Women In International Security

PolicyBrief

Realizing NATO's Women, Peace and Security Commitment in Practice

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NATO is committed to integrating Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) across all its tasks in the 2022 Strategic Concept and the revised NATO Policy on WPS endorsed by Heads of State at the 2024 NATO Summit in Washington, D.C. The NATO Strategic Concept referenced the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda for the first time in 2022. This was a significant move since it elevated a gender perspective from the margins to a more central position in the Alliance's agenda. The revised NATO Policy on WPS endorsed by Heads of State in 2024 reinforces this. The endorsement reflects the reality that the WPS agenda, and a gender perspective, is all the more relevant as the Alliance returns to a primary focus on deterrence and defense following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.[1] Russia is indeed waging a deeply gendered war in terms of the use of conflict-related sexual violence, but also in its broader attack on NATO values, including gender equality, through the promotion of "traditional" family values.

This Policy Brief looks ahead to consider the question of what NATO's commitment to WPS, as outlined in the Strategic Concept and the revised NATO WPS Policy, would look like if it were realized in practice, specifically through the NATO WPS Action Plan due for renewal in 2025. To do so, it engages with how WPS and a gender perspective have been institutionalized in NATO, noting that advances in this agenda have often not taken the "usual" or proscribed route within the Alliance. It is, therefore, an area ripe for innovation in terms of its implementation. The WPS agenda is now in a strong position at NATO with buy-in from its Member States.[2] The next step is realizing the strategic vision for WPS' implementation

set out in the revised NATO WPS Policy (2024) through the development of the NATO Action Plan on WPS due in 2025. Such an approach would drive the Alliance's long-term WPS priorities into the future and ensure WPS' institutionalization at all levels, political and, especially, military. It must rely on gender-responsive leadership to strengthen existing gender expertise across the Alliance and ensure accountability.

Realizing Women, Peace, and Security as an Asset for Operational Effectiveness

The WPS agenda emerged from UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, adopted in 2000, and the nine follow-up resolutions. It recognizes women's agency and calls for women's participation in peace and security while acknowledging the gendered impact of conflict, which often disproportionately impacts women. These two aspects of the WPS agenda are mutually reinforcing.[3] The realization of UNSCR 1325 relied on insiders and outsiders to the Security Council, including civil society, which remain crucial knowledge brokers of WPS.[4]

NATO's initial formal policy engagement with WPS in 2007 did not come with civil society involvement; rather, it built on a concern related to the status of women in NATO forces on the one hand and operational requirements vis-à-vis Afghanistan, specifically counterinsurgency, on the other. This has set NATO apart from the UN Security Council and other national and regional level engagements with WPS that have been premised on civil society consultation. It also demonstrates the nexus

between WPS and a gender perspective in NATO's approach.[5] However, since 2014 the Alliance has consulted civil society formally on its WPS policy, the first time it has done so on any policy area.[6] The Civil Society Advisory Panel (CSAP) on WPS provides an important pool of expertise for NATO to draw on in strengthening its approach to WPS.[7]

NATO's engagement also did not come out of the blue. It mapped onto decades of organizing within the Alliance to strengthen the status of women in the armed forces of the Alliance, including through the then Committee on Women in NATO Forces (CWINF), which first met in 1961. It was through CWINF that senior military women organized meetings in the 1960s on issues concerning the recruitment and retention of women in the armed forces and successfully advocated for the committee's formal recognition in 1976. From 2002, CWINF led on NATO's WPS work, introducing the topic within the Alliance and including the monitoring of the agenda's implementation among Allies. In 2009, CWINF became the NATO Committee on Gender Perspectives (NCGP), recognizing its expanded remit to monitor and support NATO's implementation of WPS by promoting the integration of a gender perspective into the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies, programs, and military operations.

NATO's engagement with WPS has relied upon decades of military women's advocacy within NATO and now benefits from broader institutional buy-in, including from men. However, the agenda has always gained traction when it has been perceived as providing "added value" for the Alliance, including improving operational effectiveness. For example, the Alliance would not have engaged formally with the agenda when it did without its involvement in Afghanistan through the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from 2001-2014.[8] Afghanistan saw a "new" way of fighting with counterinsurgency operations (COIN), given the reality that at the operational and tactical levels there was a need to incorporate a gender perspective, as the central focus of the campaign was the Afghan population. This led to the deployment of Female Engagement Teams and Cultural Support Teams, which instrumentalized gender as a "new strategic asset," demonstrating that the U.S. (and, by extension, NATO) was "no longer fighting its battles with outmoded methods."[9] In NATO's current operations in Iraq, Kosovo, and the Baltics, the military continues to have a key role in implementing WPS, with states such as Canada driven to lead on the agenda through Canada's commitment to its own Feminist Foreign Policy and because of the perceived added

value it provides to supporting operational effectiveness.[10] This is not to say there are no significant challenges to living up to WPS in practice. For example, Canada was recently criticized for not apologizing to an employee who had been sexually assaulted by a NATO soldier while deployed as part of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in Latvia.[11]

WPS has also been seen as valuable to NATO in building partnerships. A key example is NATO's partnership with Sweden before its bid for NATO membership. Sweden's involvement in ISAF helped shape NATO's early views on WPS and gender perspectives as operational assets.[12] Despite Sweden's non-alignment stance at the time, it deepened its partnership with NATO through WPS, notably supporting gender integration in Afghanistan and providing diplomatic backing for NATO's WPS efforts, such as at the 2012 Chicago Summit.[13]

However, Sweden's case also reveals WPS' vulnerability within NATO. While WPS was central to the NATO-Sweden partnership, any mention of it was omitted when Sweden began formal NATO membership talks. This suggests that Sweden's Feminist Foreign Policy—an approach it pioneered and which became a core aspect of its international stance, conflicted with its NATO aspirations.[14]

Beyond Sweden, NATO partnerships have played an integral role in the Alliance's understanding of WPS, with initial NATO WPS policies adopted jointly by the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC).[15] The agenda has thus provided "added value" for NATO by providing a "safe" non-contentious issue and diplomatic tool for NATO to build relationships with partners whose interests might usually differ. For example, Austria proved critical in supporting NATO's adoption of a policy on WPS in 2007. Japan, set geopolitically apart from NATO but increasingly important for a potential pivot to the Indo-Pacific, initially built its partnership with NATO on WPS, providing a Voluntary National Contribution to NATO HQ to support NATO's WPS work in 2015 for two years.

Another area in which WPS has run counter to "business as usual" at NATO, though again has added value, is with respect to the role of civil society and promoting the Alliance's image in global politics. At a national level, and indeed at the European Union level, civil society as knowledge brokers of WPS have been heavily involved in developing WPS policies. As a defense Alliance, such policy consultation requires a level of transparency and openness that NATO did not engage in,

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in any policy area.[16] Likewise, many civil society advocates of WPS with roots in pacifism remained skeptical of NATO's engagement with WPS; consequently, there was no civil society lobbying for NATO to engage with WPS at the time. Therefore, NATO remained one of the exceptions among actors—states and international organizations, implementing WPS only in 2014 and establishing a mechanism for formally consulting civil society in the WPS policy-making process for the first time. This has not been without challenges, but it represented a significant commitment to open NATO's WPS work to outside scrutiny and a recognition that such consultation can strengthen NATO's policy.[17]

Institutional Drivers and Leadership on WPS at NATO

On the political side, the creation of the Secretary General's Special Representative (SGSR) on the WPS position in 2012 has provided important impetus for NATO's WPS work and has been recognized by the UN as an example of best practices given the high-level reporting of the role.[18] Yet, the establishment of the position was far from a done deal prior to the 2012 Chicago Summit, and it took some NATO officials by surprise.[19] Norway offered to fill in the role from 2012-2014. At this time, institutional challenges remained to fulfilling the SGSR's mandate, including the position within the NATO structure and rank. This was a topic for discussion from 2014 to 2017, with the Netherlands putting forward and sponsoring an ambassador for the position. The high-level SGSR has successfully raised awareness of NATO's WPS work externally and taken the lead on WPS development internally.[20]

The SGSR is now recruited via the regular NATO recruitment process, which has meant bringing the funding for it "in-house" from the civil budget. As part of the Office of the Secretary General, this reflects progress on the WPS agenda at NATO. The open competition also brings the process in line with the recruitment for Assistant Secretary General positions, even if certain Allies still dominate particular portfolios here, bringing into question how "open" such competition is.[21] In practice, most Allies with a WPS National Action Plan have seen the benefit of promoting the agenda as a foreign policy tool to support their wider influence, including at NATO, so it remains a politically lucrative position for Allies to secure.[22]

The SGSR on WPS remains the main point of accountability for implementing WPS at NATO, as outlined in the current Action Plan. However, the WPS agenda also spans across the areas of responsibility of several Assistant Secretary Generals (ASGs), from Innovation, Hybrid and Cyber to Defence Policy and Planning and Operations and Public Diplomacy. Various WPS-related initiatives have emerged from these ASGs, most recently, a Public Diplomacy campaign to counter gender disinformation on social media.[23] That withstanding, to fully achieve the gender-responsive leadership committed to in NATO's WPS Policy, and to prevent the agenda from being siloed on the political side or solely managed by the SGSR and their office, there is a need for each ASG to have specific actions in the upcoming Action Plan. In this way, each ASG will share accountability for the implementation of the WPS agenda, even if the SGSR remains the driver and a crucial guide for coherent WPS implementation at NATO.

On the military side, the NATO Committee on Gender Perspectives (NCGP) serves as a prime example of the critical role institutional drivers play in successfully implementing the WPS agenda within NATO. As an advisory body to the Military Committee (MC), the NCGP has been at the forefront of institutionalizing gender perspectives and operationalizing the NATO WPS policies.[24]

It began back in the 1960s, exploring every avenue through which women could make the fullest possible contribution to NATO by serving in their national armed forces. Its efforts led to the establishment of the International Military Staff (IMS) Office of the Gender Advisor (GENAD) in 1998. Its role has expanded in recent years and now also supports the implementation of WPS and the integration of a gender perspective within the IMS, marking a significant milestone in institutionalizing gender perspectives.[25] Since 2005, it has actively championed the creation of a Military Committee policy document on gender perspectives within NATO, a long-fought goal that was realized in the adoption of the NATO WPS policy last year. This achievement underscores decades of persistent advocacy to fully integrate a gender perspective into NATO's activities, missions, and operations.

However, for the military, there are additional practical challenges in implementing WPS and incorporating a gender perspective, with the primary issue being inadequate resourcing. Gender Advisors (GENADs) positioned throughout NATO, including within the International Military Staff and Strategic Commands,

are understaffed and, therefore, unable to fully meet the political ambitions of the WPS agenda.

Putting WPS Into Practice Through the Revised NATO Action Plan

WPS remained on the margins of NATO's core business, although, as demonstrated here, it has provided significant value to the Alliance in several areas. Its elevation to a deliverable of the Strategic Concept and the revised NATO WPS Policy providing a strategic vision to the agenda indicates a novel phase in NATO's engagement and an attempt to make WPS part of the Alliance's core business.

The Strategic Concept states that NATO "will promote good governance and integrate climate change, human security, and the Women, Peace, and Security agenda across all our tasks. We will continue to advance gender equality as a reflection of our values."[26] While the inclusion of WPS is significant though not guaranteed, how it has been framed in the Strategic Concept affects how WPS will be understood within NATO moving forward. So far, the implementation of the WPS agenda and a gender perspective have added value to NATO, particularly by improving operational effectiveness and supporting women in NATO forces.[27] As the Secretary General has stated, integrating a gender perspective is "not only the right thing to do but the smart thing to do."[28] The absence of WPS in the Strategic Concept's sections on Deterrence and Defence, as well as Crisis Prevention and Management, is significant since the document guides the entire Alliance. The updated NATO WPS Policy addresses this gap by aligning it with NATO's core tasks and the four pillars of the WPS agenda. However, the Strategic Concept missed the opportunity to include this directly, meaning those not fully convinced of WPS's importance would need to consult the WPS Policy separately to understand its relevance.

Crucially, the NATO Policy on WPS introduces the concept of gender-responsive leadership "to ensure NATO leaders strengthen their gender expertise, work towards gender equality and are accountable for the implementation of the WPS Agenda."[29] Such an approach will be key to realizing an effective WPS agenda at NATO and should be integrated into the Action Plan. It should start from the top down, with the Secretary General mainstreaming WPS into public-facing remarks as a matter of course, not as an exception. In addition, and as outlined earlier, clear lines of reporting on WPS should be identified for all the Assistant Secretary Generals' portfolios. This will help address the weaknesses in WPS in the Strategic Concept and draw attention to the importance of NATO's revised WPS Policy, which is by far the most comprehensive policy to date and sets an ambitious agenda for the Alliance.

At present, there is value in ensuring the integration of a gender perspective is reflective of NATO's WPS priorities and moving beyond the institutional siloing of this topic to ensure the *whole* of NATO is committed to its implementation across political and military structures. Establishing the SGSR WPS position has been fundamental to moving this agenda forward, as well as approving the latest NATO WPS Policy, which has provided an overarching strategic vision. But now it needs to be translated into practice via the Action Plan, and a crucial part of this will be the actions of NATO leadership across the political and military structures.

To summarize, advancements in the integration of a gender perspective in NATO are tempered by remaining challenges. The inclusion of WPS in the Strategic Concept is highly significant. However, while it is referenced in relation to all of NATO's tasks, it is specifically mentioned only in the context of Cooperative Security, with no direct mention in the sections of the other core tasks (on Deterrence and Defence or Crisis Prevention and Management). This deficiency should be addressed. Secondly, as the revised NATO Policy on WPS (2024) draws attention to, translating the policy commitment of WPS into practice must emphasize WPS' added value to NATO, including promoting gender-responsive leadership by establishing clear accountability for the Assistant Secretary Generals and their portfolios in mainstreaming WPS across all NATO activities. Finally, it is essential to draw on the expertise of the Civil Society Advisory Panel (CSAP) on WPS and the NATO Committee on Gender Perspectives (NCGP).

Futureproofing WPS at NATO

As NATO's engagement with WPS to date has demonstrated, this is a policy area ripe for innovation that adds considerable value to the Alliance at all levels. The next step in supporting NATO's WPS commitments is to translate Strategic Concept statements and NATO WPS policy commitments into practice through the development of an effective WPS Action Plan.

In this regard, four steps would contribute towards NATO's efforts to put WPS into practice in developing the new NATO WPS Action Plan, which would center on the added value of WPS for the Alliance.

- Align efforts with the strategic vision that prioritizes gender-responsive leadership and ensures accountability in implementing WPS across NATO's political and military structures.

- NATO's political and military structures should better leverage the expertise of the NATO Civil Society Advisory Panel on WPS and NCGP, respectively, using it as a resource to support gender-responsive leadership in their work.

- Ensure that policy commitments are translated into concrete actions by providing the NATO Military Authorities with adequate resources—especially in terms of human resources and dedicated gender structures—to implement these initiatives effectively.

- The Secretary General and NATO's senior leadership should integrate WPS into their public-facing remarks as a matter of routine, given the demonstrated applicability of the agenda to all of NATO's tasks.

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