

# Women In International Security



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## Policy Brief

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### Beyond 1325@25: Strategies to Advance the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in a Shifting Geopolitical and Security Landscape

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#### Executive Summary

In 2025, the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda commemorated its 25th anniversary amidst a turbulent geopolitical environment, marked by intensifying anti-gender backlash, rising authoritarianism, and emerging security threats. As it confronts this rapidly shifting security paradigm, the WPS agenda faces a question critical to its future: how can the agenda be adapted to today's geopolitical and security contexts?

To explore this question, Women In International Security (WIIS), in partnership with the New Lines Institute, the Athena Initiative, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, and the Institute of World Affairs, organized the 1325@25 Conference on November 12th, 2025. The forward-leaning event collectively identified three strategies to advance the WPS agenda in a changing geopolitical and security terrain:

**1. The WPS agenda should function as a region-specific security doctrine.** Experts from across African, European, and American contexts highlighted how the WPS agenda must adapt to region-specific security threats and the lived realities of local communities. Doing so would allow the WPS agenda to operate as a core security strategy that can more effectively prevent regional instability, strengthen societal resilience, and advance human security. WPS must continue to expand beyond its narrow association with peacebuilding and be embedded in broader security architectures,

including deterrence, early warning, and resilience planning. For example, in Africa, WPS principles are incorporated into African Union (AU) security mechanisms such as the Continental Early Warning System. In Europe, more can be done to embed the WPS agenda into hybrid threat and societal resilience frameworks within the European Union (EU) and NATO.

**2. The WPS agenda needs creative coalition building across movements and sectors to ensure continued implementation.** From shifting the institutional home of the WPS agenda from the UN Security Council to the UN General Assembly (UNGA), to creating coalitions across grassroots, pro-democracy, youth, and other social justice movements, the sustainability of the WPS agenda relies on creative allyships that allow for better power-sharing, improved awareness, and long-term solidarity. Many of the most successful WPS outcomes were achieved through local coalitions. For example, in the second Liberian Civil War, women created cross-religious alliances to end the war, and in Colombia, women worked in tandem with Afro-Colombian and indigenous groups to advocate for a more inclusive peace agreement.

**3. The WPS agenda merits a bold new narrative around its strategic value.** In this politicized rhetorical environment, understanding how to communicate the strategic value of the WPS agenda is of the utmost importance. Equally crucial is determining how to navigate strategic messaging without conceding the core

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values of the WPS agenda. Given intensifying global anti-gender backlash that is now targeting gender-focused work, one approach suggests “doing WPS” without explicitly calling it such, leveraging similar frameworks such as human security, civil-military operations, or security cooperation instead. Another approach advocates for shifting the narrative around the WPS agenda from rights-based language to values-based language. For example, in Colombia, advocates initially used rights-based language around gender justice, accountability, and survivor-centered approaches. However, messaging around shared values, such as peace and stability for families, reintegration, and community healing mobilized broader public support, especially in rural and conservative communities. Regardless of the approach, crafting proactive language that offers a bold *alternative* and not counter-narrative is a promising path forward.

As various stakeholders decide how to best support the implementation of the WPS agenda in a challenging political climate, they should consider the following:

**Civil society organizations** play a significant role in advancing the WPS agenda in regional contexts and contribute to the inclusion, accountability, and innovation of regional security frameworks. They are key stakeholders with direct access to local women’s groups and grassroots actors. This allows them to share compelling, real-life stories that demonstrate the necessity of WPS in shaping stable and resilient communities. In coordination with pro-democracy movements and other allied coalitions, these stories can influence policymakers, especially in challenging political environments, while strengthening coalition-building efforts.

**Academic institutions** must actively shape the narrative around the WPS agenda. Academia produces knowledge, critiques established practices, and influences how the WPS agenda is taught and implemented. Given this, they have the ability to reposition the WPS agenda as a central aspect of security theory and connect the WPS agenda to “traditional” security issues.

**Private sector** companies actively shape the security dynamics of the countries and regions they operate in. By framing the WPS agenda as an effective tool for business continuity and stability (ex: through supply chain resilience, consumer and market expansion,

and operational risk management) the private sector can function as a key partner in creating and legitimizing an alternative narrative of the WPS agenda. Private sector actors should develop a responsible business strategy that considers WPS principles and should be bold in publicly advocating their peers to do the same.

**Policymakers** must center solutions around the lived experiences of local women and communities, while also ensuring sufficient funding for implementation. Policymakers can partner with women’s networks and civil society organizations (CSOs) to amplify their efforts, embed their expertise at all levels of policymaking, and overall foster meaningful collaboration. By partnering with local women security actors, policymakers can also illustrate that the WPS agenda is much more than just an abstract foreign policy tool. On the multilateral stage, policymakers should support the development and adoption of a WPS Treaty in the UN General Assembly, advocate for new WPS resolutions, and contribute financially to the UN and other multilateral institutions, positioning WPS as a top strategic priority.

## Introduction

On October 31st, 2025, UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 and the WPS agenda marked their 25th anniversary—a pivotal milestone that invited not only celebration, but critical reflection and renewed mobilization across the WPS community.

The anniversary coincided with an especially turbulent political environment last year, as 2025 brought a targeted and organized global assault against WPS and its fundamental principles of equality, inclusion, and dignity. WPS practitioners and advocates found themselves operating in an increasingly hostile environment, marked by rising authoritarianism, record levels of military spending, and intensifying anti-gender backlash.<sup>1</sup> It also saw shrinking funding and space for civil society, and emerging security threats such as hybrid warfare, cyber insecurity and climate change.

The WPS agenda now stands at a crossroads as it confronts this rapidly shifting geopolitical and security landscape. This paradigm is a considerable departure from the one in which UNSCR

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1 Ileana Exaras, “Military Spending Worldwide Hits Record \$2.7 Trillion,” *UN News*, September 9, 2025. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/09/1165809>.

1325 was first adopted, and given this, traditional approaches to WPS implementation are no longer sufficient. Strategies that once relied on adherence to international norms, governmental buy-in through national action plans (NAPs), and dedicated funding streams are unlikely to generate the political will, institutional commitment, and resources needed to advance the WPS agenda today. This is especially true in an environment where key actors, like the United States, are not only deprioritizing, but are actively attacking gender equality and multilateral engagement. The question, then, on the heels of the 25th anniversary is: how do we adapt WPS implementation to today's political and security contexts?

In an effort to address this question, WIIS organized the 1325@25 Conference on November 12th, 2025, in partnership with the New Lines Institute, the Athena Initiative, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, and the Institute of World Affairs. Through thematic panels, interactive breakout sessions, and a keynote speech, the high-level, day-long strategic convening aimed to collectively identify strategies to continue to advance WPS principles in a world of new geopolitical context and emerging security threats.

**This paper presents and analyzes three key strategies which arose from the 1325@25 Conference as it pertains to the future of the WPS agenda: 1) the WPS agenda should function as a region-specific security doctrine; 2) the WPS agenda needs creative coalition building across the UN, civil society, grassroots organizers, and allied movements; and 3) the WPS agenda merits a bold new narrative around its strategic value. The paper also provides concrete recommendations for a range of stakeholders—civil society, academia, the private sector, and policymakers—on how they can engage with the WPS agenda going forward.**

## 25 Years of the WPS Agenda: Progress and Pitfalls

On October 31st, 2000, the UN Security Council (UNSC) adopted UNSCR 1325, the first resolution to acknowledge the disproportionate impact of conflict on women and girls and affirm the critical role they play in peace and security efforts.<sup>2</sup> Over the next 19 years, the UNSC adopted nine more resolutions on the issue, forming the WPS agenda, a framework for integrating gender perspectives into peace and security policy and practice. The WPS agenda is organized across four thematic pillars (or principles), and calls for:

- The full, equal, and meaningful **participation** of women in peace and security at all decision-making levels;
- The **protection** of women and girls from conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) and gender-based violence (GBV);
- The overall **prevention** of conflict and the involvement of women and girls in conflict prevention activities; and
- Gender-sensitive **relief and recovery** efforts which consider the unique needs of women and girls in post-conflict reconstruction.<sup>3</sup>

Importantly, UNSCR 1325 and the WPS agenda originated from anti-militarist grassroots movements that strove to dismantle patriarchal power structures, not simply include women into existing militarized structures (i.e. “add women and stir”).<sup>4,5</sup> WPS always was and still is about *shifting systems of power* towards meaningful participation, human security, and structural equality.

2 UN Women, “What is the Women, Peace and Security Agenda?” *UN Women*, October 20, 2025. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/explainer/what-is-the-women-peace-and-security-agenda>.

3 UN Women, “What is the Women, Peace and Security Agenda?”

4 Cora Weiss, “Framers of 1325’ Series: Cora Weiss,” *Women In International Security*, accessed March 4, 2026. [https://wiisglobal.org/resource\\_library/framers-of-1325-cora-weiss/](https://wiisglobal.org/resource_library/framers-of-1325-cora-weiss/).

5 WILPF International Secretariat, “10 Things You Need to Know About Women, Peace and Security,” *Women’s International League for Peace & Freedom*, October 9, 2025. <https://www.wilpf.org/10-things-you-need-to-know-about-women-peace-and-security/>.

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In the last 25 years, the WPS agenda when meaningfully applied has demonstrated tangible impact in both peacebuilding and security domains. For example, women's participation in peace negotiations increases the longevity of peace agreements by 35%; gender-responsive early warning systems improve conflict prevention and community resilience approaches; and sustained support to women-led civil society organizations has strengthened social cohesion, local governance, and accountability in conflict-affected settings.<sup>6,7,8</sup> These examples illustrate how, at its core, the WPS agenda is a “whole-of-society approach” to peace and security.

Despite such successes, the WPS agenda has faced significant shortcomings in the past two and a half decades. Its implementation has often been uneven, with many countries failing to translate policy commitments into meaningful action. Structural barriers, such as entrenched patriarchal, colonial, and militarized norms, limited funding for gender initiatives, and weak monitoring frameworks, have also hindered progress. As political will, funding, and implementation waver, women remain underrepresented across all levels of peace and security efforts.

Arguably, one of the WPS agenda's most significant pitfalls has been its inability to recognize the trend of mounting autocratization, and the impact of this on implementation tools. If in the last 25 years the WPS agenda has seen significant growth, so has autocratization, or the process by which a political system becomes more authoritarian over time. According to Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), a “wave of autocratization has been going on for at least 25 years and shows no signs of cresting,” while “an increasing number of countries—now 45—are autocratizing.”<sup>9</sup> In particular, NAPs—considered key tools for operationalizing WPS

commitments—are increasingly insufficient in the current political climate. Many are underfunded (or do not have the operating budget to begin with), are disconnected from political strategy, and are especially vulnerable to authoritarian capture.<sup>10</sup> In both Brazil and Poland, for instance, NAPs were just a “necessary box to tick,” a performative tool signaling commitment to international rights frameworks, while domestically, gender rights were undercut by conservative administrations.<sup>11</sup>

The failure to account for such a growing authoritarian environment constrains the WPS agenda's transformative potential and requires a rethinking of how it can be advanced in today's geopolitical and security context—outside of the traditional routes of implementation.

## *Strategies to Advancing the WPS Agenda in a Changing Global Landscape*

The subsequent three strategies constitute such a rethinking, as informed by the expert insights generated at the conference. These strategies suggest a more effective and renewed path ahead for WPS implementation, and are followed by stakeholder recommendations on how to best engage with the WPS agenda going forward.

### ***Strategy #1: The WPS agenda should function as a region-specific security doctrine.***

The WPS agenda is often viewed as a tool for supporting peacebuilding efforts. However, as the 1325@25 Conference showed, the WPS agenda can also be viewed as a strategic security doctrine. Regional security frameworks integrated with the WPS agenda can better respond to local needs, address geopolitical dynamics, and adapt to emerging forms of instability—such as rising authoritarianism, climate change, and escalating hybrid

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6 Marie O'Reilly, Andrea Ó Súilleabháin, and Thania Paffenholz, “Reimagining Peacemaking: Women's Roles in Peace Processes,” International Peace Institute, June 2015. <https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/IPI-E-pub-Reimagining-Peacemaking.pdf>.

7 Susan Schmeidl and Eugenia Piza Lopez, “Gender and Conflict Early Warning: A Framework for Action,” International Alert, June 2002. <https://www.international-alert.org/app/uploads/2021/09/Gender-Conflict-Early-Warning-EN-2002.pdf>.

8 WPHF, “WPHF 2024 CSO Survey Findings on Women, Peace and Security & Humanitarian Action,” Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund, April 2025. <https://wphfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/WPHF-2024-CSO-Survey-Findings-April-30-2025-FIN-1.pdf>.

9 Marina Nord et al., “Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?” University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, March 2025. [https://www.v-dem.net/documents/60/V-dem-dr\\_2025\\_lowres.pdf](https://www.v-dem.net/documents/60/V-dem-dr_2025_lowres.pdf).

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10 Miki Jacevic, “What Makes for an Effective WPS National Action Plan?” *Inclusive Security*, March 25, 2019. <https://www.inclusivesecurity.org/2019/03/25/what-makes-for-an-effective-wps-national-action-plan/#:~:text=And%20even%20when%20there's%20a,t%20achieve%20a%20high%20impact>.

11 Jennifer Thomson and Sophie Whiting, “Women, Peace and Security National Action Plans in Anti-Gender Governments: The Cases of Brazil and Poland,” *European Journal of International Security* 7, No. 4 (2022): 531–50. <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2022.21>.

warfare.<sup>12</sup> In other words, “in an era when hybrid threats aim to fracture society itself, WPS is not a complement to security strategy—it is a security strategy,” as noted by WIIS President & CEO Dr. Lauren Van Metre during the opening remarks of the conference (emphasis added).<sup>13</sup> NATO is a useful example of how WPS and gender perspectives can be integrated into regional security priorities, such as defense, deterrence, crisis management, and cooperative security.<sup>14</sup>

Employed as a strategic security doctrine, the WPS agenda becomes a comprehensive framework for deterrence, democratic resilience, and violence prevention across its four pillars. For example, the **participation** pillar meaningfully positions women as leaders in security institutions and simultaneously protects democratic norms of inclusion; the **protection** pillar adapts to new and digital forms of violence deployed against women leaders by authoritarian actors; the **prevention** pillar stems disinformation and other gendered threats to women’s leadership at the root; and the **relief and recovery** pillar prepares women “to lead the restoration of social cohesion and democratic order when societies recoil from authoritarian capture.”<sup>15</sup>

Through this framework, the 1325@25 Conference examined a few key regions of WPS implementation, including Africa, Europe, and North America. Expert speakers from across these contexts illustrated how the uptake of the WPS agenda varies based on geopolitical reality and insecurity, and highlights why regional specificity is essential for the future effectiveness and viability of the agenda:

### *The African Context*

From the Windhoek Declaration to the UNSC presidency of Namibia, the WPS agenda is deeply rooted in African leadership

12 Examples of hybrid warfare include cyberattacks, foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), and misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation (MDM), all of which are deeply gendered security threats.

13 Lauren Van Metre, “Society as the Battlefield: Reframing Women, Peace and Security in an Era of Hybrid Threats,” *Women In International Security*, November 12, 2025. [https://wiisglobal.org/resource\\_library/society-as-the-battlefield-reframing-women-peace-and-security-in-an-era-of-hybrid-threats/](https://wiisglobal.org/resource_library/society-as-the-battlefield-reframing-women-peace-and-security-in-an-era-of-hybrid-threats/).

14 NATO, “Women, Peace and Security,” NATO, October 31, 2024. <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/wider-activities/women-peace-and-security>.

15 Van Metre, “Society as the Battlefield.”

and women’s civil society.<sup>16,17</sup> Long before the adoption of UNSCR 1325 in 2000, African women were actively engaged in peacebuilding across the continent.<sup>18</sup> In contexts such as Liberia and Somalia, women mobilized interfaith coalitions, negotiated local ceasefires, and sustained informal dialogue during periods of conflict. According to WIIS Horn of Africa President Fauziya Abdi Ali, UNSCR 1325 did not initiate women’s participation in peace efforts, but rather provided a “political language” that recognized and legitimized this “invisible labor of peace.”<sup>19</sup>

In the intervening years, Africa continued to lead on institutionalizing the WPS agenda. The African Union (AU) has developed an innovative monitoring framework around the agenda (“the Continental Results Framework”) and has established the FemWise-Africa Mediators Network. Many member states have translated UNSCR 1325 and its subsequent resolutions into policies and programs, and the continent leads with the highest number of NAPs.

Despite such efforts, Ali notes, a persistent gap remains between these high-level institutional commitments and the lived realities of women.<sup>20</sup> While NAPs and policy frameworks are robust and well-written, they lack the funding and localization critical to implementation. Without such sustained resourcing, contextual adaptation, and translation into local languages, these frameworks struggle to reach and impact communities beyond political centers like Addis Ababa and remain inaccessible to the very women they are intended to benefit. This disconnect ultimately weakens the original transformative potential of the WPS agenda to radically shift power systems.

16 Peter Wallenstein, “On the Origins of Resolution 1325,” *Women In International Security*, accessed March 4, 2026. [https://wiisglobal.org/resource\\_library/framers-of-1325-series-dr-peter-wallenstein/](https://wiisglobal.org/resource_library/framers-of-1325-series-dr-peter-wallenstein/).

17 African Union, “Windhoek+25 Declaration: ‘25 Years of 1325, Honoring the Legacy, Advancing the Women, Peace and Security Agenda,’” *African Union*, October 24, 2025. <https://www.peaceau.org/en/article/windhoek-25-declaration-25-years-of-1325-honoring-the-legacy-advancing-the-women-peace-and-security-agenda>.

18 Marie Becker and Erik Carter, “The Role of Women in African Peace Processes,” *Journal of African Development* 1, No. 1 (2020): 18-24. <https://doi.org/10.61336/jad/20-01-05>.

19 Fauziya Abdi Ali, “1325@25 Conference | Panel I: Reconceptualizing the WPS Agenda in a Changing Political Environment,” recorded panel discussion, November 12, 2025, posted November 20, 2025, by Women In International Security, YouTube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WNmU9Afs-bh0&list=PL3Lm-e2i7SiKp86cpr03S\\_4wdDupYNFJ3&index=4&t=1684s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WNmU9Afs-bh0&list=PL3Lm-e2i7SiKp86cpr03S_4wdDupYNFJ3&index=4&t=1684s).

20 Ali, “1325@25 Conference.”

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As the WPS agenda became institutionalized, it also moved away from “other lived realities” confronting African societies, including conflict-related displacement, climate insecurity, and technology-facilitated GBV (TFGBV).<sup>21</sup> Simultaneously, democratic backsliding and protracted conflict in parts of the continent further constrain civic space and limit women’s meaningful participation in political processes.<sup>22</sup> For WPS to remain regionally relevant in African contexts, it must recenter local women’s voices, invest in community-based (climate) resilience, and protect civil society actors and women leaders who are increasingly under attack.

## *The European Context*

Like the AU, the European Union (EU) has formally committed to advancing the WPS agenda through several key frameworks, including through its Gender Action Plan, the Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, and the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence. Yet despite these institutional commitments, WPS implementation is increasingly curbed by a growing militarization of security policy and rising right-wing anti-gender backlash, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>23</sup> At the convergence of these emerging security threats, the WPS agenda continues to be treated as a “soft humanitarian issue, rather than a strategic pillar of security” in much of the region.<sup>24</sup>

Take for example the significant policy gap in the EU’s digital governance framework. Despite the rise of TFGBV, online hate, and gendered disinformation targeting women leaders, journalists, and peacebuilders in Europe, the WPS agenda has not been meaningfully integrated into instruments such as the Digital Service Act and the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation, notes President of WIIS Poland Aleksandra Gasztold.<sup>25</sup> This threat has been particularly visible during the Russian invasion of Ukraine

and in election periods across EU member states. Gender-based online harassment and manipulation not only undermine democratic participation, but also weaken societal resilience.<sup>26</sup>

More broadly, EU security debates have shifted towards a predominantly militarized lens, sidelining the human-centric understanding of security that underpins the WPS framework. As Gasztold notes, “we have lost sight of what peace truly means, that in the center of security are human beings and communities, not only states.”<sup>27</sup> A more robust European security architecture would integrate WPS into resilience strategies, ensuring that militarized security policy gives way to human security, civilian protection, and democratic governance.

## *The American Context*

The U.S. context especially draws into sharp focus a central debate around WPS implementation: how to balance domestic vs. foreign application of the WPS agenda.<sup>28</sup> Despite the U.S. institutionalizing the WPS agenda through the Women, Peace and Security Act of 2017, it often treats the agenda as a foreign policy tool focused on conflict-affected settings “elsewhere.”<sup>29</sup> A credible and comprehensive regional WPS strategy would account for how women in the U.S., and North America more broadly, navigate daily realities of insecurity in their communities and high levels of violence in multiple forms.

Survivors of domestic abuse confront systemic barriers to protection and justice. Immigrant families face violence at the border, in detention systems, and in their communities. Digital spaces have become sites of harassment, surveillance, and misogyny, while violence and intimidation increasingly destabilize civic life and democratic resilience. Public health crises, from

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21 Ali, “1325@25 Conference.”

22 Hannah Smith, “Shrinking Civic Space in Africa: When Governments Crack Down on Civil Society,” Working Paper No. 2018-4, GIGA Focus: Africa, German Institute of Global and Area Studies, November 2018. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-60572-3>.

23 Aleksandra Gasztold, “1325@25 Conference | Panel I: Reconceptualizing the WPS Agenda in a Changing Political Environment,” recorded panel discussion, November 12, 2025, posted November 20, 2025, by Women In International Security, YouTube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WNmU9AFS-bh0&list=PL3Lm-e2i7SiKp86cpr03S\\_4wdDupYNEJ3&index=4&t=1684s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WNmU9AFS-bh0&list=PL3Lm-e2i7SiKp86cpr03S_4wdDupYNEJ3&index=4&t=1684s).

24 Gasztold, “1325@25 Conference.”

25 Gasztold, “1325@25 Conference.”

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26 Luise Koch, Maria Paula Russo Riva, and Janina Isabel Steinert, “Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence Against Politically Active Women: A Systematic Review of Psychological and Political Consequences and Women’s Coping Behaviors,” *Trauma Violence Abuse* (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380251343185>.

27 Gasztold, “1325@25 Conference.”

28 Columba Achilleos-Sarll, “The WPS Agenda Requires a Complementary Approach to Foreign and Domestic Policy,” *The LSE Women, Peace and Security Blog*, March 5, 2018. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/wps/2018/03/05/the-wps-agenda-requires-a-complementary-approach-to-foreign-and-domestic-policy/>.

29 Stacey Schamber, “US WPS Agenda: Not Just a Foreign Policy,” *International Civil Society Action Network*, September 8, 2019. <https://icanpeacework.org/2019/09/us-wps-agenda-not-just-a-foreign-policy/>.

maternal mortality disparities to the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, expose the structural violence embedded in health systems. Importantly, these rising security threats reflect systemic disparities that disproportionately affect women of color and other marginalized groups.

If the WPS agenda is to have a future within the U.S. context, it must grapple with these gendered forms of instability. Women's organizations and local movements across the U.S. are already responding to these challenges through survivor support, civic engagement, and digital safety efforts. A domestic application of the WPS agenda could elevate their work, provide new avenues for coordination and funding, and integrate grassroots expertise into state, and local policy processes. It would also redefine militarized or state-centric definitions of security to encompass community safety, public health equity, digital protection, and democratic resilience for the region.

Overall, several common themes emerge across all three regions for WPS implementation. If viewed as an adaptable strategic security doctrine, the WPS agenda can more effectively 1) recentre local women's voices, 2) respond to regional and local contexts, and 3) reframe security around the protection, participation, and dignity of people and communities.

### ***Strategy #2: The WPS Agenda needs creative coalition building across movements and sectors to ensure continued implementation.***

Despite the widespread adoption of NAPs—with the number of countries with NAPs increasing to 115 in 2025—recent years have seen the agenda de-prioritized and, in some cases, deliberately rolled back in practice by actors at the national and multilateral levels. In 2025, the U.S.' dismantling of WPS implementation capacity resulted in an “impoundment by elimination” of the 2017 WPS Act.<sup>30</sup> Recent cuts to gender equality funding and to WPS language in the most recent National Security Strategy in

the UK signal a retrenchment of the agenda.<sup>31</sup> At the multilateral level, UNSC member states such as Russia, China, and the U.S. are pushing back against progressive resolutions.<sup>32</sup> The politicization of existing resolutions—particularly those related to the prevention of CRSV—has forestalled the proposal of any further WPS resolutions for fear of backlash and the perception that “implementing existing resolutions ... [is] less risky.”<sup>33,34</sup> Given the threat posed by “norm spoiler” actors at the national and international level to WPS actors and organizations, many of the panel discussions at the conference discussed how and where the agenda can get the support needed to ensure continued implementation.<sup>35</sup>

Throughout the conference, panelists and participants alike identified the UN General Assembly, civil society and grassroots organizers, and coalitions across sectors and allied movements as the future of WPS funding and implementation. In their panel remarks as well as in a policy brief published prior to the conference, Chantal de Jonge Oudraat and Michael Brown called for WPS civil society to advocate for a WPS treaty in the UN General Assembly.<sup>36</sup> Both scholars and practitioners have argued that the UNSC is facing a “problem of legitimacy and a problem of effectiveness” as it struggles to adequately respond to a global climate of rising conflict and instability, abuse of veto power, and

31 Toni Haastrup, “25 Years of Women, Peace and Security in the UK: An Opportunity to Align Feminist Commitments at Home and Abroad,” *Rethinking Security*, August 4, 2025. <https://rethinkingsecurity.org.uk/2025/08/04/25-years-of-wps-in-the-uk/>.

32 Security Council Report, “In Hindsight: Negotiations on Resolution 2467 on Sexual Violence in Conflict,” *Security Council Report*, May 2, 2019. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2019/05/in-hindsight-negotiations-on-resolution-2467-on-sexual-violence-in-conflict.php>.

33 Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, “The U.N. Security Council Must Treat All Victims of Sexual Violence Equally,” *Just Security*, April 23, 2024. <https://www.justsecurity.org/94943/the-u-n-security-council-must-treat-all-victims-of-sexual-violence-equally/>.

34 Louise Olsson and Torunn L. Tryggestad, “Backlash and Progress in a New Geopolitical Reality: Women, Peace and Security and the Ambiguous Role of the UN Security Council,” in *Backlash Against the Women, Peace and Security Agenda*, eds. by Annika Björkdahl, Jenny Lorentzen, and Inger Skjeksbæk (Springer Chan, 2026). [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-10853-1\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-10853-1_2).

35 Rebecca Sanders, “Norm Spoiling: Undermining the International Women's Rights Agenda,” *International Affairs* 94, No. 2 (2018): 271-291. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iyy023>.

36 Chantal de Jonge Oudraat and Michael E. Brown, “The WPS Agenda Beyond 2025: Time for a WPS Treaty,” *Women In International Security*, November 2025. [https://wiisglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/WIIS-Policy-Brief\\_WPS-Treaty\\_November-2025.pdf](https://wiisglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/WIIS-Policy-Brief_WPS-Treaty_November-2025.pdf).

30 Kayla McGill and Rachel Wein, “The Elimination of the U.S. Women, Peace and Security Capacity at the Department of State,” *New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy*, January 2026. [https://newlinesinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/FINAL-01082025\\_WPS-Elimination\\_McGill-Wein-nlisap-1.pdf](https://newlinesinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/FINAL-01082025_WPS-Elimination_McGill-Wein-nlisap-1.pdf).

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under-representation of Global South nations.<sup>37</sup> This legitimacy crisis carries challenges for the WPS agenda as a global normative framework which, as a non-Chapter VII resolution, is not binding on Member States, rendering it vulnerable to politicization, backlash, non-implementation and non-enforcement.<sup>38</sup>

Given the limitations of the UNSC in advancing implementation of the WPS agenda, the UN General Assembly offers a promising alternative. As the UN General Assembly is composed of all 193 Member States, a WPS treaty would be shaped by greater representation and enjoy improved championing among the states who adopt it voluntarily. The universal structure of the UN General Assembly, as well as the lack of veto power for any Member State, further promotes the legitimacy of any treaties and priorities emerging from the Assembly. Adoption by the UN General Assembly may also represent state *opinio juris*, having the effect of soft law.<sup>39</sup> As de Jonge Oudraat and Brown state, “a WPS Treaty would formalize, re-legitimize, re-validate, and elevate the WPS agenda at a precarious juncture.”<sup>40</sup>

Given that efforts towards a UN General Assembly treaty will take time and not yield immediate results, conversations at the 1325@25 Conference emphasized that grassroots movements could take parallel action to protect and promote the WPS agenda. Indeed, grassroots-driven processes have been identified as “the main force of WPS progress.”<sup>41</sup> Many of the most effective WPS outcomes have been driven by local coalitions. For instance, during the second Liberian Civil War, women formed interfaith alliances to help bring the conflict to an end, while in Colombia, they partnered with Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities to push for a

more inclusive peace agreement. The WPS framework has been theorized as operating as a “policy ecosystem” in which “activities, actors, and artifacts [interact] in the name of the WPS agenda.”<sup>42</sup> This approach allows for recognition of the actors and activities that may not explicitly be labeled as doing WPS work, but whose efforts and ecosystems overlap with the objectives of the agenda.

Panelists during the conference also stated that alliance-building across sectors and social movements is critical to successfully achieving transformation of existing hierarchical power structures. Through the building of coalitions between WPS and other movements such as the pro-democracy, Youth, Peace and Security (YPS), queer rights, and anti-racist movements—which are similarly experiencing increased levels of threat and political backlash and whose objectives align with that of the WPS agenda—capacity and resources can be bolstered. Coalition with other movements also benefits the WPS agenda by increasing access and exposure to broader constituencies, a wider array of funding streams, and to political elites who serve as supporters of these causes.

However, panelists also weighed the benefits of coalition building across movements with the risks. Despite sharing a “dissatisfaction with the status quo,” the WPS agenda may struggle to align strategies, gender equality specific goals, and formalization of processes with other movements.<sup>43</sup> As an international normative framework that is shaped by and implemented through the grassroots level, the agenda functions through both top-down and bottom-up processes. This differs from other movements that originated from and remain at the grassroots level, which can lead to divergent processes of norm diffusion as well as decision-making.

Thus, these differences led WPS activists to wonder if the agenda is a sum of its parts: what may we risk losing by seeking to align with other movements that may require the compromise of the agenda’s core principles and objectives? It has been argued that the core feminist aims of the agenda have been and may continue to be “water[ed] down” by its engagement with the Security Council, highlighting tensions between militarized and anti-

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37 United Nations, “Secretary-General’s Press Conference at the ASEAN-UN Summit in Kuala Lumpur,” *United Nations*, October 27, 2025. <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/press-events/2025-10-27/secretary-generals-press-conference-the-asean-un-summit-kuala-lumpur>.

38 C. Cora True-Frost, “The UN Security Council Marks Seventh Anniversary of Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security with Open Debate,” *American Society of International Law* 11, No. 29 (2007). <https://www.asil.org/insights/volume/11/issue/29/un-security-council-marks-seventh-anniversary-resolution-1325-women>.

39 Catherine O’Rourke, “Disarming the Women, Peace and Security Agenda: The Case for Centring the United Nations General Assembly,” *Journal of Conflict and Security Law* 29, No. 1 (2024): 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcsl/krae005>.

40 de Jonge Oudraat and Brown, “Time for a WPS Treaty,” 8.

41 Soumita Basu, Paul Kirby, and Laura J. Shepherd, “Women, Peace and Security: A Critical Cartography,” in *New Directions in Women, Peace and Security*, (Bristol University Press, 2020). <https://doi.org/10.51952/9781529207774.ch001>.

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42 Paul Kirby and Laura J. Shepherd, “Women, Peace, and Security: Mapping the (Re)Production of a Policy Ecosystem,” *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6, No. 3 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogaa045>.

43 Michelle I. Gawerc, “Diverse Social Movement Coalitions: Prospects and Challenges,” *Sociology Compass* 14, No. 1 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12760>.

militaristic approaches to WPS aims.<sup>44</sup> Given the inherent internal disharmony between subsets of WPS actors, it is important that further efforts to integrate or be integrated into other social movements are carefully developed to effectively bolster, rather than hinder, WPS progress.

### ***Strategy #3: The WPS agenda merits a bold new narrative around its strategic value.***

On April 29th, 2025, U.S. Secretary of Defense (now War) Pete Hegseth wrote:

“This morning, I proudly ENDED the ‘Women, Peace & Security’ (WPS) program inside the @DeptofDefense. WPS is yet another woke divisive/social justice/Biden initiative that overburdens our commanders and troops... GOOD RIDDANCE WPS!” (@PeteHegseth, April 29, 2025, 9:04 a.m. EDT).

As indicated by Hegseth’s tweet, of late, the WPS agenda has been denounced as a “woke” left-wing agenda, rather than understood for what it actually is: a pragmatic framework for improving peace and security outcomes. Numerous rebuttals from U.S. civil society have argued that the WPS agenda is a strategic, “low-cost, high-impact way” to improve operational effectiveness, “strengthen America’s relationship with allies,” and overall increase global peace and stability.<sup>45</sup>

Then, in October 2025, the Russian UNSC presidency changed the date for the Annual Open Debate on WPS from the end of October, as is typical, to October 6th, leaving the UN community and global civil society scrambling to reorganize. Difficult travel conditions to the U.S. also disrupted crucial moments of convening for the WPS community. Further, language around gender rights at the UN has been highly contested, especially by American and Russian delegations.<sup>46</sup>

Within this context, a debate has emerged among WPS advocates: How do we effectively communicate the strategic importance of the WPS agenda and continue advancing its implementation in this rhetorical landscape? How do we do so without surrendering the core values of the agenda?

One approach emphasizes talking about the agenda implicitly, embedding WPS and gender-sensitive language in concepts that are harder to dismiss or politicize—such as human security or civil-military operations. As WIIS Defense Fellow Tahina Montoya, a panelist at the 1325@25 Conference, noted:

“In the military space, some audiences may disengage when terms like ‘women, peace, and security’ or ‘gender’ are introduced. The challenge, then, is how to effectively engage senior leaders, particularly those with the authority to drive change. Framing is key, and using terminology that different audiences understand, value, and support is essential. Concepts such as human security, civil-military operations, and security cooperation often resonate more readily, and they closely reflect the principles of WPS. By leading with these familiar frameworks, we can engage more effectively and build buy-in. From there, it becomes easier to demonstrate that what we are advancing is, in fact, WPS” (edited for clarity).<sup>47</sup>

Both WPS and human security approaches emphasize prevention and resilience, call for the participation and agency of those most impacted by violence, and define “security” beyond traditional threats.<sup>48</sup> As per this approach, focusing on *outcomes* and *impact* (ex: are local communities, including women’s groups, ultimately given stronger pathways to participate in post-conflict decision-making?) can ensure space for tangible WPS implementation—especially when the direct use of “gender” or even “women” triggers backlash. A critical tension within this approach, however, is conceding too much ground. Avoiding the word “gender” altogether can risk “defanging” the WPS agenda and undermining

44 O’Rourke, “Disarming the Women, Peace and Security Agenda.”

45 Melanne Verveer and Kim Hart, “The Pentagon’s Making a Serious Mistake, and America’s Security will be Impacted,” *Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security*, May 7, 2025. <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/2025/05/07/the-pentagons-making-a-serious-mistake-and-americas-security-will-be-impacted/>.

46 Damilola Banjo, “US Plays Spoiler at Annual Gathering on Women’s Rights,” *PassBlue*, March 18, 2025. <https://passblue.com/2025/03/18/us-plays-spoiler-at-annual-gathering-on-womens-rights/>.

47 Tahina Montoya, “1325@25” Conference | Panel III: Mobilizing Collective Action for WPS Implementation,” Recorded panel discussion, November 12, 2025, posted November 20, 2025, by Women In International Security, Youtube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UpkVYizJxcE&list=PL3Lm-e2i7SiKp-86cpr03S\\_4wdDupYNFJ3&index=4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UpkVYizJxcE&list=PL3Lm-e2i7SiKp-86cpr03S_4wdDupYNFJ3&index=4).

48 United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, “What is Human Security,” *United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security*, accessed March 4, 2026. <https://www.un.org/humansecurity/what-is-human-security/>.

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the very aspect which made it distinctive and innovative in the first place: explicitly voicing the gendered experiences of women and girls in conflict and security domains.

Another approach noted at the 1325@25 Conference involves shifting the narrative around the WPS agenda from rights-based language, such as “gender rights” or “youth rights,” to values-based language. Drawing on lessons from successful pro-democracy movements, which have long grappled with the dynamics of backlash and politicization, strategic messaging for the WPS agenda may be more effective if it centers on the key values of the framework. These can include equality, dignity, safety, accountability, fairness, inclusion, cooperation, and freedom. Recent work on “hope-based” approaches to democracy suggests that narratives rooted in shared values and lived experiences can be more efficient in sustaining public and political support over time.<sup>49</sup> For instance, in Colombia, advocates first relied on rights-based framing focused on gender justice, accountability, and survivor-centered approaches. Yet messages grounded in shared values—such as peace and stability for families, reintegration, and community healing—proved more effective at building wider public support for peace, including in rural and conservative areas.

As the debate from the 1325@25 Conference shows, there is no one way to shape a common narrative around the WPS agenda. Any messaging strategy should, however, aim to be proactive, rather than reactive; and offer a bold alternative, rather than respond to the talking points of critics.<sup>50</sup> Instead of defending the agenda as purely a normative framework, the WPS community should be able to clearly articulate how the WPS agenda improves peace and security outcomes against a variety of existing and emerging threats. Our task is not to simply survive the current backlash, but to tell a story about WPS that is grounded, adaptive, and compelling across political contexts without abandoning its core principles of equality, dignity, safety, and more.

## Conclusion

As the WPS agenda looks ahead to another 25 years and beyond amid a rapidly shifting geopolitical and security landscape, the quarter-century mark offers an important opportunity to take stock of what the agenda has achieved, its limitations, and opportunities for accelerating progress towards the agenda’s objectives. While the promotion of international norms, adoption of policy commitments such as NAPs, and governmental support have been among the key approaches to advancing the WPS agenda since 2000, the new global environment requires a recalibration of WPS strategies to ensure that future efforts are both adapted to the moment and responsive to the agenda’s previous shortcomings. In order to do so, convenings such as the 1325@25 Conference are essential spaces for substantive conversations and innovative thinking for the future of the WPS agenda. Insights from the conference led to the development of stakeholder-specific actions regarding the future advancement of the WPS agenda:

### Civil Society:

- Civil society should continue to play a significant role in advancing the WPS agenda in local contexts, contributing to the legitimacy, inclusion, accountability, and innovation of regional security architectures.
- Civil society should be platformed as the driving force behind the WPS agenda, the key to which has been an expansion of constituencies and advocates.
- Civil society, and the U.S. Civil Society Working Group (CSWG) on WPS in particular, can act to shape the narrative around the WPS agenda. As key stakeholders with direct access to local women’s organizations and grassroots peace and security actors, the CSWG and other civil society actors can influence public discourse by sharing real, human interest stories that highlight the necessity of WPS in shaping resilient and stable communities.

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49 Thomas Coombes and Adam Ludvik, “Together for Democracy: How the Czech Republic Chose Democracy over Populism,” *hope-based*, Substack, January 26, 2024. <https://hopebased.substack.com/p/together-for-democracy>.

50 Coombes and Ludvik, “Together for Democracy.”

**Academia:**

- Academic institutions play a critical role in shaping the narrative around the WPS agenda and can produce knowledge, critique established practices, and influence how the WPS agenda is taught, understood, and implemented as a necessary strategic security approach. They might also reframe the WPS agenda as a core aspect of security theory, connecting and integrating the WPS agenda into “traditional” security curricula and scholarship. For example, WPS scholarship expands the arena of deterrence and prevention beyond the state. In an era of hybrid threats, adversaries are less likely to exploit a society that is cohesive, informed, and can resist manipulation.

**Private Sector:**

- Private sector companies do not just operate within national and regional environments, but rather actively shape their security dynamics, as shown by original WIIS research. They can become not only key funding partners for civil society, but can also advocate for the WPS agenda as a risk and resilience business strategy.

**Policymakers:**

- Policymakers should support the development and adoption of a WPS Treaty in the UN General Assembly.
- How policymakers discuss the WPS agenda with their colleagues and constituents matters. This framing can take on multiple forms including WPS as a human security issue, a strategic security imperative, a governance reform tool, or a key component of civil-military operations.

As the WPS agenda works to adapt and evolve amid these current global challenges, it is essential that conversations, coalition building, and strategic planning continue moving forward. Only through coordinated and consistent effort among its advocates can the WPS agenda weather the shifting landscape and emerge stronger on the other side.

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**Abbreviations**

AU	African Union
EU	European Union
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
CRSV	Conflict-Related Sexual Violence
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
CSWG	U.S. Civil Society Working Group on Women, Peace and Security
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NAP	National Action Plan
TFGBV	Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence
UN	United Nations
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
V-Dem	Varieties of Democracy
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
WIIS	Women In International Security
WPS	Women, Peace and Security
YPS	Youth, Peace and Security

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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.

To learn more about WIIS and become a member, please visit <http://wiisglobal.org/>



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