MEETING THE MOMENT

WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY IN 2025

KVINNA KVINNA

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KVINNA TILL KVINNA

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation has defended women's rights since 1993.
For every woman's right to be safe and to be heard.

Today we are one of the world's leading women's rights organisations, working directly in areas affected by war and conflict to strengthen women's influence and power. We work closely together with more than 100 local partner organisations across 20 countries to end violence against women, reach lasting peace and close the gender gap once and for all.

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DATE: 2025

Introduction

WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY IN 2025 – WHERE DO WE STAND?

In 2020, The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation published our landmark report on the state of Women, Peace and Security (WPS), *A Right not a Gift.* Five years later, at the 25th anniversary of the WPS agenda, the world is, sadly, in a very different place. In 2020, the signs of were there, and today it is painfully clear: we are backing into the future on so many fronts. We are returning to a militarised, nationalist view of security with re-armament and rising numbers of wars and conflicts – Ukraine, DRC, Sudan to name just a few. Genocide is being committed before our eyes in Palestine; with impunity, the Israeli government is killing tens of thousands of civilians and erasing a nation.

This report takes stock of the WPS agenda 25 years after its formation, highlighting persistent challenges and new global trends that undermine women's security, rights, and participation. To do this, we delve into six contexts: Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Syria and Ukraine, most of which were discussed in *A Right not a Gift.* The themes that defined 2020 remain with us – corruption, economic discrimination and the rise of anti-gender movements. Over the past five years, these threats have only deepened. At the same time, other threats such as the climate crisis, democratic backsliding and anti-rights movements are spreading but are not being taken seriously. Women are being pushed back into traditional roles and their bodies weaponised for nationalist agendas.

The very question WPS sets out to address is once again painfully relevant: security for whom, and on whose terms? Who 'gets peace' and at what expense?

Militarised societies, weapons proliferation, and widespread gender-based and conflict-related sexual violence continue to undermine women's security and their ability to participate fully in public life. We have witnessed in the past five years an increasing failure to protect women from war crimes and genocide, which has shattered trust in the multilateral system and frameworks that house WPS.

Once again, women are told that 'other' crises matter more and that they will have to wait. As Roselyne from the DRC explains: *"[We cannot talk] about violence or how soldiers are raping people… people who speak about those things, they disappear."* But the insights and experiences from conflict contexts reveal the truth: you cannot handle crisis if you sideline gender. The struggles of women are the struggles of the world.

Women's organisations, already working under conditions of insecurity and shrinking democratic space, are also facing a resourcing crisis. The evaporation of long-term funding for civil society is a devastating blow. It silences the community voices that once carried the WPS agenda from the grassroots to the UN Security Council. Remaining funds are often short-term, rigid, humanitarian-focused and administratively burdensome—hindering progress on women's political participation. As Oksana from Ukraine reflects: *"The amount of labour that it takes for organisations to fulfil the requirements [of foreign government donors] in order to receive the scarce funds that they need to support communities, and the kind of relationship of mistrust and control that is put in place, is disempowering in so many ways."*

The rapid acceleration of climate change and increasing environmental damages that are a direct result of militarisation, are causing an ecocide which can no longer be sidelined to a single line of a single resolution in the WPS agenda. As exemplified through the interviews in this report, women are on the frontlines of armed conflict and environmental crises. We can no longer expect women human rights defenders to do the work of advocating in different spaces for different crises when they are so intertwined – our frameworks for WPS must shift to include people and planet. The final article of this report provides a much-needed focus on this issue, drawing from interviews across the six contexts. In doing so, we join a growing body of evidence urgently

advocating for WPS to address environmental and climate change crises.[1]

National Action Plans (NAPs), once seen as vehicles to localise the WPS agenda and build broad ownership, are increasingly state-controlled, underfunded and stripped of accountability. Civil society voices are excluded. As Samira in Iraq observes: *"Rather than advancing women's security, the NAP has become a tick-box exercise for governments to attract international funding while silencing independent voices."* Oksana in Ukraine adds: *"It has become, for many activists, more a tool of the UN and governments", while Amani from Syria reflects: "WPS is like something on paper that [women's rights activists] agree on but it's just to shush us."*

So how do we make sense of WPS in such a world? The answer lies where it always has—in the realities and insight of women, including women human rights defenders, living through conflict. Their persistence is not just a beacon for WPS—it is a guide for what the world itself needs to survive.

Grounded in the work of Kvinna till Kvinna's 140 partner organisations in 20 countries, this report is a sobering read for the WPS community in 2025; in many places where our partners work things are not better than they were just five years ago. The WPS experts interviewed share both insights and recommendations about how to meet this moment, to revitalise the WPS agenda for a different world.

A RIGHT NOT A GIFT – REVISITED

A Right Not a Gift, published by Kvinna till Kvinna on the twentieth anniversary of UNSCR 1325, amplified the voices of women peacebuilders and human rights defenders at the heart of the WPS agenda. Based on interviews with 91 peacebuilders and women human rights defenders (WHRDs), it highlighted both strengths and shortcomings of the framework and outlined key steps to unlock women's participation in peace work. Five years later, their messages remain alarmingly relevant. It is necessary to remind ourselves of the key findings of the 2020 report, reaffirming critical gaps and pathways forward for the 25th anniversary of WPS.

1. TWENTY(FIVE) YEARS OF THE WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY AGENDA

Women's rights activists and peacebuilders see the greatest value of 1325 as being the international legitimisation of women's rights and participation in conflict resolution. Women's organisations and activists use the agenda to mobilise coalitions, raise awareness of the impact of conflict on women, frame demands in terms of rights, influence policy, and engage international actors.

Still, they identify a number of obstacles for its fulfilment:

1. LIMITED REFLECTION OF WOMEN'S PRACTICES AND PRIORITIES. The agenda overlooks diverse contributions to peace, women's economic constraints, corruption, access to justice and threats to civil society.

2. LACK OF POLITICAL WILL. Formal and informal male-dominated power structures restrict women's roles, and National Action Plans often remain symbolic and underfunded.

3. WEAK ACCOUNTABILITY. Many see the WPS agenda as non-binding, with international actors failing to hold states accountable, and traditional diplomacy reinforcing gendered power imbalances.

4. STATEHOOD OBSTACLES. In fragile or divided states, unclear governance undermines implementation, as seen at the time of the report in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iraq, Syria, and Ukraine.

5. PATRIARCHAL SYSTEMS. Entrenched gender stereotypes, cultural traditions, and religious structures perpetuate women's exclusion from peace processes, transitional justice and reconstruction.

6. GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE. Violence and economic dependence constrain women's public participation.

7. INSECURITY. Ongoing conflict, violence, and repression of civil society create physical, psychological, and digital insecurity, isolating women and limiting engagement.

[1] See: Genevieve Riccoboni and Jacqueline Dyna, Women's Resistance to War, Injustice and Environmental Crisis: Connecting the Women, Peace and Security Agenda and Environmental Governance in the Cases of Colombia, Togo and Zimbabwe (Geneva: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom [WILPF], June 2025).

2. RECOGNISING WHAT'S MISSING

Here we draw attention to several key areas that, in 2020, women peacebuilders and women human rights defenders identified as omissions from the WPS resolutions and associated policy frameworks. They include:

Economic rights and marginalisation

Across the diverse contexts of the 91 interviewed activists, women's economic marginalisation and the feminisation of poverty stand out as key barriers to meaningful participation in peacebuilding. Lack of housing, access to profitable livelihoods and denial of land and property rights deepen women's poverty in conflict, marginalising them from public and political spheres and limiting their ability to influence economic policies. Gender-blind economic recovery processes further entrench this marginalisation through inadequate access to land, property and infrastructure.

The lack of economic power is often compounded by corruption, as administrative barriers around property rights or financial services restrict women's access and ownership, increasing their vulnerability to gender-based violence. This economic exclusion severely limits women's opportunities for decision-making, political participation, and contribution to building and sustaining peace. In conflicts, the economy itself can also be weaponised—for instance, by withholding social benefits from certain groups or stripping civil society of economic resources.

Threats to civil society fuelled by anti-gender narratives and extremist violence

2010–2020 saw a decline in democracy closely tied to rising anti-gender and nationalist rhetoric, and an increase in connected extremist violence. Women activists' participation was severely hindered due to increasing harassment, intimidation, and physical attacks. Specifically, the women peacebuilders and human rights defenders interviewed identified:

- Global and regional alliances of far-right forces share methods and strategies to limit women's freedoms, rights and possibility to act politically.
- Radical right-wing parties with links to violent extremist groups partner with religious authorities to normalise their extremist views.
- Violent extremist groups commit atrocities that range from assaulting LGBTQ+ celebrations and women's rights demonstrations, to slaughter, slavery and rape.
- Anti-gender equality radical movements exist in contexts where nationalism meets militarism, and where nationalist groups strive to promote traditional values and control women in the family and the political space.

3. STRUCTURAL SHIFTS FOR SUSTAINABLE PEACE

A Right not a Gift identifies five key structural shifts to support sustainable peace:

- **GRASSROOTS PRIORITIES AND INSIGHTS** must be taken seriously. This could be done by strengthening local analysis, creating hotlines that collect needs at grassroot level, and supporting national and local feminist mediators.
- **IMPROVE DIPLOMATIC-GRASSROOTS COHERENCE** to link top-down diplomacy with grassroots processes. Listen to community organisers beyond the usual NGO network and make use of the range of the practices of "people's diplomacy", like cultural diplomacy, intergenerational people-to-people meetings, individual visits across conflict lines.
- **INCLUSIVE AND DIVERSE SPACES FOR CHANGE** are needed, where women can find safe and reflective spaces to come together.
- **ACCESS TO EDUCATION** is key to enhancing access to economic opportunities, participation and contributions to building and sustaining peace. In many contexts, there is a need to reform the curricula to promote coexistence and recovery rather than militarisation.
- **STRENGTHENING CIVIL SOCIETY'S STRATEGIES FOR GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY.** Civil society has a crucial role to monitor peace processes and elections, and activists identified a need for empowerment, not least through strengthening their legal literacy and how to use regional systems for oversight.

4. HOW CAN INCLUSIVE PEACE PROCESSES BE SUPPORTED?

Women's inclusion in peace processes largely remains ignored, or at best, a tick-box exercise. The peacebuilders and WHRDs interviewed identified the following ways in which peace processes can meaningfully include women:

- **ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL.** The exclusion of women is often exacerbated by conflict. To design meaningful inclusion modalities, examine the structures of exclusion in the context that existed prior to the conflict.
- **LANGUAGE IS POWER.** Be mindful of the exclusionary or inclusive power of language, in terms of terminology, jargon, context suitability, etc.
- **BROADENING THE OUTREACH.** Design peace processes with an outreach to non-urban, non-central areas which are often most affected by conflict. Work with pockets of peace and weave them together along the way.
- **MORE PEOPLE, DIFFERENT PEOPLE.** Design peace processes with an outreach to non-urban, non-central areas which are often most affected by conflict. Work with pockets of peace and weave them together along the way.
- **ENGAGING THE DIASPORA IN SOLUTION DEVELOPMENT.** Capacities for conflict and peace are carried with people beyond the direct geography of conflict.
- **ACTIVELY ENGAGE YOUTH.** Support them to develop their vision for the peace process and the future of their context with equal weight to other actors.
- **INCLUSIVE LEADERS SHOULD BE SUPPORTED.** This involves including political leadership, tribal leadership and community leadership in formal and informal decision-making spaces.
- **INVEST IN POLITICAL AND MEDIA LITERACY.** Invest in electoral literacy and freedom of press and informed voting as a foundational stone for democratic participation, especially in contexts hit by political repression.
- **INVEST IN WOMEN'S CAPACITIES TO INFLUENCE AT THE PEACE TABLE.** Lean on their unique expertise and providing technical support to be effective political actors and influencers.

Recommendations

The Women, Peace and Security agenda is backsliding in its effectiveness and alignment with the realities of women in all their diversity, compared to five years ago. Many of the findings and recommendations from *A Right not a Gift* are still highly relevant today and are considered here. At the same time, it is imperative to consider stark new realities for WPS in 2025 and the need to be explicit and frank. In the recommendations that follow, we weave in new perspectives from publications of Kvinna till Kvinna and others over the past five years, and critically, the WPS experts and WHRDs interviewed for this 2025 report.

We have chosen to include a set of recommendations *for all WPS actors,* in addition to recommendations specifically for WPS activists, organisations and all those working in solidarity with them.

From these recommednations, we are guiding you forward to Kvinna till Kvinna's publications from the last five years, that cover a range of WPS related issues and topics, and provide further recommendations in each of these areas.

Recommendations for WPS organisations and solidarity partners

1	Join and support alliances within women's rights movements – in the face of anti-gender mobilisation, we need to be stronger together. That means we set aside differences, show up in solidarity, and amplify each other's work.[1]
2	Ensure youth[2], refugee, LGBTQ+, disability rights and indigenous voices are part of national and international peacebuilding agendas. If you are in a position of privilege, consider giving up your space to make room for voices less commonly heard.[2]
3	Foster alliances between environmental and climate justice activists to counter the dominating forces that perpetuate violence to the people and planet. The two movements can mutually reinforce each other.[3]
4	Draw attention to the connection between intimate partner violence and militarisation, including light arms proliferation.[4, 5]
5	Challenge militarisation and prioritise non-violent conflict resolution to decrease levels of violence of all levels of society.[4]
6	As a matter of course in all programming, systematically document human rights violations including gender-based violence.[4]
7	Plan for, and support, opportunities and convenings for women human rights defenders to process and imagine what peace looks like.
8	National Action Plans for WPS are not one-size fits all: push for localisation of NAPs to ensure context specific actions are taken that can have a real impact on the lives of women and gender diverse people living in different situations of conflict.

Recommendations for all WPS stakeholders

1	Women's equal representation and meaningful participation in peace negotiations, transitional justice mechanisms and political institutions needs to remain at the heart of the agenda to ensure women have real influence over outcomes. This means actually adhering to principles and benchmarks set out in numerous WPS resolutions, frameworks, roadmaps, and action plans.
2	Maintain the crucial alliances between member states, international NGOs, civil society and researchers that have upheld and developed the normative power of the WPS agenda for 25 years. The international community's solidarity is sometimes the only support that the women on the front lines of conflict have.
3	Acknowledge the severe security situation affecting WHRDs and women peacebuilders. Recognise this as early warning to democratic backsliding and to violent conflict. Support organisations that work to counter the threats against women in peacebuilding and human rights.[1]
4	National Action Plan processes must engage civil society as partners and NAPs must include accountability mechanisms towards government institutions.
5	Prioritise support to civil society to document, and safely report human rights violations, including gender-based violence.[4]
6	Provide meaningful support to civil society: this means long-term, flexible funding to women's organisations, protections against threats and reprisals for women human rights defenders and environmental defenders and formally integrating civil society actors into official peace processes.[5]
7	Future WPS resolutions must expand on environment and climate change across all pillars of the WPS agenda.[3]
8	Scale up support and funding for women-led climate resilience and peacebuilding in conflict-affected contexts, including advocacy efforts for NAPs to meaningful environment and climate change commitments.[3]
9	Technology facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) is an extension of GBV and poses a rising and serious threat to women's engagement in peace processes. Steps must be taken to integrate prevention and protection measures into all programmes and policies, including explicit mention of TFGBV in the WPS agenda.
10	WPS implementation frameworks including Nation Action Plans must include aspects of women's economic discrimination and exclusion from economic decision-making, relating both to challenges regarding housing, land and property rights as well as participation and influence over recovery and reconstruction.[7]
11	Sexual and reproductive health and rights must be prioritised and not sidelined or erased entirely. Be bold and tackle issues of reproductive pressures caused by conflict, as well as maternal, reproductive and obstetric violence in conflict.[8]

KVINNA TILL KVINNA WPS RELATED PUBLICATIONS 2020–2025

[1] *Hope and Resistance Go Togehter – State of Women Human Rights Defenders.* The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (2023) https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/the-state-of-women-human-rights-defenders-2023/

[2] *Power and Possibility – Young Women, Peace and Security.* The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (2022) https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/power-and-possibility

[2] *Nothing About Us Without Us – Disability, gender and security.* The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (2025). https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/nothing-about-us-without-us-disability-gender-and-security/

[3] *Environment is a Feminist Issue.* Syrian Female Journalist Network and The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (2024) https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/environment-is-a-feminist-issue/

[3] *Climate, Gender and Conflict* – Position Paper. The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (2022) https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/position-paper-climate-gender-and-conflict-2022/

[4] *Feminist Movements and Climate Justice in Middle East and North Africa.* The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (2022) https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/feminist-movements-and-climate-justice-in-middle-east-and-north-africa/

[4] *They Came Together Not To Be Silenced – Gender Based Violence in Conflict and the Role of Women's Rights Organisations.* The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (2023) https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/they-came-together-not-to-be-silenced-gender-based-violence-in-conflict-the-role-of-womens-rights-organisations/

[5] *The Continuum of Violence – Small Arms and Gender-Based Violence Across the Conflict Cycle.* The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (2024) https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/the-continuum-of-violence/

[6] *Where's the Money for Women's Rights in Ukraine?* The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation and Ukrainian Women's Fund (2025). https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/wheres-the-money-for-womens-rights-in-ukraine/

[6] *Fund Us Like You Want Us To WIn – Feminist Solutions for More Impactful Financing for Peacebuilding.* Global Network of Women Peacebuilders, Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict, International Civil Society Action Network, MADRE, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (2021). https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/fund-us-like-you-want-us-to-win/

[7] *Glass Ceilings – Factors effecting the career development of women in the public sector in Iraq.* The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (2024). https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/glass-ceilings/

[7] *A Woman's Work – Strengthening Women's Access to Benefits After the Second Nagorny-Karabach War.* The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (2022). https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/a-womans-work-strengthening-womens-access-to-benefits-after-the-second-nagorny-karabakh-war/

[7] *A Feminist Response to the Recovery of Ukraine.* The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (2023). https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/a-feminist-response-to-the-recovery-of-ukraine/

[7] *Social Protection and Gender Equality.* Act Church of Sweden and The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (2022) https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/social-protection-and-gender-equality/

[7] *Shadow Resolution on Women, Peace and Security: Women's Economic Rights, Leadership and Participation.* The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (2020). https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Kvinna-till-Kvinna-Foundation-shadow-resolution_updated-feb-2021.pdf

[8] *Obstetric, Reproductive and Maternal Violence in Gaza.* The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (2024). https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/obstetric-reproductive-maternal-violence-in-gaza/

Armenia

This article is based on an interview with Lida Minasyan, co-founder of Women's Agenda, a non-profit organisation uplifting women's resilience and expertise to build peaceful communities and a sustainable future.

In 2020, Armenia experienced a collapse of peace and security when war between Azerbaijan and Armenia broke out over control of Nagorno Karabakh enclave. Women's Agenda co-founder, Lida Minasyan recalls, *"a lot of pieces fell apart that had to be rebuilt."* What had felt like progress with the first WPS National Action Plan (NAP) in 2019 was swiftly undone. For many Armenians, the war was shocking and deeply destabilising; *"The war was unexpected for many."* Lida says. *"It was a destruction of any common understanding of what 'peace' is."* Although the situation has calmed somewhat since 2024, Armenia is still coping with the mass displacement of more than 150,000 from Nagorno

Karabakh[2]. To date, negotiations have not led to anything substantive. Even the meeting facilitated by the United States in August this year only produced 'declarations of intent' for peace – progress, but still leaving the country in what Lida described as a precarious *"negative peace."* Alongside state-led negotiations, Lida calls for there to be more substantive efforts to engage communities in track II and track III diplomacy to ensure peace is built from the 'bottom up.'

An absence of war, but far from a presence of peace

Lida describes the war that broke out in 2020 as *"the most traumatic life experience for generations to come."* Today, mental health and coping with trauma are amongst the most pressing security issues. Exercising of rights remains fragile, especially for those forcibly displaced who lack secure housing, employment and social support. The militarisation of society during and after the conflict has heightened aggressions and toxic masculinity, exacerbating issues like homophobia and violence against women. While more women are reporting cases in recent years, Lida says that domestic violence remains pervasive. *"Progress has been minimal to date"* in terms of protection or prevention.

Lida also observes that for decades, political and civic participation has skewed toward men:

> **So much has been, and still is, in men's hands — resources, power, decision-making, everything. The mere fact that they are men, soldiers and war veterans has given them control.**

Even today, women remain excluded from emergency and security planning at local levels, leaving them unprepared when crises erupt. *" Women are neither participating in the development of emergency plans nor aware of their contents,"* Lida explains, *"and therefore it's very hard for them to guide their families to safety whenever there is a conflict escalation."* New forms of insecurity are emerging such as cyber-attacks, targeted online harassment and the spread of misinformation. These forms of violence, Lida observes, have been used as a tactic in the conflict and targeted women in border-side conflict-affected areas (amongst others) in particular.

"Feminist peace means communities are open, they feel safe, human rights are protected."

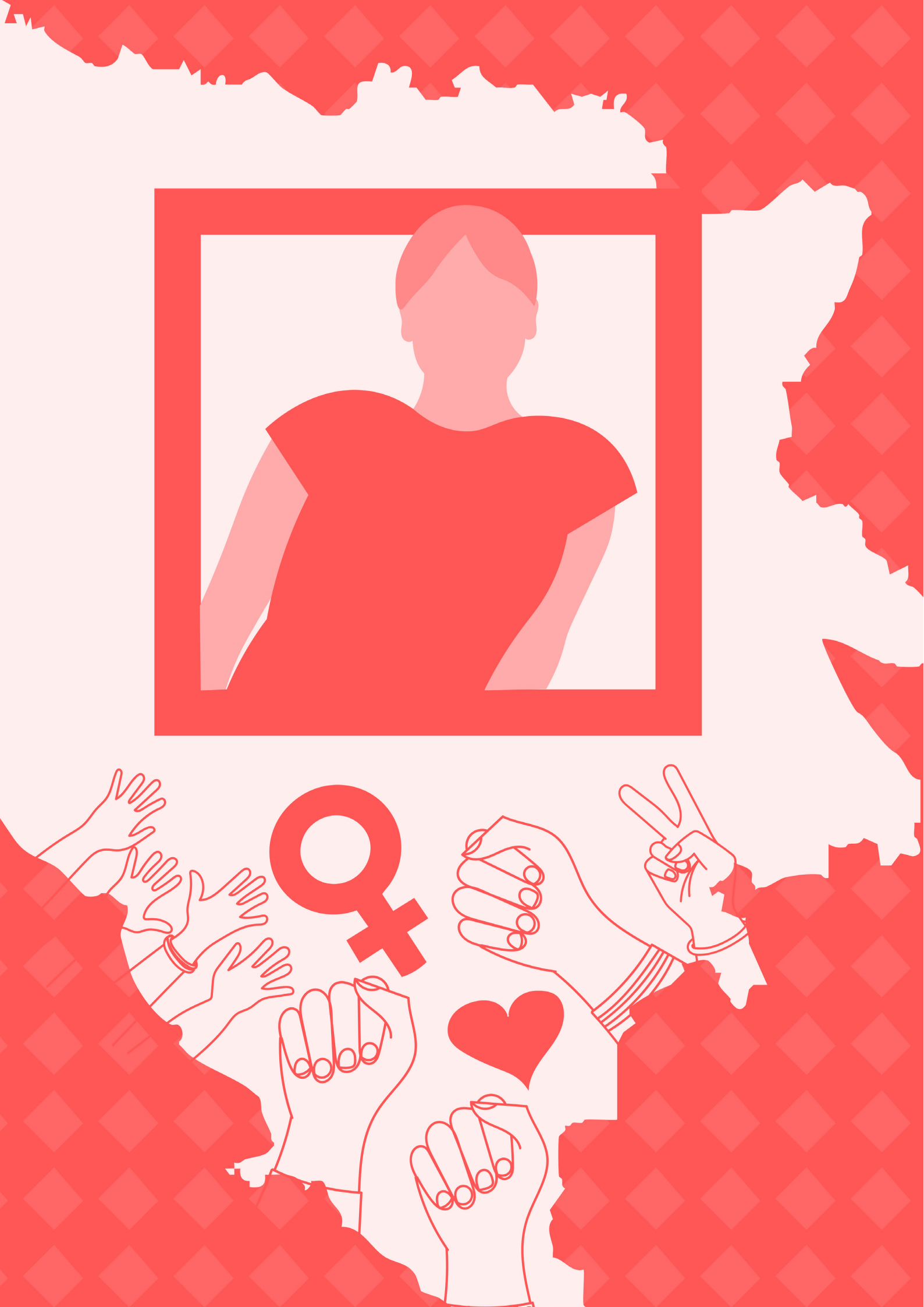
Within the Armenian feminist community, things feel *"very, very fragile,"* according to Lida; what unites them, however, is a rejection of militarisation and a demand for resources to be directed toward education, rights and rebuilding rather than weapons. Lida for her part, envisions a future for Armenia where mental, physical, and social well-being is amongst the top pzzriorities of the government and society—alongside enjoyment of rights, dignity and safety. She sees feminist peace as something built from the 'bottom up,' with communities engaged in dialogue, rather than policies being imposed top down by the upper echelons of power, as they are now. For displaced Nagorno Karabakh communities, feminist peace is synonymous with justice, collective healing and human security. As Lida explains:

> **Feminist peace…. means communities are open, they feel safe, human rights are protected… There is not a constant risk of attack and conflict is addressed not only from the state security and border protection perspective, but also from within communities. Feminist peace means women and other conflict-affected groups are part of negotiations, their rights and needs are represented at all stages of building peace.**

[2] https://infocom.am/123079/

A hope for civil society & WPS

If there is a ray of hope, it is the persistence of women's civil society in Armenia in the past five years, especially in relation to WPS. Armenia's first National Action Plan (2019-2021) was a significant milestone at the time yet was quickly overshadowed by the war in 2020. Over the past five years, civil society persisted in pushing the agenda forward, ushering in a second NAP (2022-2024) and recently contributing to the third NAP. Lida reflects that localisation of the NAP has been one of the most meaningful advances; in 2020 no provinces had local action plans, but *"now, a few are in place, the result of years of work on localisation"*. Lida attributes this, and other WPS successes, to the efforts of women's organisations and feminist activists who managed to maintain, and even expand, their space due to consolidating civil society activism and advocacy. Activism is also diversifying—different groups, including LGBTQ+ and environmental activists, are participating in dialogues, and are linking WPS with economic justice, human security, and, increasingly, environmental justice.



Bosnia & Herzegovina

This article draws on reflections from Milica and Alma, women human rights defenders in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Their names have been changed.

In the past five years Bosnia and Herzegovina's (BiH) security landscape has shifted dramatically, from a fragile but stable peace to a more volatile and fractured political environment. Secessionist rhetoric has intensified, democratic space has narrowed, and attacks on civil society and independent media have escalated.

Mounting political tensions and democratic backsliding

In early 2025, the Republika Srpska (RS) President, Milorad Dodik, was sentenced to one year in prison and banned from politics for six years for failing to comply with a peace envoy over-

seeing the 1995 peace accords. His sentencing was followed by an open political offensive from Republika Srpska's leadership, aimed at weakening state institutions and blocking key functions of the central government. For example, new laws passed by the RS Assembly challenge the authority of the constitutional court, the state judiciary, and other institutions, while secessionist narratives are amplified through alliances with right-wing actors in the EU and beyond.

These developments mark a stark departure from the slower-moving political deadlock of previous years. Today, BiH faces an acute political and constitutional crisis that threatens the core principles of the Dayton Peace Agreement. EU integration was once a top and clear priority for the country, but in the past five years progress is all but blocked with delayed reforms and a lack of transparency to the public.

At the same time, civic space is shrinking rapidly. In 2024, RS passed a draft law which labels organisations receiving foreign funding as "agents of foreign influence", creating a climate of fear and self-censorship. Attacks on journalists and activists have gone largely uninvestigated. There is an absence of institutional protection mechanisms, and no public policy or strategy to address protection of human rights defenders. In this environment, says Milica, there is a growing fear to speak freely and pursue advocacy aimed at the government.

Women's rights under threat

Women's rights in BiH are increasingly under pressure, fueled by anti-gender narratives spreading across the Western Balkans. Specifically, violence against women remains one of the most pressing security concerns—an issue long sidelined from mainstream security discussions. Like elsewhere, economic shocks are reinforcing cycles of violence, with many women forced back to abusive partners due to financial dependency.

The situation is made worse by regressive legislation for gender based violence (GBV) protections, introduced by the rising anti-gender movement, including pro-family and pro-life actors. For example, in recent years a coalition of around 20 conservative and right-wing organisations formed to publicly oppose 'gender ideology' in the name of 'traditional family values'. They use public discussions and meetings, as well as social media, to specifically target women's rights activists. Political elites in the RS-entity, tout the same rhetoric. As Alma shares:

> **We're seeing a real backlash right now—across language, politics, and culture. Conservative and traditionalist narratives accusing human rights activists of promoting 'gender ideology' are being used to discredit, for example, WPS proposals. And that has consequences... it slows progress, and in some cases even reverses hard-won gains**

According to Milica, women's civil society organisations are participating less and less in high level discussions and consultations, seemingly pushed out. For example, women's organisations used to be appointed to government working groups where they helped to draft legislation and policies. But within the past five years those appointments have dwindled. Milica reflects that similar practice has been consistently applied by UN agencies in recent years; partnerships with civil society are surface level, with a lack of ownership over advocacy processes and results.

WPS National Action Plan needs to adapt to the 2025 realities in BiH

BiH has adopted three WPS National Action Plans (NAP) to date, which largely focus on women's participation in security sectors (e.g., police, armed forces) and the prevention of gender-based violence. Attention to human security came into the third NAP only after advocacy from women's civil society. However, the high prevalence of GBV remains a major issue for the NAPs to tackle. This includes persistent challenges with weak protection mechanisms, including judicial protection for women GBV survivors. In addition, there is a need for future NAPs to be responsive to the increasing attacks on women's rights and women human rights defenders in BiH. Whether or not these issues will be addressed in a fourth NAP remains to be seen. For the past three years, some efforts were made by the BiH Gender Equality Agency to adopt fourth NAP which would span from 2025-2030. Yet amidst current political tensions in the country, the process remains stalled with an official opinion from RS outstanding.

Reclaiming peace and justice and mobilising against backlash

Despite the growing misogyny and backlash that women human rights defenders are experiencing in BiH, they continue to articulate a vision of peace which informs their activism. This vision Milica explains, centres "justice, security, and civic freedoms, including freedom from violence in everyday life, in the private and public sphere". It insists on including the voices of women facing different and overlapping vulnerabilities and demands women's real presence where decisions about peace and security are made.

Women in communities across the country continue to counter the political attacks and stagnation with grassroots WPS work. Alma points the initiative *Peace with Women's Face, which "documents and promotes the stories of women who acted as human rights defenders during and after the war",* challenging male-centred narratives of war and remembrance. Women's rights activists have also come together to call for constitutional reforms for *"a gender equal constitution and equal protection for all citizens beyond ethnicity".* In 2023 and 2024, women's rights activists mobilised country-wide protests against rising rates of femicide in BiH.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

This article is based on an interview with Roselyne, a woman human rights defender based in Bukavu. Her name has been changed to protect her identity.

"We are not living; we are just surviving": A sombre outlook for women's peace and security

Mineral rich Eastern DRC has endured cycles of violence for decades, fuelled by long-standing ethnic and political tensions and competition for natural resources. Sexual violence as a weapon of war has been widely documented, underpinned by deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and gender inequalities. The situation became noticeably worse in 2023 when the M23 rebel group escalated its fight for territorial control in north Kivu. By January 2025, M23 captured parts of North and South Kivu, including the major towns of Goma and Bukavu. Roselyne

recalls that, *"Once [M23] took Goma … the situation became very serious."* During this time, other armed groups including the Congolese army, FARDC, and Wazelendo have also clashed with M23, and each other, causing further destruction and instability across the region. The consequences have been severe, with widespread displacement, kidnappings, and killings. Daily life is marked by fear and silence:

> **As we are still living, we just follow their rules… Our security is our priority…It's so complicated…there are many topics that we are not discussing.**

"Since January 2025 the situation for all people, especially for women, is worse"

Women are facing increased risks of rape, forced marriage, forced recruitment and abductions. The absence of functioning banks, extortion over cash withdrawals and collapse of the judicial system further compound insecurity. Justice is elusive—*"actually, we don't have any legal system in Bukavu and in Goma … there are no lawyers, there is no judicial system like a judge."* Roselyne acknowledges that the judicial system there before was not perfect and mired with corruption, *"but at least it existed."*

Gender equality progress under threat

Between 2019 and 2024, the DRC made important progress on WPS and gender equality more broadly. Stronger women's coalitions emerged, training programmes expanded, and advocacy gained momentum. Proudly, Roselyne recalls that more women are *"now holding key ministerial positions which were previously reserved for men"* and a new law on gender-based violence was passed which includes recognition of domestic violence. Even President Tshisekedi has in recent years discussed the need for more *"positive masculinity"* as a result of activists' awareness raising efforts. Things were certainly not perfect, and gender inequalities were pervasive, but according to Rosalyne, women were *"actually on the forefront in DRC".*

Alongside some national-level gains in gender equality and women's empowerment, the WPS agenda also advanced in recent years. Roselyne points to women's active participation in regional peace negotiations in both Luanda (2022) and Nairobi (2023), as well as the Washington negotiations (2025). The DRC's third National Action Plan has been drafted and Roselyne explains that it brings a stronger commitment to inclusive peace, as it incorporates crucial elements such as transitional justice, cross-border trade, and responses to emerging threats like terrorism, cybercrime, environmental issues and human trafficking.

With a solemn pause, Roselyne shares how the escalation of conflict in 2025 has not only stagnated this progress but is rolling it back before their eyes. According to Roselyne and many activists, implementation of the new gender-based violence law and the WPS NAP III is now nearly impossible in M23-controlled territories, alongside dramatic funding cuts for gender and WPS from the international community.

How can you talk about protection or prevention when you can't even name the violence?

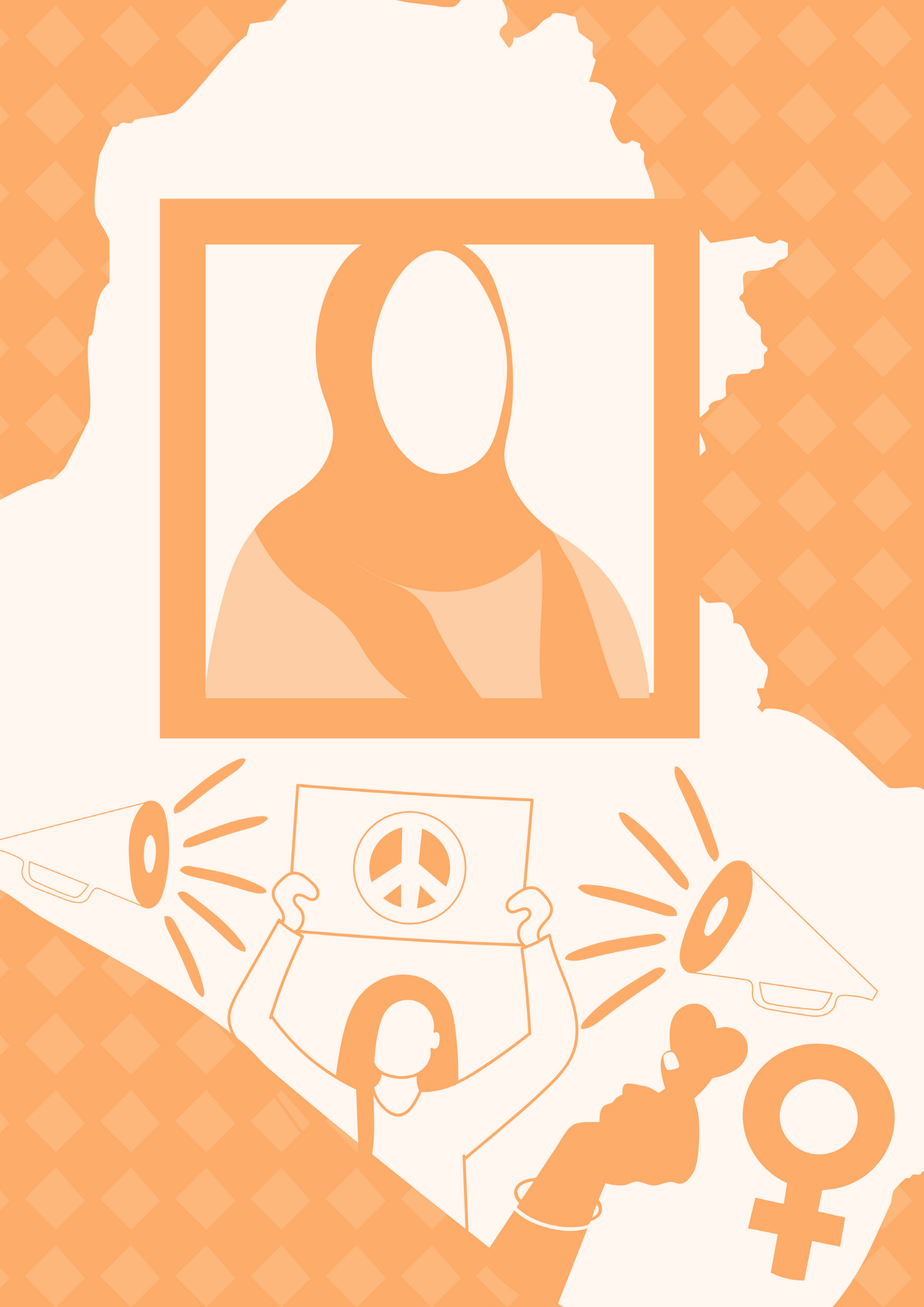
Roselyne describes how the space for women's organisations and activism has narrowed dramatically under M23 control. Where women previously participated openly in dialogues and advocacy, they now risk disappearance if they speak out. Activists are forced to operate with extreme caution, prioritising survival over advocacy for peace.

"As we are still living, we just follow their rules… Our security is our priority…It's so complicated"

Those who were once vocal are now censoring their work, for example shifting from speaking about conflict-related sexual violence to less 'politically sensitive themes'. Roselyne reflects:

[Activists] can speak about peace, but not going deeper. They can speak about lands, heritage or economic means, how to treat your wife within the family, not about violence or how soldiers and rebels are raping people in the different territories. We stopped with those thematics, because in this period of time, people who were speaking about those things, they disappear.

Under these conditions, the concept of peace for many Congolese women feels like an unreachable dream as more and more activists leave Eastern DRC in search of safety.



Iraq

This article is based on an interview with Samira, a woman human rights defender from Iraq. Her name has been changed to protect her identity.

Bombs have stopped falling in Iraq, but in 2025, women are still living under threat of retaliation, violence, honour killing and death. Armed groups and militias have subsumed into political parties, retaining their weapons and using the threat of violence as a political tool. The anti-gender movement in Iraq grows by the day, and the legal landscape grows more and more conservative. Against this backdrop, feminist activist Samira warns that violence against women is on the rise. *"The number of cases that women have been killed in Iraq... is so much higher than before,"* she said, but as is common everywhere, documenting and proving rates of femicide is near impossible. Samira reflects that some well-known cases have made the news,

citing the death of Dr. Ban, a psychiatrist who refused to testify in the state's favour and was later found tortured and raped while her death was declared a suicide. At the same time, graveyards are emerging in southern regions where women are being buried, victims of honour killings.

According to Samira and other activists the justice system and the political parties are complicit, covering for perpetrators and silencing any efforts for accountability. On the surface, the government of Iraq is cementing its reputation as an independent state after years of war and occupation. Concurrently, the last five years have seen a series of regressive legal, political and cultural steps intended to regress the rights of women. Amongst these is the introduction of the amended Personal Status Law in January 2025 - "legislation which now [allows] men to choose what law to follow" for their marriage – Sunni or Shia. In practice, under Shia law, this means that a wife cannot seek divorce if her husband takes another partner, and inheritance rights are reduced. Samira reflects that this is going to have immense consequences for *"everyone... especially for women, who lost a lot of their rights... especially for custody, for asking for divorce."*

Iraq's Amended Personal Status Law (2025)

According to Human Rights Watch, under the new law, couples concluding a marriage contract can choose whether the Personal Status Law of 1959 or a Personal Status Code (mudawana), to be developed by the Shia Ja'afari school of Islamic jurisprudence, would govern their marriage, divorce, children, and inheritance. Couples do not have the right to change their choice later. This arrangement effectively establishes separate legal regimes with different rights accorded to different sects, undermining the right to legal equality for all Iraqis found in article 14 of the constitution and international human rights law.

Then in 2023, Iraq's regulatory body for media ordered all media and social media companies licensed by it not to use the term "homosexuality" and to instead use "sexual deviance" and banned the use of the word "gender". In practice, the word 'gender' became taboo across all of society, severely impacting the ability of women's civil society to operate programmes and advocacy. According to Samira, the structures for gender equality promotion such as the Women's Empowerment Directorate and the Prime Minister's committee on women's issues exist but are corrupt and ineffective*: "What we gain is nothing... women are killed, we receive threats... they just benefit from corruption."* Women's rights organisations and activists have essentially "lost trust for all instruments that we used before."

For civil society, it's safety first

With deep sadness, Samira explains that in 2025, the space for civil society in Iraq, especially women's organisations and feminist activists, is near non-existent. Constrained by repression, co-option and smear campaigns, there is little room for genuine feminist activism in Iraq today. Samira reflects that while thousands of women's groups emerged after 2003, and were active over the last 15+ years, many have since been sidelined. They have been overtaken by organisations embedded within political parties who want *"a generation of NGOs that follow the government policy... to silence us."* The state actively interferes, she said. *"They even interfere with the funds that international agencies want to give to Iraqi NGOs."* Activists, including Samira herself, are threatened or criminalised for speaking publicly. Media campaigns portray women's rights defenders as foreign agents or "evil actors". In this grim reality, main concern in 2025 for activists in Iraq is for their security:

We are concerned about our safety. We need to be sure not to say gender as a such, because it will put a cross on us. We need to be on the same boat with the with the government. Otherwise, we need to be ready to receive more threats and maybe be killed by the government or from their armed groups, if we stand against them.

WPS in Iraq: from civil society driven to state-controlled

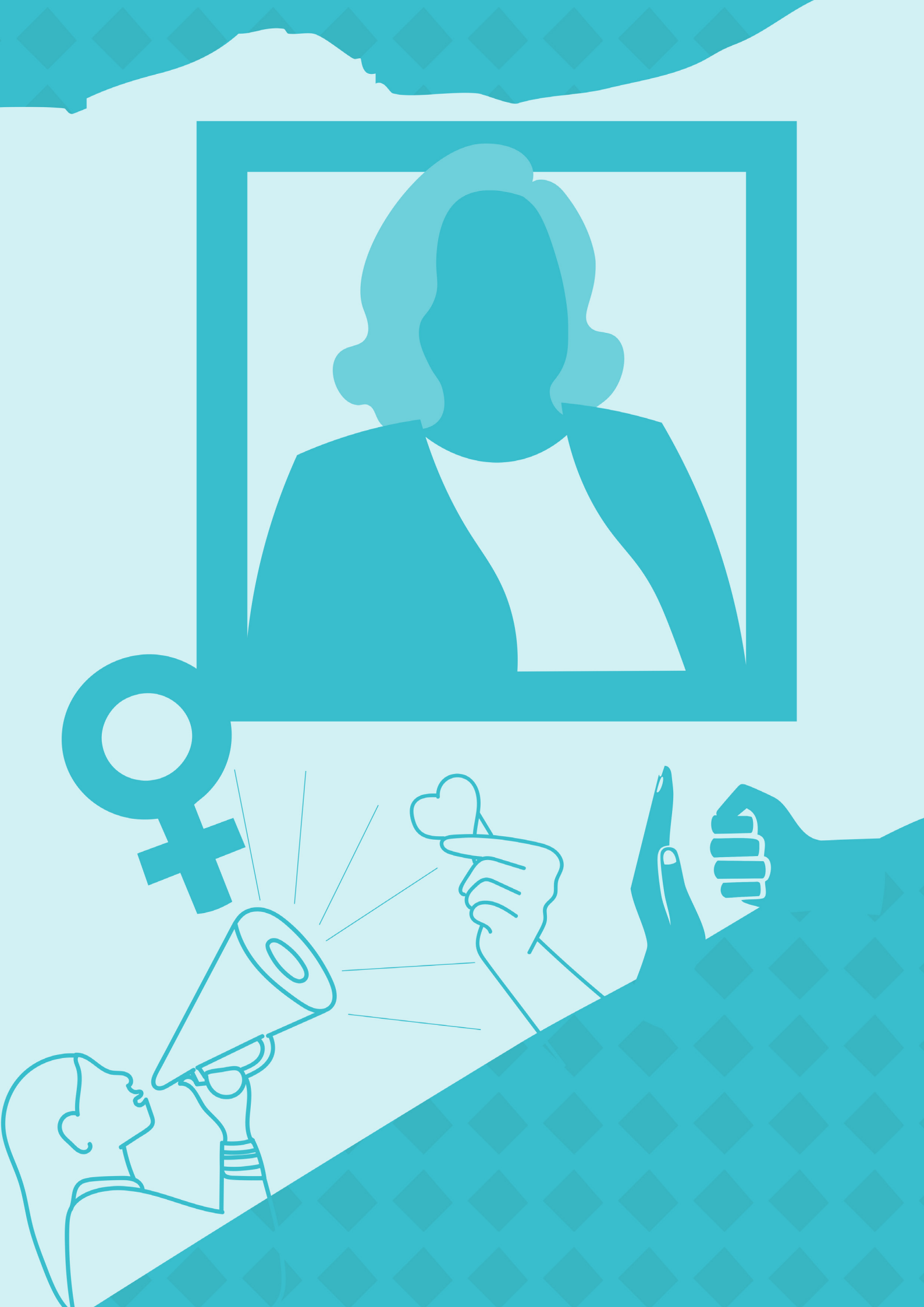
In line with growing state control and shrinking civic space, the WPS agenda has, over the course of Iraq's three NAPs, moved farther and farther away from civil society. Samira reflects with pride, how Iraq's first NAP in 2014 was regionally groundbreaking, developed entirely by civil society. While the second NAP was not completely developed by civil society, they still had a substantive part in its development. Now, as the third NAP (2025–2030) enters final consultations, Samira reflects that *"the government has withdrawn the whole WPS NAP from civil society and put it in their hand, no space for us to 'interfere'."* The NAP III will be security focused: *"All the pillars are for security sectors... nothing for other sectors",* Samira explains. Monitoring and evaluation of the NAP is also blocked, with government or government-aligned NGOs controlling reporting. Civil society contributions, such as localised plans or roadmaps, were incorporated into NAP drafts without acknowledgment. Rather than advancing women's security, Samira reflects, the NAP has become a "tick-box" instrument for the government to attract international funding while silencing independent voices.

I have so many conversations with other activists about this plan, the new national action plan. All of them say that we lost our peace because we [women] are not there. I mean the peace that we fought for, we are losing it now. So, yeah, it's a very difficult situation, especially for those who fight for the benefit of women in Iraq.

"I don't think that we are moving forward for feminist peace."

For Samira, feminist peace represents the aspiration for safety, equality, and freedom of civil society — but this vision feels increasingly out of reach: *"We dreamed to have a better future and dreamed to have a safe space... but we didn't succeed."* The corruption and militarisation of politics ensures that women's participation is tokenistic at best, and activists risk their lives for demanding more. She concluded bleakly: *"We are maybe worse than we were before."* Feminist peace is a reminder of what women once fought for through 1325, but it has been co-opted or erased by current political and power structures in Iraq.

We lost our peace because we [women] are not there.



Syria

This article is based on an interview with Amani, a woman human rights defender in Syria. Her name and affiliation have been removed to protect her identity.

A new reality for Syria

In December 2024, the regime of Bashar al-Assad fell after fourteen years of conflict and fifty years of dictatorship, overtaken in a military operation by the jihadist armed group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). The group, which formerly controlled Idlib, are well known by Syrian women rights activists for human rights violations and repression of freedom of expression. Amani, a feminist activist in Syria, says that despite HTS's track record, there was cautious optimism when HTS took over. Even though there was no peace process ushering in this new government, there was hope that a plan for peace and transitional justice would be put in place. However, in the year since the interim government assumed power things have grown more and more confusing and chaotic.

[when the Assad regime fell] there was, like a sense of hope, because people felt like, okay, if we get rid of Assad everything else will be easy, but more in time we are finding out its not easy. And it's painful too. Communities are really exhausted. They really need time to heal, to settle, to recover, and that time is not available yet.

Violence in Syria has not ended, Amani explains, although the location of violence has shifted. Areas of the country that were once heavily attacked by Assad are now 'calmer', while others newly under the interim government's control are experiencing different forms of violence. Especially in areas such as Sweida and Tartus, Amani explains, the situation is worse than it was a year ago. Israeli airstrikes in the south of Syria are also destabilising and terrorising populations, and unresolved tensions in Kurdish-controlled north-east regions are a concern. Amani reflects that although people are moving more freely, for example between Damascus, Raqqa and Idlib, security feels precarious. In such a situation, transitional justice would be an important step to relieve tensions, but measures announced by the interim government are widely perceived as superficial. Transitional justice committees established so far seem selective, focusing only on violations committed by the Assad regime and no steps toward accountability.

At the same time, there continues to be discoveries of mass graves which are going unexplained, and the country is grappling with the release of over 30,000 detainees held in prisons during Assad's regime. Amani describes how there is no coordinated state plan for reintegration, truth and justice or reparations. Many of the detainees are survivors of torture and sexual violence: *"The needs are really huge... they need like a whole habitation system to go back to life."* Women detainees struggle in particular with rejection from families after release, due to stigma. The absence of a government response to the prisoner release has left civil society struggling to fill the gap. As Amani puts it, *"we are trying our best to provide services as civil society... but the need is really huge".*

Amidst continuing violence, fear of speaking out and a discernible lack of accountability on all sides of the conflict, Amani fears a reprisal of civil war, let alone any hope of transitional justice.

How are we going to move toward transitional justice? We need to stop the violence. Otherwise, it's just a post conflict with a hidden conflict, and will turn into a bloody conflict again... The international community is pressuring Syria to settle, but you feel like the whole country, it's boiling. It's this anger, frustration everywhere, injustice, the poor economic situation, people excluded from the public atmosphere, people start to feel like they are afraid again to speak their mind

Women's peace, security and participation

"Everything that exists now in Syria is men led. It's men everywhere. It's men and testosterone."
In talking about women's peace and security situation, Amani is clear that *"violence against women has not stopped in Syria. We still have kidnapping, sexual violence, rape...we have forced disappearance and forced displacement"*. Especially in areas like Sweida, which saw a surge in violence against minority groups in July and August 2025, women and girls are at risk of death, injury and displacement. Yet for some women, conditions have slightly improved—many women who were displaced have been able to return home, employees dismissed during the revolution have returned to jobs, and female students have re-enrolled in universities.

According to Amani, these gains are not attributable to the interim government, which has shown little interest in gender equality. In fact, women are largely absent from political representation. *"The new government has barely any representation*

from women". She added that although terms like 'gender' or 'feminism' are not banned, they are widely stigmatised because society is moving in a conservative direction: *"There is a major Sunni community now in Syria and this government brought them liberation... the whole society is turning more conservative".* With a shift to conservativism and women sidelined from formal representation in the new government, patriarchal power in Syria holds strong.

Syrian women's movement: claiming space and showing up amidst fragmentation

Being a human rights defender in Syria is now very complicated, but that doesn't mean that there isn't space.

Amani describes a complicated state for women's rights and feminist activism in Syria today. On the one hand, the fall of Assad regime has fractured the feminist movement. Amani describes how previously women's rights activists were united in opposition to the dictatorship. But now, women's groups diverge in their positions toward the interim government. Amani is seeing some women's organisations falling in line with the new government, despite past, and ongoing, human rights violations carried out by its leaders, while other activists remain highly outspoken and critical of HTS.

As a feminist movement in Syria, we used to unify against Assad regime. Now we don't have anything to unify us. We are figuring out what things we work on together, what values we want to adopt.

At the same time, Amani describes how women's organising is also stronger than it has ever been: *"We are more organised, we are skilled, we have more capacity. We are not just keeping silent, we are everywhere, and we are fighting to have our place and space and voice".* Women's organisations are expanding across the country, with some operating in Damascus for the first time in years and opening offices in cities like Raqqa and Latakia. In all these places, activists are engaging ministries and government representatives, pushing for women's political participation. The new visibility also comes with risks. Women's rights activists are also extremely cautious of what they say and where. Speaking openly about violations that are ongoing in places like Sweida, by armed groups that are aligned to the new government, is dangerous.

Little hope for WPS and feminist peace

To date, there have been no talks or initiatives by the new government in Syria in relation to Women, Peace and Security. Some Syrian activists, like Amani, continue to engage in WPS talks at regional and international level, but there is a sense of deep frustration and despair. They see WPS as little more than a gesture on paper, with no real mechanisms for accountability accessible to women human rights defenders, and no real means for stopping the drivers of violence like militarisation and foreign influence. She points to the hypocrisy of the international community which celebrates the agenda while appointing countries like Russia to head the Security Council or doing little to stop Israel from committing genocide in Gaza or attacking other countries in the region. Moving forward, Amani explains, the priority must be for the WPS agenda to be decolonised and consistently localised to have meaningful impact on women's lives.

With little hope for WPS in Syria, the idea of peace for Syrian feminists is still far away. However, within her networks, Amani says there is widespread discussion about what peace could or should look like, but no consensus. *"We are talking a lot about inclusion, about a national discussion, about women participation, women inclusion, and inclusion of all groups in Syria".* But it remains an aspiration rather than a practical agenda being implemented, as activist like Amani respond to urgent needs in a tormented society, push for accountability and representation, all while under the looming threat of renewed conflict.

Ukraine

This article is based on an interview with activist and researcher, Oksana Potapova

Russia's full-scale invasion: violence that shapes everything and exacerbates all inequalities

The 2022 full scale invasion by Russia has escalated the conflict in Ukraine far beyond any experience of war to date. Attacks by land and air occur daily across the entire territory, with repeated waves of bombardment deliberately wearing down the Ukrainian population and civilian infrastructure.[5] To date, more than 14,000 people have been killed, including more than 700 children.[6]

[5] Center for Civil Liberties, "Nobel Lecture by the Center for Civil Liberties," Nobel Prize, December 10, 2022,
[6] United Nations Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (HRMMU), Ukraine: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, August 2025 (September 2025).

Activist and researcher Oksana Potapova, herself displaced, has worked at grassroots and international levels for the past 11 years to respond to the crisis. She emphasises that this is a dispute not just over territory, but a war driven by Russia's openly declared imperial project in which misogyny and homophobia are core.[7] Russia seeks to return the world to conservative and traditional values – in alignment with global anti-gender movements. This is why, alongside bombing and displacement, the war in Ukraine has seen wide-spread sexual violence in occupied territories, persecution of politically active citizens on Russian-occupied territories, and systematic repression of indigenous populations, both within Russia and in the occupied territories (such in Crimea). Through the war, Russia shows its power with impunity --"occupying and bombing another country and killing civilians every day while remaining a permanent Security Council member with the power of veto" –and has a president who receives "a red carpet" from the United States. For feminists in Ukraine, this has led to a deep disillusionment with international systems of peace and security and led them to question "who defines what peace looks like and on what terms".

The realities of war have produced new setbacks and contradictions for women's rights and gender equality in Ukraine. On the one hand, opportunities have opened for women in traditionally male-dominated professions, such as transport, demining and security sectors, including the armed forces.[8] The military conscription for men in Ukraine means that there are fewer men leading in business and local administration, while the travel ban for men also impacts their participation in international diplomacy, civil society and cultural spaces. This is already leading to disproportionate representation of women in leadership roles in civil society, culture and even business.

But the domination of men in the military industrial complex across Ukraine risks cementing masculine forms of leadership. Current leadership posts on the regional level, for example, are now occupied by people with military experience, and these are predominantly men.[9] At local political levels as well, Oksana observes that there is a decrease in women's political engagement as they have shifted into humanitarian and care responsibilities alongside taking over businesses and cultural roles. While progress in rights and representation exist at the top institutional levels in the government, everyday inequalities in resources, care responsibilities, and gender norms (which shift slowly) continue to restrict women's ability to participate fully in political and economic life. The concern, Oksana shares, is the trend could continue even after the war ends, sidelining women despite their leading roles.

Tensions in feminist imaginations of peace

Against this backdrop, the concept of peace for many Ukrainian feminists has been fundamentally redefined. Supporting armed resistance as a legitimate defence, they are often seen as *"too militarised"* and sidelined from transnational feminist peace discussions rooted in anti-militarist frameworks. Yet Ukrainian feminists are also creating new concepts, such as the Feminist Manifesto for the Right to Resist (2022), which argues that resistance to patriarchy and resistance to imperial violence must be pursued simultaneously. Important works are also being written by scholars and activists in Ukraine and the region about decolonising WPS and centring regional expertise.[10] Ukrainian feminists are insisting on definitions of peace that reflect their lived realities – one that is *"nuanced about the armed violence we are experiencing, while also ensuring that armed violence does not reoccur".*[11]

Ukraine's NAPS: a tool for institutions or a feminist peace?

For activists in Ukraine, the WPS agenda has provided both solutions and frustrations. During the past decade, Ukraine's two National Action Plans increasingly emphasised localisation to reflect diverse regional realities in the war. With the second NAP in 2020, civil society focused on addressing the multiple vulnerabilities of displaced communities, with grassroots activists

[7] Petr Kratochvíl and Maria O'Sullivan, "A War like No Other: Russia's Invasion of Ukraine as a War on Gender Order," European Security 32, no. 3 (2023): 347–66.
[8] UN Women, Three Years of Full-Scale War in Ukraine Roll Back Decades of Progress for Women's Rights, Safety and Economic Opportunities, press release, February 23, 2025.
[9] Olena Strelnyk, "Gender, Citizenship and War: How Women's Political Subjectivities Are Changing in Ukraine," Femina Politica – Zeitschrift für feministische Politikwissenschaft 32, no. 1 (2023): 114–27.
[10] Tetiana Kyselova and Dana M. Landau, "Ukrainian Visions of Peace: (Re-)Shaping Peace through Victory," International Negotiation 30, no. 1 (2025): 13–42, https://doi.org/10.1163/15718069-bja10111
[11] Feminist Perspectives on Russia's War in Ukraine: Hear Our Voices, ed. Maryna Shevtsova (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024).[6] United Nations Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (HRMMU), Ukraine: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, August 2025 (September 2025).

like Oksana advocating for the recognition of human security within the WPS framework. She recalls explaining to policymakers why access to childcare was central to security: *"What do you think is the connection between kindergarten and feminist peace and security?"* This everyday perspective was not well understood at the time, but it has since become central to discussions on recovery and gender-sensitive security.

At the same time, activists in Ukraine warn that WPS has become overly institutionalised. *"It has become, for many activists, more a tool of UN and governments"*, Oksana observes. Grassroots groups are forced to translate priorities such as collective care or trauma recovery into the framework of the four pillars, even when they do not fit neatly. In practice, WPS has functioned as both a resource channel and an advocacy tool, but it remains constrained by the need for alignment with donor frameworks rather than the organic visions of Ukraine's feminist movements. Oksana also urges that real transformation requires moving beyond performative inclusion in global forums, and needs to focus on shifting resources, power and decisions to those most affected by wars and violence: *"It's not always about bringing an activist to the Security Council... but supporting groups on the ground in envisioning their future".*

Feminist political imagination is one of the things that gets curtailed in crises and being forced to shift to the mode of responding and reacting without being able to stop and not only think, but to really dream and connect to deep longings and desires for a kind of world where we would all feel safe.

Space to imagine a feminist peace

Amidst unrelenting war and crisis, Oksana shares that there is a deep longing for the space and time to imagine alternative futures.

Ukrainian feminists need to be supported in their efforts to redefine a future that everyone can work toward -- but time, energy and resources all limit this: *"I think a lot of it has to do with having resources to stop and to think and reflect and grieve of what is already lost but what still can be reimagined and recovered."*

Even so, a foundation for feminist peace is being built daily by organisations and activists holding the fabric of communities together. Oksana urges international organisations, foreign governments and stakeholders to truly centre that knowledge – not symbolically but through co-designing programs, strategies and concepts together in a way that dismantles all forms of violence, and by channelling resources toward sustainable work of these actors.

WPS: reconnecting to sisterhood and solidarity

As the WPS agenda comes to its 25th anniversary, its fate feels precarious. Like many, Oksana holds the tension. She feels gratitude for moments when WPS has been instrumental in women's peace and security in Ukraine and elsewhere. While at the same time, she feels frustration for the ways in which the agenda is mired in institutional bureaucracy and power struggles of an increasingly confusing 'world order'. Within international and national civil society, there is a need to return to the sisterhood and solidarity that gave birth to 1325.

I'm recounting multiple spaces where I felt both very seen and heard by my global feminist sisterhood, but also very much not, just recognising that every conversation like this has an impact on me, on my body, on my nervous system. It's all part of reclaiming our power, not only in front of Russia, who is our aggressor, but also in front of the global sisterhood, which often maybe doesn't hear us as much as we would like to be heard.

Climate, conflict and women, peace and security

Across the world, extreme climate induced weather is converging with the ecological destruction wrought by war and conflict. In 2025, this is no longer an abstract concept, but one lived and documented every day by a growing number of people affected and displaced by an amalgamation of war, climate change and environmental degradation. Despite this, capitalism and the military industrial complex reign strong over the world order, continuing to bring harm to both humans and the earth. Existing inequalities and discriminatory, patriarchal structures brought by these forces continue to affect women, girls and marginalised groups in different, harsher ways.

Insights from Ukraine, Syria, Iraq, Bosnia, Armenia and DRC reveal how the impacts of armed conflict on air, water, soil and forests are inextricably linked to violence against women, increased care burdens, denial of rights, and the feminisation of poverty. All of these are aspects which the WPS agenda has sought to address over the past 25 years. The inclusion of environment and climate change in WPS resolution 2242 in 2015 made the link tangible and set an important precedent within WPS. The clear linkage between environment, climate change and conflict has also led to over 70 countries including environment and/or climate change in their National Action Plans to varying degrees – with some merely mentioning and some having more substantial evidence and commitments.[12]

Environment, climate change & the impact of war: Findings from 6 countries

Despite the clear linkages and increasing calls to action, there is still a dearth of documentation at the intersection of environment and climate change (ECC) and WPS. As we mark the 25th anniversary, we use the opportunity to gain insights from the six countries profiled in this report to spotlight findings. Through the interviews with activists and a review of documentation from the past five years, we found that several common themes emerged around the unique ways in which war and conflict intersect with environmental and climate change and all with clear implications for women, girls and marginalised groups.

- **SOIL DEGRADATION AND CONTAMINATION:** Explosives, chemical leaks, military debris and land usage, and infrastructure collapse all have serious consequences for soil contamination and degradation in Ukraine, DRC, Iraq, Syria and Armenia. In areas where populations rely on land and agricultural production, the loss of arable land has devastating impacts, particularly where women are the ones responsible for small-scale farming and providing food for the family – leading in many cases to poverty and reliance on unsafe coping mechanisms. In places like Ukraine, the damage to agricultural lands has had far ranging impacts as the country used to supply over 40% of the World Food Programme's grain.[13]

[12] University of Sydney, WPS National Action Plans, 2019, https://www.wpsnaps.org/.
[13] Andrii Bahinskyi and Natalia Potarska, "Climate-Humanitarian Crisis in the Russia-Ukraine War: Double Vulnerabilities Overlooked by the Humanitarian Response," Alternatives Humanitaires, March 31, 2025.

- **DEFORESTATION:** In Syria, DRC and Nagorno Karabakh, forested areas have been severely impacted in a variety of ways, from being cut down as firewood for survival, sold to pay for military expenses or destroyed deliberately as a tactic of war. In places where women and girls are responsible for firewood collection, deforestation causes longer journeys through insecure areas, posing increased risk of harassment and rape.

- **WATER SCARCITY AND POLLUTION:** Water systems that people rely on are being polluted with chemicals, debris and oil from the conflicts in Syria, Ukraine, Iraq and Armenia. Water sources are also deliberately attacked as a tactic of war, as seen in Syria, where two thirds of the water facilities in the country were deliberately bombed by the Assad regime during the war.[14] Combined with climate-driven drought, the dwindling availability of clean water is a serious consequence of war and has a disproportionate impact on women and girls. In such contexts, water scarcity is leading to dehydration and contamination to illness, resulting in additional care burdens on women and girls when people fall sick. In places where water must be collected, like the DRC, women and girls are at increased risk of attack when collecting water.

- **DISPLACEMENT DUE TO CLIMATE CHANGE EFFECTS AND CONFLICT RELATED ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION:** Communities around the world are increasingly being displaced due to climate change, but in conflict and climate-affected countries like DRC, Ukraine, Syria and Iraq, displacement can be not only more frequent but also more dangerous, especially for women, girls and gender diverse people, as they are forced to move in search of clean water and arable land.

As we look to the future, the WPS and environmental communities are compelled to unite against the same dominating forces that perpetuate violence to the people and planet. The two can mutually reinforce each other. Climate and environment issues can open doors to peacebuilding and conflict prevention in communities and cross borders, while WPS communities bring a wealth of knowledge and experience fighting for inclusive processes to ensure sustainable and peaceful societies. Experiences and lessons learned on both sides can be used to identify effective measures to adapt, mitigate and respond to environmental threats and damages.

Spotlight: Environment & WPS activist communities coming together in Armenia

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno Karabakh enclave raged from 2020-2023 and had devastating ecological consequences -- including air and water pollution, deforestation and degradation of soil on previously arable farmland. Agricultural opportunities and livelihoods have been severely impacted, compounding displacement and insecurity from the war. Organisations like Kvinna till Kvinna's partner *Women's Agenda* have played a bridging role, convening WPS and climate activists who had previously worked in isolation but now recognise shared struggles. Within their convergence, WPS actors contribute expertise in 'do no harm' and community-centred advocacy, while climate justice activists bring legal strategies and litigation approaches. While it is early days of these activist communities coming together, the collaboration is one to watch, and signals potential for stronger joint strategies in addressing the compounded impacts of climate change and conflict.

[14] Zeinab Shuker, "Syria's Environmental Crisis Is Its Achilles Heel," The Century Foundation, June 16, 2025.

Concluding Statement

A quarter of a century after the world promised to put women at the centre of peace and security, that promise is under siege. Wars rage, authoritarianism spreads, and women's bodies, voices, and futures are weaponised once again. Women peacebuilders and defenders are targeted, silenced, and defunded. Yet every day they continue the struggle for justice, dignity, and peace.

Silence from the international community is complicity. To arm violence against civilians, to allow international law to be applied selectively, to let women's rights be dismantled - this is to abandon not only women, but peace itself. We demand that governments stop fuelling wars, uphold international law in full, and stand with the women's movements who hold the fabric of peace together in the most difficult of circumstances.

The path forward is clear. Protect and resource women's organisations. Guarantee women's participation and influence in peace processes. Invest in climate justice and peacebuilding hand in hand. Confront the global systems, from the arms trade to nationalist repression, that perpetuate violence and impunity.

The Women, Peace and Security agenda was born from resistance. Its survival now depends on the same principled resistance: to war, to repression, to the silencing of women. The question is not whether we can afford to defend it—the truth is we cannot afford not to.

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