



Frontline Voices

25 years of
women, peace
and security

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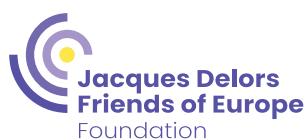
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Introduction

The concluding event of Friends of Europe's Frontline Voices project marked the launch of its final report and opened a broader reflection on how the Women, Peace and Security agenda can be renewed. The report brings together the work of the project's three thematic working groups, frontline testimonies, expert debates and exchanges between practitioners, researchers, civil society actors, defence figures and diplomats. Together, these contributions offer a grounded picture of where WPS stands today and highlight what must change for it to remain effective.

The report shows that the WPS agenda is at a critical juncture. A quarter of a century after Resolution 1325, women's participation in peace and security is recognised on paper but far less secure in real practice, as seen across the project's working groups. WPS faces both political backlash and structural limits.

Against this backdrop, the project's concluding event brought together speakers from NATO, the EU, national institutions and grassroots organisations to reflect on these findings and consider how to renew commitment to WPS. The discussion highlighted that women are central actors in security, whether in military structures, diplomacy, humanitarian response or community peacebuilding, yet they continue to face structural barriers that block genuine influence.

The panel also echoed a recurring theme throughout the project: the urgent need to protect and rebuild the political space in which WPS can function. The event posed a central question: if the WPS agenda is to remain essential for global peace and stability, what must change to safeguard it and turn commitments into tangible action that improves the lives of those living through conflict?

Celebration and backlash

The discussion among panellists at the concluding event offered both celebration and sober warning. While WPS has seen "huge progress" and widespread policy adoption, the discussants pointed to a wave of recent reversals: shrinking funding, dismantled programmes, and "ideological pushback against gender equality," as **Viviane Teitelbaum**, member of the Belgian Senate and President of the French Network of Women Parliamentarians, warned, before continuing that "Women, Peace and Security is being attacked. It's not fading [...] it's being contested everywhere."

Irene Fellin, NATO Secretary General's Special Representative for Women, echoed this concern: "Are we celebrating? It's difficult to say." The core message emerging from the discussion was clear: without renewed political will, the hard-won gains of WPS risk unravelling just when they are needed most.

The panellists also stressed that the backlash is not only ideological but structural: the very spaces in which WPS once advanced are shrinking. As Fellin noted, the symbolic absence of senior leaders from the annual UN WPS debates this year reflected the fragility of political commitment.

“ Women, Peace and Security is being attacked. It’s not fading [...] it’s being contested everywhere.

Viviane Teitelbaum, member of the Belgian Senate and President of the French Network of Women Parliamentarians

Meanwhile, Teitelbaum warned that the same patriarchal forces undermining women’s bodily autonomy and economic rights are simultaneously eroding WPS, highlighting that these regressions are interconnected rather than isolated. With this, the panel underscored that WPS cannot be treated as a niche agenda, as it too easily becomes a casualty of governments’ broader retreat from gender equality.

Funding, implementation and accountability

The discussion repeatedly returned to the interconnected challenges of funding, implementation and accountability. With budget cuts and political support uncertain, turning policy promises into tangible action on the ground has become increasingly difficult. Researcher and civil society activist **Rudina Çollaku** emphasised this point, noting: “We cannot speak about peace if we do not have economic empowerment [...] key issues [are] how to empower women economically, how to be independent.”

Viviane Teitelbaum echoed that funding remains the first casualty “in times of crisis [...] when we need the women the most.” The panellists collectively called for stable resources and proper accountability as the basis for real local change.

“ We cannot speak about peace if we do not have economic empowerment.

Rudina Çollaku, Researcher and civil society activist

Speakers also highlighted that accountability must extend far beyond monitoring national action plans. **Emmanuel Jacob**, President of the European Organisation of Military Associations and Trade Unions, warned that even within the defence sector – where WPS should be firmly embedded – the agenda remains unfamiliar to many personnel, leaving progress dependent on a “happy few” rather than institutionalised practice.

On this point, Çollaku again offered a grassroots perspective: without practical tools such as local manuals, safety councils and community-level mechanisms, national commitments risk remaining abstract and inaccessible, especially in rural

“ In times of crisis [...] when we need the women the most.

Viviane Teitelbaum

contexts where women still face stigma and mobility restrictions. Ensuring that WPS is understood, funded and operationalised at every level, from local officials to military structures, was repeatedly identified as essential to translating rhetoric into durable change.

Women as agents of change

The discussion also examined the evolving role of women in peace, security and military settings. Women are no longer framed only as victims of conflict but increasingly recognised as essential actors on frontlines, in negotiation spaces and in shaping strategic decisions. As **General Sean Clancy**, Chair of the European Military Union Committee, put it: “When we look at women, it’s not through the lens of victims anymore. It is looked [at] in the lens of actors, people that add value and that must be participating fully.”

Nonetheless, significant obstacles remain. For example, concerns about quotas, fears of a more militarised WPS agenda and the many barriers that continue to hinder genuine inclusion were all raised during the discussion.

“ When we look at women, it’s not through the lens of victims anymore.

General Sean Clancy, Chair of the European Military Union Committee

Several speakers stressed that recognising women as agents of change requires rethinking how participation is structured. Fellin argued that current peace processes are no longer confined to traditional negotiating “tables,” making old debates about inclusion insufficient for today’s fragmented or absent diplomatic arenas. General Clancy added that women’s agency extends far beyond representation, highlighting their proven contributions to operational effectiveness – from building local trust networks to generating early-warning insights on security shifts.

Panellists agreed that the next phase of WPS must encompass this broader ecosystem of influence, ensuring women shape strategy, resilience and community security, not only formal diplomacy, if the agenda is to remain relevant in an evolving conflict landscape.

Based on the discussion at this concluding event, several recommendations can be drawn. The below points summarise the most prevalent themes.

Policy recommendations

- **Create ring-fenced, multi-year WPS funds** that cannot be reallocated in times of crises. Allocate a fixed budget share to women-led organisations, provide simplified long-term grants, prioritise frontline and rural groups and include rapid-response funding for conflict-affected contexts.
- **Make WPS mandatory across defence and security institutions** by integrating it into core training, unit action plans, operational protocols and promotion criteria. Establish internal WPS oversight teams and require regular implementation audits from defence ministries, NATO, and/or international bodies.
- **Localise WPS through municipal co-design** by requiring local WPS action plans, safety councils and women's advisory boards. Provide funding, training and practical manuals adapted to local contexts, and hold annual reviews with grassroots organisations to evaluate progress and address barriers to participation.
- **Focus on increasing women's participation across all security domains**, including cyber, hybrid-threat response, border management, reconstruction and humanitarian–military coordination. Create deployable expert pools, integrate women's groups into early-warning systems and set participation benchmarks for non-traditional negotiation platforms.



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