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Operationalising Gender Integration in Peacebuilding Organisations, what happens when you try: Learning from practice

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Reflecting on partnerships with :



1. From commitment to practice: what it takes in reality

Conflict affects people differently depending on gender, and evidence shows a strong relationship between gender inequality and violent conflict. Addressing gender inequality is therefore important to achieving sustainable peace and requires peacebuilding interventions to recognise how gender shapes people's experiences of conflict and the dynamics that sustain it. Peacebuilding organisations have sought to respond in different ways, including through strategies,¹ capacity strengthening, and efforts to strengthen gender integration in programming. Yet translating these commitments into consistent practice, particularly at the organisational level, remains challenging. The 2021 report “Integrating gender in the DNA of peacebuilding: Learning with peers” captured learning from a four-month dialogue among 13 peacebuilding and conflict resolution organisations on what it takes to integrate gender not only in programming, but across organisations more broadly.

One of the main outcomes of this dialogue was the development of a gender integration spectrum, reflecting the recognition that what organisations do through their programmes and how they operate internally are closely connected. The spectrum describes organisational practice ranging from gender-discriminatory to gender-transformative approaches. It helps organisations map their current practice, recognising that different parts of the same organisation may sit at different points along it; define an organisational level of ambition for gender integration; and identify the changes needed across governance, operations and programming to move towards that ambition.



The spectrum therefore brought attention to gender integration as an organisational as well as a programming question. Moving towards an organisation's ambition may require changes not only in how programmes are designed and implemented, but also in leadership and decision-making, organisational policies and strategies, internal systems and processes, and the support available to staff. The 2021 dialogue highlighted that these dimensions are interconnected: progress in programming can be reinforced or constrained by how gender is embedded within the wider organisation.

¹ Conciliation Resources and CMI – Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation (2021), Integrating Gender in the DNA of Peacebuilding: Learning with Peers, https://peacenexus.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Report_Gender_Integration_in_Peacebuilding_English.pdf

² Adapted from Conciliation Resources and CMI – Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation (2021), Integrating Gender in the DNA of Peacebuilding: Learning with Peers, p.7

The dialogue continued beyond the publication of the report as an online peer-learning group space for peacebuilding organisations to reflect collectively on organisational gender integration, exchange experiences, and learn from one another. Building on the group's reflections and the questions raised by the 2021 report about how gender integration ambitions are translated into organisational practice, PeaceNexus Foundation launched in 2024 a small grants initiative to support four participating organisations in taking forward their own organisational change agendas. The grants provided modest but flexible resources to test approaches, deepen reflection, and contribute to practical learning, bringing it back to the wider peer-learning process.

The organisations supported under the small grant scheme³ - Saferworld, Berghof Foundation, Peaceful Change Initiative, and CMI - Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation - entered this process from different starting points. Importantly, the objective was not to prescribe particular level of ambition, but to support these organisations in advancing their own gender integration priorities and exploring what this required in practice across their organisational systems, processes, and ways of working.

What emerges from these experiences is not a single model or pathway. Instead, it is a set of grounded insights into how organisations actually move, or struggle to move, from ambition to operational reality. This brief, which is based on reflection discussions with the four organisations supported under the small grants scheme, brings these insights together for practitioners working through similar challenges. These emerging patterns were subsequently discussed with the wider PeaceNexus gender peer-learning group, where they resonated strongly with participants' own organisational experiences and were further enriched by their input.

2. What emerges across cases: from diverse starting points to shared patterns

The organisations supported through the small grants represented a diverse cross-section of peacebuilding practice. They differed in size, organisational structure, geographic focus, and approaches to peacebuilding, working across a range of conflict settings and levels of engagement. Saferworld and Peaceful Change Initiative work primarily with communities and civil society actors to support locally led peacebuilding, conflict prevention and conflict transformation; Berghof Foundation combines peacebuilding practice with research, policy engagement, and support to dialogue and mediation processes as well as peace education; while CMI - Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation focuses on strengthening the quality and effectiveness of peace processes through mediation, dialogue, accompaniment, and support to key peace actors.

³ The small grants initiative concluded in late 2025. While the grant funding ended at that time, several participating organisations continued to advance and reflect on their organisational change processes beyond the grant period.

They also entered the process from different positions along the gender integration spectrum, reflecting different organisational experiences, ambitions, and approaches to gender integration, including across their own offices and units. This diversity provided an opportunity to explore how efforts to strengthen gender integration unfold across different organisational settings and operational realities.

Despite these differences, the four organisations encountered similar challenges in translating commitments on gender integration into day-to-day organisational practice:

- a gap between awareness and application
- uneven engagement across teams
- difficulty translating tools into practice
- and challenges in sustaining progress over time

In response, they began to shift their approaches in comparable ways, placing greater emphasis on internal dialogue, adapting language to context, working through existing processes, and focusing on practical entry points for change. The following section explores these shared dynamics in more depth.

3. What happens in practice: patterns from organisational experience

3.1 The real challenge is not understanding gender - it is knowing what to do with it

Across all organisations, gender was not a new concept. Staff had been exposed to training, strategies were in place, and there was general agreement that gender matters. And yet, a common frustration surfaced: *“We understand this - but how do we actually apply it in our work?”*

At Berghof Foundation, this became clear through the development of the gender-responsive conflict analysis toolkit. While staff had engaged with gender concepts and the gender integration spectrum, they found it difficult to translate them into concrete analytical steps within projects. The team therefore developed a set of practical markers and self-assessment questions that enabled project teams to locate themselves more confidently along the spectrum and use this as a starting point for more operational discussions and decision-making. At CMI, training and organisational reflection strengthened attention to gender integration, while also raising practical questions about how gender considerations could be applied across mediation and programme work, particularly in politically sensitive contexts. At Saferworld, even with years of investment in tools and training, teams reported uncertainty about how to move from gender-sensitive to more gender-transformative approaches in practice.

What emerges across the cases is that it is in routine moments, such as drafting proposals, conducting analysis, designing programmes, or making operational decisions, that gender integration is interpreted and translated into practice or can fall short when staff lack clarity on how to apply it.

3.2 Organisations do not change uniformly – and successful approaches work with this reality

A second pattern that emerged consistently was that different teams engaged with gender integration in different ways and at different speeds. Rather than seeking organisational uniformity, successful approaches recognised this internal diversity and created space for teams to engage with change in ways that were meaningful within their own operational realities.

At Saferworld, teams were positioned very differently along the gender integration spectrum. Some were already integrating gender in sophisticated ways, while others questioned whether such approaches were feasible in their context. Reflection processes therefore enabled teams to assess their own position and identify contextually appropriate next steps, rather than expecting all teams to follow the same pathway.

At CMI, engagement also varied across teams. Rather than reflecting direct resistance, gender was sometimes perceived as an additional consideration alongside competing priorities, contributing to different levels and speeds of engagement. In response, pilot teams created opportunities to test approaches in practice, while dedicated reflection spaces enabled colleagues to discuss challenges and explore how existing formats and processes could be adapted to different operational contexts.

This internal unevenness shaped how change could happen. The experiences suggest that rather than attempting to standardise approaches across an organisation, working with this diversity can create space for teams to identify contextually relevant ways forward.

3.3 Progress starts with conversation - and the language to make it possible

Across organisations, progress was triggered by conversations, when people could engage in them meaningfully and safely.

At Peaceful Change Initiative, attempts to introduce training revealed that teams first needed space to discuss what gender meant in their context. In settings such as Libya, this was not straightforward. Gender was a sensitive topic, and how it was framed had direct implications for both engagement and the safety of staff and partners. At Saferworld, structured discussions - often adapted to local contexts, framing and languages - allowed teams to reflect on how gender norms shape conflict and how this connects to their work. These conversations were not always easy. They surfaced uncertainty, resistance, and differing assumptions. But they were necessary.

At Berghof Foundation, pilot sessions with staff from different regions and local partners were used not simply to introduce the toolkit, but to refine it. The discussions surfaced practical concerns, language preferences, and contextual considerations that shaped how the toolkit was ultimately designed and applied.

A critical part of this process was language. In several contexts, the term “gender” itself became a barrier - triggering resistance, confusion, or disengagement. Teams therefore adapted their framing. Saferworld used terms such as “inclusion” or “social cohesion” to open dialogue, while PCI teams adjusted language carefully to make engagement possible in politically sensitive environments. This was not about avoiding the issue, but about making it discussable.

Across the cases, conversation emerged not as a preliminary step before implementation, but as part of implementation itself. Through dialogue, organisations negotiated meaning, adapted language, and built shared ownership of gender integration within their own operational realities.

3.4 Integration is sustained when embedded in existing processes—and supported by practical tools

Across organisations, gender integration gained traction when it was embedded into existing organisational processes rather than an additional task. Instead of creating parallel systems, organisations embedded gender within existing planning, conflict analysis, project design, monitoring, and learning processes. Practical tools and guidance played an important enabling role, but only when they were developed, introduced, and used as part of broader organisational learning.

At Berghof, the gender-responsive toolkit was designed to integrate into existing conflict analysis practices, rather than replace them. It was modular and adaptable, allowing teams to engage with elements relevant to their work. Through piloting and iterative refinement, the toolkit evolved into a practical resource that supported teams in answering existing project design questions while adapting the approach to different operational contexts.

At CMI, gender considerations were integrated into existing planning, monitoring and learning processes, supported by training, guidance and AI-supported conflict analysis. This included strengthening staff capacity to apply gender-sensitive conflict analysis across different stages of project implementation, including using AI to access local-language sources and synthesise research relevant to particular contexts.

At Saferworld, guidance and practical resources were embedded within induction, peer learning and ongoing organisational reflection, creating multiple opportunities for staff to engage with gender integration as part of their everyday work. This included using organisational learning spaces to reflect on how gender-transformative approaches could be applied in different contexts, rather than relying on guidance and training as standalone interventions.

Across the cases, tools, guidance and training did not drive organisational change on their own. They became most useful when embedded in existing ways of working and combined with opportunities for staff to reflect, adapt and apply them within their own contexts.

3.5 Sustainable change depends on distributed ownership

Across organisations, sustaining progress in gender integration depended on moving beyond individual champions towards more distributed ownership. While committed individuals often played an important role in initiating change, organisations found that long-term progress required responsibility to be embedded more broadly across leadership, teams, structures, and organisational roles.

At Saferworld, this became particularly visible during and towards the end of the grant period, when significant funding cuts reduced gender advisory capacity from six staff members to one. This shift highlighted the risks of relying primarily on specialised roles, without embedding knowledge and responsibility more broadly across the organisation. In response, efforts were made to distribute ownership more widely, including through the establishment of gender focal points across all teams, the integration of gender into onboarding and staff learning processes, and the incorporation of related responsibilities into existing roles. Together, these measures aimed to make gender integration less dependent on dedicated gender expertise and more embedded within teams' everyday responsibilities.

A similar reflection emerged at the Berghof Foundation. While earlier efforts had been driven largely by individual champions advocating for the topic across the organization, the process highlighted the importance of distributing ownership across different management levels, including Heads of Units and Heads of Departments. By formalizing the ambition to become a gender-responsive organization in 2025, the Foundation provided an official mandate not only to individual champions but also to leadership at multiple levels. Across the cases, sustainability depended less on individual commitment than on embedding shared responsibility within organisational structures, leadership, and everyday ways of working, in other words in organisational culture.

4. Broadening the reflections on these patterns from the wider peer-learning group

The wider gender peer-learning group recognised many of the same dynamics within their own organisations, suggesting that the experiences described in this brief extend beyond the four organisations participating in the small grants initiative.

A recurring observation was that responsibility for gender integration often remains concentrated among gender specialists or a relatively small group of committed colleagues. Participants emphasised that sustainable organisational change requires

much broader ownership, including investing in feminist leadership and stronger engagement of programme staff, middle management and senior leadership, as well as greater involvement of men as allies in shaping organisational culture and practice. Without this wider engagement, gender continues to risk being perceived as a specialised agenda rather than a shared organisational responsibility.

The discussion also reinforced the importance of integrating gender from the earliest stages of programme design. Participants noted that practitioners and local partners often already possess a nuanced understanding of gender dynamics in the communities where they work. However, these perspectives are not always sufficiently reflected in project design processes, which frequently remain concentrated at headquarters or proposal development level. This creates a disconnect between existing practice on the ground and organisational systems that guide programme development.

Finally, participants reflected on the current funding environment and the growing backlash surrounding diversity, equity and inclusion. Rather than describing an ideological retreat from gender integration, many observed a more pragmatic shift driven by shrinking resources and competing organisational priorities. In this context, gender is sometimes among the first areas to receive less attention, particularly where leadership does not clearly recognise its contribution to programme quality, effectiveness and sustainability. This reinforces the importance of embedding gender within core organisational processes rather than treating it as an additional or optional component.

Taken together, these reflections suggest that the patterns identified across the four organisations resonate beyond them. They point towards emerging questions for the sector, including how to strengthen organisational ownership beyond specialist teams, involve local partners more systematically in organisational learning, and ensure that gender considerations are integrated from the earliest stages of programme design.

5. From ambition to organisational practice

The experiences presented in this brief reinforce a key insight from the 2021 report: gender integration is not only about what organisations do, but also about how they are organised to do it. Whatever an organisation's ambitions along the gender integration spectrum, putting those ambitions into practice requires attention not only to programme practice, but also to the organisational systems and processes that support it.

Across the four organisations, there was no lack of commitment to gender integration. Strategies, policies, and practical guidance already existed in many cases. The experiences nevertheless show that commitment and formal frameworks alone are insufficient to translate ambition into everyday practice. They also highlight the importance

of having sufficient resources to support this work. Berghof Foundation, for example, reflected that dedicated funding created the time and capacity needed to develop, pilot and refine its toolkit. Resources alone did not drive change, but they created space for staff to experiment, learn together and adapt approaches to their contexts, helping to ensure that tools were used in practice rather than remaining standalone documents.

The experiences also illustrate how organisational practice and programme practice are closely connected. At CMI, gender-sensitive conflict analysis was expanded across teams, supported by training and the use of AI to access local-language sources and synthesise research. Gender considerations were also integrated more systematically across the project cycle, while CMI's new 2026 - 2029 Programme formalised commitments to gender sensitivity and 40% meaningful participation of each gender. At Saferworld, this connection was visible in very practical decisions about programme implementation. Where childcare responsibilities or mobility restrictions limited participation in peacebuilding activities, teams introduced targeted measures, including childcare support and context-specific arrangements to enable participation, particularly for women. While not all of these changes can be attributed directly to the small grants, they illustrate how organisational commitments, capacities and ways of working can shape how gender integration is realised through programmes.

Taken together, these experiences build on the gender integration spectrum as a tool for organisations to map their practice across different parts of the organisation and define their ambitions for gender integration. This brief has explored what it takes to translate those ambitions into practice and what organisations encounter as they try to do so. The experiences suggest that progress depends on creating enabling conditions for change: space for dialogue and adaptation, practical tools and capacities that help staff translate ambition into their own work, integration into existing organisational processes, and ownership that extends beyond individual gender specialists or champions. These conditions are not created once and then maintained automatically. They need to be continually reinforced as different parts of an organisation move at different speeds and as organisations respond to competing priorities, funding constraints and a wider backlash around gender and inclusion.

Moving towards an organisational ambition is therefore neither linear nor solely a question of commitment. Strengthening gender integration across organisational systems and ways of working enables it to be more consistently reflected in programme practice. In these times of backlash and funding cuts, this should be an area of renewed attention. This brief is therefore also an invitation to continue the conversation about what it takes organisationally to achieve gender integration.