

2025

Women, Peace and Security: Strengthening Engagement Between the Government of Canada and Civil Society Representatives

Recommendations for
Global Affairs Canada





This work was commissioned by the Office of Canada's Ambassador for Women, Peace and Security.

We would like to thank the activists who took the time to speak with us and all those—both civil society representatives and government officials—who answered the online survey.

This report was made possible by the work of Deeplina Banerjee, Alexandria Bohémier, Christine Cassar Eldridge, Monique Cuillerier, Marisa Consolata Kemper, Elishma Noel Khokhar, Katrina Leclerc, Maria Leis, Urooj Mian, Jo Rodrigues, Laura Sewell, and Beth Woroniuk.

Published by the Women, Peace and Security Network-Canada (WPSN-C)

February 2025

©WPSN-C, 2025

All rights reserved.

wpsn-canada.org

Contact us at:
coordinator@wpsn-canada.org

Table of Contents

Acronyms	ii
Acknowledgements	ii
Executive Summary	1
Introduction	2
Methodology	3
Context	3
General Reflections and Feedback	4
General Recommendations	10
Concrete Recommendations for GAC staff	13
Conclusion	16
Annex 1 - Resources	17
Annex 2 – Parliamentary Committee Recommendations	19

Acronyms

2SLGBTQI+	Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer and other members who identify with the community
CFLI	Canada Fund for Local Initiatives
CNAP	Canada's National Action Plan on WPS
CSO	civil society organization
FPDS	Foreign Policy and Diplomacy Services
GAC	Global Affairs Canada
GBA+	Gender-Based Analysis Plus
GoC	Government of Canada
HOMs	Heads of Mission
IRCC	Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and other Members who identify with the community
NAP	National Action Plan
OHCHR	United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
PMO	Prime Minister's Office
PSOPs	Global Affairs Canada, Peace and Stabilization Operations Program
TAP	Technical Assistance Program
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
WHRD	women human rights defender
WLO	women-led organization
WPS	Women, Peace and Security
WPSA	Canada's WPS Ambassador
WRO	women's rights organization
WPSN-C	Women, Peace and Security Network - Canada

Executive Summary

This document was prepared under contract to the Office of the WPSA by the WPSN-C. It provides reflections and advice on how the GoC can strengthen engagements with civil society representatives/WHRDs – in Canada and at Canadian missions abroad.

The discussion and recommendations are based on the experiences of WPSN-C members, interviews with WHRDs, two brief online surveys open to both GoC officials and civil society representatives, and a literature review. The report uses the OHCHR's definition of WHRDs which includes women and girls rights activists and peacebuilders, all those who work for gender equality, and 2SLGBTQI+ activists (a broad definition).

The report outlines general reflections and feedback, citing specific positive examples of engagement and challenges from both Canada and Canadian missions. It then provides eight recommendations:

1. Ground all interactions in respect and support for the safety of WHRDs.
2. Take consultations seriously.
3. Increase funding and improve the 'quality' of the funding (more flexibility, reduce red tape, longer-term, etc.).
4. Design and implement a strategy to support and engage WHRDs now in Canada.
5. Strengthen the implementation of the Voices at Risk guidelines.
6. Invest in increased capacity of GAC staff to respectfully and responsibly engage with WHRDs.
7. In consultations with Indigenous women's organizations in Canada, develop a strategy to support their ongoing inputs into Canada's WPS work.
8. Strengthen policy coherence, ensuring attention to WPS generally and WHRDs more specifically across all of Canada's international engagements.

The report concludes with a concrete list of "do's & don'ts" for GAC officials.

Introduction

Being a human rights defender and building peace can be dangerous. Even more so for women and 2SLGBTQI+ people.

CIVICUS reports that one-third of the world's population now lives in countries with closed civic space.[1] The Swedish organization, Kvinna till Kvinna, notes a “concerning increase in harassments and threats against women’s and queer rights activists.” The UN OHCHR verified the killings of 34 women human rights defenders in conflict-affected countries activists in 2022 alone, noting that this is likely a fraction of the real number of cases. Although activists in Canada do not face the same level of daily violence, WHRDs who have sought asylum here still experience threats to family members at home. As well, increasing anti-Semitism and Islamophobia here in Canada are contributing to concerns regarding the safety and security of many activists.

The implementation of Canada’s second national action plan on WPS (second Action Plan) formalized interactions between civil society and the GoC staff responsible for its implementation. The Action Plan Advisory Group (co-chaired by the GoC and the WPSN-C) is seen by both government representatives and Network members as good practice. It has facilitated discussion and built relationships. Initially intended as an accountability mechanism as well, WPSN-C members noted during consultations on CNAP3 that it was less effective in this area.

This report was researched and written by members of the WPSN-C under contract to the Office of the WPSA. The objective is to provide recommendations and advice on how GAC staff can better engage WPS civil society activists (including WHRDs) – in Canada and through Canadian missions abroad. We acknowledge that there are different dynamics and factors in Canada compared to missions, especially when the mission is in a conflict or fragile setting. The report was prepared in late February 2024, before the launch of Canada’s third national action plan on WPS.

Definition

OHCHR defines women human rights defenders as “all women and girls working on any human rights issue (“women defenders” and “girl defenders”), and people of all genders who work to promote women’s rights and rights related to gender equality.” This definition goes on to include:

any civil society actors who may not self-identify as human rights defenders or those who work on non-traditional human rights fields (journalists, health workers, environmental activists, peacebuilders, private actors, development and humanitarian actors, etc.). It includes lesbian, gay, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) activists, as issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity are part of achieving gender equality.

For the purposes of this report, we use this definition of WHRDs – including women peacebuilders and 2SLGBTQI+ activists.

[1] CIVICUS website: *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings_2023/innumbers/

[2] Kvinna Till Kvinna (2023)

[3] United Nations Security Council (2023)

[4] <https://www.ohchr.org/en/women/women-human-rights-defenders>

Methodology

The methodology was constrained by the short timelines. The contract was signed on February 22nd, 2024 and deadline for completion was March 28th, leaving only slightly over two weeks for data gathering, analysis, and preparation of the initial draft. This limited the number of direct inputs from WHRDs. To ensure the incorporation of views and issues, we drew on testimony from two parliamentary studies and publicly available documentation.

The WPSN-C used the following methods to collect inputs:

- Documentation review. Annex 1 includes an extensive list of documents.
- Online survey for WPSN-C members, WHRDs in Canada, and others interested in providing input (13 responses).
- Online survey for Global Affairs Canada staff (in English and French) (14 responses).
- Interviews/groups discussions with WHRDs both in Canada and those based elsewhere (6 participants).
- Discussion and analysis of the experiences of WPSN-C members (15 participants).

It is important to note that this exercise did not employ quantitative methods. We sought to identify insights and recommendations, rather than assessing the number of times a specific recommendation was identified.

Context

Context is always important. We highlight four issues:

- Canada is often seen (and sees itself) as a leader on WPS issues. At the time of writing, Canada's third WPS national action plan (third Action Plan) has been approved by Cabinet but not yet made public. While Canada has initiated WPS policy initiatives and increased investments in programming, civil society organizations (both inside and outside of Canada) continue to raise questions and critiques regarding GoC's implementation of the WPS agenda.[5] This is important framing for the discussion below.
- The WPS agenda is broad and includes many different issues and perspectives. There are many voices in civil society.[6] Consultations and engagements require depth and sophistication to reflect diversity and differing priorities. Women peacebuilders constantly note the complexity of their contexts, their strategies, and their efforts to bring about change. There is growing documentation of shrinking civic engagement spaces, the backlash to the WPS agenda, and the growing momentum behind rolling back women's rights and attacking 2SLGBTQI+ rights in general.[7]

[5] See – for example – the publications on the WPSN-C website: <https://wpsn-canada.org/what-we-do/publications-and-reports/>. These publications bring together diverse perspectives. Other critiques include Potvin & Lefurgey (2024) and Research Network on WPS (2023).

[6] For example, the WPSN-C per se does not sign letters or join campaigns. This is done by individual members.

[7] There is a growing body of research and documentation. See – just for example – Women's International Peace Centre and Cordaid (2020) and Roggeband & Kriszsan (2020). LSE has a research initiative, Mapping Anti-Gender Movements and Resistance. A recent issue of the IDS Bulletin, Understanding Gender Backlash, provides a useful collection of articles.

- In the current moment, activists are raising important questions regarding the relevance of the WPS agenda in multilateral fora and by governments. They cite the lack of investments, slow progress, and growing global investments in military spending.[8] As well, the spirit of the WPS agenda (including the emphases in conflict prevention and inclusive peacebuilding) appears to be lacking as the death toll and violence mount in Afghanistan, Gaza, Sudan, Ukraine, and elsewhere.
- There is a growing body of evidence on the importance of WRO/WLO/WHRD organizations in conflict settings.[9] These organizations and activists do crucial work, yet they are often excluded from formal policy making and decision-making spaces. At the same time, few development assistance resources flow their way.

General Reflections and Feedback from Participants

As noted above there is growing recognition among international actors of the critical nature of the role of civil society in the WPS agenda. Civil society actors were the push behind the initial UNSC resolution and have been at the core of WPS work before and since. Canada's second WPS national action plan (CNAP2 2017-2022) highlights and acknowledges this role.

There is also a growing understanding of the work of WHRDs and the growing dangers they face. This context is an important starting point for any discussion of how GAC can support WHRDs. Several people noted that the current situation with heightened tensions around the crisis in Gaza, and growing Islamophobia and anti-Semitism in Canada have increased concerns for activists' safety and ability to speak out freely.

We heard both positive and negative examples of past consultations, engagements, and discussions between the GoC and civil society activists – in Canada and at missions. The good examples and challenges listed below are based on the information provided during outreach for this document and experiences of WPSN-C members. We do not have a quantitative analysis of how widespread various practices are or whether or not these examples are representative of broad trends.

On the positive side, good examples noted included:

- In Canada
 - The WPS Advisory Group in Canada is recognized by both government and civil society respondents as an innovative mechanism (by both civil society and government representatives).
 - Civil society representatives noted appreciation for the official recognition of the role played by civil society in the second Action Plan.
 - Briefings by WHRDs to outgoing HOMs and deploying staff, as part of their orientation, were identified as a good practice by WHRDs.

[8] *Peacewomen (2023). Hypocrisy at the Security Council is Stalling Progress on WPS.*

[9] *See, for example, GAPS et al (2020) and WPHF & Spotlight Initiative (2021).*

- The ongoing responsiveness of the WPSA to civil society (regular, useful meetings with the WPSN-C, meeting with women activists during her trips, highlighting civil society views during public statements, etc.) was mentioned by several civil society respondents.
- One civil society respondent mentioned the annual consultations on ‘peacebuilding’ as a good (lost) past practice that enabled constructive exchanges between government staff and civil society (organized under the auspices of the Canadian Peacebuilding Coordinating Committee in the early 2000s).
- GAC staff mentioned the WPS Civil Society Leadership Award as a good practice. This was not mentioned by any civil society respondents.
- Invitations to civil society to participate in GoC delegations (including to 2022 WPS Focal Points meetings, the October 2023 open debate on WPS at the UNSC, and the WPSA’s 2023 mission to Colombia) were identified as good practices by both government and civil society respondents.

- At Missions

- One person noted a specific case where the Canadian ambassador in the country was a strong advocate for women peacebuilders and gender equality and these efforts were much appreciated by local civil society activists. She made a point of visiting women’s organizations outside of the capital and was a good listener.
- GAC staff noted hosting events and discussions as good examples of engagement.
- Flexibility on the part of GAC officials was noted by civil society representatives as a good practice that supported engagement. As one civil society respondent noted:
 - “We faced significant resistance from the local government but we used this resistance as an opportunity to engage in conversations around how services should be delivered to LGBTQI+ persons with positive results. It was important that the Canadian mission and GAC understood that deliverables may be delayed while we had these conversations. That is, the process was as important as the end result.”
- Elevating discussions to regional levels can provide momentum and inspiration. One Canadian civil society respondent noted:
 - “Networking regionally on these issues may be leveraged - for example, if LGBTQI+ gains are made in India, this may be more persuasive in discussions/negotiations with Sri Lankan or Bangladeshi entities than Canadian practices. So creating avenues for regional champions outside of your mission to come to your mission and share their experiences - creating these networking opportunities.”

“

Engagement with LGBTQI+ organisations on the development of the National Action Plan, as well as through learning sessions with Outright International were positive. Partner organisations are doing important work on LGBTQI+ inclusion in the WPS agenda and addressing the particular needs of LGBTQI+ individuals in times of crisis and conflict. Sharing these perspectives with GAC staff is important to build understanding and buy-in for ongoing work in this area.

Global Affairs Canada respondent

”

- The Equality Fund has developed guidance on how to conduct in-person visits/monitoring missions that is worth quoting at length.^[10] This document outlines seven principles and how to apply them. Although not developed exclusively for use in conflict-affected contexts, this resource could assist GAC in formulating future guidance on how to contract consultations, monitoring missions, and other engagement processes. The principles included are:

- Acknowledge and shift power: We recognize the power imbalance between Equality Fund and our grantee partners. We seek to shift power to and amplify power within, the feminist movements we support and practice mutual accountability.
- Design and use for advocacy and social justice: Equality Fund recognizes that data is political and a powerful resource in influencing decision making. Equality Fund works to design systems and generate data that can be used both by the women’s rights organizations we serve and the donors who support so that we can work together to advance feminist movements’ social change agendas.
- Value multiple ways of knowing and honour diversity and context: We know that women, girls, trans and gender non-conforming persons are experts and knowledge holders and we recognize the importance of going beyond traditional western hierarchies of what counts as knowledge or evidence.
- Take the time to understand intersectionality: Equality Fund takes an intersectional approach to the work of our partners, and understands that gender inequities are inextricably linked to complex, cross-cutting and interlocking systems of oppression, including but not limited to racism, ableism, classism, and homophobia.
- Recognize that social change is complex, nonlinear, multifactorial and takes time: We understand that systemic change is rooted in complex, non-linear, multi-factorial processes. Equality Fund aims to capture systemic change in a long-term timeline.
- Design for Accessibility: We are committed to creating processes that are simple and generating knowledge that is relevant and accessible to our partners and community.



While working in a country where homosexuality is illegal, it was helpful to open discussions based on Canada's GBA+ tool to look at how public services to the LGBTQI+ community or women should be grounded in evidence - that everyone deserves respectful services irrespective of the legalities of their identity. We also engaged local LGBTQI+ organizations and advocates to guide how best to engage with the local government, and looked to the local High Commission as having visible events hosting LGBTQI+ organizations as giving legitimacy to their cause and demands. While we received input from LGBTQI+ local activists and other non-LGBTQI+ respected individuals, we were able to use our project to advocate their issues and perspectives while maintaining their confidentiality and protecting them from any repercussions. We leaned heavily on other regional best practices, as well as Canadian best practices, to show the mutual benefit of inclusive services (i.e. conflict prevention and promoting social cohesion).

Civil society respondent



^[10] Document provided to the authors by the Equality Fund.

- Consider how we can orient ourselves to caring for our colleagues: We understand care and healing as central to social justice organizing, and a political act that acknowledges the personal and collective harm that activists and organizations experienced from the impact of oppressive histories, intergenerational trauma, and structural violence. We see care as an important factor for sustainable feminist organizing and strengthening social movements.
- Working through/with multilateral organizations
 - There were differing perspectives on the advantages and disadvantages of working through UN entities within specific countries. One GAC respondent wrote favourably about working with UN Women as a key interlocutor. They noted that in that country, UN Women is “a trusted partner of the government and considered a ‘safe’ intermediary - both for government and civil society.” A civil society respondent provided a counterpoint, noting that in many contexts, activists have concerns about the role played by UN Women vis-a-vis civil society (gatekeeping, inequitable distribution of resources, etc.).
- Funding and resources
 - Several respondents noted funding for women’s organizations/2SLGBTQI+ organizations as a good practice. One noted that although Canadian support came with some red tape, it was the most flexible of all the funding received from international funders.

It is interesting to note that one consistent theme was that good examples were often the result of the efforts of specific individuals. Several times, people noted that when these individuals were rotated out, the good practices did not continue to the same extent. Priority given to WPS issues by Canadian missions is perceived to be dependent on who is posted there.

On the more challenging side, we heard:

- There are many examples where GAC staff demonstrated a lack of awareness of the challenging context (for example, expecting e-transfers to work when – in reality – the banking system as a whole was not functioning).
- Good practice still seems to be linked to specific individuals, especially in missions. We heard several examples of cases where outreach was positive (consistent, respectful, and supportive), yet this dropped significantly when the leading staff were rotated out of the position.



I think the first example of a good practice of engagement with civil society actors who work on WPS issues is to fund them. We do this here in [country] through a variety of funding mechanisms (PSOPs, Development, CFLI). Another practice, which sounds fairly straightforward but that I think is key, is having an open door policy at the Embassy to meet with civil society leaders. If they want time with us, we will make it. And often convene others. I have found that this is greatly appreciated and an important action we can take.

Global Affairs Canada respondent



- There was frustration that interactions can be tokenistic (heard from civil society respondents – both in Canada and internationally). Activists are asked for advice, but then officials - especially those at the working level - are not in the position to make changes based on that input. GAC officials may take meetings with WHRDs, but then be unable to take action on their advocacy issues, despite the alignment of these with Canada's position. This is particularly the case when this involves speaking out against the host government, which is highly political. GAC should clearly state the limits of their potential for action to avoid creating false expectations. This speaks to the challenge of 'policy coherence' and the inability of officials at lower levels to change broad policy directions or increase resource flows.
- There are instances when civil society has been asked for feedback and input, but then given unrealistic timelines for their response (24 or 48 hours).
- The absence of support for WHRDs once they arrive in Canada was a theme of our discussions. Several activists noted that they had more interaction with GoC officials in their home country and were surprised to experience the drop in engagement once they arrived in Canada, despite their ongoing connections to their home country and continued human rights work. There was a concern that Canadian officials more often engaged with activists who had sought asylum in other countries. As well, the security and economic challenges faced by many WHRDs once they arrive in Canada is a gap that has been raised previously (including by WHRDs testifying at Parliamentary committees).[11]
- Civil society respondents noted examples of meetings being scheduled between civil society activists and visiting Canadian officials (sometimes politicians) and then being canceled at the last minute, or of working level staff from Ottawa or missions engaging partners in extensive planning exercises for potential visits, only to then cancel that partner's engagement in the visit due to logistic or time management factors.
- Respondents noted examples of civil society organizations being invited to the capital for meetings, sometimes on short notice, with no offers of travel supports.
- There were critiques of Canadian policy and positioning in specific countries (by civil society respondents in Canada and internationally): One activist wrote "Canada must act independently from the United States, listen to Canadian advocates who are in tune with the realities on the ground, represented by social movements, not just corporate and financial interests."
- GAC staffing capacities pose challenges. In responding to our request for good examples, one GAC respondent noted that "Yes, I have examples. I do not, however, have time to provide an exhaustive accounting. FPDS [Foreign Policy and Diplomacy Services] teams are far too poorly resourced to be able to invest the time and attention necessary to capture and document this kind of information in any kind of systematic way."
- GAC staff noted that the attitudes, policies and positions of other governments often pose challenges for the engagement of civil society. One respondent noted: "Through the Technical Assistant Program (TAP), Canada supported [Government] in the development of a roadmap for its first National Action Plan. Participation of civil society was somewhat limited due to the [government's] view that civil society participation should come at a later point once the government institutions had their objectives and priorities clearer. In the future the participation/consultation of civil society should be incorporated in the planning of the project and the proposal."

[11] See also Amnesty International Canada (2023).

- One civil society respondent noted challenges in concepts and terminology: “We have ongoing challenges at Veterans Affairs and National Defence with government employees conflating women issues and advocacy with 2SLGBTQI+ rights. The concepts may overlap - but they are not interchangeable issues or concerns. ‘Equity seeking, Equity deserving, Equity denied groups’ can be a more equitable and inclusive vocabulary approach to some of these conversations in some cases. In my lived experiences, despite being the largest equity seeking group - it usually is the ‘women’s’ rights that get whitewashed/minimized unless kept separate to other ‘intersectionality issues’.”

There were a few examples provided from other countries that Canada could further explore and learn from:

- Example from another country: “The [Country] Embassy in [Country] has engaged with women and 2SLGBTQI+ rights and peacebuilders in the following ways: one-on-one consultations, stakeholder engagement, meetings with groups including youth groups. The Embassy also funds and has hosted a number of projects/workshops with women/2SLGBTQI+ rights and peacebuilders.”
- Embassies from other countries have directly supported the evacuation of WHRDs.
- The WPS network in the United Kingdom has developed consultation guidelines to engage women in conflict-affected contexts: [Beyond Consultations: A Tool to Promote More Meaningful Engagement of Women in Fragile and Conflict Affected States](#).

We also note the absence of links between WPS discussions and GAC’s Policy for Civil Society Partnerships for International Assistance - A Feminist Approach.[12] The policy sets out “the Department’s approach to enhancing effective cooperation with Canadian, international and local civil society organizations (CSOs) to maximize the impact and results of Canada’s international assistance and foster a strong and vibrant civil society sector.” While some of the documentation on the Policy recognizes WPS initiatives, crosswalks between these two areas of work could be strengthened and improved.

Finally, one GAC respondent also had advice for civil society in Canada: “While I recognize the essential role that the WPSN-C plays in holding the GoC accountable to its WPS commitments, I feel that at times there could be a more productive approach that is rooted in positive collaboration and mutual support. The GoC can be a complex working environment where decisions may be driven by competing priorities and geopolitical dynamics. At the working-level, there is only so much within our control, and yet, we endeavour to do our very best in continuing to advocate that a WPS lens be prioritized in all aspects of crisis response and related peace and security efforts. Healthy criticism from civil society is vital in driving these efforts and can be of great use to our work. However, consistently negative interactions that feel more personal than objective, can damage perceptions of the value of civil society perspectives in navigating complex issues. I only ask that during these times, members lead by example with patience, empathy, and compassion, as ultimately we are all working towards common objectives. Sustaining a collaborative relationship is important and requires effort from all parties, however consistently putting those without decision-making capacity on the defensive is counterproductive.”

[12] https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/priorities-priorites/civil_policy-politique_civile.aspx?lang=eng

General Recommendations

In order to help improve GAC's interactions with WHRDs, we have seven general recommendations.

Recommendation 1: Ground all interactions in respect and support for the safety of WHRDs. Given the dangers faced by WHRDs on a daily basis, safety and protection must be given primacy in all interactions with WPS civil society actors. This holds at all times for Canadian missions and is relevant when dealing with activists now in Canada. Interactions with WHRDs facing personal security risks must be referred to those within the GoC who have the seniority to ensure their safety and to meaningfully address their cause. Staff need to be aware of security protocols and the risks run by activists and take all required steps to ensure their safety. This includes, but is not limited to, whether the activists can be cited, if their photos can be used, if the event will be referenced on social media, and if the WHRDs will be able to review any quotes (etc.) in advance of public use.

Activists themselves must lead on what is safe and what level of risk they are willing to run when they engage with the Government of Canada in their human rights advocacy. This recommendation is linked to the next one. GAC officials should be transparent regarding how much influence they have to enact change in Canadian policy or other areas that are under discussion.

Recommendations 5 and 6 are also relevant here and further elaborate how to uphold a standard of safety.

Recommendation 2: Take consultations seriously. Token consultation is a difficult issue to overcome. When asking WHRDs for their insights, analysis, and recommendations GoC staff must be clear on what they can and will do with this information. They should also be clear how they will use the information and what the scope for change is. Planning and advance preparation is required (including security protocols in situations where they are necessary).



Careful preparation of having people at risk involved is essential but we can never cover every possibility. When I ask people at risk if they want to be involved I ask them how and what would help them feel safe. However, they know they are always at risk and usually are ready to participate in something if they think it will make a real difference... I am very skeptical that government representatives take the same steps.

Civil society respondent

We found the Canadian embassy representatives silent on [WPS/WHRD] matters, unable and unwilling to have discussion on these serious findings, uninformed and this was disappointing. As Canadians we hoped information sharing would be two ways.

Civil society respondent

Historically (as in past consultations on previous NAPs) GAC has engaged civil society in an extractive way, requesting their participation and guidance, and then not including them in the follow-up or implementation. This approach is not useful and can be harmful to relationships with civil society. The engagement of the WPSN-C and ongoing work with civil society is positive.

Government respondent



Follow-up and circling back to activists on what was done with the information discussed is essential. We heard many examples of WHRDs left wondering what changed as a result of their inputs. When no changes are possible, this deserves clear explanations.

Recommendation 3: Increase funding and improve the ‘quality’ of the funding (more flexibility, reduce red tape, longer-term, etc.). This remains a fundamental point and must be the cornerstone of all civil society engagement strategies. Time requested for sharing perspectives, experience, and expertise requires compensation. If activists are to participate in activities, provide inputs, function as dialogue partners, and more – then salaries, stipends, etc. are necessary.

Although funding for WHRD organizations in the Global South is the priority, it is also important not to forget resourcing for organizations based in Canada. There are few options available to support Canadian-based WPS work (especially policy and advocacy work focused on Canadian commitments and initiatives) and most is done on a volunteer basis.[13]

“ Effective engagement requires funding opportunities for women/2SLGBTQI+ rights and peacebuilders in civil society. Civil society respondent ”

Recommendation 4: Design and implement a strategy to support and engage WHRDs now in Canada (originally from a conflict-affected country). This recommendation emerged as part of the civil society consultations on CNAP3 and was included in the 2023 House of Commons subcommittee study on WHRDs.[14]

As noted above we heard from WHRDs now in Canada that there are few supports once they arrive in Canada and there are often limited opportunities to continue their human rights/WPS work. Economic necessities often force activists into low-paid work unrelated to their previous activism. As well, contact and consultation by GAC is irregular and not sustained. WHRDs now in Canada noted that they are currently an under-used resource.

Recommendation 5: Strengthen the implementation of the Voices at Risk guidelines. Updated Voices at Risk guidelines were released in 2019, almost five years ago. The guidelines are to support the interactions of GAC staff with human rights defenders, including WHRDs, 2SLGBTQI+ defenders, and women peacebuilders. GAC’s Human Rights Division does participate in training on the guidelines and is available to support specific missions. There does not, however, appear to be documentation on how the guidelines are used and what is being learned, so it is difficult to assess their effectiveness and use.

The Voices at Risk guidelines have the potential to be a useful tool, however, greater investments in staff capacity and policy coherence are required.

[13] See Woroniuk (2023)

[14] Canada (2023). House of Commons. SDIR. The Rights and Freedoms of Women and Girls Globally, and in Afghanistan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. Report of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Subcommittee on International Human Rights. See also Amnesty International Canada (2023).

Recommendation 6: Invest in increased capacity of GAC staff to respectfully and responsibly engage with WHRDs. We recognize that there are many demands on GAC staff, however, engaging with WHRDs – both in Canada and through missions – requires skills, knowledge, and awareness of the issues. As noted above, briefings for outgoing HOMs are a good practice that could be expanded and continued. Current initiatives to update GAC capacities could explicitly address this dimension of diplomacy and Canada’s WPS NAP. It’s not known by the authors if current formal training on WPS covers this dimension, however, this is a key element. As well, training courses can be supplemented by other capacity building initiatives (documenting good practices, mentoring, continuous learning opportunities, handing over of relationships during regular rotations, etc.).

Recommendation 7: In consultations with Indigenous women’s organizations in Canada, develop a strategy to support their ongoing inputs into Canada’s WPS work - both in Canada and internationally. Conversations with Indigenous women’s organizations were outside the scope of this initiative, however we would like to signal the importance of investing in and better understanding what is required to successfully and respectfully engage Indigenous communities in Canada’s WPS efforts.



The [Forum in an eastern European country in 2021 on internet issues] faced controversies related to LGBTQ+ issues. There were reports of discrimination and exclusion, with concerns raised about the safety and well-being of LGBTQ+ participants. Lack of inclusivity, understanding, and sensitivity to LGBTQ+ issues contributed to a hostile environment. Ignoring the diverse needs and experiences of participants led to negative consequences. To ensure a safe and welcoming environment for all participants, it is recommended to implement comprehensive diversity and inclusion policies. It is also advisable for event organizers and staff to receive training on LGBTQ+ awareness and sensitivity. Clear mechanisms for reporting harassment and discrimination with prompt and appropriate responses are also important. This is particularly crucial for international conferences and forums, where issues of diversity and inclusion may be complex. To this day, many international conferences and forums continue to face incidents of harassment, where individuals may experience disrespectful behaviour or feel ignored when seeking justice. Implementing better mechanisms to address harassment, raising awareness of the importance of inclusivity, and more effectively enforcing anti-discrimination policies may be needed to improve the situation.

Civil society respondent



Consistent with the GoC’s nation-to-nation policy and approach, an explicit (and resourced) approach to including representatives of Indigenous women’s organizations in WPS discussions is important. These organizations are not generally considered part of ‘civil society’ in the usual sense. Investments and conversations with Indigenous organizations are required to design mechanisms and processes for their engagement.

Recommendation 8: Strengthen policy coherence, ensuring attention to WPS generally and WHRDs more specifically across all of Canada’s international engagement. Activists have consistently raised the issue of policy coherence regarding Canada’s implementation of the WPS agenda. They have highlighted that while specific WPS initiatives are important, consistency across all international policies is key. WHRDs are affected by Canadian trade, economic, security, diplomatic, and environmental policies. For example WHRDs engaged in advocacy on environmental issues are affected by GoC support for Canadian mining companies and women peacebuilders are affected by arms exports from Canada.

WHRDs have highlighted the importance of IRCC policy and programs. The 2023 Parliamentary study recommended improvements to refugee and asylum programs and supports for WHRDs.

At the working level, coherence between engagement on WPS issues and GAC’s Policy on Civil Society Partnerships could be improved.

“

I think GAC should think about why they want to engage with WHRDs. If they open this engagement, they are accountable to making it a meaningful relationship. They are accountable for working to support these women and their work. This is not a relationship for social media. Is GAC ready to act as a liaison with the Prime Minister’s Office, IRCC, and others to represent these women’s voices and agendas? My experience with GAC is that in general at the working level/within the department they are not able to do this. This poses a risk in opening up this relationship of creating expectations that GAC cannot meet. GAC should rely on its partners who have long-term relationships with WHRD to manage the relationship with WHRDs, and for its own role should focus on how it can be an advocate within government and to other governments for WHRDs’ causes.

Civil society respondent

”

Concrete Recommendations for GAC staff when interacting with WHRDs

At the risk of oversimplifying issues, this section provides a draft tool on “do’s and don’ts” when organizing interactions with civil society in general, and WHRDs in particular.

DO

- Do ensure that the safety of WHRDs - and in particular those who speak out against injustice and oppression - is prioritized above all else, and that they are not put in danger or subjected to further violence or oppression as a result of their engagement with the Government of Canada. This includes being sensitive to dynamics with national governments.
- Do respect the time, expertise, lived experience, and analysis of WHRDs. Be guided by their requests and ensure fully informed consent of all initiatives. Avoid engaging at points in the bureaucratic process where feedback cannot be incorporated or on issues that cannot be influenced. Be accountable as to how feedback is incorporated into action.
- Do think carefully about purpose and desired outcome of the engagement.
- Do build longer-term relationships rather than one-off requests.
- Do recognize the diversity of civil society. Try to include multiple voices – Indigenous and people of colour, young people, people living with disabilities, among others.
- Do coordinate with other missions to avoid multiple, similar requests of activists.
- Do offer honoraria, travel support, child care costs, etc. Recognize the value of activists’ time and efforts.
- Do allow space for criticism and open channels for honest dialogue, even when it is negative. Provide reassurance that there will not be reprisals for disagreements.
- Do conduct ‘follow-up’ surveys or interviews to find out how participants feel about visits, events, consultations, etc. Give permission for people to identify any disappointments or challenges and what could be improved next time. Check to see if there were reprisals for their participation.
- Do understand and respect the complexity of WHRDs’ relationship with their governments, and carefully manage confidentiality and security risks.
- Do lend political support to WHRDs’ voices when they speak out against injustice and actively support their advocacy within the GoC and with other governments.
- Do include 2SLGBTIQ+ organizations and activists in WPS discussions. However, this must be done carefully and respectfully, ensuring the safety, dignity, and rights of activists. Contexts vary across countries and regions.
- Do provide ample time for when asking for feedback or inputs. Requesting a response in 24 or 48 hours is not realistic.

DON'T

- Don't view the engagement as primarily a "photo-op."
- Don't cancel at the last minute.
- Don't only consult activists in the capital city.
- Don't post on social media without the consent of the activists.
- Don't assume activists agree with GoC positions (on climate/environment, corporate responsibility, diplomatic/political positions, etc.).



Do not shy away from raising LGBTQI+ or women's rights when confronted with the responses that these issues are neo-colonialist. Rather, leverage local and international human rights instruments and engage local organizations to assist in how to frame these issues that can work based on the local situation. Search for local champions respected by local governments who can counter any neo-colonialist arguments. Understand that the process of having difficult conversations is as important as the final product - and cannot always be easily measured in a results-based management framework. Incremental change may be slow... and will be important to ensure a "do no harm" approach that may require looking for less ambitious results but that nevertheless has moved the needle ever so slightly.

Civil society representative



- Don't assume that activists will be comfortable or safe interacting with their governments. Do recognize the risk that activists often take in engaging with Canada to advance progressive positions that may not be welcomed locally.
- Don't assume that one or two organizations speak "for civil society."
- Recognize the diversity and rich perspectives of movements and organizations.
- Don't assume that if something 'worked' in one country, it will work in all. Context matters.
- Don't assume that everyone understands or is familiar with the WPS agenda or interprets the words in the same way.
- Don't forget to circle back to people consulted and let them know what you did with their recommendations. Were you able to use their inputs? If not, why not? Did anything change as a result of the engagement?
- Don't rush a meeting. Do make sure there is enough time allocated to respectfully hear from everyone.
- Don't have visiting Canadians say opening remarks and then leave. Staying for the entire meeting is the respectful thing to do.

Conclusion

This document pulls together reflections and observations from GAC staff, WHRDs (both now in Canada and several working outside of Canada), and WPSN-C. It aims to strengthen GoC engagement with civil society, especially activists who invest so much in building peace, protecting rights, promoting equality, and holding the GoC accountable for its WPS commitments.

Strong engagement is always important, but in this moment it is even more crucial. Throughout our discussions there were strong undercurrents pointing to the need to reinvigorate and innovate around the WPS agenda - on consultation mechanisms specifically and more on the overall agenda more generally. One GAC respondent noted that despite multiple years of strong and vibrant engagement with civil society organizations little progress was being made. Given current crises and global challenges, a strong WPS movement is needed more than ever. Activists who have always been at the core of the WPS agenda have much to say and deserve to be heard.

Annex 1: Resources

- Anderlini, S. N. (2020). Recognizing Women Peacebuilders: Critical Actors in Effective Peacemaking. ICAN/WASL/LSE.
- American Civil Liberties Union. (2018). 12 Things Other Countries Have Done to Promote Gender Equity.
- Amnesty International Canada. (2023). Solidarity with Women Human Rights Defenders in Exile in Canada.
- Amnesty International UK. (2021). On the Human Rights Frontline: How the UK government can defend the defenders.
- Canada (2023). House of Commons. SDIR. The Rights and Freedoms of Women and Girls Globally, and in Afghanistan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. Report of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Subcommittee on International Human Rights.
- Canada (2019). House of Commons. SDIR. Raising Her Voice: Confronting the Unique Challenges Facing Women Human Rights Defenders. Report of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Subcommittee on International Human Rights.
- Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS)-UK. (2019). Beyond Consultations: A Tool to Promote More Meaningful Engagement of Women in Fragile and Conflict Affected States.
- Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS)-UK et al. (2020). The Key to Change: Supporting Civil Society and Women's Rights Organizations in Fragile and Conflict Affected Contexts.
- GNWP/Global Network of Women Peacebuilders et al (2022). Fund Us Like You Want Us to Win.
- Global Affairs Canada. (2019). Voices at Risk- Canada's Guidelines on Supporting Human Rights Defenders. Ottawa.
- IM-Defensoras (2023). 2024: We Will Continue Weaving Networks of Life in the Face of the Policies of Death.
- International Rescue Committee (2023). Why Wait? How the Humanitarian System Can Better Fund Women-Led and Women's Rights Organizations.
- Kvinna till Kvinna (2023). Hope and Resistance Go Together: The State of Women Human Rights Defenders 2023.
- Norway, Department of Foreign Affairs. (2023). Agreement at the UN to recognize the efforts of human rights defenders.
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. (2023). Joining Forces for Gender Equality: What is Holding us Back?. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- Potvin, J & M. Lefurgey (2024). "Canada's Inaction on Gaza marks a failure of its feminist foreign policy," The Conversation 12 March.
- Research Network on WPS (2023). Where is the Peace in Canada's Women, Peace and Security Agenda? White Paper.
- Roggeband, C. & Krizan, A. (2020). Democratic Backsliding and the Backlash Against Women's Rights: Understanding the Current Challenges for Feminist Politics. UN Women.
- United Nations. (2023). Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders: Pathways to peace: women human rights defenders in conflict, post-conflict and crisis-affected settings.
- United Nations. (1999). Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (A/RES/53/144).

United Nations Security Council (2023). Women and peace and security. Report of the Secretary General. S/2023/725.

United States, Department of State, Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. (2021). [Guidelines for U.S. Diplomatic Mission Support to Civil Society and Human Rights Defenders](#).

Van Houten, K. (forthcoming) "Voices at Risk: State-Civil Society Relations in the Development and Implementation of Canada's Guidelines in Supporting Human Rights Defenders." Canadian Journal For Human Rights. Vol 12.2

Women's International Peace Centre and CORDAID (2020). Shrinking Spaces for Women Peacebuilders and Organizations Advancing Feminist Peace.

Women Peace and Humanitarian Fund and Spotlight Initiative (2021). A Missing Brick for Sustaining Women's Movements: Flexible Funding for Local Women's Organizations.

Woroniuk, B. (2023). "Resourcing WPS Work in Canada: Challenges and Shortfalls," in K. Leclerc, B. Santoire, & B. Woroniuk (eds.). [Fostering Feminist Peace at Home](#). WPSN-C.

All links retrieved February 29, 2024.

Organizations, programs, & campaigns

- Alinea International. [Promoting Reform Objectives through Technical Expertise and Capacity Transfer Program](#)
- Amnesty International USA. [Campaign on human rights defenders](#).
- [ProtectDefenders.eu](#): the European Union Human Rights Defenders mechanism
- United Nations. [Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders](#).

Annex 2: Parliamentary Committee Recommendations

The Rights and Freedoms of Women and Girls Globally, and in Afghanistan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. Report of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Subcommittee on International Human Rights. (2023)

Recommendation 1: That the Government of Canada cooperate with international organizations to end sexual violence that women and girls are subject to in conflict and in other situations.

Recommendation 2: That the Government of Canada undertake the following measures to support the education of Afghan women and girls: fund the expansion of alternative, independent education systems delivered in Afghanistan by non-governmental organizations, and fund and resource efforts to enhance the quality of these education alternatives so that they can be internationally recognized.

Recommendation 3: That the Government of Canada fund university scholarships for female Afghan transfer students to study at Canadian post-secondary institutions either virtually or in-person and with the aid of scholarships, and expedite study permits for eligible Afghan women and girls to study in Canada.

Recommendation 4: That Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada create a new temporary resident stream that enables women human rights defenders to seek immediate and non-permanent safe haven in Canada.

Recommendation 5: That Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada increase the number of places in the current global human rights defenders stream of its government-assisted refugees program to accommodate an increased number of applicants and their families.

Recommendation 6: That the Government of Canada fund a program to support activists arriving as part of the human rights defender refugee stream and other relevant streams. Such a program could provide fellowships, training, networking opportunities and other resources that will allow and encourage their valuable human rights advocacy work to continue from within Canada.

Recommendation 7: That the Government of Canada list the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist entity as per section 83.01 of the Criminal Code, ensuring that provisions are made for eliminating any unintended harm for those with involuntary links to the group, such as conscripts.

Recommendation 8: That the Government of Canada leverage its position in international fora to build alliances with like-minded partners and call out and condemn countries, regimes and individuals responsible for human rights abuses.

Recommendation 9: That the Government of Canada increase its level of humanitarian aid and ensure that this funding remains stable and is invested in long-term projects that align with its feminist international assistance policy.

Recommendation 10: That Global Affairs Canada align its international development goals and other foreign policy goals.

Raising Her Voice: Confronting the Unique Challenges Facing Women Human Rights Defenders. Report of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Subcommittee on International Human Rights. (2019)

Recommendation 1 – Building an Action Plan to Support Women Human Rights Defenders - That the Government of Canada develop an action plan to:

- establish processes and procedures for expediting emergency visas for women human rights defenders and their families when they are in imminent danger;
- ensure that infrastructure and resources are in place to be ready to assist in temporarily relocating women human rights defenders and their families into Canada or other countries;
- study and report on international best practices regarding the temporary or permanent relocation of women human rights defenders and their families when they are under threat or in imminent danger;
- enhance measures to support women human rights defenders and their organizations abroad, including programs; through core funding and funding for locally-developed training
- establish indicators for evaluating women-led civil society organizations' ability to operate freely, proactively monitor their status, and raise the cases of at-risk individuals or organizations with governments and other partners, as appropriate; enhance, through diplomatic missions, efforts to identify and partner with women's human rights organizations that can use Canadian support through measures such as funding or advocacy; and
- enhance, through diplomatic missions, efforts to identify and partner with women's human rights organizations that can use Canadian support through measures such as funding or advocacy and
- develop an information campaign to raise international awareness about the programs and assistance that Canada offers to support women human rights defenders.

In developing and implementing this action plan, the Government of Canada should continually consult and coordinate with the international community, including but not limited to, the United Nations, regional organizations, like-minded states and other partners.

Recommendation 2—Combatting Impunity - That Global Affairs Canada engage bilaterally and multilaterally to combat impunity for human rights violations against women human rights defenders.

Recommendation 3—Promoting Respect for Human Rights in the Private Sector - That Global Affairs Canada act decisively to ensure that Canadian businesses respect human rights abroad, particularly through the office of the Canadian Ombudsperson for Responsible Enterprise.

Recommendation 4—Seizing All Opportunities to Support Women Human Rights Defenders through Canadian Diplomacy - That the Government of Canada ensure that all foreign policy choices are consistent with the goal of facilitating women human rights defenders' participation in public discourse, political processes including conflict resolution, as well as national and international institutions.



WPSN-C 