



Keeping gender on the agenda:

Navigating resistance to
WPS in multilateral fora



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About the Gender in Multilateral Negotiations project

The project “Gender in Multilateral Negotiations” aims to provide practical guidance to diplomats and practitioners on how to recognize and address challenges and differing perspectives related to gender equality and the WPS agenda in multilateral settings. It seeks not only to document obstacles that hinder progress, but also to identify constructive strategies, tools, and language to advance WPS commitments, including through a facilitated expert dialogue.

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About DCAF

DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance is dedicated to improving the security of states and their people within a framework of democratic governance, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and gender equality. Since its founding in 2000, DCAF has contributed to making peace and development more sustainable by assisting partner states, and international actors supporting these states, to improve the governance of their security sector through inclusive and participatory reforms. It creates innovative knowledge products, promotes norms and good practices, provides legal and policy advice, and supports capacity-building of both state and non-state security sector stakeholders.

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List of abbreviations

CCW	Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CR-SGBV	Conflict-Related Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
CSO	Civil Society Organization
CSW	Commission on the Status of Women
DCAF	Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance
DVB	Security Policy Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands
ECOSOC	United Nations Economic and Social Council
GBV	Gender-based Violence
HRC	Human Rights Council
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
IGC	International Gender Champions
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and other sexual orientations and gender identities and expressions
NAP	National Action Plan
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-based Violence
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
SSG/R	Security Sector Governance/Reform
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
WPS	Women, Peace and Security

Executive summary

Security Sector Governance (SSG) refers to the structures, processes, values, and attitudes that shape decisions about security and their implementation. Security Sector Reform (SSR) aims to enhance SSG through the effective and efficient delivery of security under conditions of democratic oversight and control.



*** In this policy brief, the terms “resistance” and “backlash” are used interchangeably to underline the various tactics used to roll back gender equality policies and work.**

Resistance* to gender equality and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda is no longer a marginal challenge in multilateral negotiations. It has instead become sustained, strategic, and increasingly sophisticated, targeting the very mechanisms through which Security Sector Governance and Reform (SSG/R) is negotiated and implemented: language, procedures, funding streams, and participation. At a moment when armed conflict is increasing in scale and intensity causing immense challenges in the protection of civilians, when displacement is at record levels, and when diplomacy and prevention are under-resourced, the space for gender-responsive approaches is narrowing precisely when they are most urgently needed. At the same time, the multilateral system itself is under strain. Hard state-centric security logics are ascendant; civic space is shrinking; and well-organized, well-resourced anti-gender networks are investing heavily to contest gender equality norms and multilateralism through security debates.

Drawing on findings from interviews with senior leadership, an extensive diplomatic consultation process, desk-based research, and expert input, this policy brief provides a practice-informed analysis of how resistance to gender equality and WPS is part of wider power struggles and manifests in multilateral environments, as well as discussing the impact of this resistance on the credibility, effectiveness, and future of peace and security governance. It shows that opposition rarely takes a singular form. Rather, it shows that resistance is complex and can be both outright and subtle, normative, procedural, and material. These various forms and levels of resistance compound each other, ultimately hollowing out commitments while preserving the appearance of political support.

The costs of these challenges are significant: defensive negotiations, gender fatigue, shrinking coalitions, and repeated trade-offs that, over time, produce long-term normative erosion. For societies at large, the impacts are considerable: they worsen power unbalance and systemic inequalities, undermine the possibilities for sustainable peace, and erode the accountability and public trust in national and multilateral political systems. Responding effectively to this environment therefore requires more than reaffirming commitments.

This policy brief is intended for diplomats and practitioners engaged in SSG/R and multilateral processes, including those based in Geneva as well as delegations across New York and other multilateral environments, and for institutional actors supporting the implementation of the WPS agenda, including ministries of foreign affairs and organizations working on security sector governance. It offers practical guidance for navigating contested processes and strengthening gender equality commitments under pressure. It is organized around four objectives: promoting gender-responsive norms, strengthening inclusive processes, building inclusive institutional infrastructure, and accelerating meaningful participation. It also supports a shift from reactive defence to strategic preparedness, helping users safeguard hard-won gains, anticipate pushback, and build broader alliances in an increasingly polarized landscape.



NA



Introduction



These dynamics are unfolding against a backdrop of shifting geopolitical priorities, rising militarization, and increasing contestation of multilateral norms.

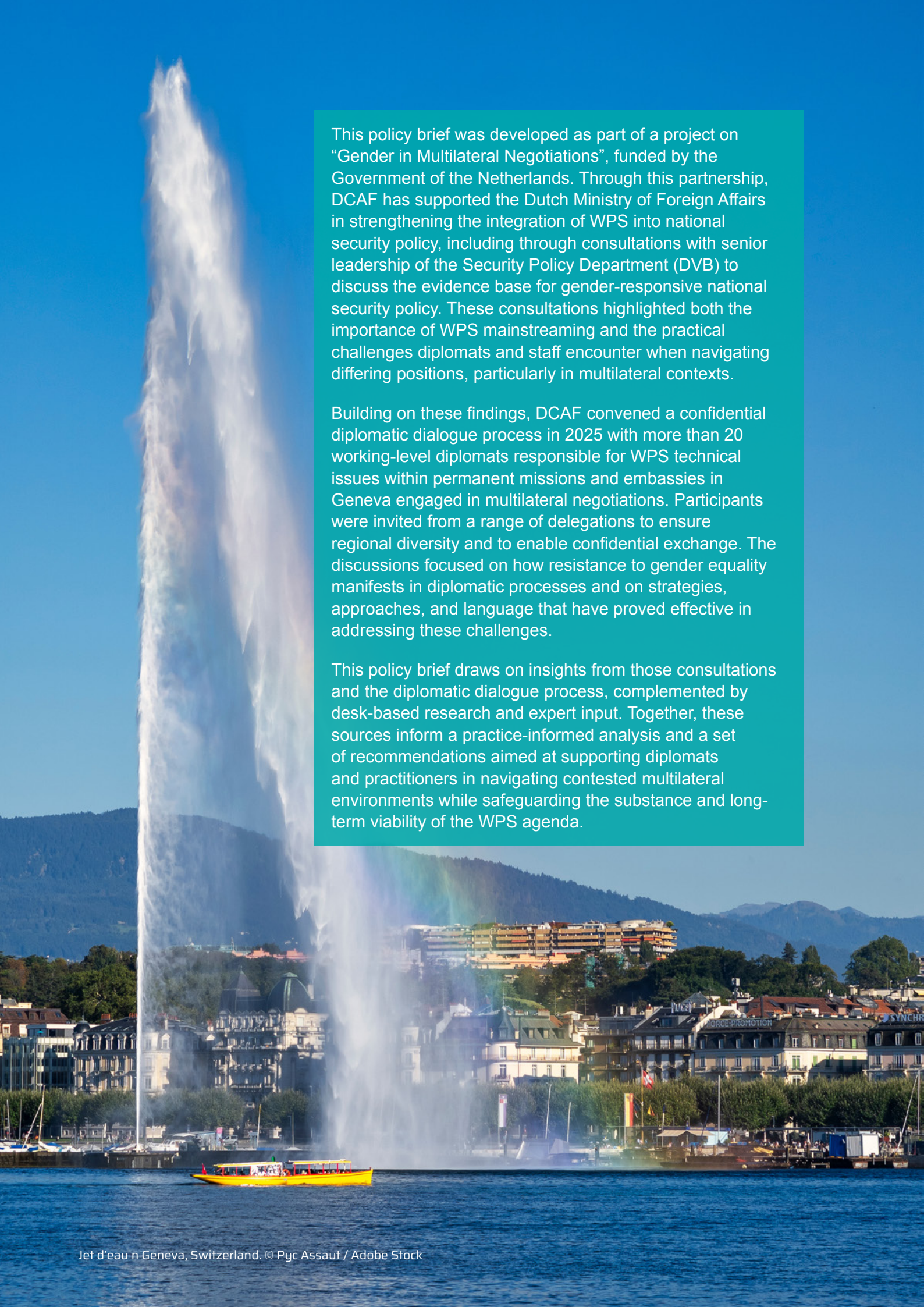
In recent years, resistance to gender equality and the WPS agenda has intensified across multilateral peace and security spaces, revealing deep systemic power struggles. These dynamics are unfolding against a backdrop of shifting geopolitical priorities, rising militarization, and increasing contestation of multilateral norms. Understanding how such dynamics shape diplomatic negotiations and institutional practices has become increasingly important for practitioners seeking to develop and advance gender-responsive approaches to peace and security.

Although existing research has documented many of these dynamics, there remains limited practice-oriented guidance on how to effectively navigate resistance in real time within multilateral environments. This policy brief addresses that gap by examining how resistance manifests across language, procedures, institutional arrangements, and participation, and by identifying practical strategies that can support diplomats and practitioners, particularly in protecting and advancing WPS commitments in complex multilateral environments.

This policy brief takes International Geneva as a starting point, broadening to other multilateral environments where parallel trends have been observed. Contestations are particularly salient in Geneva-based institutions. As a hub where norms are translated into operational guidance, funding decisions, and institutional mandates, International Geneva occupies a critical position where discussions related to human rights, humanitarian action, disarmament, labour, health, and technology increasingly intersect with WPS objectives.

DCAF's location and networks in International Geneva, combined with its mandate to promote gender equality as a core principle of SSG/R, places the organization in a key position to analyse how resistance to gender equality shapes security institutions and multilateral security governance. Through this work, DCAF seeks to support more coordinated and diplomatic engagement, policy development, and practical implementation of gender-responsive approaches to security.

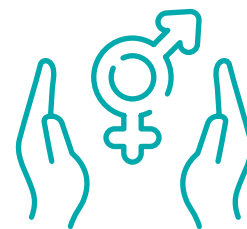




This policy brief was developed as part of a project on “Gender in Multilateral Negotiations”, funded by the Government of the Netherlands. Through this partnership, DCAF has supported the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs in strengthening the integration of WPS into national security policy, including through consultations with senior leadership of the Security Policy Department (DVB) to discuss the evidence base for gender-responsive national security policy. These consultations highlighted both the importance of WPS mainstreaming and the practical challenges diplomats and staff encounter when navigating differing positions, particularly in multilateral contexts.

Building on these findings, DCAF convened a confidential diplomatic dialogue process in 2025 with more than 20 working-level diplomats responsible for WPS technical issues within permanent missions and embassies in Geneva engaged in multilateral negotiations. Participants were invited from a range of delegations to ensure regional diversity and to enable confidential exchange. The discussions focused on how resistance to gender equality manifests in diplomatic processes and on strategies, approaches, and language that have proved effective in addressing these challenges.

This policy brief draws on insights from those consultations and the diplomatic dialogue process, complemented by desk-based research and expert input. Together, these sources inform a practice-informed analysis and a set of recommendations aimed at supporting diplomats and practitioners in navigating contested multilateral environments while safeguarding the substance and long-term viability of the WPS agenda.



Gender and security in a changing global landscape

Established through United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 in 2000, the WPS agenda was envisioned as a transformative framework: one that was to challenge militarized understandings of security; elevate prevention of conflict by addressing the root causes of violence; favour non-violent forms of conflict resolution, including by promoting women's participation; as well as recognizing women's essential role in sustainable peace and security and the differential impacts of conflict on women and girls. The agenda had emerged from continued advocacy by female peacebuilders and activists across diverse contexts and was rooted in practice and then codified in multilateral norms.

Today, more than 25 years after the adoption of UNSCR 1325, the WPS agenda has generated significant normative, institutional, and policy advances. UNSCR 1325 established a comprehensive framework across the four pillars of participation, protection, prevention, relief, and recovery, calling for the integration of gender perspectives across peace and security work. Since 2000, the Security Council has adopted nine additional resolutions, regional organizations have developed policy frameworks, and national stakeholders have translated commitments into practice. As of 31 December 2025, 115 countries have adopted WPS National Action Plans (NAPs), many in successive iterations, reflecting sustained political engagement over time.¹ These developments have led to a multiplication of WPS programmes and initiatives, demonstrating that WPS is now widely recognized as a core component of effective peace and security governance.

Yet while important gains have been made with regard to the WPS agenda, implementation has not been without shortcomings.² As much as there is a need to defend and strengthen the WPS agenda, there is also a need to reform it.³ The agenda has often been framed as Western-centric,⁴ overly technical, and insufficiently grounded in local security priorities. Progress remains uneven across national contexts, with efforts at times prioritising numerical representation over meaningful participation and insufficiently addressing power dynamics or intersectional vulnerabilities.⁵





A view of delegates in the Security Council Chamber during the Council meeting on Women Peace and Security, with a focus on women's participation in international peace and security: from theory to practice. © UN Photo/Manuel Elías

Today, women and gender-diverse people continue to be under-represented in many formal peace and security processes. This is not for a lack of evidence of the effectiveness and necessity of their participation. A global study by UN Women found that when women participate meaningfully in peace processes, the likelihood of a peace agreement lasting at least 2 years increases by 20 per cent and the likelihood of it lasting 15 years increases by 35 per cent.⁶ A growing body of research shows a direct correlation between gender inequality and increased risks of violent conflict, while more gender-equal societies tend to experience lower levels of intrastate armed conflict.⁷ These dynamics are closely linked to structural barriers that shape participation in peace and security decision-making. Discriminatory social norms, unequal access to education and economic resources, unpaid care responsibilities, and institutional exclusion restrict the ability of women and marginalized communities⁸ to engage consistently in diplomatic and policy processes. Where these barriers persist, multilateral environments risk reflecting narrower security priorities and overlooking community-level knowledge relevant to prevention and protection. Therefore, addressing these structural constraints, through resourcing, access, and institutional support, can strengthen the line of expertise and leadership that informs multilateral decision-making and supports more preventive and inclusive security approaches. Such efforts are increasingly needed in the current geopolitical landscape.

Since 2000, the global security environment has changed profoundly, and the 25th anniversary of WPS coincided with a moment of regression and profound uncertainty for international peace and security. As of 2024, the Uppsala conflict monitor reported 61 state-based armed conflicts,⁹ the highest number recorded, and the same year also showed the highest number and proportion of women ever recorded – more than

676 million – living within 50 kilometres of an armed conflict.¹⁰ Geopolitical realities increasingly prioritise state-centric and deterrence-based security approaches over human security. As a result, investment in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and gender-responsive budgeting and programming has failed to keep pace with need. The research is clear: militarization is diverting funding from investment in social infrastructure and prevention efforts, with disproportionate consequences for women and marginalized groups, who rely most on health, education, care, and protection services.¹¹ This shift has slowed progress across key WPS indicators precisely at a moment when the agenda's preventive ambitions are most urgently required.¹²

These trends are further reinforced by sustained cuts to official development assistance (ODA) and humanitarian funding, including resources earmarked for gender equality and women's rights. A March 2025 UN Women survey of 411 women's organizations confirmed that 90 per cent had already been hit by funding cuts and 51 per cent had been forced to suspend programmes.¹³ While some countries are resisting the trend of increasing ODA cuts, many members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) that have traditionally championed gender equality-focused ODA have reduced their commitments substantially.¹⁴ While defence and security budgets expand, gender-focused civil society organizations (CSOs) and peacebuilding actors face shrinking financial space. For example, in 2025, the UN peacekeeping budget faced a shortfall of US\$2 billion.¹⁵ As a result, gender expertise is being lost, and in missions such as in South Sudan, field offices are being closed, which is likely to exacerbate gendered security risks. Moreover, not only is gender equality often among the first areas to be cut or sidelined, but also this retrenchment creates fertile ground for growing resistance to WPS commitments, both normatively and institutionally. WPS actors will therefore be increasingly limited in their ability to engage in multilateral processes and sustain long-term prevention work.¹⁶

The scaling back of gender programming – both directly and indirectly – forms part of a broader systematic backlash against gender equality, human rights, and multilateralism. Indeed, it cannot be separated from historical patterns of democratic backsliding and of exclusionary political narratives against women and marginalized communities, including immigrants, for example. Specifically, for the past decades (and centuries), women's claims to equal rights have consistently been met with resistance, underscoring the structural nature of opposition to gender equality. This resistance has intensified since the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action at the Fourth World Conference on Women, when the term “gender ideology” began to be mobilised by opponents.¹⁷ Since then, well-resourced anti-gender movements have gained momentum, backed by states, private foundations, religious networks, political party structures, and wealthy individuals.¹⁸

While their rhetoric varies across contexts, these actors are often coordinated across regional and political blocs and reinforced by aligned CSOs and political leaders.¹⁹ Political authority is increasingly framed through the rule of strong men, moral conservatism, and the rejection of institutional constraints, forming part of this broader backlash against liberal democratic norms and the rules-based order.²⁰ In this context, gender equality and women's rights have increasingly become persistent targets. Across regions, authoritarian and illiberal governance trends have narrowed civic space, weakened institutional accountability, and undermined commitments to universal human rights, while portraying gender equality as an “ideological” imposition that threatens social cohesion, national identity, or sovereignty.

In the security field, gender has become a primary battleground through which the future of multilateral security governance is negotiated. Multilateral security processes have increasingly become a key space where gender equality and the WPS agenda are advanced, interpreted, and at times contested. Gender equality is increasingly framed as destabilising, divisive, or incompatible with peace, particularly in contexts affected by conflict or social unrest. Feminist, LGBTQI+, and human rights advocates are often depicted as external actors threatening national cohesion, while anti-colonial and sovereignty-based rhetoric is utilised to resist international norms. These trends can be observed within multilateral security debates, where militarized norms, hard security priorities, and the principles of sovereignty dominate. In this context, gender has become a proxy through which resistance to multilateralism and international governance is expressed, highlighting how security sector governance, power, and authority intersect with contested social norms.²¹

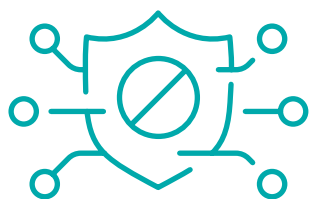
These dynamics extend beyond rhetoric and have profound implications for gender equality and security. This is directly relevant to the WPS agenda, as it illustrates how efforts to integrate gender perspectives into peace negotiations can become politically contested, creating a gap between expert commitments to gender-inclusive peacebuilding and broader public perceptions of gender equality. For example, research shows that a “campaign against gender ideology” – framing gender equality and LGBTQI+ inclusion as threats – was actively organized in opposition to the inclusion of gender provisions in the 2016 Colombian peace agreement referendum and played a role in shaping political perceptions of the peace process.²² The agreement’s gender provisions – designed to address sexual violence, land rights for women, and LGBTQI+ victim recognition – were mischaracterized as promoting same-sex marriage or moral decline. This narrative contributed to the referendum’s initial rejection, and subsequent revisions diluted gender language in parts of the agreement. This resulted in a weakening of explicit gender commitments, which in turn reduced accountability mechanisms for sexual violence.

These different forms of resistance are reshaping institutional practices and power configurations within multilateral security governance.²³ For diplomats and practitioners, resistance to WPS expresses itself across a wide range of issues and channels, including through language negotiations, procedural manoeuvres, funding cuts, and challenges to women’s participation.²⁴ These different types of resistance create practical challenges for diplomats, practitioners, and institutions working to advance WPS commitments.²⁵ Increased coordination, resourcing, and engagement by anti-gender actors have influenced negotiation dynamics, normative language, and patterns of participation across thematic areas.²⁶ At the same time, shifts in funding flows – with growing resources directed towards anti-gender advocacy and comparatively constrained support for gender equality and WPS implementation – are altering the balance of influence within multilateral spaces.²⁷

Resistance does not always take the form of outright rejection. Very often, it operates subtly, through the gradual reopening of agreed language, procedural manoeuvres, shifting funding priorities, or even the limitation on participation of women and marginalized communities. These dynamics matter profoundly, as multilateral outcomes shape mandates, institutional priorities, and resource allocation, ultimately influencing whose security concerns are recognized and whose expertise informs decision-making on prevention, protection, and peacebuilding.

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Typifying resistance to WPS and gender equality

Normative / Language-based resistance

In multilateral systems, language is foundational: it establishes political expectations, shapes institutional mandates, and creates precedents that guide future negotiations and implementation. Agreed terminology forms the basis for reporting requirements, funding allocations, indicators, and programme design. As such, efforts to contest language are not symbolic disputes but strategic interventions aimed at reshaping how gender equality is understood, operationalised, and resourced across the multilateral system. This section explores different strategies, including language deletion, dilution, narrowing, developing new frames or counter-narratives, and “gender washing”.¹

Resistance to gender equality exists on a scale, from outright rejection of the concept to reframing it and indirectly rejecting it. Normative and language-based resistance has emerged as one of the most visible ways in which opposition to gender equality and the WPS agenda is expressed in multilateral processes. Language that once functioned as a shared baseline for cooperation has become a site of repeated political contestation. Language-based resistance increasingly operates through strategic engagement such as questioning, reframing (for example, using “equal opportunities” rather than “gender equality” within UN agencies, seen as less sensitive), or hollowing out agreed terminology in ways that weaken its normative force while maintaining the appearance of procedural legitimacy.

These dynamics matter not only politically but also institutionally. In multilateral diplomacy, the language agreed in resolutions, conventions and policy frameworks shapes how international commitments are interpreted, implemented, and monitored. Once terminology has been negotiated and adopted, it creates a shared reference point for future negotiations, institutional mandates, and patterns of state practice. While language can evolve over time through consensus, it cannot simply be redefined unilaterally without reopening previously negotiated agreements. As a result, attempts to





Omar Zniber (at podium and on screens), President of the Human Rights Council, presents a report of the Human Rights Council to the 32nd plenary meeting of the General Assembly. © UN Photo/Loey Felipe

dilute or reinterpret established terminology can have lasting consequences, gradually reshaping how commitments are understood and operationalised across the multilateral system. Changes in language are therefore rarely neutral: they can influence how norms are interpreted, how institutions act, and ultimately how commitments are implemented in practice.² In March 2026, at the 70th session of the Commission on Status of Women (CSW), for the first time ever, a resolution was put forward by one Member State that sought to redefine the term “gender” within the United Nations framework. The proposal, submitted in the final stage of the process and without prior consultation, sought establishing a restrictive interpretation of the concept based on Annex IV of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The unprecedented initiative was met with widespread rejection among member states, not only because of its content but also because of the procedure used.³

The politically driven deletion or dilution of gender-related terminology is often observed in resolutions, conclusions, and official statements. Negotiations increasingly involve intense scrutiny of specific words, with long-standing agreed language reopened for debate. Amendments targeting references to “gender”, “gender-responsive approaches”, “bodily autonomy”, “reproductive rights”, or “female human rights defenders” have become common across human rights and security fora.⁴ Even when such amendments are ultimately rejected, they are often used to distract from genuine discussions, consuming significant diplomatic energy and shifting exchanges into a defensive posture, limiting opportunities to advance more ambitious commitments.⁵

Beyond dilution and deletion, resistance also operates through the narrowing of language. Gender work is often limited to a small number of topics and individuals and not consistently integrated across all human rights issues. Many scholars, activists, and UN entities such as CEDAW have been urging the WPS community to fully embrace all gender-related issues affecting all women, girls, men, boys, and non-binary people⁶ as discussed in more detail in Box 1. This narrowing is significant for the WPS agenda, as it risks limiting the agenda by depoliticising women's participation in peace and security and reducing gender equality to "some women-only" issue, rather than a question of power inequalities that drive conflict and violence.⁷



Box 1: Men and masculinities in WPS

Historically, addressing harmful and militarized masculinities as root causes of conflict and violence has not been prioritised as part of the WPS agenda. This is partially due to the lack of focus on gender as a system of power, rather than just a shorthand for women's experiences. However, as many feminists and masculinities scholars have been arguing, even at the time of the Beijing conference, preventing violence against women and girls, in conflict as well as in peacetime, requires the transformation of unequal power relations, which includes norms of masculinities and systems that privilege them.⁸ At the same time, it requires change to structures that enable and promote violent or militarized masculinities. These include, for example, economic drivers pushing men to join armed groups, through state policies and narratives celebrating militaries, or arms and gaming industries that shape men's relationship with violence and access to weapons.⁹

The engagement with men within the context of WPS has focused on addressing behaviours of individual men as perpetrators of violence, especially gender-based violence (GBV) against women. This focus is understandable, as most violence against women, as well as against other men and non-binary people, is perpetrated by men. However, focus on individuals or small-scale community-based interventions leave systemic challenges and masculine norms unaddressed.¹⁰ This long-term de-prioritization has prevailed despite the existence of some legal and normative instruments and mechanisms that recognize, for example, men as victims of conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence (CR-SGBV).

These include the UNSC Resolutions 2106 and 2467¹¹ or, more broadly, the Human Rights Council (HRC).¹² It must be recognized that some actors, for example men's rights groups, weaponize some genuine concerns and vulnerabilities around men's education, wellbeing, and experiences of violence, to drive male-victimhood narratives and scapegoat women's rights and feminist organizations. These anti-gender actors falsely blame gender equality rather than the structural challenges mentioned above and position equality as a zero-sum game. Therefore, any work on men and masculinities benefits from accountability to feminist movements and involvement of women and non-binary people to ensure that gender equality remains the primary focus.¹³

A further layer of normative resistance revolves around the reframing of gender equality through alternative concepts designed to delegitimise rights-based approaches. For instance, references to “family rights”, “parental rights”, or “natural rights” are increasingly inserted into multilateral texts to challenge universal human rights frameworks. For example, during negotiations on WPS resolutions – particularly around sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) – some member states have contested the inclusion of language they view as beyond traditional peace and security norms. In the case of UNSCR 2467 on sexual violence in conflict, references to SRHR were removed amid political disagreement, and discussions in Council debates have reflected divergent views on how gender and rights are framed in relation to family and social norms.¹⁴ These concepts are often presented as culturally neutral or morally grounded, but they seek to undermine established standards related to women’s rights, bodily autonomy, or LGBTQI+ inclusion. In some instances, rights-based language is selectively appropriated, such as invoking “religious freedom”, to advance interpretations of international gender equality commitments.¹⁵ Yet, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination based on Religion or Belief are key international legal frameworks which affirm the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion for all individuals. These texts explicitly protect the right to manifest one’s religion or belief, while also emphasizing that restrictions on religious practices must be lawful, necessary, and non-discriminatory.¹⁶

Sovereignty-based arguments also serve this reframing. Appeals to national values are frequently used to contest international gender norms – for example, by framing the promotion of gender equality by international institutions such as the UN or the EU as inconsistent with “traditional” social structures or national priorities.¹⁷ In this framing, gender equality is portrayed as an intrusion into domestic affairs or as a threat to political stability. Such arguments situate resistance to gender equality within broader narratives of state sovereignty. At the same time, resistance also depicts gender equality as culturally divisive, socially destabilising, or economically counterproductive. Concepts such as “smart economics” are mobilised to argue that development and stability depend on women’s roles within the nuclear family, while gender equality and reproductive rights are framed as disruptive to social order and national progress, with the state positioned as a protector against the gender threat. In this, feminist and disarmament organizations are being portrayed as acting against the general interest.¹⁸

At the global level, these dynamics increasingly affect not only negotiated texts but also technical guidance, indicators, and implementation frameworks. As gender language is contested or narrowed, its translation into operational tools becomes more constrained, and gender equality increasingly becomes optional rather than foundational within multilateral security governance.¹⁹ More recently, this has extended to restrictions on access and accreditation for organizations considered “problematic” for political reasons or perceived ideological bias – including in fora such as the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) or for ECOSOC statuses – and growing pressure to reframe projects or to focus on less political topics to retain funding and access.²⁰



A wide view of the Security Council meeting on Women and Peace and Security, with a focus on women's participation in international peace and security: from theory to practice. © UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

Some states also apply double standards which weaken the gender equality agenda: for instance, some governments may directly or indirectly use gender equality and legal reforms as a facade, and in multilateral fora, to highlight their gender equality achievements while still using repressive and dictatorial tactics such as jailing opposition leaders and cracking down brutally on mass protests. Other states may promote gender equality abroad while failing to fully promote it domestically.²¹

Altogether, these dynamics demonstrate that normative and language-based resistance is not simply about terminology but about reshaping the boundaries of what is politically acceptable within multilateral security governance. Gender equality has become a political issue through which broader challenges to human rights, multilateralism, and international cooperation are advanced. This comes at a time when support for gender equality policies is waning in some countries, as exemplified by the reversal of feminist foreign policies. While most states continue to express their support for the inclusion of gender perspectives in WPS, albeit not as forcefully, fewer states seem to be willing to visibly (including financially) contribute to the fight against coordinated opposition in the future. In this context, defending agreed language has become a strategic necessity not only for preserving the integrity of the WPS agenda but also for unveiling underlying power dynamics and protecting the multilateral system on which it depends. For example, when gender language is narrowed, security sector institutions receive narrow(er) mandates. When “gender” is replaced by “women and girls”, this undermines gender analysis as a tool for understanding power dynamics, and to guide effectiveness, accountability, and legitimacy. The risk that we face, therefore, is not only the erosion of normative commitments on gender equality and the WPS agenda but also the negative impact on the lives of women and marginalized groups.²²

Institutional resistance

Institutional resistance can manifest itself in multiple forms. This policy brief will focus on two primary and interconnected forms of resistance: procedural and financial.

Procedural resistance refers to the use of formal and informal rules, negotiation practices, and procedures to obstruct, delay, or dilute gender equality and WPS commitments without necessarily contesting them explicitly. Unlike overt normative opposition, procedural tactics operate within the accepted mechanics of multilateral diplomacy, allowing resistance to be framed as technical, neutral, or process driven. Indeed, this makes such resistance particularly difficult to challenge, as it is often justified in the name of consensus, inclusivity, or respect for established negotiating practices.²³



Procedural resistance refers to the use of formal and informal rules, negotiation practices, and procedures to obstruct, delay, or dilute gender equality and WPS commitments without necessarily contesting them explicitly.

One common tactic involves the introduction of late-stage amendments aimed at removing or weakening gender-related language under the pretext of preserving “consensus”. Agreed text is reopened at advanced stages of negotiations, often when delegations are under time pressure and political capital is limited. These amendments frequently target gender language, including in resolutions where gender is not the primary focus, forcing delegations to choose between protecting specific wording and securing the adoption of the overall text. This often normalises the idea that gender equality provisions are negotiable add-ons rather than integral components of peace and security governance.²⁴

Closely related is the strategic overuse of procedural tools such as silence procedures, objections, and points of order to block or delay references to gender equality and WPS. Silence procedures are intended to streamline negotiations by assuming consent if no objections are raised by a given deadline, but resistant actors increasingly utilise these mechanisms to register objections at critical moments, triggering further negotiation rounds or forcing votes. In Geneva-based institutions that traditionally rely on consensus, such disruptions have a disproportionate impact, as they extend discussions late into the evening, exhaust smaller delegations with limited staffing capacity, and undermine trust including in multilateral governance mechanisms.²⁵



Box 2: Procedural contestation at the 59th UN Human Rights Council (Geneva, June–July 2025)

At the 59th session of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC59), negotiations over gender-related resolutions illustrated a notable intensification of procedural contestation around well-established human rights norms. A central example was the resolution on “Accelerating efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls: prevention through the fulfilment of economic, social and cultural rights”. While the initiative attracted broad support from civil society and many delegations, the text was subjected to nine amendments introduced during the negotiation phase, reopening concepts that were already widely accepted within the UN.

Rather than proposing outright deletions, many of the amendments sought to reframe or narrow agreed terminology while presenting the changes as clarifications. Proposals included replacing references to “comprehensive sexuality education” with “age-appropriate education” defined by cultural context and parental guidance; substituting language on “sexual and reproductive health and rights” with more general formulations referring to physical and mental health; and replacing “bodily autonomy” with “personal integrity”. Although framed in procedural and technical terms, such revisions would have significantly modified the scope and ambition of the commitments under discussion.

By repeatedly reopening normative language that had been previously negotiated, procedural actors shifted the Council away from consensus-oriented negotiation towards a more time-consuming process. The repeated introduction of alternative framings, such as privileging “sex-based” interpretations over established gender terminology, required delegations supporting existing standards to mobilise defensively, dedicating diplomatic capital and negotiation time to preserving earlier agreements rather than advancing implementation.

This episode illustrates a broader shift observable across multilateral settings: by a gradual normalisation of permanent renegotiation, with implications for predictability, institutional memory, and the stability of agreed standards. Source: OECD (12 March 2026) “[ODA for gender equality is plummeting: How can we protect it?](#)” OECD blog.

Sources: Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID), 12 May 2025, “[The Politics of Gender and Sexuality at HRC59: Beyond backlash and posturing](#)” and Sexual Rights Initiative (SRI), 14 July 2025, “[Did You Miss It? Here’s what happened at HRC 59!](#)”

Recent cases in International Geneva illustrate how procedural disruption can be mobilised around gender issues and destabilise existing governance processes. The case study in Box 2 demonstrates how gender-related provisions are increasingly subjected to pushback. These moments mark a significant departure from long-standing practice and signal a willingness to reopen settled normative frameworks through procedural escalation.²⁶



Security Council members brief the press at the Security Council stakeout on Women Peace and Security. At the podium is Francede Piagie Alghali, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Sierra Leone. © UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

Bloc politics further amplify procedural resistance. Coordinated voting behaviour among conservative or sceptical coalitions enables delegations to systematically weaken gender language or oppose gender-related initiatives across multiple fora. These alliances often operate transnationally, reinforcing each other's positions in human rights, health, labour, and disarmament processes. By acting collectively, blocs can exert pressure on undecided or "middle-ground" states, raising the political cost of supporting gender equality and reinforcing a perception that such positions are divisive or risky.²⁷

Procedural resistance also manifests in practices that limit the participation and influence of gender experts and civil society representatives. Speaking time for gender experts, female peacebuilders, and civil society representatives is often limited, deprioritised, or confined to marginal agenda items. Accreditation and participation processes themselves can be manipulated through delayed approvals, last-minute agenda changes, or requirements that privilege established or state-affiliated NGOs, which effectively narrow who can speak and when. If women's groups have been rather visible in multilateral environments, including at the UN, many women's rights and feminist organizations from the Majority World or organizations led by people / women of colour often do not meet these formal expectations or do not have the resources to come to Geneva (see the 'Financial resistance' section). These barriers thus reduce the diversity of voices at decision-making tables and make it harder for nuanced gender expertise to shape outcomes, even in processes with otherwise strong normative commitments.²⁸ While these measures may not be explicit opposition to gender equality, their cumulative effect is to narrow the range of perspectives shaping decisions and to marginalize expertise that could challenge dominant narratives.

Procedural resistance can happen on another level as well through the fragmentation of gender issues across multiple parallel processes, preventing cross-sectoral accountability and benefiting actors in privileged positions. Seldom has gender equality been coherently embedded across organizational entities – gender considerations are frequently dispersed across humanitarian, human rights, development, peace, and security tracks, reducing their visibility and coherence.²⁹ There remains a clear lack of translation of gender work within national policy processes. Some of the barriers behind these silos include lack of coordination across government institutions, as well as CSOs having different focal points.³⁰

This fragmentation contributes to what is often described as “gender fatigue”, particularly among delegations with limited capacity. This frequently results from not having enough people who are gender technical experts and procedural barriers (for example, attacking every single instance of gender, and the negotiations then being long and frustrating).³¹ This is often not merely an innocent by-product of diplomacy; it is a tactical choice. Keeping delegations “locked” in debates over terminology aims to exhaust advocates and generate fatigue. Moreover, fragmentation makes it easier for resistant actors to contest gender language in one forum while avoiding scrutiny in others, weakening the overall impact of WPS commitments.³²

These procedural tactics are part of a larger pattern in which opposition to gender equality and WPS is not only being expressed via direct contestation but also institutionalised in the mechanics of multilateral governance. At the same time, trust in those very institutions is being eroded. With gender equality being transformed from a core obligation into a negotiable variable, governance integrity is being severely undermined. The impact of these procedural tactics thus extends beyond decision-making rooms.³³ Breaking consensus, invoking sovereignty clauses, and proceduralising opposition to gender equality have cascading effects at global, national and local levels, the consequences of which are felt most acutely by women, girls, and gender minorities, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.³⁴

Financial resistance refers to the explicit and/or implicit use of funding streams and strategies which at best dilute, neglect or under-support and at worse deprioritise, delay and obstruct gender equality work.³⁵ Unlike other forms of opposition, financial resistance can be justified as a necessary means to an end, allowing resistance to be framed as to the benefit of society at large. The fact that it is often justified in the name of financial realities savings, and even peace and security, makes it particularly difficult to challenge.³⁶



Financial resistance refers to the explicit and/or implicit use of funding streams and strategies which at best dilute, neglect or under-support and at worse deprioritise, delay and obstruct gender equality work.

World military expenditure rose to US\$2718 billion in 2024, meaning that spending has increased every year for the past ten years, going up by 37 per cent between 2015 and 2024.³⁷ Yet as the 2025 UN Secretary General report underlines,³⁸ we are observing a shift from a human-centred understanding of peace and security towards hard militarization and are moving away from investing in conflict prevention

measures, which are a pillar of the WPS agenda. Studies also show that increased military spending often negatively impacts women and marginalized communities the most,³⁹ yet gender equality is fundamental to building trust, accountability, and operational effectiveness.⁴⁰

The current funding crisis is particularly affecting civil society and international organizations working on gender issues across the multilateral system. Many CSOs working on WPS and more widely on GBV and LGBTQI+ rights are operating within this shrinking financial space. As Figure 1 indicates, compared with overall development spending, gender equality funding is falling faster. According to OECD data, in fact, total ODA declined by 8.3 per cent between 2023 and 2024, yet aid specifically targeting gender equality fell by 13 per cent over the same period.⁴¹

The volume and share of ODA with gender equality objectives in 2024

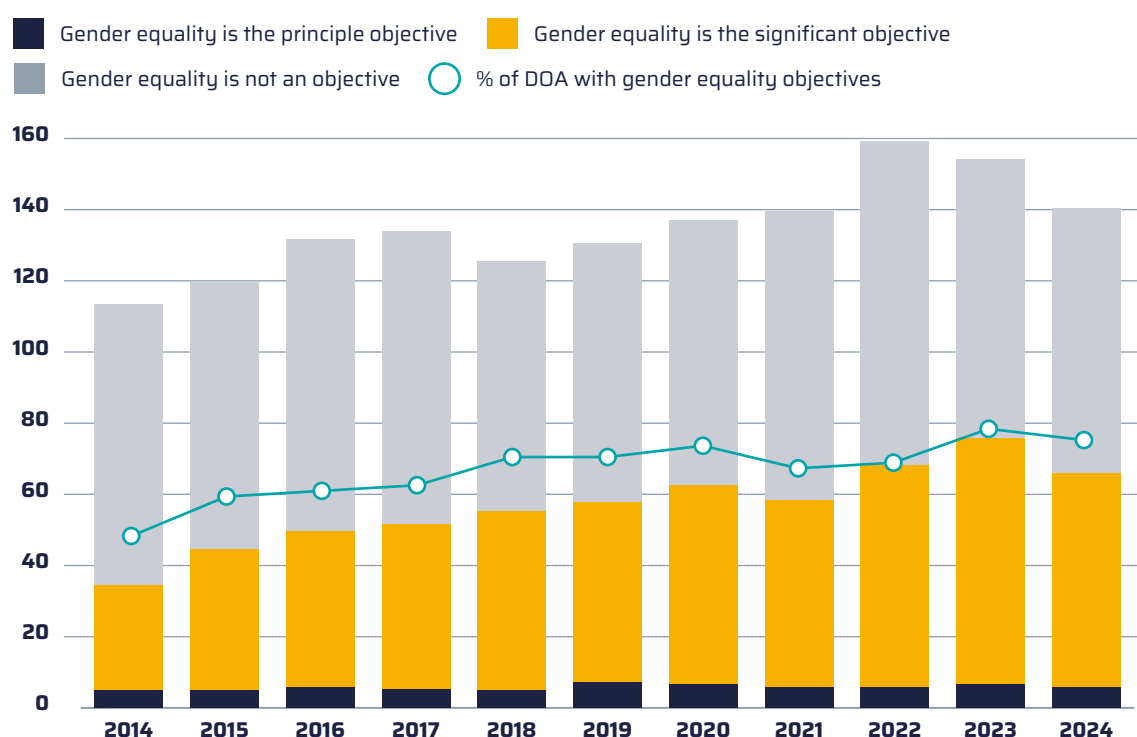


Figure 1. Source: OECD (12 March 2026) "ODA for gender equality is plummeting: How can we protect it?" OECD blog.

In 2025, ODA declined between 9 per cent and 17 per cent⁴². In 2026, it is estimated that close to half of women's rights organizations operating in conflict-affected settings will soon be closing due to financial constraints⁴³. This funding crisis is also impacting the UN itself, where budget cuts are severe and systemic, with gender equality units and WPS functions facing severe losses. Although many institutions and states continuously publicly reaffirm their commitment to the WPS agenda, including via the proposition to establish a centralized Centre of Excellence on WPS, this does not systematically translate into budgets, staffing, and operational priorities – the Centre of Excellence is a mere savings measure. In the framework of a possible UN Women and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) merger, where the WPS will sit, the agenda will lose its institutional anchoring and face potential severe detrimental impacts.

The pillars of peace and security, humanitarianism, and human rights architecture are thus often maintained only on paper and are becoming devoid of substance due to ensuing staff and budget reductions. Gender equality work, especially through the WPS agenda, has brought attention to inequalities in systems of power, and while embedding this work across the sector may ultimately be beneficial, this cannot come at the cost of making gender everyone's responsibility but no one's specific role.⁴⁴ These restructures frequently sideline or merge gender-specific mandates, signalling that gender equality is considered expendable when institutions face financial strain.

Coordination mechanisms that once supported mainstreaming efforts struggle to maintain relevance, particularly in the absence of stable funding. This has created persistent gaps in institutional memory as well as very little capacity to keep pushing for a gender equality agenda. Even where evidence exists, it is not consistently used, because staff turnover is high and tools that capture and transmit lessons learned are lacking. This loss of expertise is leading to long-term implementation gaps.⁴⁵ Therefore, defunding is tied to the bigger question of who has agency and who has power to participate in and shape political agendas, including for security sector governance.

Representation and gatekeeping

The sections above revealed the importance of another form of resistance: that of representation. Language-based or institutional resistance lead directly to decisions about who is allowed into peace and security processes, and under what conditions. This resistance is linked to broader social norms around women's leadership and place in societies, which is too often still questioned, and increasingly so in a context of enhanced gender backlash and "hard" militarized approach to security, often coded as masculine, as summarized in Box 3.



A view of the Security Council meeting on Women and Peace and Security, with a focus on women's participation in international peace and security: from theory to practice. © UN Photo/Manuel Elías



Box 3: Women's representation and leadership in defence and diplomacy

Women's representation and participation in the defence and diplomatic sectors have improved over the last 25 years but remain low. At the national level, for example, during the so-called super-election year of 2025, many elected bodies witnessed a decline in women's representation. In the executive branches, representation was even lower, with only 22.9 per cent of cabinet positions held by women in 2025. Out of these posts, the defence portfolios represented only 13 per cent, in comparison with women and gender equality at 86 per cent.⁴⁶ On the global stage, some women occupy senior leadership positions in prominent multilateral institutions, including at the World Trade Organization, the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund, and at the European Central Bank. Yet, the most notable position of UN Secretary General has never been occupied by a woman, despite multiple campaigns to elect a woman for this role. Women's representation within international organizations thus remains unequal, and only 20 per cent of ambassadors worldwide are women.⁴⁷ Several UN resolutions have called on resolving this issue, including UNSCR 2493, which highlights the need to empower women in peace processes, recognizing their contributions to lasting peace and stability. Yet, even in peacekeeping and the military, women's representation continues to be marginal. As of October 2025, only 11 per cent of troops deployed on UN missions were women, and only 21 per cent of military experts and officers were women. As of January 2026, 22 per cent of peacekeeping personnel deployed on UN missions and 8 per cent of deployed members of military contingents were women.⁴⁸ In peace negotiations, women represented 7 per cent of negotiators and 14 per cent of mediators.⁴⁹

While women are increasingly visible in many fora, they remain under-represented across all sectors,⁵⁰ including in the diplomatic corps,⁵¹ and when they are represented, their presence does not automatically translate into meaningful participation or leadership on all topics.⁵² Indeed, while women's numerical representation is important, one must also consider the issues of substantive power within these spaces and ask at what stage of decision-making processes are women in their diversity brought in, and what contexts, issues, or portfolios are they allocated to. In several settings, women remain confined to discussions on GBV or community engagement, while leadership roles or negotiations on political and "hard" security arrangements continue to be dominated by men.⁵³ For example, UN Women reports that women continue to be unrepresented in arms control and disarmament spaces. This is demonstrated in the UNGA first committee, where, despite significant improvement, women were still under-represented at only 38 per cent in 2024.⁵⁴

Women face resistance to their equal participation and leadership at all stages of their career, even before entering multilateral fora.⁵⁵ As in other sectors, women entering diplomatic careers and spaces as ambassadors must navigate institutional

resistance within their ministries of foreign affairs and other institutions, where policies can penalize them because of the double burden of care. In other words, because of social norms and expectations to care for their families, they may not be able to work in the same fashion as their male colleagues; and the same goes for mediators, negotiators, and other senior roles: issues such as parental leave policies are part of the solutions that ought to be put on the table.⁵⁶

And yet, women must operate in increasingly difficult contexts. Several female diplomats have reported intimidation and even sexual harassment in the workplace, including in multilateral fora. For example, female diplomats at UN climate talks in 2023 reported being harassed and intimidated, which prompted multiple countries to complain to the UN.⁵⁷

Finally, it is important to consider who counts as a “representative”, including amongst women. Individuals, including women, close to state institutions may be included, although women from marginalized, racialised, rural, or community-level backgrounds are frequently absent, at all levels. Moreover, tokenistic consultations are tools that are too often used to counter this, despite not translating into influence on resolutions or policy outcomes. This chapter has covered the impact of institutional resistance on women’s representation, limiting the presence and meaningful participation of women in all their diversity, in order to shape both the process and the substance of gender equality work.⁵⁸



A view of the Secretariat building with flags of Member States in the foreground, at UN Headquarters. © UN Photo/Manuel Elías

Notes

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Strategies for navigating resistance

The recommendations that follow are intended to support diplomats, practitioners, policymakers, and institutional actors in navigating increasingly contested multilateral environments while strengthening the substance, legitimacy, and long-term viability of the WPS agenda. They are organized around four strategic objectives: promoting gender-responsive norms, strengthening inclusive processes, building inclusive institutional infrastructure, and accelerating meaningful participation. Together, these actions aim to support more resilient multilateral governance and reinforce the integration of gender equality as a core component of effective SSG/R.





Promote gender-responsive norms

01

Safeguard agreed language while allowing adaptive phrasing that preserves meaning and prevents negotiations from stalling.

Reopening settled terminology is often a deliberate tactic to weaken normative commitments while maintaining procedural legitimacy. Yet rigidity can also produce deadlocks and reduce space to engage states that are hesitant, cautious, or under political pressure. A practical approach is to distinguish between *substance* (non-negotiable) and *form* (adaptable). This means identifying which terms are essential because they trigger mandates, reporting, and funding streams relevant to security sector governance, and where alternative formulations can keep the same obligations intact. In practice, delegations can support this approach by clarifying internal “red lines” in advance and developing simple internal reference tools that will ensure consistency across negotiations, reduce pressure regarding last-minute decisions, and support smaller delegations in responding quickly when language is contested. Where possible, anchor contested wording in previously agreed texts and existing frameworks to reduce the appearance of “new” concepts and to prevent attempts to recast gender equality as optional or external to security governance.

02

Use evidence strategically to reinforce gender equality as integral to security governance, prevention of violence, and institutional effectiveness.

Evidence remains a critical tool for sustaining engagement in contested environments, particularly with states that are hesitant or politically cautious. Presenting gender equality and WPS commitments through data on violence prevention, institutional effectiveness, civilian protection, and conflict sustainability can help shift discussions away from ideological framing towards governance outcomes. This approach complements rights-based arguments by demonstrating that gender-responsive policies strengthen security institutions, enhance accountability, and improve the credibility and effectiveness of multilateral action.

03

Coordinate proactive narratives that neutralise norm-spoiling tactics and prevent opposition actors from setting the terms of debate.

Anti-gender actors increasingly use sophisticated messaging, sometimes adopting the language of rights, development, and evidence, to advance exclusionary positions. To respond effectively, like-minded missions and partners can develop shared toolkits that explain why gender language matters for mandates and implementation; anticipate common reframing tactics (such as the use of “family” or “parental rights” to dilute bodily autonomy or exclude LGBTQI+ people); and articulate inclusive alternatives that resonate across political and cultural contexts. Framing gender equality as contributing to stronger institutions, social cohesion, and prevention of violence can help situate WPS within broader security reform agendas rather than allowing opposition actors to define the debate.

04

Reduce strategic ambiguity in multilingual and multicultural settings by clarifying contested terms early and consistently across processes.

Multilingual negotiations create opportunities for deliberate ambiguity, allowing agreed concepts such as gender equality or participation to be portrayed as unclear or culturally inappropriate. Where such risks are foreseeable, clarifying language grounded in existing international human rights frameworks can help pre-empt misinterpretation. Context-sensitive explanations that respect cultural diversity while reaffirming universality reduce the space for strategic misuse and reinforce the legitimacy of gender-inclusive norms within negotiated texts.



Strengthen inclusive processes

01 Stabilise the “middle ground” through sustained informal diplomacy and de-risking strategies.

Engaging middle-ground states requires sustained informal diplomacy that goes beyond formal statements and plenary interventions. Bilateral conversations, small-group exchanges, and regular informal contact can help build trust, clarify intentions, and reduce the perception that gender equality is a politically risky position. Over time, such engagement can stabilise positions, prevent late-stage surprises, and reinforce support for gender-responsive approaches within broader security governance discussions, including those shaping security sector reform processes.

02 Identify procedural vulnerabilities early and develop shared responses to minimise exhaustion and last-minute concessions.

Procedural resistance – including late amendments, objections under silence procedures, and points of order – works because it appears technical, neutral, and legitimate while consuming time, energy, and staffing capacity. The most effective response is preparedness: tracking where objections tend to appear, anticipating late-stage interventions, and coordinating response protocols so smaller delegations are not left isolated. Practical measures may include rotation systems among like-minded missions to monitor rooms, share updates, and ensure continuity across long sessions.

03 Create lightweight early-warning arrangements to flag backlash tactics before they become negotiation crises.

Resistance is increasingly coordinated and transnational; it travels across issue areas and institutions. Early warning does not require a new bureaucracy; it can be built through regular check-ins among missions, UN entities, and trusted civil society partners to identify recurring norm-spoiling language, expected late amendments, funding and staffing threats, or planned “publicity pressure” tactics. In practice, delegations may designate cross-mission focal points, integrate early-warning moments into existing coordination meetings, or maintain simple shared documents that track recurring tactics across processes. The practical value is timing: when delegations identify patterns early, they can prepare coordinated responses, distribute workload, and engage partners proactively rather than reacting in exhaustion and isolation.

04 Systematically document procedural erosion to strengthen institutional memory, accountability, and burden-sharing.

Procedural resistance often escapes accountability because it is not tracked: a small deletion here, an agenda change there, a delayed accreditation elsewhere. Over time, it produces cumulative erosion that becomes normalised. Systematically documenting weakened language, delayed decisions, reduced participation, and lapses in reporting helps delegations recognize patterns, brief incoming staff, and raise concerns with institutional leadership. It also enables like-minded actors to share the burden of response, rather than relying on the same small group to manage recurring challenges. To ensure documentation supports institutional accountability, delegations can integrate findings into existing coordination meetings, informal consultations, and exchanges among missions. Where appropriate, recurring patterns may also be reflected in inputs to thematic briefings or institutional review discussions. This may help to identify systemic trends, support collective learning, and strengthen the evidence base informing policy and SSG/R processes.



Build inclusive institutional infrastructure

01

Establish gender expertise as mandate-critical institutional infrastructure, especially during restructuring and budget cuts.

Budget cuts, restructuring, and staffing reductions often disproportionately affect gender units and expertise, signalling that equality commitments are expendable in times of constraint. Gender mainstreaming is not solely a normative commitment; it is an important component of effective governance which allows for better risk analysis, more responsive policy design, and improved accountability. Within security governance processes, gender expertise helps institutions better understand community security needs, improve responsiveness, and build public trust. Protecting dedicated positions, embedding expertise across teams, and institutionalising commitments through policy or legal measures can help ensure that gender perspectives remain integrated into core security governance functions rather than be treated as external concerns.

02

Stabilise and diversify funding that enables sustained engagement and counter-gender networks.

Access to funding directly determines who can participate in multilateral processes and whose perspectives are represented. Diversifying funding sources and partnerships is increasingly necessary to sustain women's participation, particularly in Geneva-based processes that require continuous engagement. More predictable, multi-year, and flexible funding models are essential to reduce precarity, enable strategic planning, and counter the growing asymmetry between well-resourced anti-gender actors and under-resourced equality advocates.

03

Invest in practical continuity tools that reduce reliance on individual memory in high-turnover environments.

Financial resources alone are insufficient to sustain gender equality work in high-turnover environments. There is a growing need for living, adaptable resources that track agreed language, emerging red lines, and negotiation trends related to gender and WPS. In environments characterized by frequent staff rotation and uneven levels of gender expertise, such tools support continuity, reduce reliance on individual memory, and help delegations respond more confidently when language is contested. When developed collaboratively across missions, UN entities, and civil society, these resources also strengthen shared situational awareness and reduce fragmentation across processes.

04

Establish cross-sector communities of practice to overcome silos and respond rapidly when pressure spikes.

Backlash thrives in fragmentation: contest gender language in one forum, weaken participation in another, and cut budgets somewhere else. Communities of practice help counter this by creating shared situational awareness, aligning strategies, and enabling rapid support when pressure spikes. These can be the result of linking diplomatic missions, UN entities, and CSOs working across different areas, including human rights, humanitarian, disarmament, tech, health, and labour. They can reduce dependency on a shrinking set of champions and distribute the workload that otherwise leads to fatigue. In a context of declining resources, coordination is itself a form of resilience and one of the most practical ways to protect the infrastructure that keeps WPS commitments implementable.



Accelerate meaningful participation

01 Safeguard meaningful participation by addressing gatekeeping as a core governance risk, not a side issue.

“Gatekeeping” refers to the control over access, participation, or influence within a system or institution, by certain actors who ultimately determine who gets to contribute, whose voices are heard, and which ideas or perspectives are allowed to shape decisions. It is therefore not a side issue; it is a mechanism through which resistance becomes material. When female peacebuilders, feminist organizations, and LGBTQI+ advocates are marginalized (through bureaucratic hurdles, last-minute changes, or intimidation), the negotiating environment becomes less informed and more vulnerable to narrow state-centric narratives. Diplomatic efforts should therefore include pushing for transparent accreditation practices, advocating for equitable speaking opportunities, and challenging procedural choices that systematically sideline gender expertise.

02 Strengthen pathways for women’s leadership and influence across all peace and security portfolios, including “hard security”.

Women’s participation must extend beyond numerical representation to include substantive influence across all stages of negotiation and across thematic portfolios, including those traditionally coded as “hard security”. Strengthening pathways for women’s leadership within delegations and multilateral processes helps counter persistent gendered hierarchies and ensures that women shape political, security, and institutional decisions that influence the governance and reform of security institutions.

03 Sustain civil society access and expertise to protect bottom-up legitimacy and improve decision quality.

CSOs, particularly those representing women, LGBTQI+ communities, and conflict-affected populations, remain essential sources of expertise, evidence, and accountability. Yet they face increasing barriers to access, including financial constraints, visa restrictions, and political pushback. Sustained support for civil society participation is critical to maintaining bottom-up legitimacy within multilateral processes and to preventing the WPS agenda from becoming detached from the constituencies it is intended to serve.

04 Promote allyship to normalise gender equality as a shared responsibility across security agendas.

Responsibility for advancing gender equality should not rest solely with women. Promoting allyship, particularly among men, helps redistribute responsibility, secure political and financial support, and normalise gender equality as a shared governance concern rather than a niche issue. Allyship also helps ensure that gender perspectives are integrated across all thematic discussions, rather than being confined to dedicated spaces. Engaging supportive states beyond formal feminist foreign policy networks, including middle-ground actors, further broadens coalitions and reduces polarization.



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Conclusion

The analysis in this brief demonstrates that resistance to gender equality and the WPS agenda is no longer marginal or episodic. It is systematic, coordinated, and embedded across the normative, procedural, institutional, and financial dimensions of multilateral governance. What is at stake is not only the advancement of gender equality as a standalone objective, but also the credibility and effectiveness of security governance and the multilateral system, which is in deep crisis.

Integrating gender perspectives into multilateral negotiations is far more than a normative or symbolic exercise. Gender perspectives are essential to embedding human rights and human security considerations within SSG/R. They help ensure that policies, mandates, and operational frameworks reflect the lived realities of the populations that security institutions are meant to serve. When gender perspectives are contested, sidelined, or treated as politically expendable, these broader objectives are directly undermined. The result is not only weaker gender outcomes, but also diluted commitments to prevention, protection, and accountability more broadly.

Patterns of backlash illustrate how attacks on gender equality often serve a wider purpose. Gender has become an entry point through which coordinated actors seek to challenge multilateral norms, weaken human rights infrastructures, and reshape the boundaries of institutional legitimacy. Well-resourced anti-gender networks operate with clear political intent, mobilising across regions and fora, and are increasingly refining their narratives through legal, academic, and policy-oriented channels.

For diplomats and practitioners, this translates into difficult trade-offs. Efforts to preserve consensus can lead to the quiet dilution of gender-inclusive language. Procedural manoeuvres can consume political capital and exhaust those defending inclusion. Financial and institutional pressures can hollow out gender expertise while maintaining the appearance of commitment. Over time, such compromises risk becoming normalised, producing a cumulative erosion of the WPS agenda and of human-centred approaches to security more broadly.

Addressing this backlash is therefore not simply a matter of reaffirming commitments. It is a strategic imperative for sustaining credible, effective, and people-centred security sector governance. Doing so requires moving beyond reactive defence towards more deliberate forward-looking strategies: building broader and more agile alliances, particularly with middle-ground states; investing in relationships and institutional memory; anticipating pressure points; and strengthening collective capacity to navigate contested multilateral spaces.



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