

Networks for Peace

Locally Led Capacity Strengthening Toward Gender Equality and Social Inclusion in Women, Peace and Security Programming

Funding provided by:
United States Agency for International Development
Cooperative Agreement No. AID-72048619CA00001

“This white paper is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the responsibility of FHI 360 and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.”



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



Background

As global inequality increases, social cohesion falters, and crises proliferate (with 80% of USAID Missions located in countries experiencing conflict)¹, the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda is inextricably linked to locally led development efforts. This is reflected in the integration of WPS considerations across USAID bureaus and initiatives.² However, while donor efforts to mainstream gender in peacebuilding include training for local partners, these trainings often fail to generate the changes to attitudes, behaviors, and institutional practices required for sustainability.

Networks for Peace

Networks for Peace (2019-2024) is regional program designed to foster collective engagement across Asia and support communities and organizations to promote intra- and interfaith harmony in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR), and the Tibetan community in exile in India. Issued under the Strengthening Civil Society Globally (SCS Global) Leader with Associates Award, Networks for Peace is implemented by FHI 360 and overseen by the United States Agency for International Development's Regional Development Mission for Asia (USAID/RDMA).

Amidst efforts to ensure that peacebuilding efforts are equitable, inclusive, and locally driven, there is a need for capacity strengthening approaches that recognize the roles of intersectional identities and systematic power dynamics and aim for long-term sustainability. Though this will require additional investments in time and resources beyond short-term trainings and superficial indicators of inclusion, such an approach will generate a positive return on investment and contribute toward a more inclusive, peaceful world. The USAID -funded *Networks for Peace* project provides a case study on how long-term, locally led approaches can strengthen local actors to institutionalize GESI considerations into their work, resulting in long-term improvements in the involvement of women and marginalized people in peacebuilding, and ultimately more effective peacebuilding efforts in Asia.

Challenges with Traditional Capacity Strengthening Models

Donor-funded capacity strengthening in gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) too often use approaches that are seen as top-down, driven by foreign agendas, and fail to generate sustained change.³ Local NGOs report facing never-ending, fragmented capacity-strengthening interventions that feel paternalistic and donor-driven.⁴ Gender and inclusion trainings import jargon that registers as “foreign” or “western” that may not even be translated into local

¹ USAID. (2023b). Conflict Prevention and Stabilization. Retrieved from: <https://www.usaid.gov/conflict-prevention-stabilization>.

² USAID. (2019). WPS Implementation Plan. Retrieved from <https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2023-02/2020-USAID-Women-Peace-and-Security-Implementation-Plan.pdf>

³ Funk, N. and Abdul Aziz Said. (2010). "Localizing Peace: An Agenda for Sustainable Peacebuilding," *Peace and Conflict Studies*: Vol. 17: No. 1 , Article 4. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1113&context=pcs>

⁴ Mollett, H. and Donk, L. (2021). “Capacity-strengthening and localisation: perspectives from CAFOD and its local partners.” *Humanitarian Exchange*, Issue 79.

languages. At worst, these efforts can put peacebuilders at risk, with actors support anti-rights movements justifying anti-feminist actions by assailing them as colonialist.⁵

Too often, GESI capacity strengthening focuses on quotas rather than transformative change. NGO practitioners interviewed by *Networks for Peace* reported that GESI capacity strengthening efforts in their contexts were often reduced to “box-checking” exercises and quotas for female participation rather than aiming to transform inequitable norms and power structures.⁶ *Networks for Peace* interview participants identified quota requirements as tokenistic rather than fostering meaningful inclusion, where individuals perspectives, experiences and unique issues are considered, valued and respected. As one participant explained, “Just because there are women in the room doesn’t mean that they’re the right women, or that they will speak up and defend the right of women to participate.” Quotas do not reflect the quality of participation: the women counted as participating in an activity might be making coffee rather than decisions. Finally, quotas, usually focused on gender, fail to account for other marginalized identities, including ethnoreligious minorities, people with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics, and others.

Training on gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) for local partners use traditional knowledge delivery approaches based on a set curriculum rather than responding to long-term partner needs. These approaches rely on experts to deliver knowledge to participants rather than creating a space for them to learn through their experiences. By failing to support participants to link content to their own experiences and recognize that they are affected by the structural inequalities, these approaches miss the opportunity to reinforce commitment to change. Traditional models tend to be short-term and project-specific, without considering that partner organizations will continue their work beyond a specific project. Finally, these models often use a standardized curriculum or training program that does not consider the local context, culture, needs, workload and existing resources and capacity of the participants.

Effective Approaches for Inclusive Peacebuilding

To be sustainable, GESI capacity strengthening must be locally led. Efforts to promote equity and inclusion must be rooted in clear understanding of the dynamics of power. USAID’s Local Capacity Strengthening policy acknowledges the prevalence of “power-over” relationships between donors and local partners.⁷ In its place, INGOs and their partners should establish ways of power sharing. For INGOs, this requires relinquishing decision-making and leaning into trust. The *Networks for Peace* experience shows that when partners recognize inclusion as central to reaching their goals as peacebuilders, they will prioritize efforts to improve inclusion within their organizations and their work in communities. Power sharing starts with the design process, where partners should actively co-design activities before they begin. This design should feature capacity strengthening, and all its associated costs, as inherent to the project itself and built into

⁵ <https://odi.org/en/insights/lessons-on-backlash-from-women-deliver-tackling-the-enemy-in-the-room/>

⁶ Moret, W. (2020). *Networks for Peace Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Analysis*.

⁷ Gaventa, John. “Finding the spaces for change: A power analysis.”

IDS Bulletin 37, no. 6, (November 2006): 23–33.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2006.tb00320.x>. As cited in USAID. (2023a).

the budget. Flexible budget mechanisms, including capacity strengthening funds that partners can tap into based on self-identified goals, are crucial.

To ensure that women and marginalized groups benefit from and meaningfully participate in peacebuilding activities, INGOs must use intersectional approaches. In addition to conducting an analysis of power dynamics in implementation contexts, reflecting the realities of women and targeted marginalized groups, INGOs can support local partners to conduct their own GESI analyses. This helps partners internalize their understanding of power dynamics and how they apply to their work. To support relationships that extend beyond the life of a project, INGOs can link local partners to identity-based groups, or those civil society groups representing women and members of marginalized groups. Identity-based groups can provide consultation to peacebuilding organizations on how to make their activities more inclusive and foster strategic engagement post-project.

Finally, capacity strengthening initiatives should strive for transformation. Implementing partner staff must individually internalize GESI concepts to take leadership in institutionalizing inclusive organizational practices. Capacity strengthening work should be carried out by local experts and tailored to partner needs rather than relying in a fixed curriculum. This requires the careful translation and contextualization of GESI terminology, which will otherwise come across as jargonistic. Changes in practices and policies can sometimes be quantified, but to avoid quota-driven metrics (e.g., “counting women”), and to ensure responsiveness to partner needs, success should be measured by indicators of sustainable change and monitored using qualitative, participatory approaches.

Examples in Practice: The *Networks for Peace* Model

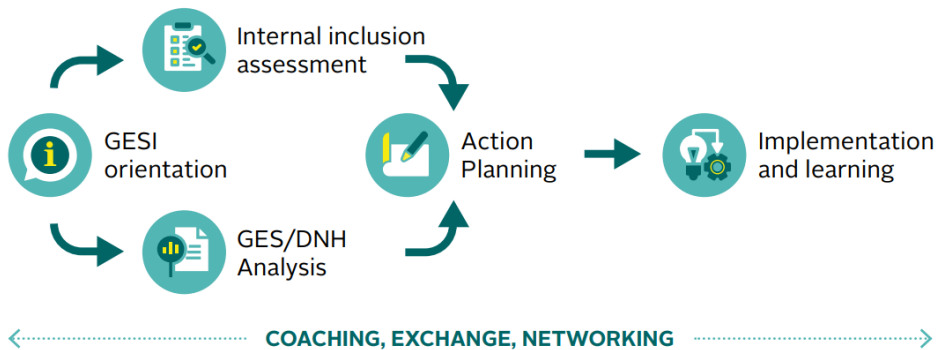
Overview of Approach

Networks for Peace's GESI approach was developed based on findings from a GESI analysis conducted at inception, which informed a Gender and Inclusive Development Action Plan (GIDAP). This structure allowed *Networks for Peace* to adapt support and allocate resources based on partners' needs, interests, and capacities. The project's partner capacity strengthening approach is operationalized through four core training workshops, including:

- **GESI Orientation:** A GESI Orientation is held during the work-planning phase to help partners understand the *Networks for Peace* approach and to share their own. The Orientation covers concepts, definitions, and approaches to GESI integration.
- **Organizational Self-Assessment:** The Inclusion Capacity Assessment Tool (ICAT) facilitates an exercise that allows partners to self-assess different domains of inclusion, both internally and in their external activities. Partners identify priority areas for action and possible capacity building needs. Action items become part of the Action Plan.
- **GESI Analysis:** The GESI Analysis is an opportunity for partners to conduct primary action research to better understand the inclusion needs of their participants. It focuses on areas of inequity related to project activities and considers the role of intersecting identities, including gender, in power relations.

- **Action-Planning:** Partners articulate and prioritize action items based on the Inclusion CAT and GESI analysis processes in a GESI Action Plan. *Networks for Peace* staff monitor and support the partner’s progress on action items. Funding from partner grants and an additional Gender Action Fund support the implementation of action items, though some items may not require funding or could be funded through the partner organization.

THE NFP GESI PROCESS



How Networks for Peace Facilitates Locally Led Capacity Strengthening

The Networks for Peace approach is committed to putting local partners in the lead.

- **Partners co-design grants with the project to incorporate GESI capacity strengthening activities**, all of which are funded. As partners implement action items from their GESI Action Plans, they can access additional funds through a dedicated Gender Action Fund. The project accommodates partners that require more rigid contract and budgeting mechanisms by paying for additional GESI-related activities in-kind or issuing follow-on grants incorporating action items.
- **Partners conduct their own GESI analyses using a methodology of their choosing.** *Networks for Peace* supports partners to prepare actionable recommendations based on this analysis, through which they can explore their operating context and consult with identity-based organizations. The methodology used is determined by the partner’s capacity and appetite for research – it can range from a simple panel interview with representatives from identity-based groups to formal research studies using focus groups, surveys, and in-depth interviews.
- **Partners define their own priorities for GESI action items**, which are assessed through regular check-ins with project staff. Partners are encouraged to set goals that are achievable and realistic within the project period rather than identifying a certain quantity of action items.
- **All workshops are tailored to individual partner needs** and facilitated by local experts. Some partners came into the process with a sophisticated understanding of GESI and well-established practices, while others were unfamiliar with basic concepts, and core workshops are adapted accordingly.

- **Partners knowledge is shared and amplified.** *Networks for Peace* recognizes its partners as peacebuilding experts and uses appreciative approaches to facilitate learning and exchange between partners and with project staff.

The *Networks for Peace* model is grounded in intersectional power analysis.

- **Partners analyze power in their own contexts, with a focus on practical application to grant activities.** *Networks for Peace* supports partners to conduct their own intersectional GESI analyses. One of the major outputs of these analyses is the establishment of relationships with identity-based groups who can provide ongoing consultation and strategic engagement with partner activities.
- **Institutional Capacity Assessments engage partners to critically reflect on internal power dynamics within their organizations.** The ICAT exercise engages staff members with diverse identities, including those of various ages, seniority levels, genders, and ethnicities, to weigh in on internal dynamics in a safe space, giving rise to new insights for organizational leaders and implications for organizational change. Unlike organizational capacity assessments that quantify capacity levels as a score, the ICAT functions as a discussion and decision-making tool to help organizations prioritize capacity strengthening needs and action items.

The *Networks for Peace* aims for transformation at three levels: personal transformation, changes to project interventions, and shifts in organizational policies and practices.

- **All workshops use experiential learning and critical self-reflection.** Workshops are paced to provide sufficient time for participants to reflect on and internalize GESI concepts, which can be emotionally challenging, and allow facilitators to adapt content to that which is most relevant to partner needs. Facilitators create safe spaces for participants to confront difficult topics without rushing through rigid agendas.
- **GESI concepts are localized.** Facilitators take time to translate GESI terms into local languages. One-to-one translation of GESI terms is rarely accurate, so translation must involve describing concepts in contextually-appropriate ways. This is crucial to supporting participants to internalize concepts.
- **Project staff model GESI concepts in their own work.** The project team participates in GESI capacity strengthening activities and internal GESI pause and reflect activities to ensure that *Networks for Peace* models equity and inclusion at the project level, beyond reaching targets for performance indicators, including how project staff relate to one another as well as partners.
- **Strong monitoring is used to assess progress, including qualitative and quantitative approaches.** Progress on ICATs and GESI Action Plans are regularly reviewed with partners. Additionally, partners receive coaching and mentoring support from project GESI staff.
- **Cultivate a dedicated group of GESI champions and promote their leadership.** We work with partners to identify individuals who play a vital leadership role in promoting gender equality and social inclusion within their organization and community.

Resource Requirements

A robust, locally led GESI approach is very time-intensive and requires significant investments in resources. Project teams and partners must have strong buy-in to the process and be prepared to commit a major portion of their activities to GESI. Below is a breakdown of key cost considerations.

Prime Partner Resource Requirements

Table 1. Prime Resource Requirements

Requirement	Details
GESI Analysis	It is recommended to budget \$20,000-50,000 for a GESI analysis in the first year of a five-year project that is \$10M in value.
Translation and Interpretation	Depending on where the project is being implemented, translation and interpretation support may be necessary. It is crucial that all workshop activities are held in local languages that participants can engage in. It is also important that workshop materials are carefully translated in advance of trainings, especially more technical GESI terms that are not commonly used outside of donor settings.
Staffing	<p><i>Networks for Peace</i> project GESI staff include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An HQ-based GESI Advisor (15-50% LOE): Responsible for carrying out the GESI analysis, developing the GIDAP, and leading the co-creation of activities specific to GESI or Women, Peace, and Security (WPS). Provides technical backstopping to a local GESI Advisor. This position is most important at the beginning of a project, after which LOE tapers off as activities shift during implementation. • A local GESI Advisor (100% LOE): Responsible for overseeing implementation of the GIDAP, coordinating with field team members on GESI activities, and providing technical assistance to partners. • GESI Champions (100 days/year): Local consultants with deep expertise, strong networks, and credible reputations in GESI and peacebuilding. Responsible for designing and carrying out core training workshops. • Country Coordinators (100% LOE, with about 15% dedicated to GESI): <i>Networks for Peace</i> is a regional activity based on Bangkok, with Country Coordinators (CCs) working directly with partners based on Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. CCs are the primary points of contact for and provide overall support to partners throughout the grant process, including monitoring and logistical support related to GESI. Additional time may be required for similar positions if staff have limited familiarity with GESI and require significant capacity strengthening.

Local Partner Resource Requirements

It is important for each partner to appoint a GESI focal person responsible for guiding the rollout of the GESI process and ensuring GESI integration in grant activities. This person may or may not be the project lead, but s/he should attend all required workshops to ensure that the organization has at least one consistent participant and reference point for workshop-related information. Otherwise, workshops should include, at minimum, a project lead and any key technical staff. For the GESI Orientation and organizational self-assessment, it is encouraged that a broad cross-section of partner staff, including those at various levels of seniority and with diverse responsibilities, are included.

Table 2. Partner LOE Requirements

Activity	Description	LOE Required
GESI orientation		
Orientation Workshop	Virtual: Three 3-hr sessions for GESI concepts In-Person: One day workshop, including tools overview below	8-9 hrs x <i>n</i> team members
Tools Overview	Virtual: One 2-hr session introducing tools	2 hrs x <i>n</i> team members
Internal Capacity Assessment		
Inclusion Capacity Assessment (ICAT) Workshop	Virtual: One 3-hr session completing Inclusion CAT In-Person: One half-day session	3-4 hrs x <i>n</i> team members
GESI Analysis		
GESI Analysis Training Workshop	Virtual: 2 three-hour sessions In-Person: One-day workshop	6-8 hrs x <i>n</i> team members
Interview guide development		4 hrs
Data collection	Depends – can range from a simple panel, a few interviews, to FGDs etc.	1-5 days
Draft write-up		4 days
Final write-up		1 day
Action-Planning		
GESI Data Analysis and Action Plan Workshop	Virtual: 2 three-hour sessions In-Person: One-day workshop	6-8 hrs x <i>n</i> team members
GESI Coaching		

GESI support	Project lead meets with GESI Advisor every two weeks to review Action Plan progress	6 days
Total		19-56 days (for 2-10 staff)

Networks for Peace's experience has demonstrated the importance of in-person engagement to foster trust and ensure meaningful interactions throughout the training workshops. As such, it is important to budget adequately for partners to be able to participate in person, considering relevant travel, catering, and venue costs.

Beyond workshops, exchange and networking between partners is central to *Networks for Peace*'s capacity-strengthening strategy. Additional in-person learning and networking activities should be considered as part of the project budget.

Flexible Activity Funding

Networks for Peace intentionally set aside flexible funding to ensure that GESI activities could be programmed in response to individual partner needs. All GESI capacity strengthening and initiatives flowing out of the action-planning exercise are funded by *Networks for Peace*. For *Networks for Peace* grants, this includes a blanket line item of at least \$5,000 for each grant to use as needed to roll out GESI Action Plans.

Additionally, partners have access to a larger pool of funding known as the Gender Action Fund (GAF) to put in place more ambitious initiatives. The GAF was added to the overall project budget to resource grant modifications or Other Direct Costs (ODCs) related to GESI. The GAF has been used to fund activities ranging additional workshops for partners to dive deeper into GESI-related topics to further advance their grant objectives to large-scale modifications expanding the objectives of grant activities to further enhance gender and social inclusion.

Return on Investment

In a survey of partners on their experience with *Networks for Peace*'s GESI capacity-strengthening process:

- 100% reported that the GESI Orientation improved their understanding of GESI, with 80% finding it relevant to their work.
- 100% considered it important to conduct a GESI analysis when designing project activities.
- 93.3% reported improvements in their GESI analysis skills and knowledge.
- 80% considered the ICAT to be a useful tool for their organizations.
- 80% reported using inclusive approaches to prioritize GESI Action Plan activities.
- 73.3% were able to connect GESI concepts to their personal or professional lives.
- 73.3% reported being able to explain how GESI action items link to the organization's overall peacebuilding goals.

"I thought that it was sufficient to ensure our organization had no discriminatory practices, but after the last session, I realized we can still do more to improve diversity and inclusion in our organization."

- Networks for Peace partner

As of the fourth year of the project, results are evident across the following domains.

Individual transformation: Representatives from partner organizations shared that they had gained greater awareness and knowledge of GESI concepts and demonstrated interest in learning more about GESI. *Networks for Peace* staff noticed that partner staff began questioning social norms more frequently and asking how they could improve, signaling changes at the individual level.

Organizational policies and practices: Based on ICAT findings, *Networks for Peace* partners all set goals relevant to inclusive policies and practices at the organizational level. Some examples of achieving these goals include:

- Trends Digital, a private tech company that worked on combatting dangerous speech online through their grant with *Networks for Peace*, updated their HR policies to be more inclusive, adding gender-sensitive language and equal opportunity statement to job postings.
- The International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) developed new policies around child safeguarding, gender equality, and preventing sexual exploitation and abuse.
- Burma Monitor, a nonprofit that combats hate speech and misinformation online, updated their recruitment practices to better reach ethnic minorities.
- Saya Foundation, changed their organizational vision statement from “to provide quality education and meaningful support for schools, learning environment and children in Myanmar” to “towards equitable society through safe and inclusive education” in the strategic planning workshop supported by *Networks for Peace*.

Engagements with identity-based groups: All partners were encouraged to engage with identity-based groups (and provided a list of contacts) as part of their GESI analyses. Trends Digital has engaged with members of these groups to gain their perspectives on dangerous speech and to inform their social behavior change approach. Hashtag Generation, which uses social and new media to catalyze dialogue on important social issues, has developed new approaches to share content to marginalized groups and people with disabilities.

Programmatic activities: With project support, partners have mainstreamed GESI throughout their grant activities. In some cases, enhanced GESI interest and capacity have driven dramatic changes during grant activities.

- ***Strengthening the leadership capacity of female religious leaders:*** Kalyana Mitta Development Foundation (KMF), a youth empowerment and social change organization that facilitates interfaith dialogue, held a series of training activities for female religious leaders to support them to better assume leadership roles in community development initiatives. These dialogues featured reflections on the “power-over” culture in the clergy and built trust between Buddhist nuns to examine the potential for shifting toward power-sharing in their own lives.
- ***LGBTQIA+-inclusive interfaith engagement:*** Under their grant focused on inter and intrafaith dialogue, INEB held a series of learning missions featuring workshops, trainings, and field visits for religious leaders. With support from *Networks for Peace*, INEB held a learning mission that aimed to create a safe and inclusive space for LGBTQIA+ advocates and laypersons to actively engage in their activities, marking the first time in their 30-year history that INEB intentionally engaged with the LGBTQIA+ community. As a result of the mission, some male peacebuilders have begun highlighting

the importance of amplifying female clergy voices and of engaging with marginalized groups in their respective communities.

- ***Integrating diversity and social inclusion concepts into children’s books, and empowering women fellows to take an active role in interfaith work:*** All Saya staff, including members from the finance and administration units, attended *Networks for Peace’s* GESI activities. Based on staff reflections, attendance at the *Networks for Peace* GESI analysis workshop contributed to dispelling staffs’ misconceptions and bias against gender and sexual minorities. More importantly, Saya staff have applied their learning when they incorporated inclusive concepts in developing key teaching and learning materials and in rolling these out to participating faith-based teachers. Training modules for teachers, for example, incorporated concepts on expressing self-identities, privilege, power analysis, and trauma healing.

Conclusion

The *Networks for Peace* GESI approach exemplifies how strong investments in locally led capacity strengthening address key constraints in traditional INGO-led approaches to generate results that far exceed the life of a donor-funded project. It is recommended that USAID consider funding similarly comprehensive approaches as part of the implementation of the Local Capacity Strengthening policy and Women, Peace, and Security Implementation Plan. Although this approach emerges from the Democracy, Rights, and Governance (DRG) sector, it holds relevance for projects across sectors. Additional information on this model, including key concepts and tools used by *Networks for Peace*, can be found in the [Networks for Peace GESI Toolkit](#).