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Foundational Governance Framework Series

Women as Architects of the International Order

Women's Decision-Making Authority as a Structural Condition
of Legitimate Governance

“The decline of the rules-based international order reflects not only failures of enforcement, but the exposure of a structural design defect: the systematic exclusion of women from meaningful decision-making authority.”



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Institutions often discover their weaknesses only after those weaknesses have become public crises. A peace agreement fails in implementation. Citizens stop trusting institutions they once accepted. Political systems become less able to respond to changes already visible in the societies they govern.

These outcomes have many causes. This framework examines one that remains underexplored: the systematic exclusion of women from consequential decision-making authority when institutions are designed, negotiated, implemented, and held accountable.

The Rimer Institution argues that women's decision-making authority is a structural condition of legitimate and durable governance. When institutions systematically exclude women from consequential authority, they restrict the knowledge, experience, and perspectives available to institutional design and weaken the representational integrity that supports governance legitimacy.

This is not a claim that women govern inherently better than men, nor that women constitute a uniform political category. It is an institutional-design argument: governance systems that systematically exclude large segments of the populations they govern constrain their own capacity to perceive conditions, design legitimate arrangements, and adapt over time.

FIVE CENTRAL CLAIMS

CLAIM	SUMMARY STATEMENT
Claim 1	Institutional legitimacy is a structural condition of governance durability.
Claim 2	Structural exclusion weakens legitimacy.
Claim 3	Symbolic representation is insufficient when decision-making authority remains unchanged.
Claim 4	In the contexts examined, available evidence associates women's decision-making authority with stronger implementation and governance durability.
Claim 5	Representational integrity must become a structural design condition of next-generation governance systems.

KEYWORDS: governance legitimacy · structural authority · institutional design · representational integrity · women's decision-making authority · governance durability · peace architecture.

I. The Legitimacy Crisis

The post-1945 international order was built upon institutions intended to provide stability, coordination, collective security, and international cooperation. Many of these institutions achieved significant historical successes. The contemporary global environment, however, increasingly reveals structural weaknesses, including declining public trust in government, democratic backsliding, and rising political polarization (Edelman, 2026; V-Dem Institute, 2026).

The legitimacy crisis is not merely political. It is structural. Institutions survive not only through law or force, but through public belief in their fairness, representativeness, competence, accountability, and moral credibility. Legitimacy shapes whether citizens cooperate voluntarily, whether governance decisions are trusted, whether institutions maintain long-term resilience, and whether social systems remain stable during periods of stress.

Weak legitimacy contributes to distrust, disengagement, polarization, implementation resistance, and governance fragility. The modern governance challenge is therefore not solely institutional efficiency but building governance systems capable of sustaining legitimacy over time.

II. The Structural Exclusion Problem

Historically, women have been systematically excluded from meaningful decision-making authority in the design of governance systems, peace negotiations, institutional architecture, and strategic decision-making. This exclusion persisted even when women participated in resistance movements, organized civil society, defended human rights, and acted as agents in formal and informal peacebuilding and recovery processes (OHCHR, n.d.).

The scale of this exclusion is documented. In a UN Women sample of 31 major peace processes between 1992 and 2011, women constituted only 2.4 percent of chief mediators and 9 percent of negotiators (UN Women, 2012). This is not merely a question of who was present. It is a structural design pattern—one that persisted during foundational moments of institutional redesign.

HISTORICAL PATTERN	STRUCTURAL SIGNIFICANCE
Paris Peace Conference (1919)	Women's organizations sought formal influence over the peace settlement but were excluded from formal negotiating authority, illustrating structural exclusion during a foundational redesign of international order (Siegel, 2020).
San Francisco Conference (1945)	Women were severely underrepresented among the delegates, although a small number played consequential roles in securing references to the equal rights of women and men in the UN Charter (Adami, 2019).
1992–2011 Peace Processes	In a UN Women sample of 31 major peace processes, women constituted only 2.4 percent of chief mediators and 9 percent of negotiators, documenting persistent structural exclusion from formal peace negotiations (UN Women, 2012).

III.

Representation vs. Meaningful Decision-Making Authority

This framework draws a precise distinction between symbolic representation and meaningful decision-making authority. Numerical presence alone does not guarantee authority over governance outcomes.

A seat at the table without Agenda-Setting Capacity is not equivalent to meaningful decision-making authority. Consultative proximity is not equivalent to authority over governance outcomes. Numerical presence is not equivalent to structural authority.

The Rimer Institution defines meaningful decision-making authority as sustained institutional authority to shape governance outcomes across five dimensions: Agenda-Setting Capacity, Negotiation Access, Design Authority, Implementation Authority, and Oversight Standing. The Rimer Institution's Institutional Readiness Assessment evaluates how decision-making authority is structured across institutional contexts.

SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION	MEANINGFUL DECISION-MAKING AUTHORITY
Numerical presence	Agenda-Setting Capacity — the ability to determine what is discussed.
Consultative role	Negotiation Access — the authority to shape agreement terms.
Quota compliance	Design Authority — the power to shape institutional architecture.
Visibility	Implementation Authority — the ability to govern execution.
Nominal standing	Oversight Standing — the capacity to hold institutions accountable.

IV.

Why Decision-Making Authority Affects Legitimacy

Governance systems function more durably when populations perceive institutions as representative, accountable, and structurally fair. Legitimacy theory, developed across democratic governance and institutional sociology by Beetham (1991) establishes that perceived procedural fairness is a stronger predictor of institutional trust than outcome favorability alone (Tyler, 2006).

Structural exclusion can weaken legitimacy through a specific mechanism: when large segments of a population are systematically absent from consequential governance processes, institutions narrow the social knowledge, risk exposure, and institutional interests available to decision-making. Affected populations may also perceive the resulting processes and decisions as less representative. This is not primarily a symbolic problem. It is a design problem associated, in the evidence examined here, with differences in implementation and governance durability.

This framework does not argue that women are inherently superior governance actors. It argues that governance systems that systematically exclude large segments of the population from meaningful decision-making authority contain a structural design defect, with implementation consequences documented in the comparative evidence examined in Section VI. A governance architecture that excludes women from structural authority narrows the range of knowledge and risk perception informing its decisions.

V.

Five Central Claims

The available evidence is directionally consistent across the governance contexts examined, though narrower than the framework's original scope anticipated: the peace-process evidence is the most methodologically robust and supports implementation and durability outcomes specifically; the stable-democracy evidence establishes coexistence with institutional trust rather than a measured association; and the crisis-governance evidence is illustrative rather than comparative.

CLAIM 1

Institutional Legitimacy Is a Structural Condition of Governance Durability

Institutional legitimacy is not peripheral to the durability of governance. Governance systems sustain public cooperation partly through belief in their fairness, representativeness, competence, accountability, and moral credibility. These beliefs are shaped—and can be eroded—by institutional design.

CLAIM 2

Structural Exclusion Weakens Legitimacy

Structural exclusion can narrow the range of social knowledge, risk exposure, and institutional interests available to decision-making. The governance design defect is not merely symbolic; it is operational. When significant segments of the population are excluded from decision-making authority, institutions risk becoming less representative of the societies they govern and less responsive to the full range of social experience.

CLAIM 3

Symbolic Representation Is Insufficient When Decision-Making Authority Remains Unchanged

Correcting the numerical count without correcting the authority structure leaves the governance design defect intact. Meaningful decision-making authority requires sustained institutional authority across five dimensions: Agenda-Setting Capacity, Negotiation Access, Design Authority, Implementation Authority, and Oversight Standing. The Rimer Institution's Institutional Readiness Assessment evaluates how decision-making authority is structured across institutional contexts.

CLAIM 4**In the Contexts Examined, Available Evidence Associates Women's Decision-Making Authority with Stronger Implementation and Governance Durability**

The evidence examined in this framework identifies associations between women's decision-making authority and governance outcomes across several institutional contexts. These findings do not establish singular causation, nor do they apply uniformly across all governance types. The strength and character of the evidence vary by context, with the peace-process literature providing the framework's most developed empirical base.

CLAIM 5**Representational Integrity Must Become a Structural Design Condition of Next-Generation Governance Systems**

As the UN Security Council undergoes active reform negotiations (CIVICUS Lens, 2026) amid broader governance pressures—democratic backsliding and declining public confidence in governance institutions (Edelman, 2026; V-Dem Institute, 2026)—the question is not whether institutions will change. The question is what principles will govern that redesign. Representational integrity must become a structural design condition of next-generation governance systems, not an aspirational addendum appended after the core architecture is established.

VI.**Comparative Governance Evidence**

The following cases illustrate the governance argument across four distinct institutional contexts. They do not establish singular causation. Governance outcomes are multi-causal, and each case involves political, institutional, and historical variables beyond the scope of this framework. Taken together, the cases illustrate associations between women's decision-making authority and consequential differences across the governance contexts examined. The peace-process cases draw substantially on peer-reviewed research, supplemented by institutional and policy analysis; the evidence on stable democracies is correlational.

POST-CONFLICT RECONSTRUCTION***Rwanda (2003–Present)***

Post-genocide constitutional redesign formally embedded women's representation within Rwanda's decision-making institutions. Rwanda's 2003 Constitution established a minimum threshold for women in decision-making organs, a provision retained in the 2015 revised text. The Constitution

requires women to occupy at least 30 percent of positions in decision-making organs and reserves 24 of the Chamber of Deputies' 80 seats for women (Constitute Project, 2015).

As of March 2026, women held 63.8 percent of seats in Rwanda's Chamber of Deputies, the highest proportion in any lower or single parliamentary chamber worldwide according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2026).

Rwanda's constitutional architecture is significant not because numerical representation guarantees meaningful decision-making authority or governance outcomes, but because it demonstrates the feasibility of embedding women's formal representation within national decision-making institutions rather than relying solely on consultative access. The case therefore establishes the feasibility of a structural mechanism at national scale while leaving the distribution and exercise of meaningful decision-making authority as a separate empirical question.

This framework acknowledges that Rwanda's post-2003 governance trajectory involves institutional and political dynamics—including constraints on political competition (Berry & Lake, 2020; Freedom House, 2026)—that fall outside the scope of this analysis and affect the transferability of the case.

PEACE ARCHITECTURE

Colombia (1982–2016)

Before the Havana process, successive Colombian governments pursued multiple negotiations with FARC-EP, including major efforts beginning in the 1980s, early 1990s, and 1998–99. None produced a settlement that ended the armed conflict. The Havana process, which began in 2012, introduced a substantially redesigned negotiating structure. In 2014, a Gender Sub-Commission was formally established—an unprecedented mechanism within the negotiations (UN Women, 2016; Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, 2020).

Forty-three percent of FARC delegates were women, the highest share recorded in modern peace negotiation history (UN Women, 2025). The 2016 Peace Accord contains 130 gender-specific provisions distributed across all six substantive points, developing a more robust gender perspective than any previous comprehensive peace agreement (Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, 2020)

Research by Joshi (2025), analyzing monthly implementation data covering 578 stipulations and 70 reform and program subthemes, found that gender provisions lagged behind non-gender provisions in implementation. At the subtheme level, however, greater implementation of gender provisions

was positively associated with stronger overall implementation of peace agreements. From this framework's perspective, the finding suggests that implemented gender provisions can function as structural connective tissue within an agreement's broader reform architecture rather than as a separate or peripheral track.

The Havana process combined substantial representation of women with a dedicated gender mechanism as part of a broader redesign of the peace process. These features cannot be isolated as the variables that caused the agreement's success. The case demonstrates their compatibility with the comprehensive peace architecture, while Joshi's implementation evidence provides a separate empirical association between gender-provision implementation and broader accord implementation.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION ARCHITECTURE

Northern Ireland (1996–1998)

The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition was among ten political parties elected to participate in the multi-party peace talks that produced the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. The NIWC operated across Catholic and Protestant communities and developed a reputation as an honest broker, maintaining communication across political divisions during critical moments in the negotiations.

Women's coalition delegates secured language specifically referencing victims' rights, reintegration of political prisoners, integrated education, and mixed housing—provisions the principal conflict parties had not raised. Analysis by the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR, n.d.) identifies these provisions as contributing to the social cohesion needed to sustain the peace in Northern Ireland.

The case illustrates how women's negotiating access broadened the governance agenda by bringing issues into the formal agreement that the principal conflict parties had not raised.

STABLE DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

Finland—Long-Horizon Institutional Evidence

Finland extends the framework beyond post-conflict and crisis contexts. Substantial women's representation and ministerial authority coexist with comparatively strong institutional trust and public wellbeing in a stable democratic system, without reconstruction or emergency conditions as the enabling context.

In 2025, women held approximately 47 percent of seats in the Finnish Parliament and 62 percent of national government ministerial positions—the highest proportion of women ministers among European Union member states (EIGE, 2026). Finland also ranked first in the World Happiness

Report for an eighth consecutive year in 2025, based on reported life evaluations (World Happiness Report, 2025)

Direct measures provide stronger evidence for the institutional-trust dimension. OECD (2024) data show that Finland remained above the OECD average in trust in national government and reported comparatively high trust in several other public institutions. These levels are not static: Finland has also experienced a decline in national-government trust from earlier levels, underscoring that institutional trust remains dynamic even in comparatively high-trust democratic systems.

This framework does not claim that women's representation or ministerial authority caused Finland's institutional outcomes. The case establishes coexistence: substantial women's representation and executive authority alongside comparatively strong institutional trust and public wellbeing. Finland therefore extends the framework's comparative scope beyond institutional reconstruction and peace processes to ordinary democratic governance.

COUNTER-CASE: STRUCTURAL EXCLUSION

Afghanistan / Doha Agreement (2020)

The February 2020 agreement between the United States and the Taliban did not include provisions protecting women's rights or establish women's decision-making authority within future governance arrangements. Women's representation across the broader Afghan peace process remained limited: between 2005 and 2020, women were present in only 15 of 67 rounds of talks, and women constituted four of the 42 negotiators in the September 2020 intra-Afghan negotiations (Council on Foreign Relations [CFR], n.d.), despite sustained advocacy from Afghan civil society organizations and international bodies.

The limited role afforded to women in the peace process stood in tension with the international community's commitments under the Women, Peace and Security agenda. UNSCR 1325 calls for increased representation of women at decision-making levels in conflict prevention, management, and resolution (United Nations Security Council, 2000). This framework goes further by distinguishing representation from meaningful decision-making authority; that distinction is the framework's analytical proposition, not the terminology of UNSCR 1325 itself.

Analysis published before the Taliban's return to power warned that continued exclusion of Afghan women from the peace process threatened the durability of any resulting peace (International Peace Institute, 2021).

Following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, restrictions on women's employment and public life expanded substantially. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2022) estimated that restrictions on women's employment could result in economic losses of up to \$1 billion—approximately 5 percent of GDP. This is a measurable economic consequence of restrictions imposed within the subsequent governance system; it does not establish that women's exclusion from the 2020 peace negotiations caused that economic loss. Those outcomes involved multiple interacting political, security, institutional, and economic forces, including regime collapse, foreign withdrawal, sanctions, and aid disruption.

Afghanistan functions here as a single counter-case consistent with the framework's broader argument, not independent proof of it: women's authority remained structurally unresolved within the peace architecture, credible institutions warned in advance that this posed a durability risk, and subsequent governance arrangements imposed restrictions on women's employment with measurable economic consequences. However, this case does not establish a direct causal chain connecting these three observations.

VII.

Institutional Note

This framework is published by The Rimer Institution, a sovereign private governance research institution focused on women's decision-making authority as a structural condition of legitimate governance. The Rimer Institution conducts governance analysis, institutional diagnostics, and framework development and publication. It operates independently of government funding, partisan affiliation, and the institutions whose governance architecture its research examines.

The framework presented here is the institution's founding research publication. It will remain subject to continuing adversarial review, citation audit, and revision as the evidence base develops. Comments, evidence, and relevant scholarship are welcome.

VIII.
Core Governance Principles

PRINCIPLE	STATEMENT
Legitimacy Is a Structural Condition of Governance Durability	Institutional legitimacy is not peripheral to governance durability. Governance systems sustain public cooperation partly through belief in their fairness, representativeness, competence, accountability, and moral credibility. These beliefs are shaped—and can be eroded—by institutional design.
Structural Exclusion Weakens Legitimacy	Structural exclusion can narrow the range of social knowledge, risk exposure, and institutional interests available to decision-making. The governance design defect is not merely symbolic; it is operational.
Decision-Making Authority Must Be Meaningful	Numerical representation without meaningful decision-making authority leaves the governance design defect intact. Meaningful decision-making authority requires sustained institutional authority across five dimensions: Agenda-Setting Capacity, Negotiation Access, Design Authority, Implementation Authority, and Oversight Standing.
Governance Has Measurable Human Consequences	Institutional design affects lived human outcomes. The evidence examined in this framework identifies measurable differences in implementation and governance durability, alongside illustrative evidence concerning institutional trust and economic outcomes in individual cases.
Institutional Trust Is Dynamic, Not Fixed	Even in comparatively high-trust, high-representation governance systems, public trust is not static. Long-horizon institutional design must therefore treat public trust as something to be continually maintained and renewed rather than as a durable achievement once secured.

IX.

Implications for Institutional Adaptation

The evidence examined in this framework carries implications that extend beyond the specific cases analyzed. If the systematic exclusion of women from meaningful decision-making authority can narrow the range of knowledge, risk exposure, and institutional interests available to governance, then the institutional question is not only how to correct that exclusion. It is how institutions can be designed to detect and address structural vulnerabilities before those vulnerabilities become governance failures.

This framework suggests three diagnostic questions that governance institutions should apply systematically in assessing their own architecture:

1. *What decision-making authority is currently absent from consequential governance processes, and what structural conditions are producing that absence?*
2. *What structural changes—demographic, technological, social, or political—are already reshaping the environments that governance systems are designed to manage, and does the institution's own decision-making authority structure limit its capacity to perceive them?*
3. *What institutional adaptations—in authority structure, design process, or accountability mechanisms—would strengthen governance legitimacy through structural authority rather than symbolic inclusion?*

These questions form the basis of The Rimer Institution's Institutional Readiness Assessment diagnostic framework, currently under development as the next publication in this research program.

X.

Research Limitations and Ongoing Development

The Rimer Institution recognizes several limitations in the current framework. Governance outcomes are multi-causal, and the cases examined here involve institutional, political, and historical variables that this framework does not fully account for. Representation alone does not guarantee effective governance. The evidence base is strongest for peace-process contexts. The stable-democracy evidence establishes coexistence rather than a measured association and would benefit from longitudinal analysis; the crisis-governance evidence is illustrative rather than

comparative and cannot be generalized beyond the single case examined. Expanding this evidence base across a broader range of governance systems and institutional types remains a priority. The framework remains evidence-seeking, revision-capable, and open to adversarial review. The Rimer Institution's next stage of research will develop and test measures of the five dimensions of meaningful decision-making authority (Section III) across institutional contexts. Additional case study development, economic-governance analysis, and expanded comparative evidence across regions and governance types are active research priorities.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT PRIORITY	DESCRIPTION
Expanded case studies	Comparative analysis across regions, governance systems, and institutional types beyond those examined in this framework.
Economic-governance correlation	Examination of potential relationships between women's decision-making authority and economic and institutional outcomes across governance contexts.
Institutional Readiness Assessment operationalization	Development and testing of measurable standards for the five dimensions of meaningful decision-making authority across institutional contexts.
UNSCR 1325 National Action Plans	Comparative analysis of implementation across jurisdictions and gaps between formal commitments, institutional mechanisms, and decision-making authority.
AI governance intersection	Examination of whether and how patterns of structural exclusion emerge within developing AI governance architectures.

Conclusion

The legitimacy crisis facing modern governance systems cannot be resolved through visibility campaigns, consultative gestures, or numerical quotas alone. It requires structural institutional redesign.

The available evidence is directionally consistent. The evidence examined in this framework is strongest in peace-process research. Peace agreements with women's meaningful participation as signatories are more durable (Krause et al., 2018). Across the broader institutional contexts examined, the evidence serves different analytical functions: Colombia provides a direct empirical association between gender-provision implementation and broader accord implementation (Joshi, 2025); Rwanda demonstrates structural feasibility; Northern Ireland illustrates Negotiation Access in practice; Finland documents coexistence with comparatively strong institutional trust, not a measured association; and Afghanistan identifies measurable economic consequences within a counter-case, without establishing a causal chain. These findings do not establish singular causation, and the broader governance argument requires continued comparative and longitudinal testing.

The structural exclusion of women from meaningful decision-making authority is not a representational concern at the periphery of governance design. This framework identifies it as a structural design defect whose institutional consequences warrant systematic measurement across governance contexts.

Women's decision-making authority is a structural condition of legitimate governance—not an aspirational addendum. The objective is not numerical correction. The objective is stronger institutions.

For institutions confronting long-horizon governance pressures, identifying structural design limitations before they become sources of institutional fragility is not peripheral to adaptation. It is part of building durable governance architecture.

Women are not the beneficiaries of a better international order. They are its architects.

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