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# Women, Peace and Security Biannual Trends Analysis: *Autumn 2025*

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## 1. Introduction

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The rapidly changing global security environment presents a challenge when it comes to gender equality. In a context where many key actors, both state and non-state, are now either hostile to or ambivalent about gender equality and women's rights it is imperative that states continue to promote the importance of the Women Peace and Security agenda. Doing this requires skilful articulation of the relationship between national security and gender.

The current report is the first of a bi-annual WPS trends analysis commissioned by the Integrated Security Fund (ISF) to provide oversight of the changing landscape of WPS. The analysis is undertaken by the WPS Helpdesk, an ISF funded initiative with partners including Saferworld, Conciliation Resources, GAPS UK, Durham University, Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF), and Researchers Without Borders.

The analysis presents a bird's eye view of global trends related to WPS. It draws on surveys with Helpdesk consortium partners, as well as their networks of in-country partner organisations alongside a literature review and trends mapping. The purpose of the survey is to collect evidence of how those who work within the WPS agenda are adapting to a changing global policy landscape. It will not produce representative or replicable data but will be used to track the experience of Helpdesk partners over time.

## 2. Context

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The 2025 Report of the Secretary General on Women Peace and Security highlighted stagnation and regression across key indicators of the WPS agenda amidst a broader backlash against women's rights and gender equality (UN 2025). These trends reflect a broader global realignment of the meaning of security and what counts as threat. Whereas the period from 2000 could be broadly characterised as centring human security, we have moved into an era where state security and strategic stability dominate defence agendas. There has been a dramatic drop in Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) funding to conflict affected contexts worldwide as budgets are diverted towards defence and security. Yet while funding to support women's organisations has declined, the United Nations registered a dramatic increase in the proportion of women killed and the number of women and girls affected by sexual violence in conflict contexts.

This shift at the global level is reflected in the changed UK security policy landscape. Successive reviews have re-oriented priorities away from a value-based order towards open and stable order based on collective security (IR Refresh 2023) and increased spending on military defence and 'warfighting readiness' (SDR 2025). The return to the language of 'strategic competition' and 'adversaries' underlines the radical shift in the domestic security landscape (NSS 2025).

The tools of the WPS agenda responded predominantly to human security and the promotion of peace. The shift of emphasis in security policy to top-down global security challenges has led to a perception that WPS is less relevant and there is less understanding of the connection between WPS and security as a result. Yet the effects of these challenges will create human insecurity, which in turn will drive geopolitical tensions. In a context where many key actors are now either hostile to or ambivalent about gender equality and women's rights, or instrumentalise gender as a tactic of war, identifying and responding to these new threats at a geopolitical level by articulating the utility of gender sensitivity and WPS for national security is key.

We acknowledge that the field is currently in a state of considerable flux, but it is still possible to identify some recurring issues.

## 3. Trends and Analysis

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### a. Militarisation

One of the most prominent changes in the past three years has been the rapid shift towards militarisation and re-armament. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 prompted a renewed focus in European states on traditional forms of defence, deterrence and war readiness (Ministry of Defence 2025). This shift poses challenges for the WPS agenda which has traditionally been an anti-militaristic movement. High profile WPS initiatives in this period have centred the role of women in the military, for example NATO's support for uniforms for female soldiers in Ukraine. Research from PRIO has demonstrated increased public support for women in frontline roles, challenging traditional gender norms (Skoog et al. 2025). There is also greater acknowledgement of the need for 'gender responsive leadership' at the institutional level, including in defence institutions such as NATO, creating a new entry point for introducing gender equality into operational and strategic planning at the international level (Wright 2025). This can be approached through the lens of security decision making and leadership within military and security institutions.

Alongside the growth in militarisation there has been a decline in engagement in the multilateral forums for disarmament and arms control. The Secretary General's 2025 report notes 'an alarming erosion of commitments to humanitarian disarmament treaties that are specifically designed to protect civilians' (para 50). Further, military applications of new technology such as artificial intelligence, and the extension of conflict to both cyberspace and outer space underlines the urgent need for an understanding of the impact of these trends on women and diverse, minority groups.

The emphasis on militarisation, strategic stability and transnational threats leads to the exclusion of human aspects of security in policy which in turn risks overlooking the important connections between local, national and international insecurity.

## **b. Hybrid and Emerging Threats**

It is clear that the nature of warfare is changing. Beyond traditional forms of kinetic force, we must now confront the risks of sub-threshold activities and hybrid forms of attack involving cyber operations and technology facilitated violence. These forms of attack can be transnational in nature, originating from hostile state actors as well as non-state actors, for example extreme right wing groups, who challenge the political and social status quo. These new security challenges have distinct human security undertones – such as understanding how people behave online and how this shapes behaviour and generates threats. Effective responses still require expertise in the human dimensions of conflict and how this contributes to instability both from a bottom up and a top-down perspective. For example, operations in outer space targeting dual use satellite systems create high risks for civilians when critical infrastructure such as telecommunications and health systems are impacted (Steer 2025).

It is also increasingly recognised that new technologies such as social media and artificial intelligence can be weaponized. State sponsored disinformation is used as a form of hybrid warfare, seeking to deliberately cause social polarisation and create mistrust in public institutions. There is an explicitly gendered aspect to this new tool – that of Gender Based Disinformation which both feeds on and contributes to pushback against gender norms (Majne 2025; Wong 2024). This form of disinformation can be used to target feminist movements and women's organisations to sow division and hate that undermines the cohesion of the movement (Bradshaw and Henle 2021); to discredit women who run for political or public roles, to weaponize traditional notions of family values to present gender equality as a threat to the values of the state (Kratochwil and O'Sullivan 2023). Globally it can be used to discredit both political adversaries and global norms by highlighting hypocrisy and failure to 'protect' women (Wong 2024). Case studies from countries as diverse as Brazil (Koch et al 2024), Sri Lanka (Bjarnegård et al. 2022) and Northern Ireland (Turner & Swaine 2021) have demonstrated the use of misogyny and sexualised content to undermine female politicians particularly during elections. One challenge is to collate data and insight from other fields on emerging threats – such as data on disinformation campaigns- that have traditionally fallen outside the scope of the WPS agenda to deepen understanding of the links between these new threats, gender and national security.

Violence against women and girls worldwide has also been enabled by new forms of technology that have moved traditional forms of risk into the online environment (Build Up 2025), making it easier to expose women to harm. New technologies and digital tools intersect with harmful attitudes such as misogyny and result in both the direct and indirect targeting of women.

## **c. Pushback on Norms and Closing Civic Space**

The language of the WPS agenda - developed through successive negotiated United Nations Security Council resolutions - provided a framework for identifying and responding to women's exclusion from peace and security decision making. Now we find the language itself is becoming contested both in multilateral forums such as the Security Council (Standfield 2025) but also in-countries such as Libya where there has been backlash against the international aspect of the WPS agenda (Turner & Swaine 2023). The Secretary General's report notes how disputes over long-established terminology reflect 'not just semantic disagreements but a pushback that undermines legal protections.' (para 4.) Helpdesk Consortium members report the active deprioritisation of gender projects, including GBV and a general shrinking of the space available for advocacy. While there have been some successes in maintaining the language of WPS in Security Council resolutions (Security Council Report 2025), a theme of survey responses was the need to reframe WPS work in language that was more acceptable and therefore created less risk operationally. This included avoiding the language of gender in their advocacy and be more discrete in how they incorporate WPS or gender equality priorities into their work. This is being achieved through strategic design of programmes to mainstream gender sensitivity of all activities rather than as a separate policy priority.

## Examples of adaption

Public-facing advocacy has been minimised, and efforts have shifted toward discreet facilitation, dialogue, and research.

Project design and communications now emphasise inclusion, social cohesion, and access to justice as entry points for sustaining WPS.

The emphasis of programmes has been shifted toward engaging men and boys through masculinities-focused interventions, recognizing that sustainable change in gender norms requires their active participation alongside women.

Adopting a stronger focus on data-driven and evidence-based approaches ... to guide advocacy and demonstrate the tangible benefits of women's inclusion and inclusive governance.

We are seeing a strategic reframing of WPS to try and maintain support for its principles or outcomes even where the language is contested or rejected (Turner & Swaine 2023). This relates not only to the language used, but to the way in which projects are designed and framed. There is less support for WPS as a priority area, but activities that support WPS can generally be included in broader project activities.

Beyond these challenges, gender equality is increasingly hindered by the rise of anti-gender movements that go beyond social backlash as it involves institutionalised efforts to challenge established norms and policies supporting women's human rights. Neil Datta's "The Next Wave" report warns of a rapidly growing, well-funded anti-rights movement in Europe, raising \$1.18 billion in five years to *"to reshape laws and institutions in order to roll back fundamental rights, particularly those of women, and to weaken European democracies"* warns (Interview with Neil Datta: "The Next Wave", a Warning Signal about the Rise of Anti-Rights Offensives in Europe). Resistance to the WPS agenda is both global as anti-gender mobilisations "constitute a coordinated transnational movement" (Haastrup, 2025), and context-specific, shaped by local socio-political dynamics. As Toni Haastrup highlights, in Africa, for example, anti-gender mobilisations draw on cultural, religious, and nationalist narratives to undermine gender equality, as observed in Uganda (via institutionalising anti-LGBTQI+ violence through the Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2023), Sudan (via resisting and framing feminist demands for political inclusion as "un-Islamic,"), Ethiopia (via weaponizing anti-LGBTQI+ rhetoric to suppress dissent), and Ghana (via proposing Family Values Bill seeks to criminalize LGBTQI). Across many contexts, governments are employing legal mechanisms to undermine gender equality, including restrictions on abortion and LGBTQI+ rights (Thomson and Whiting, 2022), and the criminalisation of gender and sexual expressions deemed "deviant or 'unnatural'" (Haastrup, 2025). Similarly, Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in 2021 and Latvia's currently ongoing debates about withdrawing from the it, reflect a broader backlash against gender equality. Furthermore, while military spending has increased significantly, the WPS agenda is facing funding cuts, and civil society, particularly women human rights defenders (WHRD), are experiencing growing repression. In addition to financial constraints, WHRD are subjected to a wide range of attacks, including sexual harassment, physical violence, persecution, and online abuse (RFLD, 2023) from wide range of actors, including religious leader, political parties, anti-gender movement, etc (Villellas, 2024; Turner & Swaine 2023).

## 4. Implications for Women Peace and Security

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The current global security landscape presents existential challenges for the Women Peace and Security Agenda. In a context where funding to conflict affected and fragile states is being cut across the board, and less money is being allocated to gender equality as a standalone priority, the challenge is to identify strategies to maintain the progress that has been made. There are, however, differences of opinion on how this should be achieved. From the Trends analysis we identify three potential approaches. These are presented as emergent schools of thought within WPS research and policy and are not endorsed as priority approaches. It should be emphasised that these categories are **descriptive** – presenting how different organisations have responded to a changing landscape. They are not presented as a proposed approach to WPS.

### a. Prioritise engagement with re-militarisation, strategic stability and transnational threats

One response to the shift by states towards remilitarisation security has been to re-orient efforts by prioritising the ‘security’ aspect of Women Peace and Security. There is already significant research, policy and advocacy on the importance of women’s participation in defence, in peacekeeping and in security decision making. Centring women’s participation in defence and security, as well as engagement with the operational requirements of the military, including gender responsive leadership, training on IHL with particular reference civilian harm mitigation continues to keep WPS on the agenda in the defence sphere. One example of this approach is the concept of ‘gender inclusive leadership’ seen in NATO. This offers easy entry points to the current security debates for those engaged in policy making. The shift is more complex for civil society for whom engagement with defence and security institutions can run counter to their core values.

In addition to participation, attention will be required to the gendered implications of the rapid development of emerging disruptive technologies and forms of warfare. These must also be subject to gender and social inclusion analysis to ensure the impact on women and vulnerable groups is not overlooked.

### b. Security as Resilience

A second response has been to strategically link domestic resilience with national security. This approach emphasises the links between the capacity of the domestic population to withstand security shocks – such as prolonged effects of a cyber-attack, for example- with national security overall (Malksöo 2025; LSE IDEAS. 2025). The WPS agenda provides the programmatic tools for conceptualising and operationalising this relationship, including articulating the civilian impact of hybrid threats, and demonstrating how engagement with civil society and civilian authorities contributes to the ‘whole of society’ approach to defence. This engagement may highlight civil society’s role in resilience to and addressing the impact of hybrid attacks, such as gendered disinformation and online misogyny. Feminist movements have already “demonstrated remarkable resilience and innovation” in approaches to gender and peace (Haastrup, 2025), and valuable lessons can be drawn from their “alternative knowledge systems” to empower society to respond effectively to unexpected changes and hybrid attacks.

### c. Re-orientation towards prevention

A third approach is to maintain the position of anti-militarism that underpins the WPS agenda and re-orient efforts towards conflict prevention. This can operate at different levels. For example, it would be reflected in national commitments to disarmament and arms control treaties (O'Rourke 2025) and including women in leadership roles in these spaces. At the local level a prevention-based approach would acknowledge the role played by women and civil society in conflict management, de-escalation and crisis early warning (Maung et al. 2025). This is particularly important to ensure that macro challenges like conflict related sexual violence or climate related conflict are not overlooked. This re-orientation towards prevention would also recognise the WPS priorities and challenges in safeguarding both human security and the organisations committed to advancing it, given that biological threats, particularly COVID-19, have revealed that threats to human well-being can be just as destabilising as military threats, and have prompted questions about whether state-centric approaches are adequately equipped to respond to such challenges (Ozguc and Rabbani, 2023). Similarly, the **Biological Security Strategy (2023)** highlights the high risk of biological threats and identifies a broad spectrum of risks, ranging from infectious diseases to deliberate misuse by state or non-state actors. To address these risks, the Strategy prioritises preventing “state and non-state actors from developing, producing, acquiring, transferring, stockpiling and using biological weapons”. Importantly, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the gendered implications of such threats, as women faced disproportionate risks due to their overrepresentation in frontline roles, increased unpaid care responsibilities during crises, and heightened food insecurity (Haegeman, 2025). Consequently, preventative measures must address structural inequalities and incorporate gender-sensitive approaches within biosecurity policy to strengthen resilience.

These three approaches are currently evident in thinking about how to respond to global challenges, each offering new ways of thinking about how to respond to the changed environment in a way that continues to promote the values of the agenda. While they reflect current responses, no one approach alone is likely to respond to the full spectrum of security challenges faced. Consideration of the linkages between the three will also be crucial, moving beyond binary approaches towards a meaningful understanding of ‘whole of society’ approaches to security.

#### About the WPS Helpdesk

The Women Peace and Security Helpdesk, managed by Saferworld in partnership with Conciliation Resources, GAPS UK, University of Durham, DCAF and Researchers Without Borders was established in December 2021 to increase capability across the UK Government on WPS policy and programming in order to make its work on conflict and instability more effective. If you work for the UK government and you would like to send a task request, or if have an enquiry about the helpdesk or this report please email us at [wpshelpdesk@saferworld.org.uk](mailto:wpshelpdesk@saferworld.org.uk).



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