



Listen to Women

By Lisa A. Aronsson

Twenty years after its creation, NATO should affirm the strategic significance of the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda and define what it means for an era of great power competition.

Listen to Women

United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) recognized the disproportionate impact of violent conflict on women and girls, and the critical role that women play in peace and security processes. Passed in October 2000, UNSCR 1325 called for strategies to protect women and girls in conflict, and to engage women in all mechanisms, at all levels, and in all stages of conflict.

Today, the WPS Agenda is a legal and political framework for gender in international security that is based on four pillars for policy-making: prevention, protection, participation, and relief and recovery. Implementation is usually measured in each of these four pillars. The United Nations Security Council has passed nine additional resolutions since 2000, which have updated WPS's concepts and definitions, and reinforced the continuing importance of UNSCR 1325.¹ Together, these resolutions and an emerging set of global norms guide the work of security organizations like NATO, steering them toward gender equality and the promotion of women's participation, protection, and equal rights under law.

In 2007, NATO and its partners formally adopted UNSCR 1325 as allied policy, and they have since developed a set of strategies, action plans, and institutional mechanisms to implement it across all of the Alliance's activities. NATO is considered a leading regional security organization when it comes to implementing UNSCR 1325, but as WPS celebrates twenty years, it is at risk of losing momentum in NATO. The Alliance is winding down its Resolute Support Mission in

Afghanistan, the first mission to have gender perspectives incorporated into the entire planning cycle, and it is not entirely clear that lessons will be learned. The risk is that NATO comes to see WPS as "outdated" before it has achieved its objectives in Afghanistan, and before WPS has been widely understood and internalized by NATO officials.

WPS risks slipping down the priority list as out-of-area stabilization operations fade into the past and NATO focuses on threats and challenges closer to home. This could not only jeopardize improvement in women's lives in Afghanistan, which have come at great cost to the Alliance. It could also put NATO at a disadvantage when confronting the complex threats and challenges closer to home. WPS remains a core interest for NATO and a strategic imperative. NATO must reinvigorate the WPS agenda by pressing ahead with gender mainstreaming, increasing relevant training and exercises with partners, and clarifying the relevance of its WPS commitments for a new security environment.

Prior to UNSCR 1325, NATO officials worked for decades to raise awareness about women's experiences in the armed forces and to elevate their status.² In the 1990s, NATO witnessed the use of rape as war tactic in the Balkans, and recognized it as a security concern for NATO, not just a personal tragedy for those involved.³ In Afghanistan, gender perspectives enhanced situational awareness and human terrain understanding. Female Engagement Teams were seen as "adding value" to counterinsurgency operations.⁴ Gender issues also provided a focus for cooperation with local forces, operational partners, international

-
- 1 The United Nations Security Council Resolutions, which combined with UNSCR 1325 collectively comprise the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda, are: 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009), 1889 (2009), 1960 (2010), 2106 (2013), 2122 (2013), 2242 (2015), 2467 (2019), and 2493 (2019).
 - 2 Katharine A.M. Wright, Matthew Hurley, and Jesus Ignacio Gil Ruiz, *NATO, Gender and the Military: Women Organizing from Within*, (London: Routledge, 2019).
 - 3 Swanee Hunt and Douglas Lute, "Inclusive Security: NATO Adapts and Adopts," *Prism*, 2016, 6(1), https://cco.ndu.edu/Portals/96/Documents/prism/prism_6-1/Inclusive%20Security.pdf.
 - 4 Katharine A.M. Wright, "NATO's Adoption of UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security: On Women, Peace and Security Making the Agenda a Reality," *International Political Science Review Science*, 2016, 37(3): 350-61, www.jstor.org/stable/44632286.

Listen to Women

A 19-year-old female Afghan sergeant is interviewed by a Dutch combat reporter during the break of a map reading class she attends with 22 other women. The course is taught as part of the 'Train-the-Trainer' concept used by NATO's Resolute Support Mission. (Source: NATO Instagram)



organizations, and civil society. Eventually the idea that NATO could help “liberate” Afghan women became part of the Alliance’s political agenda.

NATO is winding down operations in Afghanistan, but it should not lose sight of its WPS-related objectives in the country, its own organization, or in other allied missions closer to home. Those objectives are guided by two documents. The first, (adopted in 2007 and periodically updated and revised), is the NATO/EAPC (Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council) Women, Peace and Security: Policy and Action Plan.⁵ This document guides NATO’s overall implementation with three key NATO principles: inclusion, integration, and integrity. The second guiding document, the NATO strategic commands’ Bi-strategic Command Directive 040-001: Integrating UNSCR 1325 and Gender Perspective into the NATO Command Structure,⁶ guides military implementation. It created a gender advisory structure to help incorporate gender into all military structures and activities, from concepts and doctrine to all stages of

the planning cycle for missions and operations. The Alliance also has a high-level Special Representative for Women, Peace, and Security to guide overall implementation.

Reviews of NATO’s achievements generally conclude that the Alliance has robust policies and strategies in place, but that it has faced challenges in implementation and in organizational change. Part of the challenge lies with the member states, which have responsibility for implementation through the adoption of National Action Plans (NAPs). Seven of NATO’s thirty allies still do not have a NAP,⁷ and among those that do, many lack political will, national legislation, or budgets for implementation. Variation among the NAPs also makes widespread and consistent implementation across the Alliance difficult. NATO is not alone in this struggle, either. Other international organizations face similar challenges. The Security Council itself has struggled to implement its own resolutions consistently, and UN Peacekeeping’s record is considered

5 NATO. *NATO/EAPC Women, Peace and Security: Policy and Action Plan 2018*, 2018, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2018_09/20180920_180920-WPS-Action-Plan-2018.pdf.

6 NATO, “Bi-Strategic Command Directive 040-001 (Public Version): Integrating UNSCR 1325 and Gender Perspective into the NATO Command Structure,” 2017, <https://www.act.nato.int/images/stories/structure/genderadvisor/nu0761.pdf>.

7 NATO member states that still do not have a NAP are: Greece, Turkey, Hungary, Bulgaria, Latvia, Romania, and Slovakia. *Peacewomen, WPS Implementation*, <https://www.peacewomen.org/member-states>.

slow, if not “disappointing.”⁸ Recent tensions in the Security Council between the United States, Russia, and China over language on sexual health, civil society, and human rights also undermine the Agenda and slow its implementation by states.⁹

Reviews of NATO policies and activities also highlight challenges with the dissemination of knowledge and guidance. One found that in 2013, a majority of commanders did not know about the 2009 directive on gender in military structures, though they said they valued gender perspectives.¹⁰ Interviews continue to reveal misunderstandings among NATO officials about WPS. Some officials still see it as a “box-ticking” exercise and a women’s issue, rather than as an institutional and strategic imperative.¹¹ Some think women have gender expertise because of their sex and not because of their education, training, and professional experience. This has led in some cases to the appointment of unqualified gender advisors, and it leaves talented advisors feeling they cannot get their jobs done. Gender advisors point to three main challenges: lack of resources, insufficient understanding of operations and missions, and “continuing resistance from their peers in accepting gender as relevant” for their work.¹² These attitudes undermine the gender advisory structure, reinforce the entrenched gender dynamics at NATO, and keep WPS on the margins of the NATO debate.

Some gender advisors report a concern that gender has become a kind of currency in today’s political environment. Some have started to question whether NATO values their work for political ends, or for its concrete deliverables in missions and operations.¹³ Highly visible work on gender policies is increasingly seen to offer some individuals and offices short-term

political capital. Over the longer term, however, this can backfire. It diverts attention from key objectives, and it undermines the advisory structure. It also invites the kind of external scrutiny that can discredit NATO by revealing the gaps between NATO’s ambition when it comes to WPS and its actual achievements. Critically, it also risks undermining the important efforts at mainstreaming gender perspectives into all of NATO’s work across departments and headquarters. Incorporating gender perspectives into the everyday processes and procedures, and into what guides the militaries (concepts, doctrine, training, etc.), are the efforts that can lead to real organizational change.

Despite all this, NATO is still considered a leader when it comes to implementing UNSCR 1325, which is why renewed commitment is so important. NATO has much to offer the WPS community as a political organization, international standard-setter, and military alliance with the ability to bring like-minded states into a command structure. If NATO can improve implementation and advance mainstreaming within its organization, others will take note. NATO should focus on improving cooperation between its civilian and its military bodies, and it should increase accountability mechanisms through expanded use of gender markers, scorecards, and other such mechanisms.¹⁴ Officers from member states and partner states are constantly rotating through the Alliance, and NATO can help move the needle in all of those states by changing mindsets through its own process of organizational change. Bottom-up mainstreaming should be prioritized in the short term. It is the most effective tool for changing attitudes and opening up channels for new thinking.

NATO is merging WPS with its broader work on Human Security. The connection makes sense given that the

8 Paul Kirby and Laura J. Shepherd, “The Futures Past of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda,” *International Affairs*, 2016, 92(2): 378.

9 Catherine O’Rourke and Aisling Swaine, “Heading to Twenty: Perils and Promises of WPS Resolution 2493,” *WPS in Practice*, London School of Economics, November 2019, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/wps/2019/11/12/heading-to-twenty-perils-and-promises-of-wps-resolution-2493>.

10 Helene Lackenbauer and Richard Langlais, eds., *Review of the Practical Implications of UNSCR 1325 for the Conduct of NATO-Led Operations and Missions*, May 2013, 4, https://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_2013_10/20131021_131023-UNSCR1325-review-final.pdf.

11 Wright, “NATO’s Adoption.”

12 Megan Bastick and Claire Duncanson, “Agents of Change? Gender Advisors in NATO Militaries,” *International Peacekeeping*, 2018, 25(4): 554-577.

13 Ibid. 567-568.

14 Jamila Seftaoui, “Women, Peace, and Security: What it Takes to Achieve Relevant Impacts,” *Resilience and Resolution: A Compendium of Essays on Women, Peace and Security*, NATO Office of the SGSR, March, 2019: 41-45, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2019_03/20190307_190308-wps-essays-en.pdf.

agendas are mutually reinforcing.¹⁵ It can also help WPS gain political traction among allies, especially when NATO is engaged in humanitarian and pandemic relief, as well as in building cohesion and societal resilience. NATO should be careful not to let the Human Security agenda obscure the fact that allies and partners have responsibilities to stay the course on the implementation of UNSCR 1325, however. The military operationalization of the Human Security agenda is much less developed than is WPS. NATO officials should also consider the strategic relevance of WPS for its traditional collective defense and deterrence challenges. Given the complex and unstable security environment, NATO can generate more creative and successful solutions by leveraging its entire talent pool as well as emerging technologies. Providing equal security for men, women, boys, and girls can also lead to more societal cohesion and resilience and it can expand NATO's global political reach.

As NATO completes its reflection process, it should mark the twentieth anniversary of UNSCR 1325 by recommitting to the WPS Agenda, and by defining the purpose of NATO's continuing commitments in the context of a new and uncertain security environment. If NATO does not, its achievements will start to slip. The rights of women could backtrack in Afghanistan and elsewhere, divisions and inequalities closer to home will fester, and wavering commitments to values could further undermine strength and solidarity in the Alliance. NATO could open itself up to new

vulnerabilities in the conventional sense but also in information, political, and other types of warfare.

NATO officials have generally understood the relevance of WPS for out-of-area missions of the past, but few are currently thinking about its intrinsic value or its strategic relevance for an era of great power competition. NATO should invite such a debate, and ensure it takes place at the highest levels. A clear and simple vision for the future of NATO's WPS Agenda, coupled with a robust policy platform that is progressively implemented into training and exercises, including into NATO's conventional deterrence missions, would go a long way toward changing attitudes and facilitating implementation of UNSCR 1325.

In seeking to reinvigorate WPS, the Alliance needs to answer some tough questions about how to achieve success. Is NATO's commitment to WPS driven by its legal responsibilities? Does NATO value gender equality for its own sake and does it believe the armed forces should represent society? Or is NATO's work on UNSCR 1325 primarily geared toward addressing manpower shortages, modernizing its forces, or stamping out problems of sexual harassment and abuse? WPS stands at a crossroads in NATO. It could lose momentum and be a source of weakness if implementation stalls. But it could also be a source of strength for NATO—politically, militarily, and in terms of its cohesion—if the Alliance can reinvigorate WPS internally and make progress toward implementation.

Lisa A. Aronsson is a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council. She received her PhD in International Relations and MA in International and 20th Century History from the London School of Economics.

¹⁵ NATO's Human Security Umbrella includes among others: Protection of Civilians, Children and Armed Conflict, Cultural Property Protection, and Youth and Security. "Introductory Resource Guide: Women, Peace, and Security," NATO, 2019, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2019_07/20190710_1907-wps-resource-guide.pdf