



Permanent Mission  
of the Federal Republic of Germany  
to the United Nations  
New York

# WOMEN IN ARMED GROUPS: CHALLENGING INVISIBILITY THROUGH GENDER- RESPONSIVE DDR PROCESSES

HIGH-LEVEL EVENT & TECHNICAL-LEVEL MEETING



**DATE & TIME:** 18 MARCH 2025, 10:00AM – 12:30PM

**LOCATION:** PERMANENT MISSION OF GERMANY TO THE UNITED NATIONS

# SUMMARY

“ *Promoting the WPS agenda is not an ideological but a practical necessity for effective peacekeeping* ”

**MR. JEAN-PIERRE LACROIX**



On 18 March, the Department of Peace Operations organized, with the support of the Permanent Mission of Germany to the UN, a High-Level Event and a Technical-level meeting, labelled: Women in Armed Groups: Challenging invisibility through Gender-Responsive DDR processes”.

The two diverse panels brought together experts from across the UN system and created engaging platforms for exchanging ideas on promoting gender-responsive DDR in mission and non-mission settings. The event facilitated an in-depth analysis of how interventions have supported women’s meaningful participation in DDR throughout the peace continuum, from prevention, peacemaking, peacekeeping, to peacebuilding and development.

Participants reaffirmed their commitment to advancing gender-responsive DDR and translating discussions into actionable policies and programs.

**Mr. Jean-Pierre Lacroix**  
*USG for Peace Operations, DPO*

## BACKGROUND

The year 2025 marks the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, as well as the 25th anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS). Both are milestone decisions that highlight the critical role of women in peace and security efforts, especially their agency and meaningful participation in decision-making. The absence of women's meaningful participation in negotiations and political processes that shape DDR processes, along with their exclusion from implementing programs, undermines the objectives of the Beijing Declaration and UN Security Council's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda.

Structural constraints, socio-cultural biases, and stigma—such as the perception that gun holders are predominantly men—have historically caused DDR processes to focus primarily on male combatants, often overlooking the unique experiences and needs of female ex-combatants and women associated with armed groups. Acknowledging this gap, the WPS agenda advocates for the inclusion of gender-sensitive approaches in DDR processes, highlighting the distinct contributions and needs of women and girls in conflict settings.

Significant progress has been made in addressing gender disparities over the past two decades. However, these milestone anniversaries provide a crucial opportunity to assess these advancements and ensure that DDR processes are gender-responsive at every stage, from mediation and integrated planning to the design and implementation of interventions.

## OPENING REMARKS

*Opening remarks were delivered by:*

**H.E. Antje Leendertse** (*Permanent Representative of Germany to the UN*)

**Ms. Sima Sami Bahous** (*Executive Director, UN Women*)

**Mr. Jean-Pierre Lacroix** (*USG for Peace Operations, DPO*)

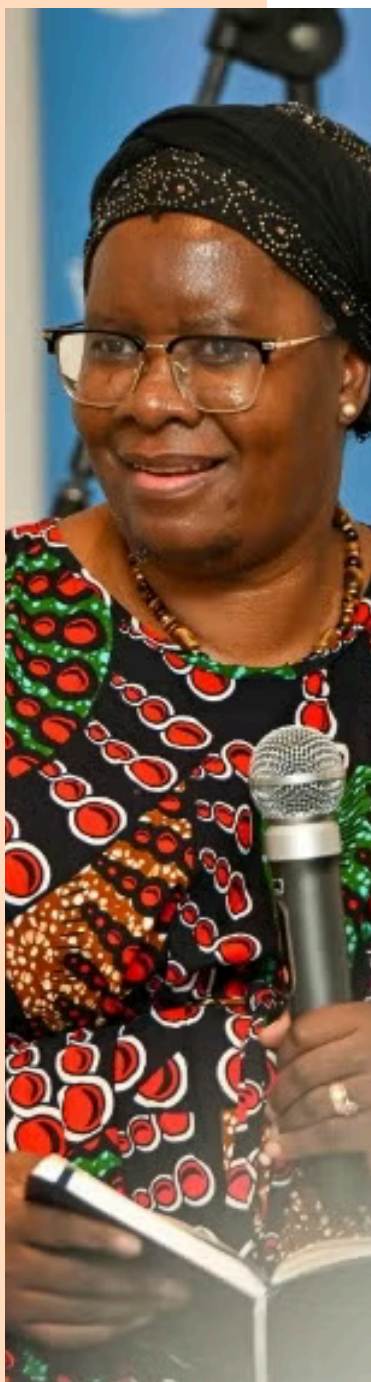
*The panels were moderated by:*

**Ms. Awa Dabo** (*Director and Deputy Head of Office, PBSO*) and

**Mr. Thomas Kontogeorgos** (*DDR Section Chief, OROLSI*)

# HIGH-LEVEL PANEL I: WOMEN'S ROLES ACROSS THE PEACE CONTINUUM

**Ms. Nyaradzayi  
Gumbonzvanda,**  
*Deputy Executive  
Director at UN Women*



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*DDR is not an event but a life-long process in designing responses*

**MS. NYARADZAYI GUMBONZVANDA**

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This panel aimed to bring together key stakeholders to exchange ideas and information on the promotion of gender-responsive DDR processes. Discussions allowed the dissemination of national efforts and international support in fostering women's participation at all stages of DDR processes. Besides analyzing new conflict dynamics and women's diverse roles, panelists have assessed political and operational challenges in advancing the WPS agenda. Representatives from IOM, UNICEF, and UN Women highlighted the importance of community-based reintegration and trauma-informed DDR programming, emphasizing the need for increased funding and long-term sustainability.

**Ms. Awa Dabo**, Director and Deputy Head of Office at the Peacebuilding Support Office, skillfully introduced the session and guided the discussion through thoughtful questions. Her facilitation highlighted the diverse perspectives of the panelists and ensured a focused and engaging conversation on the gendered dimensions of reintegration.

## NIGERIA & CAMEROON: A SHARED TRAJECTORY

The session was opened by **Mr. Syndoph Endoni**, Chargé d’Affaires ad interim at the Permanent Mission of Nigeria to the UN, who shared the country’s experience in strengthening women’s roles in peace efforts. Nigeria established a gender task force within its national DDR process to ensure women’s full inclusion. This initiative offers comprehensive support to former combatants, including psychological and social assistance, education, vocational training, counseling, and economic empowerment. The Nigerian gender task force is designed to facilitate the reintegration and recovery of former combatants by aiding their trauma healing process and promoting the development of sustainable livelihoods.

Furthermore, Mr. Endoni elaborated on the collaborative efforts undertaken by countries in the region to implement gender-sensitive approaches. At the national level, Nigeria led initiatives to manage large-scale mass exits from armed groups, notably Boko Haram, to smooth their subsequent reintegration into civilian life. If at the national level efforts are directed towards structured reintegration pathways, the persistent threat of terrorism in the Sahel continues to jeopardize regional stability and underscores the imperative for fortified transnational partnership. Mr. Endoni concluded his intervention by echoing that the success of DDR initiatives in Nigeria is inextricably linked to robust regional cooperation and collective action.

Nigeria’s situation parallels that of Cameroon, as noted by **Ms. Raina Fabo**, a representative of the National DDR Commission (NDDRC). Cameroon faces crises stemming from Boko Haram and the Anglophone conflict, resulting in internal displacement, arms proliferation, educational disruptions, and gender-based violence (GBV). To address these challenges, Cameroon developed a DDR gender strategy in 2021, emphasizing socioeconomic reintegration, inclusion, and the reduction of stigmatization. Supported by IOM, the program collaborates with local women’s associations to empower women and promote community reintegration. Ms. Fabo stressed that women should be seen not just as victims but as agents of change, actively facilitating DDR processes by encouraging family members to disarm. Currently, around 790 women are enrolled in DDR centers across Cameroon.

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*We must channel power from guns to voices*

**MS. NYARADZAYI GUMBONZVANDA**

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## CATALYZING A NARRATIVE SHIFT

The Deputy Executive Director of UN Women, **Ms. Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda**, highlighted the links between weapons proliferation, cycles of violence, and GBV, emphasizing the need to focus on prevention, dismantle the power structures that sustain conflict, and incorporate early warning mechanisms for conflict-related sexual violence within DDR. Ms. Gumbonzvanda stressed that misconceptions, such as equating women with victims or assuming they occupy only non-combat roles, hinder women from accessing essential reintegration support. Such assumptions minimize women's presence, agency, and experiences. Ms. Gumbonzvanda called for a broader perspective on demobilization, extending beyond individuals to institutions and linking it to democratization as a key factor in advancing human rights. A shift in narrative is crucial to recognizing women's diverse roles in armed ecosystems and ensuring they receive the necessary support and opportunities for reintegration into society.

## CENTRING POWER: WOMEN-LED LOCAL ACTION

As a complement, the Director of the IOM Office to the UN, **Mr. Pär Liljert**, emphasized the crucial role of women-led community-based organizations in successful reintegration efforts, thus highlighting their active participation as part of the solution. He stressed that insufficient attention is given to the local level, which is essential for trust-building and inclusive reintegration. Specifically, Mr. Liljert stated that DDR efforts should place greater focus on integrating the families of former combatants into reintegration processes to foster long-term social cohesion. To strengthen local engagement, he encouraged DDR practitioners to leverage the extensive network of field offices available to them, which are well-positioned to identify community priorities and needs. Like Mr. Endoni, he underscored the importance of international cooperation in ensuring effective interventions. Mr. Liljert concluded by noting that engagement with community-based organizations requires a sustained on-the-ground presence, which entails significant costs, thereby underscoring the critical need for adequate funding.

## RESPONDING TO GIRLS' REALITIES

**Ms. Sheema Sen Gupta**, Director of Child Protection and Migration at UNICEF, concluded the discussion by emphasizing the unique challenges faced by girls, which should inform DDR processes. Echoing Ms. Fabo, she highlighted the agency of women associated with armed groups while also acknowledging their vulnerabilities. One of the key barriers faced by girls is invisibility, which often stems from the distinct forms of violence they endure or witness and the ways in which their communities perceive their association with armed groups. She pointed out that girls, in particular, are more likely to experience socio-economic hardships and stigmatization upon reintegration, often encountering greater barriers to education and training compared to boys. She concluded by advocating for the prioritization of tailored DDR support systems, in particular screening tools for girls and GBV case management and services, for which financial resources are essential.



## TECHNICAL-LEVEL PANEL II: SUPPORT TO GENDER- RESPONSIVE DDR PROCESSES

**Ms Sheema Sen Gupta,**  
*Director of Child  
Protection and Migration  
at UNICEF*



“ *1 in 8 girls will experience rape or sexual assault before the age of 18, and these rates are higher in conflict situations.* ”

**MS. SHEEMA SEN GUPTA**

This panel brought together UN experts, DDR practitioners, and representatives of civil society organizations to discuss the challenges and opportunities for integrating gender-responsive approaches in DDR processes. Speakers shared personal experiences, research findings, and best practices to address the women’s invisibility in DDR, the stigma they face, and the barriers to their reintegration. The discussion emphasized the importance of systemic change, community involvement, and tailored support to ensure women’s meaningful participation and long-term reintegration.

**Mr. Thomas Kontogeorgos**, Chief of the DDR Section and moderator, highlighted the need to enhance women’s participation in peace processes, where they remain underrepresented as mediators and negotiators. He stressed that DDR has lifelong impacts and requires adequate resources along with tailored approaches for specific groups. He also emphasized the importance of a joint commitment to gender equality, strong partnerships with peacebuilders, and the development of new tools to bring greater diversity to all areas of DDR.



## BREAKING BARRIERS: A WOMAN IN CHARGE

**Ms. Aimee Therese Faye**, Chief of the DDR Section at the UN Integrated Office in Haiti, shared her personal experiences, aiming to inspire others by highlighting the challenges of balancing family life with her demanding role in DDR, often in non-family duty stations. She spoke openly about the sacrifices involved and the difficulties of navigating motherhood while working in a field where women are still underrepresented. Despite these challenges, she witnessed firsthand the significant impact of gender-responsive approaches. While she acknowledged improvements in women's empowerment and progress toward gender equality, she also recognized that many women continue to struggle for basic rights and are excluded from DDR decision-making processes. She emphasized that neglect and inequality persist in many areas due to a lack of genuine commitment to change. The silencing of women's and girls' voices through violence and oppression continues to fuel her determination to advocate for change.

## CHALLENGES, MISCONCEPTIONS & THE ROLE OF STIGMA

**Ms. Barbra Lukunka**, Senior Policy and Programme Officer at IOM, highlighted the persistent barriers and misperceptions that women, particularly those associated with armed groups, face in DDR processes. Despite progress, DDR remains a predominantly masculinized field, reinforcing stereotypes that either exclude women or discourage their participation due to stigma. Many women altogether avoid DDR processes, fearing societal rejection. Furthermore, women who are not classified as fighters are often left out of reintegration efforts, despite being part of the broader conflict ecosystem. While women are undoubtedly victims of violence, reducing them solely to this role hinders proper reintegration. Ms. Lukunka emphasized the necessity for a more nuanced understanding of women's roles in armed groups. Hence, IOM has implemented an Information Counseling and Referral System, a data-driven tool that customizes reintegration efforts to individual socio-economic needs. Recognizing and addressing the gender dynamics of DDR is crucial for dismantling barriers and ensuring effective, long-term reintegration.

## A SHIFT IN MINDSET

To better prevent conflict onset and to interrupt conflict cycles, UNIDIR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) project generates a unique evidence base on people's journeys into and out of armed groups that helps practitioners prevent recruitment and support exits after conflict involvement. **Dr. Siobhan O'Neil**, Project Director of MEAC, highlighted the key challenges faced by women and girls during reintegration. Despite the existence of DDR efforts, many women return to their communities in poor conditions, malnourished, living in poverty, and often with children to care for. Often overlooked, they are perceived as economic burdens rather than survivors. Additionally, women encounter functional barriers when accessing DDR programs, with men frequently receiving priority. Dr. O'Neil emphasized the difficulty of achieving true demobilization for women, particularly those in forced marriages, as economic pressures and social constraints limit their choices. She also pointed out issues such as the lack of identification papers and displacement, which further impede their reintegration. Emphasizing the need for a shift in mindset, she noted that association with armed groups is complex and requires careful handling to avoid perpetuating violence.



## A COMMUNITY APPROACH

**Ms. Lilla Schumicky-Logan**, Deputy Executive Director of the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF), emphasized the importance of trust-building in DDR processes, especially for women who may have been exposed to violent extremist ideologies. She stressed the need to involve religious and community leaders, as well as the communities themselves, to counter extremist narratives and create a supportive environment for women's reintegration. A holistic approach is crucial, which includes community preparation and clear communication to help the community understand and accept returning women. She outlined a comprehensive case management system encompassing material, economic, and psychosocial support, such as shelter, legal assistance, economic integration, and trauma counseling. Engaging religious leaders is also key to addressing cultural and religious sensitivities. Furthermore, supporting the children of these women through education and psychological support is essential for successful reintegration, as mothers are deeply motivated by their children's well-being. Ms. Schumicky-Logan also highlighted the importance of urging governments to repatriate nationals to ensure their safe return.

## MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

**Ms. Glaucia Boyer**, Global Advisor on Reintegration-DDR-PRR at UNDP, discussed the evolving landscape of DDR, which has traditionally been a male-dominated environment. While more women are now participating, she highlighted the issue of invisibility, where women's roles—as participants and beneficiaries—are often overlooked in DDR processes. Many women are excluded from DDR programs because they are not listed as combatants, and consequently, are not considered direct beneficiaries, an exclusion further reinforced by gender stereotypes. Ms. Boyer shared that sometimes, separate processes may be necessary for women to avoid further stigmatization. She emphasized the importance of understanding the perspectives of armed groups and adapting DDR approaches to fit the diverse contexts.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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- Strengthen women’s **meaningful participation** in entities and ministries supporting DDR processes (e.g., national DDR commissions and peace committees) to ensure inclusive DDR processes and programs addressing the diverse roles and needs of women associated with armed groups.
- Develop **tailored DDR programs** for women and distinct initiatives for girls, focusing on psychosocial support, livelihoods, education, technical guidance, addressing gender- and conflict-related sexual violence, basic health needs, and providing legal frameworks on issues such as forced marriage.
- **Combat stigma** and facilitate social reintegration through community sensitization and engagement with local authorities, community elders, and religious leaders.
- **Expand funding** for gender-responsive DDR initiatives, prioritizing those led by women’s organizations and community-based efforts to sustain life-long programs.
- **Improve identification** and **support** for women associated with armed groups through adapted screening tools, data collection, and research.
- **Use terminology** accurately reflecting women’s diverse roles in armed groups and reframe DDR as a peacebuilding tool, prioritizing human security, reintegration, tension reduction, and long-term social cohesion over militarized approaches.

