Re-imagining the Women, Peace and Security Agenda: Feminist Resistance and State Power in Lebanon, Sudan, Syria, and Turkey

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Abstract

On the 25th anniversary of Resolution 1325, building the foundations of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda (WPS), this report explores how women-led civil society organisations (CSOs) and feminist activists are reimagining the Agenda "from below" in four South-West Asia and North Africa (SWANA) contexts: Lebanon, Sudan, Syria and Turkey. Rather than focusing on the global backlash against the Agenda, this paper particularly centers on the organizing practices that persist despite shrinking civic space, economic collapse and ongoing violence. Using a relational feminist lens that treats agency as socially embedded, the paper synthesizes up-to-date secondary literature and targeted conversations with grassroots activists to map, in each case, structural barriers to women's participation in peace and political processes and local strategies that subvert, bypass or transform those barriers, before concluding with their implications for regional and international policies. The report's findings expose a persistent gap between stated ambitions, such as providing sufficient resources, and the realities faced by diverse women in the SWANA region**.** Lebanon's successive National Action Plans demonstrate that, while there is normative uptake of the WPS agenda, sectarian governance structures and the systematic underfunding of both the Agenda itself and women-led CSOs significantly reduce their impact. In Sudan, revolutionary feminist mobilization actively resists militarised patriarchy, particularly amid the deepening state collapse and continued civil war. Syrian women play critical roles in grassroots governance and localized aid delivery yet remain excluded from formal negotiations and increasingly vulnerable amid donor retrenchment. Turkey's WPS architecture remains shallow and blind to Kurdish and displaced women's rights and representation in the months following the announcement of the historic ceasefire between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party.

Preface

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda is facing its most serious headwinds since the landmark UN Security Council Resolution 1325 was adopted a quarter-century ago, an Agenda whose core aims are to prevent conflict, protect women and girls from violence, and secure women's full, equal and meaningful participation in peace and security decision-making. On 29 April 2025, US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth declared that the Department of Defense would terminate (or more precisely, fulfil its minimum statutory requirements under) the bipartisan 2017 WPS Act.[1] This decision echoes a broader backlash that brands the Agenda as a 'woke' diversion from hard security priorities, even in capitals that once championed it. Yet, on the front lines of conflict and recovery, women-led civil society organizations (CSOs), grassroots movements, and activists are not waiting for permission to act for themselves and the communities they represent. They are filling the spaces left by stalled peace talks, fragile ceasefires and shrinking humanitarian and civic spaces to advance women's rights, protection, and their necessary engagement with peacebuilding. While those rights are strained in many contexts, their struggle is especially acute across contexts in the South-West Asia and North Africa (SWANA) region, where ongoing and protracted conflicts, economic collapse, and authoritarian consolidation threaten to roll back even the most modest gains. Given the region's vastness and diversity, this report only focuses on four national case studies, Lebanon, Sudan, Syria, and Turkey, that offer an up-to-date snapshot of how the WPS Agenda is being challenged by the steep realities of ongoing conflict, post-war reconstruction, mass displacement and systemic gender-based violence (GBV).

In **Lebanon**, the WPS Agenda has struggled to gain traction amid the country's overlapping socio-economic crises and chronic political paralysis due to entrenched sectarian governance. Feminist actors advancing the Agenda have had to navigate a deeply fragmented security apparatus and donor-driven system where peace and security processes still largely exclude women and, even more so, grassroots organizations and refugees.

In **Sudan**, the WPS Agenda has been derailed by the ongoing armed conflict, forced displacement, and a militarized political landscape that systematically excludes women from peace processes. Despite a strong legacy of women-led revolution and grassroots mobilization, the post-2018 revolution period faced a rollback of feminist gains due to gender-based atrocities and mass violence as well as international actors prioritizing elite power-sharing, which exposed the disconnect between the formal WPS commitments and its lived realities.

In **Syria**, the Agenda unfolds against the backdrop of reconstruction post-demise of the Assad "dynasty" last December 2024, conflict with Israel in the South and latent conflicts in the North-East, fragmented governance, and humanitarian collapse following the suspension of most aid-related services. While excluded from formal peace negotiations, women have taken on critical roles in community-based aid delivery, advocacy and local governance to re-imagine peace from below.

In **Turkey**, the WPS Agenda's implementation has been fragmented and politicized – inclusive of displaced women but blind to Kurdish women's struggles – shaped by rising authoritarianism,

[1] https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2025/04/29/hegseth-wps-rubio-noem/

growing gender-based violence, and deep-rooted tensions around Kurdish identity and autonomy. The contemporary political context in Turkey is marked by democratic backsliding, increasing state repression and authoritarianism, and a nation-wise economic crisis, all impacting both women's livelihoods and lives.

Drawing on up-to-date secondary literature and targeted conversations with grassroots activists, the report traces the WPS framework's journey from its civil-society-driven origins to UN adoption and National Action Plans (NAPs) and explains why it remains relevant to engage with this broader understanding 25 years later. The report's methodology applies a *relational lens* that views agency – and in this case, women's agency – as forged through social relationships rather than owned by isolated individuals; as such, it highlights relational autonomy and agonistic spaces – where multiple actors openly contest and renegotiate power.[2] This perspective is key for the four included case studies because it reveals how women's collective strategies and intersecting identities both shape and are shaped by the settings in which they pursue justice, peace, and security. The report then assesses each case study in turn, structural barriers to women's participation in peace and political processes, and local strategies that subvert, bypass or transform those barriers, before concluding with their implications for regional and international policies. It concludes by providing cross-cutting lessons and offering concrete recommendations to institutions committed to rescuing – not retreating from – the WPS promises.

[2] Daşlı, Güneş, and Murphy, Emma. 2024. « Moving beyond binary identities in transitional justice: recognizing the complexity of agency in agonistic spaces ». The International Journal of Human Rights 0 (0): 1‑20. https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2024.2430288.

The WPS Agenda in Theory and Practice

On the 25th anniversary of Resolution 1325, the WPS Agenda continues to face critical implementation gaps. Women remain significantly underrepresented in peace and security processes. In 2024, according to the Report of the UN Secretary-General António Guterres (S/2024/671) on women, peace and security, women comprised only 9.6% of negotiators, 13.7% of mediators, and 26.6% of signatories to peace agreements.[3] Although this marks gradual progress, the figures fall far short of parity and highlight the enduring exclusion of women from high-level decision-making.[4] Of the 31 peace agreements concluded that year, only 8 (26%) explicitly included provisions on women, girls, gender or sexual violence, a situation which highlights the continued disconnect between policy commitments and actual practice.[5]

The following section examines the institutionalization and contemporary challenges of the WPS Agenda, especially in the SWANA region and across conflict-affected environments, by drawing on secondary sources, including both academic and grey literature. It begins by tracing the developments of the WPS framework, its core institutional implementing mechanisms, and persistent policy and funding gaps. The section engages with feminist and postcolonial perspectives before linking these debates to the following case studies and the gendered impacts of conflicts in the region.

Understanding the Foundations of the WPS Agenda

The WPS Agenda is an international policy framework designed to advance gender equality by promoting women's participation in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and post-conflict recovery.[6] Under Namibia's presidency of the UN Security Council (UNSC), advocacy efforts by women's rights groups and civil society coalitions, particularly from the Global South, culminated in the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) in 2000.[7] The resolution recognized women's vital contribution to the prevention and resolution of conflicts, imputed responsibilities on warring parties to ensure the safety of women and girls, and advocated for women's full involvement in peace processes.
Its adoption was strongly supported by a dedicated Working Group on WPS comprised of diverse non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other transnational feminist networks committed to reshaping peace and security.[8]

The preceding decade, which saw the consolidation of the WPS Agenda, was marked by the proliferation of what some scholars have termed "new wars" – or conflicts characterized by the collapse of state institutions, the rise of non-state armed actors, and the unprecedented targeting

[3] UNSC, Women and peace and security. Report of the Secretary-General. S/2024/671, 24 September 2024, p.9.
[4] UNSC, Women and peace and security. Report of the Secretary-General. S/2024/671, 24 September 2024, p. 9.
[5] UNSC, Women and peace and security. Report of the Secretary-General. S/2024/671, 24 September 2024, p. 11
[6] See Demir, E. (2016). The Role of the United Nations Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Promoting Gender Justice in Post-Conflict Societies: Is the Agenda Transformative?. International Journal on Rule of Law, Transitional Justice and Human Rights, 7(7), 81-90.
[7] See George, N., & Shepherd, L. J. (2016). Women, Peace and Security: Exploring the implementation and integration of UNSCR 1325. International Political Science Review, 37(3), 297-306.
[8] Vanessa F Newby , Alanna O'Malley, Introduction: WPS 20 Years On: Where Are the Women Now?" Global Studies Quarterly 1 (3). Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/isagsq/ksab017.

of civilians[9], a situation not unfamiliar to more contemporary forms of conflicts. At the same time, it bore significant advancements in both human rights law and humanitarian law,[10] thus shifting the international focus from traditional notions of state-centered security to a more human-centered approach (also called "human security") that is said to prioritize the safety and dignity of individuals and communities.[11] The UN Decade for Women (1975-1985), established in part thanks to the efforts of Global South politicians and diplomats, has been described by some authors as a "quiet revolution largely ignored by the media," yet involving "thousands of women dispersed across the globe."[12] These pioneers recognized that it was essential to establish "violence against women" as a key issue to be addressed at multiple levels and to set up a new agenda for women's rights internationally.[13]

The period leading up to UNSCR 1325 was also marked by important milestones on gender equality and women's rights,[14] including in international law, such as with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1979, as well as the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women in 1993 and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995, which laid normative foundations for future work on violence against women, equality between men and women, and peacebuilding.[15] In spite of such context, the nascent WPS Agenda was profoundly affected by the attacks of 9/11 and the securitization of international politics – and at times, used to justify military interventions, particularly following US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.[16]

Through resolution 1325, the UNSC formally acknowledged both the disproportionate impact of armed conflict on women and girls and their critical role in conflict prevention, resolution, peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction.[17] UNSCR 1325 called for the mainstreaming of gender across all UN peace and security operations, the protection of women's rights in conflict settings, and the equal participation of women in decision-making processes at every level.[18] In the following years, the WPS Agenda was further codified through a series of complementary

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[9] See Kelly, L. (2022). Emerging trends within the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. Institute of Development Studies.
[10] See generally The International Criminal Court was established under the Rome Statute of 1998, individuals were held accountable for violations of international humanitarian law in the International Criminal Tribunals for former Yugoslavia in 1993 and Rwanda in 1994, and the rise of the "responsibility to protect" as an international norm.
[11] See Teitel, Ruti. 2011. "Introduction." In Humanity's Law, edited by Ruti G. Teitel. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195370911.003.0001.
[12] Zinsser, Judith P. "The United Nations Decade for Women: A Quiet Revolution", The History Teacher 24, No 1, 1990: 19-29. https://doi.org/10.2307/494202, p. 20
[13] Lydia Begag, From Silence to Visibility: UN Security Council Resolution 1820 & the Role of Transnational Advocacy An Honors Undergraduate Thesis Submitted to the Departments of Politics and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies in partial fulfillment of the Honors Programs, 2022.
[14] See Rupesinghe, N., Stamnes, E., & Karlsrud, J. (2019). WPS and female peacekeepers (pp. 206-221). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[15] See UN Women. "Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action | Beijing+5 Political Declaration and Outcome." Accessed January 15, 2025. https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/CSW/PFA_E_Final_WEB.pdf.
[16] See Ní Aoláin, F., The 'war on terror' and extremism: assessing the relevance of the Women, Peace and Security agenda. International Affairs, Vol 92, No 02, 2016, 275-291; and https://www.pure.ed.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/131011967/Duncanson_OUP_WPS_Handbook_Chapter_42.pdf
[17] See Fitzpatrick, B., United Nations Security Council resolution 1325. In Tactical Rape in War and Conflict, Policy Press, 2016, pp. 157-180.
[18] See Kreft, A. K. (2017). The gender mainstreaming gap: Security Council resolution 1325 and UN peacekeeping mandates. International peacekeeping, 24(1), 132-158.

resolutions[19] – which deepened international institutional frameworks and addressed significant gaps[20] - such as conflict-related sexual violence[21] and questions related to accountability and monitoring mechanisms. In addition, they called for the institutionalization of National Action Plans (NAPs) as tools for implementation of the WPS Agenda by governments worldwide.[22] UN implementing bodies, such as UN Women and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), have since structured the WPS Agenda around four interrelated pillars to facilitate its application in multi-level governance, including at regional and national levels:[23]

- **Pillar I**: **Prevention**: Preventing all forms of violence against women and girls, particularly in conflict and post-conflict settings, including early warning systems and conflict prevention strategies that integrate gender perspectives.
- **Pillar II: Participation**: Ensuring women's full and equal participation in all peace and security decision-making processes, from peace negotiations to governance and transitional justice.
- **Pillar III: Protection**: Protecting the rights and safety of women and girls in armed conflict, with particular attention to gender-based violence, human trafficking, and violations of international humanitarian and human rights law.
- **Pillar IV: Relief and recovery**: Addressing the specific needs of women and girls in humanitarian crises and post-conflict recovery, while strengthening their roles as agents in rebuilding societies.[24]

Through the institutionalization of those pillars, the WPS Agenda evolved from a normative aspiration into a framework that may be applied in domestic laws and strategies worldwide. Yet feminist scholars have underscored the need to move beyond inclusion alone.[25] Hudson et al. (2020), among others, argue that the subordination of women within states is linked to broader systemic vulnerabilities – ranging from weakened state security to lower health outcomes, reduced economic performance, and heightened environmental risks.[26] As such, this raises the point that simply "adding" women within existing peace and security infrastructures is insufficient, and instead efforts should be focused on fundamentally transforming these structures.

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[19] See Resolution 1820 (2008), Resolution 1888 (2009), Resolution 1889 (2009), Resolution 1960 (2010), Resolution 2106 (2013), Resolution 2122 (2013), Resolution 2242 (2015), Resolution 2467 (2019), Resolution 2493 (2019).
[20] See Shawki, N. (2017). Implementing the women, peace and security agenda. Global Affairs, 3(4-5), 455-467.
[21] See Longhurst, K. (2021). The women, peace and security agenda: Reflections on the effectiveness and relevance of UN security council resolution 1325. Alternatives, 46(2), 52-57.
[22] See Jacevic, M. M. (2019). WPS, states, and the National Action Plans (pp. 273-292). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[23] See George, N., & Shepherd, L. J. (2016). Women, Peace and Security: Exploring the implementation and integration of UNSCR 1325. International Political Science Review, 37(3), 297-306.
[24] See United Nations Development Programme. 2019. "Parliaments as Partners Supporting the Women Peace and Security Agenda." Accessed January 14, 2025. https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/Parliament_as_partners_supporting_the_Women_Peace_and_Security_Agenda_-_A_Global_Handbook.pdf
[25] See Manchanda, R. (2020). Difficult encounters with the WPS agenda in South Asia: re-scripting globalized norms and policy frameworks for a feminist peace. In New directions in women, peace and security (pp. 61-82). Bristol University Press.
[26] See Hudson, Valerie, Donna Lee Bowen, and Perpetua Lynne Nielsen. 2020. The First Political Order: How Sex Shapes Governance and National Security Worldwide. New York, NY: Columbia University Press. doi:10.7312/huds19466.

National Action Plans and Policy Implementation

While the four pillars provide a comprehensive normative framework, their translation into practice relies heavily on NAPs – the core mechanism through which states are expected to implement WPS commitments domestically.[27] These plans outline national-level strategies which aim, in various ways, to outline a "government's approach and course of action" for localizing the WPS Agenda.[28] Since the first one was established in 2005 by Denmark, a little more than half (56 %) of UN Member States have adopted a 1325 NAP. Such dissemination, albeit not widely adopted, masks disparities in geographical coverage, quality of the established roadmap, and their renewal. For instance, about 30% of global NAPs are considered outdated, given they expired three or more years ago. Putting aside the Regional Action Plans (RAPs) developed afterwards, certain regions are also over-represented, such as Europe (41 countries) and Africa (32 countries) compared to others. In the SWANA region, both the limited number of NAPs and their scope reveal some specific gaps.[29] The region only counts 8 NAPs, with the earliest launched in 2014, in Iraq, followed by Palestine (2017), Jordan (2018), Lebanon (2019), Tunisia (2018), Yemen (2019), the United Arab Emirates (2021), and Morocco (2022).

Covering a greater number of countries, the League of Arab States (LAS) (currently 22 members) adopted in 2015 a Regional Action Plan (RAP), which embodies the organization's "first step toward" implementing UNSCRs on WPS at the "regional level" within a fifteen years-plan (2015-2030). This RAP was prepared based on Member States proposals and experts' feedback from UN organizations gathered by the Technical Secretariat of the LAS Arab Women Committee in partnership with UN Women, the Arab Women Organisation, and national bodies (e.g., Ministry of Women's Affairs in the State of Palestine).[30] The RAP sets out a plan to secure women and girls from conflicts, occupation, and terrorism while "promote[ing] their full participating in building lasting peace and promoting stability", with clear indicators and a timeframe for implementation.[31] While rich in measures, the RAP leaves little space to interpret an application of such measures beyond "Arab women" – to the explicit exclusion of racially different women (e.g., Berber, Kurdish, Yazidis), living and residing in an extremely diverse region. While the RAP sets out to publish an annual update on the implementation of each measure, little is publicly available to understand how much has been accomplished yet.

As such, it remains particularly relevant to isolate and examine specific case studies (see following sections) in order to assess such developments and their interaction with on-the-ground actors. Lebanon, for example, has adopted successive NAPs that demonstrate a degree of normative uptake, but the country's sectarian governance structure and recurrent crises have severely undermined implementation.[32] Jordan and Iraq have also launched NAPs, often with strong backing from international donors and UN agencies, yet face similar challenges around

[27] See Jacevic, M. M. (2019). WPS, states, and the National Action Plans (pp. 273-292). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[28] See Miller, B., Pournik, M., & Swaine, A. (2014). Women in peace and security through United Nations Security resolution 1325: Literature review, content analysis of national action plans, and implementation. Institute for Global and International studies, 16.
[29] See Della Valle, C. (2022). "Which women? What agenda?" Situating WPS in North Africa: the case of Tunisia. Inter-Disciplinary political studies, 8(1), 121-142.
[30] https://1325naps.peacewomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/RAP-2015-2030-LAS.pdf
[31] https://1325naps.peacewomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/RAP-2015-2030-LAS.pdf , p. 4.
[32] See Despain, A., & Rauch, J. (2023). "It Missed Them": A Refugee-Centered Analysis of the Lebanese Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan. Al-Raida, 47(1), 31-54.

localization, sustainability, and grassroots engagement.[33] In contrast, countries such as Sudan[34] and Turkey[35] have no meaningful WPS implementation frameworks in place despite active feminist movements and ongoing conflicts. In Sudan,[36] the political collapse and militarization of governance have left no institutional anchor for a NAP, while in Turkey, the state's securitized approach to gender and its suppression of Kurdish and feminist activism renders WPS commitments politically untenable.[37]

Implementation Gaps in Current Policy Practice

To some extent, the barriers highlighted in the academic literature are echoed within policy circles. While some have noted that an inadequate collection of disaggregated and country-level data may limit the way one can track funding for gender equality and the WPS, such a perspective is not sufficient to explain the steep gaps.[38] According to the 2024 Report of the UN Secretary-General (S/2024/671), the adequate allocation of funding is a key issue that prevents proper implementation.[39] An even more recent report from UN Women (2025) highlighted that despite global and bilateral funds, grants and commitments to increase funding for women's organizations, "the reality on the ground falls short." In concrete numbers, these groups receive only 0.3% of total bilateral allocable official development assistance and 1% of all gender-related aid. [40] Despite the scale of need, the share of ODA directed to feminist, women-led, and women's rights organizations in fragile and conflict-affected contexts remained extremely low, averaging just $142 million per year during 2021-2022, a decrease in funding after a short burst of growth.[41] As highlighted earlier, this falls well short of the UN's recommendation to allocate at least 1% of ODA to women's organizations in conflict-affected settings, particularly grassroots groups leading peacebuilding efforts.[42] Furthermore, even when the aid reaches organizations, often the support for the WPS Agenda "takes the shape of small-scale projects with limited funding, and in several settings, resources for implementation have either not materialized or dwindled rapidly when government, donor, and security priorities

[33] See Chilmeran, Y. (2022). Women, Peace and Security across scales: exclusions and opportunities in Iraq's WPS engagements. International Affairs, 98(2), 747-765.
[34] See Lemlemu, D. (2024). Ubuntu Feminism: The Challenges in Implementing Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Ethiopia and Sudan.: The Women, Peace and Security Agenda.
[35] See Bellou, F., & Chainoglou, K. (2022). The WPS agenda in the Eastern Mediterranean: The cases of Greece, the Republic of Cyprus and Turkey. Interdisciplinary Political Studies.
[36] See Onditi, F., Odera, J., Onditi, F., & Odera, J. (2021). Implementation of the UNSCR 1325: Critical Reflections. Understanding Violence Against Women in Africa: An Interdisciplinary Approach, 209-224.
[37] See Bellou, F., & Chainoglou, K. (2022). The WPS agenda in the Eastern Mediterranean: The cases of Greece, the Republic of Cyprus and Turkey. Interdisciplinary Political Studies.
[38] See Data Page: Systems tracking and making public allocations for gender equality and women's empowerment". Our World in Data (2025). Data adapted from Data from multiple sources compiled by the UN. Retrieved from https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/systems-track-gender-equality
[39] UNSC, Women and peace and security. Report of the Secretary-General. S/2024/671, 24 September 2024, p.9.
[40] UN Women, Unravelling the gap between global commitments and funding for women's organizations in conflict-affected contexts, March 2025, p. 6. https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2025/03/unravelling-the-gap-between-global-commitments-and-funding-for-womens-organizations-in-conflict-affected-contexts
[41] UN Women, Unravelling the gap between global commitments and funding for women's organizations in conflict-affected contexts, March 2025, p. 5-6. https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2025/03/unravelling-the-gap-between-global-commitments-and-funding-for-womens-organizations-in-conflict-affected-contexts
[42] See S/2023/725; and United Nations, "Our Common Agenda policy brief 9", p. 20.

shift."[43] More generally, the UN Secretary-General highlights that the current international financial architecture has contributed to widening inequalities between and within countries - even more so in conflict and crisis settings - therefore making it "complicit in perpetuating gender inequality."[44]

Conceptual Gaps and Structural Barriers in the Literature

Academic literature, across a variety of disciplines and epistemologies, has closely examined the WPS Agenda to better grasp its core concepts and address some of its gaps. Several scholars have critically approached the WPS Agenda by even questioning whether the association created between "women and girls" has not contributed to the reinforcement of gendered stereotypes.[45] In the WPS Agenda's conception, "women" are often assimilated to "girls" – even more broadly to civilians – supporting the perception that women are inherently peaceful, unable/unwilling to take an active role in conflict (e.g., as combatants) and subsequently in need of *protection*. In an extension of this discussion, in their postcolonial critique of the WPS Agenda, Parashar (2018) underscores how successive UNSC Resolutions have acknowledged women's agency but further strengthened a binary view of gender ("men as combatants and perpetrators of violence versus women as peacemakers and victims of violence").[46] Scholars working within critical feminist epistemologies have also scrutinized the WPS Agenda's entanglement with militarism. One of the most significant criticism focuses on the WPS Agenda's alignment with Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) strategies and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine. Musina (2023) argues that such securitized approaches frequently serve elite interests while undermining transformative gender justice.[47] For example, European-Tunisian collaborations framed as "capacity building" have entrenched militarized approaches and are often reducing the participation of women to symbolic figures rather than recognizing them as active political agents.[48] Similarly, in Kenya, the reallocation of donor funding from gender-focused programming to CVE initiatives has weakened grassroots organizing and left many women's organizations underfunded and excluded.[49]

This conceptual critique links closely to another strand of scholarship that interrogates the erasure of agency among actors in the Global South. On the twentieth anniversary of Resolution 1325, Newby and O'Malley (2021) mapped the state of the field in women, peace and security. They note that there is clear leadership from local actors (usually women) as well as regional

[43] UNSC, Women and peace and security. Report of the Secretary-General. S/2024/671, 24 September 2024, p.9.
[44] See United Nations Security Council, Women and Peace and Security, S/2024/671, p. 3. https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S-2024-671.pdf?utm_source
[45] Laura Mariani The Women, Peace and Security Agenda: a critique of liberal peace, 30 Aprile 2021 https://trinitamonti.org/2021/04/30/the-women-peace-and-security-agenda-a-critique-of-liberal-peace/
[46] See Parashar, Swati. 2019. "The WPS Agenda: A Postcolonial Critique." In The Oxford Handbook of Women, Peace, and Security. Oxford University Press, p. 8.. doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190638276.013.46.
[47] See Musina, Daniela. 2023. "Militarizing Gender: A (Contrapuntal) Reading of Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Applications in EU-Tunisian Security Assemblages." European Security (London, England) 32 (3). Abingdon: Routledge: 464–84. doi:10.1080/09662839.2023.2233961.
[48] Musina, Daniela. 2023. "Militarizing Gender: A (Contrapuntal) Reading of Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Applications in EU-Tunisian Security Assemblages." European Security (London, England) 32 (3). Abingdon: Routledge: 464–84. doi:10.1080/09662839.2023.2233961.
[49] See Aroussi, Sahla. 2021. "Strange Bedfellows: Interrogating the Unintended Consequences of Integrating Countering Violent Extremism with the UN's Women, Peace, and Security Agenda in Kenya." Politics & Gender 17 (4). New York, USA: Cambridge University Press: 665–95. doi:10.1017/S1743923X20000124.

leadership in the Global South at the political level to implement the WPS Agenda and push for the development of NAPs. However, they denote a strong "invisibility of Global South agency" which is further perpetuated by a form of "coloniality of knowledge" which systematically erases contributions from women in the Global South toward shaping the Agenda.[50] Yet attributing a "blanket" term, which is reinforcing binaries (of international vs local, grassroots vs state) is not sufficient to apprehend the lived and complex realities of women fighting for their rights and greater inclusion in processes that are determining their lives – peace, security, governance and broader politics. In addition, several scholars have questioned the deployment of the concept of "local" in the WPS Agenda, given its ambiguous conceptual and practical underpinnings, which may favour more institutional settings, such as state-led initiatives and multilateral organizations such as the UN and NATO structures.[51] Through their empirically-based findings, Columba and Chilmeran (2020) thus highlight the importance of reflecting and defining the "local" to better understand its roles "for the construction of WPS policy and advocacy."[52]

In parallel to these conceptual debates, scholars have turned to a critical examination of structural and material obstacles to implementation faced by actors involved in the WPS Agenda. According to Soumita et al. (2020) who mapped the WPS literature from 2000 to 2018, there are three clear and consistent implementation challenges, namely the lack of resources, insufficient political will, and operational fragmentation, due to the competing and contested interpretations of the WPS Agenda's core principles.[53] In addition, the authors also echo the above mentioned criticisms of invisibilization, as the WPS Agenda still operates largely within neocolonial and racialized global structures, which often leads to the exclusions of voices from the Global South, and tensions between women at the forefront, grassroots movements and the more traditional, state-centric understanding of the WPS Agenda. To answer one of these challenges – the question of funding and operational fragmentation – in 2013, the UNSC Resolution 2122 aimed to strengthen the efforts of women organizations and called on UN Member States to create specific funding mechanisms and increase their financial contributions to women's organizations locally. Resolution 2122 was followed by a series of calls to specifically earmark a certain percentage of official development assistance (ODA) to women's organizations.[54] Yet, a recent report by UN Women (2025) highlights that donors are still not aware of the UN Secretary-General's proposed goal of allocating 1% of direct assistance specifically to women's

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[50] See Newby, Vanessa F, and Alanna O'Malley. 2021. "Introduction: WPS 20 Years On: Where Are the Women Now?" Global Studies Quarterly 1 (3). Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/isagsq/ksab017.

[51] See K.C., Luna, and Crystal Whetstone. 2022. "Rethinking Women, Peace, and Security through the Localization of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 & National Action Plans: A Study of Nepal and Sri Lanka." Women's Studies International Forum 92. Oxford: Elsevier Ltd: 102575-. doi:10.1016/j.wsif.2022.102575; Achilleos-Sarll, Columba, and Yasmin Chilmeran. 2020. "Interrogating the 'Local' in Women, Peace and Security: Reflections on Research on and in the UK and Iraq." International Feminist Journal of Politics 22 (4). Abingdon: Routledge: 596–605. doi:10.1080/14616742.2020.1803097

[52] Achilleos-Sarll, Columba, and Yasmin Chilmeran. 2020. "Interrogating the 'Local' in Women, Peace and Security: Reflections on Research on and in the UK and Iraq." International Feminist Journal of Politics 22 (4). Abingdon: Routledge: 596–605. doi:10.1080/14616742.2020.1803097 p. 1.

[53] See Basu, Soumita, Paul Kirby, and Laura Shepherd. "New Directions in Women, Peace and Security." Bristol University Press, 2020 https://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/new-directions-in-women-peace-and-security?utm_source

[54] UN Women, Unravelling the gap between global commitments and funding for women's organizations in conflict-affected contexts, March 2025, p. 5. https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2025/03/unravelling-the-gap-between-global-commitments-and-funding-for-womens-organizations-in-conflict-affected-contexts ; UN, United Nations Security Council Resolution 2122 (2013), S/RES/2122(2013) https://www.un.org/shestandsforpeace/content/united-nations-security-council-resolution-2122-2013-sres21222013

organizations, especially grassroots groups mobilizing for peace.[55] In addition to the question of challenges of insufficient political will and operational fragmentation, Willet (2010) noted that separating the task of gender mainstreaming in peacekeeping across a variety of UN agencies has enabled the UN to create a "system that has ascribed responsibility to implementing 1325 to all but has held no one accountable."[56]

These limitations have also fuelled growing critiques around the externalization and instrumentalization of the WPS Agenda by actors in the Global North. Wright et al. (2023) further examined the critique of the externalization of the WPS Agenda in the Global North in the context of the UK's fifth NAP. They showed that, in the case of this last iteration, this NAP addressed more extensively domestic commitments to counter this critique. This approach, in close coordination with CSOs, calls for a "greater domestication" of the WPS Agenda in the Global North so as to avoid NAPs only focusing on traditional North-South development agenda enacted through foreign policy.[57] Yet, such efforts do not fully overcome the misalignment between policy and lived realities in fragile or post-conflict settings. This is further highlighted by Della Valle's comparative study of NAPs in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Tunisia, and Morocco, which reveals how WPS frameworks often fail to secure "meaningful local ownership."[58] She argues that the language and priorities embedded in these plans are frequently misaligned with women's lived realities in post-conflict or post-revolutionary contexts.[59] This led some scholars to echo these concerns and call for the broader inclusion of local feminist actors as both implementers and framers of WPS norms.[60]

The Gendered Impact of Armed Conflict in the SWANA Region

The 2024 Report of the UN Secretary-General on WPS highlights a regression across key gender equality and protection indicators in conflict-affected contexts.[61] Global data shows a marked deterioration in women's rights and safety, which is reversing gains made over the past two decades. At the time of writing, official data for 2024 is not yet available; however, according to

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[55] UN Women, Unravelling the gap between global commitments and funding for women's organizations in conflict-affected contexts, March 2025. https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2025/03/unravelling-the-gap-between-global-commitments-and-funding-for-womens-organizations-in-conflict-affected-contexts; United Nations (2023), "Our Common Agenda. Policy Brief 9. A New Agenda for Peace", p.20.

[56] See Willett, Susan. 2010. "Introduction: Security Council Resolution 1325: Assessing the Impact on Women, Peace and Security." International Peacekeeping 17 (2): 142–58, p.143.

[57] See Wright, K. A. M., Haastrup, T., & Guerrina, R. (2023). Domestication+: The Fifth U.K. National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security. In The Dossier: Beyond Rhetoric – Examining the UK's Fifth National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security. New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy https://research.manchester.ac.uk/en/publications/domestication-the-fifth-uk-national-action-plan-on-women-peace-an

[58] Anna Molnár & Veronika Hornyák Gracza. (2025) Women, Peace and Security in EU Interventions: Analysing EULEX and Operation Irini. Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding 19:3, pages 392-411. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13600826.2022.2153330

[59] Della Valle, C. (2022). "Which women? What agenda?" Situating WPS in North Africa: the case of Tunisia. Inter-Disciplinary political studies, 8(1), 121-142.

[60] K.C., Luna, and Crystal Whetstone. 2022. "Rethinking Women, Peace, and Security through the Localization of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 & National Action Plans: A Study of Nepal and Sri Lanka." Women's Studies International Forum 92. Oxford: Elsevier Ltd: 102575-. doi:10.1016/j.wsif.2022.102575. Achilleos-Sarll, Columba, and Yasmin Chilmeran. 2020. "Interrogating the 'Local' in Women, Peace and Security: Reflections on Research on and in the UK and Iraq." International Feminist Journal of Politics 22 (4). Abingdon: Routledge: 596–605. doi:10.1080/14616742.2020.1803097

[61] See United Nations Security Council. 2024. "Report of the secretary-General on Women and peace and security." Accessed January 14, 2025. https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n24/273/49/pdf/n2427349.pdf.

the UN Women's Peace Processes Monitor, the proportion of women killed in conflict doubled in 2023 compared to the previous year.[62] The worst conflict zones for women and girls are mostly located in the SWANA region (8 out of 14),[63] with a sharp increase due to the ongoing violence in Gaza (1 Palestinian woman killed every hour)[64] and its spillover into the West Bank. Verified cases of conflict-related sexual violence increased by over 50% globally in 2023,[65] and the number of girls affected by grave violations in situations of armed conflict increased by 35%.[66]

In **Afghanistan,** the human rights situation for women and girls has deteriorated catastrophically since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021. A cascade of decrees has effectively erased women from the public, banning them from education beyond sixth grade, excluding them from nearly all formal employment, and severely restricting their freedom of movement.[67] In 2023, these gender-based restrictions prompted widespread calls – from Member States, UN Special Rapporteurs, and civil society organizations – to formally recognize the regime's policies as a system of *gender apartheid*.[68] In 2023, several of these calls were formally raised during sessions of the UN Security Council.[69] Addressing the Security Council, Roza Otunbayeva, head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), warned that Afghan women are experiencing "near-total exclusion," with the situation continuing to deteriorate into what she described as "institutionalized misogyny."[70]

In **Syria,** the cumulative effects of conflict, economic collapse, and international disengagement have severely undermined gender-focused protection efforts. The suspension of US assistance in 2023 – affecting key programs on gender-based violence prevention, psychosocial support, and survivor services – has left displaced women and girls increasingly vulnerable.[71] With humanitarian needs growing, especially in regions most affected by conflict in region years (such

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[62]United Nations Security Council, Women and Peace and Security, S/2024/671 https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S-2024-671.pdf?utm_source, Also see: S/2024/385

[63] https://giwps.georgetown.edu/conflicts-to-watch-in-2025-women-peace-and-security-in-a-more-volatile-world/

[64]https://euromedmonitor.org/en/article/6716/Israel-kills-a-Palestinian-woman-every-hour-in-the-Gaza-Strip,-including-7,920-mothers-so-far

[65] See S/2024/292; and United Nations, Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary - General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, "15th report of the United Nations Secretary-General on conflict-related sexual violence", factsheet, April 2024

[66] See United Nations Security Council, Women and Peace and Security, S/2024/671 https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S-2024-671.pdf?utm_source, Also see: S/2024/385.

[67] See Albrecht, C., Rude, B., & Stitteneder, T. (2021). Afghanistan's free fall–return of the Taliban and flight as a last resort. In CESifo Forum (Vol. 22, No. 06, pp. 47-56). München: ifo Institut-Leibniz-Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung an der Universität München.

[68] See The term of "gender apartheid" qualifies a "system of governance based on subordination of women institutionalizes sex discrimination across state political, legal, and cultural infrastructures. It necessitates different counter-strategies." See Karima Bennoune, 'The International Obligation to Counter Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan', Columbia Human Rights Review, Issue 54.1, 2022. Proponents of the term argue that it can be pursued through gender inclusive interpretation of existing apartheid law and by codifying this crime in international law.

[69] See United Nations, Induce Taliban to End 'Gender Apartheid' in Afghanistan through All Available Means, Speakers Urge Security Council, Alarmed by Growing Oppression of Women, Girls, Press Release, SC/15421, 26 September 2023 https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15421.doc.htm

[70] See Mujeeb Rahman Awrang Stanikzai, Afghan women, girls face progressive erasure from almost all walks of life: Otunbayeva, December 2024 https://amu.tv/143615/

[71] See Lives on the Line: The human impact of US Foreign Aid Shifts
Report March 2025, A Global NGO Network for Principled and Effective Humanitarian Action
https://www.icvanetwork.org/uploads/2025/03/Lives-on-the-Line-Final-Report.pdf

as North-Eastern Syria) and the 2023 earthquakes, these funding gaps further expose women to insecurity, exploitation, and gender-based violence.[72]

[72] See Davis, L. (2016). Iraqi women confronting ISIL: Protecting women's rights in the context of conflict. Sw. J. Int'l L., 22, 27. (Id)

Peacebuilding Beyond the State in Lebanon

Progress Amid Sectarian Collapse

Lebanon's relationship with the WPS Agenda reflects a fragmented terrain: while it has developed successive NAPs with civil society input, these gains are undercut by sectarian governance, economic collapse, and elite capture of the reform processes. The country's first NAP (2019-2022) and its updated version (2023-2026)[73] were developed with support from UN Women and civil society in order to increase women's participation in political and peacebuilding processes and to address gender-based violence through transitional justice frameworks.[74]

Lebanon ratified the CEDAW in 1997, but it maintains reservations to several key articles – namely Articles 9(2), 16(1)(c), (d), (f), and (g), and 29(1). These relate to equal rights in nationality, marriage, family relations, and dispute resolution mechanisms.[75] These persistent reservations reveal the state's unwillingness to challenge sectarian personal status laws, which institutionalize gender inequality across religious communities and undermine Lebanon's commitments under CEDAW. Despite adopting WPS instruments such as its NAPs, legal pluralism and religious governance structures limit institutional alignment with CEDAW's principles.

Notably, Lebanon's WPS strategy is supported by broader initiatives, such as the 2022-2030 *National Strategy for Women*, which aims to institutionalize gender equality across sectors. However, these policies often remain siloed, underfunded, and disconnected from communities most affected by conflict and insecurity. This is consistent with critiques in WPS literature that argue NAPs are often elite-driven, technocratic exercises lacking deep engagement with grassroots actors.[76]

Fragility of Gains: War, Displacement, and GBV

The 2023-2024 Israeli aggressions along Lebanon's southern border and in the Lebanese capital, Beirut, have sharply highlighted the fragility of WPS gains in the country. More than 90,000 people[77] have been displaced in South Lebanon as of 2024, with schools, clinics, and homes destroyed and civilian casualties, many of them women and children. Not often at the center of attention, attacks on Beirut have also resulted in extensive violence against women and girls.[78]

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[73] Lebanon, website https://1325naps.peacewomen.org/index.php/lebanon-2/
[74] UN Women (2024). On the frontlines: Women-led organizations lead Lebanon's crisis response, despite significant challenges. https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/stories/press-release/2024/12/on-the-frontlines-women-led-organizations-lead-lebanons-crisis-response-despite-significant-challenges-0
[75] UN Treaty Collection (2025). CEDAW Status of Ratification. https://treaties.un.org/pages/viewdetails.aspx?src=treaty&mtdsg_no=iv-8&chapter=4&clang=_en
[76] Achilleos-Sarll, C. and Chilmeran, Y. (2020). Interrogating the 'Local' in Women, Peace and Security: Reflections on Research on and in the UK and Iraq. International Feminist Journal of Politics, 22(4), pp.596–605. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2020.1803097
[77] UN News (2024). Lebanon crisis: 90,000 displaced in last 72 hours, warns refugee agency. https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/09/1154921
[78] Amal Saad, From Dahieh to Gaza: Israel's Doctrines of Destruction, 30 October 2024 https://thepublicsource.org/dahieh-gaza-doctrine-amal-saadv

Women and girls in affected areas face heightened insecurity, disrupted access to health care and livelihoods, and increased risk of GBV and exploitation in displacement settings.[79] Displacement has further marginalized refugees, migrants (such as Ethiopian, Sri-Lankan and Philippine domestic workers under the Kafala system[80]) and stateless women, who face compounded barriers to protection, health care, and participation.[81] Despite these realities, women remain largely absent from official humanitarian and security decision-making structures.

Grassroots Feminist Praxis and Resistance

Nonetheless, Lebanon offers examples of innovative grassroots and civil society engagement. UN Women's support for community mediation programs has empowered women as local peacebuilders, particularly in regions affected by refugee influxes and intercommunal tensions.[82] Women's organizations have also played critical roles in establishing safe shelters for GBV survivors and advocating for legal reforms, such as the 2014 domestic violence law and ongoing campaigns to abolish personal status laws that discriminate against women.

Feminist organizations, particularly those led by young women, queer activists, and migrant and refugee women, are increasingly challenging dominant peace and security frameworks. These actors operate outside the state's sectarian frameworks, centering care, mutual aid, and intersectionality as foundations of feminist peacebuilding. Their work, ranging from mutual aid and trauma counseling to media advocacy and intersectional policy work, illustrates the need to recognize a broader definition of "peacebuilding" that extends beyond formal negotiations. This grassroots-led paradigm aligns with growing scholarly calls for a shift away from state-centric, securitized interpretations of the WPS agenda and toward community-defined notions of justice and safety.[83]

As scholars of women, peace and security argue, meaningful progress requires institutional frameworks alongside cultural transformation and power redistribution.[84] In Lebanon, the over-securitization of the Agenda risks reproducing militarised and patriarchal structures, especially as regional and international actors frame women's empowerment in terms of stability rather than justice.[85] Lebanon's WPS landscape reveals both the promise and the limits of normative adoption. In this context, NAPs offer a symbolic alignment with global gender norms, combined with systemic sectarianism, which inhibits structural reform. To move beyond normative adoption, Lebanon's WPS Agenda must be radically re-imagined from elite policy

[79] The New Humanitarian, Israel's Lebanon assault: A double suffering for Syrian refugees, 2 October 2024 https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2024/10/02/israel-lebanon-assault-double-suffering-syria-refugees.
[80] The Kafala system is a "binding system" which binds individual migrant workers to specific Lebanese families (or "employers") across specific countries in the Middle East, such as Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. The system is akin to a modern iteration of slavery.
[81] https://www.nytimes.com/card/2024/12/16/world/middleeast/lebanon-migrant-workers-israel-war ; https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/feature-story/2024/10/women-share-stories-of-crisis-and-displacement-in-lebanon
[82] UN Women (2024). On the frontlines: Women-led organizations lead Lebanon's crisis response, despite significant challenges. https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/stories/press-release/2024/12/on-the-frontlines-women-led-organizations-lead-lebanons-crisis-response-despite-significant-challenges-0
[83] Paffenholz, T. (2019). What Works in Participation. In: The Oxford Handbook of Women, Peace, and Security. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190638276.013.11
[84] Hudson, V.M., Bowen, D.L. and Nielsen, P.L. (2020). The First Political Order: How Sex Shapes Governance and National Security Worldwide. New York: Columbia University Press. https://doi.org/10.7312/huds19466
[85] Musina, D. (2023). Militarising Gender: A (Contrapuntal) Reading of Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Applications in EU-Tunisian Security Assemblages. European Security, 32(3), pp.464–484. https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2023.2233961

spaces to grassroots-led feminist praxis that decolonizes peace, centers women's lived experiences, and redistributes power.

> ***In times of war and crisis, women lose more than just their basic needs, they also lose parts of themselves. Despite their courage to reclaim what's been taken, they are often met with a lack of resources and support. Yet, when women are given the space and the means, they transform pain into strength and brokenness into new beginnings. The question remains: who is responsible for creating that space?***
> ***- Batoul, Lebanese Climate Activist***

Feminism in the Ruins: Sudan's WPS Agenda Amid War and State Collapse

A Fragile Foundation: Political Upheaval and Legal Barriers to WPS in Sudan

Sudan's relationship with the WPS Agenda is shaped by the deep dissonance between revolutionary feminist movements and a militarised, patriarchal state apparatus. Following decades of civil war, authoritarianism, and mass uprisings, most notably the 2019 revolution led by women, the country adopted its first NAP in 2020 under UNSC Resolution 1325 centering on its four key pillars.[86] However, the resurgence of conflict in 2023 has rendered institutional implementation almost entirely defunct. The 2020 NAP emerged not from a cohesive state vision but as a response to international pressure, with limited roots in local feminist priorities, a disconnect that has only widened since the 2023 outbreak of civil war.

The transitional government's 2021 attempt to ratify the CEDAW – with reservations on Articles 2, 16 and 29 – signaled nominal progress. However, this ratification was never finalized, as it required additional approval by the Sovereign Council, which was not secured before the 2021 military coup. As a result, Sudan remains one of only a handful of states globally that have *not* ratified CEDAW, significantly constraining the legal domestication of WPS norms. These stalled reforms expose deeper frictions between international gender justice frameworks and Sudan's plural legal system, where Islamic law often supersedes gender equity, and colonial legacies continue to shape legal interpretations.[87]

Gendered Violence and Militarization

Despite the NAP's aspirations, Sudanese women continue to face systemic GBV, exacerbated by the weaponization of rape and displacement as tools of war. The 2024 report[88] *In Her Own Words: Voices of Sudan*, jointly produced by the Women's Refugee Commission, the Sudan Family Planning Association, and the Gender in Emergencies Group, illustrates how 22 displaced Sudanese women described the erosion of bodily autonomy, psychological safety, and social cohesion amid displacement and violence.

Civil society, particularly Sudanese feminist groups, continues to resist the erasure of women's voices in peacebuilding. The *Sudan Women's Peace Dialogue* convened a diverse coalition of women leaders in Addis Ababa, issuing a resounding call for inclusive and gender-just peace processes.[89] This effort reflects a broader theme in WPS scholarship: that women in the Global South are not passive recipients of peacebuilding norms but among the active shapers of such norms.[90]

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[86] WILPF (2024). 1325 National Action Plans – Sudan. http://1325naps.peacewomen.org/index.php/sudan-nap/
[87] UN Women (2025). For lasting peace in Sudan, women must lead peace efforts.
[88] Women's Refugee Commission (2024). In Her Own Words: Voices of Sudan. https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/research-resources/in-her-own-words-voices-of-sudan/
[89] African Union (2024). Sudan Women's Peace Dialogue concludes with powerful call for inclusive peace and protection of women and girls. https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20240703/sudan-womens-peace-dialogue-concludes-powerful-call-inclusive-peace-and
[90] Parashar, S., True, J. and Davies, S.E. (2019). The WPS Agenda: A Postcolonial Critique. In: The Oxford Handbook of Women, Peace, and Security. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190638276.013.46

> ***The most systemic weapon continuously used against women in the Sudan war over the past two years—and in the Darfur genocide for over 30 years—has been gender-based violence. It must be stopped immediately, All survivors deserve protection, justice, and access to both physical and mental health support, We can't afford to lose more sudanese women due suicidal attempts made by fear of rape or shame nor to the lack healthcare services, where they bleed to death while the world watch in deadly silence.***
> ***- Dr Tasabih Mohamed, Sudanese Doctor***

International Engagement: Gaps and Critiques

The role of regional and international actors, such as the African Union, United Nations, and Gulf states, has been ambivalent. While some initiatives, like AU-led dialogues and UN technical support, have nominally promoted inclusion, many peace negotiations remain dominated by male elites and military leaders. This mirrors WPS critiques highlighting how feminist demands are often instrumentalized to legitimize elite-led security governance rather than to support transformative justice or structural change.[91] Yet, the Sudan case illustrates key critiques of the WPS agenda. Scholars argue that the institutionalization of WPS through state-led NAPs often reproduces colonial hierarchies and securitized gender politics rather than facilitating genuine transformation.[92] Sudan's NAP implementation reflects an "ambition–reality gap," wherein international frameworks fail to translate into material change due to a lack of funding, political will, and local ownership.[93]

The current civil war has also widened this gap further. More than 12 million people[94] have been displaced internally or across borders (half of whom are women), and reports of ethnically targeted sexual violence have intensified, particularly in Darfur. This protracted instability poses urgent questions for the future of the WPS agenda in Sudan: Can the Agenda survive amid state collapse? What forms of feminist peacebuilding can emerge outside the state? These questions demand that global institutions move beyond technocratic solutions and provide sustained material and political support to Sudanese feminist actors. While the WPS agenda provides a normative foundation, its success in Sudan hinges on feminist decolonial praxis that centers on the lived realities of displaced, resisting, and organizing women in Sudan.

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[91] Ní Aoláin, F., Valji, N., True, J. and Davies, S.E. (2019). Scholarly Debates and Contested Meanings of WPS. In: The Oxford Handbook of Women, Peace, and Security. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190638276.013.4
[92] Basu, S., Kirby, P. and Shepherd, L.J. (2020). Women, Peace and Security: A Critical Cartography. In: New Directions in Women, Peace and Security. Bristol University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv12sdx3t.7
[93] Ananyan, A. and Longhurst, K. (2023). Amidst an Ambition–Reality Gap: The UN's Women, Peace and Security Agenda. The International Spectator, 58(1), pp.75–91. https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2022.2131054
[94] UN Women (2025). For lasting peace in Sudan, women must lead peace efforts. https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/feature-story/2025/04/for-lasting-peace-in-sudan-women-must-lead-peace-efforts

> ***I truly believe that peace in Sudan can't be negotiated in rooms that women aren't allowed to enter. It's built in the quiet, persistent acts of survival and resistance that are and always have been led by women who've been told they don't belong in politics, but carry entire communities through war.***
> ***– Huwayda El Zain, Sudanese Youth Activist***

Restoring Peace and Security to a Broken Nation: The Struggle and Strength of Syrian Women

Despite the fall of the Assad regime on 08 December 2024, the protracted nature of the Syrian conflict – active since the 2011 revolution – has redefined the landscape of gender roles, peacebuilding, and governance. Women have emerged as critical actors in humanitarian response, civil society and local governance despite their systemic marginalization from formal peace negotiations. This section provides an analysis of Syrian women's experiences within the framework of the WPS Agenda. In the Syrian context, adapting this Agenda to a protracted and fragmented conflict requires context-specific strategies that center local women's leadership and knowledge.[95] Drawing on an intersectional approach, it briefly explores the shifting of gender norms amid fragmented governance, international aid dynamics and grassroots feminist praxis. More recently, the suspension of US foreign aid has had immediate consequences for programs targeting women and girls in Syria. More broadly, besides its military involvement in the country, the US has been a major contributor to humanitarian assistance ($18 billion since 2011, including $1.2 billion in 2024).[96] The funding freeze disrupted aid to over 430,000 people, especially in Idlib, through the suspension of major services such as water, sanitation and hygiene (also called "WASH").[97] Such suspensions have immediately affected women, including through increased job insecurity and reduced access to vital services.

Syrian Women's Struggles and the Gendered Dimensions of the Syrian Conflict

The Syrian conflict claimed millions of lives, resulted in the uprooting of over 6.7 million people, and the forcible disappearance of over 136,000 individuals, of which over 112,000 are still missing after the fall of the regime and the opening of detention centers.[98] While Syria is far from being fully rebuilt and still faces numerous challenges,[99] some timid signs of recovery are showing, such as the lifting of most US and EU sanctions.[100]

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[95] Middle East Council on Global Affairs. 2023. "Adapting the Women, Peace and Security Agenda to the Arab World." Doha, Qatar: MECGA. https://mecouncil.org/blog_posts/adapting-the-women-peace-and-security-wps-agenda-to-the-arab-world/.

[96] Atlantic Council. 2025. "The Foreign Aid Freeze Poses Risks to US Interests in Syria." Atlantic Council Blogs: MENASource. Washington, DC: Atlantic Council. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-foreign-aid-freeze-poses-risks-to-us-interests-in-syria/.

[97] The New Humanitarian. 2025. "US Aid Freezes Escalate Syria Crisis." Geneva, Switzerland: The New Humanitarian. https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2025/02/17/us-aid-freezes-escalate-syria-crisis.

[98] The Syrian Network for Human Rights, Opening Detention Centers Has Revealed the Still-Going Humanitarian Catastrophe: Over 112,414 Individuals Are Still Forcibly Disappeared at the Hands of the Assad Regime, 28 December 2024.

[99] Syria's Post-Conflict Recovery: Challenges and Prospects for Reconstruction and Stability
Bilal Mahli, April 11, 2025
https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/syrias-post-conflict-recovery-challenges-and-prospects-reconstruction-and-stability ;
The Syrian Netowkr for Human Rights, "1,562 Deaths, Including 102 Children and 99 Women, as well as 33 Medical Personnel, Recorded in March 2025 in Syria," 09 April 2025
https://snhr.org/blog/2025/04/09/1562-deaths-including-102-children-and-99-women-as-well-as-33-medical-personnel-recorded-in-march-2025-in-syria/

[100] The New Arab, Rebuilding Syria: Why sanctions relief will take time
https://www.newarab.com/analysis/rebuilding-syria-why-sanctions-relief-will-take-time; Syria; Council of the EU, EU adopts legal acts to lift economic sanctions on Syria, enacting recent political agreement, Press Release, 28 May 2025.
https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/05/28/syria-eu-adopts-legal-acts-to-lift-economic-sanctions-on-syria-enacting-recent-political-agreement/

Among all other segments of society, the Syrian conflict has had particularly heavy consequences for Syrian women and girls. Over 6.8 million people have been internally displaced for years, and over 6.7 million have sought refuge abroad, especially in neighboring countries (Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan) – 80% of whom are women and children.[101] The International Rescue Committee (IRC) notes in its 2023 report *Are We Listening?* that humanitarian efforts often fall short in addressing the needs of women and girls, particularly in relation to protection services, safe spaces and health infrastructure.[102] The collapse of healthcare systems due to continuous attacks (especially by the Syrian government forces and/or Russian forces)[103] has exacerbated maternal mortality, and access to sexual and reproductive health services has declined, particularly in highly active conflict zones. Concurrently, women have assumed new roles as heads of households, frontline responders, and community leaders, ultimately transforming traditional gender norms. These shifts have reshaped gender dynamics both in Syria and among displaced communities, especially in host countries such as Jordan and Lebanon.[104]

During the conflict, gender-based violence, including sexual violence, early and forced marriages, and human trafficking, has increased substantially both within Syria and along migratory routes.[105] The violence perpetrated in 2014 by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) forces in northwestern Iraq against Yazidi women and girls,[106] some as young as 9 years old, who were forcibly transferred into Syria before being subjected to enslavement, sexual slavery, and forced and early marriages, remains one of the most glaring examples. Over ten years since the Yazidi people of Sinjar were brutally attacked, surviving women and children remain under unlawful detention in Northeast Syria.[107]

Syrian Women's Roles in Peace, Politics, and Reconstruction

At the forefront of demonstrations and sit-ins in 2011, Syrian women have also organized and mobilized throughout the war, from within and outside Syria.[108] A telling example of this is Wafa Mustafa's tireless mobilization to find her missing father, dragged by armed men outside of her home in 2013 – never to be found, despite the opening of all prisons since the fall of the Assad

[101] UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). 2024. Syria Situation – Global Appeal 2024. Geneva, Switzerland: UNHCR. https://reporting.unhcr.org/syria-situation-global-appeal-2024.
[102] International Rescue Committee (IRC). 2023. Are We Listening? Acting on Our Commitments to Women and Girls Affected by the Syrian Conflict. New York: IRC. https://www.rescue.org/report/are-we-listening-acting-our-commitments-women-and-girls-affected-syrian-conflict-0
[103] One can see a map of "Illegal Attacks on Health Care in Syria", https://syriamap.phr.org/#/en ; see also Physician for Human Rights, 'PHR has documented attacks on health care in Syria since the start of the conflict in 2011' https://phr.org/issues/health-under-attack/attacks-in-syria/
[104] Gharaibeh, Sawsan. 2017. "Gender Role Changes and Their Impacts on Syrian Women Refugees." Berlin, Germany: WZB Berlin Social Science Center. https://bibliothek.wzb.eu/pdf/2018/vi18-101.pdf.
[105] Freedman J et al. A GendRered Approach to the Syrian Refugee Crisis. Routledge, coll."Routledge Studies in Development, Mobilities and Migration", 2017. ISBN: 978-1-138-69372-2 https://gbvmigration.cnrs.fr/pub-mbrs/a-gendered-approach-to-the-syrian-refugee-crisis/
[106] More broadly, children and men were also attacked by ISIS forces. While men were killed, "Yazidi boys (as young as seven) were forcibly trainde for combat roles and suicide missions". OHCHR, Ten years after the Yazidi genocide: UN Syria Commission of Inquiry calls for justice, including accountability and effective remedies, for ISIL crimes, 02 August 2024, p. 2.
[107] OHCHR, Ten years after the Yazidi genocide: UN Syria Commission of Inquiry calls for justice, including accountability and effective remedies, for ISIL crimes, 02 August 2024.
[108] Killed, displaced, exiled: Syria's women's movement 13 years after revolution https://syriadirect.org/syrias-womens-movement-13-years-after-revolution/#:~:text=Women%20like%20al%2DFarij%20and,voices%20heard%20in%20new%20ways.

regime.[109] Syrian women-led organizations have been instrumental in humanitarian service delivery, documentation of rights violations, and peace advocacy. NGOs and organizations such as Women Now for Development, *Mazaya*, and Start Point, blend care work with political activism.[110] Despite shrinking civic space and security threats due to consistent attacks from armed groups (including ISIS, the Assad regime, and other factions), these organizations and grassroots groups remain vital actors in local resilience and post-conflict reconstruction.

Despite their extensive contributions, Syrian women remain largely excluded from formal peace processes. Early Geneva-based peace talks on Syria lacked women's representation[111] while the related UN-facilitated constituent assembly of 2020 lacked gender parity (13 women out of 45 members of the drafting committee).[112] Another example of this is the UN-facilitated Women's Advisory Board created a consultative mechanism but ultimately lacked meaningful decision-making power.[113] Grassroots actors, including the Syrian Women's Political Movement and the Syrian Feminist Lobby, have advocated for greater inclusion and gender-sensitive transitional justice mechanisms.[114] Since 2013, UN Women has supported Syrian women's leadership in political and peace processes, in line with UNSC Resolution 2254 and the core components of the WPS Agenda, although a 2013 report from the International Rescue Committee (IRC) highlighted the failures of the international community.[115] These efforts acknowledge that peace cannot be sustainable without the meaningful participation of women. This rationale draws on recognizing that women and men experience war differently and, therefore, must have equitable influence in shaping post-conflict futures.

In areas under the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), controlled by the Democracy Union Party, women occupy a significant share of leadership positions, and governance operates through co-leadership models. The Syrian Feminist Lobby (2023) researched the situation of women across various regions in Syria, each subjected to the control of various forces/authorities during the war, resulting in the implementation of different sets of laws and lifestyles.[116] The co-management system implemented in AANES and other areas reflects anti-individualist leadership and feminist-informed structures, although their reach and sustainability vary across places and regions. A 2024 survey conducted on 31 women co-chairs

[109] Annie Kelly, Wafa Mustafa: the woman fighting to find her father – and all of Syria's disappeared, 14 July 2021 https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/jul/14/wafa-mustafa-the-woman-fighting-to-find-her-father-and-all-of-syrias-disappeared

[110] Berghof Foundation. 2025. "International Women's Day 2025 Event Report." Berlin, Germany: Berghof Foundation. https://berghof-foundation.org/news/event-international-womens-day-2025.

[111] Madeleine Rees, Syrian women demand to take part in the peace talks in Geneva, Open Democracy, 12 January 2014 https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/syrian-women-demand-to-take-part-in-peace-talks-in-geneva/

[112] https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2020/11/a-patriarchal-peace-in-syria?lang=en

[113] UN Women. 2020. Supporting Syrian Women's Engagement in the Syrian Political Process. Cairo, Egypt: UN Women Arab States. https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/peace-and-security/syria-wps-programme.

[114] CCSD (Center for Civil Society and Democracy). 2024. "Recommendations for Women's Engagement in the Peace Process to Achieve a Sustainable and Just Peace in Syria." Erbil, Iraq: CCSD. https://www.ccsd.ngo/recommendations-for-womens-engagement-in-the-process-to-achieve-a-sustainable-and-just-peace-in-syria/.

[115] Liz Ford, "Women and girls 'failed' by international response in Syria", The Guardian, 18 September 2014 https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2014/sep/18/women-girls-failed-international-response-syria

[116] https://syrianfeministlobby.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/SFL.-Co-Presidency-within-the-Autonomous-Administration-As-a-Model-for-Womens-Political-Participation-Eng.pdf

in the AANES shows that the system is "broadly respected in practice, though there is still progress to be made," especially regarding entrenched sexist attitudes.[117]

The Intersectional Realities and Marginalization of Syrian Women

Before the conflict started, Syrian women were relatively well educated,[118] although their steady increase since the 1970s in school enrollment varied greatly depending on socio-economic class, environment, and level of education (primary, secondary or higher education).[119] In addition, women had legal access to employment, though they have traditionally been marginalized from the workforce (in 2005, only 16.3% of women were active in the workforce) due to a variety of factors.[120] In addition to the Syrian conflict, the state's co-optation of women's movements and outdated patriarchal legislation continues to limit women's genuine political engagement until today. The legal system in Syria remains discriminatory in areas such as inheritance, retirement, social security and male-dominated guardianship[121] through, among others, a number of disparate personal status laws (which, among others, permits child marriage) or the Syrian National Law (which does not allow Syrian women who are married to foreigners to pass on their nationality to their children).[122] Nevertheless, at the local level, women have held various roles in governance structures through employment and representation, such as local councils.[123]

An intersectional perspective highlights disparities in how Syrian women experience conflict and displacement. Minority groups (e.g., Kurdish, Yezidi, Alawite), rural women, ex-detainees, women with a different gender presentation or sexuality, and women with visible or non-visible disabilities face compounding layers of marginalization. Policies often prioritize elite, urban-based women and related organizations, which ends up sidelining a diversity of grassroots voices. Kurdish women, in particular, have experienced both ethnic and gender-based discrimination, facing systemic barriers to political participation and cultural expression.[124] Prominent figures among refugees such as Muzoon Almellehan (UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador since 2017),[125] Yusra Mardini (Olympic swimmer and youngest-ever Goodwill Ambassador for UNHCR since 2017),[126] and Sara Mardini (humanitarian worker and activist),[127] are examples showcasing how displaced Syrian women may tell their own narratives and reclaim their story

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[117] Meghan Bodette and Aras Yussef, A Model for Gender Equitable Leadership in Northeast Syria, Wilson Centre, November 25, 2024 https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/model-gender-equitable-leadership-northeast-syria
[118] https://timep.org/2023/06/09/education-system-in-northwestern-syria-a-long-road-ahead/
[119] https://tarikhi.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Education-English.pdf
[120] The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, "Women's Participation in the Economy", 2017 https://timep.org/2017/08/02/womens-participation-in-the-economy/
[121] Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 2021. The Human Rights of Women in Syria. Geneva, Switzerland: WILPF. https://www.wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The-human-rights-of-women-in-Syria-single-pages.pdf.
[122] Daad Mousa, Syrian Personal Status Law, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2018https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/14969.pdf
[123] Local Development & Small-Projects Supports, Governance Experiences in SYRIA: Shedding Light on Women's Experiences in Local Councils in Non-Regime Held Regions, March - 2020 https://ldsps.org/report/governance-experiences-in-syria-shedding-light-on-womens-experiences-in-local-councils-in-non-regime-held-regions/ . To learn more about local councils in Syria and their role in the revolution see Hisham Rifai and Ayman Makarem, Revolution in Every Country Comic Series: Episode 1 – Syria: Erasing an Inconvenient Revolution. A series of comics on revolutionary movements, events, and ideas in the SWANA region, June 2022 https://unicornriot.ninja/2022/revolution-in-every-country-episode-1-syria-erasing-an-inconvenient-revolution/
[124] Capire. "The Impact of Conflict on Women's Rights in Syria", São Paulo, Brazil, 2023.
[125] https://www.unicef.org/goodwill-ambassadors/muzoon-almellehan
[126] https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/our-partners/prominent-supporters/goodwill-ambassadors/yusra-mardini
[127] https://assedel.org/sara-mardini-a-human-an-activist-and-a-refugee/

publicly. Criticisms are however raised regarding representation, which remains uneven and often disconnected from women's lived realities within Syria during the war. The Syrian Feminist Lobby warned against instrumentalizing women's voices for political leverage while military escalations in Aleppo and Idlib continue to endanger civilians.[128]

The Gendered Barriers to Return and Reintegration in a Fractured Syria

Although returns to Syria have been internationally advocated as "safe, voluntary and dignified" by international organizations and some NGOs for years, the reality remains much more complicated for Syrian men, women and children – even in 2025 after the demise of the Assad regime.[129] The push for return came back to the center of European agendas after December 2024 and under the eagerness of some EU Member States (e.g., Denmark, Czech Republic and Cyprus) and Turkey. A 2024 UNHCR regional survey (covering Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon) found that only 27% of Syrian refugees intend to return within 12 months, often citing insecurity, lack of housing, and absence of livelihoods as primary deterrents. Within this scenario, across all countries, women respondent shares an even lower intention to return in the same period (23%).[130]

Women-headed households, often due to the loss of men within families (disappeared or killed during the conflict), represent a significant proportion of returnees and are disproportionately affected. The collapse of public services in Syria, the entrenched economic crisis, and the legal conundrum around property ownership and documentation further exacerbate the risks women may encounter when returning. In 2023, almost all women-led families (92%) in displacement camps report being unable to meet basic needs,[131] for instance, due to camps being overcrowded and substandard conditions of living.[132] Another matter important to post-conflict reconstruction concerns the situation of families, mostly women and children (including a large number of European citizens) associated with ISIS and held in the detention camps al-Hol and Roj in Northeast Syria, as reported by the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism and several other organizations (e.g., UN Development Programme and Human Rights Watch).[133]

Gender-based violence remains a critical concern in return settings, particularly where community reintegration is hindered by stigma or past affiliations. Women returnees often lack

[128] Syrian Feminist Lobby (SFL). 2024. "Statement on the Military Developments in Aleppo and Idlib." Berlin, Germany: SFL. https://syrianfeministlobby.org/en/2024/12/02/statement-on-the-military-developments-in-aleppo-and-idlib/.
[129] Lisa Marie Borelli, "Safe, voluntary and dignified? Local Jordanian NGO perspectives on Syrian refugee return", 12 May 2025 https://blogs.law.ox.ac.uk/border-criminologies-blog/blog-post/2025/05/safe-voluntary-and-dignified-local-jordanian-ngo
[130] UNHCR, Flash Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, February 2025.
[131] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights). 2023. "Gendered Impact of Conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic: Women and Girls." Geneva, Switzerland: OHCHR. https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2023/06/gendered-impact-conflict-syrian-arab-republic-women-and-girls.
[132] See for instance Al Hol camp, in Northeastern Syria. "Women and children continue to suffer in northeast Syria's Al Hol camp", Médecins Sans Frontières, 16 May 2016 https://www.msf.org/women-and-children-continue-suffer-northeast-syria%E2%80%99s-al-hol-camp-syria
[133] Beatrice Eriksson, Lost Childhoods: The Ongoing Plight of Children in Detention Camps in Northeast Syria, International Centre for Counter Terrorism, 28 June 2024; UNDP, Affiliated with ISIS: Challenges for the return and reintegration of women and children, 24 October 2022. https://www.undp.org/iraq/publications/affiliated-isis-challenges-return-and-reintegration-women-and-children ; Human Rights Watch, "My Son is Just Another Kid", 21 November 2022 https://www.hrw.org/report/2022/11/21/my-son-just-another-kid/experiences-children-repatriated-camps-isis-suspects-and

access to justice, health, and protection services, deepening cycles of marginalization. Efforts to ensure reintegration are further undermined by funding shortfalls. The recent suspension of US foreign assistance to Syria disrupted shelter and legal aid programs essential to women's safety upon return. Without gender-sensitive policies and targeted reintegration support, returns risk reinforcing the very inequalities the WPS Agenda seeks to address.[134]

Syrian women have made substantial contributions to peace, recovery, and reconstruction,[135] yet formal recognition and the necessary allocation of resources to maintain their work remains limited. In Syria, the WPS Agenda must be re-imagined through a locally grounded, intersectional feminist lens that prioritizes justice, accountability and sustainability. As such, there is a need to not only include women in current and future peacebuilding efforts, but also to center their knowledge and leadership in this endeavour.

[134] UN Women. 2019. Gender Matters in Returns to Syria: Discussions with Refugees and IDPs. Cairo, Egypt: UN Women Arab States. https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2019/07/gender-matters-in-returns-to-syria-discussions.
[135] Merissa Khurma, "How Syrian Women Are Shaping Their Country's Future", 14 March 2025 https://www.bakerinstitute.org/research/how-syrian-women-are-shaping-their-countrys-future

The Silencing of Kurdish and Forcibly Displaced Women in Turkey's WPS Architecture

Image:"[Peace] Negotiations Right Now!", with authorization from: Dr Nisa, Göksel, 08 March 2014.

A Shallow WPS Architecture in Turkey

Turkish history venerates female fighters such as Nene Hatun and Sabiha Gökçen, but today's defence institutions still treat women's involvement in peace and security as an outstanding matter.[136] The country can point to a list of signatures and plans – CEDAW, the Optional Protocol, successive National Development Plans, a Women's Empowerment Action Plan, and even the honour of being the first country to sign the Istanbul Convention (and the first to quit it in 2021). Yet, Ankara, 25 years after UNSCR 1325, still has no NAPS that would bind these promises together.[137] Meanwhile, the indicators Turkey does publish underline some striking gaps between written policies and their results: the country slid from 105th to 124th place on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index between 2006 and 2022, and it ranks 65th on UNDP's Gender Inequality Index despite a far higher position on the Human Development Index.[138] Legislative reforms have not reversed pervasive violence against women, chronic under-representation in decision-making, or the stubborn wage and care burdens that the pandemic only deepened.

[136] Mustafa Yücehan Akal, Barış Ateş, Raif Cergibozan, Melek Kırtıl, Adem Başpınar, Social Attitudes towards Women's Military Service in Turkiye, 2023
https://iupress.istanbul.edu.tr/en/journal/iusd/article/turkiyede-kadinlarin-askerlik-yapmalarina-yonelik-toplumsal-tutumlar
[137] http://1325naps.peacewomen.org/index.php/nap-overview/
[138] World Economic Forum (2006 and 2022) Global Gender Gap Reports. (available online); UNDP (2022). Human Development 2022. (available online); UN Women Türkiye Country Office (2022). Gender Statistics 2022 Brochure. (available online)

The flagship UN Women Strategic Note 2022-25 in Turkey devotes pages to gender-responsive budgeting and earthquake recovery, but a keyword search returns zero mentions of 'Kurdish' women.[139] A similar silence runs through UN Women's first nationwide study on violence against women in politics (2023): the report maps intimidation in detail yet never once names the heightened risks faced by Kurdish candidates, including women politicians, who are routinely dismissed from office or prosecuted.[140] Kurdish and forcibly displaced women are among the groups most exposed to conflict-related violence, but their specific needs, security concerns and demands for political representation are written out of the very documents designed to operationalize WPS. Taken together, these silences and contradictions explain why Turkey's WPS architecture remains shallow.

Increased Violence against Women during an Economic Crisis

Brewing for a few years and officially started in 2019, Turkey's multidimensional economic crisis is tied to a combined national currency and debt crises and a cost-of-living crisis with off-the-chart inflation (reaching as high as 85.5% in October 2022).[141] As research highlights, in Turkey and elsewhere, there is a corelation between heightened levels of intimate partner violence (IPV) and inflation,[142] underpayment of bills,[143] or increased poverty,[144] sometimes reinforced by reduced governmental resources allocated to supporting women facing IPV.[145]

Turkey is currently facing its highest-ever recorded femicide rates, with 394 women murdered by men in 2024 alone.[146] The Turkish We Will Stop Femicide Platform (*Kadın Cinayetlerini Durduracağız Platformu* - KCDP) reported that September 2024 was the deadliest month on record, with 48 women murdered by men in Turkey.[147] This situation has undoubtedly worsened since Turkey withdrew in 2021 from the Istanbul Convention, a landmark treaty that obliges governments to adopt legislation prosecuting perpetrators of domestic violence and similar

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[139] UN Women, « Strategic Note 2022–2025: Türkiye ». 2024. UN Women – Headquarters. 5 septembre 2024. https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/05/brochure-strategic-note-2022-2025-turkiye.

[140] UN Women, "Violence against Women in Politics in Türkiye. A qualitative study", 2023 https://eca.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/violence_against_women_in_politics_in_turkiye_0.pdf

[141] Trading Economics, Turkey Inflation Rate, accessed on 02 March 2025 https://tradingeconomics.com/turkey/inflation-cpi

[142] Cigdem, G. (2022). INFLATION AND A PREDICTABLE PANDEMIC, FEMICIDE: EVIDENCE FROM ARDL BOUNDS TESTING APPROACH FROM TURKEY. Journal of Business Economics and Finance, 11(2), 78-87. https://doi.org/10.17261/Pressacademia.2022.1558

[143] Golden, S.D., Perreira, K.M., & Durrance, C.P. (2013). Troubled times, troubled relationships: how economic resources, gender beliefs, and neighbourhood disadvantage influence intimate partner violence. Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 28(10), 2134–2155

[144] Schneider D, Harknett K, McLanahan S. Intimate Partner Violence in the Great Recession. Demography. 2016 Apr;53(2):471-505. doi: 10.1007/s13524-016-0462-1. PMID: 27003136; PMCID: PMC4860387. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4860387/

Golden, S.D., Perreira, K.M., & Durrance, C.P. (2013). Troubled times, troubled relationships: how economic resources, gender beliefs, and neighbourhood disadvantage influence intimate partner violence. Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 28(10), 2134–2155

[145] Briones-Vozmediano, E., Agudelo-Suarez, A.A., Goicolea, I. et al. Economic crisis, immigrant women and changing availability of intimate partner violence services: a qualitative study of professionals´ perceptions in Spain. Int J Equity Health 13, 79 (2014). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-014-0079-1 https://equityhealthj.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12939-014-0079-1

[146] Turkey records highest-ever femicide rate in 2024 https://www.duvarenglish.com/turkey-records-highest-ever-femicide-rate-in-2024-news-65485 Friday January 03 2025 07:19 pm

[147] Turkey sets grim record in monthly femicides, November 5, 2024 https://stockholmcf.org/turkey-sets-grim-record-in-monthly-femicides/

abuse, as well as marital rape and female genital mutilation.[148] President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced the withdrawal after issuing an overnight decree, hollowing out the legal and institutional safeguards the Convention provided.[149] Turkey thus became the first Council of Europe member both to ratify the Convention, in March 2012, and to abandon it. As KCDP Secretary-General Fidan Ataselim notes, the move forms part of a broader shift towards 'family-oriented' policies.[150] Over the same period, queer and feminist groups have faced mounting state hostility, including with the criminalization bills targeting LGBTQIA+ identities and the violent suppression of annual feminist night marches.[151] As reported in March 2025, the launch of the "year of the family" by the Turkish government can be examined as a "year against LGBTI+", where any public expression of queer identities is to be criminalized.[152]

'[Peace] Negotiations Right Now!' or the Plea of Kurdish Women in Turkey

Despite its relevance, the intersection between the WPS Agenda and Kurds in the modern Turkish state is often ignored both within the scholarly literature on WPS and in WPS international policies. Turkey's long-standing conflict with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and its offshoots in Syria, Iraq and Iran[153] has disproportionately affected Kurdish civilians, especially women. From 1984 to 2002, emergency rule in the southeast resulted in over 35,000 deaths, mass displacement, and 1,388 disappearances.[154] The term 'peace process' really became politically relevant in relation to the talks between Turkey and the PKK, including PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, from 2009 onwards, and especially after 2013 when they became more transparent.[155] Despite its initial promise, this peace process ended in renewed violence and curfews in Kurdish provinces (especially after the Turkish general elections in June 2015), including the massacre of civilians in Cizre basements in February 2016, where nearly 200 people were killed by Turkish military forces and their remains later buried under a park.[156] No UN team was ever allowed to come on site and no investigations were opened.[157]

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[148] The Istanbul Convention is an international treaty from the Council of Europe (CoE), building on standards enshrined in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), general recommendations and case law

[149] UN Women, "Statement by UN Women on Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention", 20 March 2021 https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2021/3/statement-un-women-turkey-withdrawal-from-the-istanbul-convention

[150] Turkey records highest-ever femicide rate in 2024 https://www.duvarenglish.com/turkey-records-highest-ever-femicide-rate-in-2024-news-65485 Friday January 03 2025 07:19 pm

[151] Bianet, 'Our struggle is bigger than his words': LGBTI+ groups react to Erdoğan's victory speech, 30 May 2023 https://bianet.org/haber/our-struggle-is-bigger-than-his-words-lgbti-groups-react-to-erdogan-s-victory-speech-279514 MLSA, "Istanbul Pride Parada banned, nine roads closed", 30 June 2024 https://x.com/mlsaturkey/status/1807326191281406056?lang=en

[152] Duvar English, "Turkey's year of family becomes 'year against LGBTI+", 06 March 2025 https://www.duvarenglish.com/turkeys-year-of-family-becomes-year-against-lgbti-news-65764; see also Civicus, 04 April 2025 https://lens.civicus.org/interview/this-new-law-will-push-lgbtqi-people-and-communities-into-deeper-invisibility-and-precarity/

[153] The PKK is depicted as a Kurdish militant political organisation and armed guerilla group. The organisation is designated as a terrorist organisation by countries around the world, including the United States of America since 1997 and the European Union since 2004.

[154] Daşlı, Güneş. "The Politics of Gravelessness and Necropolitical Violence in Turkey: 'The Souls of Deceased Searching for a Grave.'" The Commentaries 4, no. 1 (May 20, 2024):p. 45. https://doi.org/10.33182/tc.v4i1.3323.

[155] What Can Women's Groups Do to Rejuvenate Peace Processes? The Example of Turkey by Ayşe Betül Çelik https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/c05/what-can-womens-groups-do-rejuvenate-peace-processes

[156] Daşlı, Güneş. "The Politics of Gravelessness and Necropolitical Violence in Turkey: 'The Souls of Deceased Searching for a Grave.'" The Commentaries 4, no. 1 (May 20, 2024, p. 46.. https://doi.org/10.33182/tc.v4i1.3323.

[157] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/11/turkey-dismisses-un-alarm-at-alleged-rights-abuses-in-kurdish-region

Even while the 2013-2015 peace process was ongoing, however, its implementation evidently lacked a legal framework and meaningful gender representation. Of the 63 members of the government's Committee of Wise People, only 12 were women, and their presence did not translate into influence.[158] In contrast, the Kurdish-led structures, including those of the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) and the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), integrated women more substantially, including through the co-mayorship model. This system mandated shared leadership between a man and a woman, and embodied a political vision of democratic autonomy while challenging patriarchal power.[159] Despite its success, it has been systematically dismantled through the state's replacement of elected officials in Kurdish municipalities with government-appointed trustees.[160]

The recent declaration of a new ceasefire between the PKK and Turkey marks a significant political development. On 01 March 2025, the PKK declared an open-ended ceasefire, responding to a 27 February appeal from its imprisoned leader, Abdullah Öcalan. In a statement titled "A Call for Peace and a Democratic Society," issued from İmralı Island prison, where he has been held in isolation since 1999, Öcalan argued that Turkey's second republican century can endure only through democratic compromise, respect for diverse identities, and free political organization.[161] The ceasefire binds every PKK-linked formation, from the main forces in Turkey and northern (Bakur) Kurdistan to autonomous cells, YPS civil-defence units and other self-defence groups, instructing them to adopt a strictly defensive stance while political dialogue is sought.[162]

The current blind spot of the WPS Agenda in Turkey is its failure to engage with Kurdish women's experiences of war, political violence and resistance. Although the Kurdish women's movement has been instrumental in promoting gender equality, peace and grassroots democracy, their participation in national processes is often marginalized. Feminist scholar Nisa Göksel (2018) documents how the Democratic Free Women's Movement (DÖKH), later Kongreya Jinen Azad (KJA), and the *Barış İçin Kadın Girişimi* (Women for Peace Initiative, BİKG) played key roles in peace politics during the 2013–2015 resolution process. Yet Kurdish women's conceptualization of peace, as connected to self-governance, cultural rights, and bodily autonomy, was sidelined by dominant Turkish narratives, which often instrumentalized women's voices through maternalist tropes such as the slogan 'mothers shall not cry anymore.'[163]

The recent ceasefire was supported by the Peace Mothers (*Dayîkên Aşîtîyê*) and Kurdish women activists, who have resumed hunger strikes and vigils calling for Öcalan's release and a political solution. The Peace Mothers movement emerged after the 1980 military *coup d'état* in Turkey,

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[158] Göksel, Nisa. "Losing the One, Caring for the All: The Activism of the Peace Mothers in Turkey." Social Sciences 7, no. 10 (October 2018): p.152 https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci7100174.

[159] Göksel, Nisa. "Losing the One, Caring for the All: The Activism of the Peace Mothers in Turkey." Social Sciences 7, no. 10 (October 2018): 156 https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci7100174.

[160] Medya news Peace-mother-it-has-been-enough-kurdish-mothers-and-children-should-not-cry-anymore,accessed 02 March https://medyanews.net/peace-mother-it-has-been-enough-kurdish-mothers-and-children-should-not-cry-anymore/

[161] İmralı Delegation announces the historic call by Abdullah Öcalan, 27 February 2025,accessed 02 March 2025 https://anfenglishmobile.com/news/Imrali-delegation-announces-the-historic-call-by-abdullah-Ocalan-78145 ; PKK ateşkes ilan etti, Öcalan'ın çağrısına uyacağını açıkladı, BBC Türkçe, 01 March 2025, accessed 02 March 2025 https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cewkgy2g74ro

[162] HSM: The ceasefire decision taken by the PKK is valid for all our forces accessed 02 March https://anfenglishmobile.com/news/hsm-the-ceasefire-decision-taken-by-the-pkk-is-valid-for-all-our-forces-78199

[163] Çelik, Ayşe Betül. "What Can Women's Groups Do to Rejuvenate Peace Processes? The Example of Turkey," 2023, p. 2.

following a 'period of barbarity' (*vahşet dönemi*), mass imprisonment, disappearance and systematic torture of Kurds (mostly Kurdish men) in the infamous Diyarbakır military prison in Southeastern Turkey.[164] The initiative was formalized in 1996; since then, they have been "subjected to violence, having been detained, physically assaulted, imprisoned and killed over the years." The struggle of Kurdish women, including the Peace Mothers, articulates a form of gendered agency which, although it is rooted in maternal activism, is not reducible to it.

Regularly still, women activists – in Turkey, Syria, Iraq or Iran – are targeted when expressing their discontent with Kurdish leadership (e.g., Iraq's Kurdistan Democratic Party) or simply because they may exist in spaces near militant groups (e.g., in refugee camps or villages). For instance, in September 2024, a Turkish drone strike on Makhmour refugee camp in Northern Iraq injured three women from the Peace Mothers movement; they were organizing a rally, with Makhmour's local council , to oppose Turkish claims of PKK presence in the camp and criticizing the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) leadership.[165] As Daşlı (2024: 51) reminds us, Kurdish women's resistance is shaped by intersectional oppression, from the erasure of victims such as İpek Er (mysteriously dying of suicide) to the desecration of bodies such as that of Kurdish fighter Ekin Wan, whose image was weaponized in acts akin to 'necropolitical violence.'

The pursuit of peace and justice through the WPS Agenda in Turkey will remain elusive so long as structural silences and dominant nationalist idioms continue to marginalize Kurdish and forcibly displaced women. Turkey's experience demonstrates the analytical and practical limits of the WPS Agenda when it is severed from the intertwined questions of ethnicity, sovereignty, and state violence. Speaking before the 2025 session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, Serra Bucak, Kurdish co-mayor of Diyarbakır, captured this: 'Genuine peace, democracy and social justice are impossible without women's full participation at every level of governance.'[166] Her statement, as one of the few Kurdish women still co-mayor in 2025, points to an inclusive understanding of the WPS Agenda. Therefore, a truly inclusive WPS architecture must embed intersectional accountability mechanisms and create institutional pathways through which Kurdish and other marginalized women can shape decision-making from their communities to the highest state of representation.

[164] Yesim Yaprak YILDIZ, Forced Confession as a Ritual of Sovereignty: The Case of Diyarbakır Military Prison in Turkey, Asia Pacific Journal on Human Rights and the Law, 2016. https://researchportalplus.anu.edu.au/en/publications/forced-confession-as-a-ritual-of-sovereignty-the-case-of-diyarbak

[165] Medya news Peace-mother-it-has-been-enough-kurdish-mothers-and-children-should-not-cry-anymore,accessed 02 March https://medyanews.net/peace-mother-it-has-been-enough-kurdish-mothers-and-children-should-not-cry-anymore/

[166] https://medyanews.net/kurdish-mayor-serra-bucak-promotes-womens-leadership-at-un-summit/

Conclusions and Recommendations

Across Lebanon, Sudan, Syria, and Turkey, the WPS Agenda reveals both its potential and its limitations. While it offers a normative framework that foregrounds women's participation and protection in conflict-affected settings, its current implementation often remains symbolic, elite-driven, and disconnected from the lived realities of the women it claims to serve. The securitization of gender, nationalist exclusions, colonial legacies, and international donor pressures have all contributed to a WPS architecture that frequently sidelines grassroots feminist actors, especially those from historically marginalized communities such as displaced or ethnically minoritized women. State collapse, protracted war, and authoritarian governance further restrict access to justice and political participation, while many women continue to lead transformative resistance and peacebuilding efforts from the ground up. These feminist practices, centered in mutual care, memory, and community organizing, offer crucial alternatives to dominant, top-down approaches. However, they remain under-supported and under-recognized. To be meaningful in these contexts, the WPS Agenda must be radically re-imagined, not just as a bureaucratic checklist, but as a dynamic political project rooted in justice, power redistribution, and intersectional accountability. This requires institutional reform and also cultural and epistemic shifts that center the knowledge, leadership, and demands of grassroots feminist movements. The following list of recommendations highlights a few of the priorities for the future of the WPS Agenda in the SWANA region identified by this research:

- **Shift from securitization to justice-based approaches:** Deprioritise militarised and stability-focused interpretations of the WPS Agenda to instead support approaches that center justice, reparation, and transformative peace, especially for communities particularly impacted by ethnic, racial, and gender-based violence.

- **Resource grassroots feminist organizing**: Move beyond tokenistic inclusion by providing sustained, flexible, and accessible funding to a diversity of women- and girl-led movements. Funding should prioritize local knowledge, trust-based partnerships, and feminist self-determination over a list of donor-driven metrics.

- **Embed intersectional accountability mechanisms:** Institutional WPS processes must include concrete, transparent mechanisms for holding state and non-state actors accountable for violations, including those based on ethnicity, displacement status, or sexual orientation.

- **Decolonize WPS policy-making**: Ensure that feminist actors from SWANA countries shape WPS policies at national and international levels, not as "implementers" of international, donor-driven agendas, but as agents of change at the forefront of shaping the meaning of the WPS Agenda, through the lens of their epistemologies and struggles.

- **Re-imagine participation beyond the state:** Recognize that in contexts of state collapse or authoritarian repression, feminist peacebuilding often happens outside formal institutions. International actors must adapt their frameworks to engage with non-state, community-based and diasporic feminist networks.

- **Reclaim WPS as a political project:** Reframe the WPS Agenda as a site of struggle for collective liberation, not just a technocratic tool. This means embracing its potential to challenge militarism, neoliberalism and colonial hierarchies while amplifying the everyday resistance of women and girls on the frontlines of conflict.