



## RENEWING THE COMMITMENT: A NEW WPS AMBASSADOR URGENTLY NEEDED

by Bénédicte Santoire and Beth Woroniuk

Canada took an important step with the appointment of its first Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Ambassador in 2019. Jacqueline O'Neill played a key role advising ministers on WPS issues and coordinating the second WPS National Action Plan (CNAP2) implementation across all departmental partners. Given that no replacement has been named, her departure leaves a huge gap.

In this chapter, we argue that the first WPS Ambassador had a tangible impact and that Canada needs to appoint a new WPS Ambassador. To be effective, the new ambassador must bring proven experience working on the full range of WPS issues, not just one sector or area (such as defence). Ideally, they will be a good communicator, understand and support the essential roles of civil society, and be able to mobilize support for CNAP3 implementation - especially the elements focusing on peacebuilding and conflict prevention.

We look at some of the highlights, achievements, and gaps of the term of the first ambassador and propose priorities for her replacement.

Today, the need for strong WPS leadership is more urgent than ever. An effective ambassador can mobilize resources and political capital to support the implementation of Canada's commitments. Without an ambassador, there are major risks that the latest WPS national action plan will languish and fail to yield results. This is particularly grave in a time when the global WPS agenda is under threat. Progress is threatened by massive cuts in development assistance and gender equality-related programs, a crumbling multilateral system, the growing force of anti-rights movements and authoritarian regimes around the world, attacks on human rights and civic space, increasing militarization, and historic WPS champions facing "credibility gaps" due to failures to respond to protracted conflicts and ongoing genocides.

Santoire, B., & Woroniuk, B. (2025). Renewing the commitment: A new WPS ambassador urgently needed. In K. Leclerc, S. Biskupski-Mujanovic, & S. Keeler (Eds.), *WPS at 25 and Canada's CNAP3: Feminist reflections on progress and gaps* (pp. 5-9). Women, Peace and Security Network-Canada.

WPS at 25 and Canada's CNAP3

## Chapter 2

by *Bénédicte Sautoire and Beth Woroniuk*



### A brief timeline

Civil society has long highlighted the importance of a senior-level champion who could rally support for Canada's WPS efforts. In 2016, members of the WPSN-C recommended that the government appoint a high-level special envoy who would support the implementation of the updated WPS national action plan. The government responded in the fall of 2018 with the announcement that Canada would name a WPS Ambassador. More than eight months later, Jacqueline O'Neill was appointed to the post by then Prime Minister Trudeau. Ambassador O'Neill served until her term ended in March 2025. A replacement has not yet been named.

### The first WPS Ambassador: A path-breaking term

The announcement of the WPS ambassador mentioned four tasks for the new appointment:

- Advance Canada's feminist foreign policy by championing Canada's WPS priority commitments at home and around the world
- Work across all federal departments and with partners to advise on the implementation of Canada's National Action Plan on WPS
- Provide advice to ministers
- Recommend actions Canada can take to protect the rights of women facing insecurity and violence and promote their meaningful participation in Canada's development, humanitarian, and peace and security efforts around the globe.

When Prime Minister Trudeau appointed Jacqueline O'Neill as the first WPS Ambassador, civil society was clear: the role was not about traveling around the world praising Canada. It should be about mobilizing action and resources within the government.

Ambassador O'Neill and her office did break silos and build momentum across the government, reinforcing the point that the WPS agenda is a cross-cutting priority. Her office was strengthened with seconded staff from the Department of National Defence. They focused on coalition-building, coordinating ministries and missions, and, building on recommendations from civil society actors. They involved new actors, such as Veterans Affairs Canada.

Sautoire, B., & Woroniuk, B. (2025). Renewing the commitment: A new WPS ambassador urgently needed. In K. Leclerc, S. Biskupski-Mujanovic, & S. Keeler (Eds.), *WPS at 25 and Canada's CNAP3: Feminist reflections on progress and gaps* (pp. 5-9). Women, Peace and Security Network-Canada.

WPS at 25 and Canada's CNAP3

## Chapter 2

by *Bénédicte Santoire and Beth Woroniuk*



The Ambassador and her staff mobilized political support that helped secure the renewal of the third WPS National Action Plan (CNAP3) at the June 2021 ministerial meeting, and she worked to ensure WPS stayed on the political agenda of decision-makers.

Ambassador O'Neill set a new standard for accountability. Given her extensive experience and connections with civil society, she hosted quarterly meetings with Canadian feminist civil society through the WPSN-C, creating one of the only regular, structured spaces where the government listened directly to the input of practitioners, activists and experts. This legacy of direct dialogue and engagement should not disappear.

Through her diplomatic trips, Ambassador O'Neill directly engaged with women peacebuilders in conflict-affected and crisis contexts and amplified their voices to Canadian decision-makers and in multilateral fora, from conference rooms to the UN Security Council. She spent time with Canadian diplomats, advocating for greater attention to WPS priorities. However, there were clear limits to what the Ambassador could accomplish. The role was both advisory and symbolic: she could provide expertise to Ministers but had no authority to set policies, demand action, or allocate budget resources across departments. There continued to be gaps between Canada's stated WPS goals and actual policy directions. For example, some civil society actors were increasingly frustrated over Canada's inaction towards Israel's genocide in Gaza. The position/office also had an extremely limited programming budget, which meant that even flagship initiatives like the GAC WPS Awards were symbolic recognitions without associated monetary prizes.

### **Conclusion: A suggested agenda for the next WPS Ambassador**

Even with these limitations, with the right appointee, Canada's WPS Ambassador can be a valuable and effective position. A new Ambassador is critical to ensuring that CNAP3 commitments do not remain rhetorical, fragmented, or deprioritized, and in mobilizing political attention, resources, and accountability.

Santoire, B., & Woroniuk, B. (2025). Renewing the commitment: A new WPS ambassador urgently needed. In K. Leclerc, S. Biskupski-Mujanovic, & S. Keeler (Eds.), *WPS at 25 and Canada's CNAP3: Feminist reflections on progress and gaps* (pp. 5-9). Women, Peace and Security Network-Canada.

WPS at 25 and Canada's CNAP3

## Chapter 2

by *Bénédicte Sautoire and Beth Woroniuk*



In a context of rising defence spending and militarization, the WPS Ambassador also has an important “watchdog” role: making sure that feminist, conflict prevention, and diplomatic approaches and investments are not erased or sidelined. Without this leadership, WPS risks being reduced to (or absorbed by) narrow defence and security priorities, while other vital WPS pillars, like conflict prevention, are overlooked.

Reappointing a WPS Ambassador is not just a bureaucratic detail. It is both practical and symbolic. Practically, it ensures that Canada delivers on CNAP3 at home and abroad. Symbolically, it signals that WPS remains a priority, that Canada is serious about listening to women peacebuilders and activists, and that it intends to uphold its reputation as a leader on gender equality and peace, even in spaces where the very foundations of the WPS agenda are under attack.

Key priorities for the new Ambassador must include:

- Articulate updated rationales and arguments for political and fiscal resources in the full range of WPS goals. There is a need to ‘make the case’ for WPS investments in times of increased defence spending and new global threats.
- Mobilize political support for CNAP3 implementation. The new Ambassador can lean into their remit to provide advice to the full range of ministers leading departments who have signed on CNAP3 partners. Dialogue with parliamentarians is also important to increase understanding of the WPS agenda among politicians.
- Continue robust engagement with civil society, in Canada and in conflict-affected areas. The next ambassador must clearly commit to upholding Ambassador O’Neill’s legacy of understanding and supporting civil society’s role in advancing the WPS agenda.
- Focus on building and rebuilding coalitions and constituencies inside CNAP3 government departments. Expertise, champions, learning, investments and exchange across all 10 CNAP3 federal partners are needed.
- Bring the WPS goals, insights, and achievements to broader Canadian discussions of peace and security, reaching new audiences and players. Ambassador O’Neill was able to ‘unpack’ and make the WPS agenda real to a wide range of people. This outreach and demystification is important to continue in order to strengthen support for these issues.

Sautoire, B., & Woroniuk, B. (2025). Renewing the commitment: A new WPS ambassador urgently needed. In K. Leclerc, S. Biskupski-Mujanovic, & S. Keeler (Eds.), *WPS at 25 and Canada’s CNAP3: Feminist reflections on progress and gaps* (pp. 5–9). Women, Peace and Security Network–Canada.

WPS at 25 and Canada’s CNAP3

## Chapter 2

by *Bénédicte Santoire and Beth Woroniuk*



In her last statement at the United Nations Security Council Open Debate on WPS in October 2024, Ambassador O’Neill said that “Wise women peacebuilders in Canada and around the world remind all of us, that despite being surrounded by crises, dehumanization, and attacks on this very work – we must not become suffocated by negativity. We must also give oxygen to progress and impacts.” Failing to reappoint a WPS ambassador risks cutting off this oxygen. It risks undermining Canada’s credibility. And it risks losing momentum on a key agenda in this turbulent time.

The Carney government must quickly reappoint a new WPS Ambassador - one capable of supporting the agenda of women peacebuilders around the world. Civil society is watching.

Santoire, B., & Woroniuk, B. (2025). Renewing the commitment: A new WPS ambassador urgently needed. In K. Leclerc, S. Biskupski-Mujanovic, & S. Keeler (Eds.), *WPS at 25 and Canada's CNAP3: Feminist reflections on progress and gaps* (pp. 5–9). Women, Peace and Security Network–Canada.

WPS at 25 and Canada's CNAP3