



AGENCY FOR  
PEACEBUILDING



# HARDER THAN YOU THINK

Reflections on the Past, Present and  
Future of the Women, Peace and Security  
Agenda

## Events Report

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## ABOUT THE AGENCY FOR PEACEBUILDING

The Agency for Peacebuilding (AP) is a non-profit organisation whose mission is to promote conditions to enable the resolution of conflict, reduce violence and contribute to a durable peace across Europe, its neighbouring countries, and the world. AP is the first Italian organisation specialising in peacebuilding. This allows us to occupy a unique role in the European landscape: on the one hand, we interpret and synthesise relevant topics for the benefit of Italian agencies and institutions working on peace and security; on the other, we highlight experiences, capacities, and resources specific to the Italian system, which can contribute to the resolution of violent conflict.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The present report was authored by Bernardo Monzani. It synthesises presentations made by experts in the course of three events organised by the University of Bologna and AP between March and May 2022. First and foremost, we therefore wish to express our gratitude to the following experts for participating and giving permission to include their presentations in this document: Silvia Cittadini, Laura Davis, Clara della Valle, Arbia Jebali, Sanja Kajnic, Fatima Outaleb, Elisa Piras, Oksana Potapova, Marco Puleri, Mikhail Silvestro Sustersic, and Loredana Teodorescu.

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Lastly, the drafting of the report was possible thanks to contributions from Dafne Carletti, AP's Communications Officer, and Mariachiara Giaccai, AP's intern for Spring 2022 and a Master candidate at the University of Bologna.

*Cover Photo: Public art poster by CHEAP, Bologna (Credit: CHEAP).*

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## SUMMARY

Between March and May 2022, the University of Bologna and AP organised three events to discuss the past, present and future of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda. The events' aim was to advance the debate on the challenges and opportunities to promote greater gender equality and women's empowerment on peace and security—and to encourage this debate in Italy specifically. Experts coming from the European Union, Eastern Europe and North Africa—and representing civil society and academia—took part to the events and converged on three specific points.

The first is inclusion. Efforts to implement the WPS Agenda have too often focused on a simple, ineffective formula: “add women and stir”. In response to this, more and more actors are now pushing for a shift from women to gender as a way to increase the inclusion of groups who have yet to fully participate in debates on the WPS Agenda, including young people and the LGBTQI+ community.

The second point is about embracing the concept of human security, which is a people-centred approach to security that encompasses several different dimensions that relate to feeling safe, including the freedom from fear, want and indignity. Integrating human security could bring the WPS Agenda to more effectively address issues beyond the military and security spheres.

Finally, the third point refers to the relations between the state and civil society. Civil society remains the engine for transformation and innovation, but what it can do depends on what states allow it to do. It is essential that civil society can work autonomously, independently and in a free and safe environment—yet in many countries this is becoming harder by the day.

Overall, these three points provide a sense for where to look for innovation and new thinking that can help advance the WPS Agenda. In this regard, there are opportunities for Italy—both institutions and civil society—to lead, building on a long record of engagement and leveraging existing resources.

# INTRODUCTION

The systematic exclusion of women from peace and security efforts is a problem that has defied solutions for decades. The main international normative attempt at rectifying this historical wrong, United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, is, in fact, more than twenty years old now. To its credit, the Resolution remains as relevant today as it was back in 2000, when it was adopted. Yet, the impact that it was meant to have has not materialised, and women remain marginal if not absent in peace and security processes. This warrants serious introspection and begs the question of whether the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda that the Resolution launched can still make a difference.

Recent years have provided many reasons to be pessimistic about the effectiveness of the WPS Agenda: violent conflict has been on the rise and women and girls remain disproportionately affected by it, while their voices continue to be either ignored or actively silenced. In a recent article, even Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini, one of the Agenda's most famous and staunchest advocates, had to use radical words in assessing the present situation:

*“Some would say that the Agenda was just window dressing...a way for governments who are perpetuating war to co-opt women and hide behind a peaceful mask. I think that the Agenda – which is radically transformative in many ways – has not been taken seriously enough for it to be co-opted in that way; it is still so marginal to the constantly changing political and diplomatic leadership that we see around the world.”<sup>1</sup>*

This is not where the activists who had pushed for Resolution 1325 thought they would be twenty years after its adoption. The Resolution itself was, in fact, truly transformative. It was the first resolution to explicitly acknowledge the impact that violent conflict has on women and girls, and the contribution that they regularly make to prevent or resolve conflict. It gave way to another ten resolutions re-affirming and expanding on the same principles and priorities. Together, these resolutions form an impressive normative framework for both policy and action. Indeed, under this framework 103 countries have adopted national action plans (NAPs) on Women, Peace and Security, and an additional 11 regional action plans have been developed by regional organisations like the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). Lastly, the Resolution mobilised hundreds of millions in funds to implement WPS

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<sup>1</sup> Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini, Clara Della Valle and Elisa Piras, “Powered by caring: daily struggles to keep the WPS Agenda alive”, *Interdisciplinary Political Studies*, Special Issue (Volume 8, Issue 1), University of Salento (2022), page 16.

initiatives across the world. All of this has had important and positive consequences, yet the reality remains that the Agenda has fallen short on its ambition.

This realisation has recently spurred a movement towards critical reflection, involving practitioners, activists, policy-makers and academics. This report should be read squarely within this movement, and indeed shares many of the same points made in other reports and articles written recently. For example, we, like others, argue that Resolution 1325 remains as transformative in 2022 as it was when it was adopted, in 2000. At the same time, we, like others, recognise and acknowledge that the implementation of the WPS Agenda has witnessed failures, along with successes, and that neither should be sacrificed when assessing where the Agenda is, where it should go and whether it should be revised given everything that has happened in the past two decades.

The purpose of this report is critical mass: to add, in other words, a new set of voices to the debate on the future of the WPS Agenda, and, in doing so, to contribute to finding solutions that can truly make a difference, in terms of ensuring that the Agenda can achieve the impact that it was intended to have. The voices are those of experts and academics who participated in a series of events that took place online and at the Forlì campus of the University of Bologna between March and May 2022. Three events were held, bringing together a total of nine WPS experts from both academia and civil society. These experts come from Italy, Eastern Europe and North Africa, and while they do take part to similar events (mainly in their countries and on occasion internationally), their voices are not always the most visible. The hope is that this report can elevate their messages.

The fact that these events have taken place in Italy is important in its own right. Italy has been supporting the WPS Agenda for years now, but its role on this issue has not been very visible. This is part of a trend that characterises Italy's foreign policy, which, as AP's recent report on Italy and Peacebuilding argues<sup>2</sup>, is largely gregarious. Historically and still today, Italy channels its support through multilateral institutions and rarely takes leadership roles. Yet, the country contributes significant resources to support the European and global peace and security architecture. On WPS, for example, Italy is currently on its third NAP, with the first having been adopted in 2014. It also makes regular contributions to specialised international organisations, like UN Women. Italian institutions and civil society organisations, including AP, have also launched interesting initiatives to support the Agenda over the years, some with regional or even global resonance. An example of a regional initiative is the "Enhancing Women's Participation in Peace and Security" (WEPPS) project, which the Sant'Anna School for Advanced Studies implemented

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<sup>2</sup> ["Italy and Peacebuilding"](#), Agency for Peacebuilding (2022).



together with AP in 2019-2020. The goal of the WEPPS project was to promote the effective participation of women in peace and security decision-making processes in North Africa and the Western Balkans. An example of a global initiative is instead the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network (MWMN), a multi-generational group of approximately 40 women mediators and experts on mediation from the four shores of the Mediterranean Sea. The Network is coordinated by Women in International Security (WIIS) Italy. Both initiatives, which have been funded by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, point to the strong level of expertise that exists in Italy, yet this has not, been consistently used. Ultimately, Italy could, and should, play a bigger role, and this report also wants to contribute to this end.

In conclusion, if the report makes an argument, this could be summarised as follows: achieving the transformative goals that were set by Resolution 1325 and are now embedded in the WPS Agenda should be a process that involves everyone, but currently this is not so; states leading the charge should be rightfully lauded for their efforts, but the process must be considerably more inclusive than it has been to date. Inclusion should be treated as the key to ignite true transformation.



Photo: Public art poster by CHEAP and Camila Rosa realised for ActionAid on the occasion of the Festival della Partecipazione 2022, Bologna (Credit: CHEAP).

# GENDER, PEACE AND SECURITY: TOWARDS A MORE INCLUSIVE AGENDA

The first seminar in the cycle took place online, on March 31, 2022<sup>3</sup>, and focused on one of the most salient points in the debate on the future of the WPS Agenda: the need to re-think inclusion. For most of the last twenty years the Agenda has kept a very strong focus on women. Yet, this focus has also been applied in often narrow and rigid ways. In the view of many experts, it has failed to recognise the multiple identities that exist, and co-exist, among women. It has not sufficiently worked on men and masculinities. And it has failed to foster the inclusion and participation of key groups, like youth and the members of the lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQI+) community.

Elisa Piras (EURAC Research)<sup>4</sup> started the conversation, focusing on the term “women”. This choice has been central to the implementation of the Agenda since its beginning, and it reflects the desire to have governments and policy-makers recognise the impact that peace and security issues have on women, and that women can have on peace and security. In her research, however, Piras has found that there is a clear desire to modernise and transform the WPS Agenda, in order to make it more responsive to new needs. Two factors have, as such, driven the shift from “women” to “gender”: first, a reflection on the idea of women, which can more fully take into account the diversity that exists among this group; and secondly, a re-assessment of the notion of agency that is based on the recognition of different and distinct gender markers. The shifting focus towards gender has opened the door to the concept of intersectionality<sup>5</sup>. Each one of us has personal, cultural and social characteristics that derive from a unique combination of factors: where one is born, the ethnicity and socio-economic status of the parents, religion and sexual orientation, just to name a few. Identity is as such the result of multiple intersecting characteristics. And what this means is that individuals can fall victim to multiple types of discrimination. **It is then by shifting from “women” to “gender” that we can start to really think about the complexity of inclusion and participation in relation to peace and security.**

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<sup>3</sup> The event was organised by [Punto Europa](#), an information centre whose main task is to provide information about the European Union (EU). Punto Europa is a Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence located in Forlì, Italy.

<sup>4</sup> Dr Elisa Piras is a senior researcher at the Center for Advanced Studies, EURAC Research, in Bolzano, Italy. She previously was a research fellow at the Dirpolis Institute of the Sant’Anna School for Advanced Studies.

<sup>5</sup> [Womenkind Worldwide](#) offers a useful definition of the term: “Intersectionality is the acknowledgement that everyone has their own unique experiences of discrimination and oppression and we must consider everything and anything that can marginalise people – gender, race, class, sexual orientation, physical ability, etc. First coined by Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw back in 1989, intersectionality was added to the Oxford Dictionary in 2015 with its importance increasingly being recognised in the world of women’s rights”.



Clara della Valle (University of Bologna)<sup>6</sup> started by explaining how, in the past twenty-two years, the WPS Agenda has become the vector of a discursive trend towards gender mainstreaming in the fields of conflict management and peacebuilding. However, della Valle noted that much remains to be done in order to realise the Agenda’s transformative potential: several contradictions have emerged so far in the WPS Agenda’s architecture, undermining both its conceptualisation and implementation. She mentioned the problematic relationship with the “securitarian paradigm” and the unbalanced relationship between the Agenda’s pillars. In particular, the insistence of states on protecting women during conflicts, together with the visibility garnered by sexual violence during conflict, has reinforced the stereotypical narrative about women as “victims to protect” rather than “agents of change”. **There is also a colonial frame shaping the Agenda, which has marginalised the non-Western voices in both discourse and practice.** She stressed the apparently unbridgeable gap in the number of male and female peace mediators and peacekeepers, the so-called “malestreaming” episodes within security sector reform programmes, and the “selectivity” in applying the WPS normative framework to some conflicts and not others. Finally, she concluded with the necessity of widening the scope of the WPS Agenda, by talking about “Gender, Peace and Security” and integrating the questions related to masculinities, LGBTQI+ and intersectionality.

Lastly, Mikhail Silvestro Sustersic (AP)<sup>7</sup> discussed the linkages between a gender framework and youth participation in peace and security. Sustersic noted how the term “youth” has also been treated somewhat superficially over the last twenty years. For much of this time, and still today, young men are seen as potential threats, whereas young women often tend to be described only as passive victims. In this context, the birth of the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) Agenda can actually be seen as a direct attempt to challenge this stereotyped narrative. The YPS Agenda was officially launched in 2015 with the adoption, by the UN Security Council, of Resolution 2250. Following in the footsteps of the WPS Agenda, the activists and organisations behind the YPS Agenda sought to show how, in reality, youth are already deeply and actively engaged on issues of peace and security. The concept of gender has been central to the YPS Agenda and in the way it highlights young people’s achievements and also the challenges that they continue to face. In this sense, Sustersic stressed that **natural synergies exist between the WPS and YPS Agendas, which represent an opportunity to increase these two groups’ contributions to sustainable peace**—by, in effect, thinking of them as categories that are not fixed, but rather flexible, adaptive and a key source or resiliency.

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<sup>6</sup> Dr Clara della Valle is a post-doctoral researcher and Adjunct Professor in the Department of Political and Social Sciences of the University of Bologna.

<sup>7</sup> Mikhail Silvestro Sustersic is an expert on gender and peacebuilding with the Agency for Peacebuilding (AP).

# WOMEN AND CONFLICTS FROM SARAJEVO TO KYIV

The second seminar took place at the Forlì Campus of the University of Bologna, on April 21, 2022. The focus of the event was on the role that women have played, and are playing, in conflict and peacebuilding in Eastern Europe. The region has a central role in the development of the WPS Agenda. The adoption of UNSCR 1325 was, in fact, very much driven forth by the international media's reporting of widespread gender-based violence during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Balkans were also a testing ground for the implementation of the Agenda. And today the war in Ukraine is again forcing us to reflect on and review our understanding of women in conflict.

The first two presentations focused on Ukraine. Marco Puleri (University of Bologna)<sup>8</sup> intervened first, and sought to bring a historical perspective to the conflict, linking the most recent events to Ukraine's post-independence history. While Russia's February invasion represented a new and tragic phase in the country's history, Puleri noted that Ukraine had already been rocked by recent crises, most notably the Orange Revolution in 2004 and the Maidan uprisings in 2014. These conflicts should be seen as manifestations not just of tensions between Russia and Ukraine, but also within each country, between the state and civil society. These tensions have brought about a general militarisation of culture and society, linked to the rhetoric of protecting "traditional values" as these are defined by the state. **Destabilisation went beyond the military arena, in the domestic, social and cultural spheres; in parallel, spaces for mutual engagement and dialogue have been reduced, as part of state-led efforts years in the making.** At the same time, changes from conflict have not been all negative, according to Puleri. In particular he noted how, before Russia's aggression in 2022, internal migration from the breakaway regions in Eastern Ukraine had helped to revitalise cultural and social dialogue by bringing intellectuals from the East in contact with peers from other parts of the country.

Oksana Potapova (Theatre for Dialogue)<sup>9</sup> brought her perspective as a Ukrainian citizen deeply affected by the war, and as a researcher and activist in the field of women's rights and peacebuilding. To start, Potapova talked about her work with conflict-affected communities and internally displaced women in Ukraine, which she started in 2014. The work focused on using community-based theatre as a feminist method of mobilisation and knowledge production, leading to advocacy for national WPS policies centred around the concept of human security. The objectives and approach behind "Theatre for Dialogue" are

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<sup>8</sup> Dr Marco Puleri is a Senior Assistant Professor at the Department of Political and Social Sciences of the University of Bologna.

<sup>9</sup> Oksana Potapova is a Ukrainian peace and women's rights activist and the co-founder of the NGO "Theatre for Dialogue".

based on academic foundations and in particular the need to promote de-colonial and participatory methods of knowledge production—i.e., methods that assume that knowledge is not neutral, but a reflection of existing power structures and positionalities of researchers. Working to promote this critical approach is particularly relevant in the case of Ukraine because of the country's history of Russian imperial domination and the historically few opportunities that Ukrainians have had to contribute to knowledge creation. Potapova offered some personal reflections on what was happening in Ukraine, in terms of the gendered aspects of the war, and how her own view and analysis of the WPS Agenda and peace activism have changed since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. One of the most important aspects is that the response to the current war relies on a stark transformation of gender roles in the country. **Most women in Ukraine share and support the country's requests for weapons, and many of them are taking active roles in defence forces. Women are also active in decision-making, diplomacy and politics.** This has brought a reconsideration of "militarised prevention": reaching peace through a balance of military power. Yet, Potapova also acknowledges that this war should not be considered as a "war of equals", and that there continues to be a need for a more thorough analysis of its imperial and colonial nature in order to find a proper ending to this violence, as well as prevent its further outbursts in the region.

The last two presentations focused on the experiences of implementing the WPS Agenda in the Balkans. Silvia Cittadini (University of Bologna)<sup>10</sup> talked about the significance of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the mid-1990's. During and after that war, women and feminist movements had a large role in advocating for peace and reconciliation. This did not influence the international community, however, with the Dayton Peace Agreement having been criticised for excluding women and legitimising nationalistic forces and patriarchal values. This notwithstanding, women activists and women-led organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina continued to advocate for women's participation in the post-conflict, reconstruction era. In doing so, many of them found an ally in the WPS Agenda, which had been officially launched at a critical time for the country's reconstruction and in the midst of continued regional upheaval and conflict. A lot of effort went, for example, in the development of NAPs. Yet, **the situation today is characterised by division: on one side there is the official WPS Agenda implemented through NAPs, which reflect high levels of militarisation; on the other, there are the efforts of women-led CSOs, which are centred on a human security approach.**

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<sup>10</sup> Dr Silvia Cittadini is a post-doctoral researcher at the Department of Political and Social Sciences of the University di Bologna.

In the seminar's final intervention, Sanja Kajnic (University of Bologna)<sup>11</sup> started by recalling the role that violence against women during the wars in the former Yugoslavia played in galvanising national and international action. The evolution of WPS Agenda must be seen, in Kajnic's view, in light of that context and also how it promoted the engagement (or marginalisation) of anti-war feminist networks, which had been very active during and after the conflicts. Kajnic then focused on the NAPs of Croatia and Serbia. These policies suggest a good level of engagement on the WPS Agenda: Croatia has adopted two NAPs, its most recent in 2019; Serbia has also adopted two, its most recent in 2017. **The NAPs reveal, however, the inconsistencies and ambiguities in how the WPS Agenda has been implemented, in those two countries and the Balkans in general.** In particular, the plans have focused on increasing the presence of women in security and military forces, and, indeed, more women have been recruited to become police officers and soldiers. Yet, such efforts continue to reflect a narrow view of the WPS Agenda, in particular on the side of government institutions.



Photo: The Heroinat Memorial in Pristina, Kosovo (Credit: Agency for Peacebuilding).

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<sup>11</sup> Dr Sanja Kajnic is an Adjunct Professor at the Department of Political and Social Sciences of the University of Bologna.

# MEDITERRANEAN PERSPECTIVES ON THE FUTURE OF WOMEN IN PEACE AND SECURITY

The third and last seminar took place again at the Forlì Campus of the University of Bologna on May 19, 2022. The focus remained on the role of women in advancing the Women, Peace and Security Agenda. Only the context changed, moving from Eastern Europe to Western Europe and North Africa. There, too, women have been playing a frontline role in movements and initiatives aimed at bringing about social change, including on matters related to peace and security. Yet, they also continue to be largely marginalised in all decision-making processes.

The first two presentations focused on the perspectives from the European Union, with Laura Davis (European Peacebuilding Liaison Office)<sup>12</sup> in particular discussing the role and significance of policies adopted at pan-European level. The main one is the *EU Strategic Approach to Women, Peace and Security*, which the European External Action Service (EEAS) drafted to guide implementation of UNSCR 1325 across the EU. Adopted in 2019, the Strategic Approach outlines the EEAS' approach to implement Europe's commitments in relation to WPS, including indicators and a dedicated budget. Positively, this document is comprehensive, covering specific policies related to women's participation in mediation, counter-terrorism and the EU's common security and defence missions. Davis further noted that the Strategic approach will soon be integrated into the European Commission's Gender Action Plan—another key EU-wide policy—and that the integrated document will be much stronger since the Commission has financial spending power. In assessing the EU's record, however, Davis highlighted its limited focus on women as victims and called for a move toward a gendered approach to peace and security, for three reasons. The first is to avoid the policy of "add women and stir". Secondly, such an approach would show that promoting gender equality and preventing gender-based violence is everyone's responsibility. And lastly, a gender approach would more effectively include all sexual and gender minorities. Ultimately, Davis acknowledged that **for far too long the WPS Agenda has been a tick box exercise for the EEAS, and that the all-too-common practice of bringing women together in separate decision-making spaces has largely proven ineffective.** This is why a new approach is warranted.

Loredana Teodorescu (Women in International Security Italy and Mediterranean Women Mediators Network)<sup>13</sup> continued exploring the perspectives from Europe, focusing on the example of the

<sup>12</sup> Dr Laura Davis is the Senior Associate for Gender, Peace and Security at the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO).

<sup>13</sup> Dr Loredana Teodorescu is the President of the Italian chapter of Women in International Security (WIIS Italy), and the current Head of the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network (MWMN).



Mediterranean Women’s Mediators Network (MWMN), an initiative launched by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2017 and managed since then by WIIS Italy and the *Istituto Affari Internazionali* (IAI), one of Italy’s leading foreign policy think tanks. The starting point for the creation of MWMN was that, **while women often play an active role in preventing or resolving conflict at the grassroots, their presence in official negotiations remains minimal.** MWMN is thus meant to address four challenges: (i) the lack of political will and financial resources for promoting women’s participation; (ii) the invisibility of women who are actively contributing to peace and security without being seated at the official tables; (iii) a limited view of leadership and a limited recognition of women’s agency; and (iv) a traditional understanding of security and, therefore, of the role women can play on this issue. In order to overcome these challenges, there is the need for new and creative solutions, which can coordinate different actors synergically. This is why, since 2015, women mediators’ networks have been created at regional levels across the world: such networks are valuable examples of how institutions and civil society can connect effectively and make a positive contribution towards a change in mindset. For instance, MWMN is a diverse multi-generational group of around 60 women mediators, which has helped to create solidarity among women, increase their visibility, and make concrete contributions in a number of active conflicts in the region.

The last three presentations focussed on perspectives from North Africa. Clara della Valle (University of Bologna)<sup>14</sup> kicked off by drawing attention to why, in spite of high women’s participation in social movements, the WPS Agenda has not advanced significantly in the region. For example, in Tunisia, the 2011 revolution led to the emergence of a new and variegated panorama of women’s associations, which gave unprecedented recognition to women’s rights and participation. Yet, the Tunisian government adopted its first NAP only in 2018, and this has not been significantly implemented so far. In Morocco, women activists also played an important role during the protests of 2011. Yet, the first Moroccan NAP was adopted only in March 2022, and without much involvement of civil society. These gaps are indicative of the difficult collaboration between states and CSOs in those two countries, and the region more generally. In particular, **institutions often seem to want to simply “add women” to classical defence and security structures, whereas civil society organisations promote a broader concept of human security.** The slow pace of advancement of the WPS Agenda in those countries can also be linked to the nature of governments: unstable in Tunisia’s case, overly centralised in Morocco’s. This limits the space where civil society can engage. In the future, moving forward the WPS Agenda might require refocusing on the specific needs of local realities. Indeed, della Valle concluded that the global debate and practice

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<sup>14</sup> Dr Clara della Valle is a post-doctoral researcher and Adjunct Professor in the Department of Political and Social Sciences of the University of Bologna.

on WPS is not representative of Tunisian and Moroccan women's needs, perspectives and expectations, and has substantially failed in integrating their agency.

Focusing on Tunisia's specific experience, Arbia Jebali (Free Sight Association)<sup>15</sup> recalled the long and cherished history of women's movements in Tunisia, as well as the more recent, and critical, contribution that women made to the country's new constitution, adopted in 2014, which included strong principles of gender equality. Getting to Tunisia's first NAP took longer, however. Jebali noted how Free Sight was one of the first CSOs to start advocating for a national action plan, already in 2015. The following year the National Alliance of Tunisian Women for Peace and Security was created, which is an umbrella network that includes local, regional, and national associations. The NAP was finally adopted in 2018 and represented an important milestone, which allowed for further activities to happen, including, for example, awareness-raising campaigns at national and regional levels. Yet, much work remains to be done. The implementation of the plan was severely limited by the COVID-19 pandemic, and by generally low financial resources. Currently, the second NAP is in its developmental phase, but data from the implementation of the first plan is not available. **Maintaining interconnectivity among associations and at different levels (grassroots, regional and national) remains fundamental, but not always easy.**

Lastly, Fatima Outaleb (Union de l'Action Féminine)<sup>16</sup> spoke about Morocco's experience, which has also been characterised by historical high levels of activism by women. By way of example, Outaleb talked about how it was the efforts of Moroccan women that led to the adoption, in 2004, of a new and more equal Family Code. It was therefore no surprise when, during the events and protests in 2011, women's CSOs began again to mobilise, eventually arriving at proposing nine amendments to the new constitution, all of which were accepted. Success was only partial, however: women's recommendations were, in the new constitution, still subject to Sharia law. This made real equality still a way off. According to Outaleb, the process of advancing the WPS Agenda in Morocco suffered from similar limitations. After a first phase of consultations with CSOs, in 2013, Moroccan women were not involved nor informed of a possible drafting phase. Then, on March 22, 2022, the Minister of Foreign Affairs announced the adoption of Morocco's first NAP, with none of the women's associations that had been involved in consultations being aware of this progress. In the end, the NAP is well written and tailored to the needs and characteristics of Moroccan society, and it is also notable for having a strong focus on preventive diplomacy. Yet, **the NAP was written almost unilaterally by the government, a clear indication of the challenges that women's organisations in Morocco still face as they strive to push for transformative change.**

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<sup>15</sup> Arbia Jebali is the President of Free Sight Association, a leading NGO working on women and youth empowerment in Tunisia.

<sup>16</sup> Fatima Outaleb is the President of the Union de l'Action Féminine, one of the oldest NGOs working to promote women's rights and women empowerment in Morocco.

# CONCLUSIONS

While the three events spanned many specific issues and different geographical contexts, all speakers ultimately converged on three key aspects that characterise where the WPS Agenda is today, and where it could go: inclusion, human security and state-civil society relations.

The WPS Agenda was designed to be inclusive—to shatter the glass ceiling and have more women take active part to more decision-making processes, and not just in relation to peace and security. In this respect, the Agenda has produced notable achievements, but on the whole more still needs to be done. The approach to implementing the WPS Agenda has too often focused on a simple formula: “add women and stir”. This formula, however, has ultimately failed to promote inclusion. To counter this challenge, more and more actors have started to push for a shift from women to gender—with gender seen as a much more relevant concept for framing interventions that should be built on the active participation of all groups affected by violence and on changing power relations within society. Using gender has been key to increasing the participation of young people and LGBTQI+ communities in the WPS Agenda, but more needs to be done. New approaches, including intersectionality, offer interesting potential, but they remain rare. Some countries have also tried to build more inclusive approaches to the implementation of NAPs<sup>17</sup>. Opposition to gender, nationally and internally, is also a strong factor preventing advances on this aspect.

The WPS Agenda was also designed to change the way that security is understood, away from the traditional and military-centred definition and towards one that was based on human security and participation. Over decades of implementing the WPS Agenda, the one concept that has come to be associated with this change is human security. And the consensus is that, if the WPS Agenda were to be truly centred and principles of human security, then it would live up to its transformational nature. Embracing human security would lead, in fact, to address issues beyond the military and security spheres and into sectors that are just as important for both women and men, such as health and justice, just to name a few. Some progress has been made on this front, but most of it remains largely within interventions led by civil society. Governments continue to be resistant to adopting the concept of human security. This remains evident for most of the NAPs adopted to date, but also in broader policy discussions, including those around the role of NATO and the Russia-Ukraine war, or the future of the EU’s external relations.

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<sup>17</sup> The example of Ireland is particularly interesting. Ireland has a WPS Working Group tasked with overseeing the country’s NAP on WPS, which includes both government officials as well as civil society representatives. However, because Ireland’s NAP has a dual focus on both domestic and international issues, the Working Group membership is extremely diverse, including organisations and agencies working both on gender-related domestic issues, and on international peace and security.

Lastly, the extent to which the objectives of the WPS Agenda can be achieved remains dependent on the relations between the state and civil society. The latter is the engine for transformation and innovation—including efforts to adopt the concept of human security or to make the Agenda more inclusive. Examples from Eastern Europe and North Africa show just how much the activism of women and women-led organisations has been able to achieve, yet this is true for all countries in the world.

At the same time, what civil society can do is dependent on what states allow it to do. Where states are not engaged, the WPS Agenda might not be implemented. Where states are engaged, the WPS Agenda can be advanced, but also risks being co-opted or institutionalised. These outcomes are both ineffective, yet they remain awfully common not just in conflict-affected countries, but also in Europe and North America. Ultimately, there has to be a more effective balance between the state and civil society, including around the allocation of resources for implementing the WPS Agenda. An example of this could be the creation of women mediators' networks like MWMN. Another is represented by efforts to localise the WPS Agenda<sup>18</sup>. Overall, it is essential that CSOs can work autonomously, independently and in a free and safe environment—all conditions that have, however, been recently undermined in many countries around the world.



*Photo: Young volunteers working to mobilise women and youth in Tunisia (Credit: Shadi Rouhshahbaz).*

<sup>18</sup> See, for example: Babic-Svetlin, Kika et al., "[Localization of Women, Peace, and Security Agenda: Case Study of Six Local Governments in Bosnia and Herzegovina](#)", Inclusive Security, 2016.



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