

Estudos

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# Why does peace matter for the feminist and women's movement for gender equality?

Disentangling the relationships between women and peace and security and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action

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**Abstract.** The year 2020 marks the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Platform of Action (BPFA) and the 20th anniversary of the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on women, peace and security. It is an opportunity for reflection on the linkages between the two historic documents.

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DOI <https://doi.org/10.34619/oc96-c475>

In this paper, I explore these linkages from three standpoints. Firstly, conceptually, I show a strong dependency between gender equality and peace. Secondly, historically, I argue that BPFA gave an impetus to a feminist and women's peace movement which led to the adoption of UNSCR 1325. Finally, I answer the question: are these linkages still pertinent today?

**Keywords:** Women, peace, security, gender, Beijing.

***Por que razão a paz é importante para o movimento feminista e das mulheres para a igualdade de género? Desembaraçando os relacionamentos entre mulheres e paz e segurança, e a Declaração e Plataforma de Ação de Pequim.*** O ano de 2020 marca o 25.º aniversário da Plataforma de Ação de Pequim (BPFA, na sigla em inglês) e o 20.º aniversário da Resolução 1325 do Conselho de Segurança das Nações Unidas (UNSCR 1325, na sigla em inglês) sobre mulheres, paz e segurança. É uma oportunidade para refletir sobre as interconexões destes dois documentos históricos.

*Neste artigo, a autora explora estas interligações a partir de três pontos de vista. Em primeiro lugar, conceptualmente, examinam-se as interseções entre igualdade de género e paz. Em segundo lugar, historicamente, argumenta-se que a BPFA deu um impulso ao movimento feminista das mulheres pela paz, o que levou à adoção da UNSCR 1325. Por fim, responde-se à questão: estas interligações são ainda pertinentes no mundo de hoje?*

**Palavras-chave:** *Mulheres, paz, segurança, género, Pequim.*



## INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 marks the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action (BPFA) – the blueprint for women's empowerment and gender equality. The anniversary is a cause for celebration, but also an opportunity to reflect and take stock of the progress made thus far and persistent gaps in the implementation of BPFA.

In the lead-up to the anniversary, in 2019, a number of review processes have been initiated at the global, regional and national levels, mandated by the Economic and Social Council resolution 2018/8. These include comprehensive national reviews conducted by governments with inputs from the civil society, regional reviews to be organized by the United Nations (UN) regional commissions, and global review during the 64<sup>th</sup> Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) (UN ECOSOC, 2018).

Amidst the preparations, one issue has raised much controversy: the exclusion of women and youth peacebuilders from the process and the resulting marginalization of the women and peace and security (WPS), and youth and peace and security (YPS) agendas in its outcomes.

Civil society organizations working on WPS and YPS have sounded an alarm at such exclusion. Over 150 organizations – including global, regional and national networks and grassroots women’s organizations – have signed an open letter calling for effective integration of WPS and YPS in the outcomes of the Generation Equality Forum (GEF) – the culmination of the BPFA 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration (Beijing +25) – and for creation of channels for meaningful participation of women and youth peacebuilders (Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP), 2020). The High-Level Advisory Group for the 2015 Global Study on United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 also wrote an open letter to the organizers of the GEF echoing this call (UN High-Level Advisory Group for the 2015 Global Study on UNSCR 1325 2020).

## WHY DOES INCLUSION OF WPS AND YPS IN BEIJING +25 MATTER? OUTLINING THE ARGUMENT AND METHOD

In this paper, I explore the interlinkages between BPFA and WPS from three standpoints.

Firstly, I use conceptual analysis to argue that there can be no gender equality without sustainable peace, and no sustainable peace without gender equality. This argument is developed through an examination of existing literature and evidence of how gender inequality, conflict and insecurity exacerbate each other and intersect in the lived experiences of women and girls.

Secondly, through tracing of the historical linkages between the 4<sup>th</sup> World Conference on Women and the adoption of UNSCR 1325, and a textual analysis of both policy frameworks, I demonstrate the synergies and overlaps between the content of BPFA and UNSCR 1325.

Finally, through an analysis of the existing evidence of the progress and gaps in the implementation of both policy frameworks, and of recent civil society advocacy and political developments at the global policy arena, I reflect on the following question: are these interlinkages still pertinent in today's world?

## WHY PEACE? THE INTIMATE INTERCONNECTIONS BETWEEN GENDER EQUALITY AND PEACE

Preventing armed conflict and maintaining peace is one of the chief tasks of the UN. The first purpose listed in the UN Charter – the constitutional document of the organization – is to “maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace” (UN, 1945). Overall, the word peace appears in the UN Charter forty-nine times. While Diane Otto rightly observes that in most of instances, “peace is coupled with security – rather than with development or human rights” (Otto, 2015, p. 1), the ubiquity of the term is an important indication of the centrality of the promise of peace to the vision and mission of the UN.

At the same time, as we approach the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the formation of the UN and the adoption of the Charter, preventing conflicts and building peace remains “an afterthought: under-prioritized, under-resourced and undertaken only after the guns fall silent” (Advisory Group of Experts (AGE) 2015). According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), in 2016, “just 2% of total gross official development assistance (ODA) went to conflict prevention and associated activities” (OECD, 2018, p. 3).

In the past years, a “call for a greater focus on preventing conflict has resonated across international forums” (Caparini et al., 2017, p. 245). Unlike their predecessor – the Millennium Development Goals – the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), a blueprint for the development work of the

UN and its member states, include a dedicated goal on “peace, justice and strong institutions”. The SDG Preamble recognizes that “[t]here can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development” (UN, 2015). Former United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon in his report to the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 re-emphasized that conflict prevention and resolution are the UN’s “first and foremost responsibility to humanity” (UN, 2016a). On 27<sup>th</sup> April 2016, the UN Security Council (UNSC) unanimously adopted Resolution 2282 on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace, which put forth a vision of locally-led, inclusive, inter-sectoral and coherent policy and action for peace, which cuts across the UN system, Member States, civil society and other stakeholders. On the same day, a substantively identical Resolution 70/262 was also adopted by the General Assembly, reinforcing this vision as one that belongs to the entire UN system and is shared by all of its Member States.

Peace is, therefore, a central goal of the international community, reinforced by the series of policy developments and re-commitments in the past five years. But why is it relevant to a discussion of women’s rights and gender equality – the ideals enshrined in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action?

There is a wealth of feminist scholarship that examines the conceptual interlinkages between gender and the concepts of “conflict”, “peace” and “security”. By challenging the private/public dichotomy of violence (Charlesworth, 2004) and emphasising the continuum of insecurity faced by women before, during and after conflict (Cockburn, 2004; Kostovicova, Bojicic-Dzelilovic & Henry 2020; Wood 2018), feminist analyses have made important contributions to shaping the concept of “human security” (Ní Aoláin, 2013; Peterson, 2016; Robinson, 2011). While a detailed examination of feminist approaches to security is beyond the scope of this paper, the author does contend with some of the discussions around securitization, militarism and conflict prevention, which have emerged within the WPS discourse in the section “*Armed conflict: a persistent barrier to implementation*”. In this section, I focus on the practical interlinkages between gender equality and peace – that is, the ways in which gender inequality and conflict and insecurity mutually exacerbate each other in the lived experience of women and girls.

Firstly, peace and security are underlying pre-conditions of gender equality. Just as there can be no sustainable development without peace,

so, too, there can be no true gender equality in the context of conflict. Violent conflict aggravates all facets of gender inequality. Over 50 parties to conflict are credibly suspected of having committed or instigated sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in situations on the agenda of the Security Council, and at least 1 in 5 refugee or displaced women experience sexual violence (UN, 2019). Armed conflict also creates conditions in which sexual violence that is not directly related to conflict, and which happens in the private, is exacerbated (Swaine, 2015). Economic and care burden resting on women increases in times of conflict, as many of them become heads of households (Myrntinen, Popovic & Khattab 2016; OECD, 2017). Conflict weakens institutions, which disproportionately affects women due to the underlying gender inequalities. Moreover, conflict perpetuates pre-existing gender norms, which place greater value on men and masculinity and view women as inferior and subordinate (Webster, Chen & Beardsley, 2019). This can result in further restrictions to women's mobility, access to state institutions and decision-making, in particular on peace and security (Barnes & O'Brien, 2018; OECD 2017).

Secondly, conflict resolution and peacebuilding may provide an opportunity to address gender inequalities. Some scholars have argued that post-conflict recovery and peacebuilding processes can provide women with "new platforms and opportunities to bring about change" (Arostegui, 2013). For example, in Rwanda and Uganda, women's organizing for peace at the time of conflict has translated into robust women's movements that were able to win considerable gains for women, including a stronger legal and policy framework and an increased representation in decision-making, and continue to promote women's rights and gender equality (Arostegui, 2013). In addition to creating space for women's organizing and representation, armed conflicts can also "disrupt existing social orders and open up space for women's empowerment" (Webster et al., 2019). However, as Webster et al. note, "women's empowerment gains during periods of massive social disruption are neither costless nor necessarily permanent" (Webster et al., 2019). This can be linked to the fact that most peace negotiations, as well as post-conflict reconstruction processes remain gender-blind and exclude women (Fal-Dutra Santos et al., 2019; UN, 2019).

Thirdly, gender inequality is one of the factors that undermine lasting peace, and a predictor of violent conflict. There is strong empirical evidence



for a robust correlation between gender inequality and conflict (Bjarnegård & Melander, 2011; Gizelis 2009; Hudson et al., 2012). Empirical studies have sought to explain this correlation by examining how ideas of masculinity can contribute to both gender inequality and to higher risk of violent conflict (Cockburn, 2010; El-Bushra & Sahl, 2005; Enloe, 2014; Wright, 2014) They argue that providing counter-narratives and challenging toxic interpretations of masculinity can be effectively used to prevent violence (Wright, 2014), thus strengthening the link between work combating gender inequality and conflict prevention.

The links between gender equality and peace are thus strong and many. This has been underscored by women activists themselves, who have long advocated for an inclusive, sustainable peace as a critical element of their strife for women's rights and a more equitable future. The vision of sustaining peace as "ensuring that the needs of all segments of the population are taken into account (...) addressing root causes, assisting parties to conflict to end hostilities, ensuring national reconciliation, and moving towards recovery, reconstruction and development" (UNSC, 2016), put forth by UNSCR 2282 and resolution 70/262, is certainly ground-breaking in many ways. However, to women-led civil society it represents the way they have worked to prevent conflict, build and sustain peace, and foster equality and inclusion in their countries and communities for decades. Women peacebuilders around the world advocate for women and civil society's inclusion in official peace negotiations; raise awareness about peace processes and peace agreements in local communities; lead campaigns against violence and militarization; mediate community and tribal conflicts; establish early warning systems and situation rooms to prevent violence outbreaks during elections; deliver aid and relief; and establish micro-economic initiatives to support themselves, send children to schools, and provide livelihood opportunities to veterans and victims of conflict (Fal-Dutra Santos et al., 2019, pp. 46–48). They cut across the silos of human rights, development, humanitarian aid and peacebuilding. They are the pioneers of sustaining peace. Therefore, any discussion of women's rights and empowerment is incomplete without an intentional and meaningful consideration of peace, and women's roles in building it.

## WHY WOMEN AND PEACE AND SECURITY? A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE INTERLINKAGES BETWEEN THE WOMEN'S CONFERENCES AND THE FEMINIST PEACE MOVEMENT

Women's leadership in conflict prevention, resolution and peacebuilding was recognized by UNSCR 1325, the first of the resolutions on WPS. The resolution emphasized the need for women's "equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and the need to increase their role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution" (UNSC, 2000). Over the years, UNSCR 1325 was followed by nine subsequent resolutions on WPS. Together, they constitute a normative framework for the protection of women in the context of conflict; their meaningful participation in conflict prevention, resolution, peacebuilding and all decision-making about peace and security; and integration of a gender perspective in all peacekeeping, peace-making and recovery efforts.

The resolution was a historical achievement, and a result of an unyielding advocacy of women from around the world – including in particular conflict-affected and post-conflict countries. Its adoption was welcomed by feminist scholars and activists, and hailed as a significant success, and a landmark, "watershed" achievement (Otto, 2015, p. 4). While the UNSC and the underlying political dynamics have undoubtedly shaped the negotiations around UNSCR 1325 to some extent (Shepherd, 2008), the central role of the civil society, and the women's movement in particular, in the conceptualization, development and adoption of UNSCR 1325 is undeniable. From discussions during the 42<sup>nd</sup> session of the CSW, to the Arria Formula<sup>(1)</sup> meeting during which women from Guatemala, Sierra Leone, Somalia and Tanzania briefed the members of the UNSC, to the intensive advocacy and inputs – hand-delivered to the members of the UNSC – throughout the process of drafting and

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1 An Arria Formula meeting is a during which Security Council members are able to exchange views and engage in direct dialogue with non-members, including government representatives and international organizations, as well as non-State parties. Arria Formula meetings follow a more flexible procedural framework than other Security Council meetings. The format was initiated in 1992 by Ambassador Diego Arria of Venezuela.

negotiations of the resolution, women-led civil society was front and centre of the processes that led to the adoption of the first, historical, resolution on women and peace and security (Hill, Aboitiz & Poehlman-Doumbouya, 2003).

The BPFA is a foundational document of UNSCR 1325. It is one of the two non-UNSC documents mentioned in the resolution's preamble (UNSC, 2000). The 42<sup>nd</sup> CSW in March 1998 – the moment when, according to Hill et al., “discussions on women and peace and security took a centre stage” (Hill et al., 2003, p. 1256), focused on discussing obstacles to the implementation of the BPFA's Section E: “Women and Armed Conflict”. In many ways, the 4<sup>th</sup> World Conference on Women: Action for Equality, Development and Peace (dubbed the “Beijing Conference”) and its outcomes, were a spark that “re-energized the women's peace movement” (Naraghi-Anderlini, 2001), and led to the adoption of UNSCR 1325. Conversely, some have characterized the adoption of UNSCR 1325 as a step towards implementing Beijing Platform for Action (Naraghi-Anderlini, 2001; Porter, 2003).

Indeed, the question of peace was an important one during the Beijing Conference. As Anderlini observes:

at the gathering in Beijing, the war in Bosnia and the genocide in Rwanda were fresh in the minds and experiences of many participants. Although information about the strategic targeting of women was still limited and relatively new, the trends were alarming. It was of sufficient concern for all involved to accept that a new chapter should be added to the document that focused specifically on women's experiences in armed conflict. (Naraghi-Anderlini, 2001, p. 11)

The recommendations that emerged from these discussions, and were included in Section E include: increasing the participation of women in peace processes and decision-making at all levels; protecting women and girls in situations of conflict (Strategic Objective E.1.); reducing military expenditure, increasing control of arms, and promoting non-violent forms of conflict resolution (Strategic Objectives E.2. and E.3.); promoting women's contribution to fostering a culture of peace (Strategic Objective E.4.); and providing necessary, gender-sensitive assistance and training to refugee and displaced women, and women living in colonies and non-self-governing territories (Strategic Objectives E.5. and E.6.). There is a

clear continuity between these Strategic Objectives, and the four pillars of the women and peace and security agenda: Participation, Protection, Prevention and Relief and Recovery (Cf. Coomaraswamy, 2015; George & Shepherd, 2016; O'Reilly, 2019).

Indeed, textual analysis of the two documents points to some marked similarities: both documents note that women constitute a vast majority of refugees and those adversely affected by conflicts (Beijing Declaration, 1995, p. 136; UNSC, 2000, p. 4); they recognize that women's equal and meaningful participation in conflict prevention and resolution is necessary for durable peace (Beijing Declaration, 1995, p. 134; UNSC, 2000, p. 5); and call for mainstreaming of a gender perspectives in peacekeeping operations and other policies and programmes (Beijing Declaration, 1995, p. 141; UNSC, 2000, pp. 7–9).

There is no question that historically, there is an inextricable link between BPFA and the UNSCR 1325, materialized in the texts of the two ground-breaking documents. While there is a distinct legal and policy framework for the implementation of WPS, the spirit of the agenda remains inseparable from the wider women's movement, and BPFA as its expression. In the remainder of this article, I turn to the question: "Why is this relationship important today?", looking first at the progress made and gaps remaining in the implementation of BPFA and WPS; second, at the opportunities for strengthen implementation of both frameworks – including new avenues for strengthening the focus on conflict prevention, and the inclusion of young women; and finally, at the extent to which WPS has been effectively included in the preparations for the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of BPFA thus far, and the possible ways forward. The final section builds on the author's own experience in working towards the implementation of WPS agenda, both in grassroots communities and at the global level, and her advocacy for the strengthening the inclusion of WPS perspectives in the Beijing +25 process.

## WHY TODAY? IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN AND YOUTH PEACEBUILDERS' PERSPECTIVES IN THE GENERATION EQUALITY FORUM AND THE COMMEMORATION OF THE 25<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE BEIJING DECLARATION AND PLATFORM FOR ACTION.

*Taking stock 25 years after Beijing and 20 years after UNSCR 1325: some progress, but a long way to go*

25 years since the adoption of the BPFA, there has been some notable progress. There has been a steady increase in women's representation in parliaments (George, 2019) – although men still dominate decision-making. 37 additional State Parties acceded to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) since 1995 (George, 2019). The number of out-of-school children has reduced significantly, although the downward trend has plateaued in recent years; and the gender gap in terms of primary school enrolment has reduced (UNESCO, 2018). Maternal mortality rates have dropped and female life expectancy increased (Leon-Himmelstine, 2019).

At the same time, serious challenges persist. Women's participation in decision-making does not necessarily translate into women's influence over policies, nor into their economic empowerment (Domingo & O'Neil 2016). Women continue to be less likely to be employed than men in most parts of the world, and are more likely to be in low-skilled, low-paying jobs (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2016). Early, child and forced marriage remains prevalent (UNICEF, n.d.). All of these challenges are exacerbated in the context of armed conflict and organized violence. For example, while school enrolment in conflict and crisis situations is lower for both genders, evidence shows that this negative effect is more pronounced for young women and girls (Roy & Singh, 2016; UNESCO, 2015). Conflict affects women's access to economic opportunities, rendering them more vulnerable to SGBV, recruitment into sexual slavery and trafficking, limited mobility, and early and forced marriage (Cabrera-Balleza, Iyer et al., 2020).

With regards to women in armed conflict, the adoption of WPS resolutions was a significant achievement in terms of institutionalizing the

centrality of the role of women in peace processes and decision-making on peace and security. The WPS agenda has shifted the narrative on women in conflict from one that perceived them mostly as victims, to one that recognized their “important role (...) in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building” (UNSC, 2000). Over the 20 years since the adoption of UNSCR 1325, 83 countries have adopted National Action Plans (Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, n.d.) – State-level policy instruments designed to translate the WPS resolutions into concrete and context-specific actions, and ensure accountability for implementation. The CEDAW Committee adopted a historic General Recommendation 30 affirming the linkages with WPS, and providing a concrete framework for the protection of women’s rights before, during and after conflict (O’Rourke & Swaine, 2015). Regional and transnational organizations, including the North-Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the African Union (AU), European Union (EU), Pacific Regional Working Group on Women, Peace and Security, the League of Arab States, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have adopted regional and sub-regional plans and policies for the implementation of WPS.

Yet, despite this impressive normative framework, the progress in the implementation of WPS remains uneven and “continues to be measured in ‘firsts,’ rather than as standard practice” (Coomaraswamy, 2015, p. 14). A study of 31 major peace processes has shown that between 1992 and 2011, women constituted only 2 per cent of chief mediators, 4 per cent of witnesses and signatories, and 9 per cent of negotiators (Coomaraswamy, 2015, p. 45). Even in contexts, where women’s meaningful participation in the peace process has led to strong gender provisions – such as the case of the negotiation between the Colombian government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Colombia’s Revolutionary Armed Forces; FARC) – women often find themselves excluded from the post-conflict reconstruction and the implementation of the peace agreement, which leads to a lagging or non-implementation of the gender-specific provisions (Fal-Dutra Santos et al., 2019). The civil society space available to women advocates and peacebuilders has been shrinking, and political violence targeting women has reached record levels (UN, 2019). Women’s peacebuilding and the implementation of WPS also remain grossly underfunded, with only 0.2% of bilateral aid to fragile and conflict-affected countries going

directly to women's organizations (OECD, 2019). Adopted in 2013, UNSCR 2122 – 7<sup>th</sup> out of 10 resolutions on WPS – recognized that “without a significant implementation shift, women and women's perspectives will continue to be underrepresented in conflict prevention, resolution, protection and peacebuilding for the foreseeable future” (UNSC, 2013, p. 15).

## ARMED CONFLICT: A PERSISTENT BARRIER TO IMPLEMENTATION

Importantly, armed conflict persists as a major barrier to the realization of gender equality and women's empowerment. Global military spending continues to grow, and has reached USD \$1.9 trillion in 2019 – an increase of 3.6% from the previous year (Tian et al., 2020). In 2019, nearly 132 million people were in need of humanitarian aid and protection, including an estimated 35 million women, young women and girls (UN, 2019). Conflict prevention was one of the foundational goals of the WPS agenda, which has “roots in anti-war women's movements” (True & Davis, 2018). However, some feminist scholars and practitioners have expressed a concern that implementation has been skewed towards the protection pillar, with less progress made in the areas of participation and conflict prevention. They noted that – as a result – the agenda has become too focused on making war “safe” rather than ending it, some going as far as asserting that the feminist ideals of positive peace and opposition to war have become “captive to the militarized security frame of the [Security] Council's operation” (Otto, 2015) and that the concept of “security” that underlies the WPS resolutions has become too reductive and focused on state security (Santos, Roque & Moura, 2013).

While it is true that the conceptualization and implementation of the WPS agenda can at times be a balancing act of reconciling the “tensions and ambiguities that underlie [it]” (True & Davis, 2018), such critiques apply mostly to the UNSC and global decision-making processes. At the grassroots level, civil society organizations have used the WPS agenda to frame and advance their work aimed at conflict prevention and women's meaningful participation in peace processes and decision-making. Women activists and civil society around the world remain keenly aware of the foundational aims of the agenda, and committed to work towards its holistic implementation.

This is perhaps best visible when considering the impacts of the Localization of UNSCR 1325 program, implemented by the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP) in 16 conflict-affected countries. The Localization program convenes local authorities, religious and traditional leaders, security sector representatives and local women, youth and other historically marginalized groups to “analyze WPS issues and the sociopolitical and cultural context that impact them [and] identify the concrete actions needed to implement the WPS resolutions in their local communities” (Cabrera-Balleza & Fal-Dutra Santos, 2018, p. 40). It is therefore a “key tool for translating [WPS] policy into practice” (UN, 2016b, p. 70), since it allows local stakeholders – including local women – to analyze and decide what effective WPS implementation would mean in their community, town or municipality. Tellingly, the actions identified and implemented as a result of Localization include in equal measure those aimed at protection and prevention of sexual and gender-based violence – such as passing a by-law prohibiting early, child and forced marriage in Sierra Leone or establishing gender desks and liaison officers in police stations in Uganda – those aimed at increasing women’s participation – for example, including women in a traditional conflict resolution council in the Philippines or initiating advocacy for women’s participation in peace negotiations in Colombia – and addressing root causes of conflict – for example, by establishing a public bus to allow rural women access to economic opportunities in neighboring towns in Georgia (Cabrera-Balleza & Fal-Dutra Santos, 2018).

This illustrates the fact that at the local level, the four pillars of the WPS constitute a single, interconnected whole. Conscious of that, women’s groups and civil society have been calling for holistic implementation of the agenda, including recognition of a “continuum of violence” faced by women in times of war and peace as a result of patriarchal cultures and practices (Coomaraswamy, 2015, p. 198; Kostovicova et al., 2020), meaningful participation of women in conflict prevention, including in early warning mechanisms (Coomaraswamy, 2015), and a focus on addressing root causes of both conflict and sexual violence – including economic exclusion and militarization (Coomaraswamy, 2015; Fal-Dutra Santos et al., 2019; Kostovicova et al., 2020).

20 years after the adoption of UNSCR 1325, this call for a holistic approach to WPS implementation, with conflict prevention at its core, has taken on



new urgency. The NGO Working Group (NGOWG) on WPS, a coalition of 19 international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working to advance the WPS, issued an open letter calling on governments and UNSC members to “take decisive action to prevent conflict, avert crisis and end war” and emphasizing that “nothing is more central to the function of the United Nations than the prevention of conflict and the protection of those most affected by it” (NGOWG WPS, 2019). The letter was signed by 438 civil society organizations from 94 countries. This highlights the importance of conflict prevention to women’s organizations around the world, and the need to strengthen the focus on this foundational objective of WPS in the international discourse and action.

## STRONGER TOGETHER: NEW POLICY FRAMEWORKS AND NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADVANCEMENT OF WPS AND BEIJING PLATFORM FOR ACTION

While persistent challenges to WPS implementation remain, the past 20 years has also brought new opportunities for stronger, more comprehensive implementation.

The women activists’ push for a greater focus on conflict prevention, coincides with a system-wide UN prioritization of conflict prevention (Leone, 2017), as evidenced by the adoption of the Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace resolutions in 2016 (UNSC, 2016), and the various reforms and actions taken to operationalize them since (GNWP et al., 2018). In this context, reinforcing the synergies between the WPS agenda and BPFA is of critical importance. BPFA includes strong language calling for conflict prevention, peace education to foster a culture of peace (Beijing Declaration, 1995), demilitarization, reducing military expenditures and curbing international arms trade (Beijing Declaration, 1995).

The adoption of UNSCR 2250 (2015) and UNSCR 2419 (2018) on YPS provided another framework for stronger, more comprehensive implementation of WPS and BPFA. The central role played by young women in peacebuilding and in the advancement of the feminist agenda is not new. Neither is the double-marginalization they face. Historically, young women and girls have been the last to eat, to speak, to be listened to.

The 1995 Beijing Conference was “the first of the United Nations World Conferences on Women to incorporate an explicit focus on the girl child, with Governments recognizing that girls face particular forms of discrimination not only on the basis of their sex, but also their age” (UNICEF, n.d.). However, the importance of youth – and in particular young women’s – participation in decision-making and peace processes was only mentioned cursorily in BPFA, and has been missing from most policy frameworks and targets that followed it, including the SDG (Jones, 2019). The adoption of the YPS resolutions addressed this gap, emphasizing the importance of “meaningful participation of youth in peace processes and dispute-resolution” (UNSC, 2015, p. 1). Additionally, UNSCR 2419 urges decision-makers to pay “particular attention to the inclusion of young women” (UNSC, 2018, p. 16) in decision-making at all levels. Both YPS resolutions recognize that “marginalisation [of youth] is detrimental to building sustainable peace in all societies” (UNSC, 2015, p. 2; 2018, p. 2) thus establishing a strong link between youth – including young women’s – participation and conflict prevention.

As such, the YPS agenda contributes to the strengthening of the key tenets of both BPFA and WPS. The three frameworks should be perceived as mutually reinforcing, and their implementation carried out in a coherent and synergetic way. Recognition of the mutual links and interdependencies between the policy frameworks during the commemorations of 25 years of BPFA, 20 years of WPS and 5 years of YPS, is a first step towards achieving this goal.

## WOMEN AND YOUTH PEACEBUILDERS IN THE GENERATION EQUALITY FORUM

As the world prepares for the Generation Equality Forum (GEF; the Forum) – the incarnation of the 5<sup>th</sup> World’s Women Conference scheduled to take place in early 2021<sup>(2)</sup> – it finds itself at an important juncture in the implementation of BPFA. On the one hand, 2020 is a year of reflection: despite progress, many of the challenges that women faced in 1995 persist, and

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2 The Generation Equality Forum was initially planned for May and July 2020 (in Mexico City and Paris respectively). However, it was rescheduled due to the outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19).

armed conflict contributes to aggravating all of them. On the other hand, it is also a year of opportunity: of recognizing the progress, and finding ways of making best use of the robust legal and policy frameworks that have emerged in the past quarter of the century, including WPS and YPS agendas, and Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace resolutions.

The conceptual and historical interlinkages between BPFA and WPS, outlined in the first two sections of this paper, as well as the fact that violent conflict remains a persistent barrier to the realization of BPFA goals, point to a need for stronger synergies between the two policy frameworks, as well as YPS. This requires meaningful inclusion of women and youth peacebuilders in the processes leading up to the GEF, and the Forum itself, and a strong and intentional inclusion of WPS and YPS in all of its outcomes.

To date, this has not been the case. Women and youth peacebuilders have been excluded from the decision-making structure of the GEF, and their voices have not been heard in the regional and national review processes, which took place throughout 2019 (Cabrera-Balleza, 2020). This exclusion was due to a number of factors – including “lack of information, awareness, funding, capacity, access to internet, and language restrictions” (GNWP, 2020).

Regardless of the cause, however, the impact of the exclusion was the same: marginalization of WPS and YPS agendas in the outcomes of the GEF process – including Action Coalitions, the “global, innovative partnerships with governments, civil society, international organizations, and the private sector, to catalyse collective action, drive increased public and private investment, and deliver game-changing results for women and girls everywhere” (UN Women, 2020) As “catalytic” partnerships, the Action Coalitions are the main outcome of the GEF, expected to “make accelerated and irreversible progress to advance gender equality” (UN Women, 2020). They were announced by UN Women in January 2020 and cover six thematic areas: gender-based violence, economic justice and rights, bodily autonomy and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), feminist action for climate justice, technology and innovation for gender equality, and feminist movements and leadership (UN Women, 2020).

WPS was not included as one of the Action Coalitions, and armed conflict – despite being one of the 12 critical areas of the BPFA and a cross-cutting barrier to the achievement of nearly all of its goals – only mentioned

perfunctorily as an issue that “could be incorporated within the theme on Gender-Based Violence” (UN Women, 2020). Such framing fails to recognize the breadth of the WPS agenda and its foundational principles, contributes to the conceptual “narrowing” of the agenda, and reneges on the promise of the BPFA, which had conflict prevention and women’s meaningful participation in peace processes – and not solely protection of women from conflict-related SGBV – at its core.

The announcement was met with a strong opposition from the civil society – and in particular that civil society-led Beijing +25 WPS-YPS Action Coalition. Launched in December 2019, the civil society-led coalition aimed to increase grassroots’ organizations awareness of the Beijing +25 processes; strengthen coordination among civil society working on WPS and YPS; facilitate discussions on the intersections of WPS, YPS and the priority themes of the GEF; and develop and disseminate key advocacy messages on WPS and YPS ensure that they are reflected in all discussions and outcomes related to the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of BPFA (GNWP, 2019). Participating organizations of the coalition have monitored the national and regional review processes and outcome documents, participated in the “design sprint” in Paris, in February 2020, during which the modalities and format of the proposed Action Coalitions were discussed, and consistently called for the establishment of a stand-alone Action Coalition on WPS and YPS, taking a strong stand against simply mainstreaming WPS and YPS into existing Action Coalitions (Cabrera-Balleza, Fal-Dutra Santos et al., 2020).

As a result of the civil society and grassroots women’s persistent advocacy, the core group of the GEF, composed of UN Women, governments of France and Mexico and two civil society organizations: International Women’s Health Coalition and the Foundation for Studies and Research on Women, established a task force to assess the options for meaningful and intentional integration of WPS and YPS in the GEF process. The task force came up with four potential modalities and conducted consultations with different civil society groups, from which a stand-alone Action Coalition and a “hybrid” solution or “WPS compact” emerged as the most viable options (Cabrera-Balleza, Fal-Dutra Santos et al., 2020). Currently, the details of what these solutions could look like are still being discussed. However, the above analysis clearly points to a single conclusion: for the GEF to effectively address the persistent obstacles to BPFA

implementation, and stay true to its spirit, any solution will have to be based on meaningful consultations with women and youth peacebuilders, including those living in conflict-affected countries. This is of course complicated by the current outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), which has disproportionately affected women, and made it more difficult for women and youth peacebuilders from remote communities to participate in global discussions and policy-making processes. However, this must not serve as an excuse.

## CONCLUSION

In 1995, the UN Fourth World Conference on Women “galvanized (...) a vibrant women’s peace movement”, which eventually led to the adoption of UNSCR 1325 and 9 subsequent WPS resolutions. As the above analysis clearly shows, 25 years later, strengthening the link between WPS and BPFA can serve to once again revitalize the momentum behind both policy frameworks – with conflict prevention and meaningful participation of women and youth at their core.

Furthermore, as discussed above, 25 years after the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and 20 years after the adoption of UNSCR 1325, armed conflict continues to undermine women’s security, limit their access to basic services, education, economic opportunities and political participation. In 2019, “for the first time in four years, the number and complexity of violent conflicts rose, taking a heavy toll on civilians (UN, 2020). The number of displaced continues to grow, and humanitarian needs increase steadily every year, as more crises become protracted (Silva & Ros, 2019). Gender inequality remains one of the key drivers of conflict, and the reason for women’s exclusion from peace negotiations and peacebuilding.

Therefore, today is not the time to forget about peace and security, or to sever it from the action for gender equality. It is the time to take stock and re-double commitment to a peaceful world and a prosperous future for all. A future that will only be possible if women and youth civil society and peacebuilders are at the front and centre of forging it.

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