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A vibrant mosaic background composed of many small, irregular tiles in shades of purple, pink, orange, and grey. The tiles form the outlines and features of several diverse women's faces, looking in various directions. A diagonal band of darker purple and pink tiles runs across the center, creating a sense of depth and movement.

# The role of civil society organisations and the future of Women, Peace and Security: protecting peace and progress

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# 1. Introduction

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The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, formalised through the unanimous adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 in 2000, provided the foundation for a policy framework to elevate and address the complex array of gendered drivers and impacts of conflict and insecurity. At its core, the WPS agenda is built around four mutually reinforcing pillars — prevention, protection, participation, and relief and recovery. Together, these pillars, with UNSCR 1325 (2000) and the nine subsequent WPS UNSC Resolutions recognise “that gender matters in and to international peace and security” and highlight the important roles of women and civil society in shaping peace.<sup>1</sup>

2025 marked the 25th Anniversary of the UNSC WPS agenda, yet civil society was excluded from traditional commemoration activities at the UN, and questions were raised about the future of the WPS agenda. This anniversary provided a moment for the WPS community to reflect on the progress of the agenda, identify its failures, and refocus the objectives and priorities of WPS looking ahead to the next 25 years of the agenda.

The UK has historically been a global leader on WPS. As penholder on the WPS agenda since its inception, the UK has supported the role of civil society through protecting and supporting civic space in multilateral fora, funding women-led civil societies' self-defined priorities in fragile and conflict-affected contexts and beyond,<sup>2</sup> and collaborating with UK-based civil society in the development and accountability of the UK's National Action Plan on WPS. In its programming, the UK has prioritised the protection of civic space as necessary for peace and security<sup>3</sup> and the UK's most recent NAP (2023-27) names civil society as a strategic partner in delivering on WPS commitments, highlighting the UK “will continue to work in close alignment with civil society...and ensure our policies protect and strengthen civil society in fragile and conflict-affected contexts”.<sup>4</sup>

This paper therefore speaks to the UK's role within the wider WPS policy ecosystem – through its upcoming refresh of the 5<sup>th</sup> NAP on WPS and engagement at the UN Security Council - and draws on current evidence to inform practice. The paper highlights the important role of civil society as a peace and resilience actor and a key strategic partner in delivering the WPS agenda, ensuring stability and security. The paper demonstrates that civic space, civic actors, and human rights defenders must be protected and supported for the success of the future of the WPS agenda. Civic space and participation are increasingly under threat worldwide. Further, a growing number of nationalist authoritarian governments and political movements, in coalition with anti-gender and anti-rights groups, are contributing to the dismantling of democratic space in national, regional and global systems and rolling back on human rights commitments, particularly in relation to gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights.<sup>5</sup> This

contracting civic space is also evident in spaces of global governance, including in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), with a declining number of women civil society briefers year on year from 2022 to 2024.<sup>61</sup>

Against this backdrop, armed conflict is increasing, marked by the doubling of global conflicts between 2019 and 2024 and a 25% increase in political violence in 2024 compared to 2023.<sup>7</sup> Insecurity is also rising for women, LGBTQIA+ individuals and other marginalised communities due to the increasing backlash on human rights, which have been exacerbated by a combination of drastic funding cuts and the rise of right-wing, patriarchal and populist movements.<sup>8</sup> This global environment of increasing violence and conflict, alongside decreasing accountability and civic participation, is a recipe for rising insecurity globally – at both the individual and national level - including for the UK. The UK has formally recognised the vital role of CSOs and WROs in responding to moments like these, highlighting in the WPS NAP that “women’s movements and grassroots women’s rights organisations (WROs) continue to challenge oppressive governments and provide crucial support to their communities”.<sup>9</sup>

Alongside these dangerous shifts, resourcing support for women peacebuilders and civil society is disappearing. Research by UN Women in March 2025 indicates that, due to foreign aid cuts, nearly half of women's organisations surveyed across 44 crisis settings are expected to close within six months and 90% of those surveyed reported that their operations had been financially impacted<sup>10</sup> and the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) warns that the unprecedented cuts to aid funding will severely undermine human rights worldwide, with vulnerable groups, including women and girls, being the hardest hit.<sup>11</sup>

Despite committing in multiple strategic policy documents to consulting with civil society, the UK government has continued to make funding decisions without such consultation. Civil society has critiqued crucial decisions that continue to be taken without engagement which disproportionately negatively affect women’s rights organisations and gender equality initiatives.<sup>12</sup> For example, the aid budget was cut from 0.7% of GNI to 0.5% in 2020, which resulted in an estimated £4.2 billion cut from the aid budget in 2021.<sup>13</sup> Following this, in 2025, further cuts were announced to reduce aid from 0.5% of GNI to 0.3% to fund higher defence spending. These decisions reflect a broader international trend toward increased militarisation, driven by heightened geopolitical tensions, rising armed conflict, and states’ growing emphasis on hard security capabilities. As countries redirect resources to defence, long-term investments in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and gender equality are being rapidly

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that numbers of participation alone are a good indicator of meaningful participation, but do demonstrate a trend of closing access that is very likely to also be reflective of reduced meaningful participation for civil society briefers.

deprioritised. These cuts directly impact the work of civil society organisations (CSOs) both in the UK and overseas due to reductions in funding that cause the closure of programmes providing vital services.

Drawing on research by Dr Florence Waller-Carr from the London School of Economics on CSOs implementing and shaping WPS<sup>2</sup> and Women for Women International's *From Asking to Action* global consultation on the experiences of women and women's rights organisations in conflict-affected contexts<sup>3</sup> this policy paper explores the position of CSOs in the current landscape of WPS and highlights their essential role in shaping a present and future WPS agenda that counters the increasing violence, conflict and instability facing the UK and the world .

## 2. Civil Society's Engagement With WPS

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CSOs, women's rights organisations (WROs), and women-led organisations (WLOs) have been core to the WPS ecosystem since before the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000). It is well-documented that CSOs and women peacebuilders set the conceptual groundwork for UNSCR 1325 (2000), helped draft and refine the texts that comprised the resolution, and served as intermediaries during negotiations.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, over the last 25 years, CSOs have been central actors implementing WPS across national, local and global spaces — centring the voices of those impacted by conflict and insecurity, delivering essential gender-responsive services in conflict (for example, psychosocial support, GBV case management and livelihood training), addressing structural and root causes of conflict (such as harmful gender norms, exclusion from decision-making and weak accountability systems), and adopting gender-transformative approaches to peacebuilding and reconstruction, including women-led dialogue processes and community-based conflict-prevention initiatives. Findings from Women for Women International's *From Asking to Action* consultation reinforce this central role: across 14 conflict-affected contexts, civil society was consistently recognised as providing services to women within their communities — by WROs (identified by 31% of women), local NGOs (36%), and INGOs (54%).

The value and work of civil society are recognised throughout the architecture of WPS, including in the WPS resolutions, the majority of NAPs, and the commitment of member states through their statements at the annual UNSC Open Debate on WPS.<sup>15</sup> UNSCR 1325 (2000) calls for the inclusion of

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<sup>2</sup> Based on 29 interviews, 14 event observations and a mapping and analysis of 117 CSO publications in the UK, Lebanon and the UN Security Council.

<sup>3</sup> Based on consultations with over 6,500 women and 54 CSOs in 14 conflict affected countries. See, <https://womenforwomen.org.uk/fromaskingtoaction>

gender perspectives in peace agreements, including support for local women's peace initiatives, and UNSCR 2242 (2015), commits the Security Council to engage regularly with civil society actors. When CSOs are empowered to take a central role in shaping and implementing the WPS agenda, it strengthens the agenda's capacity to be a crucial tool in responding to the intersecting crises of insecurity, violence, and conflict that the world is currently facing – areas in which the WPS agenda is often criticised for falling short.

However, the insights, expertise and experiences of CSOs are often missing and disconnected from policy spaces that dictate the direction of the WPS agenda. It was exactly that premise which drove Women for Women International to conduct a global consultation on progress against the WPS agenda from the perspectives of women and WROs in conflict – *From Asking to Action*. Through *From Asking to Action*, Women for Women International consulted over 6500 women and engaged 54 WROs across 14 conflict contexts, not just to ensure that a wide range of insights were prioritised ahead of the 25-year milestone year for the WPS agenda, but also to demonstrate that more regular and meaningful engagement with actors on the frontlines and women in affected communities can and should be done. Dr Waller-Carr's Doctoral research at the London School of Economics was also driven by asking questions to understand the contributions and role of civil society in shaping and implementing WPS. Through data collection in the UK, Lebanon and UN Security Council between 2019 and 2022 the research analysed documents, interviews and participant observation through standpoint theory analysis and multiperspectival discourse analysis. Dr Waller-Carr's research, demonstrates that from the perspective of CSOs, WPS is a transformative feminist project aimed at challenging and changing the systems and structures of power that drive conflict and insecurity. Taken together, this research demonstrates the important role of CSOs and WROs in working for peace and security that must not be overlooked by decision makers and power holders in the WPS ecosystem and highlights that action taken, including by actors like the UK Government, must also be guided by them.

## 2.1 Holistic And Structural Approaches To Security

The work and understanding of WPS articulated by CSOs engaged in Dr Waller-Carr's research and Women for Women International's consultations demonstrate how the WPS framework can reshape who gets to define peace and security, enabling more holistic responses to violence and insecurity. For example, a WPS practitioner from Uganda explained in a research paper by WILPF on civil society reflections on WPS analysed, "there [are] other forms of conflicts that are always ignored, yet pose a great effect to women [such as] poverty and socio-economic deprivation; weak state structures; historical factors, such as divisive colonial policies; human rights abuses; proliferation of small arms;

and poor governance”.<sup>4</sup> These historical factors play a key role in creating insecurity and driving conflict and violence.

This is particularly relevant to how conflicts are understood and therefore responded to. An approach to security that centres human security, as expressed and implemented by CSOs identified in Dr Waller-Carr’s research, challenges traditional militarised notions of state security and takes a people-centred approach that addresses everyday insecurities. Gender security expands this further, considering gendered elements of power relations and situating gender inequality as central to driving structural violence. This understanding of security calls for a shift the relations of power between the state and conflict-affected communities, necessitating that security be built from the ground up.

Data from the *From Asking to Action* consultation further illustrates this point: when asked to identify barriers to improving their quality of life, women most frequently cited food insecurity (52%), loss of economic opportunities (57%) and war, conflict and insecurity (60%). Health (32%) and violence against women (31%) were also identified showing how their security concerns cut across economic, social, and protection needs. These priorities illustrate how women’s own definitions of “real security” extend far beyond the absence of armed conflict, underscoring the transformative potential of women’s participation in shaping security agendas.

The centrality of addressing marginalised gendered experiences of security was also evident in Dr Waller-Carr’s research, for example, in a project by a gender equality organisation in Lebanon, framed under WPS, which built an archive of oral histories about the war from women’s perspectives. CSO practitioners explained that, at first, the project was challenging,

*Because the main narrative of the war is the men’s narrative, they focus on the battles, on these kind of events... political, security and armed events...so, when we started working with those women they were always coming back to those events, and it was really challenging to tell them no, talk about your daily life, your daily struggle and fights (Practitioner, Lebanon gender equality organisation 2, interview, May 2022).*

By centring the experiences and daily struggles of women during conflict, this CSO conceptualises their gendered experiences of insecurity or security as legitimate to the understanding of conflict, and therefore, as something that must be addressed.

Understanding and tackling the gendered root causes and drivers of conflict through a holistic approach was communicated as a priority in the WPS work of many of the CSOs engaged in Dr Waller-

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<sup>4</sup> Documents reviewed as part of Dr Waller - Carr’s research (Published document, Research Report, WILPF, 2020, pg.15).

Carr's research and Women for Women International's consultations. Some of these organisations framed this approach in professional or academic terms, while others demonstrated this commitment through the types of work they undertook such as responding to GBV, economic empowerment and democratic participation in their work on peace and security. Central to this work was a recognition of the vital role that networks and movements play in advancing collective peace and security. Civil society actors and WROs frequently adopt approaches to WPS and inclusive peacebuilding that are holistic, participatory and rooted in local contexts. This reflects an awareness of the diverse experiences and needs of women and girls, as well as an understanding that strong civil society engagement and socio-political mobilisation are critical to advancing gender equality, sustaining peace and security, and supporting the full implementation of the WPS agenda across all four pillars.

For example, during Women for Women International's consultations, one CSO in Burkina Faso, the Association pour la Promotion Féminine de Gaoua (APFG), highlighted its work at the intersection of harmful gender norms and the weakening of institutions and legal frameworks as a result of conflict. APFG facilitates dialogues between men and women to shift mindsets on priority issues identified by women and girls themselves, including girls' rights to education and women's land ownership. In addition to cultivating male allies, the organisation provides technical support to the justice system and other institutions to strengthen accountability for GBV cases.

Working collectively, APFG recognises that it can achieve greater and more sustainable impact than individual organisations acting alone. To this end, APFG has helped to establish and lead a regional network, the West African Network of Associations and NGOs Fighting Gender-Based Violence, comprising 12 organisations across five West African countries, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mali, Senegal and Burkina Faso. By addressing the root causes of structural inequalities, including the prevalence of GBV, APFG centres human security within its holistic approach to long-term peace – violence prevention cannot be separated from broader conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

The WPS resolutions themselves are absent of language addressing structural inequalities and gendered exclusions.<sup>16</sup> However, many CSOs, like APFG, emphasise the need to address root causes and structural inequality in order to achieve peace and security. In a discussion with a grassroots feminist organisation in Lebanon in Dr Waller-Carr's research, for example, they explained that it is necessary to fight the patriarchal system through both legal reform and social norms change to achieve peace and security in Lebanon (Practitioner, Lebanon grassroots feminist organisation, informal interview, June 2022).

WPS is used as a framework by CSOs for advocacy and networking to connect to other international frameworks and approaches to ensure the connection between conflict prevention, socioeconomic

conditions, underlying insecurity and human rights are central in peace and security activities. The connectivity of these different frameworks and the essential nature of using them together to achieve change was captured in Dr Waller-Carr's research in an analogy shared during an interview with a staff member at a peacebuilding organisation in Lebanon, where they explained each of the different frameworks they use as parts of a body, and needing all of them to work together in order to move forward, "It's as if you are having to move, and you need both of your legs and your hands to move, and WPS is one, even the YPS (Youth, Peace and Security) is the other, and maybe the sustaining peace is the body, so you cannot move without these agendas. And it's not that these are agendas, but these are really tools for us to move forward, to utilise (Practitioner, Lebanon peacebuilding organisation, interview, June 2022)."

In many CSOs' understanding of WPS, human rights are situated as core to its creation, embedded in its histories, and therefore central to how it should be understood and implemented. Human rights are conceptualised as a baseline commitment within the agenda, meaning they are fundamental and must be upheld by all actors. They are also universal and indivisible, meaning that they are applied to all individuals and that all rights are equally important and interconnected. CSOs' approaches that connect WPS to human rights provide the opportunity to "tackl[e] structural economic, social and political inequalities, multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, and the causes of systemic marginalisation."<sup>17</sup>

Understanding security through a human and gender security lens – and with a rights-based framing within WPS - means that the dominant ways of 'doing' security and 'doing' WPS from the top-down can and should be challenged. This lens shifts the focus away from state-centred, militarised understandings of security and instead prioritises the everyday insecurities that shape people's lives. In framing and engaging with WPS through this human and gender security lens, CSOs are explicitly challenging approaches that prioritise military responses, or high-level political processes, and are instead opening up space for the types of security understood as essential to sustaining peace. These spaces — centred on protection, access to services, participation, rights, and freedom from violence — are increasingly shrinking in the current context of funding cuts and gender rollback.

## **2.2 Gender Responsive And Transformative Approaches**

Many CSOs have also adopted a gender transformative approach to peace and security as it enables a more inclusive and representative approach, which responds to and aims to change the root cause of gender inequality, through changes to structures, systems and norms. In the work of the CSOs engaged in Dr Waller-Carr's research and Women for Women International's consultations, this included

widening WPS to encompass issues such as sexual orientation and gender identity and expression (SOGIE), men and masculinities, and the gendered drivers of conflict. In Dr Waller – Carr's research, many CSOs highlighted the benefits and opportunities that WPS enabled in promoting and bringing attention to the situation of women and wider gender inequality in conflict-affected contexts, using WPS as a mechanism that served to enable “a deeper understanding of the different roles, experiences and perspectives of different women and men interacting with the conflict dynamics”.<sup>5</sup>

This approach was evident in a project analysed in Dr Waller-Carr's research delivered by the peacebuilding INGO International Alert in Lebanon, framed under the WPS agenda. The project aimed to address socially constructed gendered identities and norms, as well as their interactions with conflict and post-conflict dynamics, through women-led community peacebuilding initiatives. Part of the project involved increasing women's understanding of societies' gendered roles and relations, their influence on societies' propensity for violent conflict, and how these roles and relations are shaped by violent conflict. It also aimed to understand how these dynamics present an opportunity for transformative change in addressing gender inequality and conflict. The interventions of the project positioned women as peacebuilders in their communities and the transformation of gender inequality as a tool for conflict prevention and peacebuilding therefore resulting in increased local, national and regional stability.<sup>6</sup>

This project pushed the application of WPS to go beyond the gendered assumptions of women as peacebuilders and invites the interrogation of gendered norms and dynamics and how they inform conflict and conflict prevention. A gender transformative approach to WPS then also becomes a conflict prevention strategy, supporting stability and security.

A significant area shaping CSOs' conceptualisation of WPS is their engagement with Sexual Orientation Gender Identity and Expression (SOGIE) and what this means for who and what is included in WPS. Dr Waller – Carr found that despite minimal engagement with SOGIE in the institutional spaces of WPS, there is a growing focus on this topic in CSO advocacy and activities to ensure gender transformative approaches to peace, security and humanitarian work respond to the diverse needs and experiences of those with diverse SOGIE. For example, an organisation focusing on SOGIE and LGBTQIA+ rights in Lebanon identified that lesbian, trans, bisexual, and queer (LTBQ) women were particularly marginalised from different aspects of peace and security work. The organisation's works to make these women visible and explore their experienced impacts of conflict in order to open the boundaries

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<sup>5</sup> Documents reviewed as part of Dr Waller-Carr's research (Published Document, Research Report, International Alert Lebanon, 2022, pg. 8).

<sup>6</sup> Documents reviewed as part of Dr Waller-Carr's research (Published Document, Research Report, International Alert Lebanon, 2022).

of who gets seen or who gets to count in the WPS agenda, thus broadening the types of issues addressed through WPS and the types of responses required (Practitioner, Lebanon SOGIE/LGBTQIA+ organisation, informal interview, May 2022). Through shaping WPS to take a more inclusive and representative approach CSOs are enabling WPS to respond root cause of gender inequality and the drivers of insecurity and conflict.

### 3. Exclusions Of Civil Society Actors

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Despite the benefits of CSOs' engagement with the WPS policy ecosystem in effectively responding to the drivers and impacts of conflict and insecurity, CSOs are systematically and structurally excluded from WPS policy and practice. As one Ukrainian woman *From Asking to Action* consultation participant shared: "We need to be part of the solution. We know what we need better than anyone else". Yet their expertise is often side lined in formal decision-making spaces, the meagre funding for WLOs is dwindling further amid aid cuts and shifting funding priorities to militarised conflict response, and the combination of closing civic space and growing anti-gender backlash render their participation increasingly unsafe.

#### 3.1 Expertise And Legitimacy

A key area of exclusion for CSOs is the construction of expertise and legitimacy, ultimately who is seen as a legitimate knowledge holder, who is constructed as 'doing WPS,' who is a recipient of WPS, and who is 'allowed' to participate in certain spaces. These understandings directly impact where, how and what kind of interventions CSOs can undertake.

The home of WPS is predominantly associated with the global level, the 'Global North,' and state-based actors, "whereas 'civil society is often imagined as coming 'from below.'"<sup>18</sup> CSOs are often constructed as localised actors, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS), with expertise rooted in specific and contextual knowledge. CSOs are seen by state-based actors as 'doing the work' and having an in-depth understanding of what is happening at the local level. However, because they are in the 'local', they are not seen as setting the priorities and making decisions about WPS. In interviews with donors in Dr Waller- Carr's research, for example, the connection with and expertise of civil society were framed as a means of responding to and working on the priorities of the state-based actor. In the UK, the interviewee stated that CSOs "help us make the link between what's happening on the ground and what we are trying to achieve" (Staff member, UK Government, Interview, Nov 2022), and the UN interviewee in Lebanon stated that they work with civil society "in order to reach our objectives" (Staff Member, UN Agency Lebanon, interview, June 2022).

CSOs are therefore situated within the WPS ecosystem as ‘local actors’ to implement the work of ‘global actors’ such as ‘Global North’ donors and UN agencies. This situates state-based actors as setting the agenda and priorities of WPS and being the ‘home’ of WPS. Where CSOs are seen as having useful knowledge to share, or extract, they are, however, often systematically excluded from global governance systems and dialogues, nor set the agenda for WPS in their own communities and countries.

This dynamic is evident in the reconstruction process unfolding in Palestine, where CSOs continue to be excluded from high-level discussions on peace and security despite their expertise and capacity for frontline response. During the *From Asking to Action* consultation, the Gazan CSO Wafaq shared their ongoing efforts to support women’s participation in decision-making even as they continue to operate in near-impossible conditions, displacement, and severe constraints. Staff members are themselves displaced, yet they continue to deliver services. They have lived experience of the conflict and of responding to the conflict by supporting fellow Palestinians, including women and girls, and yet the global peace and reconstruction process will exclude them and actors like them from decision-making about Gaza’s future.

Even under occupation, blockade and intense bombardment WROs are articulating visions for peace, justice, and recovery - from mental health initiatives to legal redress, from education to the reintegration of displaced families. However, their ability to function and participate is severely hampered by reduced funding for their work and participation, a lack of international coordination among donors, UN agencies, and humanitarian actors, which undermines coherent support and protection, and by limited humanitarian access due to the blockade and ongoing occupation.

This can be seen not just in relief and recovery efforts but also in the structures of many ‘international events’ where Dr Waller – Carr’s research observes that state-based actors first set the scene or discuss the global themes of WPS, INGOs then connect the ‘global’ to the ‘local’ and then ‘local’ CSOs and peacebuilders share their experiences ‘on the ground.’ This formula, seen again and again, produces unequal power dynamics and hierarchies of knowledge within these spaces, reflecting the wider WPS ecosystem. CSOs participating in these spaces are only deemed experts and given the space to participate if they accept to function within these existing structures and are able to speak the languages of the ‘international community’, both literally and conceptually, and keep their interventions in line with UN norms and expectations.

In 2025, we saw a marked decline in CSO access to WPS spaces, partly because expertise now intersects with political risk in ways that disproportionately affect Global South actors.<sup>19</sup> Many CSO experts cannot safely travel to the US, and therefore cannot enter the UNSC headquartered in New York City,

as doing so carries real personal and organisational risks. These risks include a more hostile US immigration environment, with cases reported of deportations, visa cancellations, and increased scrutiny.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, if they are able to navigate the immigration landscape and appear at the UNSC, that public participation can expose them to backlash at home. Advocating for gender-transformative approaches often leads to online defamation campaigns, increased government or security surveillance, or political pressure on their organisations. While Global North actors are now also beginning to experience elements of this backlash, the scale, frequency, and consequences remain markedly different. For many Global South CSOs, participation involves material risks, including threats to organisational survival, personal safety, and freedom of movement, that actors from the Global North typically do not encounter.

In her research Dr Waller-Carr found that for CSOs it was necessary to present a particular version of their politics (or not present themselves as political at all) in order to access decision-making spaces. As explained in research analysed on civil society briefers at the UNSC by the NGO Working Group on WPS:

*“UNSC members are often reluctant to invite briefers they consider to be ‘controversial’ or who will cost them political capital to invite. In some cases, UNSC members will go so far as to identify women civil society who will align with their own national views, compromising on independent civil society voices”.*<sup>7</sup>

This depoliticisation of CSOs’ work directly impacts the approaches they take, as they must sanitise their language and work to become amenable to participate in spaces such as the UNSC, thereby gaining access to such spaces of power.<sup>21</sup> This, therefore, stifles their potential to challenge the hierarchies of the WPS ecosystem and to present more transformative approaches to WPS.

## 3.2 Funding

Whilst inequitable approaches to expertise and legitimacy exclude civil society actors from defining and leading on the WPS Agenda, it is the mass retreat of funding for local WPS programmes that has narrowed CSO capacity to transform the WPS Agenda into a co-created conflict prevention framework focussed on addressing root causes of gender inequality. These challenges are now compounded by a funding environment that sets the terms, priorities and hierarchies through which CSOs participate. In parallel, the UK is increasing defence outlays - committing to reach at least 2.5% of GDP on defence

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<sup>7</sup> Documents reviewed as part of Dr Waller-Carr’s research (Public document, Research Report, NGOWG et al. 2020, pg. 22).

from 2027.<sup>22</sup> In 2026, the current WPS funding climate continues to be shaped by the prioritisation of militarised security over long-term conflict prevention and the promotion of gender equality. In March 2026 the Foreign Secretary set out how a reduced budget will be put into operation through new international development reforms. And whilst women and girls have been recognised as a strategic priority for the government, the commitments come within the context of a significantly reduced overall ODA budget.<sup>23</sup> This risks limiting the scale and reach of gender equality programming in practice and is particularly concerning because reductions to country-level allocations risk limiting support to locally-led women's rights organisations. This risk is heightened by the fact that as of March 2026 programme-level funding decisions have yet to be confirmed, leaving uncertainty around support to locally-led women's rights organisations.<sup>24</sup>

The International Development Committee's report on WPS has highlighted the impact of persistent concerns civil society actors have shared about the Government's ability to translate WPS commitments into concrete outcomes and to effectively implement the objectives of the NAP.<sup>25</sup> Ambition without resourcing for delivery risks undermining the credibility and impact of the agenda itself. Independent scrutiny and sector analyses document material contractions in funding for CSOs and WROs and warn of reputational damage to the UK's leadership on gender equality and peacebuilding.<sup>26</sup> When insecurity rises, the solution is not to invest further in militarised approaches at the expense of addressing its root causes.<sup>27</sup>

Through Dr Waller – Carr's analysis of CSOs' experiences navigating the funding system, it was evident that the restrictive nature of donor funding structures and conceptual approaches to WPS set the agenda for what kind of work should be carried out, where, and for what is understood as part of WPS. As explained frankly in an informal discussion with a staff member at a SOGIE organisation in Lebanon, 'funding often comes for a specific purpose, and you find the organisation shifting their focus or work specifically to that funding purpose just to sustain themselves' (Practitioner, SOGIE/LGBTQIA+ organisation, informal interview, May 2022). CSOs then are forced to either repackage their already existing work as WPS or change their work in order to access increasingly scarce funding and sustain themselves. Donor framings of WPS rarely challenge the institutional and hegemonic power structures that reproduce hierarchies and inequalities. As a result, these approaches can reinforce insecurity rather than address its root causes.

Through *From Asking to Action* Women for Women International heard very clearly from women that there is a critical need for flexible and direct funding for WROs. There is also a need for programmes that address barriers to women's participation at all levels of decision-making. Only 39% of the women consulted through *From Asking to Action* reported having received some form of relief and recovery

assistance, with the top types of support accessed being food and supplies, healthcare and cash. While these forms of humanitarian assistance are essential, the way funding is structured for CSOs often reinforces their exclusion from WPS governance. When response is focussed on short-term relief rather than to engage in advocacy, policy influence, or long-term conflict prevention, CSOs are positioned as implementers rather than strategic actors. This limits their ability to participate meaningfully in shaping WPS priorities and denies them the resources required to contribute to, design and lead on the transformative aspects of the WPS Agenda.

Therefore, when we unravel the web of funding within WPS architecture and the consequences that funding cuts have for the inclusion of WPS actors and the type of work CSOs can undertake within the WPS agenda, it is vital to contextualise both the significant reversal in funding commitments for longer-term gender, peace and security programmes, and the dominance of short-term humanitarian programmes that focus on food relief, health and sanitation at the expense of strengthening civic space, technical capacity in national decision-making processes and opportunities for co-creation in WPS programme design.

This trend emerged clearly within the *From Asking to Action* consultation. Women for Women International asked women if they had accessed any form of relief and recovery. 61% of the 6,500 women engaged in the consultation had never accessed relief and recovery efforts. For the 39% of women who reported accessing relief and recovery assistance, the types of support they accessed were food and supplies (41%), healthcare (25%), and cash (24%). When asked about the specific needs of women in their communities, the responses did not align with the services being provided. Women articulated a need for education and skills training (65%), economic empowerment programmes (65%), access to comprehensive health services (57%) and access to trauma counselling and psychological support (56%).

These women have been clear: when insecurity rises, there must be investment in solutions that promote stability, rights and recovery. These findings emphasise two points when it comes to the exclusion of CSOs in WPS. Firstly, the hierarchy through which limited funding is prescribed as a means to short-term recovery. Secondly, it highlights that women living in conflict contexts know what their communities need and are well positioned to provide holistic support for longer-term conflict prevention that addresses gender inequality as a root cause and driver of conflict.

### **3.3 Safety And Repercussions**

This funding deficit is unfolding alongside a broader retreat from multilateralism and the rise of authoritarian and isolationist ideologies, which further exclude civil society organisations and their

allies from decision-making processes both within and beyond the WPS architecture. Feminist movements, coalitions and networks are increasingly facing backlash for their efforts to advance gender equality and human rights. Despite rhetorical support for women's leadership in peace and security, political will to enact transformative change remains limited. Women in conflict-affected contexts continue to be excluded from decision-making spaces, and their expertise is too often undervalued or ignored.

Data illustrates this growing exclusion. In 2021, a record 62 women civil-society representatives briefed the Security Council. As of October 2025, only 20 have done so in 2025,<sup>28</sup> less than half of 2024's total, reflecting rising reprisals, surveillance and intimidation. When women are targeted, it is not only their voices that are silenced; entire networks that prevent violence, deliver essential services and hold communities together are undermined. This has direct impacts on individual, community, regional and national security, the impact of reducing support and space for women-led organisations and civil society should not be underestimated. Behind these numbers are real women whose work is critical but can come at enormous personal cost. Managing these risks is essential, but it must never mean curbing women's independence or censoring their views. A zero-tolerance approach to reprisals does not eliminate risk. It requires taking responsibility for preventing, addressing and responding to threats through sustained political and financial investment.

During Women for Women International's *From Asking to Action* consultation, 82% of women said they cannot move freely or safely within their own communities. This individual vulnerability mirrors the challenges faced by CSOs like the South Sudanese Root of Generations (RoG), which shared the intimidation and threats they face as an organisation supporting women's rights:

*"There are a lot of bureaucratic barriers to get approval to conduct [a] meeting. It takes forever, and once it is approved, you are told that in that meeting, they will send a person in to listen to what you are discussing. If any discussion is not accepted, I would end up being held [by government]"*.

RoG's work is long-term, whole-of-community, and aimed at dismantling the root causes and institutional challenges preventing women from realising their rights. But it is not without its challenges. Intimidation and harassment by government and security agencies challenges the advocacy work of the women supported by RoG. This is why safe spaces are central to RoG's approach for overcoming some of these barriers to women's meaningful participation and for supporting and empowering youth, gender-based violence (GBV) survivors, and socio-economically vulnerable women and populations. Spaces are created specifically for women to come together, discuss issues important in their daily lives, and build the necessary confidence to lift up their voices in society. Women also use the safe spaces as an advocacy venue where they identify one issue and advocate for it to the

leadership at the state level, local level, and the national government level. The women's ability to connect with each other in these spaces and determine their own priorities has led them to conduct unified campaigns and briefings to state parliamentary bodies as representatives of the recommendations of women from their communities.

Civil society actors like RoG are excluded from WPS architecture when their demands for protection due to fears of reprisals come at the cost of exclusion from decision-making. Their experience highlights the careful navigation required to balance the inclusion of women in decision-making spaces with the management of personal and organisational risk. This trend was mirrored across many of the countries where Women for Women International conducted consultations, where one of the most pronounced examples was Iraq. Within Iraq, Women for Women International heard from 306 individual women, when asked whether they had participated in efforts to prevent violence against women, 65% of respondents said that neither they nor anyone they knew had been involved. Women identified the following major challenges facing those who engage in prevention efforts:

- a lack of community or family support (76%)
- stigma against women who speak out (76%)
- fear of retaliation (67%)

The pervasive climate of fear intensifies exclusion in prevention efforts, affecting both women and WROs, where fear, intertwined with surveillance and the conditional provision of protection, functions as a means of marginalisation. The risks and repercussions for women and civil society actors working on gender equality, peace and security are only increasing in the context of rollbacks on rights, shrinking civic space and increased conflict and insecurity.

These examples from South Sudan and Iraq interlink with one of the core calls within the *From Asking to Action* consultation that demands the wider donor community to “commit to safeguarding practices and protection for women who do participate, but ensure that women's protection is not utilised as a means of excluding women from participating.”

### **3.4 The Cost Of These Exclusions**

As demonstrated, when CSOs are not recognised as experts, when funding is cut, and safety risks for frontline providers increase, CSOs are excluded from an agenda that they built and from decisions that affect their lives because they face barriers to participation or do not feel safe to participate in shaping and implementing WPS. Over the course of 2025, funding cuts disproportionately affected the very services women identified as priorities for investment in *From Asking to Action* - legal aid, counselling,

and safe spaces. These services are often the first to disappear, yet they are essential for recovery, access to justice, and meaningful participation.

When CSOs are excluded, contextually informed perspectives reflective of the realities of insecurity are not taken into consideration in decision-making, and interventions are unlikely to take an approach that addresses the root causes of growing insecurity and instability. This will contribute to increased violence and insecurity at the individual, community, state and international level. When civil society is weakened, and rights and security are under threat, this opens space for maligned state actors to increase instability and contribute to conflict and creates a vacuum of accountability for state and non-state actors' actions, which contributes to the erosion of the international rules-based order.

When contextualising the exclusion of CSOs from WPS architecture, it is vital to recognise that these cuts are not merely financial decisions; they are political choices that determine who can access justice, who gets to build peace, and whose voices are heard. The consequences of these exclusions for peace, security and stability are dire.

For the UK, these dynamics signal a strategic risk: without sustained civic space, flexible funding, and safe participation for local women's organisations, the UK's stated leadership on WPS will be harder to realise in practice, and less credible internationally, and threats to international stability and UK security will be likely to increase.

## 4. Recommendations

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The UK and international community must reaffirm the role of civil society as a peace and resilience actor and a key strategic partner in delivering the WPS agenda and ensuring stability and security. To do so, civic space must be protected in rhetoric and practice, sustainable funding based on CSOs self-defined priorities must be maintained, and threats to civic actors and human rights defenders must be comprehensively responded to.

The forthcoming refresh of the UK's 5th National Action Plan offers an important opportunity to reinforce commitments to include CSOs as strategic partners, ensuring that meaningful consultation practices are consistently implemented in decision-making spaces and support for civil societies holistic interpretation of WPS through implementation is maintained.

## 4.1 Protect Civic Space And Counter Backlash

To safeguard the voices, expertise and leadership of civil society actors - particularly those in conflict-affected settings – the UK Government should:

- **Strengthen language and commitments on international norms** that protect freedom of association, expression and assembly, especially in multilateral forums where civic space is shrinking.
- **Reassert civil society participation as a core pillar of international diplomacy and security**, ensuring that participation avenues for civil society (e.g. as briefers to the UN, as co-partners in delivering side events) are maintained and funded.
- **Develop coordinated early-warning mechanisms**, including attention to online spaces, to monitor shrinking civic space, reprisals, and anti-gender attacks, and use diplomatic channels to respond proactively.
- **Commit to safeguarding practices** and protection for women who do participate but ensure that women's protection is not utilised as a justification for excluding women from participating.
- **Reassert civil society participation as integral to diplomacy and security**, ensuring opportunities for CSOs to engage across policy processes (e.g., briefings, consultations, agenda-setting dialogues) are protected and resourced.
- **Coordinate with local partners** in national contexts, helping to protect women human rights defenders and their networks through conflict-sensitive political backing and sustained human rights and civic spaced focused programming.
- **Platform, evidence and promote the best practice approaches of CSOs in shaping and implementing WPS** to demonstrate and build evidence for the essential role of civil society in maintaining peace, resilience and security.

## 4.2 Protect Funding

Sustainable peacebuilding and gender-responsive conflict prevention require predictable, core, long-term and flexible funding for women's rights organisations and CSOs. As a donor, and in coordination with the wider donor community the UK Government should:

- **Increase flexible, multi-year and direct funding** to civil society organisations, particularly women's rights organisations, enabling them to engage in long-term conflict prevention, advocacy, and accountability work rather than being confined to short-term service delivery roles.

- **Use gender analysis and human security framing** to guide relief and recovery programming so that interventions reach marginalised women and address the structural drivers of insecurity they identify (food insecurity, loss of livelihood, VAWG, access to services)
- **Resource holistic services as part of recovery**, including education and skills training, digital literacy, economic empowerment, trauma counselling, psychosocial support and safe spaces. These services are consistently prioritised by women but are the first to be cut under crisis-driven funding decisions.
- **Avoid funding structures that push CSOs to repackage or dilute their core work** to match donor priorities, and instead align investments with CSOs expertise, strategies and definitions of security.
- **Promote coordination among donors, UN agencies and humanitarian actors**, reducing competition and contradictory requirements, and improving coherence across humanitarian, development and peacebuilding support — particularly in protracted crises.

### 4.3 Prevent, Address And Respond To Threats

To address the growing risks facing women peacebuilders and civil society leaders the UK

Government should:

- **Monitor and report threats and reprisals** against civil society actors, including technology-facilitated GBV, surveillance and harassment, using diplomatic channels and multilateral mechanisms to raise concerns and seek accountability.
- **Establish and uphold safe spaces** — both physical and digital — for women activists and WROs to meet, organise and speak openly, recognising these as essential components of meaningful participation.
- **Resource civil society participation in violence and conflict prevention**, including training, local mediating structures, networks and community-led early warning systems — recognising CSOs' unique role in identifying and responding to root causes of conflict.
- **Invest in safer digital and online spaces**, including cybersecurity training, secure communications tools and responses to online harassment, to ensure that digital participation does not become another arena of exclusion.
- **Strengthen political backing and protection for WHRDs and frontline peacebuilders**, ensuring that support extends beyond individual events and includes follow-up, rapid response and coordinated approaches with international partners.

## 5. Endnotes

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<sup>4</sup> See UK WPS NAP 2023-2027, pg. 32:<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-women-peace-and-security-national-action-plan-2023-to-2027>

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