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## Empowering Women in Mediation and Negotiation in the Great Lakes Region of Africa: A Problem Statement

Anita Kiamba<sup>1</sup> , Svetlana A. Bokeriya<sup>2</sup>  <sup>1</sup>University of Nairobi, Nairobi, Kenya<sup>2</sup>RUDN University, Moscow, Russian Federation bokeria-sa@rudn.ru

**Abstract.** Prolonged conflicts have been experienced in almost half of the countries in the Great Lakes region. Despite the robust efforts of mediators and peacemakers, peace processes aimed at resolving these conflicts have not been successful. The relevance of this research stems from the UN's introduction of a gender perspective into peacekeeping architecture over the past two decades, as well as the increasing role of women not only in peace and security, but also in mediation, negotiation and preventive diplomacy. Based on an interdisciplinary, historical and structural-functional approach, this article aims to identify the role of women as facilitators in mediation and negotiation processes in the Great Lakes region of Africa. In addition, the authors used a case study method to investigate the role of women in negotiations and mediations in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and to identify challenges to the peace process, as well as the method of analysis of the official UN documents and data, analytical reports of international organizations. The results obtained made it possible to establish that, despite possessing certain attributes that are critical for the successful outcome of peace processes, women are often sidelined from these processes. Women can participate in the entire peace process or in specific phases of negotiation and mediation. Major findings of the research are that women should be empowered by states, conflict parties and supporters to become mediators or negotiators. It is generally recommended that this empowerment should include the development of skills in mediation and negotiation, thereby facilitating effective contributions to the success of peace process outcomes. This experience can be scaled up and used in crisis management in other African states, which will make it possible to implement successfully the recommendations contained in the UNSC resolution 1325.

**Key words:** Women, peace and security agenda, WPS, mediation, negotiation, peacekeeping, the African Union, AU, UN, UN Security Council

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## Содействие женщинам в посредничестве и переговорах в районе Великих Африканских озер: постановка проблемы

А. Киамба<sup>1</sup> , С.А. Бокерия<sup>2</sup>  

<sup>1</sup> Университет Найроби, Найроби, Кения

<sup>2</sup> Российский университет дружбы народов, Москва, Российская Федерация

 bokeria-sa@rudn.ru

**Аннотация.** Почти половина стран, расположенных в регионе Великих озер, пережила затяжные конфликты. Мирные процессы, направленные на урегулирование конфликтов, не привели к их разрешению, несмотря на активные усилия посредников. Миротворчество также не увенчалось успехом. Актуальность данного исследования обусловлена внедрением Организацией Объединенных Наций (ООН) гендерной перспективы в архитектуру миротворчества, наблюдаемым на протяжении последних двух десятилетий, возрастающей ролью женщин не только в вопросах мира и безопасности, но и посредничества, а также в переговорах и превентивной дипломатии. На основании междисциплинарного, исторического и структурно-функционального подхода рассмотрена необходимость содействия участию женщин в переговорных, посреднических процессах и в области превентивной дипломатии в районе Великих озер Африки. Кроме того, использован метод кейс-стади с целью исследования роли женщин в переговорном и посредническом процессе в Демократической Республике Конго (ДРК) и выявления проблем на пути мирного процесса. Исследование опирается на официальные документы и данные ООН, аналитические доклады международных организаций. Полученные результаты позволили установить, что женщины часто остаются в стороне от переговорных и посреднических процессов, однако они обладают определенными качествами, которые имеют решающее значение для успешной реализации мирных процессов. Доказано, что женщины могут участвовать во всем мирном процессе или на отдельных этапах переговоров и посредничества. Представлены рекомендации для государств, сторон конфликта и вспомогательных участников по расширению прав и возможностей женщин, включая развитие навыков посредничества и ведения переговоров для эффективного вклада в успешное завершение мирных процессов. Опыт, инструменты и механизмы вовлечения женщин в переговорный и посреднический процесс в ДРК могут быть масштабированы и использованы при урегулировании кризисов в других африканских государствах, что позволит успешно выполнить рекомендации, содержащиеся в Резолюции Совета Безопасности ООН 1325, по увеличению представительства женщин, в том числе в миротворческой деятельности и постконфликтном восстановлении.

**Ключевые слова:** Женщины, мир и безопасность, WPS, посредничество, переговоры, миротворчество, Африканский союз, АС, ООН, Совет Безопасности ООН

**Вклад авторов.** Киамба А.: сбор и анализ информации, подготовка черновика рукописи. Бокерия С.А.: сбор и анализ документов, редактирование рукописи. Оба автора ознакомлены с окончательной версией статьи и одобрили ее.

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### Introduction

The Great Lakes Region (GLR) encompasses countries from the Eastern, Central and Southern African sub-regions.

The region has often been described as having protracted conflict. The violent conflicts in the Central African Republic, South Sudan, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo have

led towards instability in those nations and neighboring nations.<sup>1</sup> As a result, regional states and external actors initiated a conference to discuss conflict resolution and other issues.<sup>2</sup> The establishment of the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) led to the Pact on Security, Stability and Development in the Great Lakes Region, which serves as a legal framework and an agenda of the ICGLR aimed at creating the conditions for security, stability and development between the member states.<sup>3</sup>

The International Conference on the Great Lakes has since collaborated with the United Nations and the African Union to work towards managing the conflict. The United Nations Strategy and action plan 2021–2023 for the region has been Peace Consolidation, Conflict Prevention and Conflict Resolution in the Great Lakes Region. The action plan 2021–2023 further details the Priority Areas of Intervention in the GLR.<sup>4</sup>

The following were identified as priority areas for intervention:

- the promotion of dialogue and strengthening trust,
- the reduction of threats posed by various armed groups,
- the promotion of sustainable and transparent management of natural resources, and trade and investment,
- finding robust solutions about displacement; and lastly, promoting regional preparedness for public health crises.<sup>5</sup>

However, the immediate needs, identified by the African Union (AU) and ICGLR, were conflict management through the use of mechanisms in the prevention and resolution of conflict. The specific concerns by the regional organization and the frameworks of ICGLR were the promotion of dialogue between parties in conflict, the identification of early warning system indicators and strengthening women's mediation and negotiation<sup>6</sup> skills for successful peace process outcomes.<sup>7</sup> States in the region have been concerned about the ability to promote peace, security and development in a conflict-ridden environment. Development thrives, when

<sup>1</sup> See: United Nations Strategy for Peace Consolidation, Conflict Prevention and Conflict Resolution in the Great Lakes Region — Action Plan, 2021–2023 // UN Missions. 2024. URL: [https://ungreatlakes.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/un\\_great\\_lakes\\_strategy\\_-\\_action\\_plan\\_-\\_english\\_final\\_0\\_3.pdf](https://ungreatlakes.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/un_great_lakes_strategy_-_action_plan_-_english_final_0_3.pdf) (accessed: 03.03.2025).

<sup>2</sup> The International Conference on the Great Lakes Region. URL: [www.icglr.org](http://www.icglr.org) (accessed: 02.03.2025).

<sup>3</sup> Dar-es-Salaam Declaration on Peace, Security, Democracy and Development in the Great Lakes Region. Dar-Es-Salaam, November 19–20, 2004 // UN Missions. URL: [https://ungreatlakes.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/icglr\\_dar\\_es\\_salaam\\_declaration\\_on\\_peace\\_security\\_democracy\\_and\\_development\\_in\\_glr.pdf](https://ungreatlakes.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/icglr_dar_es_salaam_declaration_on_peace_security_democracy_and_development_in_glr.pdf) (accessed: 03.03.2025).

<sup>4</sup> See: United Nations Strategy for Peace Consolidation, Conflict Prevention and Conflict Resolution in the Great Lakes Region — Action Plan, 2021–2023 // UN Missions. 2024. URL: [https://ungreatlakes.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/un\\_great\\_lakes\\_strategy\\_-\\_action\\_plan\\_-\\_english\\_final\\_0\\_3.pdf](https://ungreatlakes.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/un_great_lakes_strategy_-_action_plan_-_english_final_0_3.pdf) (accessed: 03.03.2025).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Negotiation is the art of reaching a compromise, particularly in situations of conflict between the parties. There are 3 main stages of negotiations: preparation for negotiations, the process of conducting negotiations, analysis of the results of negotiations and implementation of the agreements reached. Mediation is a process during which an impartial third party helps the opposing parties to develop a mutually acceptable agreement. Mediation at the initial stage of negotiations helps to weaken the rigidity of the initial positions, reduce possible mistrust and hostility of the negotiators. It is also possible at the final stage, if the parties, not being able to solve the problem themselves, are psychologically ready for the mediator's help to break the impasse. Types of mediation include facilitation, consulting mediation, mediation with elements of arbitration and peacekeeping. See: (Slutskaya, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> The ICGLR Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, 2021–2024 // ICGLR. URL: [https://icglr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/2022-08-ICGLR\\_-RAP\\_ENG\\_Ver\\_1\\_REP\\_OB-Final-4\\_Final\\_forewordGender.pdf](https://icglr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/2022-08-ICGLR_-RAP_ENG_Ver_1_REP_OB-Final-4_Final_forewordGender.pdf) (accessed: 28.02.2025).

peace and security are present. Since there are a number of epicenters of conflict in the GLR, there have been concerted efforts by member states in the region to encourage political stability through the resolution of violent conflicts.

While there had been earlier progress made in enhancing peace and security through the management of conflict in South Sudan, the CAR and Burundi, there has been an increase in political instability, violent conflict and the failure of peace processes and peace agreements, including ceasefires in the DRC and Sudan. Nevertheless, the ICGLR continues to provide good offices and to provide a pathway in the coordination of initiatives, directed at preventing and managing conflict. In addition, amid the internationalization of conflict, policies of good neighborliness have been adopted through bilateral cooperation and through the establishment of the Contact and Coordination Group (CCG) in May 2021. Good neighborliness<sup>8</sup> initially a pillar of the Organisation of the African Unity (OAU) and subsequently adopted by the AU is meant to ensure that parties maintain cohesion and unity, even while in conflict.<sup>9</sup> Good neighborliness suggests that parties in conflict adopt peaceful resolution of conflict and settlement of disputes. It presupposes that parties will engage in amicable relations before and during peace processes, thus pacifying the parties and the neighborhood.

In addition to good neighborliness, the Great Lakes region has adopted among other initiatives and approaches, including dialogue and preventive diplomacy, to manage conflict and disputes in the GLR. These initiatives take cognizance of peacebuilding, while also

demonstrating the importance of the resolution of conflict. The resolution of conflict suggests and highly recommends the inclusivity of state and non-state actors in managing deep-rooted causes and sources of conflict and enhancing peace and security in the region (Burton, 1972). Peacebuilding targets communities' perceptions of each other and mostly distinguishes the actors in the initiatives; among whom are community leaders, the youth and women (De la Rey & McKay, 2006). Women play a more prominent role in these initiatives, although this varies from society to society (Naraghi Anderlini, 2007; Väyrynen, 2010). In light of this, consideration should be given to empowering women in preventive diplomacy, negotiation and mediation roles.

## Methodology

This research contributes to the debate on the role of women in negotiation and mediation processes in the countries of the Great Lakes region in Africa (Tripp, 2021). The article used an integrated interdisciplinary research approach and the principles of comparative analysis to collect, analyze and interpret data from the official UN, AU documents (resolutions, reports, strategies).

The historical approach allowed identifying the cause-and-effect relationships of the emergence of crisis situations in the Great Lakes region. The structural-functional approach made it possible to trace the logics of the international response of states and parties to the conflict in the area of women's empowerment in mediation and negotiation processes, using

<sup>8</sup> See Article 74 of the United Nations Charter: The United Nations Charter (Full Text) // The United Nations. URL: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text> (accessed: 28.02.2025).

<sup>9</sup> See: Taking Stock, Charting the Future: African Union Commission End of Term Report 2017–2021 // African Union. URL: [https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/40232-doc-au\\_end\\_of\\_term\\_report\\_e.pdf](https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/40232-doc-au_end_of_term_report_e.pdf) (accessed: 23.03.2025); Annual Report on the Activities of the African Union and its Organs // African Union. February 6–7, 2020. URL: [https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/39999-doc-2020\\_ex20cl2012142028xxxvi2920\\_e.pdf](https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/39999-doc-2020_ex20cl2012142028xxxvi2920_e.pdf) (accessed: 20.03.2025).

the situation in the DRC as an example. The case study method was used to examine the role of women in the negotiation and mediation process in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and to identify the challenges of the peace process. The method of analysis of the official UN documents and data, analytical reports of international organizations helped to define the main mechanisms and problems hindering women's participation in the negotiation and mediation processes.

### **Advancing the Role of Women in Mediation and Negotiation**

A key issue at the initial stage of negotiations and mediation is the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 (2000): the document reaffirms the important role of women “in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peacebuilding,” stressing “the importance of their equal and full participation in all efforts to maintain and promote peace and security and the need to strengthen their role in decision-making with regard to the prevention and resolution of conflicts.” Resolution 1325 (2000) calls on all participants to increase the participation of women and integrate a gender perspective into all United Nations efforts to ensure peace and security, and to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, in particular from rape and other forms of sexual violence in situations of armed conflict.<sup>10</sup>

In 2017, the African Union (AU), through a decision of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government, established the Network of the African Women in Conflict Prevention and Mediation (FemWise-Africa), as a subsidiary

mechanism of the Panel of the Wise within the context of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) (Tishkov, 2017; Tishkov & Kharichkin, 2023). The Network is mandated to promote and enhance the role and participation of African women in conflict prevention and mediation, including through strengthening their capacity in preventive diplomacy and mediation (Jones, 2020).

Furthermore, early warning systems are used to advise parties of imminent conflict through the use of indicators (Rakita, 1998, p. 539). These indicators are then used to develop response mechanisms. The AU's continental early warning system provides a framework of response strategies at the regional level under the AU's peace and security architecture. Early warning and response mechanisms work in tandem with preventive diplomacy.

Similarly, the Advisory Board for Women, Peace and Security (WPS) in the Great Lakes is recognized by Great Lakes Heads of State as a key body for promoting the effective participation of women and girls in peacebuilding and economic development. The importance of the WPS agenda is further reflected in the “UN Strategy for Peace Consolidation, Conflict Prevention and Conflict Resolution of the Great Lakes Region” (October 14, 2020) (“UN Strategy”) substantial presence across the continent, under the direction of the FemWise-Africa Steering Committee. The Secretariat has undertaken the initial steps in drafting a framework to guide the envisaged decentralization process, which will subsequently see the Network operationalized at the regional and national levels. It will allow members at those levels to leverage on their proximity

<sup>10</sup> United Nations Resolution 1325 (2000) Adopted by the Security Council at its 4213th Meeting, on 31 October 2000 // The United Nations. URL: [https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/1325\(2000\)](https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/1325(2000)) (accessed: 10.02.2025). See also: (Puechguirbal, 2010).

and intimate knowledge of conflict drivers; in order to intervene more effectively in the peculiar types of conflicts, they encounter.<sup>11</sup>

### **Women in Negotiation Processes**

Conflicts in society arise from mismatches in goals, values, and needs, which together form conflict issues. Depending on the nature of these disagreements, the parties may either engage in negotiations or refrain from them. For instance, the M23 in DRC previously participated in negotiation processes until they left the process in 2013 citing that their goals were undermined. In this case, the substantive issues raised, such as the forcible displacement of people from the eastern DRC, became a pivotal and contentious issue, when the M23 were instructed to return to neighboring Rwanda, with which they share common ethnic ties. These issues are well-known throughout society and affect both women and men. Thus, negotiators highlight substantive issues before and during the negotiation processes. It is the negotiators' responsibility to identify a leader or leaders to manage the process by highlighting the party's goals, values and needs. In addition, negotiators are involved in procedural issues, such as organizing the negotiation process by identifying the negotiation team, linking and delinking and packaging negotiation issues. The negotiator should also be competent in the phases of negotiation. The different phases of negotiation may consider the use of different negotiators (Kiamba, 2010).

This is likely to provide women with the opportunity to participate as a lead negotiator or as a team member. These phases include dealing with breakthroughs, turning points and the implementation of aspects of the peace agreement. The most common phase, in which women participate, is the implementation of peace agreements. It must be noted, however, that this phase includes post conflict peacebuilding activities, which attract the participation of women. Nevertheless, the role of women is limited (Tidblad-Lundholm, 2020).

### **Mediation Process**

According to the UN Charter Article 33–1 on the Pacific Settlement of Disputes, mediation is listed as one of the peaceful means for the settlement of international disputes alongside arbitration and judicial settlement.<sup>12</sup> Unlike arbitration and judicial settlement, which aim to produce legally binding decisions, mediation is generally regarded as a politico-diplomatic (non-legal) method of dispute settlement. The mediation process may seek intervention from internal or external mediators or partial or impartial mediators. Internal mediators are from the conflict environment. They can either volunteer or be invited to mediate. For example, former President of the Republic of Kenya Uhuru Kenyatta was invited by the East African Community (EAC) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to mediate in the peace process to resolve the conflict in the eastern DRC.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Vern C. Institutionalizing Women, Peace, and Security: Lessons Learned from FemWise-Africa // ANCIP Policy Brief. 2024. No. 1. P. 1–9. URL: [https://ancip-project.de/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/2024-11\\_ANCIP-Policy-Brief\\_no1\\_CVern.pdf](https://ancip-project.de/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/2024-11_ANCIP-Policy-Brief_no1_CVern.pdf) (accessed: 12.02.2025).

<sup>12</sup> See Article 33 of the United Nations Charter: The United Nations Charter (Full Text) // The United Nations. URL: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text> (accessed: 28.02.2025).

<sup>13</sup> African Regional Blocs Appoint Mediators over Crisis in DR Congo // Xinhua. February 25, 2025. URL: <https://english.news.cn/africa/20250225/eb5b98f652884012a826e18436db01f0/c.html> (accessed: 10.04.2025).

However, parties to the conflict may also reject mediators, or allow statement, non-state actors, such as the Roman Catholic Church or regional organizations and internationally recognized persons as mediators. Mediators undertake conflict mapping to identify all the parties involved in the conflict. Conflict mapping allows the mediator to identify and invite to participate in the process those actors who have been excluded from it, as well as to formulate and bring to the fore the key issues underlying the conflict. The mediator just like a negotiator has phases in which they organize the process.

The phases of mediation work simultaneously with the negotiation phases. And just like negotiators, mediators can be changed, when the parties involved agree or disagree. The parties involved in negotiations may perceive a mediator as being biased or unbiased to parties in conflict. A biased mediator takes a biased position towards one or more parties to the conflict. There are instances where parties may accuse the mediator of facilitating one party to gain more from the mediation process. In this regard, the mediator has interests in certain parties and in the outcome of the process. In certain cases, the parties are aware of the bias and welcome it, because it gives them a chance to use the mediator to put pressure on the other parties. Impartiality shows a mediator, who does not have a preferred party in the conflict. However, they may have interests, for instance, in the successful outcome of the

mediation process.<sup>14</sup> Impartiality may also suggest that the mediator has not mapped the conflict and does not know all the parties and issues in the conflict. Women mediators must determine, which type of mediator they can assume in order to lead to a successful outcome of the mediation processes.<sup>15</sup> In addition to determining the type of mediator they will adopt, it is important to ensure that women seek support during the process. This support includes financial support, empowerment from governments and sub-regional organizations in facilitating the various aspects of mediation.

The table summarizes data on women's participation in mediation activities, and it shows that women now occupy 14 out of 49 senior mediation positions in UN missions, representing 28.6% of the total. On the one hand, the slow growth of women in mediation reflects the slow pace of progress in terms of realizing the UN's promise to increase the number of women in leadership positions within the organization. On the other hand, 28.6% is a significant increase from the 1990s and early 2000s. In 2005, for example, only 4 women (6.5%) held peace-related leadership positions; this figure increased to 10 (14%) in 2013.<sup>16</sup> There is currently a slight upward trend of women in leadership mediation and facilitation positions at the UN. Increasing the number of women in these positions can lead to more effective and more successful peace treaties (Krause, Krause & Bränfors, 2018), including through dialogue with women civil society leaders.

<sup>14</sup> Palmiano J. Fighting Feminist Fatigue: Women and Peace Negotiations. Working Paper 2. Bern: swisspeace, 2014. URL: [https://www.swisspeace.ch/assets/publications/downloads/Working-Papers/61072325e8/Fighting-Feminist-Fatigue-Women-and-Peace-Negotiations-Working-Paper-14-swisspeace-julia\\_palmiano.pdf](https://www.swisspeace.ch/assets/publications/downloads/Working-Papers/61072325e8/Fighting-Feminist-Fatigue-Women-and-Peace-Negotiations-Working-Paper-14-swisspeace-julia_palmiano.pdf) (accessed: 10.04.2025).

<sup>15</sup> Women Mediators: Bridging the Peace Gap. Report // Conciliation Resources. 2020. P. 4–18. URL: [https://wmc.contentfiles.net/media/documents/Women\\_Mediators\\_Bridging\\_The\\_Peace\\_Gap.pdf](https://wmc.contentfiles.net/media/documents/Women_Mediators_Bridging_The_Peace_Gap.pdf) (accessed: 01.02.2025).

<sup>16</sup> Women in Conflict Mediation: Why It Matters // IPI Issue Brief. September 2013. URL: [https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/ipi\\_e\\_pub\\_women\\_in\\_conflict\\_med.pdf](https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/ipi_e_pub_women_in_conflict_med.pdf) (accessed: 19.05.2025).

**Women in Active Senior UN Mediation Positions, 2021–2025**

<b>Name (Nationality)</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>UN Mission/Country</b>	<b>Date Appointed</b>
Julie Bishop (Australia)	Special Envoy of the Secretary-General on Myanmar	Myanmar	2024
Najat Rochdi (Morocco)	Deputy Special Envoy for Syria	Syria	2022
María Isabel Salvador (Ecuador)	Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Haiti and Head of the United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti	The United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti (BINUH)	2023
Valentine Rugwabiza (Rwanda)	Special Representative of the Secretary-General for the Central African Republic and Head of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic	The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA)	2022
Bintou Keita (Guinea)	Special Representative of the Secretary-General in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Head of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo	The United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO)	2021
Roza Isakovna Otunbayeva (Kyrgyzstan)	Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan and Head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan	The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)	2022
Anita Asmah (Ghana)	Head of Mission and Force Commander	The United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF)	2024
Caroline Ziadeh (Lebanon)	Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Kosovo and Head of the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo	The United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK)	2021
Anita Kiki Gbeho (Ghana)	Deputy Special Representative of the SG, Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator	The United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS)	2023
Barrie Freeman (the United States)	Deputy Special Representative for West Africa and the Sahel	United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS)	2024
Sigrid Kaag (the Netherlands)	Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General to the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority (UNSCO)	The Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process (UNSCO)	2025
Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert (the Netherlands)	Special Coordinator for Lebanon, Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for Lebanon	Lebanon	2024
Hanna Serwaa Tetteh (Ghana)	Special Representative for Libya and Head of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL).	The United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL)	2025
Aisa Kirabo Kacyira (Rwanda)	Head of the United Nations Support Office in Somalia (UNSOS)	The United Nations Support Office in Somalia (UNSOS)	2023

Source: compiled by A. Kiamba and S.A. Bokeriya using data from: Leadership Team — Leadership by Entity // The United Nations. URL: <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/global-leadership> (accessed: 10.05.2025).

## Facilitating Women as Mediators and Negotiators

Women involved in mediation and negotiation need to understand the complexities of conflict in the region. For instance, managing the conflict in the DRC requires understanding the conflict itself. The conflict involves different parties, however, two parties, the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (*Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda*, FDLR) and the M23, are more involved in the conflict amongst many other parties. Mediation and negotiation require that a list is generated to include all conflict parties and their allies and supporters (Jeong, 2008). Allies and supporters are biased. This system can be analyzed by looking at the facilitation of the conflict. The internationalization of the conflict is indicated by the participation of refugees, internally displaced persons, the media, and the intervention of military and armed groups. Each of these parties pursues its own interests and acts in defense of its allies (Samset, 2002).

Women are more vulnerable to the effects of internationalized conflict. They are also amongst the first to become internally displaced or be persecuted. Thus, women as mediators and negotiators are significant in the promotion of peace in the epicenter of conflict. Since women are more likely to observe and experience conflict in all environmental settings, it is important to empower them to participate in the development of response strategies. These strategies can then be scaled up to include dialogue, progressing further to official processes in which women are recognized as negotiators or mediators. However, as with like men, women need to be empowered to develop and enhance their

negotiation and mediation skills in conflicts in the Great Lakes region.

Facilitating women as effective mediators and negotiators requires targeted interventions to ensure they are well-prepared and equipped with the necessary skills. They should be aware of the ongoing negotiation and mediation efforts in the region, and develop skills in identification of conflict and its processes.<sup>17</sup> It is also important to understand the cycle of conflict and the appropriate time for intervention (Zartman, 2000).

Understanding the current status of the conflict, including the various armed groups involved, makes it easier to demonstrate the potential interventions of women mediators in supporting sustainable peace. The need for the active participation of women mediators in various mediation processes has been demonstrated above. It is also important to emphasize that women at the local (grassroots) level play an important role not only in identifying the parties and causes of conflict, but also in negotiations and mediation. In this regard, women mediators require support in addressing the issue of sexual violence in conflicts in the Great Lakes region (Figure).

As the Figure shows, a large number of women and girls experienced physical and sexual violence in the Great Lakes countries each year from 2017 till 2023. Despite the fragmentation of the statistics collected from different sources (World Health Organisation, CARE International, International Centre for Research on Women), it is important to note that in 2021, 40,000 cases of violence against women were reported in the DRC,<sup>18</sup>

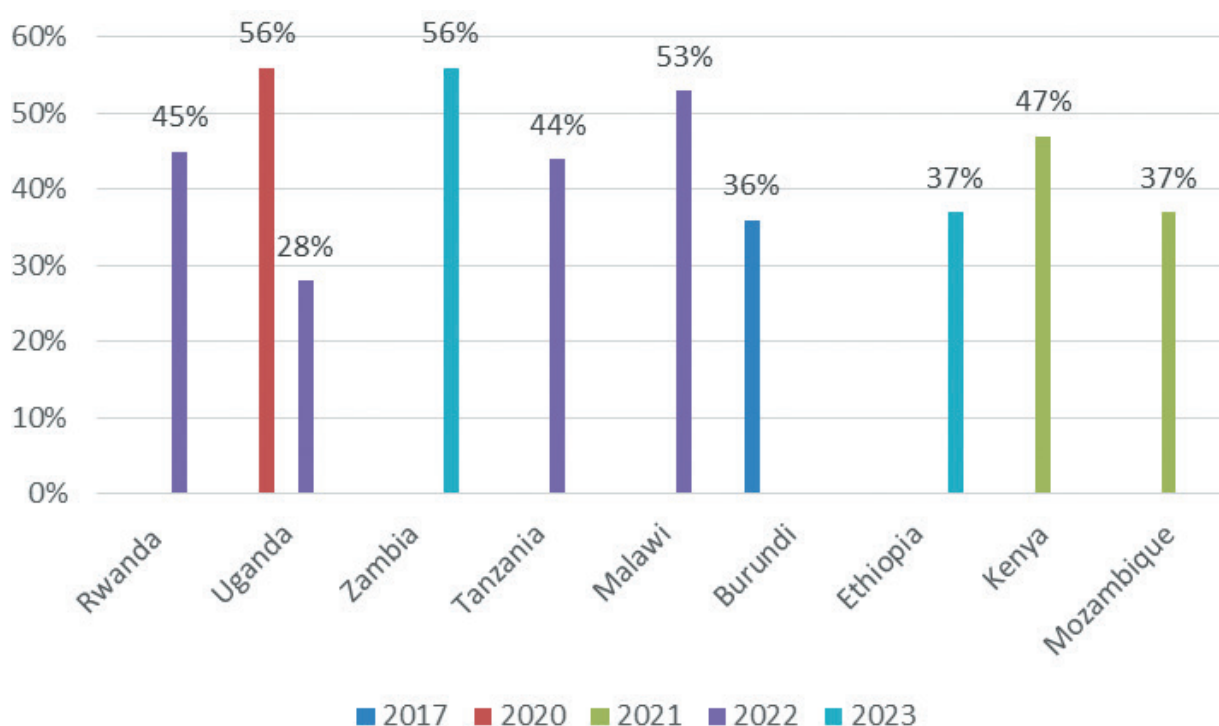
<sup>17</sup> Saevarsson K., Desmidt S., Apiko Ph. Women and Mediation in Africa under the APSA and the AGA // ECDPM. December 2017. URL: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332178360\\_Women\\_and\\_mediation\\_in\\_Africa\\_under\\_the\\_APSA\\_and\\_the\\_AGA](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332178360_Women_and_mediation_in_Africa_under_the_APSA_and_the_AGA) (accessed: 10.03.2025).

<sup>18</sup> In this case, the DRC is not included in the diagram, as the statistics obtained are presented in the form of the number of cases of violence, not the percentage of women and girls affected, as in other countries. Since the DRC is the case study of this research, the situation there will be discussed in more detail in the analytical section of the article.

and in 2022, 78,000 cases were recorded in the DRC. In 2023, the number of violent acts against women in the DRC increased to 123,000 cases.<sup>19</sup>

As noted in the UN Secretary-General’s Report S/2024/278, the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo is currently one of the most dangerous places in the world for women and girls. In the Great Lakes region, overcrowded camps around Goma often lack lighting and proper hygiene facilities, and have the most minimal security measures in place. Consequently, women and girls face horrific

levels of violence, as evidenced by the increase in the number of reported cases of gender-based violence from 40,000 in 2021 to 123,000 in 2023, an increase of more than 300% (!), and this figure continues to rise.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, deliberate underreporting and limited resources to assist survivors mean that the real statistics is much higher. There is no doubt that the evidence shows a direct correlation between gender-based violence and conflict escalation (Zverev, 2017). In particular, two thirds of all cases occur in the three eastern provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu and Ituri.<sup>21</sup>



### Sexual Gender-Based Violence in the Great Lakes Region countries, 2017–2023

Source: compiled by A. Kiamba and S.A. Bokeriya from: (Stella Shulika & Wongibeh Adunimay, 2024).

<sup>19</sup> UN Official Highlights Plights of Women, Girls in Eastern DRC // Xinhua. April 25, 2024. URL: <https://english.news.cn/20240425/2c3dd4279dab461681e160e2504e2f2e/c.html> (accessed: 12.02.2025).

<sup>20</sup> Report of the Secretary-General on the Implementation of the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework for the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Region (S/2024/278) // The United Nations. URL: <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/pro/n24/112/10/pdf/n2411210.pdf> (accessed: 17.05.2025).

<sup>21</sup> UN Official Highlights Plights of Women, Girls in Eastern DRC // Xinhua. April 25, 2024. URL: <https://english.news.cn/20240425/2c3dd4279dab461681e160e2504e2f2e/c.html> (accessed: 12.02.2025).

In this context, it is important to consider the fact that, in addition to registered cases and statistics on victims, there are violent incidents that remain unreported due to victims' fear of isolation, stigmatization, retaliation, and social rejection, as well as a depressingly negative culture of impunity for perpetrators.

The international response to this situation has been ineffective. The Democratic Republic of Congo's 2023 humanitarian response plan was only 40 per cent funded with the United States, the DRC's largest donor, contributing more than half that amount. Of the USD 2.58 billion requested by the UN, only USD 393 million has been allocated in 2024, representing approximately 15% of the required funding.<sup>22</sup> The UN has repeatedly called on countries that care about the fate of the Democratic Republic of the Congo to provide financial support to address this humanitarian issue. However, humanitarian financial assistance will not be enough. It is essential that armed groups and those who support them immediately cease hostilities, respecting international humanitarian law and human rights, ensuring unhindered humanitarian access to those in need of assistance.

In this regard, it is important to highlight the roles and expectations of negotiators and mediators in the mediation process. Consequently, women negotiators and mediators need support through empowerment for the successful outcome of mediation processes. The successful outcome considers the distinct phases of negotiation and mediation, each of which including the procedural and substantive issues (Kiamba, 2010). In addition to empowering individuals to support peace processes, it is important to coordinate the mechanisms used to achieve successful mediation outcomes. For example, the potential of multilateral institutions involved in the conflict

resolution process or external actors can play a decisive role in mediation.

Dialogue ensures that the parties address their perceptions of the issues at stake and of each other. The mediator should ensure that the process is participatory. Continental and regional conflict early warning systems have demonstrated their importance for conflict prevention, particularly in the framework of preventive diplomacy. As mediators, women can identify and prioritize regional indicators to help detect, prevent, and/or manage conflict hotspots in the Great Lakes region (Kiamba, 2010).

### **Geopolitics in the Great Lakes Region**

Support for armed groups, extra-regional interference, and the displacement of populations have all led to escalating tensions and conflicts (Flahaux & de Haas, 2016). There are more than one hundred armed groups in DRC and a further more than hundred militia groups. The DRC government does not have the capacity to unify its nation by using its military or negotiating with the different groups. In addition to being unable to manage the various armed groups in its territory, some of these groups are supported by external states. This support mostly takes the form of military assistance. Similarly, extra-regional support takes the form of supplying small arms in exchange for the extraction of resources. The militias and armed groups have laid claim to regions that have deposits of mineral resources. This external influence and interference continue to lead to protracted conflict in the DRC. The conflict is violent and has led to the displacement of people (Bokeriya & Khudaykulova, 2023).

The growing number of internally displaced people and refugees has led to the

<sup>22</sup> UN Official Highlights Plights of Women, Girls in Eastern DRC // Xinhua. April 25, 2024. URL: <https://english.news.cn/20240425/2c3dd4279dab461681e160e2504e2f2e/c.html> (accessed: 12.02.2025)..

conflict spreading beyond the DRC's borders. Neighbouring countries, citing the need to prevent threats to their own national security, have intervened in the conflict. In this context, displaced persons can be seen as a factor exerting pressure on host societies, which, in turn, leads to the internationalization of the Congolese internal conflict.

From the foregoing description of the region's geopolitics, the early warning indicators of the conflicts in the region include human rights violations, ethnic intolerance, insecurity and political instability, the presence of armed groups, resource-based mismanagement and economic underdevelopment. For preventive diplomacy to be successful, it is crucial to identify these indicators in detail. Conflict in the DRC has experienced violation of human rights and ethnic intolerance (Bokeriya, Mahapa & Kiamba, 2024). The M23 group claims that the human rights of residents of eastern DRC are systematically violated and accuses the government of collaborating with the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda, another armed group involved in the conflict, to dislodge the M23 from the territories it controls in the east of the country. In response, government representatives frequently emphasize the ties of some M23 members to Rwanda and insist on their return to that country.<sup>23</sup> Against this backdrop, the M23 continues to claim that many of its fighters and supporters are legitimate citizens of the DRC, despite their ethnic origin.<sup>24</sup>

In this context, preventive diplomacy entails establishing mechanisms for dialogue and trust between the government and affected

communities. This includes ensuring that M23 members, disarmed fighters and residents of the eastern provinces feel safe and protected from persecution. Many subregional initiatives aimed at resolving the conflict in eastern DRC have been declared to be intended to protect civilians, and these initiatives can be analyzed through the lens of the concept of "responsibility to protect," although the motivation and effectiveness of these initiatives remain a subject of debate.

The DRC's insecurity and instability stem from a lack of political goodwill beyond the capital, Kinshasa. Citizens beyond the capital are in a power vacuum that has resulted in the emergence of many militia and armed groups with some seeking power sharing with the government. The DRC military and military assistance from allies have been overwhelmed. Attempts at preventive diplomacy and supporting the government in implementing peace agreements have failed, further protracting the conflict.<sup>25</sup>

Successive DRC governments have mismanaged resources and failed to overcome the country's socioeconomic and political underdevelopment. External actors, including neighbouring states and transnational corporations, continue to extract resources from the DRC, while many local communities are deprived of access to basic services and employment opportunities. Competition for resource-rich areas between external forces and Congolese state and non-state groups is exacerbated by weak and dysfunctional governance mechanisms regulating resource extraction. As a result, various Congolese armed groups—and sometimes elements of the national

<sup>23</sup> Long N. DR Congo, Rwanda Agree on 'Partial Solution' to M23 Rebellion // ReliefWeb. July 16, 2012. URL: <https://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/dr-congo-rwanda-agree-partial-solution-m23-rebellion> (accessed: 12.02.2025).

<sup>24</sup> Chibelushi W., Bikorimana D. How DR Congo's Tutsis Become Foreigners in Their Own Country // BBC News. February 22, 2025. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c9d5zqg3228o> (accessed: 22.03.2025).

<sup>25</sup> Paffenholz T. Beyond the Normative: Can Women's Inclusion Really Make Better Peace Processes? Policy Brief. Geneva : The Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding, 2015.

army—have militarized resource-rich regions to profit from deals with external actors, who, in turn, often support their extractive activities using both state security forces and private security companies, even mercenaries.<sup>26</sup>

### Conclusion

Thus, the conducted research allows us to draw a number of conclusions.

First, while women in the Great Lakes region have made significant contributions to mediation and conflict resolution, their efforts are often underfunded and underrepresented in official peace processes. Much remains to be done to ensure their full participation in peace processes. The need to empower women in negotiations and mediation stems from the recommendations of the UN Resolution 1325. Since negotiation and mediation are learned rather than innate skills, experienced actors who have participated in peace processes and conflict resolution efforts can provide mentorship to others.

Second, the deteriorating security situation and humanitarian crisis are having a devastating impact on women in the Great Lakes region. In particular, sexual violence has increased in and around camps for internally displaced persons. Accountability must be a priority, as well as humanitarian risk mitigation, particularly in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Third, beyond dialogue, early warning systems help women negotiators and mediators better understand conflict cycles and how early

warning indicators can be used for preventive diplomacy. These skills give women negotiators and mediators a significant advantage when it comes to resolving conflicts at an early stage and beyond.

Fourth, the role of women in conflict and reconstruction requires that parties empower women in mediation and negotiations. Appointing women to senior positions in mediation and conflict facilitation in the Great Lakes region would further explore their impact on peace processes, enrich mediation with new styles and experiences, and combat gender-based violence more effectively. This is because women survivors of violence trust female peacekeepers more than male ones during investigations and information gathering.

Research shows that the presence of women in leadership positions in UN mediation bodies creates additional opportunities for the practical implementation of the key provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) “Women, Peace, and Security” at various stages of peace processes. However, further and more systematic implementation is required in several areas, including the development of durable solutions to the problem of forced displacement for both internally displaced persons and refugees.

Finally, women play a crucial role in facilitating dialogue and in analyzing early warnings of sexual and gender-based violence, which can be further highlighted as an essential issue that needs to be included in the agenda of mediation and negotiation procedures.

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<sup>26</sup> Mier y Teran A. Who Profits from Conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo? // Universidad de Navarra. May 15, 2025. URL: <https://www.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/who-profits-from-conflict-in-the-dr-congo> (accessed: 10.06.2025).

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**About the authors:**

*Kiamba Anita* — PhD (International Studies), Senior Lecturer, Department of Diplomacy and International Studies, University of Nairobi; University Way, 30197–00100, Nairobi, Republic of Kenya; ORCID: 0009-0008-3474-3861; e-mail: akiamba@uonbi.ac.ke

*Bokeriya Svetlana Alexandrovna* — PhD (Law), Associate Professor, Department of Theory and History of International Relations, RUDN University; 10, bldg 2, Miklukho-Maklaya St, Moscow, 117198, Russian Federation; eLibrary SPIN-code: 3806-0961; ORCID: 0000-0002-9052-4363; e-mail: bokeria-sa@rudn.ru