Frontline Voices

Third working group meeting

**17
06**

Co-funded by the
European Union

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MINDS
MOBILIZING INSIGHTS IN DEFENCE AND SECURITY

Introduction

As the UN's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda approaches its 25th anniversary, Friends of Europe gathered leading international experts to assess its future and effectiveness. This third working group session focused on generating concrete, forward-looking recommendations to revitalise and strengthen the agenda in today's rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape.

The global environment for women's peace initiatives has grown increasingly challenging. Institutional support is waning, with funding cuts and strategic retreats threatening decades of progress. The recent decision by the US Department of Defense to dismantle its WPS programme underscores a broader trend of institutional ambivalence, if not resistance, towards gender-inclusive approaches to security and conflict resolution – a pattern that has deepened over the past decade despite formal commitments and rhetorical support.

Participants in the session brought diverse perspectives from conflict-affected regions, sharing nuanced insights into the practical challenges of implementing the WPS agenda. Their testimonies revealed a significant gap between international commitments and ground-level realities, highlighting the need for more adaptive, locally-driven strategies that genuinely reflect women's experiences and capabilities.

Beyond critique, the Friends of Europe working group sought to develop concrete recommendations for sustaining and strengthening women's critical roles in conflict prevention, resolution and peacebuilding. The discussions explored how women can reshape political dialogue, security strategies and collaborative approaches in an era of mounting global tensions.

The conversation underscored a fundamental truth: women's participation is not a peripheral concern, but a critical component of effective, sustainable peace processes.

The following challenges and opportunities were highlighted during the discussion.

Challenges

- The dismantling of WPS programmes signals a worrying retreat from long-standing institutional commitments.

- Funding cuts to women's organisations continue to undermine their capacity to contribute meaningfully to peacebuilding efforts.

- The rise of authoritarian governance creates increasingly exclusionary political environments that sideline gender equality.

- Tokenistic approaches to women's inclusion in peace processes fail to grant genuine influence or decision-making power.

- Harassment of women peacebuilders, both online and offline, persists, while protection mechanisms remain inadequate in conflict-affected areas.

- The merging of distinct inclusion agendas without consultation risks obscuring the specific needs and priorities of each group.

- Externally driven peacebuilding approaches continue to overlook local expertise, leadership and lived realities.

Opportunities

- The 25th anniversary of the UN resolution provides a unique moment to critically reassess and reinvigorate the original vision of women in peace and security;

- Recruitment challenges in military sectors could open unexpected pathways for women's meaningful participation.

- The clear limitations of traditional conflict resolution approaches create space for more collaborative models.

- The increasing recognition of women's strategic contributions in intelligence and conflict prevention offers a chance to improve security thinking.

- The current global backlash against WPS initiatives presents an opportunity to demonstrate that gender perspectives are essential to conflict analysis, inclusive responses and legitimate peacebuilding, creating momentum for more effective mainstreaming.

- Emerging cross-regional networks of women peacebuilders demonstrate potential for broader collaborative strategies.

- Institutional shifts in security thinking present opportunities to integrate women's perspectives from the outset.

- The complexity of current global conflicts highlights the need for more context-specific peacebuilding approaches.

- Growing awareness of the gaps between policy commitments and practical implementation creates momentum for genuine change.

Key points

Reimagining participation: beyond tokenism

The discussion highlighted persistent shortcomings in the inclusion of women in peace and security efforts. A significant gap remains between formal commitments and what happens in practice, with women often involved too late in the process or confined to symbolic roles. Participants noted that women are often brought into peace negotiations as an afterthought, lacking real influence over the design or direction of talks. This issue was illustrated by the experience in Libya, where women's participation was marked by unclear objectives and insufficient protections, exposing them to harassment and excluding them from genuine decision-making roles. Similarly, the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, once characterised by women holding formal negotiating positions, has regressed to being led exclusively by men.

It was also emphasised that without sustained funding and political support, women's inclusion remains precarious and unsustainable. In Yemen, women peacebuilders played a vital role in community engagement and tribal mediation, yet their contributions have been undermined by shifting external priorities and the withdrawal of donor backing.

> " *Often women are brought in, really, to avoid criticism, as opposed to integrating a process from the beginning.*

The discussion underscored that meaningful participation goes beyond meeting quotas; it requires structural reform, transparency in selection processes and genuine opportunities for women to lead. When women are involved from the outset in shaping the agenda, peacebuilding efforts are more likely to endure.

A key barrier to progress is the persistent lack of political will to fully implement the WPS agenda. This gap between promises and action reflects a deeper failure to recognise the value of women's participation in peace processes. Bridging this gap requires long-term advocacy and targeted diplomatic pressure to influence decision-makers. In this context, participants stressed the importance of engaging with political leaders and institutions directly. One example discussed was coordinated lobbying of EU officials involved in peace talks, calling on them to insist that conflicting parties include women in their negotiating teams. This kind of concrete, sustained pressure is essential to translating commitments into meaningful change.

Institutional resistance and global backlash

The global landscape for women's peace and security initiatives is becoming increasingly complex and contradictory. Institutional support is rapidly receding, with

notable funding cuts and a widespread retreat from gender-inclusive approaches. This has now become a systemic threat, as established programmes are dismantled and women's contributions steadily eroded.

This decline in support reflects a broader geopolitical shift towards limited models of conflict management. International institutions are increasingly sidelining gender perspectives, treating them as supplementary rather than central to effective peacebuilding. This is particularly evident in defence and diplomatic spheres, where women's expertise remains undervalued and routinely overlooked.

> " *We've seen this happening for the best part of the last decade, the kind of backlash, really, against WPS. We've seen it in the budget cuts in the UK in the last five years, the redirection of WPS, the removal of some of the specialised units that focus on that.*

Despite this regressive context, participants noted that women peacebuilders continue to respond with innovation and resilience. Grassroots networks remain active and determined, developing new strategies to sustain their work in the face of shrinking institutional space.

In response to these mounting challenges, several strategic recommendations were proposed. These included the need for more deliberate and transparent selection processes to ensure that women's participation in peace negotiations is meaningful.

Long-term, stable funding is crucial to sustaining local women's leadership, and tailored training programmes are needed to prepare women peacebuilders for the risks they may face, including backlash and security threats.

The conversation reinforced a clear message: genuine peacebuilding cannot be achieved without embedding women's knowledge, leadership and lived experience at every level of the process.

Making the EU's approach matter: turning principles into action

The conversation then turned to how the European Union can move beyond general statements and develop a focused, strategic approach to women, peace and security. There was broad agreement that the EU often falls short when it comes to turning its commitments into meaningful action on the ground. Participants stressed the need for a clearer strategy that reflects both the scale of the EU's global reach and the specific realities of the regions it engages with. The Western Balkans were named as one area where the absence of a gender-sensitive lens has limited the EU's impact, allowing older, patriarchal dynamics to persist in political and peace processes.

A major point of concern was the lack of mandatory gender-responsive conflict analysis. While the EU has made a formal commitment to include gender perspectives in its conflict assessments, participants noted that there is little to no evidence of this being carried out in practice in certain conflict contexts. This disconnect weakens the credibility and effectiveness of the EU's responses, as key gendered dimensions of conflict remain unaddressed. Without the systematic application of gender analysis, strategies risk being shaped by partial understanding, reducing the likelihood of sustainable and inclusive peacebuilding.

Funding emerged as a key theme, with participants stressing the need for the EU to bring its Multiannual Financial Framework more into line with its gender equality goals. Many pointed out that, while gender equality is often mentioned in high-level commitments, the money rarely follows. Suggestions included setting aside dedicated funds for gender-focused work, applying gender-responsive budgeting across both internal and external funding streams and creating spaces where gender priorities can be properly discussed during budget planning.

There was concern that current funding models tend to fall short in offering long-term, reliable support for women working on peacebuilding. Cuts to funding were seen not just as a financial issue, but as a sign that institutions still struggle to take women's contributions in peace and security seriously. What participants called for was not only more money, but smarter investment: funding that is consistent, well-targeted and based on a clear understanding of the role women play in preventing conflict and rebuilding communities.

Finally, the importance of coalition-building was underlined. Rather than working in silos, participants advocated for stronger links between women's rights organisations across regions. Working together, they argued, gives greater weight to advocacy efforts and helps push for more consistent implementation of the WPS agenda across all levels of policymaking.

While these recommendations are designed with the EU in mind, their relevance extends well beyond its borders. When adapted thoughtfully, the same principles, from clear strategy and gender-informed analysis to targeted funding and regional cooperation, can strengthen peacebuilding in a range of settings.

Localisation and contextual strategies

A key insight from the discussion was the need to contextualise women's peace and security strategies. While global frameworks provide important reference points, they require careful adaptation to reflect the cultural, political and social realities of each setting. Participants stressed that current approaches often overlook the complex local power structures and community dynamics that shape both conflict and resolution.

" To localise was one of the really good methods that we worked on.

Effective strategies, it was argued, must be grounded in the lived experiences of the communities they aim to serve. This means engaging directly with local women's networks, understanding their specific challenges and creating space for their expertise to guide the process. Rather than introducing external solutions, successful interventions are those that recognise and build upon local women's existing roles in conflict resolution and community problem-solving.

Participants shared examples of what this kind of localisation entails in practice. Engaging with community leaders, including those initially resistant to change, was seen as essential. Transparent selection processes for women's participation help build legitimacy and trust, while protection mechanisms must be tailored to reflect the particular security risks present in each context. Support must go beyond policy statements and include practical, adaptable resources for women's networks operating on the ground. Communication strategies also need to be developed with cultural sensitivity, avoiding language or approaches that alienate or oversimplify.

There was strong consensus that women are not passive recipients of peacebuilding frameworks. They are already leading reconciliation efforts within their communities, often through informal or unrecognised channels. Their insights offer a depth of understanding that formal diplomatic processes frequently miss. The most effective peacebuilding takes place when these women are genuinely enabled to lead, design and implement strategies that reflect their communities' realities and capacities for sustainable peace. .

Reimagining political dialogue

The discussion underscored the need to rethink approaches to political communication and conflict resolution. Participants expressed concern that political discourse has become increasingly aggressive and polarised, with media and public debates often reduced to combative exchanges where constructive dialogue is lost. In these environments, women are frequently marginalised or pressured to adopt similar styles to be heard.

There is a call to create political spaces that enable more inclusive and thoughtful forms of engagement. This includes encouraging the expression of complexity and doubt, acknowledging the legitimacy of differing perspectives and moving beyond zero-sum frameworks that prioritise defeating opponents over finding shared ground.

" We need to find a way of expressing and accepting vulnerability of people in the room, and it's part of our way of also dealing and healing from the traumas that as of today, many people are facing.

Challenging existing power dynamics was seen as essential to this transformation. Participants advocated for increasing more inclusive political representation, not as a symbolic gesture, but as a means of reshaping the terms of debate. Dialogue spaces

that support more layered conversations were seen as vital, as were communication strategies that prioritise understanding over dominance. The conversation highlighted the importance of designing political environments where a diversity of approaches can coexist and where the full range of experiences, knowledge and strategies can inform public discourse.

This transformation must also address the digital dimension of political participation. Women engaged in peacebuilding and political dialogue increasingly face targeted harassment online, with threats that often extend into real-world violence. While the digital space offers opportunities for visibility and mobilisation, it has also become a site of considerable risk. Participants noted that this emerging area of insecurity is insufficiently addressed in current peace and security frameworks, despite its growing impact on women's ability to participate safely and effectively. Strengthening protections in digital spaces and recognising online harm as a serious barrier to participation were seen as critical elements of a more comprehensive approach to women's political engagement. .

Rethinking what security means: beyond the military lens

The discussion challenged some of the most entrenched ideas about security. Participants questioned the assumption that security starts and ends with military readiness, arguing instead for a broader understanding that includes prevention, community resilience and human dignity. This approach, they said, is at the heart of the WPS agenda.

Several participants spoke about the vital roles that women play in security sectors, particularly in areas like military intelligence and early warning. Far from being symbolic, their involvement has often been crucial in anticipating and de-escalating tensions. Yet the value of these contributions is often overlooked when security is framed only in terms of combat.

Importantly, the conversation did not centre on simply adding more women into existing structures. Instead, it focused on how women's participation can reshape how security is defined and delivered. There was also a clear warning: increasing the number of women in military roles must not become the main measure of progress. Doing WPS through military integration alone risks narrowing the agenda and shifting attention away from its core purpose as a peacebuilding framework.

Throughout, participants highlighted that peace and security are not separate goals. Understanding social dynamics, addressing the root causes of violence and ensuring that communities feel protected are essential to both. In this view, real security is not built through force alone, but through care, inclusion and trust.

Several participants agreed that, ultimately, real security lies in a stable and lasting peace, not in the accumulation of military power, but in the creation of societies where all people can live with dignity and without fear.

Conclusion

Despite the significant challenges facing women's peace and security initiatives, the conversation revealed a resilient, strategic global network of women committed to transformative change. Participants demonstrated that hope isn't passive optimism, but an active, pragmatic approach to reshaping institutional structures. The most powerful insights came from women who are already creating change on the ground – building cross-border networks, developing local strategies and persistently challenging systemic barriers. Their work shows that meaningful progress happens through sustained, collaborative efforts that connect grassroots experiences with policymaking. The future of peacebuilding lies not in grand, top-down declarations, but in supporting women's leadership, amplifying their voices and creating institutional spaces that genuinely value their expertise. While the current landscape is challenging, the collective intelligence, strategic thinking and unwavering commitment of women peacebuilders offer a compelling alternative to existing conflict resolution models.