

## GENDER UPDATE

### Where is Women, Peace and Security? NATO's response to the Russia–Ukraine war

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The Russian invasion of Ukraine has challenged the accepted international order and resulted in the first-ever deployment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Response Force under the remit of collective defence. It has also raised questions about the future relevance of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda encapsulated in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and the follow-up resolutions. Primarily, if the WPS agenda is not invoked now given the highly gendered nature of the war, including the use of conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence (CRSGBV) by Russia, then when is it relevant? Moreover, have limited militarised understandings of the WPS agenda as promoted by NATO, including in Ukraine, contributed to the apparent redundancy of the WPS agenda in response to the ongoing war? The WPS agenda calls for the better representation of women in peace and security, including at the negotiating table, and for an acknowledgement of the gendered impact of armed conflict (including on both women and men, but also relevant here is the impact on lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer [LGBTQ] communities). It is therefore highly applicable to both understanding and responding to the current conflict, yet the WPS agenda, its principles and its aspirations have been noticeable by their absence from NATO's and the West's response to the war despite numerous policy commitments by NATO, its members and partners.

While there remains a lot we do not know about NATO's reaction, we would expect that NATO would have articulated the relevance of a gender perspective publicly if it were implementing the WPS agenda in respect to its response. Even on International Women's Day just short of two weeks after the Russian invasion – a time that NATO usually uses to showcase its work on the WPS agenda – NATO remained silent on what it was doing to support the WPS agenda except for deploying women as part of NATO's Response Force. This contrasts with the European Union, which stated that it stood with the women of Ukraine (EEAS, 2022).

We might also expect the WPS agenda to be at the forefront of the response of NATO (including of its members and partners) to Russia's intervention given that

NATO's partnership with Ukraine has been forged in recent years through the WPS agenda. The NATO Liaison Office in Kiev supported the development of Ukraine's own national action plan on the WPS agenda, and NATO's Science for Peace programme has targeted funding at projects focusing on the WPS agenda in Ukraine, some of which have involved women's civil society organisations (CSOs). Nevertheless, the focus of such intervention by NATO had significantly narrowed the agenda through an emphasis predominantly on the recruitment of women into Ukraine's armed forces. Such a militarised approach to the WPS agenda may explain why it is now absent from NATO's response.

Furthermore, Ukraine is a signatory to NATO's WPS policy, which requires member states to take primary responsibility for collective defence, including training troops on gender issues, deploying gender-balanced forces and providing gender advisors. However, there is no evidence that gender advisors have been used by NATO members contributing to this operation.

More broadly, NATO's strategic communications and digital diplomacy have not only become a critical site to respond to Russian misinformation, but also give an insight into the alliance's priorities, in terms of both what it foregrounds and how it foregrounds it. The value of a gender perspective here is crucial for understanding just who NATO's public diplomacy reaches, and NATO had made significant inroads into challenging the very gendered reception of its communications in recent years, partnering with the celebrity Angelina Jolie to reach 'new' audiences of women through the reception of Jolie's visit in popular culture (Wright and Bergman Rosamond, 2021). Yet, we see a return to a narrative of NATO as a 'muscular military power', with far less attention paid to the human stories underpinning the war, particularly the voices of Ukrainian women and their agency, or a concern with how to reach beyond audiences primarily interested in military power.

These silences are surprising given that NATO has its own in-house expertise on the WPS agenda through the Special Representative on WPS, a high-level position established to advise Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg with a seat at the North Atlantic Council. Yet, instead of utilising this expertise, the WPS agenda has not appeared in any of Stoltenberg's briefings following the numerous high-level meetings and summits that NATO has held in response to the war. As a minimum, space should be provided on the agenda of these meetings for the Special Representative to provide a briefing on WPS agenda concerns in line with NATO's own policies.

NATO also has the tools at its disposal to utilise the WPS agenda to support a more inclusive response to the war. For example, the NATO Civil Society Advisor Panel (CSAP) on the WPS agenda established in 2014 provides a space for discussion with civil society based in member states, those on the receiving end of NATO operations and partner states, including representation in Ukraine. The CSAP has enabled NATO to build relationships with civil society actors, many of whom have not readily engaged with the alliance due to its political-military purpose. This is therefore an important consultative mechanism through which NATO could reach out to Ukrainian civil society in order to ensure that the voices of Ukrainian women are heard. There are also repercussions of not doing so for the alliance, including perpetuating a perception that the CSAP exists solely in an instrumental capacity to legitimise NATO's WPS work. Ukrainian civil society has reached out to NATO, including through an open letter signed by a group of 93 Ukrainian CSOs in early

March asking NATO ‘to close the skies’ (Transparency International Ukraine, 2022), but without success.

In 2019, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated that ‘Gender equality is an integral part of all NATO policies, programmes and projects’ (NATO, 2019). Nevertheless, the response to the war in Ukraine by NATO, its members and its partners, many of whom have championed the WPS agenda, draws attention to what many feminists had feared: the disjuncture between the rhetoric and the reality of the global commitment to the WPS agenda. This is despite the fact that NATO has the demonstrable ability and expertise to fully integrate and utilise the WPS agenda. NATO’s silence on the WPS agenda in Ukraine risks undermining its wider work on the agenda and puts at risk the possibility of a lasting and inclusive peace reflective of the whole of Ukrainian society. It also calls attention to the limits of a militarised understanding of the WPS agenda, such as that championed by NATO, which places the agenda in jeopardy of instrumentalisation and ultimately redundancy.

### Author biography

**Katharine A. M. Wright** is Senior Lecturer in International Politics at Newcastle University. She has published extensively on NATO’s engagement with the Women, Peace and Security agenda, including her co-authored monograph: *NATO, Gender and the Military: Women Organising from Within* (Routledge, 2019).

### Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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