

Women In International Security

Policy Brief

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If You Want Peace, Prepare for War with the Patriarchy A 25-Year Reckoning with UNSCR 1325

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A quarter century after the UN adopted Resolution 1325, the gap between promise and practice remains unacceptably wide. We know the evidence: when women participate meaningfully, peace agreements last longer and societies grow more stable. Yet participation remains thin, and a coordinated backlash eats away the gains once won. In my more than two decades in foreign and security policy, I have seen all the patterns up close: polite nods, token meetings, and when the real talks begin, the women are ushered out. When a “real crisis” erupts, women once again disappear from the decision-making table, as if men had a flawless track record in fixing trouble.

This is not inertia. It is by design. A system built on patriarchal logic will never dismantle itself. It guards privileges like a fortress. It dresses stagnation up as pragmatism. It sells regression as tradition. The only question left is: who exactly does that tradition serve?

On the 25th anniversary of Resolution 1325, this is not another policy paper. It is a personal reckoning with the questions our movement must confront if we are serious about peace, and about power.

A Personal Prologue

I have spent twenty years working in foreign and security policy. Missions. Negotiations. Field visits. Hearings. In almost every setting, I was the minority. Sometimes, I was the only woman in the room. It is 2025, and I still sometimes feel like an exhibit. Stared at. Assessed. Occasionally ignored. The odd one out. In this field, being a woman comes with the ambiguous privilege of being called “young” well into your forties, even with three

almost-grown children. And lately, in many rooms—including the European Parliament—it is getting worse, not better.

After years of trying to blend in, I turned frustration into strategy. I chose pink dresses on purpose. In rooms filled with grey suits and rigid hierarchies, I wanted to be seen. Then I speak with the weight of experience: “I’ve been doing this work for more than a decade now, and I’m tired of heads of state paying lip service while avoiding any structural change.” My tone is firm. The evidence is solid. And the list of titles I can attach to my name has grown to considerable length over the years. The visible irritation tells me the stereotype is cracking. Because I am real, while their stereotypes are crashing into a new reality.

It would be almost funny if it weren’t so tragic. Every woman in these rooms knows the script. First, the polite looks. Then the interruptions. And finally, the invisible wall that lingers after the applause. I keep pushing against that wall, shoulder to shoulder with many sisters and some male allies. But I am also tired of having to do it. How much further could we be—more inclusive, closer to peace—if we hadn’t wasted years replaying debates our predecessors already won on paper? Patriarchy won’t step aside politely. Its primary task is to protect male dominance, whatever the cost.

1325 at 25: What Was Promised - and What We Got

When Resolution 1325 passed in 2000, it changed the frame. Women were no longer cast as only victims of war. They were recognized as essential actors in preventing conflict, in resolving

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it, and in rebuilding afterward. The resolution set out four pillars: prevention, protection, participation, and relief and recovery. It inspired more than one hundred National Action Plans and a dense layer of European and multilateral policy frameworks.

Yet, twenty-five years later, the numbers still tell a sobering story. In 2023, women made up just 9.6 percent of negotiators, only 13.7 percent of mediators, and 26.6 percent of signatories in UN-facilitated peace and ceasefire agreements.¹ Despite glimpses of progress in small snapshots, women remain underrepresented in leadership across diplomacy, defense, and mediation. Even in Europe and the UN, parity is still out of reach.²

And it is not only the numbers. It is the terms on which women are invited—often as an afterthought. A token gesture once the real deals are done. At a roundtable, a woman mediator from the Balkans told me she was called in only after the ceasefire had already been signed: “They asked me to talk about women’s issues,” she said. “Not power-sharing, not about security, not about disarmament, as if those weren’t my fields.” If only once, women ran the show and then asked men to limit themselves to “men’s issues.”

This is more than unjust. It is strategically reckless. Research shows that when women participate meaningfully, agreements are twenty percent more likely to hold for at least two years and thirty-five percent more likely to last fifteen years.³ When civil society—and especially women’s groups—are part of negotiations, the risk of collapse drops sharply. Implementation improves, and trust in the process grows. Broader studies further link the status of women in society to domestic stability and restraint in external conflict.⁴ But change does not come from wishful thinking alone. As Laura Shepherd warned, you cannot “add women and stir” and expect transformation. If the underlying logic of security remains patriarchal, so will the outcomes.⁵ It is like running new software on an old operating system. The interface may look fresh, but the code underneath is still rigid, remaining hierarchical and resistant to change.⁶

So why are we stuck? Because, too often, gender is treated as a nice-to-have when times and resources are scarce. Currently, plans are underfunded and siloed. Gender advisers are given titles but no authority. Challenging entrenched hierarchies carries a political cost, and a growing backlash casts equality itself as a threat to order.

Feminism Under Fire: Patriarchy, Populism, and the Politics of Fear

Stagnation isn’t just bureaucratic inertia. It is a strategy. Across regions, a tightly connected anti-gender movement casts equality as a threat to tradition. It allies itself with authoritarian currents and utilizes them to rebuild hierarchical orders. Researchers have traced how these networks operate transnationally, sharing playbooks, narratives, and funding streams to hollow out institutions from within.⁷ Their method is slow and deliberate: redefine (gender) equality as ideology. Brand defenders of rights as elites or foreign agents, then chip away at the norms, the budgets, and the posts that make equality real.

On the surface, the backlash can look quiet. Gender language vanishes in the name of compromise. Proposals are pushed to the next cycle. Budget lines are merged until they disappear. Issues central to security are dismissed as soft. At other times, it is loud. Coordinated pile-ons. Disinformation. Attacks designed to make the cost of speaking up greater than the cost of silence. A young researcher told me recently that she does not fear trolls or hate. She fears the silence when she speaks. “It is easier for an institution to cut my sentence from a communiqué,” she said, “than to face the backlash of those who want voices like mine gone.” That silence is not neutral. It is a political choice—and lately it has been made too often.

Europe is not immune. The number of women ambassadors is climbing, but the patriarchal pattern of decision-making and polarisation endures. Carefully negotiated gender language is still the first casualty of “consensus.” This is precisely why feminist foreign policy (FFP) matters: not as a label or branding, but as a power analysis that confronts the hierarchies that drive insecurity and exclusion.⁸ Patriarchy 2.0 already operates globally. It runs encrypted channels, think tanks, foundations, institutes, and talk shows. It is as professional as any corporate lobby in Brussels. But this time the stakes are higher. It is not tariffs or quotas at stake; it is the rights and security of half of humanity.

As I’ve so often said publicly, “I have no problem with white men. I just have a problem when only white men are at the table.”⁹

Afghanistan: A Case Study in Blindness

Afghanistan has run like a thread through my professional life—and it is perhaps the starkest defeat for the Women, Peace and Security agenda. A few moments are enough to show why.

During the international intervention, high-level delegation after high-level delegation arrived. They met with Afghan prime ministers, foreign ministers, male religious leaders, and generals—repeatedly. And then came the single token meeting with “women’s representatives,” as if Afghan women were a monolith and as if their expertise belonged only in a side room. The message could not have been clearer. Women were symbolic but never strategic.

When the Taliban returned, the EU prepared a mission to Doha to confront their leadership about women’s rights. Then I saw the official EU photograph. Every delegate was a man. I was furious. How can you not notice the cynical irony of sending an all-male team to tell the Taliban about the importance of diversity?¹⁰ I flagged it, and to their credit, it didn’t happen again. The next two EU Heads of Delegation to Kabul were women. But that is precisely the point. Without constant pressure, the system defaults to exclusion.

One effort stood out—briefly. The Afghan Women Leaders Network, run by the European External Action Service (EEAS), brought together experienced Afghan women, including ministers, civil servants, diplomats, and humanitarian leaders. They carried knowledge our institutions lacked. If the Taliban barred women from the official table, we could at least build another table and listen to the Afghan women representatives. Then, a change of government in Sweden brought a national-conservative coalition to power, and the funding stopped. And no one stepped in at scale. An initiative designed to counter erasure was itself allowed to vanish. That decision had consequences, and we are now trying to reunite that group, albeit in painfully incremental steps.

The same blindness poisons refugee policy. We close legal pathways, leaving only the young and unencumbered—usually men—able to take on the risk of dangerous routes. We then complain about the gender imbalance on arrival. We design systems that reproduce patriarchal outcomes and then act surprised. Worse, we blame those living under those structures for the results.

Meanwhile, repression in Afghanistan has intensified. Reports from humanitarian agencies and UN monitors document the arrests of aid workers, including women. Dozens of projects have been suspended, and in 2024 and 2025, severe restrictions were placed on women’s movement, work, and education by the Taliban.¹¹ None of this is accidental. It is a deliberate strategy to silence women’s leadership and strip them from public life. Afghan women continue to resist, often at immense risk. Yet too often we leave them to fight alone in the dark, despite our many promises to stand by their side.

The EU: Leading in Principle, Lagging in Practice

On paper, the EU leads. The EU’s Gender Action Plan III (GAP III) set a bold target. By 2025, eighty-five percent of all new external actions should list gender equality as a principal or significant objective.¹² A gender analysis should shape every program. In 2020, a European Parliament report initiated by my colleague Ernst Uratsum and me demanded even more. It called for a feminist foreign and security policy, with leadership targets, mandatory training, and a shift in institutional culture.¹³ The EU’s Strategic Approach to WPS set strong standards for mainstreaming and accountability.¹⁴

But in practice, ambition still outpaces implementation. Too many EU Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) missions and external instruments treat gender advisors as optional. Parity in senior roles across the EU system still lags. Women’s organizations are applauded in speeches yet left underfunded in budgets. Gender analysis is conducted after strategies have already been established. Mid-term assessments of GAP III admit both progress and structural blockages.¹⁵ The assessments explicitly note how the backlash complicates delivery, and how it is now visible in several Member States as well.¹⁶ The pattern is familiar: progressive frameworks, but conservative outcomes. And the first glimpse of the new EU seven-year budget, with its mantra of “increased flexibility,” offers little reason for optimism.

Closing the gap between rhetoric and reality requires three things: authority, resources, and accountability—in that order:

- **Authority that bites.** Make WPS co-leads part of mission command structures. Give them the power to send back concepts of operations and programs that lack serious gender analysis. Use parity shortlists for Heads of Delegation and mission leadership, with time-bound targets and public reporting. Tie senior managers’ performance reviews to measurable WPS outcomes, not box-ticking.
- **Resources at scale.** Ring-fence a visible share of the EU’s Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI)/CFSP and the upcoming Global Europe funds for women-led peace and security organizations. Provide multi-year core funding, not just projects. Create a rapid-response window for activists under threat. Require gender-responsive budgeting across external action.
- **Accountability you cannot ignore.** Adopt a “no analysis, no money” rule for external programs. Publish mission-level WPS scorecards quarterly, tracking staffing, leadership, participation, budget share, and results. Make inclusive

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delegations and gender-responsive agendas a condition for mediation support and access to facilities. Mandate independent audits (EPRS/ECA) and real consequences for persistent non-compliance.

- **Skills and culture.** Make FFP/WPS training mandatory for heads of mission and desk leads. Implement anti-harassment and digital security protocols to protect women officials and partners from coordinated abuse. Reward teams that co-create with local women's groups.
- **Data that drives decisions.** Demand sex- and age-disaggregated data. Track digital visibility and harassment risks. Align EEAS dashboards with #SHEcurity-style parity forecasts so leaders see the distance to the target—and the cost of delay.¹⁷

As long as gender analysis is treated as a “nice to have” instead of an early-warning system for conflict and failure, Europe will keep driving with the handbrake on, i.e., progressive on paper, paralyzed in practice. The fix is not another strategy, though an update of GAPIII is overdue. The fix is power, budget, and consequences that make the strategy real.

#SHEcurity: Seeing the Gaps, Ending the Excuses

I have lost count of the dinner-table debates where a male colleague dismissed the need for gender equality in foreign policy and security institutions as “ideology.” My response never changes. “Fine, let us look at the numbers. In your country, how many ambassadors do you think are women?” The room falls silent. Guesses collapse. The reality is always worse than expected, as I show the #SHEcurity data. Suddenly, I have their attention; at least until recently, the arithmetic was impossible to deny. That, too, however, seems to have changed since Trump took office.

I built #SHEcurity in 2020 because, as an MEP, I wanted to base a report on gender equality in Europe's foreign and security policy on facts.¹⁸ I expected to measure progress since the adoption of Resolution 1325. Instead, I found gaps. The data we needed was scattered, partial, and sometimes missing altogether. So, we launched a year-long effort. We called embassies. We pressed the defense ministries. We sought assistance from the European Parliamentary Research Service. And we built projections. We asked how long it would take to reach parity at the current pace. The answer was grim: thirty-eight years on average for politics and diplomacy, in the 2022 edition, and fifty-eight years in policing. In some branches of the armed forces, it was centuries¹⁹. Since then, some indicators have even moved backward.²⁰ That's not a

pipeline problem. It's a power problem. And it is not only about headcounts. Women diplomats and leaders get less amplification online and face higher rates of harassment and disinformation. That shrinks policy space and chills participation.²¹

The numbers hit like a punch in the face because they expose a simple truth. Without targets, budgets, and consequences, progress stalls. Or, as a young diplomat told me: “The #SHEcurity Index tells me that at the current pace, we will achieve parity in my institution by the time I turn 90. That is not a career path; that is a waiting room.”

And if you're wondering why there hasn't been a fresh edition—though we badly need one—it is the most familiar story in feminist policy. We tried to hand the Index to a think tank/NGO and secure sustained funding to keep it alive, but the effort fell through. As with too many promising projects, awareness won applause while the infrastructure remained unfunded. If you want to end the excuses, fund the counting, because in this game, if you don't count us, we do not count. And those who dismiss all of this as ideology get away far too easily.

Why Women Vanish When Power Is Divvied Up

A Sudanese activist once summed it up in three sentences. “On the streets, we were seventy percent. At the negotiation table, we were ten. And then they wondered why the agreement collapsed.” This is a recurring pattern that we need to name and put an end to once and for all. Women ignite, organize, and sustain protest movements. They hold up democratic uprisings. But when the moment shifts from street to state—when hard power is divided—they are pushed aside. Not by accident, but by design.

Women often lead revolutions. Uprisings are horizontal; they thrive on social ties, community trust, and the invisible labor of coordination and care. In spaces where women's networks are strong, they are strong because women are the ones who keep communities alive under stress. Authoritarian regimes also tend to underestimate women as political actors, which creates space to organize early. In Sudan's 2019 revolution, women's leadership was unmistakable. Alaa Salah's image traveled around the world. The demands were clear: parity in peace processes and decision-making. Yet as the transition hardened, women were pushed to the margins, far from the role they had played in the streets.²²

When protest turns into negotiations, the list of stakeholders defaults to men who control guns, parties, or money. Women

disappear as soon as “hard power” is on the agenda. Security is redefined as the business of armed actors and party bosses. Roadblocks and government buildings matter more than whether women can fetch water without being raped. Civil society, where women dominate, is downgraded to consultation status. Legal and electoral rules are then written by those same gatekeepers, baking exclusion into the new order. Feminist scholar Deniz Kandiyoti calls this a “masculinist restoration.” After moments of revolutionary opening, patriarchal bargains return to claw back male privilege under banners of tradition, security, or unity.²³ We saw this across parts of the Arab Spring. Women filled the streets of Cairo and Tunis, but post-transition negotiations often relegated them to the sidelines—unless strong parity rules and constitutional guarantees forced inclusion. Tunisia stands out as a partial exception: parity lists and women’s role in drafting the constitution gave them influence beyond the square.²⁴

The costs are real. Women are not symbols of peace; they are the builders of peace. In Syria, Mali, and Yemen, local women’s networks identified warning signs early on and negotiated community arrangements long before international actors took notice. Their intelligence was ignored because our models still privilege formal, male-dominated channels. Exclusion is not neutral; it distorts analysis, delays response, and weakens implementation. In conflict settings, this blindness is dangerous. Excluding women does not just silence voices. It blinds us to reality. And in security policy, losing sight of reality is dangerous.

What must change:

- **Redefine conflict parties.** If stakeholder status defaults to men with weapons, women will always enter late and underpowered. Track-1 talks must embed women’s movements as co-decision makers, not as side-consulted “civil society.”
- **Legislate and enforce parity.** Transitional bodies, cabinets, and assemblies should include parity clauses—with enforceable benchmarks tied to diplomatic access and funding—to stop the slide from the street to the sidelines.
- **Protect and resource women leaders in the handover.** The danger zone lies between uprising and negotiation; arrests, harassment, and funding choke-points thin women’s ranks before the table is even set. Iran and Afghanistan are instructive on this point.
- **Reward inclusion with leverage.** Make inclusive delegations, gender-responsive agendas, and civil-society co-chairs a precondition for recognition, visas, funding, and technical assistance.

Women are not disappearing by choice. They are being written out when power hardens. It is the oldest trick in the book of male domination. Women may fill the streets, but not the cabinets. They may ignite revolutions, but not draft constitutions. If we want peace to last, we must change the design.

A Movement Divided: Israel/Gaza and Feminist Solidarity

The war in Israel/Gaza has fractured the feminist movement at the very moment it needs to be strongest. Friends, colleagues, long-standing coalitions have fractured over language, over who is to be named first, over questions of proportionality, over how to hold multiple truths at once. Some accuse others of selective empathy—seeing one set of victims but not the other. Others feel that naming one atrocity is used to downplay another. The result is both a strategic and moral failure. Instead of widening the space for non-violence, the conversation has narrowed and hardened. These moments reveal whether feminism is a label or a compass. The test is brutal, but it is also necessary. And right now, I am not sure we are passing it.

I have argued publicly against this narrowing, against the instinct to rank suffering. All violence matters, and every life has equal worth.²⁵ Feminism is not a hierarchy of grief. It is a commitment to the dignity and security of all people, especially civilians, no matter who they are or where they live.

There are movements showing the way. Women Wage Peace (Israel) and Women of the Sun (Palestine) have built a joint platform—the Mothers’ Call. They demand an end to bloodshed, a political horizon, and women’s inclusion in negotiations as required by Resolution 1325.²⁶ On October 4, 2023—three days before October 7—some 1,500 Israeli and Palestinian women rallied together around this agenda. In 2024, the two groups received international recognition for their joint work, including high-profile nominations and awards.²⁷ Beyond these two movements, the Parents Circle–Families Forum (PCFF), a joint association of 800+ bereaved Israeli and Palestinian families, continues to hold dialogue programs and a women’s leadership track under conditions that would drive most people to despair.²⁸

If we want a feminist movement worthy of the name, we must defend and scale this cross-conflict work. That means funding women-led Israeli and Palestinian partner organizations even when politics are heated. It means protecting activists from gendered disinformation and harassment designed to push them

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out of public life. It means requiring women's representation and civil society co-chairs in any subsequent talks. It also means practicing—within our own movement—what we demand of diplomacy: clearly naming harm to all civilians, rejecting dehumanization in every form, and showing humility in sitting with irreconcilable griefs while insisting on a political solution.

Intersectional or Irrelevant — No Exceptions

Let us be blunt. What we rightly condemn for women—being left out of the room—we must also condemn for anyone else pushed to the margins by race, class, caste, disability, sexuality, age, migration status, or religion. Multiple discrimination is real. In foreign and security policy, it is amplified. The more a forum embodies hard power and prestige, the narrower and more homogeneous the room becomes. If I, as a white, well-educated, privileged woman, already feel frustrated, how much more tired must my sisters be, who carry none of these privileges?

If we fight only for seats for some women while accepting the exclusion of racialized, Indigenous, queer, trans, disabled, working-class, and migrant experts, we are not fixing the problem; we are painting over it. And the budgets that make participation possible—translation, childcare, accessibility, travel and visa support, digital safety—are often the first to go when funding cuts hit civil society, research, or human rights lines. Remove these lines of support and participation collapses back to the usual suspects before the agenda is even set.

The consequences are not abstract. In refugee camps, researchers found that many mothers stopped breastfeeding after relocation, placing newborns at risk. The data seemed puzzling until camp planners finally asked women what they needed. Privacy. Calm. Practical support. When agencies responded by creating baby-friendly spaces, adding lactation corners, and providing IYC—in emergencies, counseling, breastfeeding rates rose again, and mixed feeders returned to exclusive breastfeeding.²⁹ The lesson is simple. Design with those most affected, and outcomes change. What we have slowly learned for women must now be applied with equal rigor to LGBTIQ+ people and to persons with disabilities in crisis, but that requires compliance and funding.

And we must finally say the quiet part out loud. Migrant and Black communities are among the most exposed to violence and insecurity. Yet people of color remain underrepresented where decisions are made about policing, borders, aid, and

peace processes. EU data show persistent racist harassment and structural discrimination against people of African descent.³⁰ UN human-rights reports document disproportionate use of force and systemic racism across regions. Visa regimes, along with conference logistics, quietly lock out Global South and diaspora experts.³¹ African scholars and practitioners face markedly higher Schengen rejection rates and repeated denials for international convenings, shrinking precisely the expertise we claim to need.³²

The rule should be simple. No selective inclusion. Build intersectionality into the operating system, not the footnotes. Count data for sex-, age-, disability-, race/ethnicity- and, where safe, SOGIESC-disaggregated data.³³ Fund it via core support for grassroots Global South and diaspora partners, including the “invisible” line items: interpretation, childcare, accessibility, security, and connectivity. Enforce it. Make inclusive delegations, accessible venues, racial-equity metrics, and community co-chairs a condition for EU grants, mediation support, and political recognition. Tie money and access to proof, not promises. And if you have a seat at the table, bring your sisters with you. Otherwise, we're just moving a few chairs while the door stays shut.

Beyond a Seat: Change the Table, Change the Logic

We have tried politeness. We have tried persuasion. We have tested pilot projects. We have passed resolutions and drafted action plans. Some progress is real. Much of it remains fragile.

Diplomacy is not neutral. For too long, it has been coded as “male.” A feminist foreign policy is not about replacing men with women. It is about replacing a logic of dominance with a logic of justice—where inclusion is not a courtesy but a precondition for security. Representation must mean more than presence. It must mean power. Institutions built to exclude must be redesigned. And we must fight not only for women's inclusion, but for everyone's security.

And yes, anyone who demands parity from others must first open their own doors. Otherwise, it is empty rhetoric, and the rest of the world sees through it faster than you think.

Peace will never come from those who profit from war. As long as we negotiate at tables built like trenches, the results will look like the ceasefires we know today: fragile, temporary, and patriarchally coded. Patriarchy—make no mistake—is a war machine. If we truly want to build peace, then yes, we must be ready for some conflict with patriarchy in the years ahead.

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Women In International Security (WIIS—pronounced WISE) is a non-governmental organization that champions gender equality by helping women advance as leaders in the international peace and security sector. We've been promoting an inclusive and intersectional approach to the Women, Peace & Security agenda for 35 years by providing professional growth opportunities for women, leading gender equality research projects and policy engagement initiatives, and nurturing a community of mentors, advocates, experts, and leaders. The WIIS network spans nearly 50 countries across six continents and includes 15,000 members who are committed to closing the gender equality gap worldwide.

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