



Insider Mediation and the Future of Peacebuilding in Ethiopia: A Gender-Inclusive Perspective

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In June 2026, I had the privilege of participating in the Training of Trainers for Insider Mediators at the Clingendael Institute in The Hague, supported by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and UNDP. The programme brought together experienced practitioners from conflict-affected countries to deepen our understanding of negotiation, mediation, conflict resolution, inclusivity, and the role of insider mediators in building sustainable peace.

The experience prompted an important question: What can insider mediation offer Ethiopia at this critical moment in its history?

Who Is an Insider Mediator?

An insider mediator is not an external facilitator parachuted into a conflict setting. Rather, an insider mediator is someone who belongs to the community, institution, network, or social system affected by conflict and possesses the trust, legitimacy, relationships, and contextual understanding needed to facilitate dialogue and resolve disputes.

Insider mediators understand local histories, identities, power dynamics, cultural norms, and grievances. They are often religious leaders, elders, women leaders, youth leaders, civil society actors, traditional authorities, community influencers, or respected professionals who can bridge divides and create space for constructive dialogue.

Their greatest strength lies in their ability to maintain relationships before, during, and after conflict.

Why Insider Mediation Matters for Ethiopia

Ethiopia is a country rich in diversity but also marked by recurring political, ethnic, resource-based, and social conflicts. While formal peace processes remain important, many conflicts begin and evolve at the local level, where national mechanisms often struggle to respond quickly and effectively.

The country has a long tradition of indigenous conflict-resolution systems, including Gadaa, Shimglina, Jarsumma, customary councils, and faith-based reconciliation mechanisms. These systems already contain many of the principles associated with insider mediation.

The challenge is not the absence of mediation traditions. The challenge is how to strengthen, professionalise, connect, and modernise these mechanisms while ensuring they remain inclusive and rights-based.

Insider mediation offers an opportunity to bridge traditional practices with contemporary peacebuilding approaches.

A Gender Lens: From Participation to Influence

One of the strongest messages from the training was that peace processes are more effective and sustainable when they are inclusive. Women, youth, and marginalized groups must not merely be present; they must have meaningful influence over decisions.

This lesson is particularly relevant in Ethiopia.

Women have historically played significant roles in preserving social cohesion, managing family and community relationships, supporting reconciliation, and preventing escalation of local disputes. Yet their

contributions often remain invisible or informal. In many mediation structures, women are consulted but rarely occupy leadership or decision-making positions.

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda reminds us that women are not simply victims of conflict; they are agents of peace.

A gender-responsive insider mediation approach would therefore:

- Ensure women serve as mediators, facilitators, negotiators, and decision-makers.
- Strengthen the capacities of women-led organizations engaged in peacebuilding.
- Create safe spaces for women to articulate their priorities and concerns.
- Address structural barriers that limit women's participation.
- Integrate women's experiences and perspectives into conflict analysis and peace agreements.

Most importantly, it would move beyond symbolic representation toward meaningful influence.

Making Inclusion Practical

Inclusion is often discussed as a principle, but insider mediation requires inclusion to become a practice.

For Ethiopia, this means deliberately ensuring participation from:

- Women and girls;
- Youth;
- Internally displaced communities;
- Persons with disabilities;
- Religious minorities;
- Ethnic minorities;
- Survivors of violence;
- Grassroots civil society organizations.

An inclusive mediation process should ask not only “Who is at the table?” but also “Who is missing from the table, and why?”

Conflict transformation becomes more durable when those most affected by conflict participate in shaping solutions.

Building an Ethiopian Network of Insider Mediators

One practical lesson from the programme is the importance of communities of practice. Individual mediators can only achieve so much. Sustainable peacebuilding requires networks that facilitate learning, mentorship, collaboration, and collective action.

Ethiopia could benefit from establishing a national network of trained insider mediators composed of:

- Women peacebuilders;
- Community mediators;
- Faith leaders;
- Traditional leaders;

- Civil society representatives;
- Youth leaders;
- Local government actors.

Such a platform could facilitate experience sharing, early warning and response, peer learning, and coordinated mediation support across regions.

Looking Ahead

Peace agreements alone do not create peace. Peace is built through relationships, trust, dialogue, and inclusion.

Insider mediation offers Ethiopia a powerful approach to preventing conflict, reducing polarization, and strengthening social cohesion. When combined with the principles of the Women, Peace and Security agenda, it can help create peace processes that are not only locally owned but also more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable.

As Ethiopia continues its journey toward peace and reconciliation, investing in insider mediators, especially women mediators, may be one of the most effective and enduring contributions to building a peaceful future.

The future of peacebuilding in Ethiopia will not be determined only in conference halls or political negotiations. It will also be shaped in communities, where trusted local actors bring people together, rebuild relationships, and demonstrate that dialogue remains possible even in the most difficult circumstances.