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Transforming the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Africa: *What is to Be Done?*

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Summary

This working paper reflects on twenty-five years of the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda in Africa. It contends that though there is progress in implementing the agenda, the overarching aims of the agenda, namely, greater participation and security for women, have yet to be realized. The changed geo-political and/or conflict context, as well as limitations with the conceptualization of, and strategic approaches to, WPS, impact implementation. The paper reflects on the evolution, implementation, and challenges of the WPS agenda by providing a background on the formation of the agenda and the AU frameworks and organs related to WPS, and an indication on how to move the agenda forward. In particular, it calls for innovation and a recentering of the agenda so that it can develop alternative peace and security structures and processes, i.e. that women need to lead on the dialogue and design of alternative peace and security architectures. Women also need to emulate the movements that gave rise to the WPS agenda and use collective mobilization, soft power, and thought leadership to shift mindsets, ideologies, principles and infrastructures of peace and security so that they are just, inclusive, democratic, and advance the peaceful resolution of disputes.

Table of contents

Acronyms	4
1. Introduction	5
2. Background	5
3. Conceptualizing the WPS Agenda	8
4. Frameworks, Structures and Strategies for Implementing the WPS at the African Union	10
5. Moving the WPS Agenda Forward	15
6. Key Findings	17
7. References	19
Imprint	22

Acronyms

AGA	African Governance Architecture
AU	African Union
APSA	African Peace and Security Architecture
BPfA	Beijing Platform for Action
CEDAW	Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CRF	Continental Results Framework
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
ECCAS	Economic Community of Central African States
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EOM	Election Observation Mission
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
IPI	International Peace Institute
M&E	monitoring & evaluation
NAPs	National Action Plans
OAU	Organization of African Unity
OSE	Office of the Special Envoy
PAPS	Political Affairs, Peace and Security
PSC	Peace and Security Council
PSO	Peace Support Operations
RAPs	Regional Action Plans
RECs	Regional Economic Communities
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SSR	Security Sector Reform
STYIP	Second Ten-Year Implementation Plan for Agenda 2063
UN	United Nations
UN DPKO	UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations
UNECA	UN Economic Commission for Africa
UNSC	UN Security Council
UNSCR	UN Security Council Resolution
WILPF	Women's International League for Peace and Freedom
WPS	Women, Peace and Security

1. Introduction

In 2025, the Women Peace and Security (WPS) agenda received widespread attention as policymakers, researchers, practitioners, and activists celebrated both the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action (United Nations, 1995) and the 25th anniversary of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 (UNSC, 2000). After decades of advocacy, convening, producing evidence, learning, and implementation, there is marked progress in norm and agenda setting and knowledge production, but less so in the substantive expectations of women's participation in peace processes and in their everyday experiences of security in conflict and non-conflict situations. Progress can, for example, be seen in the number of frameworks, UNSC resolutions, National Action Plans (NAPs) and Regional Action Plans (RAPs) adopted; the deployment of gender advisors in peace support operations; the institutionalization of the agenda in intergovernmental organizations; the formation of networks to promote women's participation in mediation; and there has been a marginal increase, since 2000, in the number of women participating in conflict prevention, peace-making, peace-keeping and peacebuilding. The overarching objective of the WPS agenda, however, is to have greater peace and security for women. This objective is to be achieved through the meaningful participation of women in peace and security, the protection of women during conflict, the prevention of violence against women, and the mainstreaming of gender in relief and recovery efforts (as elaborated in UNSCR 1325). Meeting these goals has proved elusive. This paper contends that the WPS agenda's limitations are due to geopolitical shifts with concomitant changes in conflict contexts, conceptual and strategic inadequacies inherent in the agenda, insufficient resourcing, and the lack of prioritization by policymakers. These factors necessitate a reset of the implementation strategy of the WPS agenda. This working paper therefore reflects on the evolution, achievements and challenges of the WPS agenda, especially as it relates to Africa. It argues for bolder, more comprehensive, and transformative implementation of WPS, and that this requires (re-)situating women as thought leaders and central agents in designing new peace and security architectures.

2. Background

Women, throughout the centuries, have been instrumental in forging peace and security, as for example, warriors, negotiators, mediators and advisors. Warfare and peace-making have, however, been constructed as a male activity: ideas that were reinforced in the medieval period and through the spread of Christianity and further cemented in the World War I. Indeed, combat began to inscribe the essence of male identity. In Africa, warfare, too, was largely a male preserve, but not exclusively so. The spread of colonization brought with it ideas about who were protectors and who needed protection, and how that protection would be provided. There are many examples of women playing key roles as mediators and warriors in pre-colonial Africa, for example, the Dahomey Amazons of Benin (all female military regiment), Queen Amina of Zaria (famous female warrior – Nigeria), Yaa-Asantewaa of Ghana (commanded an army to fight the British), Muhumusa of Rwanda (led a major armed rebellion against German colonial rule), Queen Nzinga-Mbande of Angola (military strategist and mediator), Krotoa of South Africa (interpreter, negotiator, peace-maker), Queen Modjadji in South Africa (the rain queen acted as broker of peace in the region), and so forth. Interestingly, too, is that in the post-colonial era, President Gaddafi of Libya surrounded himself with a regiment of women bodyguards.

The impetus to advocate and organize for women's participation in peace and security can be seen in the 20th century, post-World War I, when women campaigned to be fully integrated into the armed forces. Some European women, in 1915, also actively promoted peace through the establishment of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) in the Netherlands. African women have a long history of participating in anti-colonial struggles, many in combat positions. Their input into and adoption of the Kampala Action Plan on Women and Peace in 1993 (published in 1994) also informed the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action's (1995) Chapter 4 E on Women and Armed Conflict, which posits women as both victims of conflict and agents of peace. The UN's Windhoek Declaration on Mainstreaming a Gender Perspective in Multi-Dimensional Peace Support Operations (2000) was a precursor to the adoption of UNSCR 1325. Namibia played an important role in ushering in the adoption of both frameworks and remained a key champion of the WPS agenda globally. African women who were part of formulating these WPS frameworks were motivated by their experiences as fighters in armed liberation movements, as local and national peacebuilders, and by the prevalence of large-scale conflict-related sexual violence.

The lack of acknowledgement and visibility of women's experiences, as actors and victims in conflict and post conflict-situations, and their exclusion from peace and security decision-making, were key drivers for the rise of a global movement of feminist, activist, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers that [re]emerged in the 1990s to advocate for women's inclusion into, and the transformation of, international and national peace and security structures and processes. The then global and continental conflict context enabled a shift in approach, as the Cold War had ended and human security had become a dominant lens through which to view peace and security.

The transformation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) into the African Union (AU) in 2002 provided an opportunity to centre gender in the continental body. The AU adopted the gender parity principle, integrated the WPS agenda into the operationalization of the AU Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), and established an Office of the Special Envoy (OSE) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) to advance the realization of the agenda. Although the AU and its member states have made great strides in the adoption of frameworks and institutionalization of the WPS agenda, much still needs to be done to translate it into the everyday lived experiences of women, i.e., many women remain vulnerable, insecure, and sexually, physically and emotionally abused on the continent, especially in conflict situations.

The emergence of a multipolar world has been accompanied by geopolitical shifts that have increased tensions between major global actors, strained transatlantic alliances, weaponized trade, intensified unilateral state actions, and renewed a scramble for critical minerals. The Global South has strengthened its voice in multilateral forums, formed alternative blocs such as BRICS, and is making attempts to de-dollarize. There has been a rise in interstate and intra-state armed conflicts, a spread of violent extremism and terrorism, the re-emergence of coups d'état, disrespect for the sovereignty of states, fragmentation within and between states, a decline in public trust of democratic institutions and a concomitant rise in conservatism, narrow nationalism and authoritarianism. Peace and security architectures such as the UNSC and the African Union's APSA are hamstrung by this geopolitical context and thus mainly unable to respond effectively to the new conflict context. Transactional peace-making, the jettisoning of long-established norms and standards such as the peaceful resolution of disputes, human rights, and gender equality, are also all being normalized.

In this global context, the WPS agenda is peripheral, and policymakers merely pay lip ser-

vice to it. Yet the motivating factors for initiating the WPS agenda remain as relevant today as they were at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. The WPS agenda, therefore, requires new thought leadership and strategic approaches. Moments of crisis, such as the current global environment, are also an opportunity for change. WPS advocates need to seize the moment to provide the thought leadership and agency on broader peace and security issues, thereby centrally situating women in decision-making on conflict management. There were many global initiatives in 2025 attempting to revisit peace and security, for example, the UN's New Agenda for Peace (2023), the Pact for the Future (United Nations, 2024b), the Review of the Peace-building Architecture (United Nations, 2025), and the revisiting of the Future for Peace-keeping Operations (Wane et al., 2025). Women's voices remained marginal to these processes, and none of the outcomes went far enough in reimagining processes and structures for just, fair, inclusive and sustainable peace and security. The key documents for future agenda setting therefore, only broadly point to the need to "dismantle patriarchal power structures" (United Nations 2024b, 10) by "listening to women" and "consideration of the role of men," or reconfirm their commitment to gender equality and the meaningful participation of women in decision-making (ibid.) without an analysis of why these efforts have borne so little fruit over the past 30 years.

Africa has contributed to the above deliberations and discussion documents. It has also held its own reflections in, for example, the AU High-Level Retreats of Special Representatives and Special Envoys. Moreover, it has reflected on the implementation of the WPS agenda in, for example, the regional evaluations that took place in West Africa, Southern Africa, North Africa, and East Africa. The Namibian government's hosting of a celebration on 25 years of WPS implementation and the AU Office of the Special Envoy's 5th and 6th High-Level Forums on Women, Peace and Security were also spaces to reflect on the agenda. However, here too, substantive critical reflection and envisioning new approaches were limited (African Union 2024a, 2024b). The long-cited challenges of the WPS agenda were reiterated in these forums, i.e., the limited access to funding and the lack of political will (AU PSC, 2023). The forums are well-intentioned but their format does not lend itself to the courageous conversations that must be had, i.e., they are largely diplomatic and often held in parallel to the mainstream peace and security rethinking processes. This creates a gap in translating the thinking emanating from the WPS meetings into future peace and security doctrines. The proponents of the WPS agenda also need to think beyond capacity building, advocacy, and monitoring and evaluation, which have not yielded the expected results, to develop more innovative interventions that can meaningfully advance WPS implementation.

Women must strive to lead and integrate their thinking into processes for resetting the malestream peace and security agenda. We are in an "interregnum moment" (allegedly coined by the Italian philosopher and communist Antonio Gramsci in his Prison Notebooks, 1929–1935) in global and continental peace and security ideation, and as in the 1990s, this presents an opportunity structure for transformation. To restate a central point in this working paper: women must now claim their space and provide the necessary leadership to reshape global and continental peace and security architectures. This centers their participation from inception and eliminates the calls for inclusion that have dominated the agenda from 1915. The working paper will now further examine the challenges of conceptualizing and implementing the WPS agenda and indicate the strengths and limitations of the AU and its member states in promoting its implementation. The paper highlights key principles, processes, and methodologies that should inform a reset of the WPS agenda.

3. Conceptualizing the WPS Agenda

The WPS agenda is characterized by both change and continuity. It has undergone shifts in its conceptualization and emphasis that influence the nature of advocacy and implementation, and the actors responsible for them, globally and continentally. The WPS agenda has shifted from its peace activism and feminist intellectual roots to state and intergovernmental corridors of power, which has increased its visibility but has blunted its transformative capacity. The emphasis has shifted from providing alternative feminist approaches to peace and security to women's representation in the peace and security sector (mediation and peacekeeping in particular), with the assumption that women's presence is sufficient to engender the changes envisioned by the WPS agenda.

There is, however, also continuity in the WPS agenda on the need to recognize women as victims of war and actors in peace and security and to amplify their voices in international peace and security matters. These ideas find an early expression in the work of the WILPF and in the viewpoints of international relations feminists such as Cynthia Enloe (1989, 1993), V. Spike Peterson (1992), J. Ann Tickner (1992), Betty Reardon (1993), and others. The WILPF, for example, called for women to be mediators and special envoys as early as 1915 (WILPF, 2026).

The activism and body of ideas, prior to 2000, centered on the peaceful resolution of disputes, demilitarization, the need for alternative paradigms and the transformation of peace and security architectures. WILPF called for a Society of Nations that would promote constructive peace, the reduction of military expenditure, reform of the UNSC, while feminist international relations questioned the invisibility of women's experiences during conflict and the focus on inclusion without a concomitant shift in power relations. Women were largely excluded from the League of Nations and from the formation of the UN. Only four women were signatories to the UN Charter (UN Women, 2019). The Commission on the Status of Women was established a year later, in 1946, to promote women's equality and rights globally. This entity transformed into the Division for the Advancement of Women in 1978 and into UN Women in 2010. The right to women's equality was established with the ushering in of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1979. However, the emphasis of the Commission was largely on women's inclusion in politics and development. CEDAW's General Recommendation 30, on women in conflict prevention, conflict, and post-conflict situations, was only adopted in 2013.

African women, as evidenced in the Kampala Action Plan on Women and Peace, sought to link women's peace and security to economic and social justice issues, and noted the need for peace education in schools, the need to reduce defense expenditure, and that the OAU establish a Committee of Women Ministers that could articulate women's views on global and regional issues. They also called for women to be included in the OAU's Conflict Prevention Management and Resolution Mechanism and for women "to develop and support programmes to introduce, promote and sustain peace" (OAU and UNECA, 1994). The ideas outlined above find expression in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted in 1995. The Beijing Declaration noted that,

women are increasingly establishing themselves as central actors in a variety of capacities in the movement of humanity for peace. Their full participation in decision-making, conflict prevention and resolution and all of the peace initiatives is essential to the realisation of lasting peace" (UN, 1995, para. or page?).

These policy frameworks were informed by, and further generated, activism and intellectual pursuit of, women who sought to (1) make peace in war affected countries, (2) address

conflict related sexual violence, and (3) make visible the differing roles women played during conflict, i.e., as victims and actors (humanitarian workers, peacebuilders, armed fighters and as fulfilling the reproductive functions for militaries) (Olonisakin et al., 2015; Hendricks, 2015) Scholars analyzed the gendered nature of the peace and security sector and recognized the absence of women from peace-making and peacekeeping, as well as the opportunity to transform social relations in post-conflict settings if women were part of peace processes (Meintjies et al., 2002). The experiences of women peacebuilders in, for example, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Uganda, Rwanda, and Somalia were documented to illustrate the varied local peacebuilding roles women played during conflict, and their marginalization from formal peace processes (Alarakhlia, 2000).

The following can be elicited from the early conceptualizations of the WPS agenda:

- (1) Women sought to understand, to be included, and to transform the broader peace and security agenda
- (2) Women's inclusion was premised based on rights and agency, not victimhood and instrumentality
- (3) Women positioned themselves as thought leaders on and agents for peace and security
- (4) Women campaigned for an end to all wars and for disarmament
- (5) Women connected the attainment of peace to social and economic justice
- (6) Women challenged the gendered construction of war and peace, the gendered power relations that excluded women from peace and security decision-making, structures and processes, and those that contributed to women being victims of rape, torture, abduction, sex-slaves and the like.

There was therefore a rich archive of women's intellectual engagement and activism in relation to peace and security before the adoption of UNSC Resolution 1325 in 2000 and its translation into the AU policy landscape. UNSCR 1325 and the subsequent nine WPS resolutions focused on including women in peacekeeping and mediation and on protecting women in conflict situations, primarily from conflict-related sexual violence. The agenda was essentially narrowed to advocacy for inclusion in specific aspects of the peace process (as a peacekeeper and a mediator) in a peacebuilding arena that is much more complex, multi-pronged, and multi-layered. By 2015, the inclusion of women as mediators had become the dominant focus of the WPS agenda for practitioners and policymakers. There has now also been a shift towards women's inclusion in conflict prevention (corresponding to the shift in the UN itself) and towards localization (women's mediation in community-based conflict). The reasons advanced for inclusion are often instrumental and underpinned by an essentialist logic, for example, that women are more peaceful and that their inclusion will lead to a reduction of, and accountability for, violence against women in conflict areas. African feminist security analysts have, more than a decade ago, raised caution about the statist, essentialist and instrumentalist turn of the WPS agenda, but this work has largely been marginalized in the WPS discourse (see for example Clarke, 2008; Mama, 2012; Olonisakin et al., 2011; and Hudson, 2017). Consequently, there is a de-politicization of the agenda in favor of more technocratic pursuits of developing guidelines, training, and the like. The WPS Agenda has also been critiqued for its lack of an account of intersectionality and for its homogenization of women.

Proponents of the WPS agenda are largely focused on ending wars ("silencing the guns") through state-led mediation processes, in which women's participation is posited as a key variable for the sustainability of peace agreements. There is far less attention on the

shifting drivers of conflict, the limitations of the dominant models of peace processes (especially with the turn towards peace deals), and the revision of the structures and processes that are required during the conflict and post-conflict phases to achieve a “positive peace.” These limitations in conceptualization and implementation contribute to the marginalization of the WPS agenda within mainstream peace and security and to its run down a rabbit hole of endless justification, training, and producing “empirical evidence.” This marginalization, in turn, is feeding a discourse of “localization” as the WPS advocates seek to retain relevance. The focus on power relations, on human rights and on transforming our ideas about, and processes and structures for, attaining peace and security, globally, regionally and nationally has been diverted.

As the international context reverts to Realist conceptualizations of the world order, where military power and material interests hold sway, and to national contexts where those who are engaged in warfare have way less interest in principles and ideas and the protection of human rights, the space for the WPS agenda, too, is shrinking. A seat at the peace table – despite the rhetoric – is becoming rarer and will increasingly become so if it is sought *only* based on identity: being a woman.

This overview provides a backdrop upon which to review the implementation of the WPS agenda in Africa. Its implementation on the continent is shaped by, and shapes, these larger occurrences.

4. Frameworks, Structures and Strategies for Implementing the WPS at the African Union

Frameworks

The AU has produced an array of frameworks, structures and instruments that serve to institutionalize the WPS agenda. Article 4(l) of the Constitutive Act of the African Union (OAU, 2000) situates the “promotion of gender equality” as a principle of the organization. The AU adopted a Gender Parity Principle for all its structures policies and practices at the Summit of the Heads of State and Government in Durban, in 2002. This was a path-breaking intervention to achieve gender equality in intergovernmental institutions. The adoption of the AU Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (popularly known as the Maputo Protocol), in 2003, further embedded women’s rights to equality, peace and security. For example, the right to bodily integrity and security of person, the right to a peaceful existence and to “participate in the promotion and maintenance of peace.” It also called for the protection of civilians, including women, in the event of armed conflict.

The Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (2004) called for the “full and effective representation of women in peace”, and for the appointment of women as Special Envoys and Special Representatives (African Union, 2004). The AU Gender Policy (African Union, 2009) sought to promote women’s effective participation in peacekeeping, peacebuilding and post conflict reconstruction. It also called for the creation of “regional consultative platforms on peace for the exchange of knowledge and information and harmonization of strategies” and to “mobilise and include female leaders in mediation processes.” These policies were in line with UNSCRs 1325, 1820, 1888, and 1889. However, the policy also called for the need for regular regional and continental critical reflection on the strategies to be adopted to promote WPS on the continent. The implementation of this aspect of the policy has largely been through the AU OSE’s establishment of a High-Level Annual

Forum on Women Peace and Security in 2020 (there have been six forums held to date) and through the regional engagements on WPS implementation hosted by the AU Gender Program in 2025.

Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want (AU Commission, 2015) is considered as the “blueprint and masterplan” for Africa’s transformation. This framework reasserts the principle of gender equality in all spheres and its outcomes document calls for, among other, (1) gender parity in control, representation, advancement for all AU Organs and the REC’s, and (2) all forms of violence against women would be reduced by a third in 2023 (ibid.). There is no flagship project related to women’s participation in peace and security. The Second Ten-Year Implementation Plan for Agenda 2063 (STYIP) speaks to mainstreaming peace education and promoting reconciliation and alternative dispute mechanism and to “mainstream gender in peace and security discourses and enhance the role of women in peace and security...” (AU Commission, 2024, p. 68).

The AU Master Roadmap for Silencing the Guns by 2020 (African Union, 2016), however, merely refers to training mediators and in brackets (including women). The implementation of the WPS agenda at the AU is skewed towards training women to become mediators and to their inclusion in peace-making. Hundreds of women have been trained as mediators directly by the Network of African Women in Conflict Prevention and Mediation – in short Fem-Wise Africa – and many more through other NGOs, but few have been deployed as mediators (and they have been senior woman such as the former South African vice-president Dr Phumzile Mlambo Nqocuka). This emphasis on mediation has meant that other aspects of the peace process (peacekeeping, post-conflict reconstruction, security sector reform, etc.), have largely been neglected, leading to a partial understanding and skills acquisition, for a more comprehensive implementation of the WPS agenda. It has also meant that the other units in the Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security (AU Border Program, the Continental Early Warning System, etc.) have not had to engage much with the WPS agenda.

In addition, the AU adopted the Strategy for Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment (GEWE) 2018–2028 which has a pillar on Dignity, Security and Resilience. Outcome 2.2 seeks to reduce all forms of violence against women and for women to participate equally in peace processes.

Structures and Strategies

There are multiple, often competing spaces, in which the WPS agenda is institutionalized within the AU. The AU Panel of the Wise, one of the five APSA pillars, was established in 2007. It was mandated to provide support with the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts in Africa (Gomes Porto and Ngandu, 2015). The first panel (2007–2010) had five members, two of which were women, Brigalia Bam of South Africa, and Elizabeth Pognon of Benin. The inclusion of women in the Panel of the Wise reflected the political will to implement the gender parity principle as well as to include women in mediation (although this was more towards shuttle diplomacy efforts to prevent conflict). Marie Madelaine Kalala Ngoy of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Mary Chonery-Hesse of Ghana were members of the second panel (2011–2014). The panel actively engaged in preventative diplomacy, conducted fact-finding missions, deployed good offices, conducted solidarity missions, and organized dialogues (Gomes Porto and Ngandu, 2015). The third panel was inaugurated in September 2014 and Specioza Kazibwe of Uganda and Luisa Dioga of Mozambique joined the panel, with Dioga becoming its chair. The members of the fourth panel (2018–2022) had three women: Specioza Kazibwe remained, and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of

Liberia and Honorine Biteghe of Gabon joined. In 2022, the fifth panel was constituted with Justice Effie Owuor of Kenya and Dr Phumzile Mlambo Ngcuka of South Africa as members. Both have been re-elected to the sixth panel in 2025.

This was potentially an important space for women to engage in conflict management efforts. The experiences – strengths, challenges and opportunities – have not as yet been adequately captured and reflected upon. The panel's women are usually skilled with a stature that can command the necessary respect of warring parties. They also have the backing of the AU Chairperson, and that of their member states, and come close to being the "Distinguished Statesmen" – who were portrayed in the UN's Agenda for Peace as the most appropriate for mediation.

However, there was also a noticeable decline in the deployment of the AU Panel of the Wise, post-2014, and the Peace and Security Council (PSC) had noted in 2023 that they had not received a briefing from the panel since 2017 (AU PSC, 2023). This period seems to correspond with the intensification of conflicts on the continent, yet the Panel of the Wise was rarely called upon, nor did it have the resources to initiate its own interventions (which statutorily it was entitled to do). The panel presented an opportunity to deploy women in AU-led mediation engagements, but the AU, whilst adopting policies in this regard, seemingly marginalized the panel's women as potential mediators. The AU recently deployed Dr Mlambo-Ngcuka as a mediator in the Ethiopian mediation process, but this seems to be too little, too late. There was also no woman representing either party at the actual cease-fire negotiations.

The Panel of the Wise has however left its mark on WPS in the AU. It decided on Women in Armed Conflict for its 2010 theme and commissioned Femmes Africa Solidarité – then headed by Madame Bineta Diop – and the International Peace Institute (IPI) to do the study (Gomes Porto and Ngandu, 2015). This report called for the establishment of an Office of the Special Envoy on Women Peace and Security; the launch of a Gender Peace and Security Program; an Open PSC Session on WPS; and for the establishment of FemWise-Africa (Engel, 2022).

The OSE was launched in 2014 with Benita Diop as the Special Envoy. She reported directly to the Chairperson of the AU Commission, who at the time was Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma of South Africa, a known advocate for WPS. During her tenure at the helm of the AUC, there was rapid progress in the institutionalization of WPS. Having WPS champions within organizations remains a key factor for progress. The OSE was highly productive in ensuring norm diffusion on WPS throughout the AU and its constituent member states. It sought to increase the number of women into AU peacekeeping missions, mediation, election observation, and conflict prevention and to monitor the implementation of WPS in AU member states, as well as promote the adoption of NAPS. In this regard, the OSE developed a Continental Results Framework (CRF), in 2019, as a monitoring and evaluation tool for WPS implementation in Africa. The success of the tool is however dependent on member states sending the OSE information on WPS achievements, and many states have not done so. To date, only one report has been produced (in 2020), though the delivery of a second report is said to be imminent.

The OSE is poorly resourced in terms of human capacity and access to sustainable funding. Madame Diop tried to build synergy with the other units at the AU working on WPS, established partnerships and used available continental expertise to augment the capacity gaps. This enabled the OSE to conduct training, deploy solidarity missions, host conferences and forums, as well as promote the implementation of NAPS. Madame Diop is globally renowned for the path-breaking work she has undertaken. She is a skilled diplomat and

mediator in her own right who should be deployed in this capacity. She left office after more than ten years and was succeeded on 1 July 2025 by Ambassador Liberata Mulamula, a Tanzanian career diplomat.

The OSE hosts an Annual Forum on Women Peace and Security (WPS). The 4th Forum was on “Enhancing Women’s Participation and Leadership in Peace and Security Processes in Africa” held in December 2023. At this meeting it was decided that the PSC should adopt a policy on gender quotas for women’s participation in conflict prevention, peace processes and electoral observation (African Union, 2023). The Ministerial High-Level seminar of AU PSC in March 2024 (Swakopmund, Namibia) called on the PSC to adopt a gender parity policy for all AU led mediation processes. Accordingly, a Policy Framework for Equity for Women’s Participation in Mediation in AU-led processes is currently being developed and championed by the OSE. Calling for co-led mediation is a simple way to address the numbers challenge for women in mediation in Africa. The shift towards more broadly building the capacity for women to deploy in mediation support teams is a welcome change from the preoccupation of women only being the mediators. However, how can it be ensured that the new framework for co-mediation is translated into practice given previous experience of adopted gender related frameworks being ignored by decision-makers and bureaucrats alike at the AU? How can it be ensured that those women who are capable are deployed in various capacities of the peace process?

There are many variables to be considered during mediation, including the mediator preferences of the warring factions, the principles and interests driving the antagonists, and the kind of “peace tables” being created: are they peace tables or war tables? The former is more predisposed to being inclusive, comprehensive and to seeking a more just peace, whilst the latter is focused on what is to be gained from the spoils of war. Current guarantees for a seat at the table and a share of power are more about the ability to inflict harm and potential to spill more blood if not appeased, i.e., the principle of gender equality does not guarantee women a seat at the current peace tables. The AU has been more successful at deploying women to lead AU Election Observation Missions (EOMs), for example, its women only EOM to the Seychelles in 2016, and deploying Dr Speciosa Kazibwe as head of the AU EOM to Namibia in 2024.

The 5th Annual Forum was titled “Recalibrating the Women Peace and Security Agenda” (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 5–6 December 2024). The outcomes document called for an increase in support to women’s peace networks, increase in funding, an accountability framework for the Swakopmund process, strengthen capacity building and monitoring & evaluation (M&E), amplifying women’s voices in global platforms by providing status reports on WPS, documenting the roles of women at Track II and Track III levels and establishing a network of various media forms to advance WPS (African Union, 2024a). The theme of the forum was in line with the deliberations that had taken place globally and continentally on resetting peace and security. However, the outcomes document does not go far enough in terms of resetting the agenda both substantively and strategically. It would have been more beneficial for these discussions to find a hearing at the AU High-Level Retreat of Special Representatives and Special Envoys in 2024, where thought leadership on the broader peace and security agenda was being advocated. Having separate events perpetuates the division between the *malestream* peace and security agenda and the WPS agenda and does not enable women to participate in broader discussions of reconstructing the continental peace and security architecture.

The speech by the UN Secretary General’s Representative to the AU, Parfait Onanga-Anyanga, at the 5th High-Level Forum, noted that there should be more emphasis on localization; intersectionality; enhancing collaboration; designing programs that resonate with the his-

tories and cultures of peoples, the need to bring in more young women, and the need for more evidence based initiatives (Onanga-Anyanga, 2024) This has been the approach for the last decade and has not substantially shifted the implementation of the agenda.

The 6th High-Level Forum was held under the theme “25 years of UNSCR 1325: Leveraging Multilateral Diplomacy to Reinforce Africa’s Women Peace and Security Agenda in a Shifting Global Order” (Tunis, Tunisia, 9–10 December 2025). This forum was more far-reaching in its deliberations and call to action. It called for, among other, the recognition of women as agents shaping peace and security; promoting intra-African solidarity, South-South co-operation, and cross regional partnerships to reinforce shared priorities and protect normative gains; to institutionalize WPS in diplomacy, embedding the principles, commitments, and practices of the WPS agenda into the core structures and processes and cultures of diplomatic institutions at national, continental and international levels; and to mainstream WPS in annual work plans, summit themes, and multi-lateral engagements, reinforcing Africa’s leadership in protecting and advancing the rights, agency and leadership of women and girls in peace and security (African Union, 2025).

The Network of African Women in Conflict Prevention and Mediation (FemWise-Africa) is another key AU mechanism for the institutionalization of the WPS agenda (Vern, 2024). Established in 2017, it is a subsidiary mechanism of the Panel of the Wise. FemWise staff report directly to the Commissioner Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS) (Engel, 2022) and this access provides them more space to get their projects implemented. Their target audience, however, are women in communities rather than a prominent focus on changing mindsets and practices within the AU and RECs in order to achieve goals. The first cohort of FemWise had approximately 500 members. Its second cohort is much smaller, 56 members. Training has occupied much of the network’s time. Training of the first cohort was predominantly online, while the second cohort’s training took place in Addis Ababa in May 2025. Training is a necessary but not sufficient variable for deployment and to date Femwise has yet to develop an effective deployment strategy. The turn towards “localization” is also informing the development of national and regional FemWise chapters. To date there are four national mediation networks that have been formed in Ethiopia, South Africa, Uganda and Malawi. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) has also launched a Regional Mediation Network.

South Africa launched a national network, the Gertrude Shope Women’s Mediation Network, in March 2024. Post the launch it is still preoccupied with the modalities for operationalizing the network, including what the objectives of the network should be. This uncertainty emanates from a disjuncture between the stated objectives of the WPS agenda of women’s inclusion in Track 1 mediation processes, to a return to women leading community dialogues as part of a “localization” strategy. The thousands who have been trained on the continent, by different organizations, including FemWise, are now being tasked to go back and do what they have always been doing in their communities, without the prior assistance of these mediation networks and without financial support from them. In addition, the Gertrude Shope Mediation network is located in the South African Department of International Relations and Co-operation, given its relationship to the UN, and the turn towards this “localization” agenda, it no longer appears to be a natural fit for the department. The turn towards “localization,” stems more from the inability to get women to the main negotiating tables in conflict areas and into broader conflict management processes. The WPS agenda emerged because of a recognition of what women were doing in their communities to bring about peace. It sought to re-orient women’s peacebuilding goals towards “a seat at the table” – which by its very nature has limited seating – and now there is a pivot towards guiding women back to leading community dialogues. Community dialogues are important

and women have been, and should continue, leading them. The UN, AU, RECs and national departments were responsible for bridge building between the local, national, continental and global and amplifying local women peacebuilders voices in these spaces and not for collaborating, and often competing, on work at the local level. The rationale for the existence of these networks becomes questionable when they are situated as gatekeepers for who can be engaged in peacebuilding work and as resource competitors of organizations doing the work at local level.

We must create spaces for multiple peace tables and impactful peacebuilding is anchored in communities. However, the WPS agenda must be multi-pronged such that the NGOs and communities do what they do best at local level and national, regional and continental networks concentrate on getting women to integrate into key global and continental peace and security spaces and amplify their voices to transform structures and approaches in those arenas.

In addition, there needs to be a strategic rethink about which peace tables we need to expend our energies on, and on who needs to be trained for what purpose. How will we get the few to the main peace tables and support, and link, Track 3 to Track 1 processes? More importantly, what is the agenda once a seat at the table has been achieved? Moreover, how should the WPS agenda advocates and feminist peace and security experts be informing a transformed, comprehensive, collective peace and security agenda that includes women and youth from its inception?

The African Women's Leadership Network is yet another network formed in June 2017 at the UN Headquarters through the Office of the Special Envoy and UN Women and seeks to "create a continent-wide force of women leaders who contribute to Africa's transformation in line with Agenda 2063 and the Global Sustainable Development Agenda" (African Union, 2020). It has 6 pillars, one of which is peace and security. This network also claims to have over 500 members. In addition, the APSA hosts the Gender Peace and Security Program, launched in 2015 with a mandate to develop "effective strategies for gender mainstreaming in peace and security" (AU PSD, 2021). This program develops knowledge products, curricula, and conducts capacity building on WPS.

Clearly, there are overlapping units, programs and networks, all of them under-resourced, working to implement the WPS Agenda at the AU and on the continent. Their impact in achieving the meaningful participation of women in peace and security decision-making, the protection of women during conflict, the prevention of violence against women and gender mainstreaming in relief and recovery efforts is limited. Going forward there must be greater harmonization, rationalization and collective strategic planning on the implementation of the WPS agenda at the AU and across the continent. There must also be a wider focus on the key areas of the WPS agenda, i.e., there has been a neglect of a focus on peacekeeping and peacebuilding, whilst the bulk of APSA's resources are dedicated to these aspects. The WPS units at the AU are also not sufficiently aligned with the African Governance Architecture (AGA) and there is a disconnect with women working on human rights, governance and democracy. WPS engagement in this regard seems to be confined to deploying women as election observers. Peace and security cannot be attained in the absence of a focus on politics and governance; these aspects must be centered in the WPS agenda going forward.

5. Moving the WPS Agenda Forward

The above has highlighted that the WPS agenda has a lengthy history with major achieve-

ments globally and continentally in its popularization, domestication and institutionalization. This has been achieved because of the tireless efforts of thousands of women working at all levels. There are 112 countries that have adopted NAPs, 35 of which are in Africa (WILPF, 2024). Regional organizations in Africa such as SADC, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Great Lakes Region, and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) have adopted Regional Action Plans on WPS. The AU, however, does not have a Continental Action Plan (Engel, 2022). Many of the NAPs are not widely popularized, dated, not prioritized or integrated into the operations of the security sector, and not funded. This renders them as nice to haves but strategically ineffective.

As illustrated, there has been a growth of mediation networks in Africa that align to the Global Alliance of Regional Mediation Networks. The operationalization and focus of these networks have been challenging and their existence has not provided the necessary impetus to increase the representation of women in mediation. This is primarily because of shifts in the global conflict contexts and the nature of the peace processes that are transpiring.

Training has been a primary intervention of the WPS agenda implementation, and many thousands of women have been trained by various international, continental and national organizations. The quality of the training varies and there is no centralized regularly updated data-base of all those who have been trained. Training has become an end in itself, a tick-the-box exercise. Women are being trained to be the peace mediator: a position that is no longer in high demand given a decrease in the number of peace processes and forms they are taking. There must be a return to a focus on the broader peace process and its entry points for WPS and on the different skills that are required in a mediation process so that there are more opportunities for women to engage in conflict management.

There is regular high-level support voiced for the WPS agenda at the UN and the AU. However, the continued gap between the commitment of support, the development of frameworks, and the actual meaningful participation of women and their levels of security indicates that something is amiss. The explanation is often reduced to a “lack of political”. However, the public articulation of support by leaders in Africa and the adoption of WPS frameworks indicate a level of political will but this exists amid competing peace and security priorities, shifting interests, limited funding and human capacity shortages in a rapidly changing conflict environment. The reasons and modalities for women’s inclusion in peace and security decision-making and mediation, in the current geo-political and conflict contexts, no longer seem to hold sway. The strategies for inclusion, as alluded to above, were limited in their conceptualization and have not yielded the expected results, and will increasingly render the WPS agenda as a secondary consideration. Citing statistics of the sustainability of peace agreements if women are included – as “empirical evidence” – will not suffice to enable more women to participate in peace processes.

UN Women indicate that in 2023, women made up only 9.6 per cent of peace negotiators (a drop from 16% in 2022 and from 19% in 2021, and a further drop from the 23% in 2020) (UNSG, 2024). They made up 13 per cent of mediators and 26.6 per cent of signatories of ceasefire agreements in 2023 (but this proportion drops to 1.5% if we exclude the Columbian peace process). This is far from the envisaged gender equality in representation in peace-making efforts. We initially saw a modest increase in the number of women who participate in African-led Peace Support Operations (PSOs), but this has tended to remain relatively stable over the years. African countries deploy women to PSOs, for example, South Africa (19%), Ghana (15%) and Ethiopia (13%) (UN Peacekeeping, 2026a). In 2022, women constituted 30 per cent of civilian personnel; 5.9 per cent of military troops; 14.4

per cent of police; and 43 per cent of justice and corrections personnel deployed (UN Peacekeeping, 2026b). Cumulatively, this amounted to 7.8 per cent of uniformed personnel in peace missions. In 2024, the figure rose to 8.5 per cent and is still a long way from the 15 per cent target set by the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (UN DPKO). There are no statistics for women in AU-led PSOs or for bilateral peace missions (for example, by Rwanda who deploys high numbers of women). The more peace enforcement scenarios we have, the less likely we are to see a rapid increase in the number of women deployed.

The numbers tell one story, while the conditions that women encounter during these missions, tell a different tale. The continued lack of adequate facilities for women's participation, the backlash by male peacekeepers who still believe that they need to be the protectors of women and thus feel compromised by their presence in missions, as well as the continued rendering of women peacekeepers to the reproductive and instrumentalist functions of missions, calls for a reconsideration of the WPS strategy in relation to PSOs. PSOs and peacekeeping have also not been excluded from the reflections around reimagining the form and content of peace and security (Wane et al., 2024). The report on *The Future of Peacekeeping* (2024) notes, among other, the need for fresh thinking on the roles that peacekeeping can play, the need to address the trust deficit and the "capability-expectations gap". The WPS agenda, which started with a strong focus on peacekeeping and on conflict related sexual and gender-based violence, has veered away from this area of engagement and should refocus its attention to make a meaningful input into how to restructure peace support operations.

Other key weaknesses relate to the lack of data of women's engagement in peace and security beyond mediation and peace support operations (even this data is lacking for the AU). Women are active in local-level peacebuilding initiatives, but these stories are not being counted and reported on at high-level meetings. There must be investment in research methodologies that capture the many different forms and levels of engagement of women's implementation of the WPS agenda.

The UN Secretary General's report on WPS for 2024 noted "amid record levels of armed conflict and violence, progress made over the decades is vanishing before our eyes. Generational gains in women's rights hang in the balance around the world, undercutting the transformative potential of women's leadership and inclusion in the pursuit of peace" (UNSG, 2024, p. 1). This backlash is in the AU and its member states, despite the rhetoric and the production of frameworks.

6. Key Findings

All the challenges pointed to above reveal a strong pushback by patriarchal systems. As feminists seeking to attain greater peace and prosperity for all, we cannot be apolitical in our approach to implement the WPS agenda. It is about power, interest and resources: the pie is seen as finite and the battle in zero-sum terms. The New Agenda for Peace is correct in stating that patriarchy must be dismantled, but the strategy for doing so – which is echoed everywhere – is that we as women must include men in their organizations and implementation strategies. The WPS agenda was largely about including women into the mainstream peace and security agenda, not the other way around! This conceptual challenge emerges because we have reduced WPS to being about men and women, and not about systems and power relations and their transformation.

Solutions that implore women to double down on implementation, with little critical reflection on why, despite all the efforts, we are not making progress, will take us nowhere. The

advocates of the WPS agenda need to get back to its original ideals of constructing inclusive, just, democratic, equitable, peaceful and sustainable global, continental and national peace and security ideologies, structures, approaches and processes. There is a vacuum in the international arena and women can emerge as the new thought leaders on peace and security if they are organized to have deep thinking and mobilization in this regard. This is especially needed now that the world is descending into power politics, authoritarianism, military rule and where there is a pushback against discourses of equality, human rights, rule of law and international law. Advocates of the WPS agenda must be equipped to meaningfully participate in the reconceptualization of the fundamentals of war and peace, i.e. to acquire substantive knowledge on, for example, the current causes of global conflicts, new conceptualizations of peace and security and how they can be afforded, disarmament, DDR, SSR, humanitarian law, international law, mediation, post conflict reconstruction peacebuilding, state building, constitutionalism and governance, so that we begin to shape how it unfolds. What is it that we seek to be included into? Why? How? This is where the WPS journey started and where we need to come back to. The broadening of the WPS agenda may have made it receptive to a larger audience, but in the process, it has been hollowed out of content and has become reductionist.

We must be innovative and ground-breaking in our thinking and practice and build the skills set required to produce the alternative approaches needed to create sustainable peace and security. There cannot be peace and security only for women. Therefore, the WPS agenda has always been a more inclusive and larger agenda of creating peace and security for all. This is the lever for women's meaningful participation in peace and security.

WPS advocates and experts must identify entry points for resetting the WPS agenda so that it can have a more meaningful impact on reimagining the larger peace agenda, i.e. a major part of WPS must be restructuring the UN, AU and RECs in terms of their functions and their methodologies for sustaining peace in a changed geopolitical and conflict context. The WPS experts must be at the forefront of rethinking governance globally, continentally and nationally as this is key to informing how we co-exist in future. Our strategy should no longer be to focus on an increasingly shrinking space of Track 1 mediation or peace support operations. The invitation is to provide alternative structures and processes in which women have been the architects and the builders and are thus included from its inception. Current peace tables have no seats for women, and pulling up our own chairs does not resolve the challenge of the increasingly flawed nature of these processes.

We need to take a leaf out of the movements that gave rise to WIPLF and Beijing, and UNSCR 1325 and use our collective mobilization, soft power and feminist thinking to shift mind-sets, ideologies, principles and infrastructures for peace and security.

Our collation of data and critical reflections should also be concentrated on our presence, as opposed to our absence: what are women peacebuilders and mediators engaged with in their varied spaces? We need to find the methodologies for capturing it, making it visible; counting it; reporting it; and funding it. There are many initiatives taking place that remain undocumented, not analyzed and not reported on in continental and global arenas.

In Africa, the WPS agenda has done relatively well at getting women into the security sector (police, military, corrections, immigration, peacekeepers, etc.). However, Africa do not score high on WPS index compiled by the Georgetown University and the peace Research Institute Oslo because they measure outcomes (GIWPS and PRIO, 2025). There is, however, little translation of women's presence in the peace and security sector into effective outcomes. This is primarily because dysfunctional patriarchal peace and security structures remain in place. These institutions are failing societies in Africa as a whole, not just wom-

en. Africa has placed emphasis on building security architectures; it is now time to build peace architectures. What may they look like?

Finally, we have to move beyond capacity building and concentrate on collective values, ethics, principles, norms, and the like, that should inform new peace and security provisioning. This is a major gap and is often the explanatory factor for the often-cited implementation gap.

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