Unhappy birthday! Women, Peace and Security at 25

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Introduction

Columba Achilleos-Sarll and Paul Kirby

This year – 2025 – the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda marks its 25th anniversary, a milestone that invites both reflection and reckoning. WPS was born from United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, unanimously adopted on October 31, 2000, and few at the time could have foreseen how widely it would spread, becoming the largest thematic domain of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), and sparking hundreds of national action plans (NAPs) and regional action plans. Today, the agenda faces a crisis of legitimacy, provoking questions about the depth of its roots, its convoluted growth, and whether it warrants celebration

at all. Since the wars and atrocities of the 1990s that spurred the first resolution – itself a product of the turn toward human security and the wider embrace of liberal internationalism – authoritarianism has risen, multilateral norms have eroded, civic space has shrunk, and aid budgets have been slashed. This profoundly gloomy picture is set against ongoing violence, including repeated violations of international law, too often met with the silence or complicity of WPS champions and so-called liberal defenders.

Anniversaries are more than brute markers of time; they are moments of collective memory, inviting reflection on what has been achieved and what has been lost or left unfinished. As Walter Benjamin had it,

> the initial day of a calendar serves as a historical time-lapse camera … the same day that keeps recurring in the guise of holidays, which are days of remembrance. Thus the calendars do not measure time as clocks do; they are monuments of a historical consciousness. (cited in Hutchings 2007, 71)

WPS has no holiday, but its anniversaries offer both remembrance and recreation: a return to origins, but also a chance to re-narrate the origin for present hopes (Naraghi-Anderlini, this forum). It is this orientation toward possible emancipatory futures that is distinctive of critical theory (Hutchings 2007). Anniversaries also provide an opportunity to assess unfulfilled promises, and to reckon with uncomfortable truths of stagnation, regression, and co-optation. In the case of WPS, this 25th anniversary compels us to question not only where we are, but also whose voices are remembered and whose have been forgotten.

This is not the first WPS birthday of note. Indeed, marking the passages since UNSCR 1325 was adopted has become something of a tradition. In 2005, the concern was already with lagging implementation and poor accountability, at the same time that many – especially in the Global South – were taking up UNSCR 1325 as a tool in their struggles (Basu 2016). By 2010, hopefulness was on the rise, with WPS securing a firmer institutional foothold at the United Nations (UN), buoyed by several successor resolutions. For the 15th anniversary, however, optimism at the progress of offices, strategies, and reviews – most notably, the 2015 *Global Study* (Coomaraswamy et al. 2015) – had descended into wariness at bureaucracy and state co-optation, alongside a growing sense that structural analysis – of militarism, colonialism, and patriarchy – was being displaced.

In October 2020, the confluence of Trumpism and Putinism frustrated an 11th WPS resolution (Allen and Shepherd 2019), fueling a sense of crisis and urgency just as the COVID-19 pandemic raged. The trajectory was already one of decline, though still invested with some hope, whether in the rebound of the "liberal international order" or in radical alternatives born of anti-racist and anti-militarist organizing (Haastrup and Hagen 2020). However, any revival was to be short lived. As many of the contributions to this forum attest, the current mood

is one of deep disillusionment, and even despair for the future of WPS. As long-time WPS advocate Thania Paffenholz has put it, "the mood is far from festive … [I]t [feels] more like a funeral" (Wisotzki and Paffenholz 2025).

To capture this moment in the agenda's history, when its architecture is being tested like never before, we set out to convene not policy recommendations or an expert consensus, but a time capsule: a collection that can be revisited in the decades to come for clues to how this anniversary was experienced from multiple vantage points. Publishing this forum in the *International Feminist Journal of Politics* (*IFJP*) carries particular significance. Established in 1999, *IFJP* was the first journal to publish early scholarship on the WPS agenda, including foundational work such as Carol Cohn, Helen Kinsella, and Sheri Gibbings' (2004) article, and it continues to be at the forefront of WPS research. This forum, then, connects past and present feminist engagements while leaving a record for future ones.

We have gathered perspectives from across the WPS "ecosystem" (Kirby and Shepherd 2024), covering the UN, international justice institutions, national militaries, and civil society; grounded in each regional experience from Africa to Latin America to the Middle East to South Asia to the Pacific to Central and Eastern Europe and the Global North; and informed by critical queer, decolonial, and abolitionist feminist perspectives. Our contributors include those who have worked in WPS advocacy and practice for many decades and sometimes from the start (Naraghi-Anderlini, Seelinger, Grimes) as well as those engaged in feminist activism that is sometimes sharply critical of the WPS edifice (Weerawardhana, Jayakumar, Wright). Many of our contributors are based in the universities of the Global North, but for the regional capsules we have taken some care to invite those with significant links to those contexts (Haastrup, Rebelo and Drumond, Chilmeran, Jayakumar, Lee-Koo, Krulišová, Kirby). Inevitably, these choices (and our own positionalities) leave some things out: a perspective from within the UNSC or a UN agency, a direct line to women peacebuilders on the front lines, the views of an ex-combatant who may have been through a WPS program or a skeptic from the diplomatic corps. There are also other ways to divide WPS thematically – to foreground the traditional "pillars" of participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery, or the interface with migration, climate change, terrorism, and so on – but we hope that the collection gives at least an approximate freeze frame of the field at this anniversary.

We do not aspire to consensus; indeed, none exists. Some of our contributors differ sharply on what WPS is and what it does. For some, this moment marks crisis and despair (Chilmeran); for others, a sense of continuity (Lee-Koo, Seelinger); and for yet others, hope and possibility (Krulišová, McLeod) despite the challenges facing traditional WPS domains (Naraghi-Anderlini, Grimes, Rebelo and Drumond). The contrast in perspective is at least partly a question of political geography, as documented below: measured by NAP adoption, Latin America has deepened its WPS engagement just as Western

Europe is scaling back; South Asia is dominated by two countries without NAPs but nevertheless with a strongly gendered sense of identity and conflict; Asia and the Pacific, meanwhile, faces intersecting insecurities, from climate change to conflict, that traditional WPS has proven ill-equipped to deal with; in Africa, widespread NAP adoption coexists with uneven implementation shaped by conflict and donor dependency; in the Middle East, WPS remains caught between authoritarian restrictions, protracted wars, and feminist resistance movements that often operate outside the formal agenda. However, what unites these diverse regions are the tireless efforts of feminist activists and a mosaic of civil society organizations, including women-led organizations. Their agility and understanding of the root causes of conflict often surpasses that of states and international organizations (IOs), enabling them to intervene urgently, creatively, and in collaboration with communities even amid shrinking resources and constrained civic space.

Addressing themes from militarism to abolition, this collection captures both celebration and reckoning as the agenda is lived across different landscapes. It thus offers a moment to reflect on the agenda's structural limits and what might come next. For many, WPS has reached a crossroads, with feminist scholars and practitioners increasingly turning to decolonial (Weerawardhana, this forum), intersectional (Sapiano, Jin, and Heathcote 2024), queer (Hagen 2016), and more recently abolitionist frameworks (Wright and Achilleos-Sarll 2025) to reimagine peace outside the boundaries of traditional WPS as it exists within the state, IOs, and traditional diplomacy.

Do anniversaries imply a lifecycle, birthday candles marking the procession from cradle to grave? The marking of a tragedy past, a time ended too soon? Or something like an endless saga, as generation replaces generation, a blooming family tree? To mark time against an egalitarian horizon is necessarily to sort the last decades into some narrative arc: a plot of turning points and backlash, deep explanations and surface details. If an anniversary conventionally signals a return, a cycle of remembrance, then for WPS that ritual is in disarray. As the contributions here attest, we are instead adrift among plural timelines: clashing origin stories, diverging experiences, rival futures. In the wider circuits of the agenda, as practitioners and activists gather for 25th birthday events, we may well wonder: what sort of party does WPS deserve?

Overlooked origins: the past as a guidepost for the future of WPS

Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini

Introduction
UNSCR 1325 is often mischaracterized as a Western, liberal, normative "gender equality" agenda. This has spurred resistance among some states

and encouraged performative, technocratic fixes among others, and is fueling today's backlash. Yet the agenda has been prescient and resilient. It has evolved to address diverse issues – from the gendered dimensions of violent extremism, to climate-related insecurity, rising militarism, and women's peace praxis. This resilience reflects the agenda's origins: women's lived experiences of war and the mobilization of transnational civil society. As Bangladesh's Ambassador Anwarul K. Chowdhury told the UNSC on October 24, 2000, "Finally the voices of women have reached the Security Council … the results of the efforts of numerous women and their organizations" (Chowdhury 2000, 19).

This contribution revisits three overlooked originating features of the WPS agenda.

A globally connected and locally rooted constituency

WPS was not born in UN conference rooms. It emerged from women on the front lines of conflict – from Liberia and Sri Lanka to Colombia and Iraq. Its essence lies in the largely unwritten experiences of women's organizing, mediation, and peacebuilding through time, and across cultures. The 1982 General Assembly Resolution 37/63 affirmed women's equal participation in public life, peace, and international cooperation, while the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women was an inflection point. Against the backdrop of genocides and fragile peace processes, advocates secured a chapter on "Women and Armed Conflict" in the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA), with six strategic objectives: participation, conflict resolution, disarmament, a culture of peace, protection for displaced women, and support for women in colonies, anchoring WPS to come (UN Women 2015). Advocates highlighted what formal processes missed; in conflict zones, women were mediating, calling for disarmament, building bridges, and crafting solutions. Ann Hope, a Northern Irish trade union representative stated: "We went to Beijing to ensure that women were recognized as agents of change" (Naraghi-Anderlini 2001, 11).

With 189 signatories, the BPfA gave civil society a global framework to monitor state commitments and address women's wartime realities. In 1995 in the United Kingdom (UK), International Alert pioneered the practice as the Senegalese Ndeye Sow launched the first "Women and Peacebuilding" program in Rwanda and Burundi (International Alert 2006). Within two years, other female staff with experience of crises united to work on gendered conflict analysis and bring attention to women's roles in peacemaking.[1] This culminated in a landmark 1998 conference in London where 50 women from conflict-affected contexts across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Europe communicated a central message: how women as fighters, protectors, peacebuilders, and humanitarian responders were rendered invisible,

under-resourced, and politically marginalized, yet indispensable (Naraghi-Anderlini and Manchanda 1999).

They called for a global policy framework grounded in justice, equality, human security, and peace. To sustain this transnational momentum, International Alert launched the "Women Building Peace" campaign in 1999. The campaign was founded on partnerships with more than 100 grass-roots organizations across war zones to consult and identify women's priorities. They presented five demands, communicated by thousands of postcards addressing UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan (see Box 1) (Adrian-Paul et al. 2004).

Dear Secretary-General Kofi Annan,

Women everywhere applaud the efforts made for peace by the United Nations. Women recognise the progress made in including women in peace-making and peace-building efforts within the UN itself and the pledges made to women during the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. However, we believe that five years later not enough has been done to make these pledges a reality. They must be implemented, as sustainable peace can only be achieved with the full participation of women from all levels of society. We ask the governments of the international community and the United Nations to stand by the commitments they have made to women. These are to:

(1) Include women in peace negotiations as decision-makers
(2) Put women at the heart of reconstruction and reconciliation
(3) Strengthen the protection and representation of refugee and displaced women
(4) End impunity for crimes committed against women and ensure redress
(5) Give women and women's organisations the support and resources they need to build peace.

Box 1. Message on a postcard.

A tripartite partnership: civil society, states, and the UN

Civil society alone could not have attained the resolution; UNSCR 1325 originated from a multi-sectoral collaboration. The period 1999–2000 was an unusual moment of cooperation among the permanent members of the UNSC, as they struggled with tackling brutal civil wars while constrained by their mandate to respect state sovereignty and non-interference. Campaigners strategically framed WPS, built on practices of women's role in the prevention and resolution of wars, as offering solutions, not new burdens.

This approach bridged two core UN pillars: "we the peoples" (UN Charter) and the state-centric system. In New York, campaigners formed the ad hoc Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Working Group (later formalized), convening bilateral and plenary meetings with UNSC members and supplying evidence and a draft resolution. The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) provided logistical support and leveraged its convening power. This collaboration remains a hallmark of the agenda.

Namibia's strategic role

The elected members of the UNSC in 2000 were pivotal, particularly Bangladesh, Canada, Jamaica, and Namibia. In March 2000, Bangladesh secured a Presidential Statement, placing WPS formally on the agenda. Jamaica – whose representative, Patricia Durrant, was the UNSC's only woman ambassador – was a strong supporter, as was Canada, given their leadership on human security.

Namibia, however, provided the breakthrough. Concerned about sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers, Namibia hosted the May 2000 Windhoek Conference and Declaration, calling for prevention, accountability, and more women in peacekeeping. Planning to table a resolution on women and peacekeeping in October 2000, Namibia met with civil society and agreed to International Alert's suggestion of integrating the campaign's priorities – participation, protection, prevention, and post-conflict recovery – alongside peacekeeping.[2] That strategic move anchored WPS within an existing UNSC mandate acceptable to Russia and China, while broadening the agenda's scope. The African leadership and ownership also increased the resolution's chances.

From origin to future

Twenty-five years on, women peacebuilders remain active and vocal in war zones. Meanwhile, states have reduced the WPS agenda to a focus on women as either victims or mediators, negating the inherently transformative and political nature of women's demands for recognition as peace actors and change agents.

With multilateralism in crisis, inflamed by the occupation of Ukraine and the genocide in Gaza, the agenda and its global origins are more relevant than ever. The path forward includes (1) refocusing on the transformative essence of women peacebuilders as decision makers; (2) holding states accountable while expanding the locally rooted, global constituency for peace, rights, equality, and pluralism, aligned with arms control and anti-war movements; and (3) engaging popular culture to amplify women's contributions to peace and security. As Chowdhury said in October 2000: "We must send a powerful message … [W]omen need peace, *but more importantly, peace needs the involvement of women*" (Chowdhury 2000, 19, emphasis added).

The WPS agenda, international crimes trials, and the promise of prevention

Kim Thuy Seelinger

In what today may seem patently obvious, UNSCR 1325 identified conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) as a threat to international security.

Subsequent resolutions foregrounded impunity and also endorsed international tribunals and the International Criminal Court (ICC) in prosecuting sexual violence as a war crime, a crime against humanity, or an act of genocide. The assumption was, in part, that through effective prosecution and punishment, CRSV could be prevented. Over the past two and a half decades, we have made meaningful – if at times halting – progress with respect to the prosecution of CRSV and the development of jurisprudence in the field of international criminal law. It is less clear how we measure and ensure the preventative or deterrent effects of these efforts. Without this, the promise of the WPS agenda will remain unfulfilled.

Since UNSCR 1325, we have seen an increasing diversity and number of CRSV-related cases brought to courts around the world. Building on the critical jurisprudence issued by the International Criminal Tribunals for Rwanda and the Former Yugoslavia through the mid- and late 1990s, a new generation of national and international courts have explored individual criminal responsibility for atrocity crimes including CRSV. While the first decade of the ICC bore little fruit in terms of successful prosecution of CRSV, the past several years have brought important advances, such as in convictions for crimes against humanity including forced pregnancy and "other serious crimes" such as forced marriage.

There have of course been setbacks at the ICC. In light of the acquittals of Germaine Katanga and Jean-Pierre Bemba Gombo for sexual crimes committed by their subordinates, many have noted a trend of unique disconnect: while judges often accept that crimes involving CRSV have occurred as a factual matter, they may struggle to attribute these acts to the individual defendant before them. Often, judges (and, at times, lawyers) fail to see gender-based crimes as part of the overall repertoire of violence, or as intrinsically connected to other crimes such as killings or pillage, for which guilt is somehow more easily understood and assigned. At other times, there is a failure to see the gendered aspects of certain crimes at all. In *Prosecutor* v. *Al Hassan*, the ICC prosecutor's first attempt to prosecute gender-based persecution did not succeed due to an extraordinary fragmentation of opinions from the bench – despite strong argumentation and evidence of gender-related discrimination (International Criminal Court 2024a, paras 1438–1439, 1457–1458, 1472–1473, 2024b, para. 125).

Despite these setbacks, encouraging progress continues. Alongside the development of rich policies to guide the ICC Office of the Prosecutor's work on gender-based crimes, crimes against and affecting children, slavery crimes, and the specific crime of gender persecution, we see ongoing efforts to investigate and charge crimes related to the WPS agenda (International Criminal Court 2022, 2023a, 2023b, 2024c). ICC prosecutors have charged gender-based crimes in several situations, including

those of Afghanistan, Israel/Palestine, Libya, and Uganda. These efforts are bearing slow fruit.

There has also been tremendous expansion of the so-called ecosystem for CRSV accountability beyond the ICC. In fact, national tribunals have done much of the heavy lifting this past decade. We see military tribunals in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) undertaking several cases involving CRSV, with convictions of soldiers and civilian leaders alike, including for crimes against children (Military Operational Court of North Kivu 2014; Military Tribunal Court of South Kivu 2018). Across the globe in Guatemala, two former military officers were convicted for the sexual slavery and domestic servitude of Indigenous Maya Q'eqchi' women during the civil conflict three decades earlier (Tribunal Primero de Sentencia Penal, Narcoactividad y Delitos Contra el Ambiente 2016). In Europe, domestic courts have taken up both legacy and "live" prosecutions of CRSV committed on their national territories, as in Bosnia Herzegovina and Ukraine. Moreover, universal jurisdiction has opened up creative avenues for CRSV accountability at distance – particularly where no in situ or international tribunals currently have jurisdiction. The courts of Senegal, Belgium, Germany, and Switzerland have been particularly inspiring.

Perhaps the more challenging promise of the WPS agenda with respect to CRSV accountability lies in the expectation that all of this prosecution will have a preventative or deterrent effect. Thoughtful scholars and observers have theorized about the deterrent potential of trials,[3] but empirical evidence, to my knowledge, is lacking – certainly with respect to decreased incidence of CRSV. This does not mean that atrocity crime trials, including those involving CRSV, do not have a deterrent or preventative effect. It may simply be that impact is more nuanced than simple correlation between trials and incidence rates might explain. Some scholars have referred to the "conditional deterrence" of these trials. I agree that deterrent value is likely multi-factorial, operating in qualitatively different ways across cases and contexts. In my view, relevant considerations include:

- *timing* – is a conflict ongoing, and could atrocities in theory be halted?;
- *politics* – might trials frustrate peace negotiations, and are state perpetrators responsive to international pressure?;
- *positionality* – what is the role, career stage, and public reputation of the accused?;
- *social norms* – how is the charged conduct understood locally, and is CRSV uniquely stigmatizing to the accused and would-be perpetrators?;
- *awareness* – how distant from the site of the crime is the trial, and do potential perpetrators know about it?; and
- *outcome* – are only convictions deterrents, or can arrests, investigations, and prosecutions also be effective?

Legal accountability for CRSV is important in its own right. Trials serve an essential function regardless of whether they in fact deter future violence. However, it is this potential that gives formal justice legs. As to courts' ending CRSV itself, I have two suggestions. First, we should reframe the question to ask "Under what conditions do trials deter the commission of certain kinds of CRSV by certain kinds of actors?" Second, this inquiry is not something that lawyers and judges or even legal scholars can take on themselves. We should engage disciplines with expertise in prevention and decision making (such as public health, political science, or economics) to develop a richer assessment of what aspects of prosecution work, with whom, and where. This next quarter of a century needs an updated CRSV research agenda. The question of prosecution's deterrent value is a critical part of it. When it comes to understanding the full effect of our hard-fought trials, social science will help us to move from our rhetoric and assumptions, closer to evidence-based understanding.

No silver bullets: military engagement with the WPS agenda

Rachel Grimes

Twenty-five years of age is quite the milestone. If UNSCR 1325 were a British monarch, military regiments and bands would be on parade. Sadly, there is unlikely to be any military fanfare on this silver anniversary. The resolution and the military have not exactly enjoyed a happy union. On October 31, 2000, when the UNSC acknowledged that the experiences of women and girls in conflict *is* a security matter, military organizations were contracted by their political masters into what some perceived to be an arranged – possibly forced – marriage. Recently, the United States (US) Department of Defense formally absolved its military of WPS obligations, possibly emboldening other armed forces to renege on their own WPS policies (Kirby, this forum). This is unfortunate, as WPS – when implemented as intended – is highly relevant to the military. To confound matters, over the years some friends and family of UNSCR 1325 have been hostile to any association between it and military organizations, citing irreconcilable differences (Cockburn 2012; Shepherd 2016).

Back in the 2000s, it was challenging for me to find military staff who were aware of UNSCR 1325; in a twisted way, it is a measure of success that US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth has even heard of WPS. In the early days, I had to deflect skepticism and outright hostility. Then, as now, many military staff perceived the agenda to be "a UN responsibility" and "only applicable in peacekeeping." Some officers told me that the military "is already doing WPS by observing international humanitarian law." Since 2007, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) policies, action plans, and doctrine

have prompted the strategic echelons of defense ministries to better understand WPS, while the UN has also encouraged senior military staff to integrate the resolutions beyond peacekeeping efforts.

Instruments such as NAPs have further encouraged military engagement with the UNSCR 1325. Some departments of defense now co-author the NAP, as is the case with the UK. Despite this success, the inclination for militaries to "export" WPS to "other" nations while overlooking their own armed forces' lack of education on UNSCR 1325 is still prevalent. Additional influences on military engagement with UNSCR 1325 include the UN Military Gender Advocate of the Year award and the UK Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative. Both of these WPS vehicles have seen Angelina Jolie and other celebrities directly inspire senior officers (Ministry of Defence 2017). Regrettably, after the shine has worn off and the "converted" officers have moved on, the process of education begins again.

Some defense budgets now resource WPS, employing military staff as gender advisers in the UN, NATO, and national militaries. Funding for WPS courses is evident, such as the Nordic Centre for Gender in Military Operations (NCGM). Military gender adviser posts frequently remain unfilled, and it is rare to find military personnel from the combat arms (such as the infantry and the cavalry) on WPS courses. UNSCR 1325 therefore remains on the periphery of military awareness and is seen more as a human resources (HR) matter concerned with the numbers of uniformed women.

Mainstreaming a gender perspective into the work of military branches such as intelligence or planning continues to be challenging. In 30 years of military service, I never attended a military briefing by intelligence staff that detailed how the conflict impacted women and men differently. This is despite the role of intelligence personnel in providing fundamental context for the area of operations to senior staff. UNSCR 1325 remains absent from planning briefings; instead, it is left to the gender adviser (if there is one), who frequently (and unfairly) lacks the gravitas of the intelligence and planning staff in the eyes of military leaders. To address such omissions, NATO now requests military branches to report on their integration of WPS; however, as the evaluation is conducted internally, the branches are essentially marking their own homework. NATO would do well to employ external entities such as the Civil Society Advisory Panel or NCGM to critically audit its WPS progress. A UNSCR 1325 victory within NATO has been the inclusion of language on WPS and wider human security concerns in the two recent NATO Strategic Concepts.

Certain nations have acted as WPS ambassadors: Sweden delivers WPS coaching for senior military officers, while Canada and the UK run courses on operational-level understanding of UNSCR 1325. Several departments of defense have introduced policies without which traction in the subordinate military headquarters would be challenging. Examples include the 2017

Canadian Defence "Gender-Based Analysis Plus" policy, which promoted understanding of conflict from multiple perspectives; the UK's 2018 explicitly named Joint Service Publication 1325, which introduced WPS through the lens of each military echelon, at strategic, operational, and tactical levels; and Australia's "Defence, Gender, Peace and Security" mandate in 2020, which sought to mainstream UNSCR 1325 into military considerations. From a policy perspective, the last ten years have witnessed a minor eruption in defense engagement. However, despite these achievements, it is challenging to identify which militaries meaningfully engage with WPS, and which merely use WPS to project a progressive, democratic state identity.

While WPS has "arrived" at the defense strategic level, I suspect that it will take another quarter of a century to reach the operational and tactical levels, which is ironically where it is most needed. Military engagement has reached a plateau. The reasons for this stagnation can be attributed to the inadequate manner in which WPS policies are introduced to military audiences, the general failure to translate WPS into tactical actions, the inability to demonstrate how UNSCR 1325 enhances operational effectiveness, a military leadership that is slow to evaluate policy implementation or steer subordinates, and a male-dominated workforce that struggles to see the relevance of the agenda.

There are also more profound aspects that undermine the union of UNSCR 1325 and the military. The resolution was drafted by organizations that courageously wanted to end warfare. As the military are only called on when diplomacy has failed and the use of force is deemed necessary, it is challenging to see how they could contribute to this envisioned transformation. Instead, those serving in the military – myself included – have tried to mold UNSCR 1325 to fit within and contribute to military operations. Some feminists criticize armed forces' engagement with UNSCR 1325 as "making war safer for women" (Weiss 2011), overlooking how international humanitarian law has sought to "make war safer for men." Similarly, criticism that the military focuses excessively on the protection pillar seems petulant when the role of the military is routinely to protect a population. Recently, a trend to conflate lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) inclusion with WPS has weakened efforts to integrate WPS into military planning, as military organizations are becoming immersed in HR-driven conversations. These are absolutely necessary for departments of defense, but not at the expense of WPS implementation across military branches.

All marriages have challenges, and the divergent normative assumptions of war-fighting entities and anti-war perspectives will always make this union an awkward one. There appear to be no silver bullets in advancing UNSCR 1325 beyond the rhetoric to meaningful action in a military context. However, gender advisers and military advocates of UNSCR 1325 will not give up.

Decolonial feminism and the WPS agenda

Chamindra Weerawardhana

In this contribution, I offer a decolonial feminist reading of the WPS agenda, a necessary intervention in a volatile global context, characterized by militarism, extractivism, and imperialist aggression. Decolonial feminism is best described as a feminist discourse developed by Indigenous women and gender-diverse peoples, working-class women from global-majority contexts, and socioeconomically, racially, and culturally marginalized women in imperialist "core states" in the Global North (Lugones 2010; Rivera Cusicanqui 2012). Rooted in a politics of liberation, self-determination, and anti-imperialism, decolonial feminism takes an unequivocal stance against all other discourses developed under the banner of "feminism." Decolonial feminism takes issue with neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg 2014) and its elitist manifestations, such as "girlboss" feminism, as well as every single discourse that presents itself as "feminist" but, in reality, operates in the service of the patriarchy. At the heart of decolonial feminist thought is the right to bodily autonomy, a social class-based understanding of gender-based oppression and violence, the rights of gender-diverse people, a broad understanding of womanhood that does not exclude women with diverse lived experiences (Weerawardhana 2018), and a commitment to climate justice and the *mana motuhake* (the self-determination of oppressed peoples).[4]

While acknowledging the positive effect that WPS has had on global conversations on gender justice in conflict-affected contexts, a decolonial feminist reading of WPS raises critical questions. WPS as a discourse that calls for equity and equality has been developed within an inequitable and unequal "system," which bell hooks described as the imperialist capitalist white supremacist patriarchy (hooks 1984). This means that WPS is executed in such a way that the "core" of this oppressive system remains intact. Herein lies the contradiction, and adjacent discourses popular in Western circles such as "feminist foreign policy" (FFP) – all of which have fallen from grace, especially with the violence of the ongoing Nakba. The challenges, if not problems, associated with WPS stem from this fundamental contradiction.

WPS is an archetypal invention of Western liberal feminism, or, to be precise, white feminism, universalizing top-down, state-centric solutions and marginalizing non-Western, decolonial feminist approaches. It purports to stand for women affected by armed conflict but deploys a "one-size-fits-all" approach to complex realities. It leaves little space for critical engagements with questions of CRSV, self-determination, and other systemic challenges facing women, which have disproportionate impacts based on the specific intersections of lived experience of women affected by armed conflict. In practice, WPS often boils down to career development

opportunities for Western women with powerful passports and privileged women from global-majority backgrounds with varying levels of proximity to white privilege and Western neoliberal feminism. WPS also waters down commitments at international platforms that are attended by a privileged few and severely immigration policed (preventing the participation of women from global-majority countries who are directly affected by armed conflict). WPS creates a "peace hierarchy" among women peacebuilders. In many global-majority countries affected by armed conflict, post-conflict challenges, and persistent ethnonational division, the work of rebuilding communities is often spearheaded by local women who speak local languages and are familiar with the complex realities. However, they receive next to no recognition. Instead, it is privileged women, with considerable class and caste status in urban centers, and with access to Western languages and education, who in turn gain access to Western donors and academia, and who are recognized as "women peacebuilders."

WPS often reduces women to "victims" of armed conflict, as passive proponents of "peacebuilding." The language of "women and children" posits women as a vulnerable group requiring protection (Shepherd 2017). WPS disregards women in armed resistance, prioritizing a Western liberal feminist (mis)conception of women as inherently peaceful (Basu and Nagar 2021; Parashar 2014). This reading is often used to justify militarism and consequently militarized masculinity, counterproductive to what WPS stands for (MacKenzie 2015). Decolonial policy approaches to peace and security, such as that of the Alliance of Sahel States,[5] receive next to no recognition from WPS proponents. There is a need for a decolonial feminist re-imagining of WPS that acknowledges women in armed resistance, not only as powerful agents of resistance and leaders with political agency, but also as theorists of *jineologî* and bearers of knowledge.[6]

Queer people have long been categorically ignored in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. When WPS advocates and Western scholars write about "queering WPS" (Hagen 2016), what transpires is an understanding of "inclusion" that does not fundamentally question the classism and casteism of WPS, or its other systemic flaws. While this academic literature challenges the heteronormativity of WPS, it conceptualizes "queerness" from a place of divisive identity politics in the West. This results in a situation where it is difficult to develop a WPS-related focus on gender and sexual diversities in conflict-affected global-majority contexts, in such a way that it emphasizes the interconnectedness of challenges faced by women in all of their diversity, non-heteronormative people, non-cisnormative people, and people with diverse sex characteristics. This body of work is far from helpful to global-majority contexts. Developing conflict management/transformation and peacebuilding initiatives that cater to diverse segments of the community with a sense of equity requires an understanding of queerness as a range

of natural variations of the human experience, together with a core focus on the shared struggles and shared humanity of all citizens, irrespective of their lived realities. This calls for locally grounded discourses and praxes of equity for people with diverse lived experiences, whose realities seldom receive any meaningful attention in WPS and broader conflict transformation work. While existing work produced in Western academic circles usefully draws attention to queer lived realities, it also helps to reinforce the false yet influential narrative in many global-majority countries that discourses on bodily autonomy-related human rights are "Western imports." This is where decolonial feminist readings of this body of rights, articulated by people with relevant lived experience in global-majority countries, can be helpful.

WPS reveals itself as one salient reality: a soft power strategy to make the West's imperialist, capitalist ambitions "look good." WPS is deployed when it is of structural advantage to imperialist powers. When academics, governments (especially in the global majority), and other stakeholders engage with WPS, it is in our collective interest to take stock of these inherent contradictions and seek more people-centric, decolonial feminist solutions.

WPS at 25: an African feminist reckoning

Toni Haastrup

Twenty-five years after the passage of UNSCR 1325, the WPS agenda is found in policy documents from Addis Ababa to Abuja. Much has changed, but it is fair to observe that the widespread invocation of WPS has not equated to progressive feminist lifeworlds for many in Africa. From an African feminist vantage point, there are good reasons why this anniversary may feel less like a celebration and more like a necessary pause – a moment to interrogate whose security has improved, whose voices remain on the margins, and what entrenched power hierarchies persist beneath the language that signals increased attention to "gender-responsiveness." At the same time, must we simply accept that this is the story of WPS – one of "failures"?

From my perspective, I think that we need to move beyond the language of failure versus progress (Haastrup 2025). Rather, in revisiting the idea of Africa as a specific site of practice for the WPS agenda (see Haastrup 2019), I want to examine where we are now. In particular, what are the conditions and context for WPS, 25 years on, on the continent, and what does it imply for a global peace and security situation that continues to be ripe for feminist interventions?

More than two decades since the advent of the WPS agenda, there have been notable achievements. As of October 2025, 33 African states have developed NAPs for WPS. Moreover, through the African Union (AU), there has

been greater institutionalization of the aspirations of the agenda. In 2014, the AU created the Office of the Special Envoy for WPS. This institutional investment signals the importance of the agenda as a basis for linking WPS within the African Peace and Security Architecture (Haastrup 2021).

Already by 2015, a global study on the WPS agenda revealed an increase in the use of gender-sensitive language in peace agreements, including those in Africa, as well as the inclusion of women in peace processes as negotiators or mediators (UNOAU 2022). This followed a drive by campaigners across the continent and within formal institutions culminating in the establishment of Fem-Wise, Africa's women mediator network. Fem-Wise mobilizes African women as agents of peace, including as mediators, observers, and participants in early warning mechanisms. From 2010 to 2020, the AU's core theme was the African Women's Decade. This was significant because it formally centered women and gender equality in institutionalized pan-African efforts intended to accelerate global commitments to equality, such as WPS.

Yet, many African feminists would agree that changes toward the positive transformation of women's lives have been slow, non-linear, and challenged by an increasingly hostile environment. Indeed, this anniversary arrives during a turbulent period for the continent; more conflicts and democratic backsliding via coups d'état that engender militarism amid the rise of global anti-gender movements further destabilize fragile triumphs (Haastrup 2025).

However, this is not necessarily a story of despair. Across the continent, movements are envisioning what WPS could achieve if it broke free from institutional capture. Consider the feminist networks in Senegal that are challenging both state violence and religious fundamentalism (Sow 2023), or the LGBTQI+ activists in Kenya who are expanding definitions of (in)security (see Hörter 2025).

In Sudan, women's resistance committees organized advanced protection networks during the 2019 revolution and continue to do so during the current conflict, independent of international support. Similarly, in the DRC, women have constructed parallel justice systems to address gender-based violence when state mechanisms have failed (Murhula 2022). Far from being evidence of "implementation failures," these actions exemplify how peace and security are instantiated when official structures abdicate their responsibilities.

When young feminists in Nigeria fight police violence as part of the #EndSARS movement and challenge patriarchal oppression in tandem, they insist on an indivisible concept of security, and beyond active conflict zones (Omotoso and Faniyi 2024). Similarly, Sudanese women's call for peace and justice as an interwoven demand resists the compartmentalization that invariably seems to characterize the institutional praxis of WPS.

Increasingly, African feminist movements articulate the aspirations of WPS without necessarily placing them within the framework of WPS, UNSCR 1325, or successive resolutions. Yet, I contend that WPS has given us the language to even characterize these practices as worthy of global attention. The future of WPS, then, is not only about improving implementation but also fundamentally reimagining its premises. Institutions have a role to play undoubtedly, but they have been unable to absorb the liberatory ideas of pan-African feminism (see Horn 2025; Tamale 2020) and the critical resources that they offer to push the ambitions of WPS beyond where we are at the moment.

In effect, marking this anniversary demands different questions to the usual. Rather than deliberating how WPS can be "implemented" in Africa, we must reflect on what Africa's feminisms teach the world about the possibilities of peace, justice, and liberation. WPS was not a benevolent offering from the international community. Instead, it resulted from the relentless efforts of African women's and feminist movements, well before 2000. As such, the future of WPS practice and scholarship must find ways of recentering African feminist imaginaries, not simply as regional adaptations of a global norm or case studies of failure, but as situated models that can reconstitute global understandings of peace, security, justice, and the praxis of feminist peace. Beyond inquiring about Africa's compliance with the WPS agenda, a worthy focus could – and indeed should – be on how African perspectives and experiences become necessary to praxis that reshapes the contours of WPS for everyone.

At 25, in one sense WPS has still not come of age – but, when I think of what African feminists want from WPS and how they want to use it, I maintain that it retains radical potential. To see it – to realize it – we too must rethink what it is we want out of the agenda and how we choose to understand it. We should learn lessons from African feminists who, despite funding cuts and direct attacks on feminist goals, use a range of tools including digital platforms to spread the message of liberatory feminism as essential to feminist peace (see Clark and Mohammed 2023). The future of WPS depends on investing in these movements' power, not simply offering them visibility.

25 years of WPS in Latin America: is Brazil walking the talk?

Tamya Rebelo and Paula Drumond

From a Latin American perspective, the 25th anniversary of the WPS agenda evokes feelings of both progress and frustration. In recent years, the region has moved from being among the most underrepresented in the adoption of NAPs to increasing adoption.

For decades, Latin American countries evaded direct involvement with WPS norms. Marked by colonial pasts and recurrent episodes of interventionist policies by great powers, some of these countries firmly adhered to principles of sovereignty and non-interference, avoiding external scrutiny of their national and regional security challenges (Drumond and Rebelo 2020). Prior to 2015, no Latin American country besides Chile (2009) had elaborated on a national tool to implement the agenda. With the adoption of NAPs by Argentina (2015), Paraguay (2015), El Salvador (2017), Guatemala (2017), Brazil (2017), Mexico (2021), Peru (2021), Uruguay (2021), and Colombia (2024), there were hopeful indications that the WPS agenda would gain traction in the region.

Brazil is a key example in this regard. While recognizing UNSCR 1325 as a significant milestone and participating in discussions on gender equality within the UNSC, the country has adopted an "outward-oriented" WPS approach, overlooking the pressing issues of gender violence and insecurity faced by women domestically. During the development of Brazil's first NAP, some officials argued that the WPS agenda was driven by Global North interests and priorities, and expressed concerns that the inclusion of domestic insecurities could lead to interference in Brazilian affairs. However, despite these concerns, the NAP was adopted due to the efforts of an informal coalition of civil servants and a civil society representative working behind the scenes (Rebelo and Drumond 2021).

In terms of content, Brazil's first NAP largely mirrored the desire of national political elites to maintain the country's image as a "zone of peace," free from armed conflicts and interventions. The NAP primarily emphasized traditional peace and security topics, such as women's participation in peace operations and diplomacy and the protection of victims of sexual violence "in conflict, pre-conflict and post-conflict situations in which Brazil acts" (Government of Brazil 2017, 38).

Unsurprisingly, this limited content reflected an insulated elaboration process that involved marginal engagement from civil society actors (Drumond and Rebelo 2019). By and large, the WPS agenda was not recognized by feminist movements and social organizations as a strategic tool for advancing their struggles. It is particularly ironic that Brazil's democracy has fostered a civil society that is robust in some areas but largely indifferent to the WPS framework. Attempts to bridge this gap, such as the Igarapé Institute's initiative to establish the Brazilian Women, Peace and Security Network – which brings together specialists from various related fields – have failed to gain traction.

Interestingly, even after its adoption, Brazil's NAP remained largely unknown across various sectors of society, including within the halls of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was frustrating for us to observe that the WPS agenda remained unfamiliar to Brazilian diplomats across different sectors,

and that some reported progress in implementation resulted from ad hoc initiatives conducted without awareness of the agenda but later recorded as part of it.

Brazil's instrumental use of the WPS agenda to advance its international aspirations, rather than from a genuine commitment to women's rights, became evident during Jair Bolsonaro's government. As researchers, we anticipated that the WPS agenda would come under attack as part of Bolsonaro's anti-gender offensive. Yet, ironically, we witnessed the opposite; while attacking women's human rights in some multilateral arenas, the Bolsonaro administration continued to advocate for gender equality in international peace and security debates. For the Bolsonaro government, in the realm of peace and security, WPS norms were acceptable because of their tokenistic character and essentialist framing, which posed little challenge to its conservative political project (Drumond and Rebelo 2024).

In 2023, the return of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, whose previous governments championed women's and LGBTQI+ rights in multilateral forums, saw Brazil enter another intriguing chapter. Despite his promises to revitalize human rights and promote social justice and equality, discussions on this topic have been sparse, unclear, and lacking transparency. Red flags have been raised by governmental representatives regarding themes that may blur the traditional conflict/non-conflict divide. Lula's commitments to a more inclusive global order continue to ignore how gender operates as a structuring force within security dynamics.

As a result, steps taken in 2024 to adopt a second NAP failed to spur significant action from the government. Almost a year after Stage 1 of the second NAP was published, an interministerial group was created to give it life. However, there has been limited transparency about its procedures or the extent of civil society involvement. Institutional disconnect persists, even in initiatives potentially linked to WPS. For example, though Lula appointed a High Representative for Gender Issues, the postholder has not actively engaged in discussions on peace and security. Moreover, the government has missed several opportunities to promote WPS themes, as in its participation at the G20 summit in November 2024 or through the 2024 decree allowing women to enlist voluntarily in the armed forces. In both cases, the government's attitudes were disconnected from UNSCR 1325 or broader WPS measures.

These ups and downs reveal an instrumentalization of the WPS agenda. It appears that Brazil is engaging in a form of "gender washing," projecting an international image of commitment to gender equality while limiting the agenda to select governmental circles and specific interests. This tactic avoids addressing structural inequalities and implementing meaningful initiatives, even those that could easily connect with declared goals of the current Lula government, such as bringing about racial justice and ending intersectional violence.

Brazil is not alone in decelerating its commitment to WPS. A stagnation can also be observed in Latin America more broadly, highlighting a troubling trend of disengagement. The current landscape reveals a significant lack of active NAPs, as all previously implemented plans have expired except for that of Colombia. Political polarization, growing uncertainty surrounding upcoming elections, and broader democratic backsliding might be preventing policymakers from making a more active contribution to the WPS agenda. These factors create a challenging environment for meaningful WPS discussions, underscoring the urgent need for renewed commitment and collaborative efforts to revitalize this critical agenda in the region.

WPS in the Middle East: dark times and dark outlooks

Yasmin Chilmeran

As I began to write this piece in early June 2025, I was one of many UN staff in the Middle East to receive an alert that several foreign embassies were withdrawing non-essential staff due to regional security escalations. This occurred amid two years of genocide in Gaza, air strikes in Lebanon, military mobilizations across the region, and the fall of the Assad regime in Syria. As I edit the piece, the region has endured 12 days of missile exchanges between Israel and Iran (and subsequently the US), while those of us stuck in the middle watch news updates and security alerts anxiously, trying to understand if this spells more violence.

I am not the first to ask in this context: where are the women? Where are our concerns about women's inclusion and participation in peace processes, conflict prevention, and the prevention of extremism heard? In fact, what conflict prevention is even occurring for women to participate in? Globally, we are stuck in an endless cycle of escalation, militarization, and normalization of genocide, while inclusion, human rights, and gender equality frameworks seem distant.

It is no secret that inclusion and equity are treated as "nice-to-haves" in crisis settings. This is a longstanding feminist critique of mainstream accounts of war, security, and peacemaking (Enloe 2004). Twenty-five years after the adoption of the first WPS resolution, many have explored its impact and potential. However, today the gap between the rhetorical commitments to WPS and the realities of women's lives in so many parts of the world seems enormous. However, surely, this is the agenda's test. Is it not failing? Are we not failing?

The WPS agenda has had reasonable uptake in the Middle East. Nine Middle East and North African (MENA) states have at least one NAP for local or national implementation.[7] Many are also the focus of outward-facing NAPs elsewhere, meaning that there is international attention and

earmarked funding directed to the role of women in conflict prevention and security sector reform.

An example of this uptake is Iraq, the first country in the region to adopt a NAP, which has since gone on to launch a third iteration in 2025. However, Iraq also illustrates how the broader environment increasingly challenges women's rights, gender equality, and the independent civil society that makes this work possible. Against the background of the drafting of its third NAP, Iraq banned the term "gender" in a wave of backlash against queer "ideologies" and terminology (Alkhudary 2023). The ban was first issued through the Iraqi Communications and Media Commission, then later enshrined in law, restricting the use of the term by academics, NGOs, and activists.

In Iraq and elsewhere, the potential to challenge these restrictions is shrinking due to reduced civil society space and funding opportunities. This was exacerbated by US stop-work orders in January 2025, though the trend has been developing for years. NGO-ization pushes women's civil society groups into service delivery or "implementing partner" roles, instead of challenging broader structural issues and social norms or advocating for gender equality.

The challenges that Iraq faces in safeguarding WPS are magnified in Gaza. Genocide has not only devastated women's lives but also exposed the fragility of international commitments to protect and promote women's participation in crises. The genocide, ongoing since October 2023, has had profoundly gendered impacts affecting every aspect of life. The scale is staggering; 33,000 women and girls had been killed as of November 2025, 17,000 pregnant and breastfeeding women were at risk of malnutrition as of July 2025, and 16,000 women are now single heads of households (UN Women 2025a).

Another disturbing angle is the weaponization of gendered and queer narratives that attempt to determine who deserves life, dignity, and protection, and who does not. Regarding both Gaza and Iran, the weaponization of gender equality narratives and queerness is present in media coverage and in state-led online campaigns, reiterating a backward "other" from which women need to be liberated to justify indiscriminate violence. In November 2023, a widely circulated photograph showed an Israeli soldier posing amid Gaza's ruins with a Pride flag reading "In the name of love," presented by official Israeli channels as a gesture of liberation but condemned as pinkwashing in broader media (Dabbous 2023). Similarly, in June 2025, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu invoked the Iranian feminist slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom" (*Zan*, *Zendegi*, *Azadi*") in an address to Iranians ahead of military strikes. These state-sanctioned messages are mirrored in coverage of the civilian suffering in Gaza, where narratives refer to "women and children" as vulnerable bodies, while men are cast as inherent drivers of violence undeserving of protection.

In political transitions in the region, the WPS agenda is similarly sidelined. The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 opened a new phase of state and institution building in Syria. Despite over a decade of mobilization by Syrian women (including Kurdish-led movements in the northeast and the Syrian diaspora), women's participation remains limited. In January 2025, fewer than 15 percent of the participants in the first major post-Assad national dialogue were women, and there was no discussion of mechanisms to institutionalize participation. Things have not improved; Hind Kabawat is currently the only woman in a cabinet of 23, serving as Minister of Social Affairs and Labor. This is despite 25 years of WPS work on post-conflict transitions, including specifically on Syria, and extensive evidence of the importance of women's participation (Anderson 2016).

Witnessing the events in the MENA region unfold in recent years has been heartbreaking, particularly given the promise of liberal institutions. Instead, red line after red line has been crossed, despite collective knowledge that should have enabled us to better advocate against these harms. The MENA region is not exceptional, nor do its challenges to gender equality efforts exist in a vacuum. Today, we are facing a global backlash against gender equality coupled with increased militarization and polarization, which has had harmful impacts in Europe, the US, and the MENA region alike.

What matters now is how we respond. Norms and frameworks must be made resilient to anti-gender backlash and the militaristic tendencies of current global politics, and these same frameworks should not be abstracted from the realities of women's lives at the front lines of conflict and peacebuilding efforts. To protect the values underpinning the WPS agenda, academics and activists must rethink how and where we work to effect change, and what coalitions are needed to make this happen. Recent years have shown how quickly hard-won progress can be erased.

Which women, when peace, what security, and whose agenda?

Kirthi Jayakumar

As I was writing this piece, South Asia witnessed a flurry of activity. Social media was a hub of misinformation and hatred, and news reports on either side of the India–Pakistan border offered no clarity or grounding. In the midst of this, three startling stories drove home a powerful message capturing the South Asian experience of the WPS agenda. In the first, two women from the Indian Army helmed a press conference, delivering detailed accounts of their military operation in Pakistan – named Operation Sindoor, a hat-tip to a marker of married women[8] – where India projected itself as a protector of (married) women (Dixit 2025). Proud messages were ferried

across cyberspace, calling this a win for women's rights and a milestone in the journey of women's empowerment.

Hiding in the algorithmic shadows were the two other heavy, painful stories. In one, a survivor of the terror attack in Pahalgam that led to Operation Sindoor who had lost her husband made earnest pleas calling on state leaders to avoid war; she was brutally harassed and abused online for being "antinational" (Prasad 2025). In the other, tribal women in Kashmir bore the heaviest burden of cross-border violence and politics but were never mentioned in any mainstream narratives on the conflict and left to their own defenses to handle the brunt of life in war (Farooq and Tantray 2025).

This is the South Asian experience. Instead of commitments to implement the WPS agenda, we see a prioritization of militarism, nationalism, and the goal of making war safer for elite women.

Historically, most of South Asia's boundaries were drawn or redrawn by Western imperial powers, while the original form of colonization, the caste system, continues to underpin the sociopolitical realities of all South Asian countries. Both borders and the caste system are sites where conflict manifests. The lived realities of women in South Asia, when viewed through the lens of intersectionality, drive home the fact that they live in a state of negative peace, if not in conditions of overt armed conflict. Here, the WPS agenda does little to address either of these conditions, and instead serves the military-industrial complex and nationalism.

Discussions on themes relating to the WPS agenda, including the framing of NAPs (where applicable – India and Pakistan do not have a NAP, arguably because adopting one might complicate their militarism), in South Asia take place among elite actors who to varying extents prioritize the security sector and the military. This has resulted in outcomes that serve national interests over feminist ones. First, left to the state, the implementation of the WPS agenda has at best been about outward-facing action and inward-facing inaction. For instance, where Pakistan denies the existence of conflict within its territory, India actively supports the agenda globally by supplying all-women forces but does not apply it to the officially designated "disturbed areas" of the northeast and Kashmir (Manchanda 2020, 63). By contrast, Pakistan has the sixth-highest number of female staff officers and military observers in UN peacekeeping, including female engagement teams (FETs). India has deployed FETs in peacekeeping missions, including in the DRC and Liberia, and is known to be the first country to deploy an all-women force to a UN peacekeeping mission. Second, economic empowerment has been prioritized over the goals of the WPS agenda. This is evident in Sri Lanka and Nepal, where post-conflict processes focused more on skills development, business investments, and financial literacy than on transitional justice. Third, the WPS agenda has been centered on tokenistic women's inclusion in peace processes through "capacity-building" programs, which

have rightfully been subject to much criticism. In Afghanistan and Bangladesh, effort was expended to enhance grassroots women's capacity to build peace, but without any attempt whatsoever to address undercurrents enabling conflict, be that with the Taliban insurgency or the Chittagong Hill Tracts conflict (Manchanda 2020).

In sum, the South Asian WPS story is best encapsulated by two paradoxical truths: "making war safer for women" (Goswami, Samuel, and Khan 2017), and "add[ing] women and stir" (Dharmapuri 2011). Between protection and participation, the WPS agenda in South Asia creates space for two categories of women: victims in need of saving and women who have struck a patriarchal bargain. Both are included to keep militarized masculinities and nationalistic fervor alive, which are inherently underpinned by militarization, domination, and violence, all of which are mutually reinforcing (D'Costa and Parashar 2024). Where the WPS agenda is acted on, it is consistently instrumentalized to bring more women into the army (Manchanda 2020) – a careful orchestration of increasing numbers to enable presence without disturbing the extant ideologies of militarism and patriarchy. Even as states' aggressive focus on militarism and nationalism has avoided interrogating the roots of their approaches to security, civil society continues to embed communities of practice that strive to go beyond making war safer for women.

The WPS agenda arrived in a vehicle made of the master's tools (Lorde 1984, 112). It uses the colonizer's tongue and concerns itself with the gendered impact of conflict rather than with dismantling the military-industrial complex or nationalisms that are deeply intertwined with colonialism. Every element that it endorses, enables, includes, and excludes is by design, and every iteration of state-led implementation only affirms this (Parashar 2018). Ultimately, the ten resolutions endorse an "agenda," a deep structure that is carved, shaped, and endorsed by a colonial and capitalist complex in the form of a political economy of war. Annie Zaidi's (2019, 116) words in *Prelude to a Riot* lay bare what a deep structure does: "A syllabus is 'set' for you. You understand? It is 'set' by people whose job it is to limit your knowledge." Until we are willing to dismantle these deep structures, the WPS agenda will have unhappy anniversaries forevermore – in South Asia and beyond.

Lessons from a quarter of a century working with WPS in Asia and the Pacific

Katrina Lee-Koo

Introduction

Jindy Rosa, one of the *IFJP* co-founders and my PhD adviser, introduced me to UNSCR 1325 soon after its adoption by the UNSC. I remember thinking how

fantastic it was that the preeminent global peace and security body was finally taking the gendered politics of peace and security seriously. Against the backdrop of Canberra's traditional security community, the resolution seemed to validate the pioneering research that Jindy was conducting. "Yes," I remember Jindy saying with her characteristic grace, "it is something of a landmark – and it will be even better if it gets implemented!"

Those early conversations with Jindy launched my academic/activist commitment to the WPS agenda across Asia and the Pacific. I have sought to navigate a path that remains critically and intellectually engaged with the agenda while advocating for its principles (as I interpret them) in a journey that has taken me through conferences and classrooms, civil society forums, and the corridors of policymaking, military education, and conflict- and crisis-affected communities.

Here are five lessons that I have learned along the way.

Lesson 1: policy innovation does not guarantee change
Jindy, characteristically, was right. The development of policy – even backed by strong political rhetoric – does not automatically translate into transformative action (see Chappell 2006; Mackay 2014). On paper, Asia and the Pacific boasts impressive WPS adoption. Over a dozen countries have developed NAPs. In 2022, the Association of Southeast Asian Networks (ASEAN) adopted a regional framework, and the Pacific Islands Forum established a regional plan in 2015 (though it has not been renewed). Yet, failures of implementation are widespread. With soft monitoring protocols and weak accountability mechanisms, few plans guarantee that WPS will be embraced when crises unfold.

I was reminded of this in late 2021 when the Australian Federal Police and Defence Force were deployed to the Solomon Islands to support local authorities during civil unrest. When my colleagues and I inquired why none of Australia's 300-plus gender advisers had been deployed, we were told that the situation "did not require" gender expertise; instead, they would prioritize a "do-no-harm" approach. The irony was bitter.

Lesson 2: civil society thrives despite inconsistent formal support
Guided by Jindy's work and networks, I learned early that most innovative WPS work happens in communities where women navigate daily insecurities. Over the past decade, my colleagues and I have had the opportunity to work with young women leaders across Asia and the Pacific who develop their own independent agendas for WPS. They prioritize conflict-related early and forced marriage, access to education during and after crisis, the impact of climate change on their futures, and finding their own space and voice within peacebuilding (see Lee-Koo and Pruitt 2020). This is common across the region; civil society networks develop their own advocacy

infrastructures – which are more agile and responsive than government mechanisms – in the absence of formal recognition of their insecurities (see also Hamilton, Mundkur, and Shepherd 2021). Yet, despite their essential work, these groups are woefully under-resourced.

Lesson 3: let us remember that WPS is a commitment to feminist peace

By contrast, across the region, institutionally supported WPS activity has often been concentrated in militarist and masculinist state agencies (police, defense forces, and foreign affairs departments). Genuine efforts – with associated funding – have been made to increase the number of women peacekeepers deployed from Indonesia's armed forces, to train gender advisers in Aotearoa, and to strengthen the women police in Papua New Guinea. Yet, these activities are primarily driven by institutional operational outcomes rather than by the ambitions of feminist peace. Sometimes, these two things can align; I have met many people who promote feminist principles within these organizations. However, in the big picture, WPS and state agencies are on different paths. After 25 years, we probably need to acknowledge that WPS has become more securitized than "security" has become gender responsive, and that "peace" is often "missing in action."

Lesson 4: WPS needs to be dynamic to be relevant

Asia and the Pacific is a complex tapestry of intersecting insecurities that liberal, state-bound, and Western imaginings of WPS are arguably ill-prepared for. Throughout the region, political violence intersects with natural disasters, forced migration, great power rivalries, digital repression, illiberal politics, health pandemics, colonial legacies, and non-Western political philosophies. Since the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, women peacebuilders have had to navigate an authoritarian environment featuring human rights violations, a devastating earthquake, foreign interference, illicit economies, and humanitarian crises. In Kiribati, communities face permanent displacement due to sea-level rise, compounding insecurities around land rights, cultural preservation, community cohesion, and food insecurity. In Aceh, I met with women peacebuilders enduring digital surveillance designed to silence and intimidate them.

In the face of these challenges, there have been times when it has been clear to me that WPS is both alien and alienating for women in Asia and the Pacific. While it may be a leverage for funding, it has not always been relevant to, reflective of, or respectful of the insecurities that women in the region face or the longstanding (sometimes centuries' long) work that they have done to build peace and security. As explored by many scholars (see Kirby and Shepherd 2024), a truly global WPS agenda needs agility, humility, and dynamism to maintain relevance across diverse regions.

Lesson 5: WPS needs a succession plan

Finally, WPS faces a succession crisis. Twenty-five years offer a touchstone for generational change, yet mechanisms to bring young women in remain woefully inadequate. Even with a decade of Youth, Peace and Security initiatives, young women across the region are routinely excluded – often by older women – from meaningful participation in WPS (see Lee-Koo and Pruitt 2025). In Australia and across the region, I have routinely heard otherwise pathbreaking feminists say things such as "Young women need to wait their turn," "Young women were born after the war – they don't understand," or "They don't know how hard we fought to get here." This is a problem – not least of all because, according to the UN Population Fund, the region is home to 60 percent of the world's youth (some one billion people), and it will require intergenerational effort to address the multidimensional challenges that the region faces. Without systematic work to bridge generational gaps, share institutional knowledge, and create inclusive leadership pathways, the WPS agenda risks losing both its historical foundations and future potential.

After 25 years, WPS seems packed with idiosyncrasies. I am not sure that I am as emboldened by it as I once was. Nevertheless, the agenda has given us something to cling to, leverage, and jump off. I do not know what its next 25 years will look like, but I take heart; feminist peace was pursued in Asia and the Pacific long before there was a WPS agenda, and it will continue now – one relationship, one intervention, and one innovation at a time.

WPS is not dead (yet): reflections from and about Central and Eastern Europe

Kateřina Krulišová

Like most of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE),[9] I am relatively new to WPS. I was invited to join Czechia's working group on WPS in late 2017, shortly after the government approved its first NAP. My answer was along the lines of "I haven't heard much about that, but why not?" This somewhat embarrassing confession mirrors the region's engagement with WPS: insufficient knowledge and lukewarm enthusiasm (with some notable exceptions). As we approach the 25th anniversary of UNSCR 1325, I know a little more about what WPS does and means in CEE. Despite the challenges that WPS continues to face – its "fast and furious" undoing in the US,[10] its quiet deletion from UK defense policy, and scholarly and activist disillusionment with its limited transformative impact – my (sometimes shaky) hope and (often just about) lukewarm enthusiasm persist.

I understand why CEE did not play a key role in WPS's inception. While CEE feminists were active globally – including at the 1995 Beijing Conference –

the twenty-first-century political context turned most of their attention inward. European Union (EU) accession reforms and Western funders' priorities, coupled with local issues such as political participation or reproductive justice, pushed WPS to the margins. Many local activists today still either have not heard of WPS or, if they have, find it irrelevant. Add to this the lingering post-socialist mistrust of the state, lack of transparency, intensifying anti-gender campaigns, and widespread attacks on civil society organizations as parasites, and it becomes clear why interest remains low. Academics in the region also give limited attention to WPS compared to scholars elsewhere.

These tensions, combined with the mental gymnastics of wanting to "belong" to the "West" while still widely resisting feminism and progressivism as a "Western invention" irrelevant to local experience, have shaped the engagement of the countries in the region, including their NAPs. Insiders in Czechia, Poland, and Slovakia noted that the first NAPs were a result of top-down political pressure, mainly from the UN, the EU, or the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE). The femocrats who authored the documents shared the embarrassment of being called out for lack of engagement and how the plans were often drafted after hours with selective inspiration drawn from Western and Northern European plans. The first NAPs of Czechia (Government of the Czech Republic 2017), Poland (Government of Poland 2018), Romania (Ministry of National Defence Romania 2020), and Slovakia (Government of the Slovak Republic 2021) primarily reflect the "add (white, uniformed) women and stir" approach. These documents feature hyper-agential CEE women, either providing care (Government of the Czech Republic 2017, 8, 11; Government of the Slovak Republic 2021, 1, 5) or in more militarized portrayals, such as guarding borders on horseback (Government of Poland 2018, 38–39). While they all reference conflict-related sexual violence, they ignore reproductive injustice at home – such as Poland's abortion ban, which forced Ukrainian refugees to seek care abroad (International Campaign for Women's Right to Safe Abortion 2023), and the forced sterilization of Roma women in Czechia. This top-down approach to WPS also proved incapable of addressing Russia's aggression against Ukraine and remains selectively blind to gendered harms in ongoing genocides and conflicts beyond the region.

Nevertheless, CEE's WPS engagement should not be dismissed entirely. Some promising practices exist. CEE femocrats and activists have learned to navigate WPS structures and local politics more effectively. Estonia's focus on cybersecurity marks it out as a potential leader (Government of the Republic of Estonia 2021). Ukraine's NAP, developed and revised during the ongoing war, offers a roadmap for localization and active civil society participation (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine 2023). In Czechia, a shift occurred with the third NAP; a newly established open working group and more inclusive consultation process – while not without flaws – illustrates the importance

of continuing WPS work. Importantly, the tragedy of Russian aggression against Ukraine has led to an unprecedented wave of feminist solidarity and production of localized knowledge on gendered insecurities and imperialism (Oksamytna 2023; Potapova and O'Sullivan 2024). It is not only the many excellent contributions to decolonial feminist debates that are both theoretically and empirically innovative, but also the leadership of Ukrainian and CEE feminists in transnational activism and policymaking (Dovgan et al. 2024; Ukraine–Palestine Solidarity Group 2025). I see much more confidence, energy, and transnational solidarity in the broader CEE feminist community now than I did a decade ago.

This energy, I hope, can transform how CEE engages with WPS. The many feminist conversations on the complex realities of imperial and epistemic violence and decolonial resistance (Graff 2022; Hendl et al. 2024) are helping us to develop the concepts and tools to ensure that WPS lives up to (at least some of) its potential. Taking a good, hard look at the geopolitical and socioeconomic realities of the region, I propose a principled and pragmatic stance. Anti-gender movements, populism, illiberalism, and militarism are not going away. However, neither is WPS – at least for now. We must engage local and global WPS systems to ensure LGBTQI+, refugee, and women's rights are embedded in policy and law. This includes insisting on intersectional, localized approaches to security, and integrating environmental protection into our frameworks. The work will be hard, we will be dismissed, and we will face setbacks. However, WPS may still be our best chance to institutionalize some key protections – and perhaps, just perhaps, we can be both radical and pragmatic at once.

A wake for WPS

Paul Kirby

On an overcast Tuesday in late 2024, I was dispatched to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to plead for WPS. A Labour government was newly in office, ending 15 years of Conservative hegemony almost entirely coextensive with UK WPS policy. Though Labour were in theory more amenable to gender equality, their plans were not yet known, and their stance on Gaza was already deeply disappointing. I was standing in for a civil society network in a delegation of a dozen due to meet Anneliese Dodds, the Minister for Development, Women and Equalities. Advocacy was afoot.

I arrived early to a massing protest. Plaintive songs crackled out from cheap megaphones as a delegation of predominantly women, several with their children, carefully deposited washing lines of baby clothes outside the carriage gate of what was first the British India Office and then the

Colonial Office. Demands for an arms embargo written on cardboard, keffiyehs in all colors, Palestinian flags. I circled for a bit, approximating a respectful distance, took some pictures, choked down a lump, and stepped over the ghosts as tenderly as I could.

In the end, the minister did not show, called away to answer an urgent question on the expulsion of the UN Relief and Works Agency by the Israeli Knesset. We delivered our rehearsed talking points on policy coherence, resourcing, and accountability to her special advisers and I limped home, dejected and wet. The scene could have played out, with minor variations, at almost any point in the first 25 years of WPS. Failure and frustration are, after all, the leitmotifs of the agenda.

Yet, we are in the midst of a more severe shift, a twilight of Global North WPS.

Donald Trump has returned to the US presidency with a mission to eviscerate "gender" and "diversity, equity, and inclusion" (DEI) as never before. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) was effectively dismantled in a lightning purge lasting a few weeks, with deadly ramifications already evident (Cavalcanti et al. 2025; PEPFAR Impact Counter n.d.). Plausibly half of the women-led organization working in humanitarian crises expect to close by the end of this year (UN Women 2025b). Pete Hegseth, the former Guantanamo Bay guard and Fox News host elevated to Secretary of Defense, has crowed that the agenda, pushed by feminists but "hated" by troops, is dead: "GOOD RIDDANCE WPS" (Mitchell 2025). Allies and clients are following Trump's lead, embellishing with their own excuses. The UK government has slashed aid by £6 billion, leaving it £12 billion off the legal target. Dodds has resigned in articulate protest; her successor has labeled aid "charity" and told a Parliamentary Committee that there will be no special treatment for women and girls (International Development Committee 2025, 3, 10–11). References to WPS that had crept into security reviews and strategies are evaporating.

Already in 2022, the new Swedish government ditched FFP. In 2023, Friedrich Merz – now the German Chancellor – dismissed feminist language as needless baggage for a lean and transactional geopolitics (Latella 2023). At the time of writing, 19 Global North states have not renewed their NAPs.[11] Of 27 countries in Europe and North America with a NAP for which data was available, two-thirds had decreased their overseas development aid (ODA) commitment to gender equality in the last few years.[12] The global percentage of projects with gender equality as their principal objective has only inched up, never topping 6 percent of all ODA. The latest figures predate the second Trump term and can reasonably be treated as a high-water mark.

The savings are to be redistributed toward the military. At the 2025 NATO Summit, member states who turned away from WPS committed to defense

spending at 5 percent of GDP; NATO's Secretary-General praised Trump as "a man of peace" and "daddy" for bombing Iran's nuclear sites (Sabbagh 2025). At the UNSC, supreme seat of the agenda, WPS had started to fall apart even before Trump's return. In 2024, there were only half of the number of decisions integrating WPS than at the 2017 peak.[13] In the run-up to the 20th anniversary of UNSCR 1325, it was possible to complain of "resolution fatigue" and joke about the performative hyperactivity of open debates; on the verge of the 25th, no such levity is possible.

Some still hold to the old ways. Denmark has made WPS a priority of its UNSC tenure and published an expanded fifth NAP (Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2025). Norway has co-organized a communiqué recommitting dozens of states and organizations to the agenda (WPS Focal Points Network 2025). Canada has agreed a security and defense partnership with the EU that integrates WPS "in all aspects" and pledges to "counter setbacks against gender equality and the rights of women and girls" (Prime Minister of Canada 2025). Spain has increased its aid spend and codified the 0.7 percent target into law. However, these are rearguard actions.

WPS is not the exclusive property of the Global North, nor of states, nor of the multilateral institutions that so depend on first-world donors. Its decline in North America and Europe, whether short term or long, is not to be confused with the end of WPS at large. From the start, feminist activists used UNSCR 1325 agilely; they may do so again. Yet, the progress narrative of WPS cannot be told, even if grudgingly, without the contribution of Western governments: as the permissive cause on that fateful October 2000 gathering; in the subsequent struggles over UNSC language, mandates, and special offices; in the millions spent on thousands of dispersed initiatives; in the Nobel Prizes and celebrity endorsements; or in the growing dependence of a professional cadre of WPS advocates and experts on government funds now earmarked for martial ends.

Ours is a wary wake. We gather to mourn, to celebrate a life, to commiserate, to find new ways of keeping a memory alive. There are flowers and long speeches, and a hold-out hope that UNSCR 1325 may not be dead quite yet.

Abolition feminism and the afterlives of WPS

Columba Achilleos-Sarll and Hannah Wright

Attacks on liberal equalities frameworks, long criticized by feminist scholars and organizers of various orientations for reinforcing the very structures that they claim to reform, have intensified. Now under sustained attack from ascendant far-right forces, these frameworks are being hollowed out, exposing marginalized communities to compounded and increasing harms – from violent border regimes and policing, to the abandonment of

climate targets, hyper-exploitative labor conditions, the dismantling of social safety nets, cuts to international aid programs, rising militarism, fascism, and genocide. Though far-right politics are often positioned as oppositional to liberalism, critical scholarship reveals that far-right movements have emerged in defense of the imperial, racial, and capitalist hierarchies long upheld by the liberal international order (see for example Mojab and Carpenter 2020; Ojeda, Holzberg, and Holvikivi 2024; Sabaratnam and Laffey 2023).

Far-right attacks are often narrowly framed as addressing equality, diversity, and inclusion (ED&I, also DEI) agendas; however, they also target the radical values and political struggles that originally gave rise to and shaped many of these frameworks. Though institutionalized in liberal terms, many such frameworks emerged from anti-colonial, radical feminist, anti-militarist, and/or Black power organizing. Their dismantling represents not only a retreat from liberal humanitarianism and rights-based frameworks, but also a broader ideological project through which former imperial powers disavow any moral or material debt for past injustices.

While these attacks emanate largely from the right, in the UK where our thinking begins, the governing Labour Party, or the center left (as once described), is pursuing transphobic policies, slashing welfare, and reallocating unprecedented amounts of development aid to military spending. Meanwhile, the radical left, including anti-racist and anti-colonial organizers and thinkers, grapples with the coloniality of aid and development, with calls to decolonize or abolish the aid sector growing (see for example Gender and Development Network 2021; Raghavan 2024).

The WPS agenda exemplifies these tensions: a collection of resolutions and policies embedded in liberal peacebuilding practices but (in part) initiated, shaped, and underpinned by currents of anti-militarist, anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist feminist organizing. Yet, increasingly, the WPS agenda confronts existential questions about its anti-militarist origins and future strategies as wars proliferate and intensify in Sudan, the DRC, and Ukraine, and genocidal violence is carried out in Palestine, with the complicity or silence of many self-styled WPS champion states.

The current climate presents a dilemma for feminist peace activists, including WPS scholars. How can we confront and mitigate the consequences of these losses while resisting nostalgia for frameworks that were always structurally constrained and complicit in violence? How do we sustain feminist peace work in an increasingly hostile political economy of aid and peacebuilding that recapitulates its racial-colonial origins and structures? And what radical alternatives and forms of solidarity and critique should we pursue that better reflect our visions for feminist worldmaking?

Building on our work on abolition, WPS, and feminist peace (Wright and Achilleos-Sarll 2025), we take abolition feminism as a starting point for raising these questions and reimagining political possibilities at this deeply

precarious moment in the agenda's history. These possibilities may not resemble the WPS agenda as conventionally understood; rather, they urge us to loosen its hold on our feminist political imagination, making space for alternative, collective, and reparative feminist worldmaking. Drawing hope from abolitionist praxis impels political organizers to work to transform the conditions that make existing systems appear necessary, and to build new ones grounded in an abundance of care, collective provision, and the redistribution of resources. The current aid cuts do not reflect abolitionist imaginaries, which aim to render colonial institutions obsolete through structural transformation, not merely excise them from the racial-capitalist present. Yet, radical alternatives to the current aid regime – such as reparations for colonialism, slavery, and climate injustice, debt cancellation, and redressing unjust terms of trade (Hickel et al. 2022; Sylla et al. 2024) – feel increasingly remote from the policy agendas of the states against which such demands are made. Nevertheless, in the face of refusal, abolitionist praxis insists on building otherwise, offering alternative pathways toward new feminist futures.

Since 2020, UK feminists and anti-racists have catalyzed a crisis for UK policing following the rape and murder of Sarah Everard by a police officer; countless revelations of sexual violence and abuse by serving officers; and the infiltration of social justice movements by undercover officers through deceptive sexual relationships with female activists (Cowan 2024; Day and McBean 2022). Diverse coalitions have emerged – including feminists, sex workers, trade unionists, Gypsy Roma and Traveller communities, activists for racial, climate, and migrant justice, and many more – mobilizing against a wave of legislation to expand police powers.

Overlapping coalitions continue to coalesce in opposition to Israeli genocide in Palestine, with feminists drawing links between carceral politics at home and militarism abroad (Sisters Uncut 2023). While advocacy work has often struggled to gain the ear of the government, direct action groups bypass formal structures to shut down arms factories producing weapons for Israel, and boycott, divestment, and sanctions campaigns have won victories in the banking, retail, entertainment, and education sectors. These movements offer glimpses of what could be and concrete abolitionist practices today, including feminist anti-militarist praxis that joins domestic and international struggles where institutionalized WPS often falls short.

Far from being in opposition to the WPS agenda, these alternatives extend and expand the very values that drew many of us to WPS in the first place: the hope for a demilitarized, anti-capitalist, anti-colonial world; a world centered on racial, climate, and gender justice, built through care, solidarity, and collective popular power. If, as seems evident in the current moment, liberal paradigms no longer offer a tangible horizon for survival amid conflict, genocide, and planetary crisis, then surely our political attachments must shift.

As Shahrzad Mojab and Sara Carpenter (2020, 137) put it, "[m]oments when fascism is on the rise can make us desperate for the seeming tolerance of liberalism, but we will only reproduce what we are trying to eradicate if we avoid these difficult discussions."

Hopes for the future of WPS

Laura McLeod

In January 2023, I went to an academic workshop. I was delighted to see people and have scholarly discussions after a long absence following two periods of maternity leave sandwiching a pandemic. I was shocked. Discussions round the table – much like other pieces in this forum – were layered with cynicism and disappointment about UNSCR 1325, previously heralded as "potentially revolutionary as it could transform ways of understanding how security is conceived, protected and enforced" (Felicity Hill, cited in Cohn, Kinsella, and Gibbings 2004, 137).

It *was* revolutionary. For the first time, the UNSC had held an open debate and created a resolution specifically about the security of women and girls in conflict-affected contexts. Moreover, the resolution had come about following efforts from African feminists within institutions and the transnational women's movement. Activists had pushed for the formal recognition of the gendered insecurity of women and girls. As I listened to people at the workshop, I worried that the initial activist spirit of the resolution had been lost and, in the process, so had its revolutionary hopes. As feminists, we must remind ourselves of the radical potential of UNSCR 1325 (recognizing its imperfections and flaws too) and consider how it is a useful tool for ensuring that feminist voices and hopes are heard in this global gender backlash moment.

April 2025. A colleague texts me a link to an article in *The Hill* with a headline describing how the US Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth, is "'proud' to end Women, Peace and Security program" (Mitchell 2025). At the same time, I hear of how NATO plans to downplay its gender discourses associated with WPS. There are rumors of the UK government slimming down its WPS activity. I am tired. Another day in the global gender backlash era. I sigh and teach my Master's students about UNSCR 1325. What do I tell them?

I relay how, in June 2009, I was in Serbia on my second fieldwork trip for my PhD research – this time, observing a three-day women and anti-militarism workshop organized by the feminist NGO Women in Black near Leskovac, southern Serbia. Throughout the sessions, women highlighted UNSCR 1325 as a way of rethinking international security, and as a potential tool for advancing anti-militarist ambitions. It was not the first time that I had heard grassroots feminist activists highlight the potential of the resolution for

their work. The previous summer, activists of the Kosovo Women's Network described how they wrote letters to the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) insisting on the implementation of UNSCR 1325 and referred to the resolution to demand that the 2007–2008 Kosovo–Serbia peace negotiations included women and women's perspectives.

I also tell my students how, in New York in September 2016, I interviewed a self-described femocrat about the WPS indicators launched in the 2010 Secretary-General's report on UNSCR 1325 (United Nations Security Council 2010).[14] The interviewee reminded me that the indicators are far more radical than they seem. They provide momentum for the UN system to implement UNSCR 1325 and ensure "a lot more progress both policy-wise and programmatically" as a result.[15] However, developing and using the indicators has not been easy; it has required determined work in their creation and use by advocates within the UN (McLeod 2024).

As these flashbacks drift through my mind, I think of a popular feminist protest slogan: "I can't believe I still have to protest this shit" (Boston Women's March 2017). The popular appeal of this slogan is undoubtedly connected to its powerful reminder of how patriarchy continues to sustain, transform, and endure, no matter how hard feminists work to challenge and dismantle it.

What connects these flashbacks? Activism. The stories of the Kosovo Women's Network and the self-described femocrat in New York demonstrate how – across different spaces and times – peace and security institutions have rarely embraced UNSCR 1325. Activism and advocates have long been central to the implementation of the ten WPS resolutions. Funding has been cut, and institutions are more nervous about vocally supporting gender-sensitive programming; the institutional context for implementing UNSCR 1325 is certainly less favorable. However, we must not rush to declare the end of WPS.

The resolution articulates and provides a framework for a significant ontological and epistemological shift in how we think about international security. It demands a more human-centered approach to security mindful of gendered power relations, and one that is multilevel and multidimensional (Tickner 1992, 55). "Security" is a powerful and agenda-setting word used to justify a range of actions (many of which we may not agree with); UNSCR 1325 places "security" in relation to "women" and "peace." The radical potential of these ontological and epistemological values is more urgent and more critical for us – as feminists – to hold onto and remind people of as we navigate the choppy waters of the global gender backlash era and as cultures of militarism ramp up. UNSCR 1325 remains a key tool to which feminist activists can point, much in the same way that the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and other global normative frameworks are.

Is it time to look at different ways of keeping the activist spirit of UNSCR 1325 alive? Is there potential, especially in the face of increasing national government cuts, to demand a more cross-cutting implementation of WPS NAPs? Can we look to different places to produce critical knowledge about women, peace, and security, such as history museums (McLeod and O'Reilly 2025)? Can UNSCR 1325 have value in connecting unexpected allies within institutions, such as military women's health advocates (McLeod, Hobbs, and Holmes 2025)? Looking to other ways of implementing change, building knowledge, and connecting people via WPS agendas opens ways for regrouping and strategizing around the values of a multilevel, multidimensional, and human-centered security. There is hope yet.

Notes

1. The key staff in charge were Costa Rican Eugenia Piza Lopez, Guyanan Ancil Adrian-Paul, and I (Iranian-British).
2. The civil society delegation comprised Isha Dyfan (Sierra Leone), Cora Weiss (US/Hague Appeal for Peace), Betty Reardon (US/Columbia University), Maha Muna (Palestine/US), Ramina Johal (Canada/Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children), Felicity Hill (Australia/Women's International League for Peace and Freedom) and I (Iran/UK, International Alert).
3. Consider, for example, the useful work of Beth Van Schaack, Payam Akhavan, Mark Drumbl, Kate Cronin-Furman, Michael Patrick Broache, Julian Ku, Jide Nzelibe, Sonja Starr, and Kenneth Rodman, among others.
4. In the Māori tradition of Aotearoa, the term *mana motuhake* stands for self-determination and autonomy and is closely linked to sovereignty: caring for land and water resources, as well as the rights of ancient knowledge systems and traditions.
5. The Alliance of Sahel States is a pan-African coalition composed of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, with a focus on ensuring regional security, taking control of the natural resources of each country, and adopting a decolonial approach to development and industrialization.
6. The term *jineologî* roughly translates into English as "women's science." *Jineologî* maintains that women's liberation is central to freedom and sovereignty. Etymologically based on the Kurdish *jin* (woman), it has been central to the Rojava Revolution of Kurdistan, and how Kurdish women conduct armed resistance.
7. According to the PeaceWomen NAP database, these are Iraq, Palestine, Jordan, Tunisia, Yemen, Lebanon, Sudan, the United Arab Emirates, and Morocco. While Afghanistan is not counted as a MENA country, it too has a NAP as of 2015.
8. Sindoor refers to a red pigment made from powdered red lead, and is applied as a dot in the parting of the hair of married Hindu women. Operation Sindoor was named to avenge women who were widowed during the terror attack in Pehalgam.
9. Defining "Central and Eastern Europe" is a difficult task. Many scholars have debated how the label of "Eastern Europe" reinforces racialized imaginaries of otherness and inferiority and goes hand in hand with discussions on illiberalism and corruption (Kalmar 2022; Lewicki 2023). In this piece, I use the term to make

sense of how some of the countries that I know quite well (Czechia, Slovakia, Poland) and others that I know a little about (Romania, Ukraine) have engaged with WPS and what I think the future may bring for this broader region.

10. This phrasing was used by Cori Fleser, Nonresident Senior Fellow of the Scrowcroft Center for Strategy and Security and the Transatlantic Security Initiative, with the Atlantic Council, during the "Geopolitics and WPS" round-table organized by the Centre of Geopolitics at the University of Cambridge on July 18, 2025.

11. NAPs were counted as inactive if they ended in 2024 or before and had not been renewed. The dormant plans were for Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Georgia, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Kosovo, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, New Zealand, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, and Switzerland, some of which may issue a new plan for the anniversary year.

12. The data was compiled from two-year averages for ODA volume for gender equality, from Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) data on development finance for gender equality (OECD n.d.).

13. In 2024, there were 34 decisions that included WPS keywords ("woman"/ "women," "sex"/"sexual," "gender," "girl"/"boy," "female"/"male," "reproduc-tive"/"maternal," or "1325"), compared to 67 in 2017 (United Nations Security Council n.d.).

14. To track the implementation of UNSCR 1325 within the UN system, 26 indicators were developed during 2009 and 2010. These indicators are reported on annually.

15. Author interview, New York, September 2016.

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