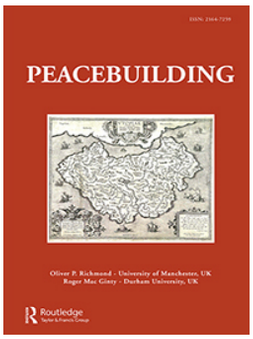

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(Dis)connected? Women's agency and meaningful participation in the digital space

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ABSTRACT

There are growing calls for greater inclusion of women in digitalisation and digitally-facilitated processes, including those related to peace and peacebuilding. However, there is little discussion of what such participation may look like. Using the notion of '"meaningful participation"' as a conceptual framework, the paper seeks to explore both the pathways towards greater participation of women in digital peacebuilding, and the challenges in doing so. Applying a feminist lens, the paper goes beyond viewing digital inclusion simply as a matter of having access to the internet and explores the questions of agency and presence in the digital realm.

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Introduction

In late 2019, together with my team at the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP), we were strategising to increase our understanding of the use of digital technologies in peacebuilding and peace negotiations. It was an issue that the organisation has historically been engaged in, and it was clear to us that although international peace actors, including the UN Department for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, increasingly relied on the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in mediation, very little was known about whether and how local peacebuilders, in particular women, engage with such technologies in their work.

Only a few months after these initial discussions, the COVID-19 pandemic swept through the world, bringing both the benefits and dangers of 'digitalising' peacebuilding work and activism into a sharp focus. The pandemic re-shaped the way women peacebuilders engage with digital tools. Even in contexts with minimal internet access, the shift towards online spaces was felt strongly: women activists increased their use of social media for virtual campaigns, recruiting members, and establishing and maintaining relationships with other actors – at home and abroad. In Colombia, GNWP partners have trained local women in conflict-affected departments in the use of online communication and document-sharing platforms to be able to run online trainings and continue monitoring the implementation of the peace agreement provisions during COVID-19.[1]

At the same time, the pandemic created new risks of exclusion. Many women simply did not have access to the internet and necessary equipment. Furthermore, women peace activists received 'condescending comments from their male peers about their digital competency'[2] and faced an increase in cyberviolence – both of which have prevented some of them from effectively using digital tools.

The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic provides a microcosm illustration of the broader trends that have been at play in the peacemaking and peacebuilding practice. On the one hand, the use of ICTs in peace negotiations and mediation – which has been increasing steadily in the past decades – has raised hope that digital tools might become a 'great equaliser', facilitating the participation of marginalised groups, in particular women, in peacebuilding. On the other hand, digital spaces have often become sites of exclusion and violence. This has been exacerbated by the under-regulation of the digital spaces in international law,

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[1]GNWP, 'Colombia Country Update', February 15, 2021, https://gnwp.org/wp-content/uploads/Colombia-COVID-19-Profile.pdf.

[2]Agnieszka Fal-Dutra Santos et al., 'Lockdown on Peace? COVID-19's Impact on Women Peacebuilders', *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* (January 25, 2022): jxab050, https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxab050.

providing little recourse to victims of violence and little possibility for holding perpetrators accountable, as well as by the misuse and abuse of digital tools to restrict civil society space, further deepening the activists' exposure to violence and threats.

In this paper, I set out to explore the questions of women's inclusion and agency in digital spaces in more detail. Following Hirblinger's strategy of 'summoning' digital peacebuilding as a way to nuance research on the issue,[3] I seek to engage with the 'challenges and disillusionment' of moving peacebuilding into the virtual space. I do so by asking the question: what does it mean for women to 'meaningfully participate' in peace and political processes through digital means? I critically interrogate the way in which approaches to digital inclusion conceptualise women's 'meaningful participation' and identify the silences and omissions in these interpretations. The focus on 'meaningful participation' allows me to make a contribution on several levels. On the one hand, it builds on the growing body of feminist literature that has brought attention to the different levels and modalities of women's participation in peace negotiations,[4] while emphasising that merely 'adding women to the table' is not sufficient. As described below, feminist scholars have made important contributions to conceptualising women's participation beyond equating it with mere presence at a negotiating table or in other decision-making spaces.[5] This article contributes to these discussions by reflecting on whether and how such conceptualisations apply in the increasingly digitalised context of peacebuilding and peacemaking. On the other hand, the focus on 'meaningful participation' also aligns with policy debates around women's participation, which have increasingly used the term and sought to define its parameters.

In my interrogation, I apply a critical, feminist lens. This means, first of all, that I seek to pay close attention to how gender dynamics and pre-existing gender social norms and roles shape not only the patterns of inclusion and exclusion in digital spaces but also the *meanings* that are attached to the concept of 'meaningful participation', and therefore the strategies that are employed to advance it. This brings attention to the mutual co-constitution of digital technologies or platforms *and* the social and political contexts in which they are implemented.[6] In line with feminist epistemological approaches, I ground my argument in an understanding of the importance of plurality of views and perspectives.[7] I view the existence of contrasting meanings and interpretations of 'meaningful' participation not as a challenge to the usefulness or 'objectivity' of the concept, but rather as a reflection of the complexity of the reality of women's participation in peace processes. In my analysis, I draw on both official documents and spoken accounts of women peacebuilders from different contexts. While not using a representative sample, I seek to provide a diversity of perspectives that aims to allow for 'less partiality, less distortion' in how participation in digital spaces is conceptualised.[8] In this sense, applying the notion of a digital pluriverse – a 'world in which many worlds fit' – is particularly useful as it provides the space to bring to the fore the multiple, alternative views of peacebuilding and peace processes and women's place in them.

A second key tenet of my feminist analysis is recognising and valuing the agency of women in shaping the digital realm and the patterns of inclusion and exclusion within it rather than viewing them solely through the prism of their victimhood and exclusion.

The technology-facilitated violence against women – including women activists – has received extensive attention in recent years. While, as argued elsewhere, much of this literature does not refer to violence against women *peace* activists specifically,[9] it does provide a detailed insight into a key source of 'challenges and disillusionment' women peacebuilders have faced in their engagement with online platforms.

[3]Andreas T. Hirblinger, 'When the Digits Don't Add Up: Research Strategies for Post-Digital Peacebuilding', *Cooperation and Conflict* (August 12, 2023): 00108367231184727, https://doi.org/10.1177/00108367231184727.

[4]Thania Paffenholz, 'Civil Society and Peace Negotiations: Beyond the Inclusion-Exclusion Dichotomy: Participation of Civil Society in Peace Negotiations', *Negotiation Journal* 30, no. 1 (2014): 69–91, https://doi.org/10.1111/nejo.12046.

[5]Anne Marie Goetz and Rob Jenkins, 'Agency and Accountability: Promoting Women's Participation in Peacebuilding', *Feminist Economics* 22, no. 1 (2016): 211–36, https://doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2015.1086012.

[6]Andreas Timo Hirblinger et al., 'Digital Peacebuilding: A Framework for Critical – Reflexive Engagement', *International Studies Perspectives* 24, no. 3 (2023): 265–84, https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekac015.

[7]Laurel Weldon, 'Inclusion and Understanding: A Collective Methodology for Feminist International Relations', in *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations*, ed. Brooke A. Ackerly et al. (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006), 62–87, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511617690.

[8]Ibid, 80.

[9]Agnieszka Fal-Dutra Santos and Panthea Pourmalek, 'Preventing Violence in the Digital Age: Women Peacebuilders and Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence', in *Mapping Online Gender-Based Violence*, ed. V. Mariateresa Garrido (University for Peace, San José, Costa Rica, 2022), 71, https://upeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Garrido-Mapping-Online-Gender-based-Violence.pdf.

Recognising and analysing the impacts of technology-facilitated violence against women is of critical importance. However, disproportionately focusing on such violence risks reducing women to the role of passive victims. As argued by Smith and Stavrevska, '[t]he prioritisation of sexual harm [in discussions about women in peacebuilding] ignores other types of violence that impact women, with environmental destruction being but one example (. . .), and, relatedly, the visions for peace of women who live with that violence'.[10] Thus, while I recognise and acknowledge the ways in which gendered violence in digital spaces inhibits women's participation in them, in my analysis, I look beyond the sexualised harm and women's victimhood.

While recognising and centring women's agency, I am also cautious not to fall in the trap of techno-optimism. The gains and progress achieved by women activists through the use of online spaces – such as increasing engagement with some international policy bodies or successfully launching and leading campaigns to bring awareness to the challenges they face – are not to be disregarded. However, uncritically viewing the advancement of technology as a pathway to women's greater participation can be damaging.[11] This article seeks to provide an alternative way of thinking about women's participation in digital spaces that provides a nuanced perspective and does not presume a simple and straightforward path from digitalisation to empowerment.

Recognising that women do not encounter these challenges as helpless victims but as determined and innovative agents, in the below analysis I explore not only the 'disillusionment' of feminist encounters with digital peacebuilding but also solutions and adaptations that have arisen from that disillusionment. Rather than drawing a simple line between the digitalisation of peacebuilding and women's increased participation in it or viewing digital platforms as opportunities for subverting patriarchal norms, I seek to reveal and reflect on the gendered dynamics of the mutual co-constitution of digital technologies and the social contexts in which they are implemented, and which are often permeated by patriarchy. In doing so, I focus my exploration of women's meaningful inclusion not on 'what happens next' – that is, the pathways from digitalisation to empowerment and potential future technological solutions – but rather on 'what has already happened and how that conditions present and future peacebuilding'.[12]

My analysis proceeds in two steps. I first outline a theoretical framework based on a critical understanding of the concept of 'meaningful participation' and related concepts, such as the 'agency' of women in digital spaces. Second, I move to explore empirical material provided through the research by the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP) and my analysis of official documents from key international actors to trace how the approaches to 'meaningful participation' have been translated into the *practice* of digital peacebuilding. In doing so, I seek to identify the assumptions that underlie dominant approaches to 'meaningful participation' and critically interrogate the way in which they are shaped by political and social contexts marked by deeply ingrained patriarchal norms. Such interrogation contributes to a concrete illustration of the nature of post-digital, pluriversal approach to peacebuilding: one that is acutely aware of the limits of digital technologies, looks beyond a digital-nondigital binary and embraces the often messy and turbulent nature of (digital) peace processes.[13]

Before proceeding with my argument, a quick note on the terminology used throughout the paper may be useful. I speak of 'digital spaces' – through these, I mean platforms, avenues and channels created or facilitated through digital technologies in which agents can interact with one another. This builds on the feminist understanding of 'space' as relational and constructed through social interactions.[14] A 'digital space' is constituted through interactions that are facilitated by digital technologies – these can range from means as simple as text messages or social media to more complex spaces such as consultation fora for

[10]Sarah Smith and Elena B. Stavrevska, 'A Different Women, Peace and Security Is Possible? Intersectionality in Women, Peace and Security Resolutions and National Action Plans', *European Journal of Politics and Gender* 5, no. 1 (2022): 69, https://doi.org/10.1332/251510821X16354049461534.

[11]Francesca Bray, 'Gender and Technology', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 36, no. 1 (2007): 37–53, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.36.081406.094328; Tam O'Neil and Clare Cummings, 'Do Digital Information and Communications Technologies Increase the Voice and Influence of Women and Girls?' (2015), https://odi.org/en/publications/do-digital-information-and-communications-technologies-increase-the-voice-and-influence-of-women-and-girls/; and Judy Wajcman, 'From Women and Technology to Gendered Technoscience', *Information, Communication and Society* 10, no. 3 (2007): 3.

[12]Hirblinger, 'When the Digits Don't Add Up', 6.

[13]For more discussion of the pluriversal approach to digital peacebuilding see Hirblinger and Perera, in the introduction to this volume.

[14]Annika Henrizi, 'Building Peace in Hybrid Spaces: Women's Agency in Iraqi NGOs', *Peacebuilding* 3, no. 1 (2015): 75–89, https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2014.969510.

specific peace processes. I sometimes use the term 'digital space' interchangeably with 'digital platform', although the former has a slightly broader meaning. I also use the term 'digital realm' to reference the entirety of digital technologies, spaces, actions and interactions available to an individual. By 'digital tools', I mean the various technologies (both in terms of software and equipment) available to an individual.

A note should also be made with regards to peace processes. Most of the examples in the paper come from official peace processes, meaning negotiations between two parties with a view of achieving a peace agreement. The data was collected at a time when multiple such processes were still ongoing and in contexts where they have taken place in the past decade. It could be argued that today, the space for such processes is closing. Peace agreements achieved through such negotiations have been criticised for their limited implementation and durability.[15] In my other work, I have also called for 'dethroning' of the peace agreement as the ultimate goal in conflict resolution and management.[16] However, I believe it is too early to discount such processes as an important part of the peacemaking landscape. At the time of writing of this article, a peace negotiation between Ukraine and Russia – however fraught – is ongoing and receiving much international attention. Peace negotiations are also ongoing in other contexts – including Colombia, where the government is attempting to sustain negotiations with multiple armed groups and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where the country's government has agreed to negotiate with the government of Rwanda whom it accuses of supporting rebel groups spreading terror in Eastern DRC. The topic of *inclusion* in such processes – in particular – deserves continued attention, as it is one that has received much political lip service, but often without enough evidence-based analysis and recommendations. I believe much of the below discussion could also be applied to meaningful participation in other post-conflict processes, such as discussions and negotiations around a country's recovery. Debating this applicability, however, falls beyond the scope of this paper.

Methodological note

In my analysis, I relied on three main sources of data. First, I made use of the data collected by GNWP as part of its research into the modalities of women's participation in digital peacebuilding and peace processes. I was able to analyse both the data that was published in the final report,[17] which I co-wrote, and some of the unpublished interview data made available to me by the GNWP team. The GNWP study spanned 19 countries. More in-depth research was conducted in Colombia and the Philippines, while elsewhere the information was often derived from discussions with a narrow, purposive sample of interviewees. As a result, and because I did not conduct additional interviews in writing this paper, the empirical part of the paper provides a birds-eye view of how 'meaningful participation' in the digital realm has been conceptualised and constituted in different contexts, rather than an in-depth analysis of any single example of the use of technology. In this sense, I view the paper as a first step towards more critical thinking about digital inclusion: a setting of a feminist post-digital research agenda that, I hope, can lead to more critical thinking and, ultimately, more careful practice around digital inclusion.

The GNWP research consisted of 79 key informant interviews, as well as a global online consultation with 50 women and ICT experts from around the world.[18] The interviews in Colombia (21 interviews) and the Philippines (28 interviews) were conducted by national researchers, while the other interviews were conducted by the GNWP team, which I supervised. I personally conducted or observed several of the interviews.

The other two sources of data I used were (1) websites and online reports prepared by other women's organisations working on digitalisation and digital inclusion; and (2) policy documents

[15]Dorina A. Bekoe, 'Toward a Theory of Peace Agreement Implementation: The Case of Liberia', *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 38, nos. 2–3 (2003): 256–94, https://doi.org/10.1177/002190960303800207; Caroline Hartzell et al., 'Stabilizing the Peace After Civil War: An Investigation of Some Key Variables', *International Organization* 55, no. 1 (2001): 183–208; and Roy Licklider, 'The Consequences of Negotiated Settlements in Civil Wars, 1945–1993', *The American Political Science Review* 89, no. 3 (1995): 681–90, https://doi.org/10.2307/2082982

[16]Agnieszka Fal-Dutra Santos, 'Building Trust Through Care: A Feminist Take on Inclusion in Multi-Track Mediation', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* (2024): 1–22, https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2024.2326623.

[17]Anne Marie Buzatu et al., *Women, Peace and Security and Human Rights in the Digital Age: Opportunities and Risks to Advance Women's Meaningful Participation and Protect Their Rights*, (2021), https://gnwp.org/digitalization-research-report/.

[18]Ibid., 7.

and strategies published by key international actors working on women's inclusion in peacebuilding.[19] This paper builds on my work and advocacy for better digital inclusion and my experiences as a woman working in the peacebuilding space and as a gender-responsive peacebuilding practitioner. This positionality has certainly coloured how I have perceived and analysed the documents and the experiences of those interviewed by GNWP. However, I have made deliberate efforts to apply a critical lens and deconstruct the meanings behind key concept to avoid essentializing them – both through a careful review of the literature and through a critical reading of the interviews.

Defining 'meaningful participation' – a theoretical framework

Review of existing definitions

The term 'meaningful participation' entered the international vernacular related to women's participation in peace processes following its use in the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2242 (2015). The resolution – the eighth in the WPS suite of resolutions – encourages all actors involved in peace processes 'to facilitate women's *meaningful inclusion* in negotiating parties' delegations to peace talks'. The use of the phrase was a departure from the previously agreed-upon language. Earlier WPS resolutions called for women's 'full' or 'equal' participation in peace processes. The subsequent WPS resolutions have maintained the reference to 'meaningful' participation. The term has also been used outside of the WPS policy universe, for example, in discussions about the development of public health policies[20] or humanitarian responses.[21]

Overall, the term lacks a clear definition. Tacitly, many of the policy and academic texts engaging with meaningful participation determined the extent to which inclusion was 'meaningful' through the participating actors' ability to exert influence or advance their policy goals.[22] Others have emphasised the importance of the process design in ensuring that participation is 'meaningful'. Dizon et al., for example, argue that 'meaningful participation occurs when the parameters of participation are clear, and the participation is ultimately concerned with how power is used and distributed'.[23]

With regard to *women's* meaningful participation, specifically, Ellerby notes that women's 'presence' alone is not enough to ensure peace.[24] Rather this 'women at the table' discourse must focus on how women (and men) participate in peace negotiations'. Once again, meaningful participation is tacitly defined as participation through which concrete policy goals can be effectively advanced.

Perhaps the most comprehensive effort at defining 'meaningful participation', in particular in the context of women's participation in peace processes and peacebuilding, was the Expert Group Meeting (EGM) on women's meaningful participation in negotiating peace and the implementation of peace agreements, convened by UN Women in 2018. The meeting's report notes that '[t]he concept of "meaningful" participation has evolved to become a conceptual reference point to describe a multifaceted set of elements to realise the tangible and urgent demands that women not only be present but that their concerns are heard and taken on board'.[25] In order for this to happen, it argues, four elements are necessary: being present, deploying agency, exercising self-efficacy, and exerting influence.

[19]The former included strategy documents and annual reports of organisations such as the Feminist Digital Justice, Policy and Association for Progressive Communications, all of which self-identify as feminist collectives or organisations working to increase inclusion and gender-responsiveness in the digital realm. The latter included: the Digital Strategy of the UN Development Programme, the UN Women and UN Department for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs policy paper on 'COVID-19 and conflict', the information available on the Women in the Digital Economy Fund website, the OECD case study of the UK's Digital Access Programme, the presentation on 'Women's Digital Inclusion: Global and Regional Strategic Efforts For Women Empowerment' delivered at the Conference on ICT for Women empowerment in the Arab Region by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, and the 'Women in Digital' strategy of the European Union.

[20]Lovely Dizon et al., 'What Is Meaningful Participation for Older People? An Analysis of Aging Policies', *The Gerontologist* 60, no. 3 (2020): 396–405, https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnz060.

[21]Tristan Harley and Harry Hobbs, 'The Meaningful Participation of Refugees in Decision-Making Processes: Questions of Law and Policy', *International Journal of Refugee Law* 32, no. 2 (2020): 200–26, https://doi.org/10.1093/ijrl/eeaa010.

[22]See, for example, Parmila Nazary et al., 'Women in Peace Process in Afghanistan: Meaningful Participation and Its Impact', *Kardan Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 3, no. 2 (2020): 17–34.

[23]Dizon et al., 'What is Meaningful Participation for Older People?'.

[24]Kara Ellerby, 'A Seat at the Table Is Not Enough: Understanding Women's Substantive Representation in Peace Processes', *Peacebuilding* 4, no. 2 (2016): 136–50, https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2016.1192240.

[25]UN Women, 'Women's Meaningful Participation in Negotiating Peace and the Implementation of Peace Agreements', *Report of the Expert Group Meeting* (2018), 11, https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2018/egm-womens-meaningful-participation-in-negotiating-peace-en.pdf?la=en&vs=3047.

Figure 1. Elements of women's meaningful participation in peace and security processes.

The EGM framework is based on a synthesis of academic and policy debates that unfolded around the concept of women's participation prior to the meeting. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, there has been little contestation of the four elements of meaningful participation identified by the EGM. However, there are also some troubling silences within the framework. First of all, the question of *who* participates is not clearly addressed. The reference to 'coalition building' under the deploying agenda component (see Figure 1) could be seen as a nod towards the importance of including *diverse* women in peace processes. However, failing to make explicit the need for inclusion of women from different backgrounds and with different identities is an important shortcoming of the framework. The EGM report does mention different groups of women in particular in the 'best practice' segments provided by different organisations that contributed to it. However, the consideration is not reflected in the conceptual framework itself. This omission, or silence, is consistent with the broader critique of the WPS agenda as not taking the intersectionality of women's experiences and identities seriously enough.[26] The second 'silence' within the EGM framework concerns the fact that it focuses exceedingly on women's participation in 'official' spaces, missing perhaps the opportunity to call for the recognition of the work women already *do* – notably through caring for their communities, contributing to trauma healing, and repairing relationships, both across conflict fault lines and within communities on the same side of a conflict.[27]

The silences within the EGM framework are important. However, I argue that they do not stem from the core structure or elements of the framework but rather insufficient nuance in how its components are

[26]Smith and Stavrevska, 'A Different Women, Peace and Security Is Possible?', 64.
[27]Fal-Dutra Santos, 'Building Trust Through Care'.

conceptualised. As a comprehensive consolidation of different discussions and meanings around 'meaningful participation', I find the framework to be a useful 'organising tool' in attempting to unpack the meanings of meaningful participation in the context of digitalisation. In the following section, I review the framework by applying a feminist lens to deepen and nuance the understanding of each of its components, thereby providing a more useful framework for my subsequent analysis.

Feminist perspectives on 'meaningful participation' in peace processes

Feminist literature has brought to light a range of challenges to women's participation in peace processes. Discussing these challenges provides a tacit insight into what participation *should* look like. For example, feminist scholars have warned of a tokenistic approach to women's participation – that is, including women as a matter of fulfilling a quota or an obligation, rather than because of regard for their merits and potential contributions.[28] In such cases, women 'are not necessarily empowered to make the changes they have planned'.[29] This affects the *ability or opportunity to influence process outcomes* as part of meaningful participation, in line with the EGM framework exerting influence component. Feminist scholarship helps better define what 'exerting influence' means. Gammage et al., for example, state that 'for change to happen, [women's] "voice" must go beyond the capacity to speak, it must be heard, listened to, and acted on'. This validates the importance of the 'exerting influence' component but also brings nuance to its meaning by tying it to the concept of voice, which is closely related to the idea of agency, discussed in more detail below.

Another key challenge to women's participation identified in feminist literature is *the lack of recognition of women's agency* – and the skills and experiences they bring. Scholars have pointed out that women's roles in peacebuilding are 'often overlooked, both by others and by themselves'.[30] This provides an important perspective on the silence behind the 'self-efficacy' component of the EGM framework, which emphasises women's skills and confidence but fails to mention the necessity of recognition and support for the capacities that already exist. Indeed, women's alleged lack of capacities or skills to participate in peace negotiations has often been used as an excuse for their exclusion – since 'demands for women's inclusion are often met with questioning women's capacity to act as negotiators, or requiring that they represent the entire spectrum and full diversity of women in the concerned country – neither of which is typically asked of other constituencies'.[31] However, feminist literature suggests that rather than focusing on improving women's capacities, it may be necessary to *recognise* those that are already there and provide greater visibility and support to women's actions.

In their discussions around women's participation in peace processes, feminist scholars have also provided important insights into the concept of 'agency'. 'Deploying agency' is one of the central components of the EGM framework. However, its definition within the framework is unclear, thus leaving space for (mis)interpretations and silences. In feminist literature, most references to 'agency' appear as a contrast to the depictions of women's victimhood. For example, the Global Study on the Implementation of Resolution 1325 states that '[r]esearch on youth gangs in Central America has begun to reveal the complex roles women and girls play in relation to gangs, including their agency as members and collaborators, *and not just victims of violence*.'[32] Similarly, Adjei notes that 'the exclusion of women from the peace table is fuelled by essentialist notions of women which consider them as victims of conflict rather than as active actors'.[33] In defining 'agency', many feminist scholars have built on the definition provided by Naila Kabeer, who framed it as the *ability to define and act on one's goals*. Building on in-depth interviews with Iraqi women activists, Henrizi adds to this

[28]Tolulope Jolaade Adeogun and Janet Muthoni Muthuki, 'Feminist Perspectives on Peacebuilding: The Case of Women's Organisations in South Sudan', *Agenda* 32, no. 2 (2018): 83–92, https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2018.1450572; and Maxwell Adjei, 'Women's Participation in Peace Processes: A Review of Literature', *Journal of Peace Education* 16, no. 2 (2019): 133–54, https://doi.org/10.1080/17400201.2019.1576515.
[29]Adeogun and Muthuki, 'Feminist Perspectives on Peacebuilding', 88.
[30]Zohra Moosa et al., 'From the Private to the Public Sphere: New Research on Women's Participation in Peace-Building', *Gender & Development* 21, no. 3 (2013): 453–72, https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2013.846585.
[31]Agnieszka Fal-Dutra Santos, *Towards Gender-Equal Peace: From 'Counting Women' to Meaningful Participation | HD Centre* (Oslo Forum, 2021), 4, https://www.hdcentre.org/publications/towards-gender-equal-peace-from-counting-women-to-meaningful-participation/.
[32]Radhika Coomaraswamy, *Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace: A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325* (UN Women, 2015), 210, https://wps.unwomen.org/pdf/en/GlobalStudy_EN_Web.pdf emphasis added.
[33]Adjei, 'Women's Participation in Peace Processes', 137.

definition, framing agency as something that 'implies more strategic planning, constantly reflecting one's own decisions of how to steer the organisation' and 'is framed as the possibility to pursue one's own agenda, meet the necessities on the ground and launch one's own initiatives'.[34] Agency, then, emerges not only as an ability to *act* on one's choices but to *strategically consider, deliberate and define* them. While the strategic decision-making and positioning of oneself can be done by an individual, feminist literature has brought to light the *collective* aspects of women's agency. For example, the Global Study concludes that '[p]roviding an environment where women's voice can coalesce into a collective voice can thus promote women's agency and greater gender equality'.[35] The reference to 'coalescing into a collective voice' highlights the importance of organising and community in pursuing agency. In a similar vein, Hudson argues for the recognition of 'deep agency' that goes beyond merely an ability to act and 'considers multiple overlapping identities'[36] as part of what constitutes one's agency. From a feminist perspective, then, 'Deploying agency' appears to have a clear collective component and be closely linked to one's identity and belonging to different groups. Agency is exercised not through asserting one's individuality but rather through defining and asserting one's identity and belonging.

The importance of collectivity is further stressed in feminist literature that focuses on the issue of *voice* and representation as a key aspect of (meaningful) participation. This literature points out that 'coming together around common goals and interests helps to amplify [women's] voice and increase the likelihood of influence in ways that would not be possible for individual women acting in isolation'.[37] Organising, movement-building and collective action, then, emerge as critical components of women's meaningful participation – components that are largely invisible in the EGM framework.

With regards to 'being present', The EGM framework defines it as a condition in which one is able to 'seize opportunities to inform, influence and make decisions'.[38] This is in line with the argumentation provided by WPS activists, who have pointed out that women peacebuilders are sometimes able to influence the content and dynamic of processes with their (embodied) presence. For example, '[i]n [UN Security Council, UNSC] meetings where women civil society briefers raise the issue of women's meaningful participation, UNSC members were more than twice as likely to also raise the issue as compared to meetings where there were no civil society briefers present'.[39] Thus, the very presence of civil society briefers has shaped what the UNSC members discussed during their meetings. Similarly, an oft-quoted example cites Liberian women who were not part of the official negotiation process and who 'staged a sit-in, blocking the doors of the building in which the negotiations were taking place until the parties came to an agreement'.[40] Paffenholz argues that this embodied presence 'gave civil society representatives on the inside greater leverage to push for an agreement'.[41] While most of the feminist literature ultimately focuses on the extent to which women's presence has been effective in influencing the outcomes of peace processes, feminist scholars have recognised that 'women's physical presence in agenda-setting forums can be politically important in its own right'.[42] For example, Berents argues that 'the physical presence of those who exist in the marginal positions of vulnerability and insecurity foisted upon them by circumstance' is central to the construction of 'everyday peace'.[43] She argues that peace is built through 'perpetuating the rhythms of relationships and practices of day-to-day life', which in turn contributes to resisting the diverse forms of marginalisation.[44] This aligns with a feminist conceptualisation of everyday peace as rooted in care and

[34]Henrizi, 'Building Peace in Hybrid Spaces', 85.
[35]Coomaraswamy, *Global Study on the Implementation of UNSCR 1325*, 174.
[36] Heidi Hudson, 'A Double-Edged Sword of Peace? Reflections on the Tension between Representation and Protection in Gendering Liberal Peacebuilding', *International Peacekeeping* 19, no. 4 (2012): 443–60, https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2012.709753, 108.
[37]Sarah Gammage et al., 'Voice and Agency: Where Are We Now?', *Feminist Economics* 22, no. 1 (2016): 5, https://doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2015.1101308.
[38]UN Women, *Women's Meaningful Participation in Negotiating Peace*, 12.
[39]Caitilin McMillan et al., *'Do Our Voices Matter?': An Analysis of Women Civil Society Representatives' Meaningful Participation at the UN Security Council* (NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security (NGOWG), 2020), 13, https://doi.org/10.21201/2020.7116.
[40]Paffenholz, 'Civil Society and Peace Negotiations', 80.
[41]Ibid.
[42]Goetz and Jenkins, 'Agency and Accountability', 270.
[43]Helen Berents, 'An Embodied Everyday Peace in the Midst of Violence', *Peacebuilding* 3, no. 2 (2015): 186, https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2015.1052632.
[44]Ibid., 186–7.

mundane acts of caring – which inevitably require an embodied presence of both those caring and those cared for.

A careful reading of feminist literature on women's participation and agency in peace processes allows us to re-frame the key components central to meaningful participation. First, the *embodied* presence as a means of influencing policy outcomes but also of (re-)shaping spaces through *mundane, everyday practices*. Second, the ability to deploy *deep* agency understood as a process that requires *collective strategising and movement-building around diverse identities*. Third, *recognition* of women's capacities, abilities and self-efficacy as a critical pre-condition for their meaningful participation. And fourth, the ability and opportunity to influence process outcomes, understood as exerting influence. These four categories build on the EGM framework but provide it with additional nuance based on feminist theorising around the concepts of participation and agency. In what follows, I apply this framework to answer the question: what happens to 'meaningful participation' when peace processes are moved to the digital realm?

Meaningful participation in the context of digital peacebuilding – reflections from empirical evidence

Embodied presence

Embodied presence carries great importance for feminists studying women's participation in peace processes. Is it possible to imagine women 'being present' in the same ways – bringing in their everyday experience and care – in peacebuilding spaces using digital platforms? Certainly, efforts have been made to create digital modalities of participation in peace processes. For example, problem solving workshops can (and increasingly do) take place online, as do public consultations to inform peace processes. Moreover, while a sit-in requires physical presence, women interviewed within the GNWP study suggested that access to digital spaces has provided them with other avenues to create pressure and leverage through online campaigning and giving visibility, for example, to cases of violence against women.[45]

In this sense, digital tools have been seen as a way to facilitate presence. High costs of travel and limited time due to the disproportionate burden of social reproductive labour (as well as the impossibility of arranging childcare, especially at short notice), have all been cited as factors restricting women's ability to meaningfully participate in peace processes and peacebuilding more broadly.[46] Virtual access options are viewed as a way to overcome the logistical hurdles. For example, a policy brief issued by UN Women and the UN Department for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs in September 2020 included digital tools, along with childcare, as a potential solution to the challenges women face in meaningful participation.[47]

This narrow focus might obscure other barriers faced by women – ones that are central to their presence as conceptualised by feminist activists: embodied and embedded in everyday practices and rhythms. Offering digital tools as a *solution* to the challenge of unequal care burden hides both the nuance of what it means to 'be present', and the complexity of the challenges women face. For example, an interviewee from the Philippines shared that 'if women spend too much time online, they are accused of not taking care of their children'.[48] Others have also noted that it is often difficult for women to find quiet space to be able to participate in online spaces.[49]

Offering digital access as a solution for women who are unable to attend meetings in person because of care responsibilities reflects the predominant worldview that does not view care or social reproductive labour as *work*. As Steans and Tepe note, '[n]eo-liberal ideology sees care work as a private household responsibility' and thus treats it differently than other types of work.[50] In a similar vein, Hester and Srnicek noted that 'activities of social reproduction have been both increasingly privatised and further entrenched within the personal sphere', in the neo-liberal

[45]Buzatu et al., *Women, Peace and Security and Human Rights in the Digital Age*, 12.
[46]Coomaraswamy, *Global Study on the Implementation of UNSCR 1325*.
[47]UN Women and UN DPPA, *COVID-19 and Conflict: Advancing Women's Meaningful Participation in Ceasefires and Peace Processes*, UN Women Policy Briefs 19, vol. 19, UN Women Policy Briefs (2020), https://doi.org/10.18356/0fb06dea-en.
[48]Unpublished interview with a Philippine woman activist, 2020.
[49]Buzatu et al., *Women, Peace and Security and Human Rights in the Digital Age*, 26.
[50]Jill Steans and Daniela Tepe, 'Introduction – Social Reproduction in International Political Economy: Theoretical Insights and International, Transnational and Local Sitings', *Review of International Political Economy* 17, no. 5 (2010): 811, https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2010.481928.

order.[51] The uncritical offering of digital access as a solution to women not being present because of the disproportionate care work burden, thus, reflects the fact that modern peacebuilding approaches are largely rooted in neo-liberal ideology.[52] Offering digital access would not be considered an effective solution for factory workers who cannot leave their posts to be able to attend a meeting. Yet, it is considered that a mother performing her social reproductive duties can, at the same time, effectively and meaningfully participate in an online meeting. In this sense, the approaches to digital inclusion and 'meaningful participation' online are constituted by the social context in which they have been developed – one marked by patriarchal social norms and the invisibilisation of social reproductive labour. Women provided with an option to participate virtually, but not with any support to their care duties are thus not only unable to participate in an *embodied* way, but the very rhythms of their everyday life and care work – which could become a foundation for their peacebuilding work – are disrupted by the inclusion attempts.

There is thus a need to think more critically about what 'being present' in the digital realm means and how this presence can be facilitated in a way that does not reproduce existing patterns of exclusion. Online participation can never be 'embodied' in the most basic meaning of the world. However, it might not be impossible to imagine online inclusion modalities that allow for participation that makes space and aligns with the everyday rhythms of women's care work, thus allowing for inclusion that is more meaningful. In fact, in their 'Manifesto for our Digitally Mediated World', the feminist collective 'Feminist Digital Justice' call for an 'intelligence economy that humanises labor and enables the realm of work to be reconstructed as a site of self-actualisation'.[53] They provide several concrete pathways towards such a change – including the construction of digital platforms that are designed to serve solidarity enterprises and movements, as well as the provision of universal care support. The solutions they suggest blend the digital and non-digital. This underscores that digital technologies 'cannot be seen as a replacement for human interaction in particular when it comes to peacebuilding work',[54] and should rather be seen as a complement of the peacebuilding practices (including the everyday, embodied ones) that take place outside of the digital realm.

Recognition and support of existing capacities

As noted above, the 'self-efficacy' component of the EGM meaningful participation framework carries with it a risk of obscuring the skills and capacities women peacebuilders already possess. In the digital realm, 'self-efficacy' has most often been framed through the lens of digital literacy – the ability to use digital tools and platforms. This was highlighted by several of the interviewees. For example, an interviewee from Armenia noted that 'many people might have access [to ICTs], but do not know how to use the platforms – which platforms are safer or more trustworthy, how to protect themselves online'.[55] This view is consistent with that embraced by international actors working on digital inclusion. The UK's Digital Access Program lists promoting digital literacy and skills as one of its main strategies for ensuring digital inclusion alongside affordable connectivity.[56] Digital literacy and skills are also one of the core desired results of the Women in the Digital Economy Fund, jointly ran by USAID and Bill and Miranda Gates' Foundation.[57]

Framing self-efficacy in the digital realm primarily in terms of the skills to access online platforms is likely to obscure women's existing capacities, including those that could help them leverage digital tools for peacebuilding work. Reflecting on the 2016 peace process in Colombia, one interviewee noted that while there was not enough information about the negotiation in the mainstream media, 'as soon as the negotiators started to communicate a bit more about the advancements of the

[51]Helen Hester and Nicholas Srnicek, 'The Crisis of Social Reproduction and the End of Work' in *The Age of Preplexity: Rethinking the World We Knew* (Fundacion BBVA, Barcelona: 2017): 372–389.
[52]Suzanne Bergeron et al., 'Rebuilding Bridges: Toward a Feminist Research Agenda for Postwar Reconstruction', *Politics & Gender* 13, no. 04 (2017): 715–21, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X17000368.
[53]Feminist Digital Justice, 'A Manifesto for Our Digitally Mediated World,' n.d., https://feministdigitaljustice.net/ (accessed August 23, 2024).
[54]Buzatu et al., *Women, Peace and Security and Human Rights in the Digital Age*, 18.
[55]Unpublished interview with an Armenian activist, September 2020.
[56]OECD, 'Leaving No One behind in a Digital World: The United Kingdom's Digital Access Programme', *OECD*, December 2021, https://www.oecd.org/development-cooperation-learning/practices/leaving-no-one-behind-in-a-digital-world-the-united-kingdom-s-digital-access-programme-e8b15982/.
[57]USAID, 'Women in the Digital Economy Fund | Basic Page', U.S. Agency for International Development, March 12, 2024, https://www.usaid.gov/digital-development/gender-digital.

negotiations, WhatsApp became very handy, as long chains of graphics explaining the process were shared'.[58] An interviewee from the Philippines noted that social media had become a platform to 'drum up and show reality by posting photos and testimonies that are not going to be covered by mainstream media, collect, and share narratives of harassment and indignities' that took place during the Marawi siege.[59] Having such information at their fingertips can help women peace activists prepare to represent and convincingly argue for their key interests and priorities – thus contributing to their self-efficacy in the peace processes. However, collecting and sharing such information required primarily the non-digital skills of women – the ability to organise and mobilise and to document violations and abuses. While technology helped women disseminate the information, the types of technology used – Facebook and WhatsApp – required minimal digital literacy. It was the other skills that made it possible for women to leverage these spaces.

This is not to argue that digital literacy is not important or to invalidate programs and strategies that seek to enhance it. However, it does question this approach as predominant in addressing women's self-efficacy and ability to meaningfully participate in the digital space. Women's activism is chronically underfunded, with local organisations in particular struggling to access funds to support their work.[60] Women's organising work – the work to build movements and build the trust necessary to be able to use social media to access and share information effectively – is particularly underfunded.[61] This, once again, reflects the patriarchal social context in which the approaches to women's participation are conceived – a context which places greater value on 'hard' skills, such as an ability to use a particular device or software, which are often viewed as 'masculine' than 'soft' skills such as ability to organise and interpersonal and communication skills often viewed as 'feminine'.[62] To address this bias, programs aimed at digital inclusion could consider supporting non-digital skills and activities that might contribute to a better use of digital tools in the long run. They can also design digital programs in ways that more clearly link the digital platforms to women's social concerns and the needs of their communities – for example, providing women with space to jointly strategise and design digital campaigns that would benefit their communities rather than focusing on teaching them how to use particular tools.[63]

Exerting influence

Arguably, digital tools can be useful in enabling women to provide inputs into outcomes of peace processes, including, in particular, written outcomes. Working on a text allows greater flexibility in terms of time – different actors can input at different times, making it easier to adapt to different schedules. Moreover, reviewing a text often requires a lower broadband than participating in an online meeting, removing yet another barrier to access. There are some examples of digital consultations on draft documents. The draft of the UN Secretary-General's report on WPS – for example – is circulated to the members of the Inter-agency Standing Committee on WPS (including civil society representatives) each year, and inputs are collected. This has resulted in many of the suggestions of women-led civil society being integrated into the report, often literally.[64] However, there is little evidence of such strategies – direct circulation of text for comments – being used as a way of digital inclusion of women in peace processes. In Colombia and the Philippines, the primary digital strategies for including women in processes related to peace and security, such as peace negotiations and the development of other key policies, like the National Action Plan (NAP) on WPS, were (1) the use of social media and messaging to create channels between women and negotiators at the table; and (2) online consultations.[65] For example, during the negotiations between the Colombian government and

[58]Unpublished interview with a Colombian activist, September 2020.
[59]Unpublished interview with a Philippine activist, 2020.
[60]Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP) et al., *FUND US LIKE YOU WANT US TO WIN: Feminist Solutions for More Impactful Financing for Peacebuilding*, Background Paper (2022).
[61]Fal-Dutra Santos, 'Building Trust Through Care'; and Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP) et al., *FUND US LIKE YOU WANT US TO WIN*.
[62]Kaela Jubas and Shauna Butterwick, 'Hard/Soft, Formal/Informal, Work/Learning: Tenuous/Persistent Binaries in the Knowledge-based Society', *Journal of Workplace Learning* 20, no. 7/8 (2008): 521, https://doi.org/10.1108/13665620810900337.
[63]Fiona Suwana and Lily, 'Empowering Indonesian Women through Building Digital Media Literacy', *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences* 38, no. 3 (2017): 212–7, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.kjss.2016.10.004.
[64]Example is based on the author's own lived experience.
[65]Buzatu et al., *Women, Peace and Security and Human Rights in the Digital Age*, 10.

the FARC, a *Mesa de Conversaciones* was launched – a website that allowed anyone to provide their recommendations or priority issues for the process. However, the GNWP report found many of the [17,000] submissions were spam and fake messages [and] there was also no clarity on how the messages would be transmitted to the negotiators, and no transparency on if and how they were ultimately included in the peace agreement.[66]

Putting aside the structural and bureaucratic shortcomings that make it difficult to effectively systematise inputs from consultations and ensure they make their way into the final version of a text, an aspect of exerting influence in the digital realm that is important to consider is the extent to which women are actually *listened to* when their presence is not embodied. For example, a woman from Georgia noted that 'It is easier for government actors to ignore [women peacebuilders] online', while a woman from Ukraine noted that in online meetings, government officials can 'switch women off', whereas in non-digital spaces persistence is what allows women to get their point across.[67]

While this challenge is not unique to women, one could argue that it has been more acutely experienced by women because of how their experiences and expertise have traditionally been marginalised and ignored. Different studies have shown that men are more likely to be perceived as 'brilliant' than women,[68] and more likely to be thought competent as leaders (especially by other men).[69,70] These perceptions mean that women are less likely to be conferred *epistemic authority* – defined as being granted based on 'sexist, racist and classist assumptions about reliability, intelligence and sincerity.[71] In considering the relationship between gender and epistemic authority, Janack notes that '[m]any women find that in telling the story of their own experiences, their interpretations are given less credibility than those offered by husbands, doctors, or other authorities'.[72] Thus, a 'privileged position within social contexts adds a certain form of objectivity and a level of authority to claims of knowledge'.[73] The social reality within which women are generally conferred less epistemic authority is likely to be reflected in how their online presence is perceived. For example, both women peacebuilders facing connection issues and high-level diplomats facing conflicting schedules might resort to submitting a pre-recorded video as a way of participating in meetings and events. However, given the different levels of epistemic authority enjoyed by these actors, it is likely that the diplomat's video will be listened to more carefully and ultimately able to exert more influence than the one recorded by a woman peacebuilder. Bearing in mind the intersectional impacts of different identities held by an individual on their epistemic authority, there might also be differences between the extent to which a female and a male diplomat is listened to – although discussing those is beyond the scope of this paper.

Women have used their embodied presence to demand that their issues be recognised. Because their expertise is often not respected, they have to insist, follow the policymakers down the hallways and organise sit-ins to ensure that their arguments are heard. The move towards digital consultations as an avenue for exerting influence makes this more difficult. As a result, it r produces the marginalisation of women's experiences.

Mobilising to deploy collective agency

If agency is defined as the ability to set and pursue goals, what can it look like in the context of digital peacebuilding? The evidence collected through the GNWP research suggests digital technologies may play

[66]Ibid., 21.
[67]Ibid., 28.
[68]Daniel Storage et al., 'Adults and Children Implicitly Associate Brilliance with Men More than Women', *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 90 (September 2020): 104,020, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2020.104020.
[69]Hentschel, Heilman, and Peus, 'The Multiple Dimensions of Gender Stereotypes: A Current Look at Men's and Women's changeCharacterizationschangechangeCharacterisationschange of Others and Themselves', *Frontiers in Psychology* 10 (2019), https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00011; and United Nations, 'Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the Twenty-Third Special Session of the General Assembly, Entitled Women 2000'.
[70]Hentschel et al., 'The Multiple Dimensions of Gender Stereotypes'; and United Nations, *Review and Appraisal of the Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the Outcomes of the Twenty-Third Special Session of the General Assembly*, with United Nations, Official Records (United Nations Economic and Social Council) (UN, 2019), 53–85, https://doi.org/10.18356/6e4ab32d-en.
[71]Marianne Janack, 'Standpoint Epistemology Without the ? Standpoint?: An Examination of Epistemic Privilege and Epistemic Authority', *Hypatia* 12, no. 2 (1997): 130, https://doi.org/10.2979/hyp.1997.12.2.125.
[72]Ibid., 132.
[73]Nicola A Harding, 'Co-Constructing Feminist Research: Ensuring Meaningful Participation While Researching the Experiences of Criminalised Women', *Methodological Innovations* 13, no. 2 (2020): 3, https://doi.org/10.1177/2059799120925262.

a role in facilitating consensus and movement-building and in devising collective agendas and consultations. Several of the interviewees pointed out that online platforms have facilitated their networking and made them feel part of a transnational community. An interviewee from the Philippines noted that 'ICTs offer spaces where one can feel that they belong to a group of peacebuilders'.[74] Similarly, an interviewee from Cameroon noted that digital platforms have allowed her to 'network and collaborate with my sisters in the region', increasing both the reach of her advocacy and the feeling of belonging.[75] Being able to communicate and coordinate helps women activists establish a shared agenda, including with actors they might otherwise not reach as easily – such as transnational networks and the diaspora – as was the case in South Sudan during the COVID-19 pandemic.[76] This is significant, especially if we consider the importance of transnational networks as a channel for women to deploy their agency and to 'reach beyond policy change to advocate and instigate changes in the institutional and principled bases of international interactions'.[77] In other words, beyond merely exerting influence, by engaging in transnational networks, women activists seek to *shape the environment* in which they operate – in line with the meaning of deploying one's agency based on feminist literature.[78] Digital tools can facilitate the formation and maintenance of such networks – thus enabling women to establish their goals and exercise their agency as part of broader collectives that allow them to position themselves and assert their often complex and multiple identities.

The considerations of the importance of collectivity, organising, solidarity and movement-building in the digital realm are abundantly visible in the strategies adopted by feminist collectives and activists working on digitalisation. The Feminist Digital Justice collective identifies solidarity-building as one of the key components of change in its manifesto. Similarly, the Association for Progressive Communications recognises 'network- and movement-building' as a strategy towards achieving its mission of ensuring that 'the internet and digital technologies enable social, gender and environmental justice for all people'.[79]

Conclusion: (re-)defining 'meaningful participation' in a digitalised world

In the above discussion, I considered how different aspects of 'meaningful participation' might translate into the digital realm. Building on feminist literature, I sought to provide a nuanced definition of 'meaningful participation' and its components that took seriously the various, often invisible, aspects of women's peacebuilding work. An analysis of key policy and strategy documents around women's participation in digital spaces indicates that the primary focus is often on (1) access to the internet and digital technologies; (2) protection of women in the digital sphere, and preventing gender-based violence online; and (3) digital literacy of women. While all three elements are important and necessary, the disproportionate focus on them results in digital inclusion programmes and initiatives that flatten the concept of 'digital participation', moving away of the key elements that could make it meaningful. 'Being present' is reduced to being able to access the internet, with challenges created by women's disproportionate care responsibilities largely made invisible and ignored. 'Self-efficacy' is reduced to being able to use digital tools, with underlying social norms that might affect women's confidence in online spaces obscured and women's non-digital skillsets largely unrecognised. 'Exerting influence' and 'deploying agency' are largely missing from digital inclusion frameworks and programmes, and – as a result – women's organising and mobilising (both online and offline) remains woefully underfunded.

What then, could be some recommendations for better supporting women's meaningful digital participation? Indeed, while concluding that participation through digital platforms works best when accompanied by in-person participation might not be a novel or ground-breaking conclusion, it bears repeating, since there is a danger in viewing online organising and campaigning as a 'cost-saving' alternative to in-person meetings. Lower costs of online engagements have often been cited by the interviewees as a benefit of digitalisation. However, given the fact that women's participation – and in particular the movement-building and organising requisite for effectively deploying agency – is already severely underfunded,

[74]Unpublished interview with Philippine woman activist, 2020.
[75]Buzatu et al., *Women, Peace and Security and Human Rights in the Digital Age*, 14.
[76]Fal-Dutra Santos et al., 'Lockdown on Peace?', 14–5.
[77]Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, 'Transnational Advocacy Networks in International and Regional Politics', *International Social Science Journal* 51, no. 159 (1999): 89, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2451.00179.
[78]Henrizi, 'Building Peace in Hybrid Spaces', 88.
[79]Association for Progressive Communications, '2024–2027 Strategic Plan', 2024, https://www.apc.org/en/strategic-plan-2024-2027.

focusing on the 'cost-saving' potential without 'summoning' the digital solutions to investigate their potential for advancing women's *meaningful* participation in more depth, can perpetuate the systematic and systemic exclusion in the long run.

A pluriversal approach – one that recognises that the value in bringing together different realities of digital peacebuilding – is thus promising. That could start with better understanding the digital landscape of a specific context rather than applying a one-size-fits-all solution. In many conflict-affected contexts, relying on low-data technologies, such as messaging applications in addition to in-person engagements has been successful in facilitating more fruitful exchanges and fostering relationships that are central to ensuring meaningful participation.

On the other hand, programmes aimed at enhancing women's meaningful participation could benefit from a reflection on how digital processes intersect, interact or build on those happening without the digital spaces. This would allow for a greater appreciation of the non-digital work and skills that women bring to the table. Digital literacy programmes might be useful in some contexts, whereas in others funding in-person meeting possibilities, which can give rise to online campaigns and networking, could be more valuable.

Finally, while it is important to invest in programmes explicitly designed to improve digital access, it is also key to recognise that the under-valuing and under-financing of women's peacebuilding work – in particular, the work to build movements, to organise and to heal differences *within* movements, in particular in the aftermath of a violent conflict.

I hope this article will open a space for further research on how women's presence and participation in online spaces is conceptualised and – consequently – through what programmes and measures it is supported.

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