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Doing Women, Peace and Security Better: Opportunities for the Next UK National Action Plan

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Dr Paul Kirby, Dr Hannah Wright and Dr Aisling Swaine look at the UK's contribution to the WPS Agenda, discussing the strengths and limitations of the UK's work and providing recommendations for future WPS plans. The authors also summarise the distinctive characteristics of UK WPS, the persistent limits of state action, and the practical possibilities for a policy platform to come on their recent policy brief [the future of the UK's Women, Peace and Security Policy](#)

Ever since the birth of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda nearly twenty-two years ago, activists, academics and practitioners

have asked how its various gender equality commitments get implemented or, just as likely, don't. Beyond the bold rhetoric of empowerment and protection, does policy work in practice? Even as WPS has grown in great waves to include ten resolutions of the United Nations Security Council, [ninety-four national plans](#), dozens of regional institutional strategies, dedicated offices, special envoys, and a complex supporting universe of civil society and research networks, it is still [often said](#) that the necessary 'political will' is lacking.

Given their now settled status as the major implementers of the agenda, national governments are the primary targets for both complaints and hopeful appeals; at the same time, the same governments reiterate their commitment to WPS and in some cases champion their record as a version of ethical foreign policy.

In sheer policy productivity terms, the UK is indisputably an innovator and major influence on the agenda: only the second country to issue a NAP (back in 2006, on International Women's Day, simultaneously with Norway), one of only four with as many plans today, a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council with 'penholder' responsibility for the agenda at large, a leading funder of key UN offices and other WPS-adjacent entities, and the creator of bespoke programmes like the now decade-old [Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative](#).

As civil servants draft the next UK National Action Plan (NAP) on WPS, due for launch later this year, the three of us took to understanding this history. Drawing on practically all official WPS documentation from the last fifteen years, whatever available data we could assemble on government spending, and the record of civil society engagement led by the Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS) network, [our new policy brief](#) summarises the distinctive characteristics of 'UK WPS', the

persistent limits of state action, and the practical possibilities for a policy platform to come.

Though the original goals of resolution 1325 were ambitious, the agenda has [in many senses expanded in the last decades](#), adapting to new realities and deepening its treatment of longstanding issues. The scope can be traced in the literal growth of documents, from the two pages of the first UK NAP to the thirty-two pages of the fourth. Yet states vary in what aspects of the agenda they address, their divergences reflecting multiple struggles over what the agenda 'should' be: an effort to manage the gendered impacts of war and/or to prevent it altogether?

A project to empower women and girls specifically, or to apply broader gender analysis to conflict and insecurity? Measured by issue coverage relative to other NAPs issued in similar time periods, [the UK has been more likely](#) to emphasise sexual violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, and human rights defenders, and less likely to focus on transitional justice or small arms. Compared just to other WPS champion states (which we define as those with three or more NAPs to date), the UK makes over six times the references to 'men and boys' but only half as many to refugees or LGTBQI and mentions climate change and non-proliferation not at all.

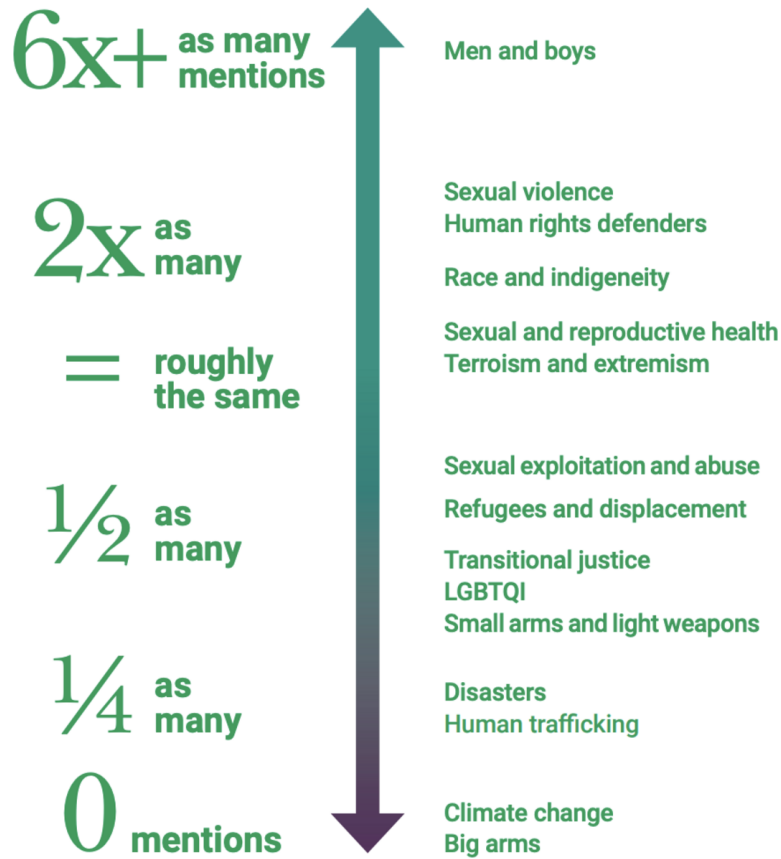


Diagram 1: UK WPS Relative to Other State Champions

While official priorities tell one story, spending may tell another, though accounting for it is challenging. There is no dedicated WPS budget and currently no common marker for identifying WPS spend. Annual reporting to Parliament lists some very large projects, but many have a small or vague gender component. Others focus on gender significantly, but go beyond WPS, as in the case of the flagship ‘What Works to End Violence Against Women and Girls’ research programme, costed at £25 million but only in part investigating conflict-related violence.



*The Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative –
which has been criticised for dominating*

UK WPS efforts – can be tracked a little more clearly, with over £55 million in spend since 2012. Its focus has been on criminal justice and accountability, though the independent aid commissioner has also identified failures on survivor inclusion and long-term strategy.



A more precise, if partial, snapshot is available from the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF), a ‘whole-of-government’ pot under the aegis of the National Security Council which is only one of several sources of funding for WPS work, but the most important since 2015.

In our own analysis of 300 CSSF [programme summaries](#) since 2017, we found that dedicated gender spend has increased over time, but is on our best estimate still only 3 per cent of thematic and country spend and only 1.3 per cent if calculated as a share of the total CSSF budget. Like many other governments, the UK treats WPS as almost exclusively external, promoting gender equality in distant lands, usually of the global south.

The alternative is what has been called ‘domestication’ – aligning WPS principles across departmental divisions and beyond siloed issue areas like violent extremism. There are some signs that the UK government is considering a more explicit ‘internal’ face to the next NAP, and we

identify a range of opportunities, including the place of Northern Ireland and the asylum/refugee system.

The CEDAW Committee and civil society have consistently [recommended state implementation of WPS in Northern Ireland](#).

Women in leadership from grassroots peacebuilding to formal politics experience direct threats to life, intimidation, control, sexual slander and falsified sexual imagery-based abuse in their roles, directly inhibiting women's 'participation' in peacebuilding and in broader politics. The next NAP could and should provide a basis from which implementation of WPS is advanced locally in response to priorities identified by diverse women's civil society.

While WPS resolutions [urge states to recognise risks facing female refugees](#), decades of legislation designed to reduce migration to the UK have produced policies that enact a range of gendered and racialised harms. Migrants and refugees – including those who are pregnant, nursing, and/or survivors of GBV and torture – can be detained without time limits while cases are processed, and there have been multiple reports of sexual abuse of detained women by detention centre staff.

The government's refusal to ratify Article 59 of the Istanbul Convention, which would grant residence to individuals whose immigration status depends on an abusive partner, further traps people in abusive situations. The Nationality and Borders Act 2022 punishes those who arrive in the UK via 'irregular' routes while safe and legal routes are closed off, and the latest policy of deporting asylum seekers to Rwanda further undermines the Refugee Convention. A radical rethink of migration policies is needed to bring them into line with WPS and refugee regime principles.

Fulfilling the hopes invested in WPS requires sweeping transformations to patriarchal business as usual. Such changes are unlikely to come

from governments alone, still less from those in the global north that have historically profited from inequalities and iniquities.

Still, in response to the history of UK policy, we identify three opportunities for the next NAP. First, despite significant investment, monitoring, evaluation and learning procedures could be significantly strengthened. Improvements in fund labelling and tracking would improve reporting, enable independent scrutiny, and allow for a clearer identification of policy success. The welcome inclusion of civil society and academic expertise should be given a stronger formal basis throughout NAP development and delivery.

Second, the many opportunities for domestication of the agenda continue to be neglected. Though these pose understandable bureaucratic and political challenges, the success of the agenda depends on coherence and creative thinking across policy domains and government departments, even where this is politically sensitive.



It is especially important that the UK government engage with domestication to avoid the impression that it believes WPS applies only beyond its borders and in its aid and humanitarian relationships with distant others.



Finally, the fifth NAP offers an opportunity to commit to the full breadth of the agenda and make a step change in policy ambition. The UK continues to lead on issues of CRSV, and the Foreign Secretary's recommitment is welcome. However, the national action plan framework should not be taken to mean that governments should only engage with parts of the agenda (or what has been called 'a la carte WPS'). In crucial contemporary threats like climate change and the arms trade, the government should do more to comprehensively apply the gender perspective and ensure maximal adherence with its commitments to international regimes.

The views, thoughts and opinions expressed in this blog post are those of the author(s) only, and do not necessarily reflect LSE's or those of the LSE Centre for Women, Peace and Security.

Image credit: [Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office](#) (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

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