

2025



LEVERAGING GOVERNMENT - CIVIL SOCIETY COLLABORATION

Insights and Recommendations for
Strengthening the WPS Agenda
Amid Growing Challenges



We would like to thank our partners—Benimpuhwe Organization (Rwanda), Justice Without Frontiers (Lebanon), Red Nacional de Mujeres (Colombia), Synergie de Femmes (DRC), and West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (Nigeria)—for their collaboration on this project. We also extend our gratitude to everyone who contributed to our consultations, whether by attending our events in New York, participating in follow-up online discussions, or responding to our survey.

This report was made possible through the work of Sarah Keeler and Monique Cuillerier, with contributions from Alexandria Bohémier, Katrina Leclerc, Bénédicte Santoire, and Beth Woroniuk.

This collaboration was made possible by the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI) through the Permanent Mission of Canada to the United Nations.



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

March 2025

©WPSN-C, 2025

All rights reserved.

wpsn-canada.org

Contact us at: coordinator@wpsn-canada.org

Acronyms

CRSV	Conflict-Related Sexual Violence
DRC	Foreign Policy and Diplomacy Services
NAP	National Action Plan
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
WPS	Women, Peace and Security
WPSN-C	Women, Peace and Security Network - Canada

Summary Recommendations

1. **Incorporate justice and human rights-based approaches** as key components across the four pillars of the Women, Peace and Security agenda, and within national action planning.
2. **Develop narratives and ways of promoting WPS that respond to emergent global realities** such as the rise of anti-rights movements, political polarization and the climate crisis.
3. **Support innovative approaches for consultation and knowledge sharing** to allow for a plurality of perspectives and a more inclusive, intersectional understanding of the multiple contexts in which WPS work can operate.
4. **Invest in programming that builds capacity and knowledge** for diverse grassroots civil society actors to engage substantively with WPS processes and the development of NAPs.
5. **Simplify funding mechanisms for grassroots organizations and provide more flexible funding**, by streamlining application, eligibility and reporting processes to reduce existing barriers for those actively engaged in innovative and accessible approaches at the local level.

Overview: The importance of civil society to advancing WPS

2025 marks the 25th anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), and amid proliferating militarization and armed conflicts, a global rise in anti-rights movements, and political uncertainties, the role of civil society in protecting and advancing the WPS agenda remains critical. WPS National Action Plans (NAPs) are a means by which to advance accountability for States' commitments, and have been adopted by over 110 countries. Yet obstacles persist in ensuring meaningful civil society involvement in their development and implementation, and in ensuring that they are responsive to emergent challenges at national, regional and global levels.

Grassroots organizations are key to reflecting the realities of women and marginalized groups affected by conflict and ensuring that WPS processes - including the development of NAPs - are inclusive, actionable and relevant to the needs and realities of local communities.

Our Consultation Approach

Between September 2024 and January 2025 the Women, Peace and Security Network-Canada (WPSN-C), with support from the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI) through the Permanent Mission of Canada to the United Nations, carried out a series of dialogues with civil society partners in Canada, partner networks in five other countries, and with activists and practitioners in the WPS space. A number of activities took place in October 2024, during the WPS Week at the UN in New York, where representatives from WPSN-C came together with counterparts from Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Lebanon, Nigeria, and Rwanda.

During our WPS Learning Lab, 27 participants from 19 countries^[1] engaged in mutual learning, shared best practices, and developed strategies for improving collaboration among civil society groups, specifically on WPS NAPs, but also on advancing the WPS agenda more broadly. Project delegates also held bilateral meetings to share their insights with the New York Permanent Missions to the UN of Austria, Canada and Switzerland. A subsequent public panel event with civil society leaders and representatives from governments of Canada, Colombia and the African Union created an open forum for dialogue on how governments and civil society can work more closely together to ensure the success of WPS NAPs, and provided expert level analysis of lessons learned and promising innovations. Between October 2024 and January 2025 WPSN-C also conducted a members' survey and held several sessions online with an additional 22 participants, to hear directly from our members and Network partners.

Purpose of this Policy Brief

This document summarizes the key themes and findings of these dialogues. It highlights the important insights and knowledge that civil society actors from diverse global contexts offer in shaping responsive policies, and amplifies their perspectives to inform broader policy discussions on WPS at national and international levels.

The brief provides clear and actionable recommendations on how governments and civil society can work collaboratively with one another to ensure the success of WPS NAPs, and to protect and advance the WPS agenda as a non-partisan issue. Drawing on lessons learned, key challenges, innovations, and good practices highlighted in recent international WPSN-C dialogues, it identifies practical solutions to enhance these partnerships.

[1] Participants came from Afghanistan, Albania, Canada, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Fiji, Haiti, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Netherlands, Nigeria, Palestine, Rwanda, Serbia, South Sudan, Switzerland, Uganda, United Kingdom and the United States.

Key Findings

In the current global climate, activists and practitioners are deeply concerned about the need to incorporate justice and accountability approaches into the WPS agenda

With conflicts proliferating across the globe, significantly impacting and targeting women, young women and girls, actors working to advance the WPS agenda, including multilateral institutions, States, civil society organizations and activists must find ways to adapt and respond to emerging crises that seriously impact gender equality and women's participation.

Referencing contexts of ongoing crises—including Afghanistan, DRC, Haiti, Lebanon, Myanmar, Palestine, Sudan, Ukraine and Yemen—participants in our dialogues highlighted the importance of centering rights, justice and accountability for gender-based crimes in the WPS agenda. An approach that promotes a singular focus on peace and security in the absence of justice—for example by including women combatants while overlooking civilians - weakens the WPS agenda as a whole and excludes key actors. In crisis settings, an approach that favours security goals while failing to incorporate a human security lens that recognizes the totality of rights across a spectrum of societal dimensions, in turn increases the burdens placed on women, young women, girls, and other vulnerable groups. In other contexts, including North America and Europe, backlash against feminist and rights-based policies poses the risk of policy stagnation or rollback on the progress made on WPS, including in the very language used to frame discussions.

“

It is important to focus on 1325 and localization, but we also need to think about how we can advocate for justice within WPS, and not be selective in our approach. How can I talk about the NAP when there is an active war? How can we use a NAP to meet the needs of 1.4 million displaced persons in Lebanon? When we talk about UNSC resolutions, and humanitarian crisis and relief, we have to bring this work forward centered in justice.

Participant from Lebanon

”

Intersectional approaches are vital to advancing WPS and ensuring that National Action Plans are responsive to the diverse realities of women, young women and girls

Government-led WPS efforts on national action planning all too often overlook the compounded vulnerabilities faced by individuals at multiple intersections of oppression, including racialized women, those from ethnic minority backgrounds, women with disabilities, Indigenous women, and LGBTQI+ communities. On the other hand, marginalized communities can also bring rich insights that highlight adaptive strategies, ways to reach diverse communities, and support local participation and ownership of WPS NAPs. Tailored strategies that draw on these insights are required to address unique regional and community-specific challenges. Governments must embrace intersectional approaches in their engagements with civil society to ensure they are capturing the realities of women, young women, girls, and gender-diverse people within the WPS agenda. For example, in Canada, greater effort and new approaches are needed to more fully incorporate Indigenous perspectives into NAP development and implementation, recognizing both barriers to participation and the benefits of deeper engagement.

“ Often, the focus of participation has been combatants or conflict parties. We need to go back to the basic issue of inclusion, nothing about us without us. We need to look at how we can prioritize the participation of excluded communities, such as youth. We are also not talking enough about women with disabilities in this space, and how we can involve them.

Participant from Fiji

Resourcing and finance remain a significant barrier to consultation and implementation of NAPs

Strong, sustainable, and flexible funding is needed to ensure not only the implementation of NAPs but also the full and meaningful involvement of civil society across the WPS agenda. Participants from several countries highlighted a lack of funding commitments and allocated resources from governments as a significant barrier to ensuring NAPs are relevant for local communities and that collaboration with civil society is achievable.

Even where available, funding mechanisms often remain inaccessible to smaller, local organizations and those doing the frontline work of localizing WPS NAPs - ensuring they are locally relevant and owned - monitoring government commitments, and responding to the needs of women, young women, and girls caught in conflicts. Over-reliance on intermediaries that prioritize their own goals and do not employ feminist funding practices can result in fewer resources reaching frontline actors, and short-term funding cycles hinder sustainable impact and long-term planning for civil society involvement.

Localizing WPS is crucial to ensuring robust and inclusive civil society engagement, ownership and collaboration

Participants highlighted the ongoing need to localize the WPS agenda, both at the point of consultation in the development of NAPs and through implementation. While governments often reference localization as a buzzword, there is a lack of clarity on what this means in practice, and a need to deconstruct the process to ensure grassroots perspectives and intersectional approaches are being included throughout. There is also a gap in government understandings of this process and views held by civil society and grassroots level actors. Governments tend to view localization with a focus on national-level action planning and capital level efforts, as opposed to multilateral approaches. Governments and multilateral agencies are also prone to a perception of NAPs as a final outcome indicating “success” of the WPS agenda, rather than an ongoing process of engagement that supports the creation of tools for use by civil society actors carrying out the frontline work of implementing WPS.

For civil society actors on the other hand, localization emphasizes community and regional level initiatives and local investment in national action planning that allows communities to take ownership of the process in ways that meet their specific needs. A true commitment to localization can contribute to meaningful participation of diverse groups, including marginalized voices, ensure that NAPs are relevant to realities at the community level, and secure sustainable impact. Civil society has been key in advocating for this approach, equipping communities with the knowledge and skills to actively engage with the process and creating a decolonial WPS language outside the often inaccessible system of multilateral institutions. Governments must support and resource this civil society work.

Transforming plans into clear commitments remains a challenge

Even where governments offer clear goals for advancing WPS, there is a risk that stated commitments become little more than rhetoric at the stage of implementation. Our dialogues identified several factors that contribute to this challenge, including a shortage of available data to ensure robust monitoring and evaluation (and inconsistent monitoring and evaluation mechanisms across government), insufficient resources for implementation, and a lack of space for civil society to hold governments accountable on promises made. In Colombia, for example, women combatants were key to the 2016 peace process and formal negotiations, but government commitments on the gender provisions therein and in the recent NAP have since been weak, and the formal spaces for civil society to advocate on this issue have been limited, at a time when the government's total peace project is faltering.

Similarly, in the Pacific Islands context civil society actors have faced difficulty in holding elected officials accountable for stated commitments due to a lack of space to initiate mechanisms such as parliamentary hearings to report on progress. In Uganda commitments to a whole-of-government approach involving all ministries have been hampered by a lack of dedicated resources.



Image: Group photo of WPSN-C members alongside other WPS practitioners from various countries participating in the WPS Learning Lab. The event was held on the sidelines of the 24th anniversary commemoration of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in New York on October 22, 2024. This initiative was supported by the Canadian Fund for Local Initiatives through the Permanent Mission of Canada to the UN in New York.

Recommendations

1. Incorporate justice as a key component across WPS pillars

As one participant eloquently put it, we must “bring this work forward centered in justice”, particularly in situations of humanitarian crisis and response. One key means of ensuring a WPS agenda informed by justice and centered on rights is to intentionally align and interweave UNSCR 1325 with other UN Security Council Resolutions that focus on accountability for gender-based crimes and protection of victims - such as Resolution 1820 on conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) and Resolution 2467 that highlights the range of threats and human rights violations and abuses experienced by women and girls in armed conflict. In relief and recovery efforts, the particular needs of victims [2] (for example, survivors and their children born of CRSV) must be met, and support provided for them in seeking justice.

2. Develop narratives and ways of promoting WPS that respond to emergent global realities

Growing challenges such as increasing political polarization, anti-rights movements, and the nexus of conflict and climate change require ongoing attention and a flexible approach that will simultaneously address emergent realities while protecting gains made on the WPS agenda. Governments can recognize and respond to increasing threats that intersect with and undermine progress on the WPS agenda by emphasizing the structural connections between greater gender equality and conflict reduction. Understanding the critical role of WPS can provide a more complete analysis and thus contribute to more robust, sustainable and nuanced responses in the promotion of global stability, conflict reduction, and enhanced security and diplomatic interests. Narratives that highlight the crucial importance of gender equality in advancing these interests, for example, by enhancing climate change resilience, or incorporating discussion of positive masculinities [3] into efforts to counter radicalization, should be more actively incorporated into existing language and practice.

[2] We use the term "victim" as understood in victim-centered justice approaches, which explicitly identify the person(s) who have experienced harm as central to the process of justice seeking. This approach acknowledges their rights and needs as a primary concern within human rights instruments, accountability and justice systems while also empowering individuals and groups by recognizing their agency in the process.

[3] Masculinities are the various ways of being and acting, values and expectations associated with being and becoming a man in a given society. In the context of peacebuilding "positive masculinity" refers to actively promoting healthy, non-violent expressions of masculinity to prevent conflict and contribute to sustainable peace by challenging harmful gender norms that often link masculinity with aggression and violence.



Image: WPSN-C members and partners from various countries on a panel during the WPS Learning Lab. The event was held on the sidelines of the 24th anniversary commemoration of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in New York on October 22, 2024. This initiative was supported by the Canadian Fund for Local Initiatives through the Permanent Mission of Canada to the UN in New York.

3. Support innovative approaches for consultation and knowledge sharing

By connecting with networks, both formal and informal, at national and regional levels, governments gain and encourage a plurality of perspectives and a more inclusive, intersectional understanding of the multiple contexts in which WPS work can operate. In order to do this effectively, civil society organizations must be approached and recognized as experts capable of providing strategic advice on NAP development, monitoring, and evaluation. Resources such as WPSN-C's recent report with reflections and good practice for government engagement with women human rights defenders are examples of the expertise available. A partnership approach like Canada's WPS Advisory Group, established under the second NAP on WPS and continued under the third NAP, was identified as an

example of good practice that fosters transparency, shared ownership, and accountability in NAP implementation. Recognizing intersectional realities and the fact that outreach/engagement with diverse groups calls for diverse and flexible approaches will ensure that consultation is both meaningful and barrier-free.

“

When it comes to monitoring and evaluation, the government always wanted a positive approach. It was very difficult for them to see the challenges, but we wanted to tell the government that acknowledging the presence of these challenges is really important to our collective learning. Acknowledging the challenges in implementation of the NAP is a strength, not a weakness, because only then can we find solutions. It's very important for government to think about the impact of their interventions, not only the outputs.

Participant from Canada

”

4. Invest in programming that builds capacity and knowledge for diverse grassroots civil society actors to engage substantively with WPS processes and the development of NAPs

Governments can provide direct support and funding for community-based programming that equips civil society with the knowledge, skills, and resources for impactful engagement on WPS. Aside from ensuring allocated budgets for the implementation of NAPs, examples of such programming include independent civil society convenings on NAPs as a precursor to collaboration with government, working with local government and community leaders to develop cross-regional approaches and creation of local action plans, and capacity-building workshops that explore the implementation of norms and policies as a tool for women at the community level. Innovative approaches to strengthen local knowledge, which were shared in the WPSN-C consultations, include interactive digital board games and WPS-themed quilting initiatives. Crucially, in order to benefit from diverse perspectives, such approaches should employ an intersectional lens to engage with and equip diverse groups who are often marginalized from government-led WPS processes. This includes those based outside capitals, women with disabilities, women with low socioeconomic status, racialized women, those from ethnic minority backgrounds, Indigenous women, young women and girls, and LGBTQI+ communities.

Image: Participants during the WPS Learning Lab. The event was held on the sidelines of the 24th anniversary commemoration of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in New York on October 22, 2024. This initiative was supported by the Canadian Fund for Local Initiatives through the Permanent Mission of Canada to the UN in New York.





Image: WPSN-C members and partners from various countries on a panel held on the sidelines of the 24th anniversary commemoration of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in New York on October 23, 2024. This initiative was supported by the Canadian Fund for Local Initiatives through the Permanent Mission of Canada to the UN in New York.

5. Simplify funding mechanisms for grassroots organizations and provide more flexible funding

The recent decision to halt USAID funding has had a dramatic impact on the resources available for work that promotes gender equality and WPS. This sudden policy shift is creating a crisis that calls for creative approaches to feminist finance, as well as an increased role for States that remain committed to gender equality. Governments can respond to this crisis and show leadership by providing strategic support in key areas. For example, allocate resources for diverse grassroots networks and make funding accessible to smaller, local organizations, ensuring that resources reach those directly implementing WPS initiatives. Streamlining application, eligibility, and reporting processes will reduce existing barriers for those actively engaged in innovative and accessible approaches at the local level.

Our recommendation on accessible and flexible funding for WPS echoes the voices of broad-based movements for gender equality, including those presented in the Walking the Talk Common Ask Framework.

“

We need to focus on localization and ensure grassroots organizations understand WPS and what it means to work on WPS. We have been working with communities and local government officials to develop their own local action plans. We also need to engage across all Government Ministries and get better at going to the local level and having people from all walks of life understand the issues and how to be part of the work. This kind of work requires allocated finances, too.

Participant from Uganda

”

Looking Ahead

At its 25th anniversary, the WPS agenda is at a critical juncture, facing threats to the progress achieved over the past two and a half decades in the form of political polarization, rising anti-rights movements, the proliferation of armed conflicts that deeply impact women, girls and gender diverse people. In order to protect hard won gains in WPS and the development of NAPs adopted in 110 countries to date, we must collectively find new ways of responding to emerging threats and addressing crisis that will advance and highlight the vital importance of approaches informed by WPS. Civil society actors in all their diversity are a critical asset in driving this work forward when included as equal partners with expertise and intersectional perspectives to contribute.

This policy brief sets out a series of key insights for governments to incorporate in their collaborations with civil society. Our discussions with partners and members of the WPSN-C, civil society representatives, and grassroots activists highlight the importance of local ownership, flexible finance, non-partisan narratives, intersectional approaches that recognize both the challenges faced and insights offered by marginalized communities, and of centering justice-informed, human rights-based approaches for a strong WPS agenda in 2025 and beyond. We hope this document provides direct recommendations for governments committed to WPS and creates ongoing opportunities to strengthen collaboration with civil society for the challenges ahead.



Image: Photo of Network members and civil society partners from Colombia, Nigeria and Rwanda outside the United Nations Headquarters in New York moments before attending the UN Security Council Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security on October 24, 2024.

WPSN-C

wpsn-canada.org



In partnership with:



BENIMPUHWE
organization



JUSTICE
WITHOUT FRONTIERS
عدل بلا حدود

