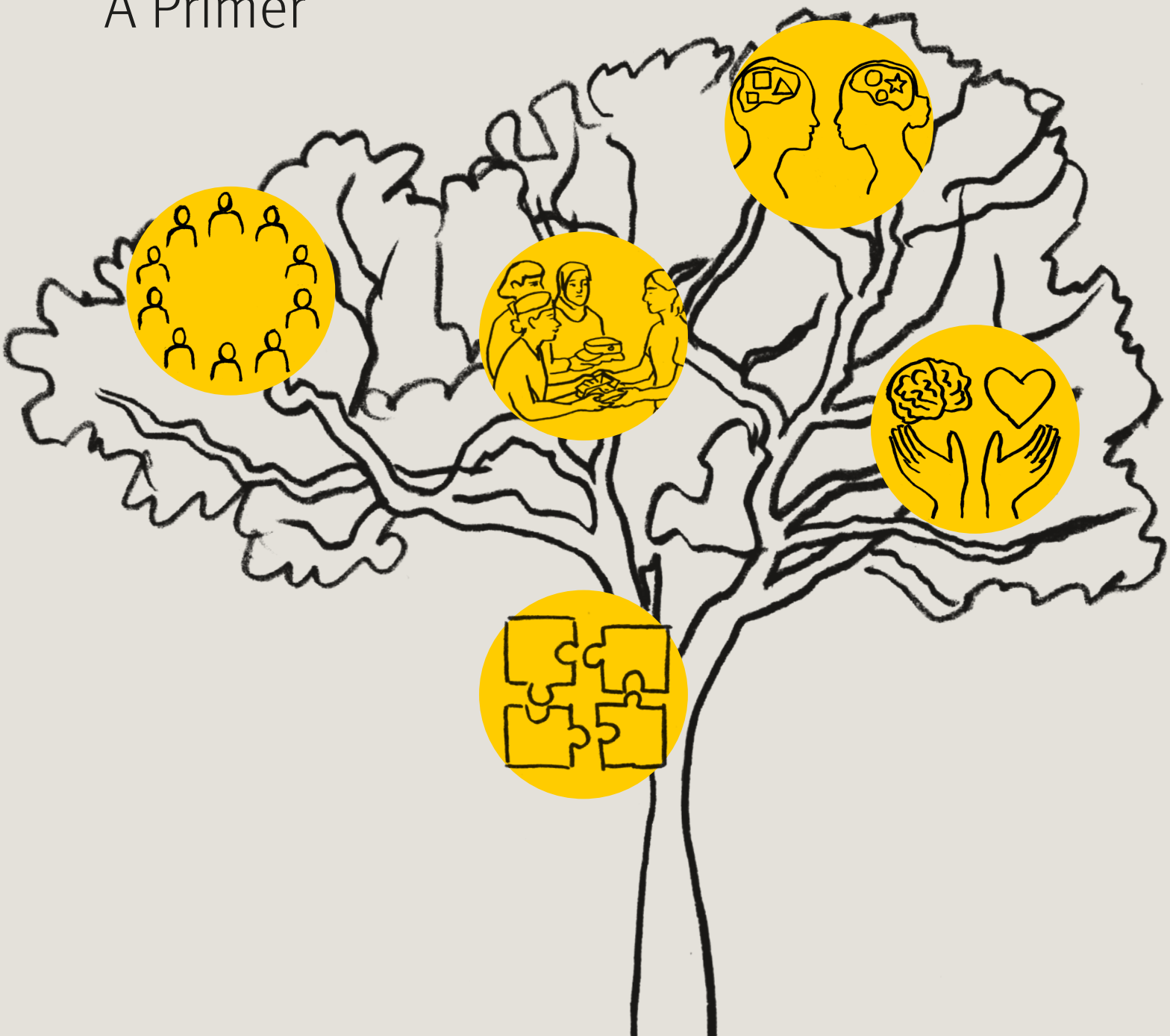
Berghof Foundation

ENGENDERING POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION

Gender-responsive support on the political participation of ex-combatants

A Primer



About this Primer

This Primer offers guidance to DDR practitioners, peacebuilding actors, and international partners on how to support gender-responsive political transformation during or outside of DDR processes. It underscores the urgent need to move beyond narrow interpretations of reintegration that focus solely on livelihoods or security, and instead recognize political participation as a core dimension of sustainable peace. Drawing on lessons from direct practical engagement in various contexts, the Primer highlights how women, men, and gender-diverse individuals associated with (former) armed groups often face distinct gendered challenges and opportunities when transitioning into political life. In particular, it emphasizes the importance of addressing entrenched patriarchal norms and ensuring that gender-responsive approaches are embedded across all phases of DDR and political transformation. The Primer aims to equip practitioners with concrete tools to foster equitable, safe, and meaningful political participation for all ex-combatants.

Design & Illustration: AMBERPRESS, Katja Koeberlin, Gosia Warrink

Published by

Berghof Foundation

UN

Supported by

Federal Foreign Office

© 2025. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Political transformation is a critical yet often overlooked component of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) processes. Too often, DDR narrowly focuses on economic livelihood or security concerns, neglecting the political exclusion that can fuel conflict in the first place. Therefore, enabling ex-combatants to become agents of peaceful change, through political parties, civil society or community leadership, is essential to building inclusive and sustainable peace.

Who gets to participate in politics, whose voices are heard, and who benefits from post-war reforms are questions shaped by deeply entrenched patriarchal power structures. These dynamics are often reproduced within non-state armed groups (NSAGs), both in wartime and during DDR processes. Women, girls, and LGBTQ+ persons are frequently excluded from formal political processes and influential positions, while cis-men are often socialized into dominant, militarized masculinities.

Across the globe, women have taken active roles in NSAGs, often comprising up to 40% of membership. Depending on the nature of the conflict and societal structures in which these groups operate, women may be enrolled as fighters, messengers, recruiters, nurses, cooks, cleaners, or wives. Women, just like all members of armed groups, join for diverse reasons. Whether driven by ideology, protection, economic hardship or aspirations for equality, many women join these groups in search of agency and rights. Indeed, they may see NSAG membership as an opportunity to access greater responsibilities and status, both within the armed group and in their community. That is especially the case when such groups advance claims seeking to overcome traditional patriarchal norms and structures. Nevertheless, following peace agreements and demobilization, women ex-combatants who aspire to political careers typically face cultural, economic, and institutional blockages limiting their access to formal political and decision-making positions.

Without actively addressing these dynamics, DDR programs and other post-war support schemes for ex-combatants and their surrounding communities risk perpetuating exclusionary gender norms which relegate women and other marginalized groups to subordinate and gender-stereotypical roles in society. IDDRS Module 5.10 of the United Nations Integrated DDR Standards (IDDRS) offers guidelines for designing and implementing DDR programs that take into consideration the gendered roles and needs of ex-combatants, for instance by ensuring the representation of women's interests at the peace negotiation table and recognizing the eligibility of women for DDR, even if they have not played active combat roles. While this is an essential starting point for any DDR effort, it is equally important to pay attention to the risks of marginalization of women and gender-diverse groups during the political transformation of former NSAGs.

This Primer outlines practical approaches for recognizing and enabling gender-responsive political transformation during or outside formal DDR processes, by addressing the diversified needs of women and men (formerly) associated with armed groups in transitioning to peaceful political life.

Example: Challenges and opportunities for political participation in Colombia

Following the 2016 Havana Peace Agreement, Colombia's peace process included unprecedented gender provisions. Yet many women ex-combatants from the FARC-EP were sidelined during implementation. DDR programs frequently offered stereotypically "feminine" training, such as sewing, instead of political capacity-building or leadership support. Structural barriers also limited women's participation in formal party politics. For instance, some parties placed women at the bottom of electoral lists simply to meet the 30 percent legal quota, reducing their chances of being elected and effectively prioritizing male candidates. In addition, women often lacked institutional backing and equal access to campaign financing, further weakening their prospects.

In response, many women organized through informal networks such as the National Platform of Popular Women for Peace and Territory. Rooted in feminist and intersectional principles, these alliances created alternative spaces to voice demands, influence policy, and sustain social activism. While formal political entry remained constrained, collective action allowed women to continue their struggle for visibility and representation (Sandino Simanca Herrera 2024).

Options for gender-responsive programming in political transformation

WHO?

This Primer focuses on the political transformation of **women and men exiting armed conflict**, recognizing their rights and interests in participating in post-conflict governance. Most transitions "from bullets to ballots" – or from armed to peaceful politics – occur without external assistance, driven by the agency of former combatants, both individually and collectively.

The guidance provided here is primarily aimed at **external actors involved in supporting such transitions**, either during or outside of DDR programs. These include relevant teams within national DDR commissions, as well as DDR staff or political affairs officers within intergovernmental agencies (e.g., UN, AU, EU), mediators, peace support missions, and non-governmental actors such as democracy support (I)NGOs.

National stakeholders in the transitional context must also be engaged for their expertise or as allies in supporting a gender-responsive transition, in order to avoid spoilers, gatekeeping, duplication, and competition in support efforts. These include **women's rights organizations and feminist activists**, who should be consulted in program design. They can offer context-specific insight into gendered power dynamics, social roles, and political aspirations. These civil society organizations can also support advocacy at the domestic political level and act as watchdogs to monitor agreement breaches, injustices, and threats to women and other marginalized groups throughout their political engagement.

In addition to civil society, the **media** can play a vital role in normalizing women's political leadership in post-conflict settings. Media campaigns are especially important where prevailing gender norms associate political leadership with men. While changing gender norms is a long-term process, post-conflict transitional phases offer key opportunities to launch such campaigns and

begin the transformation toward inclusive political participation by ex-combatants of all genders.

WHEN?

Gender-responsive political transformation is not a one-off activity. It must be strategically integrated throughout the entire DDR cycle, with different opportunities emerging at each phase. Practitioners can create lasting impact by identifying the right moments to intervene and engage key stakeholders.

- **Pre-DDR Assessment and Planning**
  This is the most foundational moment to lay the groundwork for inclusive political transformation. Practitioners should integrate robust gender analysis into broader conflict and political economy assessments, helping to surface the gendered dimensions of power, violence, and governance, for instance by identifying who sets the agenda, who has access to resources, and what differentiated gendered needs combatants have.

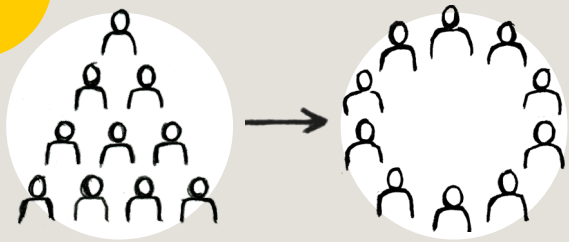
  It is also critical to map the roles of women and gender-diverse individuals – not just in armed groups and support roles, but within formal and informal political spaces. Understanding these roles helps to identify both the barriers they face and potential entry points for their formal political participation after conflict. This early diagnostic work shapes the direction of inclusive DDR from the outset.

- **Demobilization Phase**
  The demobilization phase offers a key moment to begin reshaping political identities and aspirations. Practitioners should engage ex-combatants of all genders in conversations about political participation and the value of inclusive governance. This can be done through early civic education efforts, based on needs and interest assessments, tailored to different gender groups and literacy levels, to build awareness of rights, political systems, and accountability mechanisms (see also in this Series our Primer on civic and political education).

  Participatory workshops – both separate and mixed-gender – can encourage reflection on political agency while building leadership skills for demobilized combatants. Meanwhile, community-based dialogues should start to frame women and other marginalized individuals not just as community members or economic actors, but as stakeholders with legitimate aspirations for political influence.

- **Reintegration Phase**
  As DDR transitions into reintegration support, political empowerment should be embedded in economic and social programming. Civic training can be integrated into vocational training, or youth initiatives – such as youth parliaments or participatory budgeting forums. A mixed approach to training and capacity building combining hard (e.g. vocational training) and soft (e.g. empowerment and civic education) skills is likely to have a holistic impact on both ex-combatants and societies, and tackle root causes of conflict and violence.

  This phase also offers an opportunity to actively link women and other underrepresented groups with local governance mechanisms, transitional institutions, and civil society organizations. These connections can help bridge the gap between personal reintegration and broader political engagement.



Crisis moments and windows of opportunity

Peacebuilding practitioners should identify moments of political flux (e.g., peace negotiations, elections, transitional justice processes) to push for gender-inclusive reforms and schedule specific support activities in a timely fashion to prepare women and marginalized groups for meaningful participation at these critical junctures. These critical junctures offer rare openings to reshape political norms and institutions. Timely, gender-responsive support during these moments can help ensure that women and other marginalized groups are not only present but also actively influence the direction of future policies and governance. Male ex-combatants themselves are often already excluded from such participation, with women and gender-diverse individuals facing even greater barriers.

HOW?

To support meaningful and lasting political transformation in post-conflict settings, DDR practitioners must move beyond token inclusion and adopt strategic, gender-responsive approaches.

- **Gender mainstreaming with intersectionality**
  A critical starting point is to apply a gender lens across all DDR efforts. This means going beyond simply including women in political capacity-building activities, or assuming that all women are excellent peacebuilders. It requires a profound understanding of the underlying gender norms and power structures that exclude or silence certain groups, in order to identify where changes need to take place that can pave the way for inclusive political participation.

  Gender-responsive political transformation needs to take into consideration the diversified backgrounds, needs, interests and opportunities of ex-combatants of all genders, and their own unique motives to join armed groups and even participate in violent action. Not all women and men are equally privileged or marginalized, and hence women ex-combatants (or more broadly, women associated with armed groups) cannot be considered as a homogeneous group. Political transformation support programs need to be responsive to their multiple identities, across social markers such as ethnicity, age, class, religion, which shape their differentiated access to power and resources in society.

  Support actors must mainstream gender considerations throughout the design, budgeting, implementation, monitoring, and staffing of political transformation initiatives. While the presence of gender advisors and focal points is essential, gender responsibility must extend to all staff. This requires investing in capacity-building on core competencies such as gender-responsive facilitation, political analysis, and inclusive leadership; and where possible, ensuring that state and partner institutions engaging with armed actors and ex-combatants are also gender conscious and responsive. All personnel should have at a minimum, a foundational understanding of gender dynamics and how these shape political participation opportunities for ex-combatants of all identities.

- **Participatory and contextual approaches**
  Equally important is the adoption of participatory and context-specific approaches that prioritize local ownership. Despite access to international resources and expertise, support actors must take a bottom-up approach – ensuring that the target groups are not merely consulted but meaningfully involved in the design (co-creation) and monitoring of DDR programs. This includes particularly women ex-combatants seeking political agency, especially those from

marginalized social backgrounds, but also community-based women's organizations.

Strategies must also be tailored to reflect the realities on the ground, taking into account rural–urban divides, ethnic and linguistic diversity, varying literacy levels, and political space at the regional and national level. Such inclusive processes are essential to ensuring both the sustainability and legitimacy of gender-responsive political transformation.

- **Addressing structural barriers**
  Addressing structural barriers is another core priority. Legal, cultural, and institutional obstacles frequently hinder formal political participation. These may include discriminatory laws, restrictive gender norms, exclusionary practices within political parties, gender-based violence, or limited access to economic resources, education, and information. While legal and policy reforms are essential to guarantee equal political rights and protections, they often lie beyond the direct mandate of DDR or peacebuilding actors.

  Nonetheless, DDR initiatives can contribute to leveraging cross-sectoral synergies and aligning with broader state-building, peacebuilding, and transitional justice processes. Strategic partnerships – with electoral commissions, women's ministries, constitutional reform bodies, and political parties – can help raise awareness about the political aspirations of women ex-combatants and support the institutionalization of gender-inclusive reforms with lasting impact.

- **Transforming masculinities**
  Masculinities are not fixed traits but socially constructed norms that shape how people understand and perform gender. During and after armed conflict, dominant forms of masculinity often link leadership with aggression, strength with violence, and legitimacy with dominance. These ideals are reinforced in armed groups and political institutions, creating systems of exclusion and emotional strain for men themselves.

  Many male ex-combatants are socialized into roles that discourage vulnerability and value control, competition, and emotional detachment. In wartime, this can harden into militarized masculinity, where protecting one's family or community becomes tied to violence and dominance. After conflict, these norms can lead to stigma against emotional expression or help-seeking and, if unaddressed, can spill over into post-war life as gender-based violence and exclusion.

  Masculine norms are also embedded in institutions – political parties, reintegration programs, and peacebuilding organizations – that often privilege men's voices and leadership styles. Opaque nomination systems or militarized hierarchies exclude women and men with alternative masculinities. Women ex-combatants face dual stigma, as women and as former fighters, while men are pushed to compete for power in ways that reproduce old hierarchies. Without challenging these norms, DDR and political transformation processes risk reinforcing exclusion, even when they appear gender-inclusive. Women who do reach political or leadership roles may also experience backlash, including intimidation or harassment, as their empowerment is perceived as a threat.

  Not all masculinities are harmful. Building inclusive political spaces means shifting from adversarial and dominant models of masculinity toward cooperative and reflective ones. Men can and must be part of this process. Creating safe spaces for male ex-combatants to reflect on their experiences, supported by trained MHPSS personnel, helps promote emotional healing and awareness. Encouraging positive masculinities that value care, cooperation, and non-violence and supporting peer learning and mentorship across contexts can foster sustainable change. In parallel, engaging male leaders, elders, and religious figures as allies can help challenge resistance to women's leadership and inclusive practices.

  Transforming masculinities should be understood as a participatory process, not an

external imposition. It requires local knowledge, gender expertise, dialogue, and long-term commitment. When done effectively, it helps create more balanced gender relations, stronger communities, and more inclusive political systems – reducing pressure on men while opening political space for all.

Example: Renegotiating Masculinities after DDR in Aceh, Indonesia

In Aceh, Indonesia, the Helsinki Peace Agreement (2005) ushered in a DDR process for GAM (Free Aceh Movement) fighters. Research on masculinities shows that ex-combatant men struggled with the loss of the militarized status they had acquired during the war, where "real manhood" was equated with armed strength, authority, and the ability to protect and provide. Once disarmed, many faced unemployment and poverty, undermining these masculine ideals. Some responded by attempting to reassert dominance in community and household spaces, while others – often with NGO or government support – began redefining masculinity around non-violence, caregiving, and religious piety.

This illustrates the core dilemma: militarized masculinities create pressure on men to embody toughness and dominance, yet post-conflict contexts open possibilities for alternative masculinities. In Aceh, DDR and reintegration programs provided an entry point for this renegotiation, though the process was uneven, with persistent risks of backlash and gender-based violence when men felt their authority threatened (Affiat et al. 2024).

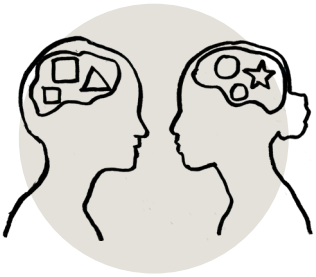
- **Adaptation, safety and accountability**
  Monitoring and adaptation are essential to ensuring effective and inclusive political transformation. Support programs should systematically track both gender and masculinity-related indicators – such as shifts in gender norms, access to political spaces, and perceptions of leadership and empowerment. Participatory tools, such as storytelling, community scorecards and reflective dialogue, can help capture nuanced changes and community perceptions. Embedding robust feedback loops allows programs to adapt in real time, responding to evolving contexts, lessons learned, and the needs of those most affected.

Finally, all efforts must be underpinned by accountability and safeguards. Gender-sensitive complaint mechanisms and protection systems are vital to prevent – and respond to – backlash or violence linked to increased political visibility. Monitoring these risks, and responding to them swiftly, ensures that political engagement is not only inclusive but also safe and sustainable.

Checklist for practitioners to support gender-responsive political transformation

Analyze gendered power dynamics: Conduct participatory and intersectional analyses to uncover how gender, class, age, ethnicity, and other identities shape access to power and political spaces. Identify exclusionary norms, institutional barriers, and opportunities for transformative engagement. Ensure regional and contextual variations are factored into the assessment to avoid one-size-fits-all solutions.

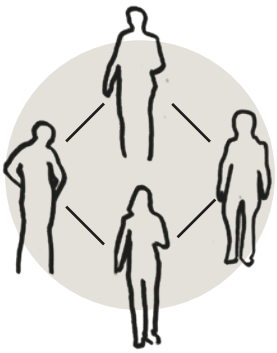
Partner equitably: Work closely with local civil society organizations, especially feminist and community-based groups, and ensure ex-combatants – particularly women and gender-diverse individuals – are meaningfully involved in program design, implementation, and evaluation. Bottom-up engagement strengthens legitimacy, local ownership, and relevance.



Tailor interventions: Design and co-create initiatives that reflect the specific aspirations, barriers, and social positions of diverse ex-combatants. Recognize that women and men from different backgrounds face unique challenges; for instance, rural women may have less access to formal politics but may be highly engaged in community mobilization. Avoid uniform approaches that ignore these distinctions or that make assumptions about entire groups such as 'all women' or 'all men'.

Engage gatekeepers: Identify and involve influential male allies, such as commanders, party leaders, elders, and religious figures, in challenging patriarchal norms and promoting inclusive political cultures. Use their platforms to advocate for women's leadership and non-dominant masculinities, while also addressing resistance and backlash.

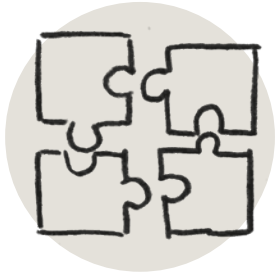
Address psychosocial burdens: Integrate trauma-informed practices and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) into political empowerment initiatives. Recognize the emotional toll of war and reintegration. Create safe, reflective spaces for healing and identity redefinition.



Create networks: Support the formation of peer groups and associations of women ex-combatants to foster exchange, solidarity, and collective political action. These groups can act as safe spaces for mutual support and as platforms for mobilizing around shared goals or advocacy campaigns. Where possible, create networks of women ex-combatants spanning different contexts and regions for mutual support and inspiration. Built-in mentorship channels can help ex-combatants identify their own ambitions, strengths, and political spaces to get engaged.

Monitor backlash and political violence: Establish mechanisms to prevent, track, and respond to gender-based threats, stigmatization, and violence targeting politically active ex-combatants – especially women and LGBTQ+ individuals. Risk mitigation, protection systems, and gender-sensitive complaint mechanisms are crucial for safety and sustainability.

Challenge stigma: Use media, storytelling, and public education campaigns to counter harmful stereotypes about women and former fighters. Promote inclusive narratives that normalize political leadership by all genders and celebrate alternative masculinities that prioritize peace, care, and cooperation.



Strengthen coordination across sectors: Ensure DDR efforts are aligned with broader peacebuilding, transitional justice, electoral, and constitutional reform processes. Collaborate with relevant ministries, electoral commissions, and feminist movements to amplify structural transformation, avoid working in silos, and foster political space for gender responsive political transformation.

Relevant resources, tools and further readings

Affiat, Rizki Amalia, Peny Rahmadhani and Maho Nakayama (2024). Reconstructing Masculinities: Gender dynamics after conflict in Aceh, Maluku and Bangsamoro.
Sasakawa Peace Foundation

Cruz Almeida, Claudia, Véronique Dudouet and Johanna Maria Hülzer (2024). Political Reintegration and the Continuation of the Struggle after War: Women ex-combatants in formal and informal politics.
Berghof Foundation

Darwish, Siad and Sophia Close (2021). Integrating Masculinities in Peacebuilding: Shifting Harmful Norms and Transforming Relationships.
Conciliation Resources

Echavarria, Josefina et al. (2025). Navigating the Waters of Peace: Progress, Challenges, and Opportunities in the Eighth Year of Implementation (December 2023–November 2024).
DOI: 10.7274/29155028

Fal-Dutra Santos, Agnieszka, Sonia Cardona and Francy L. Jaramillo Piedrahita (2024). Taking Peace into Our Own Hands: Colombian Feminists Use Local Politics to Advance Their Agenda for Peace. *Global Studies Quarterly*.
https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksaf001

Giri, Keshab (2021). Do All Women Combatants Experience War and Peace Uniformly? Intersectionality and Women Combatants. *Global Studies Quarterly*.
https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksab004

Matfess, Hillary (2022). Women and Rebel to Party Transitions.
Folke Bernadotte Academy

Mundkur, Anuradha, Johanna Poutanen, Laura Hendry and Sophia Close (2021). Integrating Gender in the DNA of Peacebuilding: Learning with Peers.
Conciliation Resources and Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation

Myrttinen, Henri, Lana Khattab and Jana Naujoks (2016). Re-thinking hegemonic masculinities in conflict-affected contexts. *Critical Military Studies*.
https://doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2016.1262658

Pauls, Evelyn (2023). Long-term reintegration challenges and opportunities for female ex-combatants. Insights from Aceh, Burundi, Colombia, Mindanao, Nepal and Uganda.
Berghof Foundation

Sandino, Victoria Simanca Herrera (2024). From the mountains to the public arena: The struggle of women ex-combatants of FARC-EP to make their voices heard.
Berghof Foundation

Tarnaala, Elisa (2016). Women in armed groups and fighting forces: lessons learned from gender-sensitive DDR programmes.
NOREF

Tielemans, Sanne (2015). Gender and Conflict Analysis Toolkit for Peacebuilders.
Conciliation Resources

United Nations (2023). Integrated DDR Standards, Module 5.10 Women, Gender and DDR.
IDDRS

This publication is part of a series of Primers offering brief insights and practical guidance on the political transformation of non-state armed groups as a core element of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR), and as a contribution to sustainable peace. These Primers are produced in the context of a project that aims to operationalize Module 2.20 of the United Nations Integrated DDR Standards (IDDRS): "The Politics of DDR" (https://www.unddr.org/). It is based on the collaboration between the United Nations Department of Peace Operations DDR Section (UNDPO DDR) and the Berghof Foundation. Through first-hand experience and on-site support, the project generates and disseminates concrete guidance on planning, designing and implementing politically sensitive DDR processes. It further develops training resources for DDR practitioners and other stakeholders involved in peace processes and post-war peacebuilding, with a focus on practical support for political transformation.

Berghof Foundation
Operations gGmbH
Lindenstraße 34
10969 Berlin
Germany

www.berghof-foundation.org
info@berghof-foundation.org

@berghoffnd.bsky.social
@BerghofFnd
/BerghofFoundation
/berghof-foundation
@berghoffnd

Department of Peace Operation (DPO)
Office of the Rule of Law & Security Institutions (OROLSI)
Disarmament Demobilization & Reintegration Section (DDRS)
2 United Nations Plaza. DC02 – 13th Floor
10017 New York, USA

www.unddr.org

@orolsi.bsky.social
@UN_OROLSI
/OROLSI
/orolsi
@un_orolsi