

RECLAIMING THE WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY AGENDA IN TIMES OF BACKLASH:

The Role of Women's Rights Organisations, Women-Led Organisations and Women Human Rights Defenders in Shaping, Leading and Reclaiming the Women, Peace and Security Agenda for a Feminist Decolonial Approach

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INTRODUCTION

Today, twenty-five years since the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and thirty years since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the international community stands at a critical juncture. In light of current insecurities, shrinking civic space and pushback against fundamental rights – especially for women and LGBTQIA+ people – armed violence, increased militarisation and polarising discourses on gender equality and women’s rights, it is time to reflect on the progress made and the setbacks endured. This learning paper is prepared by the Danish Civil Society Organisation (CSO) Network for Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and draws on recent reflections from webinars¹ and meetings by Women’s Rights Organisations (WROs), Women-Led Organisations (WLOs) and Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) as well as wider civil society actors working on WPS, to examine how systemic inequalities, coordinated backlash and limited local ownership continue to undermine the WPS agenda and what lessons we can draw from this.

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¹ *Speakers during the Webinar on 25 March 2025 at 1-3PM CET included: Anila Noor, New Women Connectors, Fatuma Kinsi Abass, Pastoralist Girls Initiative, Kenya; Gloria Soma, Titi Foundation, South Sudan; Helene Forsberg, Women’s Council, Denmark; Lubna Alkanawati, Women Now for Development, Syria; Marie Sophie Pettersson, Oxfam Denmark; Marsha Henry, Queens University Belfast, Pablo Castillo Diaz, UN Women; Riham Al Faqih, MIFTAH, Palestine; Ruth Kangwa, Women’s International Peace Centre, Uganda.*

KEY ISSUES AND ANALYSIS

While human rights defenders and advocates have made significant advances over the past decades, recent years and months have witnessed a growing backlash against gender equality, human rights defenders and even multilateral spaces.

Armed conflict accounts for 33,443 civilian deaths in 2023 alone² and has increased in recent months. In fragile and conflict-affected settings, women continue to experience disproportionate impacts of violence, exclusion from decision-making and increasing repression of civic space.³ Yet, it is precisely in these contexts that locally led feminist peacebuilding efforts continue to demonstrate transformative potential despite decreasing funding, increasing oppression and militarisation.⁴

The strategies of local WROs, women peacebuilders and peacebuilding networks – including resistance, storytelling, intergenerational leadership and coalition-building – offer critical pathways to advance the WPS agenda in the face of militarisation, shrinking civic space and political co-optation. This paper highlights both the challenges they face – including funding barriers, security risks and exclusion from peace processes – and the opportunities for building feminist alliances, strengthening accountability through National Action Plans (NAPs) and leveraging global policy frameworks in support of transformative peace. In times of backlash, reclaiming the WPS agenda is not

only a moral imperative – it is a strategic necessity for sustainable peace, gender justice and human security.

WROs, WLOs and WHRDsb have sustained decades-long commitments and initiatives to promote peace and security. Their activism has been foundational in shaping international frameworks, particularly the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000 and its subsequent resolutions. Through sustained engagement, they have influenced and monitored the development and implementation of more than 100 NAPs worldwide, often ensuring that local realities, intersectional perspectives and the voices of marginalised communities are reflected in national and regional policies. Their experience holds critical lessons for dismantling unequal power relations in times of increased oppression, conflict and polarisation.

They have persistently advocated for the inclusion of women in peace negotiations, contributing to the presence and influence of women in peace talks. Their involvement has not only expanded women's participation but has also introduced critical issues such as sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), justice and accountability, and socio-economic reintegration into the peacebuilding agenda and transitional justice mechanisms. Importantly, meaningful participation should not only refer to

² United Nations Security Council (2024). *Protection of civilians in armed conflict: Report of the Secretary-General (S/2024/385)*, 14 May 2024; para. 6: "The United Nations recorded at least 33,443 civilian deaths in armed conflicts in 2023, a 72 per cent increase as compared with 2022."

Link: <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/protection-civilians-armed-conflict-report-secretary-general-s2024385-enarfrueszh>

³ UN Women. (2015). *Preventing conflict, transforming justice: A global study on the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325*. New York: UN Women.

⁴ El-Bushra, J., Naujoks, J., & Myrtilinen, H. (2014). *Rethinking gender in peacebuilding*. London: International Alert.

inclusion of diverse women in decision-making processes; it must also emphasise women's political agency and leadership in shaping peace processes. In many contexts – particularly where NAPs are weak, absent or poorly implemented – women-led groups, WHRDs and grassroots WROs and WLOs are already leading peacebuilding efforts at local, national regional and international levels. Their role goes beyond participation: they are agenda-setters and decision-makers.

On the ground, WROs and WHRDs continue to be the essential actors in documenting human rights violations, providing legal and psychosocial support to survivors, and sustaining community resilience during conflict and crisis. They have also led innovative programmes in local mediation, early warning systems, and disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration, often bridging formal processes with grassroots realities.

Good practices that have emerged include the creation of women's peace coalitions that transcend ethnic, refugee/host and political divides, feminist protection mechanisms for WHRDs operating in high-risk environments, and participatory models for transitional justice that centre survivors' agency. Despite facing shrinking civic space and backlash, these women-led movements have continued to hold institutions accountable, foster inclusive dialogue and ensure that peacebuilding efforts are rooted in human rights and gender justice. In order to ensure that they remain the critical cornerstone of peace and development, we strive to highlight lessons to be learned in light of the current backlash, funding cuts, and threats faced by women's rights defenders today.

UNEQUAL GLOBAL PEACE SYSTEMS AND ARCHITECTURE: FINANCING AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

The operating environment for WROs, WLOs and WHRDs remains shaped by unequal power dynamics, exclusion and discrimination rooted in colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy. These structural conditions continue to prevent their equitable participation in decision-making processes and the full exercise of their rights. Despite increased global recognition of their critical roles, many local and national actors in the Global South face persistent barriers to accessing resources, shaping agendas and contributing to knowledge production on equal footing with their academic counterparts in the Global North. Research, data and insights are predominantly generated by or filtered through institutions based in the Global North, which tend to marginalise local expertise and lived experience, often portraying women as victims rather than agents and framing peace as a technocratic process rather than a lived, political struggle.⁵ Meaningful participation means including everyone, but especially those who have historically been and continue to be the most marginalised based on gender, race/ethnicity, refugee status, class and other intersectionalities. By considering all voices as equally important, enhancing the visibility of those sidelined can contribute to the effort to balance existing power inequalities.

This imbalance in the global knowledge and funding ecosystem reinforces existing power hierarchies, limiting the full potential of locally led action and influence. According to a recent report

⁵ Henry, M. (2021). *On the necessity of critical race feminism for women, peace and security. Critical Studies on Security.*

by AWID, “women’s rights organizations (WROs) receive only 0.13% of the total Official Development Assistance (ODA) and 0.4% of all gender-related aid.”⁶ While this proportion of funds seems to be shrinking even further, WROs, WLOs and WHRDs from the Global South, as well as those led by refugees and diaspora networks in the Global North⁷, are particularly affected.

It is therefore important for those most affected by armed inequality, exclusion, conflict and crisis to reclaim narrative power as part of decolonial feminist peacebuilding. Storytelling, research production and knowledge dissemination have become political tools. Meaningful partnerships require more equitable models of collaboration – ones that acknowledge diverse forms of knowledge and prioritise trust, mutual accountability and long-term support for women’s organisations on the

frontlines.⁸ Consequently, “WPS is (also) about recognizing power and privilege and giving up space and being aware of how power is being reproduced, including through donor practices and funding modalities.”⁹

INTERSECTIONALITY: CRITICAL BUT OFTEN OVERLOOKED, MISUNDERSTOOD AND UNDERUTILISED

Women’s rights and experiences in conflict and crisis cannot be understood in isolation from broader systems of power and inequality. Intersectionality – first articulated by Black feminist scholars and increasingly embraced in peace and security work – recognises that overlapping identities such as race, ethnicity, class, age, disability, sexual orientation, citizenship, refugee and migrant



⁶ Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID) (2022). *Where is the Money for Feminist Organizing? New Analysis and Ideas*. AWID. Page 4.

⁷ *New Women Connectors (2025). NO NEW CRISIS – Refugee Women-Led Organisations Remain Under-Resourced.*

⁸ Oxfam Canada (2018). *A feminist approach to localization: How Canada can support the leadership of women’s rights actors in humanitarian action*. Oxfam Canada.

⁹ Oxfam Denmark (2020). *WPS learning event outcome report – January 2020. Internal report summarising outcomes from the WPS learning event held in Copenhagen, November 2019.*

status, and geography shape the risks, opportunities and responses available to different individuals and groups.¹⁰ It is not the mere recognition of diverse aspects in our identities, but rather how different aspects can overlap and lead to multiple forms of discrimination and exclusion.

Despite growing rhetorical commitment, intersectionality remains underutilised in implementing WPS frameworks. Many policy approaches still treat ‘women’ as a homogenous group, failing to capture the differentiated impacts of conflict, displacement, environmental degradation, violent extremism and state violence as key structural sources of insecurity and exclusion. While UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and its follow-up resolutions – such as 1820, 2242 and 2467 – stress the importance of women’s participation and protection in all aspects of peace and security, they often lack clear guidance or mechanisms to ensure that the diversity among women is specifically addressed. As a result, the unique vulnerabilities and contributions of women with disabilities, Indigenous women, refugee women, young women, LGBTQIA+ individuals or women from marginalised ethnic and religious groups are frequently sidelined in both international policies and national-level implementation. This is consequently also the case in many NAPs that mention women in general but not in references to other aspects of their identity. Only by recognising intersecting factors that affect gender roles and overall identity can peacebuilding strategies become truly inclusive and context specific.¹¹ Intersectionality is consequently

not simply a lens for analysis; it is a call to redesign peace processes, funding models and accountability mechanisms in ways that are responsive to complexity and grounded in lived experience.

Integrating intersectionality meaningfully into WPS practice is not only a matter of justice – it is essential for the sustainability and legitimacy of peace efforts. Without it, peacebuilding risks reproducing the very exclusions and hierarchies it seeks to dismantle.

BACKLASH AGAINST GENDER EQUALITY: INCREASINGLY COORDINATED AND WELL FUNDED

While there have been notable advances in feminist and non-binary approaches in public policy in many countries, the WPS agenda has increasingly come under threat. A coordinated backlash and funding cuts – most recently supported by actors from the Global North, including donor states and former allies¹² – have rolled back gender equality and human rights gains and restricted the civic space for feminist movements. Language agreed in the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action and the WPS agenda seems to have become re-negotiable or watered down in political fora¹³, as seen recently in the Political Declaration adopted at the 69th Commission on the Status of Women (CSW69), and is increasingly ignored in political actions, including funding.

Right-wing and authoritarian forces are increasingly shrinking civic spaces, eroding

¹⁰ Crenshaw, K. (1989). *Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics*. University of Chicago Legal Forum.

¹¹ Oxfam International (2022). *Gender justice and feminist futures strategy 2022–2025 and Saferworld (2016). Gender and conflict analysis toolkit*.

¹² Merima Šišić and Derya Binışık (2025) *Beyond the Cuts: How the Defunding Affects Feminist and Civil Society Organizations*. Heinrich Boell Foundation.

¹³ United Nations (2024). *Women and peace and security: Report of the Secretary-General (S/2024/671)*. United Nations Security Council.

civil rights and putting human rights up for discussion.¹⁴ The resulting funding cuts for gender equality and human rights in crisis and conflict settings put WROs and WLOs in direct jeopardy.¹⁵ This is deeply concerning given that gender inequalities intensify in conflict and crisis, with the most marginalised bearing the greatest burden.

Some UN agencies and INGOs¹⁶ have responded by increasing visibility for WHRDs, WROs and WLOs in international decision-making spaces, amplifying their voices in policy advocacy, allocating funding through programming in crisis and conflict settings, and improving documentation of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), SGBV and related gendered violations. However, these measures depend on donor funds and political support within UN structures – conditions that are increasingly under threat. This dependence risks constraining whose voices are heard and on whose terms, ultimately compromising the independence of women’s rights and peace advocates.

The growing anti-gender backlash is exposing the fragility of previous gains within the WPS agenda. This crisis is further compounded by the fact that traditional ‘allies’ such as UN Women and INGOs are themselves facing drastic funding cuts and shrinking access to decision-making, with catastrophic trickle-down effects on grassroots organisations. For women-led groups in the Global South, the situation is even more dire: they are trapped in ‘multiplier-threats’ of

economic collapse, active conflict, and state violence and oppression, often with little or no political will to protect feminist civic space. Underlying all of this is the systematic defunding of the broader feminist movement – a structural condition that makes advancing the WPS agenda increasingly untenable.

LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY ENDANGERS WOMEN’S RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Persistent lack of accountability for violations of women’s and girls’ rights not only deprives survivors of justice but also contributes to the continuation of violence. It reinforces stigma and silence, deters reporting and exposes WHRDs to heightened risk, especially those working in politically sensitive environments or armed conflict. In countries where legal systems are fragile, under-resourced or politicised, women who advocate for accountability often do so at great personal risk. Cases of threats against women and human rights advocates range from sexual harassment and defamation to direct violence, online and in real-life spaces.¹⁷ Turning a blind eye on certain contexts and oppression while highlighting others may contribute to furthering the structures of inequality and injustice that women in those contexts already face. As Oxfam has documented, donor countries have demonstrated significant bias towards some conflicts and advocated for peace and human rights protection in some contexts while remaining silent in others.¹⁸

¹⁴ Galvez Munoz, Lina (2025) *An antidote against the far-right international: more feminism!* Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS).

¹⁵ Oxfam International (2022). *Gender justice and feminist futures strategy 2022–2025*. P.5.

¹⁶ E.g. UN Women, Oxfam, Care, Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, Women for Women International, and many others.

¹⁷ Oxfam Denmark (2020). *WPS learning event outcome report – January 2020*. Internal report summarising outcomes from the WPS learning event held in Copenhagen, November 2019.

¹⁸ “Moreover, the P5 have deliberately cherry-picked which conflicts to address in the Council. Over the last decade, over 95% of the resolutions that the UNSC passed relate to just half of the protracted crises, leaving the other half mostly neglected.” In Marc J. Cohen; Amy Croome and Elise Nalbandian (2024). *Vetoing Humanity: How a few powerful nations hijacked global peace and why reform is needed at the UN Security Council*. Oxfam.

Especially, the documentation of sexual and gender-based violence way too often puts the witnesses and survivors at risk. The absence of strong legal monitoring and enforcement mechanisms undermines the implementation of international commitments. The lack of strong mechanisms to prosecute women's rights violations, including sexual violence and the implementation of the pillars of the WPS agenda, undermine the actual legal gains made in recent years.

Connecting different legal tools – e.g. international criminal courts and women's rights monitoring systems such as the CEDAW Committee – with national WPS action plans can help protect women's rights defenders and support the work of women's organisations.¹⁹

Furthermore, existing protection mechanisms for WHRDs are fundamentally flawed in that they often rely on relocation and exile, which effectively silences activism in contexts like Afghanistan, Iran, Syria and many more. This lack of localised,

robust protection is compounded by the total absence of mechanisms to hold non-state actors accountable for their roles in violence. Without addressing these specific gaps, the WPS agenda remains a theoretical framework that fails to provide safety for those on the front lines.

FROM IMPLEMENTATION TO TRUST: RETHINKING INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT FOR LOCAL ACTORS

International peace and development efforts have long relied on top-down implementation models that prioritise control, compliance and reporting over trust, collaboration and local agency. These models reflect unequal power relations rooted in colonialism – structural conditions that persist across



¹⁹ Oxfam Denmark (2020). WPS learning event outcome report – January 2020. Internal report summarising outcomes from the WPS learning event held in Copenhagen, November 2019.

international cooperation frameworks. While international organisations, including INGOs, play an important role, their approaches often involve complex intermediary structures that absorb significant resources before any funding reaches grassroots actors.²⁰ This risks replicating the very power imbalances that the WPS agenda seeks to challenge.

Locally rooted women's organisations and networks must not be seen merely as implementers of externally designed programmes, but as political actors and co-creators of peace and stabilisers of democratic structures. International actors should prioritise direct, flexible and long-term support to national and local WROs.²¹ This requires not only a shift in resources and attention but also a move from traditional implementation structures towards a culture of trust.²² Especially women peacebuilders, "particularly at the grassroots, must be at the heart of decision-making at all levels"²³, leaving space to define WPS actions and interventions on their own terms. Their legitimacy, proximity to and trust within the community, and lived experience uniquely position them to lead context-responsive, sustainable solutions as architects of peace.

A genuine WPS agenda must centre local women peacebuilders, WLOs and WROs as leaders and partners in policy and implementation.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND AI AS AN OPPORTUNITY AND RISK FOR WLOs, WROs AND WHRDs

Digital technologies – particularly social media and artificial intelligence – have become double-edged tools for WLOs, WROs and WHRDs. On the one hand, they offer powerful platforms for advocacy, solidarity and visibility for women's rights advocates and WHRDs, including those in exile, and at the same time they become a risk, making these organisations and individuals vulnerable to cybercrime, threats and further exclusion. Women human rights defenders who challenge patriarchal norms or advocate for the rights of persons of diverse sexual orientations and marginalised ethnic groups are especially targeted with hate speech, threats and online attacks, often orchestrated to silence or discredit them.²⁴

WLOs, WROs and WHRDs have used social media to share reports and updates from crisis zones, amplify marginalised voices and build cross-border feminist networks. These tools have enabled faster mobilisation and greater global attention to local struggles. However, in authoritarian regimes in particular, women risk being identified and face oppression, threats and violence – both online and offline – for publishing reports and activists perspectives. NAPs for the WPS agenda must therefore explicitly protect WHDRs in both physical and online spaces.²⁵

²⁰ Cabrera-Balleza, M. & Popovic, N. (2011). *Costing and financing 1325: Examining the resources needed to implement and monitor National Action Plans on UNSCR 1325*. GNWP & Cordaid.

²¹ Oxfam Canada (2018). *A feminist approach to localization: How Canada can support the leadership of women's rights actors in humanitarian action*. Oxfam Canada.

²² Anderlini, S. (2020). *Recognizing Women Peacebuilders: Critical Actors in Effective Peacemaking*. ICAN.

²³ Smyth, F.; Hersi, A.; Baldoumus, A.; Tonelli, A.; Khezi-Nwoha, H.; Bhagwan-Rolls, S.; Evans, A.; Banerjee, P. & Kaya, Z. (2020).

Transforming power to put women at the heart of peacebuilding: A collection of regional-focused essays on feminist peace and security. Oxfam International.

²⁴ Pultz, K. (2023). *Online harassment and censorship of women human rights defenders*. DanChurchAid.

²⁵ Smyth, F.; Hersi, A.; Baldoumus, A.; Tonelli, A.; Khezi-Nwoha, H.; Bhagwan-Rolls, S.; Evans, A.; Banerjee, P. & Kaya, Z. (2020).

Transforming power to put women at the heart of peacebuilding: A collection of regional-focused essays on feminist peace and security. Oxfam International.

CONCLUSION

Considering the current political climate, the WPS agenda seems to be facing a critical time in history, not only because of its 25th anniversary but also because of the shift in political priorities. Despite decades of advocacy, normative gains and the tireless work of feminist movements, WLOs – particularly in the Global South – continue to operate within unjust and unfair systems that continue to replicate structures of inequality, sideline local leadership and fail to provide adequate protection and resources for those upholding democratic, feminist and human rights-based structures. The current geopolitical landscape, marked by increasing militarisation, shrinking civic space and well-funded, coordinated backlash, threatens to reverse progress.

WLOs, WROs and WHRDs must be recognised as more than survivors of violence and beneficiaries – they are architects of peace and defenders of human rights and accountability. Their leadership must be resourced and protected across all spaces, from national and global fora to the digital sphere, where risks are evolving alongside opportunities. Reclaiming WPS in times of backlash means more than defending past achievements – it means transforming peacebuilding into a feminist, inclusive, transformative, decolonial and locally owned process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Respond to the Global Backlash with Coordinated Solidarity** – Strengthen transnational feminist alliances and engage proactively in support of agreed norms in multilateral spaces. Hold donor states and international actors accountable for their gender equality commitments by highlighting present commitments in National Action Plans and binding international agreements, including CEDAW, and reporting transparently in cases of non-compliance.
- 2. Direct More Resources to Local Hands** – In line with the global commitments by the UN Secretary General and the international community, states and donors should increase core, flexible and self-determined funding for local women-led and community-based organisations to meet the minimum target of 15% of funds earmarked for gender equality programmes and allocate at least 1% of overseas development assistance to WROs by 2025. Ensure co-creation and co-leadership of programmes by grassroots organisations at every stage – from design through implementation to evaluation.
- 3. Foster a Culture of Trust, Care and Solidarity** – Recognise, trust and sustain feminist networks and alliances that prioritise collective care, resilience and long-term joint movement-building, not just service provision and project implementation.
- 4. Strengthen Accountability for SGBV and Human Rights Violations** – Link legal and support systems that ensure the documentation of SGBV leads to prosecution and justice. Silence and inaction in response to violence against women, girls and other structurally excluded groups and crimes against humanity must be recognised as complicity.
- 5. Centre Intersectionality in Policy and Practice** – Design and evaluate policies through an intersectional lens, beyond the recognition of diversity, taking into account how overlapping systems of discrimination, particularly racism, colonialism and patriarchy, result in systems of inequality, violence and exclusion.
- 6. Decolonise Knowledge and Practice** – Rebalance the knowledge economy by supporting research, documentation and storytelling led by Global South organisations. Ensure knowledge flows are equitable and reciprocal.
- 7. Foster Responsible Use of Social Media and Artificial Intelligence** – Recognise social media and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence as both critical tools and potential threats for WLOs, WROs and WHRDs. Invest in feminist digital literacy, cybersecurity infrastructure and include online safety into WPS National Action Plans.

