

Feminist peacebuilding in 2025: A note from the author

THINKPEACE
#4

In a nutshell

- Decades of research show that integrating women, civil society and marginalized groups leads to more sustainable peace. Yet, there has hardly been any progress in this regard over the past 25 years of the Women, Peace and Security agenda.
- Feminist perspectives on peace and security provide strategic guidance for today's crises by building on decades of experience and learning from both successes and limitations.
- The growing resistance to feminist peace and security agendas is not just about women's participation, but about blocking structural transformation and reinforcing a «military-first» security logic that sidelines prevention, diplomacy and human security.
- The dismantling of feminist foreign policy commitments aligns with broader democratic regression, as anti-feminist movements erode support for gender-transformative policies while militarization diverts funding away from peacebuilding and human rights.
- Advancing gender commitments and feminist peacebuilding requires dual strategies that combine grassroots feminist momentum with institutional pressure, strong accountability networks, critical self-reflection and sustained engagement with feminist initiatives from the global majority.

The year 2025 came with the 25th anniversary of the UN Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, and 30 years of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Yet, there was little cause for celebration. While research has time and again proven that integrating women, civil society and marginalized perspectives into peace and security approaches leads to more peaceful and resilient societies, just last year, women represented only 7% of negotiators in formal peace processes worldwide. And the numbers have not changed much in comparison to earlier years. This is happening in a global context of the ↗ highest number of violent conflicts after the Second World War, which the international community seems unable to prevent or bring to an end.

Yet, the ground for feminist approaches to peace and security is crumbling. In a political climate ↗ increasingly resistant to evidence-based policy making, even instrumentalist arguments for gender-transformative policies struggle to gain traction. Instead of moving forward, women's and human rights norms previously perceived as well-established are being undermined or rolled back, even the ones legally codified. The year 2025 marked an abrupt end to Germany's Feminist Foreign Policy, while the federal budgets for 2025 and 2026 signal the country's alignment with a broader EU-wide and global trend that undermines human security, development cooperation, and humanitarian assistance in favor of expanded military spending. The announced restructuring of the federal foreign office underscores a geopoliticization of foreign policy at the expense of human security. This unfolds at a moment when Germany's ↗ «soft» power has already substantially eroded by the ↗ glaring gap between its proclaimed commitment to human rights and international law and its steadfast support for Israel in the face of serious violations in Gaza and the region.

Feminist perspectives offer strategic guidance in countering these dynamics. The path forward requires what Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, former Under-Secretary General of the UN and Executive Director of UN Women, has recently called a «big push» for feminist peacebuilding; one that learns from both the successes and limitations of the past quarter-century. This year's final *ThinkPeace* shares three observations and three strategic implications that may contribute to the feminist re-thinking needed.

Three Observations on the current conjuncture

The Power Paradox: Women's and human rights activists as well as feminist organizations and peacemakers in conflict and fragile settings are often the posterchild to WPS implementation, but remain excluded from formal processes. This is a consistent pattern: Grassroots feminist initiatives play a crucial role, yet their inclusion in political peace processes remain reduced to box-ticking or afterthought at best. One illustrative example is the UN Syrian Women Advisory Board, which, despite being widely recognized and granted high-level access and international visibility to advise the UN Special Envoy, was limited to an advisory function without agenda-setting authority or formal standing in the Geneva negotiations it was established to inform. The closer feminist peacebuilding gets to genuine power redistribution, the more ferocious the pushback becomes. When women and marginalized actors are invited to join the table – figuratively or literally – more often than not, they receive the invite late in the process and are there to fill the seats, not to decide on the agenda. Hence, 25 years after UNSCR 1325, feminist expertise, agency and lived realities keep being reduced to a story one can choose to ignore rather than perspectives that are structurally integrated and truly matter. For a perspective to truly matter, as argued by feminist pioneer Cynthia Enloe, it would have to have consequences for how we think, act and implement foreign policies. In the end, this resistance is not solely about women's participation but represents opposition to transforming the very structures that perpetuate conflict. This is illustrated by the exclusion of feminist perspectives from the current debates on military spending and conscription in Germany. This exclusion is based on a misreading of the feminist position. ↗ Feminist perspectives can acknowledge a need for defense, especially in solidarity with allies under attack or at risk, as was the case after Russia's full-scale

invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Feminist critique is not per se anti-defense but indeed anti-militaristic. Thus, it challenges the logic that treats military capacity as the «real» security while prevention, diplomacy, and human security are treated as secondary or expendable. This hierarchy – military first, everything else second – only perpetuates the very conditions that generate conflict and insecurity in the first place.

The Inside-Outside Tension: There is a famous saying «If you are not given a seat at the table, build your own.» And indeed, the most inspiring feminist peacebuilding work and resistance happens outside of formal institutions, from Ukraine to Sudan and other contexts, where civil society networks operate to counter patterns of violence and conflict despite or against state structures. Yet, this rarely translates into structural political action. On the contrary, approaches centered on strongman «dealmaking» and the logic of «might makes right» are gaining ground over the rule of law, while international actors, including the EU and the UN, are increasingly contesting and rolling back gender equality commitments they previously championed. There is, thus, a stark tension between feminist peace activism outside formal structures and the backlash within the latter. Still, feminist peacebuilding needs engagement at both levels. Abandoning institutional engagement is not a viable pathway, and research underscores that it is the combined effort of women peacebuilders on the ground and in UN institutions that promises effective and sustainable peacemaking. Dual strategies are required that leverage grassroots momentum while maintaining institutional pressure points.

A Double Threat: Two context factors are converging in ways that compound their individual effects: the anti-feminist pushback and accelerating militarization. Regarding the first, treating the anti-feminist pushback as a «women's issue» alone obscures its broader implications for democratic governance. This highly organized, globally connected and substantially financed movement is strategically pushing an anti-gender agenda, gaining grounds within the EU and member states, across the public and political realm. Recent research has exposed the (geo)political interests that are facilitating the reach of this movement, with its political consequences materializing in concrete policy and rights reversals. Notably, right-wing populism and anti-feminist agendas share more than electoral timing: both reject multilateral frameworks and frame gender equality as an elite project imposed from above. The rollback of feminist foreign policy commitments thus fits into a broader pattern of democratic backsliding in which established norms – from climate agreements to human rights protections – face systematic headwinds. This converges with the second factor: accelerating militarization. Global military spending increased by 9% in 2024, reaching its highest point since the Cold War, while the WPS agenda both in its preventive and protective objectives remains significantly underfunded. This happens at a time when peaceful means for conflict prevention or resolution, and humanitarian aid – including for a historic number of people affected by war and conflict – are severely cut. The compounding effect is clear: as anti-feminist movements hollow out the political will for gender-transformative policies, militarization redirects the funding – leaving feminist peacebuilding undermined on both fronts.

Strategic Implications

These observations point toward several strategic considerations for feminist work in the current environment.

First, a «security first, women's and human rights second» logic reproduces the same dynamic that has consistently failed. This hierarchy is not a neutral sequencing but a political choice that prioritizes symptoms over root causes and short-term containment over long-term transformation. The current moment is one of urgency and scarce resources. But short-term responses that abandon long-term structural work tend to generate the next crisis rather than resolve the current one. Importantly, the time for

course correction is now, especially considering the erosion of the international development and cooperation system, including civil society and democracy support, → following the first year of President Trump's second term.

Second, feminist foreign policy as an analytical framework and political practice is not disappearing. Globally, it is a vibrant movement – even as many Western governments are retreating. Connecting more closely to → feminist initiatives from the global majority context offers a chance to learn from their innovative approaches, often more comprehensive and gender transformative. This also warrants critical self-reflection, as international feminist and human rights communities have, over the past two years, lost trust not only in the German government but in a wider range of global actors, largely due to their failure to take clear positions in response to the unfolding genocide in Gaza.

Third, as feminist peacebuilding work is increasingly about defending gains, marking red lines becomes crucial. Importantly, while narratives around gender are shifting, commitments remain codified in political frameworks and legal obligations. Strengthening systems of accountability through diverse networks of critical expert communities, civil society networks and courts is one element of preventing further hollowing out of feminist/WPS commitments.

Looking ahead, preventing commitments to gender equality from being systematically dismantled, requires not just persistence but strategic creativity, global solidarity, and unwavering commitment to the structural transformation that feminist approaches have always pushed for. The Swedish example, with its opposition's plan to reinstate feminist foreign policy in case of re-election, offers a glimpse into how political actors can continue to support these commitments, even at difficult moments.

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