The Women, Peace and Security agenda
as an anti-colonial and liberation framework

Returning to the Radical Roots

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As the Women, Peace and Security agenda after 25 years stands at a critical crossroads, we have to reclaim the agenda and recenter community-rooted feminist peace activists. The findings of this report are also available in policy briefs focused on Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria and Yemen. This report, as well as the policy briefs underscore the critical importance of accountability of international policy towards local actors, ensuring that liberation, justice, and intersectionality safeguard and advance WPS.

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Foreword

Power relations are always at the roots of conflict dynamics. Addressing conflict in a structural way is – or should - therefore be inherently feminist in nature: structurally addressing power inequalities.

Gender inequality is a causal factor in driving conflict, and peace cannot be achieved without addressing the root causes of gender inequality, exclusion and related violence. This includes analysing power and conflict from a gender perspective through an intersectional feminist lens, promoting inclusive participation in decision-making processes, challenging harmful norms and fostering an environment that supports gender equality and inclusivity. Increased women's participation in peace processes not only greatly improves their quality and effectiveness, but also the likelihood that outcomes will be long-term. Greater women's participation and leadership in non-violent movements also increases the likelihood that these movements remain non-violent, are more democratic, and ultimately more successful in realising democratic governance and stability.

Since its adoption 25 years ago, the culmination of years of successful advocacy by international feminist peace movements, the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda stands at a critical crossroads. This report unpacks the WPS trajectory in the South West Asia (SWA) region —amid ongoing genocide, escalating violence and shrinking civic space due to authoritarian backlash and donor-driven technocratic containment. The report is based on physical gatherings between feminist peacebuilders from Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria and Yemen. Subsequent interviews highlight that in the face of this onslaught, feminist peace actors have redoubled their resolve and continue to resist erasure and exclusion from formal processes, often at great personal risk. How can the WPS agenda be reimagined, re-understood, and reapplied in a region scorched by settler colonialism, authoritarian collapse, and military occupation, while funding for WPS has diminished substantially?

This report rightfully questions whose knowledge and agency are being privileged in the translation of the WPS agenda into policy and practice, and challenges the narrowing of feminist language under donor compliance and securitised frameworks. The research elevates visionary practices—shadow action plans, legal reforms, care networks, and transnational coalitions—as the real blueprint for peace and justice. Rather than adapting to existing power structures, this report calls for an unequivocal return to radical feminist praxis, with accountability as a new foundational pillar. It urges movement actors, donors, policymakers, and advocates to recognise that inclusive and sustainable peace is unattainable without confronting root causes such as settler colonialism, militarisation, and the erasure of feminist knowledge, by centring those most affected in future-proofing the WPS agenda – from the ground up.

This report invites a collective vow to stand with feminist peacebuilding practitioners to renew and transform the WPS agenda from within. Anchored in feminist vision, radical inclusion, and decolonial imagination, it calls us to act with courage and conviction. The moment to rise and to support feminist movements boldly is now.

Rolien Sasse

Executive Director, PAX

Introduction

A brief history

During the 1990s, several brutal intra-state conflicts, such as those in Rwanda and Bosnia, revealed the devastating consequences of war on civilian populations, especially women and girls. These conflicts highlighted egregious patterns of sexual and gender-based violence used strategically as weapons of war. Despite this, women were systematically excluded from peace negotiations and decision-making processes. In response, women peace activists and civil society organisations mobilised to break the silence within international institutions, demanding recognition of women's voices, agency, and protection in peace and security efforts. Five years after the Fourth World Conference on Women, which led to the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action, UNSCR 1325 was adopted on the 31st of October 2000 (UN women).

UNSCR 1325, backed by decades of feminist advocacy and emerging insights from peace and gender studies, reframed peace and security beyond state-centric military approaches. It introduced a human security[1] perspective that acknowledged the need for inclusive and gender-sensitive approaches to build sustainable peace. As the most translated Security Council resolution ever, it laid the groundwork for a broader Women Peace and Security agenda articulated in nine subsequent resolutions: 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009), 1889 (2009), 1960 (2010), 2106 (2013), 2122 (2013), 2242 (2015), 2467 (2019), and 2493 (2019)

Transformative ambitions and radical roots

WPS is not merely an agenda for incremental change; it reflects radical ambitions for gender justice and inclusive peace[2]. Its transformative potential lies in challenging patriarchal power structures that perpetuate cycles of violence[3] and exclusion. By affirming women's agency and demanding their equality in peace processes, it confronts traditional militarised notions of security and fosters more democratic, equitable peacebuilding. The agenda envisions breaking the cycle of conflict by addressing intersectional vulnerabilities and empowering diverse women, including sexual minorities and marginalised groups, as peacebuilders.

The WPS agenda is widely understood along the lines of four interrelated pillars[4] that guide its implementation:

1. **Prevention**: Addressing the root causes of conflict and protecting women and girls from sexual and gender-based violence.

2. **Participation**: Increasing women's meaningful participation and leadership at all levels of decision-making in peace and security processes, including peace negotiations, peacekeeping, and post-conflict reconstruction.

3. **Protection**: Safeguarding women and girls from violence during conflict and post-conflict periods, including implementing measures against sexual violence.

4. **Relief and Recovery**: Ensuring gender-responsive approaches in humanitarian aid, recovery, and rebuilding efforts to meet the specific needs of women and girls.

These four pillars are operationalised through National Action Plans (NAPs), adopted by state authorities. The importance of adopting UNSCR 1325 NAPs is the recognition by states and international bodies of the importance of translating global commitments into tangible, coordinated, and context-specific strategies. However, adoption trends are inconsistent in contexts of compounded crises.

1. **NAPs Adoption in the contexts of the study**:

There are variable levels of interest from states in the region in adopting UNSCR 1325 NAPs. Regions with more isolated governments or contested governance witness lower appetite from state authorities to adopt a NAP. For example, Syria has not adopted an official NAP to date. Yemen only adopted its first NAP in December 2019, which expired in 2022. Similarly, in Lebanon, a NAP was adopted in 2019 and expired in 2022. Palestine adopted its first NAP 2017-2019, a second NAP followed,

covering the period 2020-2024. Iraq stands out as the first country in the region to adopt a UNSCR 1325 NAP in 2014, having adopted its third NAP by the time of writing this paper.

2. **Thematic focus and lead authorities:**

Since 2016, globally, fewer NAPs are focusing on protection skewing more towards participation. It is notable that the Prevention pillar is absent from all NAPs in the context of this study, except for in Lebanon where it is combined with the Protection Pillar. The lead authorities for implementing NAPs in the contexts of the study are the Women and Family affairs-like institutions, while in Europe, North America, and South America, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are more likely to take lead with a whole-of-government approach.[6]

3. **NAPs as advocacy and donor mobilisation tools:**

Governments frequently leverage NAPs to access international funding and technical support for gender, security, and humanitarian efforts. The plans also serve as advocacy frameworks for civil society towards state authorities and international donors. Women's coalitions and advocacy groups are instrumental in pushing for the adoption and revision of NAPs, despite efforts to sideline them. There is also tension between their advocacy narratives and their counterparts from state authorities vis-à-vis international donors.

4. **Gaps and challenges in implementation:**

Notwithstanding their potential, many NAPs face challenges, including insufficient funding, weak institutional frameworks, lack of political will, and limited enforcement mechanisms. These shortcomings can hinder sustained impact and require ongoing support and political commitment to overcome.[7]

Despite significant progress, challenges remain in fully realising WPS goals. Women's representation in formal peace negotiations is still disproportionately low[8], and sexual violence continues to undermine peace and security globally.

In South-West Asia (SWA), the WPS agenda stands at a pivotal crossroads, shaped by the intersecting realities of settler colonialism, contexts of revolutions, protracted conflict, militarisation, and the persistent contestation of statehood. This report emerges from a period of profound upheaval, with the region enduring ongoing genocide in Gaza and its ripple effects across Palestine, escalations in Lebanon, Yemen and Syria, anti-gender backlash and the fragmentation of governance in Iraq. Against this backdrop, feminist activists, thinkers, and organisations have continued to resist erasure—linguistic, legal, spatial, and historical—while navigating the shifting terrain of diminishing international aid, the politicisation and militarisation of aid, policing donor compliance, and securitised policy frameworks.

Rooted in UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (31 October 2000), the first resolution to explicitly link gender equality with the maintenance of international peace and security, the WPS agenda was conceived as a watershed intervention aimed at transforming the logics of war and peace by centring women's participation, rights, and agency. Its four interlocking pillars: participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery, were later deepened by subsequent resolutions (including 1820 [2008], which recognised sexual violence as a tactic of war and affirmed accountability obligations). At the national level, WPS National Action Plans (NAPs) were introduced as implementation frameworks to localise these commitments across policy and institutions. Read together, these texts trace an agenda with radical, transformative roots, that sought to reconfigure security away from militarised paradigms and toward gender-just peace.

In light of the region's realities, this paper aims to: (i) clarify how WPS has been institutionalised and domesticated in South-West Asia (SWA), and where this process reproduces colonial, patriarchal and securitised logics; (ii) surface the contradictions between policy text and lived experience; and (iii) outline what a liberation-centred, anti-colonial feminist praxis demands of donors, states, and international actors. The primary audience is movement actors in the region: activists seeking analytical tools and strategies. A secondary audience includes international NGOs, multilateral organisations, and diplomats who shape funding and policy architectures, as well as researchers who document and translate feminist practice into influence. The report is designed to equip each of these audiences with concrete diagnostics and policy levers while preserving the political edge of the WPS agenda rather than sanding it down into technocratic compliance.

Drawing on interviews with feminist actors and peacebuilders across Palestine, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, as well as a survey of 147 respondents, and a comprehensive review of regional literature, this report interrogates the limitations of a WPS framework that privileges state-centric, technocratic solutions over liberation and justice. It foregrounds the lived experiences and political imaginations of those who operate in spaces where the very concept of statehood is contested and where the machinery of violence—whether through occupation, authoritarian collapse, or militarised governance—continues to shape the boundaries of feminist action.

The report's primary objective is to deconstruct the deployment of the WPS agenda in the South-West Asia (SWA) region, and to surface a liberatory feminist praxis that is rooted in anti-colonial struggle, radical care, and transgenerational knowledge. It challenges the reduction of WPS to a technical tool or donor-driven checklist, instead, framing it as a terrain of political contestation and a site of epistemic[9] and material struggle. Through detailed country case studies, analysis of persistent structural challenges, and documentation of emerging practices, the report offers actionable recommendations for reimagining advocacy strategies and international influencing on WPS priorities.

By centring the voices and strategies of community-rooted feminists, the report calls for a return to the radical roots of the WPS agenda—one that confronts and unravels existing patriarchal power structures rather than adapting to them. It is both a record of the region's feminist resilience, and a blueprint for future-proofing the WPS agenda in the face of ongoing and emerging threats.

This report is directed at a broad audience, including activists, local and international CSOs, international organisations and diplomats.

Methodology and respondents' profiles

- Desk review of grey literature including regional WPS reports, feminist critiques, and donor evaluations. Focus on lived experiences, historical memory, feminist language reclaiming, and epistemic disruption.
- A survey reaching 147 respondents from target countries as follows:

Country	Number of respondents
Syria	55
Yemen	30
Palestine	28
Iraq	24
Lebanon	10

76% (112) were women, 16% (23) were men, the rest (12) preferred not to disclose their gender.

- This policy paper is grounded in the Amman Women, Peace and Security Learning Event (held in November 2024) which gathered leading feminists and activists from the region. Further, 20 semi-structured key informant interviews were conducted between January 2024 and March 2025 with feminist actors and peacebuilders (1 man and 19 women) working across Iraq, Palestine, Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, and the diaspora, as well as various international advisors engaged at global policy levels. The interviewees represent a wide cross-section of civil society, humanitarian, and advocacy ecosystems, encompassing diverse geographic, institutional, and socio-political contexts.

Geographic and political contexts

- Respondents from Iraq included senior directors of women's rights organisations, peace researchers, and community-based mediators working across sectarian and ethnic lines (including Kurdish and Sunni Arab backgrounds), primarily in Baghdad and Erbil.
- From Palestine, interviewees were based in the West Bank and Gaza (with one currently displaced to Egypt), and included women with leadership roles in development, communications, and community-based trauma work.
- In Yemen, respondents were based in the South, and included peace practitioners and civil society leaders navigating local governance under conditions of siege, displacement, and restricted humanitarian access.
- Syrian feminist voices were included from Syria and the Diaspora, representing activist-archivist networks and organisations collaborating with local governance bodies in non-state-controlled areas.
- Additional interviews included Lebanese heads of organisations, practitioners working on gender, and policy advocacy; as well as international actors with regional portfolios or global mandates based in Europe.

Professional backgrounds and areas of work

Interviewees included:

- Directors and founders of women-led NGOs and feminist initiatives
- Gender and humanitarian policy advisors at major INGOs
- Researchers with doctoral-level expertise in gender and peacebuilding
- MHPSS and SRHR specialists working on trauma and disability
- Youth leaders and digital feminist organisers
- Experts in transitional justice, advocacy, and women's political participation
- Professionals engaged in international legal documentation and WPS coordination

Diversity and lived experience

- Respondents ranged in age from late 20s/early 30s to mid-60s.
- Several had lived experiences of displacement, refugeehood, or growing up under military occupation.
- The group included individuals from minority groups (ethnic, sectarian, or geographic), those with psychosocial disabilities, and those with non-traditional family structures (including single, widowed, or separated women).
- Many operate in contexts of limited or contested statehood, often negotiating with armed actors, navigating aid dependencies, or confronting digital and physical repression.

Key research questions

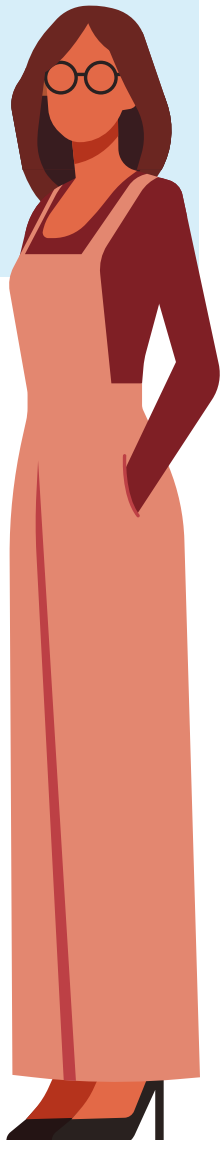
1. What is the current landscape for WPS in the contexts of the study? What is the existing infrastructure for WPS in the contexts of the study?
2. What challenges do countries face in implementing the WPS agenda effectively? Perspectives from civil society and INGOs.
3. What are the key successful practices in driving and implementing WPS within 1325 NAPs and beyond, and how can those be adapted and scaled up across the region?
4. How can the WPS agenda be future-proofed in the region? What resources, partnerships and approaches are needed to ensure that?

Limitations

The study took place during some of the most tumultuous times for the region, with the ongoing Israeli genocide against Gaza, multiple Israeli aggressions on Lebanon, escalation in Yemen, the fall of the Assad regime, and Israeli aggression against Syria and Iran. Those events affected respondents' operations and immediate families. We appreciate the toll of working through difficult times like these and are deeply grateful to our respondents for taking the time to speak with us.

List of abbreviations and acronyms

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CRSV	Conflict-Related Sexual Violence
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CSW	Commission on the Status of Women
ESCWA	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia
EU	European Union
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IEG	Informal Expert Group
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
JONAP	Jordanian National Action Plan
WHRDs	Women Human Rights Defenders
LAS	League of Arab States
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
NAP	National Action Plan
NCLW	National Commission for Lebanese Women
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OHCHR	United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PCVE	Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
UN	United Nations
UNAMI	United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine
UN Women	United Nations Programme for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
VAW	Violence Against Women
WHO	World Health Organization
WEF	World Economic Forum
WLOs	Women Led Organisations
WPS	Women, Peace and Security
SWA	South-West Asia
SWANA	South-West Asia and North Africa



Executive Summary

This report explores the fundamental question: How can the WPS agenda be reimagined, re-understood, and reapplied in a region scorched by settler colonialism, authoritarian collapse, military occupation, and with WPS funding tethered to political compliance with all of the aforementioned? This report calls for the establishment of a fifth pillar—accountability—as essential for strengthening and sustaining progress on the WPS agenda.

Chapter 1: Setting the scene - SWA as a site of epistemic and material struggle
This chapter explores how the WPS agenda has been shaped by state-centric limitations and the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings, which shattered old governance structures and ushered in new forms of militarised masculinities and forced depoliticisation. Rather than opening space for transformation, the collapsing of governance structures produced new forms of militarised masculinities, and tightened control over feminist organising. Women's participation, when institutionalised through post-uprising frameworks, was often reduced to token roles, at a time when protection mechanisms also became detached from accountability. The chapter also traces how women's struggles in non-state-controlled territories or in contexts of occupation were insufficiently represented in official WPS processes, leading to the structural erasure of their agency. The chapter underscores the fragility of civic space and the ways in which militarised and securitised environments have redefined the boundaries of feminist organising.

Chapter 2: 25 Years of WPS – We ARE the Agenda
Marking a quarter-century since the adoption of UNSCR 1325, this chapter examines the persistent structural challenges facing feminists in the region. It describes a civic space that is overwhelmingly restricted, with only a narrow margin for organising. Chronic underfunding, societal and religious restrictions, digital censorship, and direct security threats are identified as key barriers. The chapter also traces significant shifts in feminist discourse, noting a move toward bureaucratic, project-based language and a focus on security and counter-terrorism, such as Iraq's locally-drafted action plan, legal reforms for Yazidi survivors, Palestinian evidence observatories, Yemeni women's frontline mediations, Syrian shadow NAPs, and Lebanese legal and community-based innovations. These stories of resilience and achievement are set against a backdrop of fragmentation and the rise of NGOis, which has often sidelined grassroots actors.

Chapter 3: Linguistic Warfare – The Battlefield of Rights
This chapter delves into the co-optation and erasure of feminist language by states and donors, who have redefined key terms and de-politicised advocacy. It describes how, in places like Iraq and Lebanon, terms

such as “gender” and “empowerment” have been scrubbed from official discourse, replaced with sanitised language that strips away insurgent meanings. The narrative highlights the creative tactics feminists use to reclaim language, including oral history, vernacular storytelling, and the politicisation of care. In Palestine, naming the unlawful occupation, annexation, and genocide becomes an act of resistance; while in Syria, art and oral history are wielded to preserve memory and challenge propaganda. The chapter also explores how care work, grief, and collective healing are reframed as acts of resistance and political indictments of violence, particularly in contexts like Gaza, where the intimate becomes a site of political struggle.

Chapter 4: Policy Influencing – What Works and What’s Dying

Focusing on the strategies feminists employ to influence policy in hostile environments, this chapter narrates how refusal, redirection, and radical localisation have become essential counter-strategies. In Iraq, quiet coalitions with parliamentarians and survivor-centred legal reform bypass institutional paralysis. Palestinian feminists use strategic walkouts from co-opted international spaces to reclaim narrative authority. Syrian activists develop shadow NAPs and informal networks to amplify the voices of women human rights defenders. In Lebanon, care work is leveraged to advocate for safe housing and communal healing, while in Yemen, hybrid peace tracks re-engage rural voices and broker humanitarian access. The chapter emphasises the need for alternative policy venues that prioritise feminist knowledge and lived experience over compliance and technical jargon.

Chapter 5: Emerging Themes

This chapter weaves together cross-cutting themes that have emerged from the region’s feminist struggles. It highlights the role of oral testimonies and communal care in political healing, positioning them as tools for justice and resistance. The narrative discusses the strategic withdrawal and refusal of feminists to engage with donor tables and securitised WPS actors that compromise their principles. It also explores the creation of feminist lexicons and transformative justice narratives as central to resisting militarised and colonial meanings. The chapter underscores the importance of cross-border continuities, such as oral history, decentralised organising, and transgenerational solidarity, which bind together feminist movements across the five countries.

Chapter 6: Future-Proofing WPS

This chapter addresses the urgent need to future-proof the WPS agenda in the face of existential threats; including the collapse of support, intensification of authoritarianism, loss of accountability, and rising humanitarian needs. It calls for a radical transformation that centres liberation, justice, and intersectionality, moving beyond technocratic containment and donor-driven compliance. The narrative outlines key strategies for resilience, such as establishing sustainable and diversified funding, localising and contextualising the agenda, building alliances and networks, innovating discourse and tools, enhancing accountability and justice, and investing in education and young leadership. It also calls for building parallel data-sharing and exchange channels that bypass Global North platforms and funding dependencies, so feminists in the region can connect and resist without being fragmented by external control. The chapter concludes by emphasising the necessity of an intersectional and decolonial approach, recognising the diverse realities and identities of women across the region, and positioning the WPS agenda as a genuine framework for peace, justice, and equality.

Chapter 7: Recommendations

This chapter synthesises insights from approximately 50 feminist and women’s rights advocates who convened in Amman in November 2024 to address urgent challenges threatening the progress of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda globally. It identifies critical risks, such as the erosion of financial and political support for WPS, rising authoritarianism and militarisation (including occupations), the loss of accountability and documentation mechanisms, and increasing humanitarian crises overshadowing long-term justice efforts.

The chapter calls for a radical transformation centring liberation, justice, and intersectionality to safeguard and advance WPS. Essential to this transformation is the emergence of global feminist leadership committed to disarmament, feminist economics, transformative justice, and reformed international governance. Finally, it presents two sets of recommendations for WHRDs and feminist actors, and for donors as enablers. The recommendations for WHRDs and Feminist Actors are focused on driving localised, and context-responsive WPS work. Building alliances and networks and strengthening cross-border feminist solidarity and advocacy coalitions. Lastly, innovating discourse and tools to revitalise the language of resistance and liberation to inspire feminist advocacy rooted in movement-defined priorities.

The recommendations for donors offer detailed proposals for:

- Perspective shifts: with aid as an investment in global peace
- Enabling feminist infrastructures
- Scaling-up good donorship practices
- Adopting an intersectional and decolonial approach to WPS in SWA

Chapter 8: Call to Action – The Fifth Pillar

Chapter 8 elaborates on an urgent and unequivocal call to action: the WPS agenda must return to its radical roots, confronting and unravelling existing power structures rather than adapting to them. This chapter presents a comprehensive call to action to establish a fifth pillar—accountability—as essential for strengthening and sustaining progress on the WPS agenda. The chapter highlights the imperative roles of Member States and diplomatic missions in implementing UNSCR 1325 through national action plans, legislative reform, and institutional adoption. It underscores the critical responsibilities of UN leadership and agencies to integrate WPS priorities into their planning, resource allocation, and peacebuilding efforts.

Regional bodies such as the European Union and the League of Arab States, though with a trust deficiency constraint for the latter, are identified as key actors through their strategic frameworks supporting gender equality and women's protection. Civil society organisations, especially women's groups and rights-based NGOs, play a vital role in monitoring implementation, exposing gaps, advocating for systemic change, and providing technical and survivor support. Their role is positioned as essential in driving transparency and course corrections, rather than substituting official responsibilities. The accountability process outlined includes regular monitoring, gender-sensitive evaluation, transparent reporting, and meaningful involvement of women's organisations and affected communities. This chapter's call to action aims to embed accountability as a foundational pillar within WPS, paving the way for tangible, transformative results in advancing women's rights, participation, and security in peace and conflict settings.

▼ Tishreen revolutionary holding up a sign "Revolution is Female" in Iraq, 2019

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Chapter 1: Setting the scene - SWA as a site of epistemic and material struggle

Feminists across Palestine, Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon are navigating multiple and simultaneous erasures; linguistic erasure, memory erasure, legal erasure, and spatial erasure. The phrase "women's participation" is thrown around in donor reports, often reduced to counting seats at negotiation tables or women in trainings, but rarely tied to actual influence, decision-making power, or protection guarantees. But what does that mean in a place where activists are being bombed and kidnapped, feminist archives are disappearing, digital spaces surveilled, and feminist language criminalised?

Iraq adopted its first UNSCR 1325 NAP in 2014 and a second in Dec 2020 for 2021–2024; Palestine adopted NAPs for 2017–2019 and 2020–2024; Lebanon endorsed its first NAP on 12 Sep 2019 for 2019–2022; Yemen adopted its first NAP in Dec 2019 for 2020–2022. As previously mentioned, Syria has no state-led NAP; feminist engagement is channelled through UN-facilitated and civil-society frameworks.

Grey literature assessing these experiences consistently conclude that while NAPs create formal entry points, they largely reproduced state-centric and donor-driven agendas, narrowing WPS into technical programming and sidelining liberation politics. Interviews with feminist actors across Palestine, Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon confirm and deepen this critique, showing how WPS has been less of a framework for liberation than a tool of technocratic containment[10]. In fact, across the conducted interviews, as well as grey literature findings, one thing is clear; WPS in South-West Asia (SWA) has been deployed less as a liberation framework, and more as a tool of technocratic containment for localised feminist liberal struggles[11].

These findings mirror the interview findings and resonate with a wider body of feminist scholarship, which helps situate regional experiences within a broader critique of how WPS has been framed and institutionalised globally. From a decolonial feminist lens, the WPS agenda in SWA must be seen not merely as policy, but as the reproduction of epistemic dominance[12] and racialised hierarchies[13]. Scholars like Maria Lugones introduce the concept of 'coloniality of gender[14], arguing that current frameworks often impose Western gender binaries and norms onto societies

already resisting colonial occupation. Toni Haastrup and Jamie Hagen further expose that NAPs frequently serve as conduits for global racial hierarchies, preserving knowledge production in Global North institutions over local feminist knowledge. In contexts where Palestinian, Iraqi, Yemeni, Syrian, and Lebanese feminists live under surveillance, occupation, authoritarian governance, and fragmentation, these plans recast feminist resistance as depoliticised participation. Transnational feminist thinkers like Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Gaytri Spivak challenge Western feminist universalism, and highlight the need for situated coalition-based solidarity and structural transformation. The current reality in South-West Asia (SWA) centres these reflections, and forces us to confront the central question of this policy paper: How can the WPS agenda be reimagined, re-understood, and reapplied in a region scorched by settler colonialism, authoritarian collapse, military occupation, and WPS funding tethered to political compliance with all of the above?

The SWA region exposes the grey zone for political appropriation in the application of the WPS agenda. National Action Plans (NAPs) are the primary tools through which states translate WPS into policy frameworks, but critics have shown how they often operate as donor-driven checklists that privilege Global North expertise and reproduce racialised hierarchies in knowledge production. Rather than centring feminist praxis, many NAPs reinforce state and International Governmental Organisation (IGO) priorities, preserving global minority knowledge while sidelining local and decolonial approaches (Ní Aoláin et al., 2016; Shepherd, 2021)[15]. The problem is not the implementation of WPS through state-led NAPs or IGO-backed initiatives per se, it is the ontological mismatch between a westernised understanding of the WPS agenda and how people in this region actually live, resist, and survive erasure.

In **Palestine**, the first NAP was launched in January 2017, led by the Ministry of Women's Affairs. It was followed by a second NAP in 2020 that extended into 2025. Palestinian feminists say the process is controlled by the Palestinian Authority and UN Women, inviting only 'politically palatable' NGOs while excluding anti-occupation voices. As one interviewee noted: 'NAPs exist under occupation to keep us quiet'. The Israeli apartheid settler colonialism functions as a regime of racialised control that fragments Palestinian life and forcibly compounds feminist struggles. In the words of one of the interviewees 'how can we even begin to have political imagination related to WPS, or any other matter, when we are under occupation?'. Women and feminist activists in Palestine face double repression: on the one hand, Israeli state violence and the Palestinian Authority's role as a counterinsurgency force under occupation; on the other, entrenched gender norms that reinforce patriarchal systems and exacerbate gender-based discrimination and violence. Activists operate in a climate of surveillance, securitised aid structures and marginalisation of resistance voices. As mentioned by several interviewees operating in WPS spaces, multilateral organisations' backed WPS platforms routinely sideline feminist actors deemed too 'political' or 'unpalatable' for their anti-occupation stance. A WPS version that is rooted in Western liberal peace takes place, with a framework that defines peace as institutional stability with the violent political status quo; upheld through the faulty governance of the Palestinian Authority, the structures of exclusionary racism of the Israeli occupation, and the suffocating conditionalities of international donors.

This model actively de-links gender from liberation, and dangerously predisposes 'peace' as technocratic coexistence with the occupier (a regime where Palestinians are reduced to managing their day-to-day lives through bureaucratic and technical fixes-checkpoints, permits, etc.- while the deeper violence of occupation, dispossession, settler expansion, erasure, and colonial domination, remain unquestioned and untouched). Activists described the NAP as a sanitised script disconnected from grassroots priorities and liberation frameworks. The NGOisation of feminist work, donor imposed vetting, and the co-optation of feminist language have only deepened this erasure. As one interviewee noted: 'liberation is a precondition for any WPS work in Palestine'.

In **Iraq**, political fragmentation is not just territorial or political, it is institutional and epistemic. Since the 2003 US-led invasion and the post-Daesh period, as well as the post 2019 Tishreen uprising, governance has been defined by militia-state entanglements compounded by foreign countries' interference, sectarian clientelism and kleptocratic frameworks that instrumentalise women's rights for international visibility while criminalising feminist work and organising on the ground. The erasure of the terms 'gender' and 'women's empowerment' from public discourses are a sign of the demonisation of feminist work as part of the broader patriarchal and militarised framework determined to erase hard-won feminist gains.

Feminists are waging a linguistic fight (amongst others), that holds the line against a regime that sees feminist presence as a threat to the state's authority. The first NAP (2014-2018) in Iraq (and the SWANA region), was locally drafted by women-led coalitions across Baghdad and Erbil, before the second NAP (2021-2023) was shaped by the state, ministries and UN Women, with civil society mobilised too late in the process[16]. As one

▲ Palestinian women creating hopeful artwork to encourage inclusive decision making, 2020

activist stated, 'the draft went to the Prime Minister for approval before we even saw it'.

The third UNSCR 1325 NAP (2025-2030) has been widely criticised for the exclusionary design and being led by officials with a track record of anti-women's rights legislations. In her paper Between Resolution and Implementation, Reem Ghassan states that "in Iraq, the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, [...], might be used today as a legitimate cover to consolidate discriminatory concepts, discourses, policies and laws against women, that increase violence against women". What began as a tool of resistance and a landmark document for the countries of the region, soon got neutered into a bureaucratic document that preserves the political status quo, roll-back women's rights gains, and indeed serves as a blueprint for feminist erasure from national security dialogues.

In **Yemen**, the struggle lies in both the deep fragmentation of political authority between the North and the South of the country, and the hyper-militarisation of everyday life. The absence of a unified governance has enabled armed actors to target human rights and women's rights activists more specifically with gendered violence (kidnappings, killings, smear campaigns, and physical threats), all while excluding them from formal negotiations. Despite this, feminist insider mediators continued to establish themselves in spaces that are impenetrable by other actors, and work to broker local ceasefires and reopen humanitarian lifelines in areas controlled by the Houthis, often without funding, protection or acknowledgement.

Yemen's WPS NAP structure (approved in December 2019 for 2020-2022) has been characterised by optics—public visibility to donors and international actors— rather than by genuine ownership from Yemeni women. Civil society groups that contributed to it were sidelined as governments fragmented, and the Women's Technical Advisory Group (formed to advise international actors on women's issues in Yemen, and backed by the UN Envoy's Office) was later silently dismantled, with no accountability or closure. This was emblematic of a broader pattern of an extractive and top-down WPS model that instrumentalises Yemeni women's knowledge, while discarding it when they demand structural and reciprocal influence.

In **Syria**, the protracted conflict has produced a space of no 'safe zone' for feminist work. Whether under the control of Assad's regime, de facto authorities, or more recently, the transitional government, women continue to navigate compounded systems of surveillance,

smear campaigns, intimidation, killings, and patriarchal repression. What is often labelled as shrinking civic space is in reality a war on feminist existence. As one interviewee put it: 'Organising is permitted only when it doesn't disturb the hierarchy. The minute you politicise your survival,; instead, they navigated NAPs in donor countries like the United Kingdom[17], the Netherlands, and Sweden, in which those countries either held direct consultations with Syrian women, or feminists used oral histories and advocacy avenues. This is because any state-endorsed process would have been shaped by Assad's regime, which would not reflect the aspirations, ethos or the struggles of the Syrian feminist movement that survived multiple matrices of suppression.

In **Lebanon**, the compounded impact of the 2019 uprising, the world's third largest non-nuclear explosion (Beirut Port Explosion), the ongoing economic collapse, and the 2024-2025 Israeli war on Lebanon, has exposed the hollowness of Lebanon's "statehood" as a fragmented, sectarian arrangement incapable of delivering structural accountability, let alone implementing a transformative WPS agenda. While Lebanon's NAP (2019-2022) endorsed by the council of Ministers in 2019 was a milestone, one activist mentioned that 'it's mainly a donor-driven document, imposed via The National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW)-UN channels'. Despite boasting different strategic priorities and measurable targets, the NAP functions more as a political placeholder, dislocated from lived struggle and real female activists who continue being present through grassroots organising.

In conclusion, the WPS agenda in SWA is both omnipresent and absent. New iterations of National Action Plans and strategies have been written, jargonised with buzzwords, and backed by rounds of training and technical support. But all these documents skirt around the root causes; militarised occupation, authoritarian collapse, settler violence, and patriarchal governance. Feminists in the region are not asking for more policies. They are demanding that existing policies stop being performative and start being transformative by tackling the machinery of violence. Their call is that of this policy paper: for a WPS agenda that does not adapt itself to existing power, but defies it. What began as a grassroots resistance tool was later institutionalised into a bureaucratic script that neutralised feminist agency.

Chapter 2: 25 Years of WPS – We ARE the Agenda

Post-2011 rupture and the depoliticisation of the feminist movement

The aftermath of the 2011 uprisings across the SWANA region marked a rupture in the architecture of governance that was predominant for decades prior, and had a direct impact on gender politics. Authoritarian regimes that had relied on centralised control and state-led machinery began to fracture, giving way to new forms of militarised rule, sectarian power-sharing, and foreign intervention, all of which reshaped the terrain for feminist organising. Far from ushering in a linear transition focused on constitutional and institutional reform, these uprisings exposed the fragility of state institutions and cracked open new terrains for militarisation in everyday life. For the feminist movement, the collapse of these archaic architectures did not translate into liberation. Instead, a new masculine order emerged, one that is hypermilitarised, hyper-nationalist, and hyper-suspicious of human rights movements that challenge the status quo[18].

Across Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq, the counter-revolutionary backlash relied not only on repressive tactics, but on the reassertion of a virile, militarised masculinity that polices the bodies of feminists, their minds, and the spaces where they operate. Political messaging often invoked patriarchal orders masked as family moral orders to delegitimise women's emancipation. Nowhere is this clearer than in the twin cases of Yemen and Iraq, where the inclusion of women has been instrumentalised to serve sectarian, patriarchal and geopolitical interests.

In Yemen, for instance, women peacebuilders have been systematically excluded from Track 1 peace processes, not due to oversight, but as a deliberate act of governance that protects masculinised war economies, and excludes those who threaten to unravel them. The deployment of women into hyper-orthodox religious and security apparatuses in Yemen illustrates how gender inclusion in these militarised spaces is weaponised by women and against women, in order to preserve patriarchal and geopolitical power. The rise of all female security forces such as the Zainabiyat, and Al Fatimiyat, reveals a strategic instrumentalisation of womanhood for the purpose of surveilling, disciplining and repressing other women. Their roles are less about gender equity and more about expanding patriarchal control under the guise of moral policing. These are not anomalies, but structural expressions of a broader trend in South West Asia, where the optics of female participation are manipulated to reinforce sextarian[19] and sectarian governance.

Similarly, in Iraq, the dynamics exerted by Shia-influenced educational and religious institutions, funded and operated by Iran, are equally embedding of conservative gender norms, particularly in southern and central Iraq. The hawza system (Shi'a Islamic Seminaries located mainly in Najaf (Iraq), and Qom (Iran)), and political parties with religious affiliations, actively shape the normal boundaries of permissible feminist discourse. As one Iraqi scholar interviewee noted, 'these narratives build upon existing cultural norms that are now sanctified by state-linked religious actors; at the same time, Western actors claim to support civil liberties while supporting militarised governance structures and weaponisation', a contradiction that is leaving feminist organising across the region caught between two imperial powers that are equally harmful.

Importantly, not all women in these spaces are passive instruments. The field is full of contradictions and the WPS agenda is "sandwiched" by the competing forces of hyper militarisation and ideological hegemony. Some religious women's groups trained in these traditional networks may articulate gender justice in radically different vocabularies, and in ways that suit their

context, but speaks to a feminist political courage; however, their legitimacy and their inclusion in the broader WPS dialogue is often questioned by a display of national, regional and international actors who continue to normalise 'liberal' feminism as the only form of feminism valid for resistance. What is clear, however, is that many feminist activists, whether secular, religious, or somewhere in between, face demonisation and erasure by media, political elites, and religious institutions alike. Feminism itself, especially post-2011, is rebranded as a threat to national identity or religious purity, rendering the WPS agenda vulnerable to co-optation, demonisation, and collapse.

Yet, even when women navigate these complex dynamics, another force stands in the way of transformative participation of women in political life: donor-driven depoliticisation (the active reshaping of feminist agendas through funding conditionalities, counter-terror vetting, securitised log frames, and the selection of "palatable" partners, mechanisms that erase colonialism, occupation, and militarisation from analysis while rewarding compliance).

Across the region, activists interviewed have consistently testified how international frameworks, despite claiming to support women's inclusion and participation in political life as per the first pillar of the WPS agenda, have functioned less as enablers of such change, and more as filters, muting dissent and reshaping resistance into technical jargon. Words like "liberation" or "resistance" trigger pushback from donors and international institutions in policy forums on Palestine, where such terms are read as "too political"; meanwhile, terms like "capacity-building" or "gender mainstreaming" pass through unchecked in these same spaces, precisely because international frameworks have normalised them as apolitical, technical jargon.

Feminist actors are, as such, not only demonised by local regimes and media outlets but also disciplined by donor ecosystems that reward compliance over resistance. In Yemen, for instance, Al-Hawyah Channel launched a smear campaign against women anchors from Belqees TV and Yemen Shabab TV, describing their appearances as "pornographic" and publicly shaming them simply for their professional visibility[20]. In Iraq, one activist recounted how donor pressure meant that her organisation's WPS work needed to be hollowed out through the decoupling of gender equality work from its political roots; a sacrifice she refused to make, despite the looming threat of funding withdrawals, and exclusion from WPS spaces. Palestinian interviewees echoed the same logic, but with even more urgency. One activist noted how donor ecosystems 'routinely caution against mentioning occupation or state violence, thus pressuring organisations to frame protection needs in ways that sidestep accusations of settler colonialism, reinforced by broader 'anti-incitement' clauses in donor contracts that not only conflate criticism of Israel with antisemitism, but also recast support for resistance as terrorism[21]. This strategic dilution of WPS work not only reshapes language, it reshapes the very possibility of any meaningful localised programming to confront the systems that produce violence and insecurity, those same systems that gave rise to UNSCR 1325 in the first place.

As such, whether it is from militarised structures or the sanitised grip of donor compliance, WPS work is, in its locally rooted sense, heavily policed, censored and punished. When feminist activism is forced to strip its work from politics, what remains is a shell. A shell of participation that excludes political criticism, a shell of protection that protects systems not people, a shell of prevention that silences any revolt against the structural causes for violence, and a shell of relief and recovery that tokenises women as 'grateful recipients', rather than strategists of reconciliation and repair.

Policy without protection is surveillance

If participation is often reduced to tokenism and instrumentalisation, the protection pillar of the WPS agenda is increasingly re-engineered from a commitment to safeguarding life, to a mechanism aimed at managing risk. Across the region, but especially in the context of the unlawful occupation of Palestine and genocide in Gaza, protection is detached from accountability altogether. In its current iteration in contexts of occupation and militarisation, interviews show that protection has become less about shielding women from violence, and more about shielding systems from critique due to the decoupling of protection mechanisms from accountability and enforceability of state compliance with protection standards.

As one Iraqi researcher noted: "Protection mechanisms are absolutely fundamental. But we are being surveilled by security forces, and we do not feel safe or protected enough to exercise our rights. Without protection, activism will decline, research will diminish, and there will be a kind of internal censorship, mental and emotional restraints even before external ones." That sentence says everything: the system of control defines what counts as harm and conveniently exempts itself from it. This is the same logic of the state that surveils activists, violates their rights, and crushes dissent,

yet sits at the table with multilateral institutions drafting frameworks on "women's protection." Another Lebanese activist echoed the same thought when referring to the international community, saying that 'they focus on participation but ignore protection and accountability entirely. For many, especially after 15 months of genocide in Gaza and aggression/war on Lebanon, the WPS agenda has collapsed into a humanitarian shell. Protection is now translated into humanitarian service delivery, and not structural safeguards for the integral protection of women and their political agency.'.

In other contexts, the dynamic of protection is no less coercive. As one Iraqi activist mentions: 'There are several women who were assassinated. Their names are not necessarily documented but we lost women in this journey. Every activist I know who was working on accountability and protection is now either hiding, stopped her work, or has had to change her area of focus.' This phenomenon is not abstract or metaphorical, but rather violently structural. The international WPS apparatus, initially envisioned as a platform where radical accountability is a foundational pillar, now tolerates regimes that ought to be held accountable. In contexts like Palestine, where the illegal Israeli occupation has normalised genocide and mass destruction, the absence of protection has been both the result of a militarised strategy by the Israeli government, and a byproduct of the international community's failure to prevent and confront that violence with any meaningful form of accountability, in accordance to the to the ICJ's provisional measures[22]. Protection in this context becomes completely void of meaning, evacuated of any enforceable content, and perceived as an unattainable measure by the populations seeking it. As one Palestinian activist stated:

> When we speak about occupation, we speak about the political system. But until now, we see that international organisations have abandoned any serious effort to support accountability against the occupation. So how can we talk about protection? **Are we even important to them?"**

The collapse of the protection pillar of the WPS agenda is most visible when applied to girls. While the WPS agenda is concerned with women and child-related conventions are concerned with children, we find the link here is important to draw. The language used in conflict and occupation settings undermines the agency of both women and girls: the same logic that erases

Sudanese protestors and Resistance Committee members expressing their solidarity and outrage with the honour killing of Iraqi feminist activist Tiba al-Ali, February 2023

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women's agency also strip girls of personhood. This distortion shows how protection in its current form fails on multiple fronts. As feminist scholars argue, the liberal humanitarian discourse that centres on "women and children" often functions to erase Palestinian agency, while also enabling the convenient exclusion of Palestinian men, who are continuously framed as legitimate targets by Israel and its allies. This "ungendering" process strips children and women of personhood, rendering them passive victims rather than political actors. In Palestine, children are subjected to systematic 'unchilding[23] and childcide[24] policies ' are not seen as innocent dependents but as political capital; their trauma wielded to normalise siege, bombardment, arrests, and demolitions.

This process is deeply gendered and racialised: social and legal machinery labels them as "born terrorists[25]," enabling militarised control of their psyches, and futures, which Shalhoub-Kevorkian describes as 'constructing childhood itself as a contested site of colonial power'. This unchilding reveals how protection frameworks, collapse in settler-colonial contexts, failing not due to language but because they lack the political courage to challenge the colonial logic that renders Palestinian children's vulnerabilities politically expendable. As one interviewed international expert mentioned: 'Despite the Paris Principles and handover protocols designed to protect children from and in conflict, the implementation remains very weak. Child protection frameworks, much like broader WPS tools, falter not because of flawed language, but because the political will to uphold them is absent.'

In the contexts of the country subjects of this policy paper, protection is what allows those affected by violence to speak, investigators to investigate and communities to demand redress and inform, share and meaningfully engage with transitional justice processes. As one Palestinian activist described: "We face immense challenges in documenting sexual violence linked to conflict. People fear retaliation. Survivors do not feel safe enough to speak. Even when I personally documented testimonies, I realized, what power do I have to protect these women? None." One activist recounted a horrifying case she documented of a man raped with a fire extinguisher until he died. 'Even in this case' she explained, 'we could not document, let alone investigate or prosecute, for fear of reprisal'. She continues to say: "Protection must come first. Without it, documentation, justice, and accountability are impossible."

Without protection from impunity for the perpetrators, there is no safety. Without accountability, there is no locally rooted or sustainable peace. Without the right to name violence, there is no justice. Without all these elements, what remains of the WPS agenda is a reductionist language of performative care that conceals political violence and control.

'Stateless' feminism

If the WPS agenda is increasingly shaped by forces that discipline its political force, then it is entirely erased in geographies that exist outside of the cartographies of statehood. Across Palestine, Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq and Syria, one common thread exists: large swaths of territory are governed not only or not at all by internationally recognised states, but also by de-facto military authorities, non-state armed groups, or fragmented governance structures[26]. The WPS agenda as it is, built its language and ethos on state-centrism, and has limited capacity to recognise women's political agency in these zones. The result is unfortunately, structural erasure.

Let's look closely at the language of UNSCR 1325. Participation is tied to 'national institutions', protection is considered a state obligation, prevention requires state capacity, and relief and recovery are state-coordinated. Nowhere in this state-oriented architecture is there space for political life outside of it, such as communes outside state control, in liberated areas, in unions outside formal state control, etc.

But women in SWA do not wait for permission to get political, because being political is a deeply personal issue to them. One Syrian activist, when asked whether the 1325 framework is still enough today, was unequivocal in saying 'No'. She explained that the Syrian revolution cracked open a new orientation, one centred around rural and grassroot women, long ignored by both the regime and the international system. In places like A'zaz in the Aleppo countryside areas with no historical institutional feminist presence before the revolution, women began shaping local governance and holding municipal councils accountable for water and electricity service delivery.

The same was true in Yemen, where women's organisations in places like Taiz have continued to operate under fire, literally and figuratively. After being harassed, expelled, and threatened by Houthi forces, women-led groups in Taiz negotiated their way back in. They rebuilt trust with local leaders and re-entered areas under siege to secure humanitarian access and implement water infrastructure projects. Their survival was a political strategy of resistance. Feminist activism here looked more like collective leadership, and a grassroot force of nature.

While these practices do not 'fit' into the architecture of the WPS framework, they expose its narrowness. These are examples of an insurgent authorship of 1325 from below. As a famous Arabic proverb goes: 'necessity is the mother of invention'. These women carved out feminist space, not because the political climate welcomed them in, but because their survival needed it. They did not wait for the international community to validate their political agency, they became the political agency.

If these actions had taken place in official spaces or along recognised state-controlled areas, the predisposition would be to call it "progress." But when they occur in places where the regime has collapsed, where donor frameworks have no coordinates, where statehood is no longer the organising principle, they simply do not make it to reports. This is a stark example of structural erasure.

Decolonial critiques of 1325 in the grey and academic literature[27] have long warned of this. The framework, despite its emancipatory language, reproduces the racialised-sexualised hierarchies of colonial power. As Korteweg and Rutazibwa write, it "codifies and reinforces the global colonial order through its selective inclusion: women are made visible only if they conform to state-sanctioned roles and in state-sanctioned places, speak the language of donors, and present their claims in a global Minority/Western/Eurocentric frame'. Those who don't, like those operating in liberated zones, revolutionary councils, occupied cities, or under the gun, are made invisible.

As such, what would it mean to decolonise the WPS agenda? It would mean decolonising its very architecture, and asking what kinds of peace, what kinds of security, what kinds of governance women are already building, especially when the world is not watching.

▼ Syrian women celebrating the fall of the Assad regime, December 2024

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Chapter 3: Linguistic Warfare – The Battlefield of Rights

This chapter explores persistent challenges as experienced by feminists in the SWA regions and their key achievements over the years. The chapter offers key findings from the survey, as well as country-specific results from the qualitative analysis. The conclusion is loud and clear: with hyperlocal challenges, hybrid warfare, and a context of settler colonialism, the agenda must return to its radical roots. These roots lie in the feminist movements that preceded UNSCR 1325, which demanded structural transformation, accountability, and justice. Reconnecting to that lineage is what regional feminists are calling for, even if they don't always frame it in such sanitised language.

Persistent structural challenges

When UNSCR 1325 was adopted in October 2000, it offered a blueprint to thread gender justice into every layer of conflict prevention and peacebuilding. Twenty-five years, and several wars, uprisings, occupations, and pandemic lockdowns later, feminists from Palestine, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen, testify that the Resolution now returns as an 'exported template' as they continue to wrestle with morphing dilemmas on a day-to-day basis. The survey findings highlight two key areas under attack across the target countries of the study: the civic space, and the feminist discourse.

Civic space

The vast majority of participants described the civic space as restricted but with room for operation (117 out of approximately 147 responses), which undoubtedly reflects a difficult operational environment for women's rights groups and activists. Of the persistent challenges, lack of funding and restricted funding and societal and religious restrictions remain key influencing factors, while we see an increase in digital censorship, and direct security threats to activists among the most hindering barriers to the women, peace, and security agenda work.

The government and national security forces, occupation forces, religious/traditional structures, the overreliance on specific actors by the donor community, and armed groups all received above-average to high scores in terms of their negative impact on the civic space. International and regional organisations and the private sector/technology companies had relatively fewer negative impacts according to the survey respondents.

Shifts in feminist discourse

More than 90% of respondents to the survey (see annex I) noted clear stressors which have led to shifts in feminist discourse over the past 5 years:

- 80% cited increased bureaucracy (predominantly project-based language).
- 70% cited a security focus (counter-terrorism) in the broader aid sector.
- 60% noted the institutionalisation of work and the exclusion of women activists in favour of professionals.
- 50% noted elitism and exclusion.
- 40% noted the framing of women as victims rather than actors.

These shifts reflect the pressure under which feminist discourse is, with the language of resistance and comprehensive justice being marginalised in favour of projectised and ''toned-down'' language. Respondents expressed a wish to revive or introduce language on:

- Gender, equality, freedom of choice, and freedom of expression
- Justice
- Recognising the impact of occupation on women
- Human security, politics, comprehensive resistance, ownership, agency, activism
- Intersectionality, positive masculinities
- Collective feminist solidarity as a liberation pathway
- Intergenerational leadership, inclusivity, citizenship
- Community resilience, feminist resilient economy
- Heritage
- Feminist mediation
- LGBTQI+

Palestine

Deconstructing the trap of the 'perfect victim' under occupation

Criminalising feminist resistance through securitised aid and a political persecution of NGOs

The majority of Palestinian respondents found the civic space restrictive with marginal space for operations. Post-October 7, the criminalisation of Palestinian feminist organising has become operationalised through international aid systems, legal frameworks, and counter-terror policy[28]. Within days following October 7th, Switzerland suspended funding to 11 Palestinian NGOs[29] under the pretext of an anti-discrimination "compliance review." Multiple EU donors followed suit. These suspensions were the result of years of donor conditioning that slowly started seeping in years earlier, and by Israel's 2021 designation of six Palestinian CSOs as terrorist organisations. Three of these were women-led, focused on documenting conflict-related sexual violence, political detention, and violations under occupation. That designation, still in effect, blocks financial transfers, allows Israeli forces to raid offices and seize files, and cuts off critical operational channels. OHCHR and Amnesty International have both confirmed that the evidence for these designations remains secret and inaccessible, denying organisations the ability to legally challenge them.

Inside the West Bank, Military Orders 101 and 1651[30] continue to be used to criminalise peaceful assembly and classify documentation work as incitement[31]. These orders enable arrests, equipment confiscation, and arbitrary detention, particularly for women's rights defenders working on politically sensitive files, including evidence destined for international legal institutions[32].

Donors and financial institutions have adopted these repressive frameworks by embedding "counter-terror compliance" requirements into all funding mechanisms[33]. Recent scholarship underscores how this plays out in Palestine: Iqtait's analysis of aid weaponisation post-October 2023 shows how Austria, Denmark, Sweden, and Germany suspended $139 million in development funding, the European Union launched a comprehensive aid review, and the US, Germany, the EU, and 16 other donor states cut $450 million to UNRWA. The study further highlights how agencies like Sweden's SIDA, Switzerland's SDC, and Germany's BMZ escalated surveillance of Palestinian CSOs, while the EU expanded restrictive clauses such as Annex II, Article 1.5bis, compelling subcontractor vetting. At a structural level, the paper situates these donor practices in continuity with earlier conditionalities imposed by the IMF and World Bank, embedding coercive governance through financial control and aligning external aid with Israeli securitisation frameworks.[34]

The result is a de-risking chain: bank transfers are delayed or blocked, donor agencies introduce additional layers of vetting, and CSOs are forced to comply with vague and opaque criteria. Funding is frequently conditioned on accusations that are never substantiated or explained, leaving organisations in a permanent state

of uncertainty, and women's organisations operate with extreme financial precarity. Amnesty International notes that donors impose "special scrutiny[35]" almost exclusively on Palestinian applicants, while scrutiny is waived for Israeli organisations. Interviewees mentioned that organisations with English-language proposal writers and "low-risk" mandates may sail through, while frontline organisations documenting settler violence drown in compliance paperwork.

One interviewee from Palestine mentioned that this filtering effect has concrete consequences: entire constituencies of women are rendered invisible in WPS programming. One stark example is former women detainees, who are automatically branded "terrorists" and excluded from any rehabilitation or reintegration support because no funding can be secured when addressing them. She mentioned: "If a woman is a freed prisoner, she is immediately labelled a terrorist. We cannot get funding for economic projects, for vocational training, for rehabilitation... nothing,". Organisations working with ex-detainees are rejected by donor compliance units, making this category of women effectively untouchable. This undermines core components of WPS work; rehabilitation, reintegration, and access to justice.

The erasure of these women is not an isolated case, but symptomatic of how donor-driven compliance regimes hollow out core pillars of WPS work. The cumulative effect is a collapse of accountability and a reduction of potential agency altogether: survivor testimonies never reach legal review, case files remain incomplete, and international filings stall under the weight of surveillance, funding restrictions, and the criminalisation of political work. This is not a technical failure. It is a coherent system of control.

As such, feminist resistance in Palestine is not only delegitimised through the occupation and military violence, but also through the global counter-terror infrastructure that governs aid and silences advocacy. Unless donors address their complicity in these blockages, no WPS agenda can function in the context of the unlawful Israeli occupation.

NGOisation leading to Palestinian Movement fragmentation

The NGO-isation of feminist organising has turned what was once a politicised, grassroots-driven resistance into a mosaic of depoliticised project silos. Yet this process is not purely static or one-sided. Feminist activists, groups, and networks in the region continue to negotiate space, resist dilution, and strategically use donor frameworks to advance their agendas, even

▼ Palestinians react in front of Israeli forces during a demonstration, 26 May 2017

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under restrictive conditions. While donor agencies and some MFAs have more recently adopted language around "southern leadership" in response to sustained advocacy from majority world civil society, these shifts remain uneven and often superficial. What persists is the structural imbalance: feminist agency operates within an aid economy that still rewards compliance over confrontation, making negotiation possible but never fully liberating.

'On one hand, you have the Palestinian Authority-endorsed "official" 1325 platform, backed by UN Women and European embassies[36]. On the other, the Ahli coalition, a group of grassroots organisations often coordinated by the General Union of Palestinian Women. Both work toward similar goals but operate log frames, key performance indicators, and donor gatekeepers—metrics that measure outputs on paper but fail to reflect real political or practical impact. The result is duplication, friction, and zero harmonisation' said one Palestinian activist. In practice, however, this duplication is contested. The state often relies on coalitions and NGOs for NAP implementation due to chronic budget shortfalls, and while this creates some alignment, it also reproduces tensions between state-endorsed platforms and civil society agendas. Most grants are short-lived, 12 to 18 months at best, and come with predefined "deliverables" such as workshops conducted or reports published. These timelines and metrics leave no room for a long-term strategy that builds toward systemic legal accountability. This is part of a broader pattern across aid-dependent conflict zones: is visibility the only metric for transformation?[37]

NGO-isation also depoliticises the core of the movement. Where feminist actors once led campaigns rooted in liberation, return, and de-occupation, many are now boxed into technical roles: gender mainstreaming consultants, CVE trainers, "local partners." Political resistance is rewritten into donor language, thus stripped of its historical and territorial claims.[38]

Unless WPS frameworks operating in Palestine embed freedom from occupation and legal redress such as accountability for the occupational settler colonial violence, at their core, they risk functioning as empty political rhetoric that obscures rather than confronts the structures of oppression, thus absorbing feminist labour and normalising the very dependency they claim to dismantle.; palliative care for a chronic structural wound.

Iraq

Three chokepoints

The vast majority of respondents found the civil space restrictive with marginal opportunities for operations. Feminist politics in Iraq travels through three 'chokepoints'. First, the women leadership space within formal hierarchies is apportioned by sectarian patronage. Second, the security sector, army units, intelligence services, militias, and the religious ecosystem set the perimeter of permissible activism. Third, these same actors police language, by vilifying and criminalising the use of words like 'gender' and 'empowerment'. Together these dynamics restrict civic space, derail legal reform, and reward NGOs that echo technical jargon over those that confront power.

Feminist Leadership[39] caged by sectarian clientelism

In the 2021 election, women secured 28.9% of seats, yet 83% of them entered on party lists controlled by sectarian machines. The election law guarantees a 25% quota in multi-member districts, according to UNAMI, 57 out of the 95 women (roughly 60%) were elected beyond the quota, winning through open electoral competition rather than filling reserved seats[40]. An Iraqi interviewee mentioned that 'UN Women convened its February 2025 consultation on NAP II, invitations ran through the UN and Prime-Minister-controlled National Directorate for Iraqi Women, sidelining autonomous civil society networks'. She continues to add that CSOs outside ruling blocs "must brand proposals around donor jargon to stay on the inside," a pattern confirmed by budget data showing that 71% of UN-funded WPS projects were channelled to organisations vetted by government partners in 2023.

In the words of one of the interviewees for this policy paper: 'The new NAP for Iraqi Women (2023-30) is void of meaning, omitting real threats against Iraqi women: militia violence, religious and sectarian violence, exhibited through the passing of the domestic-violence legislation, and the amendment of the personal status law, which could legalise child marriage as young as 9'. UN press releases echo the technocratic frame, celebrating Baghdad as "Capital of Arab Women 2023" while sidestepping accountability for protest killings following the 2019 Tishreen Uprising.

The Tishreen Uprising: The backlash on the feminist movement

The 2019–2020 Tishreen uprising ignited Iraq's sectarian and gender divides, defining a moment where feminist mobilisation and brutal suppression collided. Over 600 protesters were killed, and more than 20,000 wounded in coordinated violence by federal security forces and Iran-backed militias, with women among the fallen and the disappeared. For the first time, thousands of young Iraqi women took to public squares like Baghdad's Tahrir, leading feminist protests and marches, and declaring, often physically, "A woman's voice is revolution." Their activism was not confined to slogans: they organised communal kitchens, legal clinics, and mutual-care networks, merging aid delivery with political resistance. The Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI), for example, pivoted from managing shelters for survivors of ISIS to providing political support, legal advocacy, and frontline protection for female protestors.[41]

The surge in feminist agency provoked a violent counter-reaction; at least 29 activists were assassinated, including Basra physician-activist Reham Yacoub, while others faced abductions, digital defamation campaigns, and threats amplified by militia-controlled media. Tishreen demonstrated the potential of feminist organising in radicalising civic space. But it also exposed how state and militia forces will systematically extinguish this momentum, especially when women lead from the front, without any national, regional and international backing.

'Gender' and language neutralisation

'Roughly six months before Iraq's 2025 provincial elections, the then-head of the Federal Women's Empowerment Directorate was summoned by a senior cleric who asked: "Why are you using the term Tamkeen (empowerment)? What do you want, to empower women against us?"' An Iraqi activist, who served as an external adviser to the Directorate, stated. She recounts that the Quranic connotation of the word Tamkeen (empowerment), was reinterpreted by religious authorities as a threat of gender rebellion.

Within weeks, the Directorate's name was quietly changed to the National Office for Iraqi Women; every official letterhead and donor brief adopted the new, neutral label. A head of an Iraqi WRO describes the rebrand as "deliberately stripping the agenda of its power vocabulary." In parallel, UN Women press releases began substituting "empowerment" with "capacity development" and "leadership", purging all politically charged language, and neutralising any terminology that might challenge clerical or sectarian power. What is needed now is a deliberate return to language that recentres political agency and names the structures of violence women are resisting, rather than masking them.

Yemen

A needle's eye for operations

The majority of respondents found the civic space criminalised or closed with a small margin for operation. The 2011 uprising catapulted women from token reformers to "32% of the National Dialogue seats, more than any party bloc," forcing a criminal ban on child marriage and winning six cabinet seats in the 2014 technocracy cabinet. Yet by 2015, the same visibility put them on militia black-lists, pushing many into exile or into anonymous, underground community work that confined itself mostly in the digital space. UN Women, alongside Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed (former Special Envoy for Yemen)'s team, launched the "National Women's Consensus on Peace and Security" in 2015-2016. They gathered 62 women from across all governorates and took them to Cyprus. This consensus lasted three years, but increased social fractures among women. This is mainly due to women from the North aligning with Houthi militias for survival, and women from the South and Central areas feared sharing information with Northern participants for that reason.

A Technical Advisory Group was later formed to advise donors, UN Women, the UN envoy's office, and others, on the situation of Women in Yemen. Initially 62 women, the group was reduced to 8 and then subsequently only 6 members. One interviewed activist, who was part of this TAG team, mentioned that the members communicated to the UN entities, 'If we advise you on the situation in Yemen and feed you ground data, you need to disclose your meeting take-aways from Washington to Berlin about the country's situation with us," but, as she states, 'We received nothing.' The TAG team was then dissolved quietly, without any email sent or explanation given. The lesson was blunt: Yemeni women were left to fend for themselves.

Such initiatives reveal how international actors have participated in creating so-called "feminist" structures that are both temporary and extractive. These platforms were framed as inclusive, yet functioned as information harvesting mechanisms, drawing legitimacy and local data from Yemeni women, while offering no real transfer of power or accountability in return. The TAG's quiet dissolution without notice is emblematic: women's political engagement is welcome only so long as it remains serviceable to broader geopolitical narratives.

The overall trajectory of women's political engagement in Yemen reveals a pattern of structural silencing that is both gendered and strategic. What began

as an unprecedented moment of feminist political assertion quickly recoded into a threat by both formal and informal power structures. The backlash was not incidental. It was a recalibration of governance mechanisms that explicitly punished women for stepping beyond sanctioned forms of participation.

Moreover, the fracturing of the consensus process along territorial and survivalist lines (North-South divisions exacerbated by militia alignment) speaks to how women are forced into securitised identities to retain operational safety. This splintering is not a failure of women's solidarity, but a structural outcome of militarised reality, where the inclusion of women becomes symbolic at best, and dangerous at worst.

These conditions have produced a dual bind: visibility leads to targeting, and invisibility leads to irrelevance. Feminist actors in Yemen are therefore navigating a governance context where every form of political engagement, formal or informal, carries risk. What is urgently needed is not merely re-entry into formal spaces, but a reparative political framework; one that acknowledges the violence of extractive participation, centres local feminist accountability, and refuses the instrumentalisation of women as data points in peacebuilding theatre.

Lebanon

WPS under security logics

Lebanon's WPS machinery illustrates how a donor-dominated checklist can coexist with a grassroots feminist movement[42] that refuses to dim down. Lebanon's second National Action Plan (2019-22) was drafted largely by external consultants hired through the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW) and UN Women. As one of our interviewees mentioned: 'Many NGOs still treat 1325 as a lens you apply to projects, but without understanding its depth'. A study on feminist activism confirms that funding is channelled to a handful of UN's "safe" partners, once again reinforcing the same power hierarchies the NAP seeks to dismantle.[43]

Counter-Terrorism framework used on civic space

Since the 2019 mass protests, Lebanese authorities have revived dormant anti-terror statutes to interrogate and detain activists, including women documenting political violence. Regional civic-space monitors list Lebanon as "repressed," citing arrests for "spreading false news" and "undermining national security" on social media. An OHCHR submission details how counter-terror measures now cover peaceful assembly and NGO financing, allowing the state to freeze accounts or block foreign grants on vague security grounds[44]. This creates particular vulnerabilities for feminist activists and women's rights organisations, whose reliance on external funding and political advocacy makes them especially visible targets under these security frameworks.

Arms trade blind spot

The Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), adopted in 2013, is the first legally binding international agreement to regulate the global trade in conventional arms, obliging states to assess whether weapons exports could be used to commit or facilitate serious violations of international humanitarian or human rights law, including gender-based violence. Yet in practice, implementation remains siloed inside defence and security circles. Feminist organisations argue that ATT obligations could and should be leveraged within WPS frameworks. Article 7.4 of the Arms Trade Treaty obliges states to assess whether exported weapons could facilitate gender-based violence, but monitoring remains siloed inside defence circles.

Feminist CSOs report no mechanism for tracking how small-arms proliferation, from clashes in Tripoli to cross-border fire in the south, directly increases femicide and domestic abuse; but the issue seems to disappear from national and international WPS discussions. Additionally, this blind spot has had (and continues to have) catastrophic consequences: arms transfers to Israel have severely undermined the protection of women and girls, particularly in Gaza and southern Lebanon. In Gaza, repeated bombardments have devastated health and water infrastructure while hospitals are being systematically destroyed. The resulting collapse has exposed millions, especially women and children who are disproportionately reliant on maternal and reproductive healthcare: to heightened illness, dehydration, and death. Meanwhile, in southern Lebanon, attacks on civilian infrastructure, including water and health facilities, similarly exacerbated risks to women's safety and well-being[45].

A war on language

A head of a Lebanese WRO interview notes that most CSOs now treat UNSCR 1325 "as a checklist" rather than a political framework; key terms such as gender equality and empowerment have been "emptied out, twisted into something unrecognisable, like gender is just diversity, nothing more." Workshops tick the participation/ prevention box, yet "women end up excluded from

the heart of the process," because programmes are designed without any analysis of sectarian power or economic, social, and political collapse. When the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW) requests progress reports, NGOs still answer "I have a WPS project" or "I don't," unable to explain how protection or participation should cut across every intervention and programme they have.

A 2019 Oxfam study[46] on feminist-movement building reaches the same conclusion: donor templates push organisations to adopt depoliticised language, privileging safe, service-delivery outputs over structural change. ABAAD Resource Centre for Gender Equality's own media-monitoring work shows how reporting on women and refugees recycles stereotypes, and fails to use rights-based terminology; attributing this to a broader failure to embed UNSCR 1325 principles in public discourse.

What makes Lebanon's case especially insidious is that the aesthetic of feminist inclusion coexists with deep structural erosion. There is no shortage of workshops, toolkits, or gender mainstreaming plans, yet sectarian hierarchies remain untouched, arms trade accountability is non-existent, and care infrastructures are in collapse. Feminists in Lebanon are not suffering from a lack of access; they are suffering from access that demands compliance. Any refusal on their part to conform is not a failure, it is a political strategy. By refusing to bend, grassroots actors expose how power operates through funding architectures, insisting that accountability belongs first to movements and communities rather than to external gatekeepers. This moment calls for a return to a feminist activism that names complicity, interrogates funding architectures, and refuses to be tamed by external metrics.

Syria

A theatre of compounded crises

The majority of respondents found the civic space restrictive, with only a small margin for operation. The civic space has been restricted by multiple factors; from elite gatekeeping, to the Assad regime persecution of activists, and de facto authorities pressure on women's rights groups and organisations.

Feminist organising in Syria

Before the 2011 uprising, feminist civic organising was elite-driven, tightly surveilled, and rarely disruptive. Legal reforms were the limit, and systemic exclusion was rarely questioned due to the high cost of challenging the system, which can cost WHRDs their freedom or lives. The revolution cracked open civic space. Forced displacement out of regime-held areas, driven by the Assad's regime's systematic war crimes, including indiscriminate bombardment, mass detention, and siege warfare, created new centres of feminist organising, across cities, camps, and the diaspora. Class, geography, and generational hierarchies were unsettled. Hyperlocalism[47] also produced fragmentation along ideological and geographical lines, fatigue from the relentless demands placed on already overstretched activists and grassroot hubs, and stark resource disparities between organisations operating from exile, and those trapped inside besieged or impoverished localities.

The armed turn of the revolution

The Assad regime's chemical attacks on Eastern Ghouta in 2013 were key turning points in the nature of armament, arms use, and ideological motivation. This institutionalised women's political erasure, as it further pushed women to the sidelines. Armed groups (whether regime-affiliated, HTS, opposition factors, or others), entrenched gendered control over space, speech, language, mobility, and identity. Militant ideologies resurrected 'virtue' narratives to widely justify women's exclusion and killings. In the absence of formal protections and a complete abandonment from the international community, WHRDs became disposable. The illusion of safety created by donor training or UN briefings collapsed against the reality of activists with no secure housing, no legal recourse, and no protection mechanisms.

Post-regime violence

Post 8 December 2024, violence subdued for a celebratory moment in an Assad-free Syria. Incidents of retaliatory violence occurred sporadically as of January 2025. Recorded incidents were primarily along former conflict contact lines, in areas where severe violence or war crimes were committed by the Assad regime and its local and regional paramilitary groups. On 6 March 2025, armed groups affiliated with the Assad regime launched what Amnesty International described as ''multiple coordinated attacks on security and military sites"[48] managed by the interim authorities in the coastal governorates of Latakia and Tartous. This was met with a counteroffensive from the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Interior, backed by supporting militias, which resulted in a scale of violence that Amnesty stressed should be investigated as war crimes.

The Syrian coast massacres, which led to the death of 1,400 people - 100 of whom were women - and the displacement of tens of thousands[49], exposed deep fractures. Some activists denied the violence, distorted facts or remained silent. Trust broke. Value-based organising was replaced with defensive positioning, driven by fear rather than principles. Feminist coalition-building suffered a dilemma of keeping their constituencies who suffered decades of the Assad regime engaged and supportive of their work, as opposed to taking a public stand against those atrocities with the risk of losing a critical audience of women who are in need of continued support to reach justice for the war crimes and violations they suffered over the past 14 years.

Political vacuum for policy implementation

Despite donor affirmations to support WPS, feminist activists report exhaustion from performative engagement. Attempts from feminists to institutionalise structures, like civil-society-led shadow 1325 NAPs, exist in a vacuum of political applicability. Engagement on the issue with some de facto authorities can mean compromising safety. As one interviewee puts it: 'our participation is used to validate agendas we did not shape and will never benefit from'. Furthermore, recent iterations of the interim constitutional declaration have only added layers of centralised power and legal erasure. The gender-blindness of these texts consolidates patriarchal rule under the guise of national unity.

Erasure of under-represented voices

Much like elsewhere across the South-West Asia region, inside the Syrian feminist movement, key voices remain erased. Queer and trans feminists continue to be sidelined by activists who fear that publicly aligning with LGBTQI+ issues will jeopardise their credibility within the communities they operate in, and put activists at risk of detention and killings.

One of the clearest obstacles raised in interviews was time needed to pause, strategise, and recalibrate. Without it, activists are forced to keep reacting rather than shaping. The absence of time is a deliberate erosion of the movement's stamina.

Achievements from the frontlines

Across the five focus contexts, feminist movements have made real wins, even if underreported. These victories take different shapes and scales: in Iraq, for instance, youth feminist activists who emerged during the Tishreen revolution carved out new civic space, and some even entered Parliament, though their presence continues to clash with entrenched sectarian and patriarchal dynamics. Iraq's women's networks also wrote the region's first locally-authored UNSCR 1325 action plan and a successful ISIS-contingency emergency plan; Yazidi survivors converted their dossiers into a genocide-reparations law; Palestinians built their own evidence observatories and "narrative diplomacy" programs; and Yemeni women pushed a 32% seat-share at the National Dialogue, and later successfully conducted frontline humanitarian mediations. Syrian women forced European courts to prosecute sexual-violence crimes alongside torture, digitised political crimes in an underground oral-history archive, drafted a civil-society Shadow 1325 Plan that centres rural women and WHRD safety, and created youth-internships and cross-line hotline systems that keep the next generation of activists protected and employed; and finally the Lebanese HRO/WROs co-drafted the country's first WPS National Action Plan (2019-23), repealed the "marry-your-rapist" article 522 (2017), pushed through the domestic-violence amendments and the 2020 sexual-harassment law, and after the Beirut-port blast, set up a feminist aid network that still feeds, shelters, and legally represents blast survivors while the state stalls on accountability. While this section provides examples of achievements from the frontlines, it does not claim to be representative of the full width and breadth of feminist peace activism, which is worthy of its own research.

Iraq

Iraqi civil society wrote the first NAP I (2014-18). Forty-five CSOs produced the text before any multilateral organisation or any ministry touched the text, proving that localisation can work before elite gatekeeping set in.

The Ministry of State for Women's Affairs and the WROs[50] who were involved in the drafting of the first NAP (and part of the 1325 alliance), created a rapid-response emergency 'Post-Daesh' action plan (2014-2017) that focused on protecting displaced communities, in coordination with 17 ministries.

Grassroot documentation drove the 2021 Yazidi Survivors law[51] and supplied evidence for Germany's first ISIS slavery conviction.[5]

WROs-organised hubs, such as those led by Tamkeen al Mar'a, modelling and mentoring 15 smaller Women-Led Organisations, thus effectively implementing a localised plan for grassroot groups[53]

Women-led organisations now co-chair seven protection-working-group sub-clusters highlighting their humanitarian and cluster management leadership. The Tishreen revolution opened unprecedented civic space for youth feminist activists. Young women played a visible and leading role in the protests, organising parallel feminist marches, coordinating aid and legal clinics, and shaping new political imaginaries beyond sectarian divides. Some of these activists have since transitioned into formal politics, entering parliament and local councils. Their presence signals both a generational renewal of feminist political participation and the ongoing tension between grassroots movements and entrenched party structures.

Palestine

Feminist NGOs and WROs have created secure observatories that catalogues settler and army violence in various formats, such as data management systems to record violence against women, survivor testimony collection, and evidence collection. However, the need for a Marsad Watani (national observatory) is more important than ever to ensure that all data collected meets the evidentiary standards required under universal jurisdiction proceedings, such as those derived from the Rome Statute of the ICC and national courts exercising universal jurisdiction (chain of custody, authentication, and victim/witness protection).

Programs by Women-led Organizations such as the Palestine Institute for Public Diplomacy[54] train activists, journalists, diplomats, and parliamentarians to brief UN Special Rapporteurs and regional parliaments using evidence rooted in lived Palestinian experiences, shifting the discourse from donor-crafted talking points to frontline realities.

Tal'at, the grassroots feminist collective, shattered the silence in 2019-20 under its cry of "There is no free homeland without free women." Organising across geographies, the movement explicitly connects gender justice to decolonial liberation, repositioning feminist struggle as a non-negotiable to national emancipation.

Community-based psychologists, drawing from frameworks like Dr. Samah Jabr's anticolonial psychological practice[55], pairs grief work with teach-ins on settler violence. Work like hers, frames mental-health support as political mobilisation and resistance work, embedding trauma-informed counselling in everyday feminist resistance.

Yemen

Through sustained mobilisation by women's civil society organisations, women secured 32% of the seats in the National Dialogue and successfully pushed for the inclusion of a child-marriage ban clause. Women held 4 of the 17 seats on Yemen's Constitution Drafting Committee in 2014, making up about 23.5% of its members, a level of representation that, while notable, was still below the 30% quota set by the National Dialogue Conference.

Since the beginning of the conflict in Yemen in 2014, women have played instrumental roles as informal peacemakers in their communities. Despite being excluded from formal negotiations, Yemeni women have mediated inter- and intra-community disputes, including the release of detainees, opening humanitarian corridors, and stopping the recruitment of children by armed actors. Women mediators in Taiz reopened water-truck access and hospital safe-passage in the first ever women-led humanitarian mediations with the Houthis.

Syria

The COVID-19 pandemic inadvertently dismantled long-standing geographic and political barriers to feminist organising, enabling women from across regime-held and opposition-controlled territories to meet, mobilise, and strategise in transnational digital forums that continue to thrive today.

Women-led organisations, such as Badael and Women Now for Development, became central feminist platforms providing strategic research[56], emergency protection support, and financial tools that anchor many national feminist actions, including oral history archiving, WHRD safety planning, and youth political training.

Investments in youth, through mentorship, paid internships, and political education, have created a new generation of feminist organisers and knowledge producers equipped to carry forward and redefine post-revolution feminist priorities.

Oral history documentation, particularly through digital platforms like Women Behind the Siege[57], preserves the political memory of siege, detention, and displacement, reclaiming narrative power and feeding into international

legal accountability structures.

Women's rights organisations provided strategic support to victims' groups and spearheaded coordination efforts with country-specific international instruments, ultimately influencing their gender strategy development. A prominent leader of this work is Women Now for Development, who coordinated crucial information sharing between WROs and the IIIM mechanism, eventually leading to the development and publication of IIIM gender strategy in collaboration with Syrian feminist CSOs.

Syrian feminist actors have consistently intervened in rushed and exclusionary formal political processes (e.g. the National Dialogue Conference), often producing ad-hoc but politically significant recommendations and counterproposals, even under duress and surveillance.

The Syrian feminist movement's willingness to "fail forward" has led to radical experimentation, including new frameworks for protection, accountability, and community solidarity, often created outside traditional donor paradigms and rooted in lived experience. Now feminist organisers are drawing from previous generations' legal reform efforts to build on their foundations as Syria enters a phase of potential reconstitution.

Lebanon

Women-led organisations like MARCH[58] are transforming conflict and stigmatisation through love. They have worked with repurposed frontline zones of Bab Al Tebbaneh and Jabal Mohsen in Tripoli, once a staple of sectarian violence, into collaborative civic spaces. Through their Theatre for Reconciliation and livelihood programmes, MARCH established mixed-gender youth committees that now mediate local disputes, engage in joint problem-solving, and feed grassroots peacebuilding insights into municipal planning. The initiative's shared café and cultural centre stand as everyday symbols of co-existence and social reintegration. Similarly, women activists such as Zeina Daccache, a drama therapist, launched a nationwide programme on drama therapy inside Lebanon's carceral system in order to humanise inmates, challenge dehumanising penal codes, especially those targeting detainees with psychiatric illnesses, and drive truly feminist criminal-justice reform through participatory theatre - transforming prisons into spaces of healing and systemic change.

Feminist auditors (Fe-Male) combed through post-Beirut blast tenders, forcing the Council for Development & Reconstruction to publish sex-disaggregated labour data, the first time the CDR has ever done so; thus, creating a gender media audit of the Beirut Blast Aid.

Digital-rights organisers (SMEX, Digital Rights Lebanon) and feminist allies (ABAAD, KAFA), drafted amendments to Lebanon's E-Transactions and Cyber-crime Law 81/2018 that explicitly criminalises the non-consensual distribution of intimate images, and strengthens penalties for cyber-extortion[59]. The National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW) has formally endorsed the text and lobbied the Ministry of Justice; a parliamentary sub-committee began reviewing the draft in mid-2023, but no vote has taken place yet. Activists view the amendment as the logical next step after the 2017 repeal of Penal Code Article 522, otherwise known as the "marry-your-rapist"[60] escape clause, which was won by women-led WRO, ABAAD, after a nationwide street and media campaign.

Beyond law-making, Lebanese and regional feminists have begun safeguarding their own digital narrative spaces. Launched in Beirut in 2023, the Arab Feminist Forum for Digital Content[61], "Al-Mountada al-Nasawi al-'Arabi lil-Muhtawa ar-Raqmi", convenes activists, journalists and technologists in order to pool skills on secure archiving, intersectional storytelling, and countering-disinformation feminist strategies. The sessions produce open-source toolkits and a shared repository of feminist multimedia; ensuring that grassroots WPS knowledge remains accessible, even as state and platform censorship rises.

▼ Syrian civil society and activists doing visioning exercises, 2023

Chapter 4: Linguistic Warfare: Why the Battlefield of rights begins with a word.

When states and donors rewrite the dictionary of WPS

Since 2000, the Women, Peace & Security agenda has been absorbed into state-security planning, where women's "participation" is promoted mainly to enhance operational effectiveness of armies and police. This co-optation echoes what scholars call embedded feminism: 'the appropriation of women's-rights language to legitimise militarised projects and mask structural violence'. The pattern repeats in donor log-frames across the region, where empowerment is re-defined as protection devoid of accountability, towards systemic violence committed against women, and participation as seat-filling at workshops and in forums, none of which disturb the architecture of violence. Decolonial scholars locate this manoeuvre within the coloniality of gender: the long-standing practice of re-coding dissenting knowledge so it serves colonial order rather than disrupt it. In the words of Rosalba Icaza: 'erasing insurgent meanings is an act of epistemicide[62] akin to ecocide, killing the possibilities of all other worlds.'

Since foreign security programmes began pushing "women's participation" as a way to boost counter-terror ops, the Iraqi state has moved from co-opting feminist terms to erasing them. In 2024 a cabinet order scrubbed gender from official use, re-labelling the Prime Minister's "Women's Empowerment" unit as Affairs of Women and Society and warning NGOs that "wrong wording" could cost them their licences. As one interviewee mentioned: 'The Gender Studies Centre in the Kurdistan Region used to be known under that name, now it is rebranded as 'ROSA- Organization for Women's Development and Studies'. Similarly, any division previously called "Women's Empowerment" is now renamed "Community Development Divisions.'. The interviewee continued to note that while multilateral organisations complied with this new ban on language to keep the political status quo with the government in place, feminist organizations refused to fold. They responded strategically by reframing gender programmes under human rights or domestic violence frameworks, rebranding their messaging but conducting silent yet subversive advocacy, online and in person, keeping the language, the momentum, and the feminist will to survive, very much alive.

Linguistic tactics to stay alive

Under Israeli military censorship and digital censorship across international media[63]—such as policy directives within outlets like The New York Times that urge journalists to avoid using terms like "genocide"—Palestinian activists are reclaiming language as a political tool. This includes efforts to challenge content takedowns and algorithmic shadow-banning on platforms like Meta, where posts containing the term "genocide" are disproportionately targeted. Care-based mutual-aid networks focus on political education and oral-history initiatives that resist the "neutral" humanitarian grammar in the minds of Palestinians and consider the battlefield of language as a live indictment of occupation. These networks are often led by women's collectives, community health workers, and grassroots feminist groups. They provide food,

shelter, and psychosocial support, but crucially, they couple this with political education sessions, storytelling circles, and oral-history archiving. Oral-history initiatives (such as The Palestinian Oral History Archive (POHA)[64] based at the American University of Beirut (AUB), a collaborative effort with the Nakba Archive and the Arab Resource Center for Popular Arts (AL-JANA), frame memory as resistance, preserving narratives erased by both occupation and humanitarian neutrality.

By embedding political education in caregiving practices, these initiatives refuse to consider and treat Palestinians as passive victims. Instead, they situate care as inseparable from resistance, insisting that grief, memory, and daily survival are also political acts. These networks are intergenerational and intersectional: they involve ex-detainees, students, mothers, and young activists, creating spaces where daily acts of survival are politicised into collective indictment of occupation.

In **Syria**, Inside rebel-held towns and refugee camps, 'artivists' resist with colours. From Daraya's bomb-scarred school walls to clandestine poster collectives, women painters archive "herstories" that the regime tries to erase, turning graffiti into people's museums[65]. Additionally, Syrian feminist organisers are utilising algorithms. Grassroot initiatives are being developed to teach rights-advocacy in colloquial Arabic rather than NGO English. They aim to translate abstract notions like "agency" into everyday verbs ("I decide", "we refuse") and could be used as a resource working online and offline.

Alongside these initiatives reclaiming language and decentralising it, a web of oral-history collectives is re-engineering who writes the first draft of a population's historical grievance. Projects like Dawlaty's Syrian Oral History Archive (SOHA)[66] record thousands of testimonies by women and displaced communities, then publish short TikTok-style "feminist bites" and Instagram reels so that memory eclipses propaganda. Syrian feminists are keeping their language alive, their evidence public, and their care work guarded by their bodies and voices, even as political brutality looms over their heads, day in day out.

In **Yemen**, linguistic adaptation is both a survival tactic and a political strategy. Feminist actors have learned to navigate a landscape where word choice can mean the difference between access and exclusion. One key example is the deliberate shift away from the term tawṭīn (localisation), a word heavily loaded with perceived threat in Yemen as it implies a permanent establishment by the North in the South. Instead, activists and negotiators now adapt their language to use muwāʾama (alignment or harmonisation), a softer and more technical term that allows continued engagement between feminists operating across the territory without triggering fears of permanent demographic imposition and replicating the masculinised power dynamics within feminist circles.

In **Lebanon**, one interviewee mentioned how local organisations are bypassing donor-speak by translating UNSCR 1325's abstract pillars into everyday community action; whether it's through working on educational programmes within municipalities, migrant worker protection, and collective care in villages, these initiatives have revealed the true face of WPS language, ethos and purpose on the local level in Lebanon. The interviewee described this as "micro-level 1325 interpretation," and it emerged from deep refusal to let donor frameworks dictate both the language and shape of Lebanese feminist organising.

Additionally, feminist critique in Lebanese contexts has pushed back on the simplistic WPS language used, arguing that narrow focus on "gendered violence" or "women's protection" invalidates deeper structural injustices and ignores how violence is racialised and normalised within sectarian and militarised politics. Another key initiative that speaks to language reclamation is the Storytelling and Oral History Project launched in 2016 by 'knowledge workshop' focused on "forgotten and untold feminist histories", a strategic act of language reclamation, re-centring terms like empowerment, resilience, and participation in the voice of those who lived them. Their Feminist Library[67] now holds nearly 1,900 Arabic-language books, memoirs, and journals, as living lexicons that feminists are actively translating WPS language into grounded, vernacular repertoire, that looks like them and lives through their stories.

Politicising care through blood, absence and grief

Across the region, women activate their most important political assets: love, care, and blood, into public indictments of the colonial and militarised violence that they hurl back at the machinery of political, physical, emotional and intellectual domination. The forcibly disappeared negotiate through the mouths of their mothers, menstrual pads mark the humanitarian blockage clearer than any report, and graves spell the grammar of revolt. Across these countries, women are repurposing the intimate. Their intimate.

In Gaza, where Israel's ongoing genocide, military

operations, siege conditions, and systemic deprivation continues, women map the siege by the scarcity of sanitary pads, turning menstruation into a barometer of collective punishment. One interviewee from Gaza mentioned: 'I bled for fourteen days straight with nothing affordable to stop it. Ten women in my building leaned on me for help. In the end I took hormone pills to shut my own body down so I could keep caring for theirs.' Decolonial scholars remind us that "blood-work" is not charity but body politics, resisting sanitation thinking that deem period poverty a private misfortune instead of structural violence.

In Palestine, seventy-five years of slow-burning systematic[68] violence are revealing that community healing is a strategy of resistance. An interviewee captured that thought very clearly when she mentioned that: 'Collective solidarity is for us a method of healing using endogenous practices. It starts with sharing food and hearing each other out.' Another interviewee continues to add: 'The meaning of the collective struggle is the bedrock of societal healing. Spaces to be vulnerable for liberated men, co-existing heroism and vulnerability, holding spaces to talk about our individual losses in a collective space, this is what is needed'.

In the Palestinian context, solidarity contributes to healing. Yet too often aid programmes treat healing as an intervention focused on group therapy circles, mass 'well-being days'. As one interviewee from Gaza noted: 'We cannot convene large psychological sessions, the moment a crowd gathers, drones show up' In a surveillance landscape, the very format prescribed for care can become a serious vector of harm. Until aid organisations understand these realities of life under war and illegal occupation, similar proposals will keep putting communities at risk.

Crucially, this also means shifting from externally-driven interventions toward community-led and locally-anchored initiatives, where those living the realities of war shape the priorities and practices of aid. Good intentions must be matched with the hard knowledge of war, and healing-work must start with the hard knowledge of what war does to one's psyche in the greater collective.

▼ Stand up against harassment expression-through-art activity titled "Thread of Hope" in the Public Garden of Majdal Anjar in Lebanon, 17 April 2025

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Chapter 5: Policy Influencing, What Works and What's Dying

In contexts where the implementation plans of the WPS agenda have been hollowed out by donor-driven processes, securitised protection frameworks, and regime co-optation, feminist actors in South-West Asia (SWA) have developed a set of counter-strategies rooted in refusal, redirection, and radical localisation. These tactics do not merely fill gaps in official policy, they also constitute a counter-politics that refuses to separate the personal from the political, survival from resistance, and care from confrontation.

This section outlines five cases, drawn from Iraq, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, that illuminate how feminists have manoeuvred through hostile terrains to reclaim space, articulate alternatives, and subvert the terms of engagement imposed by states and international actors alike.

Iraq: Quiet Coalitions with MPs, and Survivor-Centred legal reform

Iraqi feminists have been forced to practice politics in the interstices of a state that criminalises "gender" discourse, securitises dissent, and trades quota seats for partisan loyalty. Their tactical choice to cultivate one-to-one alliances with the political class, especially women parliamentarians, is therefore a realist assessment of what is doable in the environment they operate in. By moving outside the formal WPS structures that have become clearing-houses for state branding[69] rather than sites of accountability, activists bring feminist statecraft through humane, political, relational knowledge. In the words of one of the Iraq activists interviewed: 'We engaged directly with women members of the parliament on revising laws on violence against women. The engagement was done through informal coalitions between civil society actors and MPs'.

Another activist mentioned that 'The law proposed (referring to the 2021 Yazidi Survivors' Law) was directly informed by survivors, through consultations with women who had been displaced or subjected to violence.' Inserting survivor testimony as the evidentiary core of statute-writing challenges both the paternalism of humanitarian lawyering and the state's monopoly

over truth and legal production. Such a law could only have been made impactful for affected communities by continuous follow up and advocacy from feminists and women human rights defenders.

These testimonies reflect a strategic manoeuvre around institutional paralysis. These tactics reveal a larger feminist indictment: participation inside existing gender units will always be performative as long as parliamentary processes and culture remain deeply patriarchal and sectarian. Quiet coalitions are not a retreat to the shadows; they are a deliberate counter-governance strategy that transforms informality into leverage. Through strategic ambiguity, never announcing alliances, feminists convert the same opacity that shields corrupt patronage networks into a shield for insurgent law-making.

The practice of working 'under the radar' constitutes a form of shadow governance and a masterclass in how to advance change through relational politics, discretion and strategic ambiguity. Iraqi feminists' refusal to conform to sanitised frameworks should not be seen as disengagement but as a prime example of calculated resistance.

Palestine: Strategic Walkouts from Co-Opted Spaces

Palestinian feminists have long refused the choreography of international conferences that parade them as proof of inclusivity. One activist mentioned: 'I decided to boycott my participation in Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) week this year in NYC during the ongoing Israeli bombardment of Gaza...we can't normalise these spaces while our people are being massacred'. By withdrawing, feminists made visible the constitutive violence that multilateral arenas insist on backgrounding: the simultaneous funding of Israeli militarism and Palestinian "empowerment".

Such refusals expose the coercive economy of visibility in the global WPS regime. Presence is often rewarded with grants, travel, and photo-ops; while principled participation is punished with accusations of radicalism and the withdrawal of funding. Palestinian collectives invert that economy by treating absence as a communicative act that carries higher strategic value than any speech delivered under gag rules. The walkout becomes an evidentiary record of structural silencing, a sort of 'politics of non-recognition' (meaning the deliberate refusal to legitimise forums that reproduce inequality or normalise occupation), and it sometimes can lead donors to choose between diluted panels and substantive political engagement.

Critically, this tactic interrogates the limits of liberal feminist solidarity that centres access over liberation, when for Palestinian activists liberation is defined in dismantling settler-colonial rule, the restoration of land and sovereignty, and the refusal to separate gender justice from the collective struggle for self-determination. Participation without political 'teeth', is not empowerment, it is containment.

Syria: 1325 NAPs Manoeuvres and informal networks to amplify WHRDs

Due to the absence of a UNSCR1325 NAP, activists advocated progressive countries which included Syria as a priority context of their UNSCR 1325 NAPs to consult with Syrian women on their priorities and needs. For example, the national-level consultations undertaken by the UK on Syria[70], enabled women on the ground and in exile - using their own language and methods - to articulate their priorities for the WPS agenda within the framework of the UK's UNSCR1325 NAP. This exercise has constituted a ''shadow UNSCR 1325 NAP'' - as one interviewee put it - for Syrian women in the face of institutional vacuum and heterogenous governance and control maps.

The agency of the activists' perceived shadow NAP was in itself a structural critique of both the authoritarian state and the nation-state centrism of international frameworks. Official policymaking under the Assad regime has systematically erased dissenting feminist voices or instrumentalised them for legitimacy. By drafting their priorities grounded in the lived realities of women inside the country and in exile, Syrian feminists and their allies delinked the notion that validity is conferred by proximity to state institutions.

To bring the inclusivity duty home as a collective responsibility for those who can afford the cost of visibility, another activist highlighted a tactic used to securely amplify WHRDs' voices, she described that they: 'used informal feminist alliances [to mask the individual in the collective] and [secure] transnational digital tools to amplify the voices of WHRDs who cannot speak publicly.'

The successful feminist advocacy for UNSCR 1325 NAP national consultation processes of priority countries, in this case - Syria, also undermined dominant understandings of security. Rather than reinforcing state-centric protection narratives, it redefined security as a feminist relational infrastructure, one where emotional, physical, and political safety is co-produced through networks of trust, community-based care, and documentation practices. The use of encrypted communication, pseudonymised testimonies, and transnational coordination was not just tactical, it was foundational to a new feminist epistemology of protection, which addresses the overt violence of the state.

Moreover, these tactics called into question the legitimacy of the WPS framework itself when implemented through authoritarian partnerships. The Syrian ''shadow NAP'' illustrated how policy-making can become a mechanism of resistance rather than absorption. By establishing horizontal alliances, Syrian WHRDs demonstrated that radical feminist policymaking is not only possible under repression, it is, in fact, most urgent under those very conditions. Their work rejects co-optation, decentres institutional visibility, and reclaims political authorship from the margins. Syrian women have, indeed, recentred authority in lived agony and collective memory. Their encrypted dissemination routes mock the surveillance state, proving that security can be crowdsourced, adversarial, and definitely feminist.

Lebanon: Advocacy through the protection discourses rooted in care work

'The discourse of protection in Lebanon is often depoliticised, but some feminist groups use it internationally to advocate for safe housing and care infrastructure, especially in IDP camps', mentioned an activist. In Lebanon, feminist actors have navigated a complex political ecosystem where confessional institutions, international donors, and state actors each deploy the discourse of "protection" as a gatekeeping mechanism. Rather than reject this vocabulary outright, some feminists have appropriated and re-instrumentalised it to push for structurally redistributive demands. In doing so, they have reframed care as political labour and social reproduction as a legitimate terrain of struggle. Their work exposes how the WPS agenda, when filtered through donor templates, often divorces protection from accountability and reduces it to individualised safety measures rather than collective justice.

By embedding feminist demands within state- and donor-sanctioned language, activists have tactically circumvented repression while preserving the radical core of their work. This tactic is a calculated manoeuvre to shift resource flows and reframe public discourse. The turn toward safe housing, transport, and emergency relief for IDPs is not only a response to the multitude of crises present, but also a feminist critique of the state's abandonment of basic welfare. These actors simultaneously fill and indict the vacuum left by sectarian clientelism and donor humanitarianism, revealing how protection becomes a site of contestation rather than accommodation.

What emerges is a feminist strategy that understands the politics behind visibility and access. By engaging the language of protection, feminists reassert control over the framing of their interventions. Yet they remain acutely aware that such discursive engagements must not substitute for structural transformation. Their ability to masterfully use institutional language without being absorbed by it speaks to a feminist political literacy that sees through both the violence of state neglect and the instrumentalism of donor recognition. This is resistance in camouflage.

Yemen: Re-engagement of rural voices through hybrid peace tracks

'Feminist mediators don't appear in Track I or Track II processes, but they try to have their concerns inserted and their presence influence policymaking through trusted intermediaries'. In a context where elite peace negotiations are exiled, inaccessible and disconnected from the realities of women outside the epicentre of power, women have built hybrid tracks rooted in local legitimacy and collective voice. These were a radical rejection of the centralisation of peace architecture. Through decentralised listening sessions and trusted intermediaries, rural feminists have asserted their political subjectivity without conforming to the frameworks of Track I or II diplomacy.

Yemeni feminists have also exposed the performativity of international actors who champion inclusion rhetorically but rarely use their leverage to enforce it. The historical experience of UN Special Envoy Jamal Benomar's intervention, however, is a rare but powerful

counterexample. It demonstrated that international actors do, in fact, have tools at their disposal to shift political dynamics, when they are willing to use them. One activist mentioned: 'The whole status of the UN was very strong with UN Special Envoy for Yemen Jamal Benomar. He fought to include women in public policy spaces. During a meeting to form a new government after the National Dialogue, political parties refused women's participation. He pushed back against it and used soft-power on political parties to allow youth and women into the meeting, and thus, be included in the negotiations'. The tactic of using trusted intermediaries to carry concerns upward mimics oral traditions and community organising methods long practiced by feminist movements worldwide. It is a best practice of how international actors can be true allies by using their influence in an indirect, relational, and cumulative way; a form of an insurgent model of pushing for the true participation of women in transitional justice processes, one that is not performative, but deeply political.

These tactical innovations demand that we rethink what counts as 'participation', and what qualifies as 'policy'. Feminist actors around South-West Asia are resisting marginalisation; and what binds these tactics together is not their form, but their intent: they are all a collective insistence on reconstituting feminist core peacemaking work through political pragmatism.

In conclusion, this chapter's political lens contests a common myth: that inclusion in formal WPS spaces inherently brings power. Instead, it surfaces a logic where feminist policy influence emerges from reinvention. Feminists need policy venues that prioritise foundational knowledge over procedural acceptance, that valorise critique over tokenism, and that are accountable to movements, not mandates. In practice, feminists across South-West Asia have turned this requirement into real-world infrastructure. By investing in autonomous underground advocacy, activism, and community agency, feminist movements are not just influencing policy, they are seeking to compose it.

▼ Discussions on localisation of WPS in Yemen, 2023

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Chapter 6: Emerging Themes

As Chapter 5 mapped tactical innovations in feminist policy influence, Chapter 6 distils the deeper patterns: emergent political logics, epistemic ruptures, and ideological commitments that run through feminist work across Iraq, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. These themes are part of a larger, historically situated feminist counterpower that refuses absorption, tokenisation, surveillance, and/or erasure.

In Chapter 6 we unpack four of the most politically generative themes that emerged through interviews, grey literature[71], and years of grounded and complex layered learning of feminist organising. While acknowledging that many WLOs continue to navigate and compromise for survival and preserving their space in a hostile operational environment through conformity, we surface less-visible strategies in this section.

Feminist Political Healing

Across all five countries, feminist actors described grief not as a weakness or private affair, but as a strategic political force[72]. Oral testimonies function not just as tools of preservation but as defiant interventions into dominant narratives. Memory is a political weapon, and remembering is re-engineered as a justice practice, especially in spaces where formal mechanisms refuse to name structural or colonial violence by its name. This mode of feminist political healing diverges sharply from the Western liberal frameworks that often frame healing as therapeutic, individualised, or apolitical. In contrast, feminist healing rooted in South-West Asia is collectivised, confrontational, and deeply insurgent. It does not aim to return to a status quo conducive to trauma, but to remake the political landscape that created it in the first place, through shared memory, communal grief, and justice-seeking. It is relational, historical, and radically rooted in the historical refusal to normalise the brutality of the life circumstances being imposed on the region.

What results is not about trauma-informed care as a service, but political care as a rupture to the hegemonic system of oppression. Feminist healing is inseparable from feminist resistance. It names absence, silence, and fragmentation as legacies of violence, but also as starting points for political commitment. What is offered instead is a politics of care that builds justice infrastructures from below. Healing is not an aftermath or an afterthought; it is the ethos of any insurgent beginning.

▲ Iraqi feminist activists of Alliance 188 protesting roll back of women's rights by amending personal status law No. 188, August 2024

Strategic Withdrawal and Refusal

Strategic refusal emerged as one of the most potent forms of feminist critique across geographies. This is not disengagement but a refusal to lend legitimacy to institutions, frameworks, or actors that reproduce or even acknowledge violence or erase core political demands. Walkouts from donor forums reject tokenistic inclusion in the face of genocide, and a refusal to be folded into counterterrorism frameworks[73] that criminalise dissent is a way of feminists saying, 'we refuse to be folded in into these boxes'.

What connects these micro acts is a collective feminist consciousness that presence is not always power, sometimes it is complicity. This also exposes the limits of liberal WPS discourses that equate access with progress. By withdrawing from staged inclusivity, feminists reveal the coercive economy of visibility: participate and be funded or refuse and be disciplined by funding institutions/parties. These actors upend the logic by refusing both. In this sense, feminists are reframing exit as a strategy. What is emerging is a reassertion of feminist agency, one that doesn't beg for institutional acceptance but builds power elsewhere, on more principled and accountable terms.

Reclaiming Language

Feminist actors across South-West Asia are dismantling the linguistic scaffolding that holds militarised power in place. Words like "resilience," "security," and even "protection" have been whitewashed, emptied of meaning, and redeployed to police, manage, and silence. Feminists have reappropriated "protection" to mean safety and healing. Refusal to use decontextualised and sanitised terms like "empowerment" or "capacity-building" reasserts all forms of mental, physical, political and intellectual occupation as the frame, not a mere backdrop.

As such, language reclamation becomes more than just semantics, it becomes the most powerful form of reclaiming narrative jurisdiction. Feminists are reclaiming vocabularies that carry their own political theory, grounded in their lived experience. These acts rupture sanitised grammars and expose the violence embedded in even the most benign-sounding policy phrases.

Cross-Border Continuities

Despite divergent geographies and governance

contexts, the feminist actors across these five countries exhibit a striking convergence in their tactics and theories. Oral history is everywhere. Hybrid care spaces emerge as core feminist infrastructure. Horizontal structures, underground coalitions, and decentralised mobilisation define the terrain.

These shared practices have created a transborder feminist continuity. Tactics travel. Digital tools now facilitate solidarity between people and movements separated by borders. Transgenerational wisdom is passed from exile to camp, from WhatsApp to WhatsApp, from the1990s to Gen Z. This is co-construction. The borders that define formal WPS interventions, geographic, legal, institutional, have been rendered irrelevant by these feminist architectures of care and power.

Continuity also acts as a feminist epistemology: theory is not what's funded, or published in white papers, it's what is shared across wounds, networks, and tactical blueprints. Feminist futures in the region are not imagined in isolation[74], they are already being co-authored across these ruptured yet resilient terrains of shared identities.

In conclusion, the question is no longer whether feminists should be included in existing processes, but whether those processes are even worth salvaging. The answer offered here, quietly, consistently, and collectively, is no.

The task ahead is not to better integrate feminist voices into failing structures, but to dismantle and reassemble the very logic of what counts as policy, participation, and peace. These themes are not recommendations. They are refusals, generative acts of dissent, and political groundwork for a different feminist horizon.

Chapter 7: Recommendations for Future-Proofing The WPS Agenda

Approximately 50 feminist and women's rights actors, supported by the commissioning consortium of this paper, met in Amman 4-7 November 2024 and discussed the need and solutions for future-proofing the WPS agenda. They concluded that future-proofing the WPS agenda is an urgent priority as we witness a derailing of rights and democracy globally which threatens:

- The collapse of financial and political support for WPS, linked to the rise of anti-gender backlash and the radical right, leading to the rollback of women's rights and exclusion from decision-making.
- Intensification of violence, authoritarianism and militarisation (including illegal military occupation), with increased violence against women and marginalised groups.
- The loss of documentation and accountability mechanisms, erasing decades of feminist gains.
- Exponentially increasing humanitarian needs overshadowing long-term development and justice efforts.

The transformation needed is not one that just reforms policy but one that centres liberation, justice, and intersectionality. A radical transformation towards global feminist leadership that dares to drive disarmament, feminist economies, transformative justice mechanisms, and a reformed international governance system. To enable such leadership to emerge, two sets of high-level recommendations are offered.

Recommendations for WHRDs and feminist actors

1. **Drive localised and Context-Responsive WPS work**
   - Create flexible, locally driven UNSCR1325 action plans that reflect community needs and lived realities.
   - Invest in and advocate for local feminist knowledge production and documentation of women's experiences.
   - Ensure inclusion of diverse women, especially from marginalised backgrounds, in agenda-setting and implementation.
2. **Build Alliances and Networks**
   - Strengthen cross-border feminist solidarity and advocacy coalitions.
   - Engage men as accountable allies and partners in challenging structural barriers.
   - Create effective protection[75] networks for women human rights defenders.
3. **Innovate Discourse and Tools**
   - Revitalise resistance and liberation language in feminist advocacy.
   - Continue to harness digital platforms, the arts, and alternative media to circumvent censorship and expand reach.

- Continue to develop locally informed creative communication strategies to adapt to restrictive environments (e.g. through indirection and cross-disciplinary work embedding political meaning in forms that are harder to censor because they carry cultural weight).
- Articulate human-centred peace narratives guided by a human security lens as a robust alternative to narrow and often fragile state-centred peace narratives.

Recommendations for donors

Donors addressed in this section include but are not limited to bilateral donors, (feminist) philanthropies, regional funding instruments, and intermediary INGOs.

A perspective shift: aid as an investment in global peace

A key perspective shift in donor logic is needed, one that moves away from the ''charity'' mindset to investment in the collective good logic. The donor – change actors' relationship should be built on mutual respect and equal partnership, not handouts from minority world taxpayers to ''unrelatable'' contexts. It is time we viewed aid as an investment in global peace and as an instrument to address the accumulation of colonial wealth through fair investment in the collective good. This shift necessitates communication to minority world taxpayers that a percentage of their tax is invested in global peace, and this investment (like all other investments) comes with certain risks but the peace yields are high. Language is central here to how donors and policymakers communicate and how they understand feminists' communication. In the same light, words like 'resistance' and 'liberation' should be delinked from counter-terrorism lingua and understood as the antidote to the complex systems of oppression women in SWA face, this understanding should in turn inform partnerships fostering and priority setting.

Enable feminist infrastructures [76]

- Support Local, Community-Rooted Systems: Prioritise funding for peacebuilding ecosystems that centre resistance, care, and memory as essential components of peacebuilding.
- Support the Establishment of Sustainable Regional and Solidarity Feminist Funds:
- Create large-scale, independently governed endowment funds specifically dedicated to feminist initiatives, peacebuilding, and women's rights that generate sustainable income through ethical investments rather than annual donations
- Support funding frameworks that cede control and priority-setting to regional feminist networks to foster trust and responsiveness.
- Build south-to-south solidarity funds/trusts with the use of technology (such as blockchain) for traceability

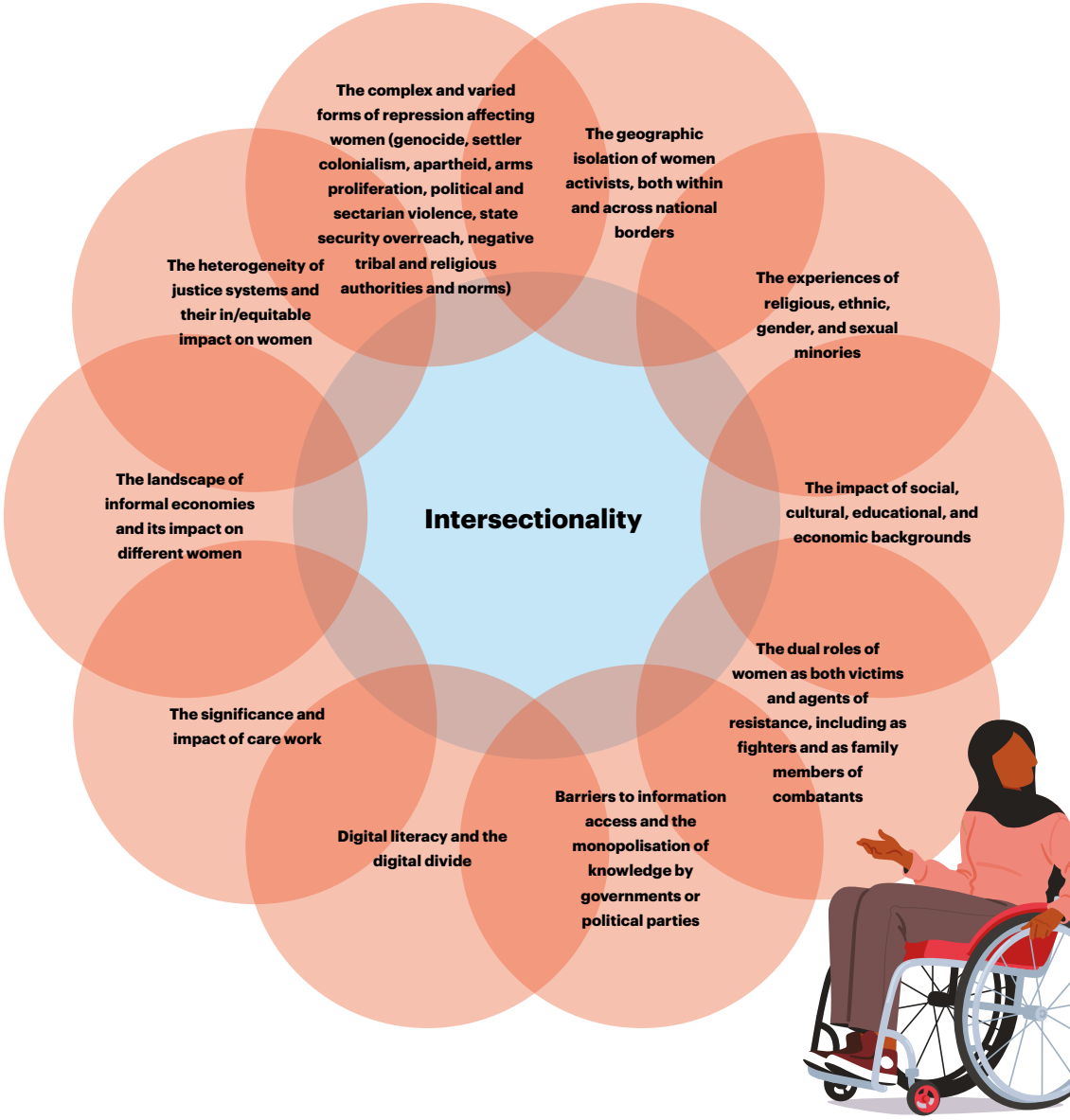
Scale-up good donorship practices

- Long-term, flexible and learning-focused partnerships: For example, up until 2025, the Dutch MFA offered long-term, flexible and strategic WPS partnerships (namely under its Policy Framework for Strengthening Civil Society 2021-2025), which enable partnerships for a more realistic duration for mutual learning and impact.
- Rapid rights-based response: UN Women's - WPHF/Rapid Response Window acted immediately after the rash funding cuts by some donors to Palestinian civil society in the aftermath of October 7th. WPHF came to the support of at least three Palestinian organisations solely for the purpose of enabling them to remain functional in adverse funding conditions to Palestinian civil society.

Adopt an intersectional and decolonial approach to WPS in SWA

For the WPS agenda to survive this century, it must relearn to see power where it wasn't told to look. Advancing the WPS agenda in the SWA region requires a nuanced intersectional and decolonial approach that recognises the diverse realities and identities of women across the region and reimagine SWA from the starting point of women's aspirations, agency, and mutual learning.

Donors working on WPS should consider 10 key factors in their understanding of the heterogeneity of women in SWA to enhance intersectionality in their funding and partnership models:



The language on decoloniality is not a stranger to the WPS agenda, since the agenda has been rooted in decolonial activism, with indigenous feminist movements playing a foundational role. In fact, colonial domination is explicitly referenced in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), underscoring the need for a liberation-centred understanding of WPS. Therefore, returning to those roots, especially by feminist donors as enablers, is the bedrock for future-proofing the agenda. Key shifts to conceptualise a decolonial approach include:

1. **Liberation-Centred Understanding**: Liberation is a key concept to reclaim for transformative impact of the WPS agenda. Feminist donors/ enablers should position the WPS agenda as integral to the support of broader liberation movements, encompassing freedom from patriarchal, economic, military, political, and colonial oppression.
2. **Safe Spaces for Theory and Action**: Create and support environments where WPS theorising and activism are protected from both local and international censorship. Those environments can be in the form of thinking spaces, local knowledge production, core and "surge" funds.
3. **Inclusive Liberation Economies**: Support economic models rooted in feminist political economy analysis[77] that challenge neoliberal paradigms, while fostering collective well-being.
4. **Reimagining Equality**: Develop frameworks for equality in SWA that are informed by decolonial perspectives, where investigating the de-equalising power of the state and occupation is central to those frameworks and how they engage with men as partners in gender equality rather than reductive violent caricatures.
5. **Decolonised Accountability**: Build meaningful partnerships that enhance a global sense of urgency for feminist peace, which requires people-centred accountability of policies, funding, and operational practices.

Chapter 8: Call to Action – The Fifth Pillar

This chapter presents a comprehensive call to action with ambitious and attainable changes to build an accountability infrastructure for the WPS agenda.

The Fifth Pillar: Accountability

Key actors

As the previous chapter emphasises, a fifth pillar focused on accountability is paramount for future-proofing the WPS agenda. This pillar needs all the key actors responsible for accountability to act, namely:

Member States and diplomatic missions: They hold primary responsibility for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 through National Action Plans, legislative reform, and institutional adoption at all levels.

UN Leadership and Agencies: The Secretary-General, Special Envoys, and agencies such as UN Women, UNDP, OHCHR, UNICEF, who are responsible for integrating WPS priorities into planning, resource allocation, and peace process implementation.

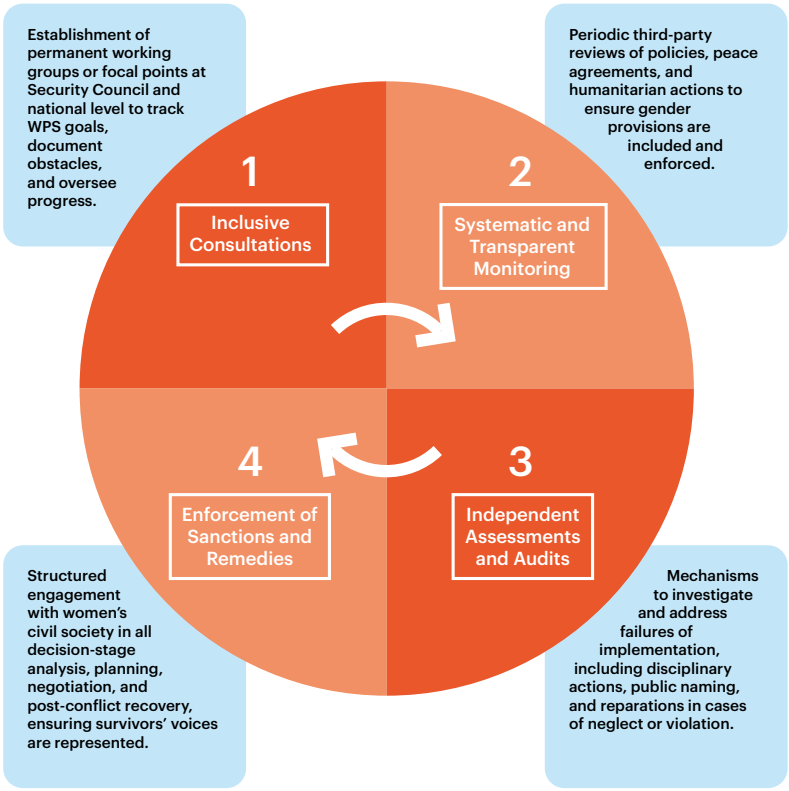
Regional bodies: such as the European Union and the League of Arab States (LAS) (and their relevant frameworks: the EU's Strategic Approach to WPS, the EU's Gender Action Plan III, and the Protection of Arab Women: Peace and Security Executive Action Plan 2015-2030)

Civil Society Organisations: Women's groups and rights-based NGOs monitor implementation, report gaps, advocate for systemic change, and provide technical expertise and survivor support. Instead of playing a substitution role, civil society organisations need to spearhead exposure of gaps and provide proposals for course correction.

Components of the accountability process

Accountability must be anchored in regular monitoring, gender-sensitive evaluation, transparent reporting, and meaningful stakeholder involvement, including women's organisations and affected communities. The accountability process should have at least 4 components

A meaningful accountability process requires smart benchmarks and indicators. While this paper does not offer a full accountability framework, it aims to inspire its development by suggesting the introduction of feminist indicators to be further elaborated at country level with feminists and WHRDs, such as dignity, narrative ownership, survivor-led monitoring, as well as the below Feminist Foreign Policy[78] inspired benchmarks for UN leadership, diplomatic missions, and regional bodies.



▼ Graffiti is seen amidst widespread destruction in Nur Shams refugee camp, Tulkarem on the West Bank after the Israeli army withdrew. During the Israeli raid, five Palestinians were killed by Israeli drone strikes and gunfire, 23 July 2024

These benchmarks should be tracked with regular progress reviews and the active participation of women's organisations and civil society at each stage generating country WPS profiles that include and go beyond UNSCR1325 NAPs.

Closing the accountability gap

A. Cross-mechanism explicit WPS reporting

It is possible to close accountability gaps and institutionalise gender-responsive peace and security norms across the international system, also by making WPS reporting explicit across relevant UN mechanisms, diplomatic representations, and regional instruments—and building civil society capacity for meaningful engagement and oversight.

We suggest 5 key mechanisms, bodies and processes which could be navigated as they are for greater WPS impacts.

Accountability Benchmarks			
1. Participation	**2. Prevention**	**3. Participation**	**4.Relief and Recovery**
Benchmark 1.1 Minimum 30% representation of women in all peace negotiations, mediation teams, and official delegations.	**Benchmark 1.2** Systematically integrate gender-sensitive conflict analysis which effectively identifies gendered conflict risks into all strategic planning by UN agencies and diplomatic missions	**Benchmark 1.3** Dedicated funding for women and girls survivors and witness support services as a mandatory budget line in all relevant UN and regional bodies country programming.	**Benchmark 1.4** 30% minimum of all humanitarian and recovery programme resources must target women's empowerment, economic recovery, and economic leadership capacity-building.
Benchmark 2.1 Ensure gender parity is systematically embedded across all diplomatic appointments, UN missions, and security sector leadership by guaranteeing women occupy at least 40% of senior leadership positions.	**Benchmark 2.2** Annual reporting of early warning data —including risks of CRSV and violence[79] against WHRDs and women political actors—disaggregated intersectionally.	**Benchmark 2.3** All senior UN staff and diplomatic representatives trained annually on trauma-informed and survivor-centred approaches, and sexual exploitation/abuse prevention.	**Benchmark 2.4** At least 75% of needs assessments, project designs, and evaluation teams in relief and recovery operations must include meaningful participation of women, demonstrated through documented roles in decision-making, consultations, and leadership positions, ensuring accountability to gender-responsive and inclusive peacebuilding outcomes.
Benchmark 3.1 Formal inclusion of and resource facilitation for women's organisations in all consultation processes and decision-making forums linked to peacebuilding, security sector reform, and post-conflict recovery by diplomatic missions, UN agencies, and regional instruments.	**Benchmark 3.2** Every conflict context is safeguarded by a bold prevention framework that champions at least one targeted, gender-specific programme—uplifting women human rights defenders and peacebuilders (e.g. supporting WHRDs and peacebuilders' protection networks).	**Benchmark 3.3** Operational complaint and redress mechanisms for violations of women's security and rights are operational at country level in diplomatic missions with annual public reporting of cases addressed.	**Benchmark 3.4** Dynamic gender-sensitive outcome indicators (e.g. women's economic power, access to psychosocial support, participation in and leadership of reconstruction efforts) monitored and publicly reported annually by relevant UN agencies, and regional instruments.

1. Human Rights Council Mechanisms

- Universal Periodic Review (UPR): UPR reviews can integrate WPS via state and NGO submissions, questions, and recommendations.
- Special Procedures: Special Rapporteurs and thematic working groups—including those on violence against women, human rights defenders, and transitional justice—can incorporate focused analysis on WPS in country visits and thematic reports.
- Fact-Finding and Inquiry Missions: These can feature specific content on women's participation, protection, and conflict-related violations related to the WPS agenda.

2. Security Council Mandated Mechanisms

- Peace Operations Mandates: Security Council resolutions and the Secretary-General's reports on peacekeeping, political missions, and sanctions monitoring increasingly include WPS-specific requirements and indicators.
- Arria-Formula Meetings: These informal Security Council meetings can be used to advance WPS-specific accountability and hear civil society on progress and challenges.

3. Treaty Bodies and Related Exams

- Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW): States Parties are required by General Recommendation 30 to report on legal frameworks, policies, and programmes relevant to women's human rights in conflict, including direct reference to UNSCR 1325 and subsequent resolutions. CEDAW's reporting and review cycles can be used as an institutional platform for WPS monitoring, leveraging mutual mandates and the adoption of joint recommendations on women's decision-making, security, and conflict recovery.
- Other UN Treaty Bodies: Country reviews by the Human Rights Committee (CCPR), Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Committee Against Torture (CAT), Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) can incorporate WPS content, especially where issues of women's participation, protection, and gender-based violence in conflict are at stake.

For example, CEDAW shadow reporting on the Netherlands was used by Dutch civil society[80] linking ATT to CEDAW by focusing on Gender-based violence assessment (GBVA) needed in arms export licensing and Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas (EWIPA).

4. General Assembly Processes

- Annual General Assembly Debates and Resolutions: The General Assembly can endorse WPS indicators, call for annual reporting, and seek accountability around implementation—including through established debates or side events on gender, peace, and security.

5. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Reporting

- Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs): WPS can be mainstreamed within reviews of SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) using gender-responsive progress indicators.

Integrating WPS reporting across these mechanisms ensures a system-wide, multi-mandate approach—enabling monitoring, advocacy, and accountability for WPS commitments at national, regional, and international levels.

B. The security council and member states: immediate actions within mandate

- Create a permanent official Security Council Working Group on WPS (similar to the Children and Armed Conflicts) to oversee implementation, monitor commitments, and recommend corrective actions.
- Require cross-cutting integration of WPS indicators, reporting, and provisions in all country-specific and thematic resolutions and mandates.
- Urge robust application of arms embargoes and sanctions where conflict/occupation related sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is present to enforce accountability for gender-based violence and protection.
- Establish mandatory quotas for women's participation in all peace negotiations, delegations, and mediation teams mandated or supported by the Security Council.
- Requests the Secretary-General to report, prior to mandate renewal, on gender parity compliance in all negotiation contexts and peace talks
- Current and future participating members should take the Shared Commitments[81] initiative forward, ensuring E10 commitment to WPS as a top priority.

The above actions can be made possible by a reformed security council. An overdue reform of the privilege system given to the P5, in response to the increasing demands from human rights actors and senior diplomats to abolish or at least bypass[82] the veto privilege, which has for decades stifled the council in key peace and security actions.

C. Centring WPS at the heart of the foreign policy deck: No more "Nice to Have"

EU institutions and instruments, diplomatic missions, and the League of Arab States (LAS) must ensure policy coherence, where WPS is not a siloed or a stand-alone affair with minimal resources but rather a part of the full set of foreign policy tools.

The EU

- Enforce Transparent Gender-Responsive Budgeting and Funding Disclosures: Make it mandatory for all EU funding streams related

to peace and security to have dedicated WPS budget lines with public, periodic disclosures on spending, outcomes, and gaps, ensuring donor funds effectively empower women's organisations and address women's protection.
- Establish an Annual High-Level Accountability Dialogue: involving EU institutions, member states, partners, and civil society, where detailed progress reports on WPS implementation and accountability status are presented and discussed openly.
- Establish a High-Level WPS Accountability Task Force: Create a dedicated inter-service task force to coordinate accountability efforts, monitor implementation of WPS commitments, and facilitate engagement with feminist civil society and grassroots women's organisations.
- Drive Integration of Accountability across EU Funding Instruments: Direct relevant DGs (Directorates-General) to embed mandatory gender-responsive accountability clauses into all funding agreements related to peace, security, and humanitarian work, requiring periodic audits and impact evaluations.
- Champion WPS Accountability as a Strategic Priority: EU leadership should elevate accountability within the EU's WPS framework, publicly committing to measurable targets and transparent progress reporting that hold EU institutions and partners responsible.

Member States Diplomatic Missions

- Advance UNSCR 1325 NAPs with third-country priorities to offer a platform for shadow NAP development: WHRDs and feminist actors are capable of producing independent data, analysis, and reporting that prevent policy whitewashing and ensure governments honour WPS obligations with true impact. Support to shadow NAPs combined with amplifying findings with calls for corrective actions, offer a mechanism for national-level accountability.
- Support democracy and democratic processes: democratic transformation is paramount for state-centric international frameworks such as the WPS agenda, where often the state ends up being the perpetrator of violence against women in autocratic contexts. Conflict contexts repeatedly receive a surge in support for stabilisation at the expense of democratic transformation, which risks falling into the same cycle of violence again, and continue to stifle the civil society. Therefore, protecting spaces for democratic thinking and practice, and supporting democratic transformation in a context-relevant manner is crucial for WPS implementation to be meaningful.
- Dedicate a diplomatic suite for transformative WPS country impacts: While diplomatic representations stand for the interests of their countries, a comprehensive diplomatic suite can be streamlined across areas of engagement (e.g., trade deals, green transformations, economic development, etc) ensuring inclusive consultations with WHRDs and feminist actors, setting clear benchmarks, monitoring progress and correcting course, and introducing gender-responsive clauses into all agreements and contracts with redress measures.

League of Arab States (LAS)

While faith in the UNSC is fading, the possibility to drive its reform injects a new hope into its mandate among conflict and occupation-affected populations. However, the legitimacy deficiency is greater for LAS given its composition of "perpetrator" states as seen by rights groups and its limited efforts to engage with the civil society or offer protection to human rights defenders through its human rights court. The perception of LAS is of a stifled and ineffective structure. To date, only eight out of the 22 member states have adopted UNSCR 1325 NAPs, with some of these plans having reached expiration without subsequent renewals. The challenging environment characterised by complex governance issues, fragile states, political repression, prolonged conflicts, and ongoing occupation puts front and centre the challenges to harness political will on WPS in LAS. However, if LAS seeks to enhance its impact and potential, it can strive to better activate its:

Mandate: LAS is mandated to support member states to develop 1325 NAPs in a harmonised manner with its regional strategy. LAS must take a more proactive approach to incentivise its members to adopt UNSCR 1325 NAPs.

Instrument: The Arab Women Mediators Network (AWMN): The network operates with the technical and political support of LAS and UN Women, aiming to support national mediation efforts and bring women's perspectives into peace negotiations and recovery planning. However, members are largely absent in form and statements from peace and recovery processes. AWMN can and should convene women peacebuilders from the region to address real-life challenges and push for an effective protection framework for WHRDs and peacebuilders.

Policy Frameworks and Processes: LAS has a regional strategy on WPS (2013)[83] and the "Protection of Arab Women: Peace and Security" Executive Action Plan 2015-2030[84].

Arab Summits are held annually – The secretary general should deliver a progress report and host an open debate on WPS during Arab Summits. Redress measures, such as suspension of membership for states with regressive track records in the areas of priority in the executive action plan should be introduced.
LAS has a long way to go to build trust with communities in SWA, however, serious commitment to the above actions can serve as trust-building measures.

D. National and regional feminist actors taking the reigns

Apathy starves progress and silence visionary action. State-centric international instruments cannot be transformed without the visionary guidance of feminists and WHDRs across the world. In fact, this is exactly how UNSCR1325 came to light. Therefore, as architects of accountability and liberation, WHRDs and feminists in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, and Palestine must claim radical agency in holding local, regional, and global actors to account for implementing and respecting the objectives of the Women, Peace and Security agenda.
Participatory Monitoring and Accountability Mechanisms: Establish accessible, participatory mechanisms for communities to regularly monitor all WPS actions, report grievances and successes, and trigger corrective actions when commitments are unmet. Feedback loops should be rapid, actionable, and built on principles of care and trust.

Build Intersectional, Transnational Feminist Coalitions: Forge alliances beyond borders using collective power to catalyse meaningful change, it is essential to deepen grassroots organising that centres the voices and priorities of diverse women—especially those most marginalised and impacted by conflict. Strengthen cross-border solidarity networks that share skills, resources, and strategic advocacy tools, creating a unified regional front demanding accountability from governments, non-state actors, and international actors.
Narrative Sovereignty and Knowledge Production: Lead and direct the production of knowledge, research, and documentation of regional realities to challenge dominant, often external narratives, and protect spaces for feminist and rights-based dissent to ensure women are not forced to edit their lived realities. Creating this body of regional feminist knowledge and solid narrative strengthens partners' capacity to drive accountability based on this evidence forward.

Conclusion

The WPS agenda in the South-West Asia region stands at a historic crossroads. The findings of this report emphasises that, despite a quarter-century of global policy frameworks and national action plans, the lived realities of women in Palestine, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen are still shaped by settler colonialism, militarisation, illegal occupation, authoritarian collapse, violence, and donor-driven depoliticisation. The WPS agenda, as currently implemented, too often functions as a technocratic shell—one that risks reinforcing the very structures of violence and exclusion it was meant to dismantle.

Yet, the region's feminist movements have demonstrated extraordinary resilience, creativity, and political imagination. Across contexts of occupation, conflict, and fragmented governance, women have refused erasure—reclaiming language, building alternative infrastructures of care and resistance, and forging new forms of solidarity that transcend borders and generations. Their strategies—ranging from shadow action plans and oral history archives to community-based care networks and strategic walkouts—offer a blueprint for a radically reimagined WPS agenda.
The evidence is clear: genuine peace and security in South-West Asia (SWA) cannot be achieved through imported templates, donor compliance, or state-centric frameworks that ignore the root causes of violence. Instead, the path forward demands unequivocal commitment to accountability.

The call to action is urgent and unequivocal: the WPS agenda must return to its radical roots, confronting and unravelling existing power structures rather than adapting to them. This requires not only policy shifts but a fundamental reimagining of what peace, security, and justice mean in the SWANA region. Only by centring the knowledge, agency, and political courage of local feminists can the WPS agenda fulfil its promise of transformative change—delivering genuine liberation, justice, and equality for all.

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Endnotes

1 Human security: The concept emerged from a multi-disciplinary understanding of security which centres the human rather than the nation state. It focuses on three freedoms; freedom from fear, want, and indignity. The first milestone publication in the field is the UNDP Human Development Report of 1994.

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13 Racialized hierarchies describe systems that assign value, authority, and credibility to people and communities based on race, producing structured inequalities in whose lives are protected and whose knowledge is taken seriously. These hierarchies are not natural but socially and politically constructed, rooted in colonial histories that continue to shape global governance and everyday interactions. Feminist scholars have shown how such hierarchies mark women of colour as perpetual subjects of intervention while privileging whiteness as the site of authority and universality. To read more on the matter: Mohanty, C. T. (2003). Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity. Duke University Press.

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24 Ibid.

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75 Effective protection should be defined by the women subject of protection. However, this includes but not limited to approaches that go beyond physical security or legal aid to encompass holistic, feminist practices of safety: collective, community-based, and politically grounded. This entails

embedding care, psychosocial support, solidarity networks, and movement-defined priorities into protection, rather than relying solely on, technocratic frameworks.

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78 With focus on representation, resources, and rights.

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80 Mind the Gap: Addressing Policy Gaps in Women's Rights, Dutch CEDAW Network, (2024)

81 In 2021 Ireland, Kenya and Mexico formed a "Presidency Trio for Women, Peace and Security" (WPS), pledging to make WPS "a top priority" of their respective presidencies, and signed a Statement of shared commitments, more countries of the E10 have joined since, including Albania, Brazil, France, Gabon, Niger, Norway, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the UK.

82 Through UNGA's uniting for peace resolution 377 (V)

83 Implementing the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in the Arab Region, UN ESCWA (2023), P20

84 Strategic Framework For the Executive Action Plan on "Protection of Arab Women: Peace and Security, Adopted under the Resolution number 7966 O,S 144th League of Arab States Council at the Ministerial Level Resolution on 13-09-2015