The Women, Peace and Security agenda at 25

Views from *The Strategist*

EDITED BY
OLIVIA NELSON, GEORGIA OPIE,
ELIZABETH LAWLER AND
ANGELA SURIYASENEE

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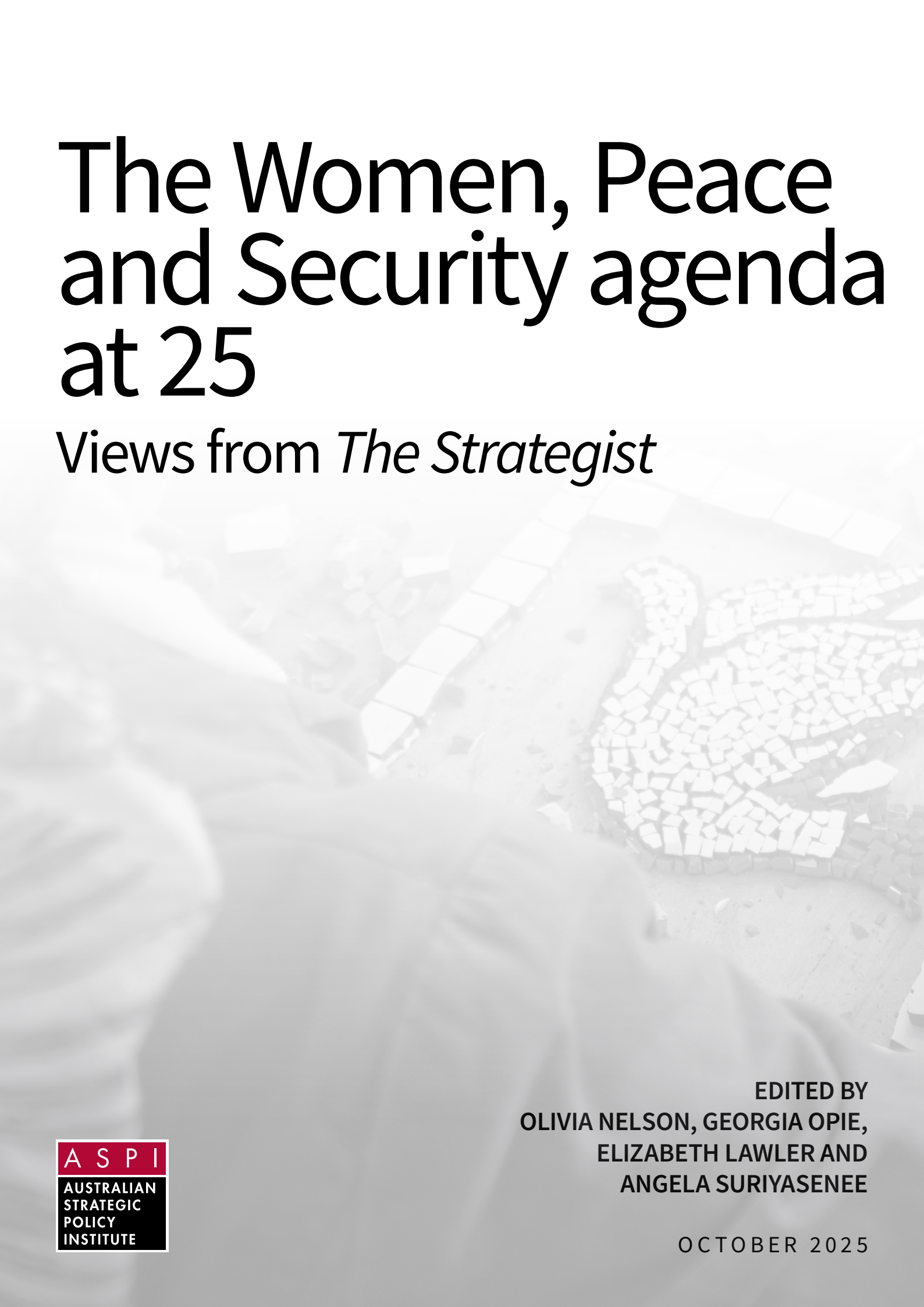

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ASPI
Level 2
40 Macquarie Street
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Australia

Tel Canberra + 61 2 6270 5100
Email enquiries@aspi.org.au
www.aspi.org.au
www.aspistrategist.org.au

Facebook.com/ASPI.org

@ASPI_org

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The life and lessons of the WPS generation

Emily Cooper

Image: UN Women Asia and the Pacific

She was born in 2000—an agenda, an aspiration, a promise. She was named Resolution 1325, and with her came a new way of thinking: that peace and security are stronger when women are included, when protection is prioritised, and when conflict prevention takes gender into account.

In her early years, she was celebrated. Speeches were made, toolkits were developed, and pilots were launched. She learned to speak the language of inclusion and became fluent in 'frameworks' before she ever learned to lead. She was adopted globally, quoted often, yet implemented unevenly.

At the same time, a new cohort was growing up under her shadow. Girls born into warzones. Young women taking part in peacebuilding. Local activists, female police officers and community leaders. They were told the system was changing, and that they would be protected, included and heard.

Twenty-five years later, both she and they are asking: what became of that promise?

In the early years of her childhood, she was full of promise. She arrived at a time when the world was exhausted by war but cautiously optimistic about peace. The ink was barely dry on the Dayton Agreement, ending the Bosnian War, and on the Rome Statute, establishing the International Criminal Court. The global war on terror had not yet begun. The Taliban had not yet fallen.

She was celebrated by diplomats and development professionals alike. Within a few years of her birth, countries rushed to draft national action plans. Peacekeeping missions were instructed to protect women and girls from conflict-related sexual violence. Conferences bloomed across continents. She was a keynote speaker before she could even walk.

She believed she was making a difference. When Liberia's women helped bring warlords to the negotiating table and elect Africa's first female head of state, she stood a little taller. When Colombia's peace accord included more than a hundred gender provisions, she believed the system might just be learning.

But even then, there were signs. The same missions that hosted her often failed to protect the women she was meant to serve. Security forces nodded at her, then ignored her. In some countries, she was welcomed into the Ministry for Women, but not into Defence or Foreign Affairs. Her presence was politely acknowledged but rarely funded. She had to grow up fast, and she learned that being seen was not the same as being heard.

By the time she turned fifteen, the world had changed again. Civil society space was shrinking. The Taliban were regaining ground. Peacekeepers were implicated in abuse. In Syria, war dragged on with little regard for women's voices. In South Sudan and Myanmar, strategic sexual violence continued with impunity.

She kept showing up, but the rooms felt more performative. She sat on panels, wrote reports and developed training modules. But when real decisions were made—when budgets were approved, operations were planned, and missions were deployed—she was often nowhere in sight. When female peacebuilders in Afghanistan were left behind in the 2021 evacuation, she wept. Not just for them, but for the failure of the promise.

She was told it was complex. That geopolitics had shifted. That priorities were evolving. But she had heard those excuses before. Complexity, she'd learned, was often just another way to justify inertia.

Now, at 25, she has lost some of her innocence but none of her clarity. She doesn't want to be empowered; she

wants power. She doesn't want another conference; she wants command appointments, strategic influence and operational funding. She's done asking nicely.

She knows that her Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda is not just about inclusion for its own sake; it's about better outcomes. She can show you the evidence that gender-inclusive processes are more likely to result in lasting peace, that protection frameworks reduce the risk of conflict escalation, and that preventing violence against women is a matter of national and international security.

She's not asking to be heard because it's fair. She's asking because it works.

The WPS generation has come of age. It includes women who are leading human rights organisations in Sudan, commanding units in the Ukrainian armed forces and rebuilding communities from Bougainville to Bakhmut. But many of them are doing this work despite the system, not because of it.

Twenty-five years ago, the world made a promise: to include women in peace and security, not as an afterthought but as a strategic imperative. Today, that promise remains uneven, underfunded and too often symbolic.

Anniversaries are for reflection, but also renewal. On Resolution 1325's 25th birthday, the real question is not whether WPS is still relevant, but whether we have the political will to make it real.

Those raised on her promise are no longer content to be the subject of a resolution. They were told the system was changing—that they would be protected, included and heard. Now, they are the ones asking the questions. And the next generation is listening closely to how we answer.

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Reflecting on 25 years of UNSC Resolution 1325

Susan Hutchinson

Image: UN Women via Flickr

The United Nations' Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda suffers from an ongoing burden: the need for less talk and more action. Invariably, several speakers raise this issue at the Security Council's annual Open Debate on WPS. But we are now experiencing a very concerning backslide.

The Security Council passed the first WPS resolution, UNSCR 1325, on 31 October 2000, after much collaboration with feminist civil society organisations. It was a natural evolution of the women and armed conflict objective of the Beijing Platform for Action, which was developed from the UN's world conferences on women.

By late 2000, there was enough momentum to get UNSCR 1325 off the ground. This was helped by a highly successful international workshop on gender and peacekeeping hosted by Namibia, which at the time held the UN Security Council presidency.

There are now 10 resolutions on WPS, highlighting the importance of women's participation in conflict prevention, mitigation, resolution and recovery. Grounded in the language of existing international law, they also prioritise protection from and justice for conflict-related sexual violence.

In 2013, the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women passed General Recommendation 30 on women in conflict prevention, conflict and post-conflict situations, articulating States Parties' obligations beyond the Security Council.

Despite this progress, for more than a decade we have seen a pattern of certain member states trying to roll back women's rights across the UN system. While this is most obvious at forums such as the Commission on the Status of Women, it has also affected the Security Council.

Antonio Guterres's appointment as UN Secretary General followed She4SG, a campaign calling for a woman to fill the role. Guterres made a concerted effort to increase female leadership within the UN system, achieving positive results.

But women remain excluded from peace processes. More women and girls than ever are affected by conflict. Reports of conflict-related sexual violence, including those verified by the UN, are increasing.

Today, the body of evidence supporting the relationship between gender and security is huge. Not only do we know that women's participation in peace processes makes them more enduring; we know that responding to women's security concerns ensures better security outcomes. We know that the way a nation treats its women is the best predictor of its willingness to go to war, and that the higher the level of violence against women, the more likely a country will be to break international norms and treaties during wartime.

In many ways, we have come a long way since 2000. For example, 112 countries now have national action plans to help them implement the WPS resolutions. However, many of the problems identified in the Global Study on the Implementation of UNSCR 1325 remain. Most national action plans are unfunded, and women-led organisations in countries affected by conflict struggle for even meagre supports.

Despite global pacts to localise humanitarian and development programming, organisations working on women's rights in the world's most conflict affected areas—including Afghanistan, South Sudan, Yemen, Gaza and the Democratic Republic of the Congo—are crying out for the most basic supports.

The Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund was developed to provide readily accessible funds to small organisations working directly on WPS issues. But it's largely failing: its bureaucracy prevents timely release of funds; its structure leads to insufficient responses; and its governance requirements are unrealistic in the oppressive environments in which many women's rights defenders operate.

Globally, the ongoing failure to invest in aid and development continues to threaten peace and security. In Britain, cuts to aid were justified as enabling increased defence spending. Ideally, Australia would spend 1 percent of its budget on aid. But at the last budget, aid spending fell from 0.68 percent to 0.65 percent.

Especially as uncertainty grows around the United States' international role, democracies must support the rules-based order and provide the funds women's groups need to advance gender equality in their own communities.

Meanwhile, impunity remains for conflict-related sexual violence, even when this violence is perpetrated by groups seemingly despised worldwide, such as Islamic State. Of the tens of thousands of foreign fighters that travelled to Syria and Iraq, only two have been prosecuted for sexual violence, war crimes, crimes against humanity or genocide perpetrated against Yazidi women and girls. These prosecutions occurred in Germany and France.

Australia's own National Action Plan has remained woefully under-implemented. The plan contains two outcomes related to justice for conflict related sexual violence. Despite this, and despite thousands of Yazidis calling Australia home, there has been no accountability or justice for survivors of Australian perpetrators, even in the face of parliamentary calls for investigations and prosecutions.

The plan's implementation report was delayed several times and lacked any substantive reporting on the qualitative outcomes of government efforts. The Department of Home Affairs is missing in action despite having significant responsibilities for displaced women, including women's rights defenders.

WPS has certainly progressed since October 2000. We have seen considerable talk, but the world's women need more action. Countries, including Australia, need to do far more to stop the backsliding on the WPS agenda.

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Taking stock of the WPS agenda

Jacqui True

Image: UN Women via Flickr

Women, Peace and Security (WPS) is at a critical juncture, facing significant challenges to its relevance. Every major anniversary of the WPS agenda has renewed attention to the agenda in both research and policy circles. Now, as we approach the agenda's 25th anniversary, we should double down rather than step away from WPS commitments and issues.

A rise in violent conflict is undermining peace and security. Female participation in these conflicts has become more complex, with women now increasingly filling combat and political roles. Today, women are more unsafe than at any point since 2000, when United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 was passed. According to the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security's 2023-24 WPS Index, 600 million women, or 15 percent of women globally, live close to a conflict zone.

Rising extremism and democratic backsliding are fuelling gender backlash. Violent extremist groups and militarist, authoritarian regimes target women's bodies and freedoms. These actors aim to control societies from the household up, forging an alternative international order based on patriarchal, strongman leadership.

To assess the momentum of WPS and look to the agenda's future, it is worth revisiting the findings of a study on its international diffusion, conducted a decade ago to mark the agenda's 15th anniversary. In 2004, the UN Secretary-General called for states to adopt WPS action plans (NAPs) to implement the terms of UNSCR 1325. By 2015, 55 countries and four regional organisations had done so.

According to the study, NAPs were adopted equally in the Global North and South, and in conflict-affected and non-conflict countries. Democracies were more likely to adopt, suggesting that women have a greater capacity to advocate for peace and security in democratic states.

States with unreserved commitments to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women were more likely to adopt a NAP, reflecting the alignment of WPS with other gender-equality norms. Members of regional organisations with WPS plans were also more likely to adopt NAPs, indicating the role of peers and their demonstration effect. Adoption rose around anniversaries, revealing the importance of global review and focusing events.

Today, we see similar patterns in global politics and the uptake of WPS. Conflict-affected countries and women continue to draw on the normative principles and practical guidance of WPS even as they face war and insecurity. Far from considering WPS irrelevant, Ukraine has revised and adopted its second NAP during the conflict on its territory. This commitment to WPS is considered vital to Ukraine's democratic governance and the country's alignment with international norms against Russia's defiance of them. It signals the importance of women's participation in the Ukrainian armed forces and national defence, and the country's determination to prevent and prosecute conflict-related sexual violence.

The withdrawal of Western forces from Afghanistan in August 2021 allowed the Taliban's forceful takeover of the country. These events were preceded by failed peace talks that barely involved women. But rather than submitting to the Taliban, Afghan women have protested against the brutal regime. To defend women's security and fundamental rights, they have founded a transnational network of advocates, states and diaspora calling for international recognition of gender apartheid as a crime against humanity among other actions.

Closer to Australia, in 2022, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations developed a regional plan of action on WPS to implement and coordinate the agenda across ASEAN member states. Since then, more countries in the region, notably Vietnam and Cambodia, have adopted WPS plans, continuing a pattern of state uptake in response to regional uptake. WPS perspectives and expertise are being integrated into conflict prevention and disaster

preparedness initiatives, demonstrating that WPS is a relevant agenda outside of overt conflict.

While the United States has backtracked on its WPS commitments by cancelling its WPS program and closing its Global Office on Women's Issues, the WPS agenda does not depend on its underwriting. WPS has been carried forward by many states and organisations seeking to address the gender-specific effects of conflict on women and girls, promote female participation in security and support women's roles in peace processes. The WPS consensus holds, as demonstrated by the 108 states with NAPs in 2025. Its agenda has considerable state agreement, if not the action and outcome of inclusive peace that we desire.

With conflict rather than peace predominating worldwide, there should be greater focus on documenting and responding to the gendered impacts of conflict, such as the use of conflict-related sexual violence against civilians. Researchers have drawn attention to visibly male-dominated peace processes by monitoring the inclusion of women signatories and provisions on the protection of women's human rights and gender equality in peace accords. This data has influenced processes in Colombia, the Philippines and Nepal, for example. Future WPS analysts, advocates and policymakers should continue to closely monitor women's participation across conflict-affected states to inform strategies to target support for peaceful change.

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The overlooked frontline of Women, Peace and Security

Raelene Lockhorst

Image: Raelene Lockhorst

In 2000, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 and established the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. This formally recognised not only the disproportionate impact of conflict on women and girls, but also the critical role women play in peacebuilding and recovery.

That same year, I began my deployment as a civilian peacekeeper at the forward operating base of Sirakatau in Bougainville—the closest team site to the Panguna mine, where tensions with the Bougainville Revolutionary Army remained high. I was the only woman, and the only civilian, in a patrol group of Australian, New Zealand, Fijian and Ni-Vanuatu military personnel. Living in an abandoned supermarket and needing airdrops for supplies, it was as remote and austere as deployments get.

During the decade-long Bougainville conflict, the destruction of hospitals and clinics, collapse of medical supply chains, water contamination from Panguna mine tailings, and mass displacement severely eroded access to maternal healthcare. Pregnant women were often forced to give birth without skilled assistance, increasing the risk of miscarriage, stillbirth and maternal mortality. These conditions highlighted the acute vulnerability of women and newborns during and after conflict and underscored the importance of safeguarding maternal health as a cornerstone of community survival and long-term peacebuilding.

A few weeks into the deployment, our patrol was called to assist a young woman experiencing labour complications in a nearby village. With no sealed roads or local transport, the villagers relied on us to take her to the nearest clinic. But by the time we arrived, it was too late. With only a young army medic (who was tragically killed in Afghanistan 11 years later), our patrol commander and remote guidance from doctors over the radio, we attempted a breech birth delivery. The medics and I performed an episiotomy and delivered the baby—tragically stillborn. As the only female and the closest in age to the mother, I tended to her wound on the way to the local midwife.

I can only hope that, in some small way, my presence softened the trauma of such a vulnerable moment being managed by foreign male soldiers. But the experience reinforced a broader truth: women's participation in peacekeeping is not just a matter of principle, but of necessity. It also underscored the indispensable role of humanitarian and health workers—those who should have been there in the first place—whose absence left a frontline patrol improvising maternal care.

That lesson resonates well beyond Bougainville. From Ukraine to Gaza, Haiti and Sudan, wars today are being waged on the very systems designed to protect civilians. Health workers, hospitals and ambulances are being targeted in horrifying numbers. According to the UN Population Fund, attacks against health facilities doubled between 2023 and 2024, with more than 900 health workers killed last year alone. Humanitarian aid workers were also killed in record numbers in 2024, and this grim figure is already being surpassed in 2025. Miscarriages, premature births and newborn deaths are rising sharply as health systems collapse.

Despite these realities, the WPS agenda has too often been interpreted narrowly, focusing on women in military or police roles. Female humanitarian aid workers, both local and international, remain largely invisible in WPS action plans, even though their work is indispensable to stabilisation. They mediate disputes, deliver essential services, build trust with communities and keep health systems alive under fire. They face the same risks as uniformed personnel—ambushes, violence, intimidation—without the same recognition, protection or voice in decision-making.

Australia knows this reality well. Since the late 1990s, we have been deeply involved in peacekeeping missions globally and regionally, from East Timor and Solomon Islands to Bougainville. On the ground, the WPS agenda felt less like a bold new idea and more like a belated recognition of what was already happening: women were the backbone of reconciliation and recovery. They were peacebuilders long before the UN had the words to describe them.

Twenty-five years on, the WPS agenda must evolve again. Conflict today is not confined to conventional wars. Climate shocks, pandemics, cyber disruption and displacement are destabilising communities and undermining security. Women are again on the frontlines—from Pacific disaster resilience efforts to humanitarian corridors in across the world.

For Australia, the opportunity is clear. With our history of peacekeeping and strong aid presence in the Indo-Pacific, we can lead by embedding WPS principles across defence, diplomacy and development. That means recognising that peacekeeping, peacebuilding and humanitarian responses are part of the same continuum. And it means ensuring that the women who sustain resilience in their communities— whether in uniform, in non-government organisations, or in aid agencies—are decision-makers, not just participants.

As we mark the 25th anniversary of Resolution 1325, it is time to broaden our lens. Maternal health and the role of female humanitarian workers are not peripheral issues; they are central to peace and security and to future generations.

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Wired for harm: how tech-facilitated abuse silences women and undermines peace

Julie Inman Grant

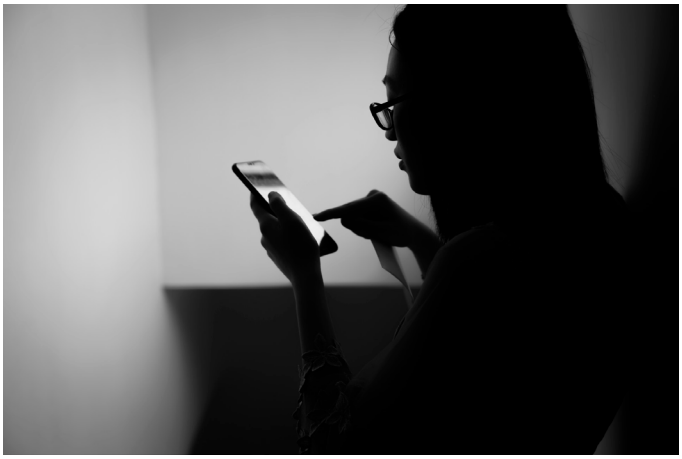

Image: Unsplash

The struggle for influence and the right to be heard has often been a dangerous and fraught one for women. But the strategies to silence us are getting darker and more sophisticated. Women in 2025, wherever they live, must contend with a growing number of digital threats in their fight to be meaningfully represented in all spheres, including humanitarian and peacekeeping operations.

As Australia's independent regulator for online safety, eSafety is committed to working with regional partners to build safer digital environments, particularly for women in public-facing roles. Through capacity-building initiatives and targeted training, we're helping journalists, politicians and human rights advocates across the Indo-Pacific respond to technology-facilitated abuse. But the personal toll of this abuse is escalating. Increasingly, women are questioning the price of participation—and whether they want their daughters to inherit the same burden.

As we mark the anniversary of landmark United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325—the founding document of the Women, Peace and Security agenda—and look to what's next, we must accept that the digital online environment is inextricably shaping the dynamics, sentiment and politics of almost all offline interactions. We must also confront the reality that women are in the direct line of digital fire when they advocate for greater protections for women, children and the vulnerable—because they are women.

Women's participation is essential for sustainable peace solutions. But if we want more women to be architects of global peace and security, we need to confront the tide of malicious online activity seeking to drown out their voices and jeopardise peace and healing.

The imperative for Safety by Design

While technology-facilitated gender-based violence takes many forms, themes tend to oscillate around the sexualisation of women. This includes threats of rape; assertions that women are inferior; and an obsession with appearance, fertility and traditional family roles. Tactics can range from cyberattacks and rape threats to stalking, exposing personal information (doxing), and image-based abuse. Disinformation and conspiracy theories thrive in unstable environments and fill online information vacuums, fostering mistrust. The cumulative intent is painfully clear: to intimidate women back into the shadows, off the frontlines and out of public life.

One of the fastest-growing harms we're seeing is explicit and sexualised deepfakes, which almost always feature women and girls. We predicted this threat in our 2020 issues paper and, five years later, reports of the issue from investigators in our image-based scheme are increasingly common. Governments around the world are beginning to address this gendered harm. The United States' *Take It Down Act*, for example, 'criminalises the nonconsensual publication of intimate images', including deepfakes, and requires platforms to remove such images. While these global actions are heartening, the tech sector itself must do more.

An obvious starting point for understanding online gender-based violence is to examine the DNA of the industry itself. It was principally established, and remains largely dominated, by men. While there's no doubt that many people in the industry are motivated to harness tech for good, this gender gap may be blinding companies to how humans could exploit their designs. In short, there's simply no lived experience reflected in the engineering. And when you zoom out, it's facilitating an industry-wide myopia to how technology is used as a vector for violence.

The language of hate, misogyny and violence can be coded and nuanced, particularly in conflict zones. Context matters. Seemingly imperceptible cultural and linguistic signals matter. With the evisceration of the industry's trust

and safety teams worldwide, and the roll-back of policies aimed at addressing harmful content, these companies have lost valuable local knowledge to expertly identify and respond to serious harms playing out on their platforms.

Since 2018, we've been advocating for industry to apply our Safety by Design principles across the system and product lifecycle to assess these risks and help prevent some of the most egregious harms. But our calls are more often answered with lip service than meaningful measures to remediate harm. In fact, we've seen a regression in safety protections, especially over the past two years.

The chilling feedback loop: when abuse is magnified by generative AI

Since ChatGPT burst onto the scene in 2022—reaching 1 million users in just five days—a wave of open-source tools has followed, enabling anyone to generate not just text but hyper-realistic images and videos at the click of a button. These apps are cheap and no longer require extensive technical expertise, with few guardrails preventing weaponisation. Beyond the chaos and misinformation this tech can sow during humanitarian operations, there are huge implications for free and fair elections and the vitality of democracy.

The opacity of generative AI development and deployment is also deeply problematic, with little known about the complex processes that govern it. This is especially true for large language models. We have virtually no information about how the data inputs are weighted and balanced, raising important questions about how they could reinforce outdated or narrow gender norms.

As the pace of generative-AI adoption accelerates, it's more important than ever for companies to embed Safety by Design principles, creating platforms equipped with robust, survivor-centric reporting tools.

Resetting the course of online history

Addressing technology-facilitated gender-based violence is central to ensuring women's full and equal participation in all sectors and spheres. The next 25 years must not simply be about building on the legacy of Security Council Resolution 1325; they must be about scaling it for a digital age to bolster, rather than hinder, humanitarian and peace-building efforts. The range of online harms canvassed here can significantly undermine missions by eroding trust, inflaming tensions, and disrupting coordinated action.

Australia is paving the way in mitigating this range of digital harms through proportionate legislation. Using our powers under the *Online Safety Act*, eSafety is holding industry to account and taking on some of its biggest players. But we can't do this alone.

As we look to 2050, partnerships such as the Global Online Safety Regulators Network (of which eSafety is a founding member) and the Global Partnership for Action on Gender-based Online Harassment and Abuse have the potential to be a powerful defender of human rights online, starting with ensuring personal safety in the digital world. But we need to swell our ranks with even more human rights-respecting regulators, unafraid to take on a powerful tech sector that is more focused on profits than safety and well-being.

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ASEAN needs a regional approach to tech-facilitated gender-based violence

Alice Wai

Image: UN Women Asia and the Pacific

This year marks the 25th anniversary of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, which first formally recognised women's indispensable role in peace and security. Since the resolution's passing, the threats that women face have evolved. Exclusion now has a digital frontline, where online abuse and tech-facilitated gender-based violence silence women's voices and curb their civic, political and social participation.

The rise of tech-facilitated gender-based violence across Southeast Asia highlights a systemic failure as legislation is unable to address online abuse, and platforms profit from it. To address this, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations must move beyond rhetorical digital strategies and adopt binding safeguards that hold platforms accountable, empower civil society to monitor harm, and align legal reforms with UN human rights standards.

It has been more than a year since 30-year-old Malaysian social media influencer Rajeswary Appahu, known online as 'Esha', committed suicide following online harassment. Five days before her death, Esha lodged a police report over online threats she had received, including during live sessions on TikTok. The case ended with two offenders pleading guilty, with one offender receiving a token fine of 100 ringgit (about A$35). Public pressure led Malaysia to pass new cyberbullying laws, introducing penalties of up to 10 years in jail.

In Myanmar, women face escalating online harassment as intimate images are sold and circulated on messaging app Telegram. This helps facilitate blackmail and threats, often causing victims to withdraw from public life. This hidden market—fuelled by vengeful ex-partners, spy cameras and hacked data—profits by exposing women while protecting perpetrators, with celebrities and influencers regularly targeted. Telegram, which remains unrestricted in the country, has also been weaponised by the junta and its supporters. These actors use the platform for doxxing, threats and intimidation, especially towards women.

Facebook, already condemned for enabling violence against the Rohingya population in Myanmar's Rakhine State, has allowed threats, misogynist rhetoric and incitement to spread on its platform. Survivors report that these attacks erode personal safety and mental health while silencing women's political participation, demonstrating how the platform amplifies and normalises gendered abuse.

These cases are not isolated. They are symptoms of a systemic failure to address online harms. As Julie Inman Grant has written, 'The next 25 years must not simply be about building on the legacy of Security Council Resolution 1325; they must be about scaling it for a digital age to bolster, rather than hinder, humanitarian and peace-building efforts.' Some progress is underway across Southeast Asia, but efforts remain uneven, with policy responses varying widely in scope, enforcement and political will.

In its first move against a global platform, Malaysian authorities in June secured a court order against Telegram to halt the spread of harmful content. Singapore is also advancing its online safety agenda: its 2023 Code of Practice for Online Safety imposes obligations on designated social media services and requires annual reporting. The forthcoming Online Safety Commission, to be launched in 2026, is intended to allow victims to request platform takedowns and obtain perpetrators' information under new legislation.

ASEAN must now translate national progress into binding regional standards. The ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025 gestures toward inclusion but offers little beyond rhetoric. While the Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of Violence Against Women recognises technology-enabled abuse, it lacks concrete measures or accountability mechanisms. In 2024, ASEAN held a UN-supported consultation in Bangkok, with the aim of designing a

regional campaign against online gender-based violence. This consultation was a start, but outcomes have yet to follow.

To tackle tech-facilitated gender-based violence across Southeast Asia, governments should use UN human rights mechanisms to adapt legal frameworks for stronger protections. Local civil society organisations should document abuse and raise public awareness, while tech companies should proactively safeguard users by prioritising online safety and preventing the monetisation of abuse. Media outlets should avoid amplifying misogynistic narratives, instead highlighting women's voices and initiatives that challenge patriarchal norms.

This will involve dedicating more resources to monitoring content in Southeast Asian languages, in close consultation with women's rights organisations and survivors who understand evolving forms of abuse in their local contexts. It would also require platforms to make disaggregated data accessible to affected communities across the region, enabling them to track patterns of tech-facilitated gender-based violence and assess the effectiveness of platform countermeasures in collaboration with civil society. Meaningful progress is possible, even in constrained environments, if ASEAN states and partners commit to coordinated action.

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Traditional gender ideals undermine military inclusion efforts

Amy Brosnan

Image: New Zealand Defence Force

As warfare evolves, the perpetuation of traditional military masculinity could limit the effectiveness of combat forces. While progress has been made to include women in combat roles, narrow concepts of what it means to be a soldier continue to run deeply in some areas. The cultural exclusion of women (and men) who don't fit into this box can supersede formal inclusion efforts. To pursue true inclusion, we must understand and interrogate these traditional gender ideals.

In the same year that the United Nations Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), the New Zealand government rescinded its policy that prohibited women from enlisting into combat roles of the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF). There is no evidence to suggest that these two decisions, both made in 2000, were related. But 25 years on, it is time to consider how connecting them could further improve the participation of more women in combat roles.

When the combat exclusion policy was being debated in 1990 during a government review lead by Mai Chen, the NZDF defined combat as 'the act of killing or capturing along with the associated risk of being killed or captured.' Based on this definition, women were banned from sea service and aircrew positions. The Brigade Headquarters demarcated the danger zone for ground forces, and women were prohibited from trades operating forward of this line.

Before 2000, it was accepted that women's military service should be confined to non-combat roles. Women were regarded as homemakers within New Zealand society, not life-takers. Indeed, uniformed women had not been taught basic military skills, such as firing a rifle, until the late 1970s. In 1990, the NZDF voiced concerns that society was not ready to see women being brought home in body bags, and the force held significant anxiety about the detrimental impact of women on combat effectiveness. Although it was readily accepted that men could and should endure the hardships of combat, the dominant viewpoint was that women could not and should not.

Importantly, restrictions were not only designed to keep women safe from being killed, but also to keep them from killing. Such societal resistance to women engaging in acts of violence underscores the gendered nature of war itself. However, by 2000, the NZDF had to concede that there was no valid reason for delineating combat zones. The reality of the modern battlefield was that no specific position offered protection from killing or being killed.

It is argued that Western countries have traditionally held militarised conceptions of citizenship, including beliefs that citizenship could be classified based on who is excluded from military service. Historically, this has included not only women, but also the disabled and, in some societies, ethnic and sexual minorities. In New Zealand, exclusion from combat once extended to the indigenous Māori population as well as members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Rescinding the combat exclusion policy was, therefore, a significant milestone for women's rights in New Zealand. And although the NZDF had initially opposed the change, after 2000 it quickly recognised that diversity—in all its forms—enabled operational success. Fast-forward to 2020, and NZDF's senior leadership is wanting to understand how to recruit even more women into combat roles.

However, while women's participation in combat has challenged deeply entrenched norms, the gendered nature of the NZDF remains largely intact. We see the perpetuation of gendered divisions of labour that reflect socially accepted gender roles. The combat soldier in particular remains rooted in traditional ideals of masculinity. This is despite NZDF strategy documents calling for traits such as flexibility, agility of thought, negotiation skills and compassion—traits not typically associated with this image, and in fact more traditionally associated with perceived femininity.

Removing a policy that excluded half of New Zealand's population from combat offered the NZDF a key for transformation, but evidence shows that the door has not yet been unlocked. To succeed within combat roles, women (and men) must fit within a very narrowly defined set of masculine norms. As a result, informal processes of exclusion continue to act in defiance of formal policy change.

Gendered ideals continue to constrain and diminish not only women's participation in combat, but the participation of anyone who does not conform to a heterosexual and binary concept of male identity. In short, the ideal typification of the combat soldier has not evolved in concert with the evolution of society and warfare. Instead, emphasis remains on lethality and strength over empathy and thinking skills.

It is here that the intersection with UNSCR1325 becomes pivotal, as it brings to attention traditional understandings of masculinity and femininity. More specifically, it brings to attention how and where certain traits are expected to be performed—and by whom. The WPS agenda predominantly focuses on women and girls, and rightly so due to the disproportionate effects they face amid conflict and crisis. However, paying attention to men and the performance of masculinity is a critical piece of the exclusionary puzzle.

The idealised form of military masculinity holds its power not through force, but because it is accepted. This means that we can reimagine the combat soldier. Changes in warfare, such as the emergence of hybrid warfare, make this reimagining even more important. Until we can make this change, the soldier best suited to perform in modern warfare contexts will remain stifled—if not excluded altogether—by a reliance on simplistic definitions of combat and outdated understandings of gender.

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WPS can be a competitive edge for Defence

Angeline Lewis

Image: Department of Defence

Understanding and applying United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 as a theory of human security offers Australia an edge in its regional engagement. This is particularly so in an era of competition, and a region challenged, as we are, by gender-based violence and the need for economic growth. Leveraging the connection between women's participation and stability, and longer term with rights-based economic development, is a theme implicit in the 2024 National Defence Strategy, but one that should be called out explicitly for best success.

This broader theoretical context of UNSCR1325—the resolution that established the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda—is often overlooked.

The resolution's origins in a century of activism by a feminist-inspired peace movement have been recognised. It also has clear legal antecedents. These notably include the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women 1979, which calls for women's equal participation in policy development and national representation (articles 7-8), declaring that 'the full and complete development of a country, the welfare of the world and the cause of peace require the maximum participation of women on equal terms with men in all fields.'

Consistent with this legal background, the lynchpin of the WPS agenda for the Security Council is not gender equality for its own sake, but international stability: there is a clear, empirically backed connection between women's involvement in the conflict spectrum, and greater security. In fact, it is only this connection that brings UNSCR1325 within the Security Council's jurisdiction at all.

A 2018 study of 130 peace agreements signed since 1990, for example, found a 'robust correlation' between agreements signed by at least one woman—of which there were 13—and the durability of the peace settlement. Agreements with female signatories had significantly more provisions dealing with political reform, not specific to gender, and higher rates of implementation of provisions over 10 years.

Second, the resolution's development alongside the concept of human security gives it great relevance to Australia's defence planning. This is because 'human security' reconfigures 'security' within a broader, non-traditional framework. This is centrally important to Pacific nations facing non-traditional threats—including climate change—and therefore to the 2024 National Defence Strategy (NDS) given the importance it places on the Pacific family within Australia's approach.

Throughout the 1990s, the emerging UN concept of human security placed the individual and individual human rights at the centre of security discourse and recognised that security threats expanded beyond armed conflict. An early expression of this came in 1995, with the Commission of Global Governance's declaration that 'Global security must be broadened from its traditional focus on the security of states to the security of people and the planet.'

The UN General Assembly also drew a connection between rights, development and security in its development goals and its 2000 Millenium Declaration. The 2005 Secretary-General's report took the idea further, describing a human security triangle sided by development (freedom from want), security (freedom from fear) and human rights (freedom to live in dignity). Similar connections have been drawn in international legal theory between the stability offered by rights-based rule of law systems and the realisation of economic development. This thinking was essential context to the passage of UNSCR1325 in 2000, as well as the subsequent body of resolutions that have guided the UN's approach to WPS.

Understanding UNSCR1325 as a security concept, and a path to rights-based economic development, helps situate it as an effective part of Australia's defence strategy.

Australia's 2024 NDS focuses on 'strategic competition,' particularly in the Pacific and particularly with reference to competition for influence and access. To this end, the strategy specifically names coercive and grey-zone tactics. However, the strategy does not set out any clear concept of Australia's competitive offering in response to this coercion, instead focusing on the Australian Defence Force's deterrence tasking, capability acquisition and references to respect for sovereignty.

A human security model, acknowledging and addressing risks across whole populations, could be this competitive offering. Such a model is implicit in the NDS's linking of security and economic prosperity. The challenge now is to make it explicit and enable Defence to develop tasking and prioritisation that reflects the security objectives of WPS.

In the immediate future, such tasking would be diplomatic and subtle, lacking the grandeur of large-scale capability projects. It would instead focus on engagement, capacity-building and consolidating population security approaches across the blue Pacific. This could be a major contribution to building partnerships and shared stability.

In this capacity, the WPS agenda contributes directly to the ADF's directed requirement to protect Australia's economic connections and, by implication, regional economic development. It can greatly support the force's mission to collaborate with partners on collective security in the Indo-Pacific and contribute to the maintenance of the rules-based global order.

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Leading without a map: The NZDF's journey in WPS implementation

Laura Cranston

Image: New Zealand Defence Force

When I stepped into the role of director for Women, Peace and Security (WPS) at the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF), I knew the terrain would be complex. The National Action Plan had lapsed in 2019. There was no roadmap, no resourcing and no system, just a legacy of patchwork initiatives driven by passionate predecessors.

There was no approved implementation plan, no dedicated funding and only one full-time equivalent assigned to the work. Much of the NZDF's gender-related efforts were housed under diversity and inclusion, which led to an internal focus on participation rather than the strategic and operational goals of WPS. Without a clear strategy and sustained investment, WPS risked remaining an aspiration rather than becoming a practical reality.

As a trained military planner, I knew the first step was to assess the situation and define the vital start state. I attended an NZDF training course for gender focal points (GFP)—personnel tasked with providing gendered perspectives. Despite prior exposure to UN Security Council Resolution 1325, I found myself perplexed. It was one of the most interesting courses I'd ever done, but at this point I still wasn't sure what a GFP was supposed to do, let alone how to implement the concept NZDF-wide.

The epiphany came through three key experiences: attending the Nordic Centre's Gender Advisor Course; engaging with academics such as Katherine Wright at the NATO Gender Conference; and connecting with Australian Defence Force counterparts at the Gender Peace and Security Directorate. These encounters helped crystallise the problem: the NZDF lacked a system

that was accountable, measurable and embedded in change management.

So, I developed a five-year implementation plan based on the ADF's model. I incorporated the work of my predecessors, added my own insights and focused on operational effectiveness. Rather than wait for approval, I implemented it—seeking forgiveness rather than permission. Fortunately, my senior leaders were quietly supportive.

To make change real, I focused on integrating gender perspectives into the NZDF's training system, starting with the army. It was the most complex component, but also the one I understood best. In a landmark moment, this was approved by the then land component commander, Major General Hugh McAslan.

I developed a training concept that embedded gender considerations at every level. Soldiers received introductory briefs, junior personnel learned practical application with gender in mind, and senior personnel learned how to include gender integration in the planning process. We produced guides on incorporating gender in non-combatant evacuation operations, cordon-and-search missions, and deploying GFPs and gender advisors effectively. Military planners often take a task-focused approach—our challenge was to encourage them to consider the human terrain.

Almost fortuitously, the maritime component commander, Commodore Garin Golding, returned from Australia inspired by their progress. He appointed a gender advisor and directed that all ships have GFPs aboard. These were positive steps, but I remained cautious. Having GFPs and enabling them to act are very different things. We had plenty of GFPs, but their impact was unclear. So we created a toolkit: a living document that evolved with our understanding of the role and its practical application.

Yet, even where GFPs were embedded, I was still being called upon to do the work myself. I wanted to understand why. A quick survey revealed that time was the biggest constraint: when pressed, people defaulted to their core expertise and gender fell off the radar.

To address this, we gave GFPs key tasks, embedded responsibilities into their performance development reviews and educated supervisors on the value of the role.

We aligned the GFP model with leadership development frameworks—particularly the concept of conscious competence, which refers to the stage in learning where individuals understand what they need to do and can apply it, but it still requires deliberate effort.

This journey hasn't been without its challenges. At times, my commitment to integrating gender perspectives was met with resistance. Some colleagues felt other priorities should take precedence, and there were moments where the value of the work was questioned or misunderstood. In one instance, I was advised not to expect revolutionary change, reflecting the reality that cultural shifts take time, especially in environments where traditional perspectives are deeply embedded. While I understood the caution, it was also a reminder of how entrenched norms can quietly undermine progress.

Leadership means making space for perspectives that have long been excluded. It requires the courage to challenge norms, the humility to listen and the persistence to keep going when the path isn't clear. Operational effectiveness demands that we understand the human terrain—not just the mission, but the people. We must do the right thing by those we are there to support.

Moving on from this role was one of the hardest transitions I've ever made, but a necessary one. It was an essential shift to leave room for growth, innovation and fresh inspiration. I know I've laid the foundation, and I do so with deep gratitude to those who walked alongside me: Addie Brownlie, Paul Corke and Emma Songivalu. Their support, insight and courage helped shape this journey, and will continue to shape what comes next.

The next incumbent has, hopefully, inherited more than good intentions—they deserve a system that works and a culture that values what they bring.

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Women, Peace and Security is more than a side quest

Emily Cooper

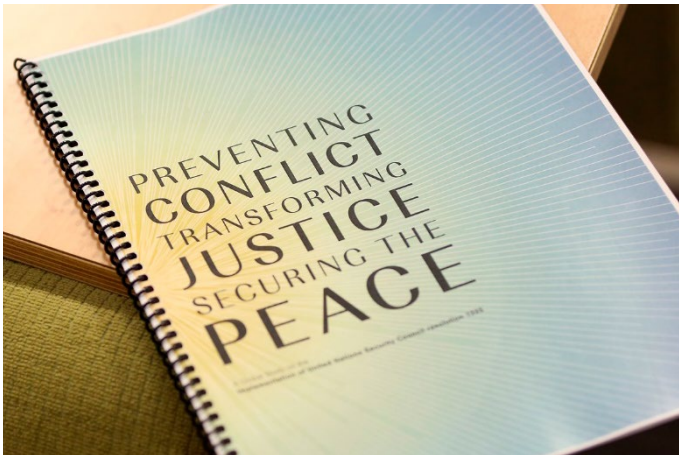

Image: UN Women via Flickr

Somewhere between the fifth email about rescheduled meetings and the third cup of coffee, another email arrives. It's about Women, Peace and Security (WPS).

A few people skim it. One or two frown: '*Didn't we already do DEI training last month?*' The rest delete it or file it, unread, under 'woke stuff' and move on.

And just like that, a framework designed to reduce civilian harm, improve operational effectiveness and support inclusive peacebuilding is reduced to a misunderstood human resources initiative.

It's not malicious. It's not even deliberate. But it's a problem, because when we conflate WPS with Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI), we mislabel and sideline it. In doing so, we quietly remove a strategic capability from our national security arsenal.

WPS and DEI may share some of the same vocabulary, such as 'inclusion', 'participation' or 'equity', but they are very different concepts.

WPS is a suite of commitments grounded in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and subsequent resolutions. It was forged from battlefield experience and post-conflict failures. It asks militaries and governments to consider how gender shapes security, who participates in conflict, who is most affected, who gets excluded from peace processes and who is missing from the decision-making table. In short, WPS is about improving the quality and sustainability of peace and security operations.

DEI, on the other hand, is about workforce demographics and institutional culture. It's internal and focuses on who gets hired, promoted, mentored or sidelined. Unfortunately, DEI is often treated as a side quest: cursory, cosmetic and occasionally politicised. But at its core, it's about making institutions smarter, fairer and more resilient. Diverse teams challenge assumptions, inclusive cultures retain talent, and equitable systems ensure we're not overlooking capability just because it doesn't look like what we're used to. In national security contexts, that matters, not because it's morally fair (although fairness is hardly a vice) but because homogeneity can be a liability. DEI, when done well, is about removing internal friction so that institutions can perform better.

The confusion usually starts innocently enough. A gender advisor is placed under the People and Culture branch. A WPS reference is dropped into the same slide deck as internal mentoring programs and inclusive language guides. Before long, WPS is bundled in with leadership pipelines, flexible work policies and International Women's Day cupcakes. And just like that, a strategic framework intended to shape our approach to armed conflict is reclassified as a staff wellbeing initiative.

This mislabelling wouldn't be such a problem if it didn't come with consequences, but it does. When WPS is seen as DEI, it is treated as a distraction. Soft. Political. The sort of thing you can shelve during periods of high operational tempo or quietly defund when budgets tighten.

That's when the blind spots emerge: intelligence misses the early warning signs of conflict because it wasn't looking at gendered indicators; peace processes fail because half the population was excluded from the table; or a deployed force undermines its own legitimacy through sexual exploitation and abuse, and no one in the chain of command recognises the strategic fallout until it's too late.

These aren't abstract risks. They are known failure points. WPS exists precisely because we've seen what happens when gender is ignored in the planning phase: short-term tactical success followed by long-term instability, resentment and mission fatigue. In other words, when WPS is conflated with DEI, it's not feelings that get hurt; it's operations.

One of the great misconceptions about WPS is that it's about being nice. That it's an ethical add-on, the policy

equivalent of a fruit platter at a working lunch: worthy, but not exactly mission-critical. But that couldn't be further from the truth.

WPS isn't about niceness. It's about power: who holds it, who's targeted by it, and who is left unprotected when it fails. It involves mapping threats more accurately, understanding populations more deeply and designing operations that don't unravel at the first contact with lived reality. These are strategic issues, and recognising them isn't political correctness; it's situational awareness.

WPS is about sustainable peace and enhanced operational decision-making, while DEI is about institutional fairness. You need both, but they are not interchangeable. Collapsing WPS into DEI is sometimes a convenient shortcut for those who find both concepts uncomfortable. The word 'woke' quietly creeps in, and suddenly decades of operational lessons can be dismissed without a second thought. But when we dismiss WPS on these grounds, we don't just throw out the map; we throw out the compass, the GPS and the situational report, blinding our troops on the ground.

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A Pacific reflection on Women, Peace and Security

Pua Hunter

Image: UN Women Pacific via Flickr

This year marks 25 years since the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), a global commitment to elevate women's voices in peacebuilding, conflict prevention and recovery. For the Pacific, this anniversary is a moment to reflect, recalibrate and reclaim the promise of UNSCR1325 through our own vessel—our *vaka*—guided by oceanic wisdom, Indigenous knowledge systems and the enduring strength of our women.

In our Blue Pacific continent, peace and security are not defined by the absence of war alone. They are shaped by the tides of looming climate displacement, the legacy of colonisation, the extractive pressures on our lands and oceans, and the rise of digital threats. For Pacific women, security is relational, anchored in land, language, kinship and culture. It is about safeguarding the sacred space between people and place.

Though formal armed conflict may be rare, Pacific women have long stood at the frontlines as active agents of peace. The matriarchs of Bougainville brokered ceasefires, mediated tribal disputes and land conflicts, and organised food distribution and prayer vigils during blockades. The women of Solomon Islands nurtured reconciliation by creating safe spaces for dialogue and healing, using church networks and traditional customs to mediate and restore harmony. Mothers in Cook Islands are pillars of strength in times of crisis, mobilising through church groups, *vaka* committees (district communities) and women's councils to ensure families had food, elders were cared for and cultural protocols were upheld despite restrictions.

Our women have always been peacebuilders. Yet their stories remain untold, their leadership underfunded and their wisdom too often sidelined in formal decision-making spaces.

Today, Pacific women are also asserting leadership in cyberspace. Across the region, they are defending digital sovereignty, countering cyber violence and shaping inclusive cyber norms. Women are emerging as guardians of digital peace as the region faces growing threats of misinformation, data exploitation and online abuse. Their work—whether through grassroots information-communication technology initiatives, regional cyber diplomacy or digital literacy campaigns—is redefining what peacebuilding looks like in the 21st century.

Across the region, there are signs of movement. Fiji's National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against All Women and Girls (2023–2028) is a landmark step. The Pacific Islands Forum is embracing gender-responsive

peacebuilding. Civil society networks—such as Tonga Women in ICT and the Women in IT, Solomon Islands—are bridging traditional knowledge with digital innovation.

Yet the journey remains uneven. Many plans lack financing, monitoring or meaningful engagement with women at the grassroots level. External actors often dominate agenda-setting, leaving little room for local ownership. The WPS agenda is still too often siloed and disconnected from the lived realities of Pacific women, where climate justice, digital inclusion and economic empowerment are inseparable from peace.

As we mark this milestone, the Pacific must not only remember UNSCR1325; we must reimagine it. This is a time to reclaim its spirit, not as a checklist, but as a *vaka* for transformation. Let us paddle forward with purpose, guided by three priorities.

Firstly, Pacific women should lead. Efforts should invest in our local networks, honour Indigenous leadership and ensure regional and global spaces reflect our realities—not just in voice, but in vision. This includes elevating Pacific women in international security and cyberspace, where their expertise is shaping global norms from a uniquely relational and rights-based perspective.

Secondly, we should redefine security through our lens, expanding the WPS agenda to include cyber violence, climate displacement and economic precarity. Security in the Pacific is intersectional and must be understood in context: digital threats are as real as rising seas, and online safety is integral to community wellbeing.

Finally, we must match ambition with resources. Political will must be backed by flexible, long-term funding that supports locally grown WPS efforts, even those outside formal institutions. This includes resourcing Pacific-led cyber initiatives that protect women's rights and digital futures.

The 25th anniversary of UNSCR1325 is a mirror, reflecting both our progress and the work ahead. In the Pacific, peace is not merely the absence of conflict. It is the presence of justice, dignity and self-determination.

Pacific women have always been navigators, charting paths through complexity, building coalitions and sustaining communities. Now, the WPS agenda must rise to meet their leadership. As we look to the next 25 years, let us move beyond rhetoric and toward radical inclusion. Let every policy, every plan and every peace process reflect the wisdom of our women, the strength of our cultures and the vision of our region—on land, at sea and in cyberspace.

Only then will the promise of UNSCR1325 be truly realised on our terms, in our voices and across our ocean.

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Women in defence and strategy still face an uphill battle

Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan

Image: UN Women via Flickr

National security can only be achieved with the participation of all sectors—public, private and civil—and with the diverse perspectives that come when both women and men are in leadership positions. In a technological era in which social media gives more people a voice than ever before, more still needs to be done to ensure different voices are being heard.

This requires government and non-government entities to give women opportunities to voice their views. Those views should then inform the development and public messaging of security policies.

In Australia, women have broken the glass ceiling in many traditionally male-dominated security fields. Australia's past three foreign ministers and the past three secretaries of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade have all been women. In the intelligence community, women now

run both the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD) and Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS).

Despite these breakthroughs, career progression can still be an uphill challenge, including in senior defence positions and in academia, where progress has been slower and acknowledgement of women's contributions is lacking. As a woman in the field with close to 30 years of experience, I can attest to these continuing challenges.

We must avoid the trap of thinking it's enough to have women lead agencies such as ASD and ASIS. It is also necessary to promote movement and progression across the security sector, including a pipeline of diverse leaders. This will mean that, when men are appointed to leadership positions, it won't be viewed as an automatic backward step for women.

We are not there yet. Amplifying female voices, developing pathways to leadership for talented young women and maintaining retention will require a dual track approach: an internal culture that values organisational diversity; and an external stakeholder strategy in which women in national security are given public facing roles, including speaking opportunities, and are publicly cited for their work.

A higher level of representation is not the only measure of success. Women should be better represented across all fields, not just limited to fields traditionally considered softer or more feminine, such as gender balance in security—the very topic of this article. Female representation remains limited in public policy debates on hard security topics including international arms control issues, counter terrorism, and defence matters such as Russia's war on Ukraine or China's nuclear build-up.

Correcting this requires several steps, starting with increased public visibility. Governments, think tanks, academia and the media need to showcase the work being done by female experts. Recognition and appreciation of women's work in national and international security is beneficial to show girls and young women that the field is not a boys-only club.

Public endorsement can go a long way in showcasing the work of female scholars. Less visibility means less name recognition and fewer opportunities for female scholars to be invited to conferences and panel discussions. This also results in exclusion from networks that identify and reinforce expertise.

Women are also less likely to have their work cited. As I have written about previously, citations are particularly important in the academic and think tank worlds. The number of times one has been cited in essays, opinion pieces or commentaries plays an important role when looking for jobs in these fields and influences promotions within institutions.

Media outlets, which often rely on experts for comments or interviews, are not immune to this citation bias. Generally, men put themselves forward more than women to provide comments on sensitive and controversial security matters. This should be factored into mentoring responsibilities within organisations, and media outlets should be obligated to seek diverse perspectives.

At a 2013 gender gap symposium, David Lake, a well-known scholar and then president of the International Studies Association, acknowledged the gap in his own work. He recognised that we all have a tendency to go with what and whom we know, despite the internet providing access to far more resources than ever before. Lake said that with so much new work coming out, he was more likely to read a piece if he knew the researcher: 'Personal connections lead to deeper readings, which lead to more citations and, likely, more personal connections.'

As a result, men often promote each other's work, amplifying their voices and referring to each other in their publications. Even when women are well published in top-tier journals or prominent websites on security and foreign policy issues, they tend to receive far fewer citations. Writing on this gap and bias, Daniel Maliniak, Ryan Powers and Barbara Walter wrote, 'Articles authored by women are systematically less central than articles authored by men, all else equal. This is likely because (1) women tend to cite themselves less than men, and (2) men (who make up a disproportionate share of [international relations] scholars) tend to cite men more than women.'

It therefore all comes back to improving internal culture and increasing external visibility. Affecting change will take effort, regular review and a genuine desire to build better culture across government, academia, think tanks and other civil society institutions. The good news is that both culture and public messaging can be improved. This will, however, take time, consistency and persistence.

We cannot rely on change to happen naturally. Instead, we need to commit to conscious corrective measures to encourage and promote the work of female scholars. Such conscious change is not only a matter of ethics; it is in the interests of our national security as we navigate a complex international environment.

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After 25 years, backlash threatens to erode WPS breakthroughs

Jen Wittwer

Image: UN Women via Vlickr

Once a breakthrough landmark in recognising women's disproportionate experiences of conflict and their essential role in peace and security, United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) is being sidelined by hard security priorities and hostile politics.

Since its adoption in 2000, UNSCR1325 has transformed global security debates. It has embedded gender in normative and policy frameworks; expanded women's participation in conflict and peace processes; strengthened women's protection from violence; and pushed institutions to recognise peace as inseparable from equality.

Yet as we mark the resolution's 25th anniversary, its promise feels precarious. Progress is being eroded by global backlash against the human and equal rights of women, and by efforts within states and multilateral security institutions to relegate the WPS agenda to the margins. Commemoration, therefore, must not be self-congratulatory; it must be a reckoning for the future.

As UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres outlined in a sobering 2024 statement, 'Amid record levels and armed violence, progress made over decades is vanishing before our eyes.'

Women's rights are facing unprecedented backlash. Authoritarian and populist governments, religious fundamentalists and anti-feminist movements frame gender equality as a threat to traditional values or as a Western imposition of values that 'contradict' human nature. In Afghanistan, for example, four years after peace talks mostly excluded women, Taliban directives have stripped women and girls of their rights and dignity.

And in peace and security debates, women's participation is dismissed as secondary to hard military priorities, despite such participation leading to more durable peace. Indeed, according to the UN Secretary General's 2024 report on WPS, women were virtually absent from talks on ending conflicts in Ethiopia, Sudan, Yemen, Myanmar and Libya.

The backlash is also evident in multilateral arenas once seen as champions of WPS. At the UN, consensus on women's rights has fractured. In Security Council negotiations, references to sexual and reproductive health are increasingly contested, with WPS language watered down or omitted. Divisions among permanent members have paralysed progress, turning gender equality into a bargaining chip. Gender backlash does not only appear in authoritarian states such as in Russia, but also in liberal democracies such as the United States, which backtracked on its commitments this year by closing its governmental Global Office on Women's Issues and cancelling the Department of Defense's WPS program.

Within NATO, the pattern is subtler but no less damaging. WPS is often portrayed as a soft concern, overshadowed by defence imperatives. This was evident at the 2025 NATO Summit, when NATO allies pledged to allocate up to five percent of GDP to defence spending. In contrast, the summit's accompanying declaration made no mention of funding WPS efforts, despite NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept committing to integrating the WPS agenda across its three core tasks: deterrence and defence, crisis

prevention and management, and collective defence and security. Such moves betray the spirit of UNSCR1325, which was never about symbolism but about transforming security by embedding women's equality, perspectives and participation at its core.

Even when policies exist, implementation is hampered by entrenched institutional cultures. Gender advisers, who facilitate the implementation of the WPS agenda, are frequently sidelined, facing organisational and resourcing challenges and harmful workplace cultures. Institutional doctrines continue to privilege kinetic operations, treating gender perspectives as peripheral rather than integral to mission success, despite the UN and NATO calling for their member states to increase women's full, meaningful and equal participation in armed forces and military operations. These practices reflect the persistent hegemonic masculinities within security institutions that equate strength with dominance and dismiss feminist-informed approaches as irrelevant or political.

Rhetorical support for inclusion has grown based on evidence that woman's participation makes peace talks more sustainable. Despite this, material and political support has lagged far behind. These challenges extend beyond institutions. Women's grassroots peacebuilding movements—the heart of the WPS agenda—remain chronically underfunded, even as global military expenditure soars. In the past quarter-century, these gaps between promise and practice have become an increasingly common feature of WPS implementation.

Commemorating UNSCR1325 at 25 must therefore be a call to reclaim the agenda from those who would weaken or instrumentalise it, and to re-centre feminist analysis that challenges militarised security logic. We need to resist narratives that frame WPS only in terms of operational effectiveness rather than as a transformative tool to guide genuine participation, protection and prevention efforts. This involves the promotion of an effective human security approach that reconfigures security within a non-traditional framework and positions WPS as integral to protecting civilians, dismantling gendered insecurities and creating inclusive peace, rather than simply supporting military operations. The WPS agenda was never intended to soften security or 'make war safer for women'. It was designed to redefine it—to make clear that sustainable peace and security cannot be achieved through military means alone.

The 25th anniversary of UNSCR 1325 is not a celebration of mission accomplished; it is an inflection point in the face of regression. The global institutional and political backlash against women's rights is real, and the erosion of multilateral consensus is concerning. But the resolution's transformative vision endures. To honour it, states and institutions must recommit to the principle, as the Australian government affirmed in 2021, that peace and security are inseparable from gender equality. Peace depends on nothing less.

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Quiet victories: Twenty-five years of Women, Peace and Security in action

Emily Cooper

Image: UN Women via Flickr

Twenty-five years after its adoption, the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda is often assessed by its gaps: it is underfunded, under-implemented and under constant pressure to prove its worth. But beyond resolutions and rhetoric, women have been turning promises into progress. In the streets of Monrovia, the negotiating rooms of Havana, the villages of Bougainville, and far beyond, the WPS agenda has not only inspired change; it has delivered it.

Far from abstract, these successes are concrete, hard-won and often overlooked. They serve as quiet blueprints for

what's possible when political will, community leadership and gendered insight align.

Liberia: Women who ended a war

In the early 2000s, when Liberia was caught in the grip of a brutal civil war, a coalition of Christian and Muslim women came together under the banner of the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace. Wearing white t-shirts and armed only with persistence, they launched a sustained campaign of nonviolent protest, sit-ins and moral pressure. They refused to leave until the warring parties negotiated.

Their efforts helped force the peace talks that led to the end of the conflict. It was one of the clearest demonstrations in recent history of women not only participating in peace processes, but catalysing them. Not long after, Liberia elected Africa's first female head of state, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

For the WPS agenda, Liberia became a symbol, not of victimhood, but of agency. It was proof that women are not just beneficiaries of peace, but builders of it.

Colombia: Gender at the heart of peace

In 2012, the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, a guerrilla militant group, sat down to negotiate an end to Latin America's longest conflict. When these talks were announced, women's groups and civil society organisations demanded more than symbolic inclusion. Their advocacy led to the establishment of a gender sub-commission within the talks—a first for any formal peace process.

The final 2016 agreement contained more than 130 gender-related provisions, including commitments on women's participation, land restitution and protection against sexual violence. While implementation has faced challenges, the accord remains the most gender-sensitive peace agreement in history.

Colombia didn't just add women in. It redesigned the architecture of peace to reflect their realities and aspirations. And in doing so, it set a precedent others can learn from.

Bougainville: The mothers of the land

In the wake of the Bougainville civil war, it was not formal institutions but the quiet authority of women that helped broker peace. Drawing on matrilineal cultural norms and community trust, women became mediators, messengers and moral anchors during the most fragile phases of the peace process.

Their contributions were not framed by international frameworks or donor templates. They were grounded in custom, credibility and care. But they aligned perfectly with the principles of WPS: locally led, culturally embedded and strategically effective.

Today, women in Bougainville remain active in community conflict prevention and are vocal in shaping the region's political future. Their story is a reminder that WPS doesn't always look like a resolution—it often looks like relationships.

The Pacific and beyond: Quiet infrastructure

Timor-Leste offers another example of early success. Women who had participated in the struggle for independence successfully pushed for gender provisions in the post-conflict constitution. Today, Timor-Leste has one of the highest rates of women's parliamentary representation in Asia. The foundations were laid not just in law, but in the legitimacy that women had built during conflict and transition.

Across the Pacific, women's networks continue to engage in conflict prevention, disaster response and local mediation, often without formal recognition or stable funding. Their work is invisible to most strategic planners, but vital to community resilience.

Globally, there are other encouraging signs: NATO and the European Union have embedded gender perspectives into operational planning; UN peacekeeping missions now deploy gender advisors as standard practice; and countries such as Rwanda, Namibia and New Zealand consistently rank among the highest in women's political participation.

Lessons from the wins

These stories don't diminish the gaps in WPS implementation, but they do reframe the narrative. When WPS is treated as a strategic approach rather than a symbolic gesture, when women are included from the beginning, and when gendered dynamics are embedded into analysis and action, the outcomes are stronger.

Common threads exist. Success happened when the agenda was: locally led and driven by those closest to the conflict, not imposed externally; politically supported and backed by real authority, not just policy statements; practically resourced with funding, training and long-term commitment; and integrated into strategy, not siloed or treated as optional.

Too often, hope is dismissed as naive. But in the WPS context, hope has been operationalised. It has mobilised movements, shaped negotiations and rebuilt institutions. It's not soft; it's structural.

The WPS agenda works—when we let it.

As we mark 25 years of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, the question isn't whether its promise has been kept in full—we know it hasn't. The real question is whether we're ready to scale what already works. These quiet victories aren't ornamental; they are foundational. If the next 25 years are to deliver on the agenda's transformative potential, this is where we begin.

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Elevating women's voices and leadership in the humanitarian reset

Humanitarian Advisory Group

Image: UN Women

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda is more relevant than ever in humanitarian action, as the sector grapples with funding cuts and the 'humanitarian reset.'

The WPS agenda promotes women's participation in conflict-related decision-making; protection from gender-based violence; and crisis response, all while supporting women's rights and local peace initiatives. The 25th anniversary of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325—the resolution that brought about the WPS agenda—comes at a pivotal time for the humanitarian sector. The number of people affected by conflict and requiring humanitarian assistance is increasing, with more state-based conflicts taking place in 2024 than in any other year since World War II. Globally, more than 305 million people need humanitarian assistance. Yet funding to meet these needs is decreasing, especially in the areas of gender equality and protection.

The abrupt withdrawal of humanitarian and development funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in January has thrown the sector into chaos. Meanwhile, other traditional donors are reducing their funding to humanitarian, development and peacebuilding programs while increasing defence spending.

A humanitarian reset is now underway, promising a reimagined and more efficient humanitarian system, though the results remain to be seen. As the sector grapples with these changes, the WPS agenda offers a framework for locally led responses that value the

experiences and leadership of women and women-led organisations, address gender inequalities and bridge hum anitarian-development-peacebuilding siloes in a way that doesn't undermine humanitarian principles.

Women and women-led organisations often lead humanitarian and protection efforts at the grassroots level, providing essential services, addressing gaps in formal responses and ensuring the needs of diverse women and girls are met. However, following USAID's funding cuts, many of these organisations will struggle to keep their doors open: 90 percent of women's organisations surveyed in 44 crisis-affected countries reported that reductions in foreign aid had hindered their work. More than 60 percent had reduced their services, including emergency health care, gender-based violence services, economic assistance and shelter.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, research by the Humanitarian Advisory Group and UN Women found that women and women's rights organisations were playing critical roles in Covid-19 response and recovery efforts, yet they were underfunded, underrepresented in humanitarian response decision-making forums, and their knowledge and expertise often went unrecognised. The WPS agenda provides a framework to elevate the leadership of local women-led organisations and networks and draws attention to the importance of crisis response and recovery efforts adopting a gendered lens.

The work of women-led organisations—like other local organisations—often bridges the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding nexus. Donors and the international system frequently divide programming into siloes such as humanitarian, development, peacebuilding and human rights. In contrast, women-led organisations and networks often take intersectional approaches, addressing the needs of diverse women and groups in a holistic way that supports immediate needs and strengthens the foundations for peace.

Research exploring intersectionality in humanitarian responses in Myanmar, for example, has highlighted how women-led networks navigate the intersectional issues of gender, ethnicity, displacement and statelessness to advance protection and peace for diverse communities. For example, a local gender group recognised the multiple vulnerabilities facing ethnic minority Kachin women in camps for those who had been displaced. They incorporated these complex realities in their humanitarian and livelihood programs, improving access to services and protection.

Women-led organisations' deep understanding of oppression and discrimination is important for promoting peacebuilding and reducing the chances of future violence Such intersectional approaches offer a way to analyse the social, political and economic drivers of conflict such as those in Myanmar's Rakhine State. Building partnerships with women-led organisations and networks that have expertise in specific social and identity factors can strengthen the integration of intersectional approaches within networks and coordination forums, as well as in humanitarian, peace and development programs and sectors.

However, there are concerns that the humanitarian reset will further marginalise the voices of local communities and responders, especially women. The WPS agenda provides a framework that emphasises women's leadership and participation in peace-making, supports local women's peace initiatives and further strengthens gender-sensitive approaches to relief and recovery efforts.

As the humanitarian sector prepares to transform, we need to resist the tendency to centralise and solidify only the role of international actors. Instead, we should look to elevate locally led responses, including the leadership of women-led organisations that prioritise the needs of the most vulnerable and already work in interconnected ways. Instead of being one of the many frameworks and reform priorities that falls to the wayside, there is now a chance to recommit to the WPS agenda as the sector looks to radically shift how humanitarian assistance and protection are delivered.

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About the authors

Lieutenant Colonel Amy Brosnan is director of Women, Peace and Security with the New Zealand Defence Force.

Emily Cooper is a curious generalist who examines the invisible threads shaping national security and Defence capability.

Lieutenant Colonel Laura Cranston is currently serving as a project officer in Army General Staff with the New Zealand Defence Force.

Pua Hunter is the director of the Global Forum on Cyber Expertise Pacific hub.

Susan Hutchinson is a civil-military professional with experience in government, military and non-government organisations.

Julie Inman Grant is Australia's eSafety commissioner.

Elizabeth Lawler is a sub-editor for *The Strategist* at ASPI.

Angeline Lewis, a group captain in the Royal Australian Air Force, is director of operations and international law with the Department of Defence.

Raelene Lockhorst is deputy director of ASPI's National Security Programs.

Olivia Nelson is chief of staff at ASPI.

Georgia Opie is executive assistant to the executive director and coordinator of executive and strategy at ASPI.

Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan is a resident senior fellow at ASPI.

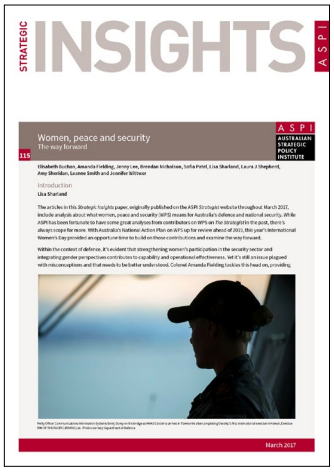
Angela Suriyasenee is a researcher with the Cyber, Technology and Security Program at ASPI.

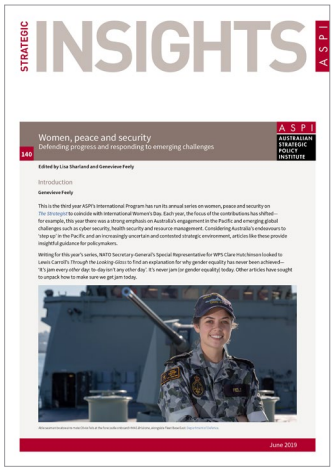
Jacqui True is a professor of international relations at Monash University and director of the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the Elimination of Violence against Women.

Alice Wai is a junior researcher at ASPI.

Jen Wittwer is a retired Australian Defence Force officer and international expert on gender, peace and security in armed forces, operations and peacekeeping.

Previous ASPI Women, Peace and Security publications.





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