominance of hegemonic masculinity and reimagine peace as a collaborative, inclusive, and sustainable project.

A. Reform Mediator Training and Process Design

Train mediators to recognize masculine-coded behavior.

International mediators should receive training that addresses how hegemonic masculinity shapes negotiation styles. Behaviors like posturing, emotional detachment, and dominance are often misread as strength. Training should emphasize relational credibility, consensus building, and flexibility – qualities frequently devalued as “feminine” but essential for long-term success.

Redesign agenda-setting to include marginalized, everyday peace issues.

External actors must support processes that do more than invite women to the table – they must also elevate issues male actors often overlook; conflict-related sexual violence, care infrastructure, land and inheritance rights, and trauma healing. These aren't peripheral concerns; they're foundational to legitimacy and sustainability. Agenda-setting must be participatory, with civil society input from the outset, not as afterthoughts.

B. Addressing the Limits of Combat-led Negotiations

Identify and compensate for gendered blind spots.

Combatant negotiators – overwhelmingly male – often frame peace in narrow security or political terms, sidelining everyday needs like economic recovery, social cohesion, or survivors' justice. Left out of agreements, these omissions fuel resentment and recurrence. Mediators and

⁹ UN Woman, September 2024, *A Review of Women's Engagement in Peace Processes in Ethiopia, South Sudan, Sudan & Uganda: Good Practices and Lessons Learned*. UN Women Africa.

[https://africa.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-](https://africa.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/gender_review_of_peace_processes_in_ethiopia_south_sudan_sudan_and_uganda-web.pdf)

[09/gender_review_of_peace_processes_in_ethiopia_south_sudan_sudan_and_uganda-web.pdf](https://africa.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/gender_review_of_peace_processes_in_ethiopia_south_sudan_sudan_and_uganda-web.pdf)

observers should proactively map which critical issues are missing from combatant proposals – and adjust the process to fill those gaps.

Pair elite negotiations with grassroots consultations.

When combatants dominate formal talks, parallel consultation tracks should be institutionalized. Women's organizations, community leaders, and affected civilians must have dedicated channels to influence agreements. These grassroots tracks feed into the main process with real weight – not symbolic listening sessions.

Conclusion

The success of a peace process cannot be measured solely by the signatures on an agreement or the silence of guns. It must also be judged by the depth of inclusion, the legitimacy of its outcomes, and the sustainability of its implementation. When negotiation remains dominated by masculine norms, it risks replicating the very conditions that made war possible in the first place.

Hegemonic masculinity is not a backdrop to peace processes – it's a shaping force that narrows strategic options, sidelines essential issues, and rewards behavior that undermines trust and collaboration. It affects not only how negotiations are conducted, but what kind of peace is ultimately designed. Masculine-coded norms are not neutral. They are political and performative. As long as leadership is equated with control and compromise is framed as weakness, peace will remain fragile.

A gender-inclusive peace is not just more just – it's more strategic. By centering women's participation, challenging masculine-coded behavior, and broadening the agenda beyond elite bargains, peace becomes a shared project – not a settlement imposed through power, but a future built through partnership.