What We Heard
No Women, No Peace? Gender and Multilateral Security Governance

Roundtable: Comparative study on the implementation of the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda across regional organizations.

November 12th, 2024

Background

On November 12, 2024, the Research Network on Women, Peace, and Security (RN-WPS), supported by the Mobilizing Insights in Defense and Security (MINDS) program, convened a roundtable of experts to discuss the implementation of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Representatives from the two organizations presented accounts of the implementation of WPS in their regions of operation, highlighting their policies, procedures, successes and lessons learnt. Following the presentations, an in-depth discussion took place among the presenters and representatives present from the Department of National Defense (DND), the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), Global Affairs

Canada (GAC), and MINDS. The roundtable discussion was therefore a high-level discourse on the successes, challenges, and future opportunities in WPS.

This report captures the rich discussions, weaving together key insights and reflections shared during the session. It focuses on institutional practices, regional dynamics, and Canada's leadership role, the roundtable shed light on the evolving WPS agenda and its potential to transform security governance globally.

WPS by NATO and ASEAN

Stories of Implementation: NATO's Experience

The conversation began with a presentation by Dr. Stéfanie von Hlatky on NATO's journey in advancing the WPS agenda. Dr. von Hlatky highlighted NATO's movement toward the institutionalization of WPS principles, focusing on integrating gender considerations into mission design and operations. Recent examples include the inclusion of WPS principles in NATO's 2018 Iraq mission and policy adjustments in response to the war in Ukraine.

She then delved into challenges encountered during the implementation. She stated that differences in how WPS is interpreted and implemented across regions, the predominance of male-dominated military teams, and institutional memory gaps—exacerbated by the disruptions of COVID-19—pose persistent obstacles. Despite these hurdles, NATO continues to explore innovative ways to balance operational effectiveness while meeting gender equality goals, including addressing emerging threats like tech-facilitated gender-based violence.

She further emphasized the potential for NATO to deepen its focus on human security and broaden its WPS agenda to encompass transboundary issues such as cybersecurity and disaster management.

ASEAN's Localization Journey

The discussion then shifted to ASEAN, which began operationalizing the WPS agenda in 2017. PhD Candidate and WPS expert Emma Fingler outlined ASEAN's efforts to effectively adapt global WPS norms to contexts in the Indo-Pacific region. This approach has been facilitated by tools such as the 2022 Regional Plan of Action, localization toolkits, and lessons-learned reports.

Emma Fingler expanded on ASEAN's establishment of a regional WPS Community of Practice and its engagement with multi-stakeholder partnerships. These steps have fostered regional buy-in and facilitated the integration of WPS principles into areas like disaster response and climate change planning. However, challenges remain, including waning interest in WPS and competing agendas with Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS)

initiatives in target countries. There is also the risk of WPS becoming a "check-the-box" exercise rather than a meaningful framework for change.

Despite these challenges, ASEAN envisions that a continuation of bilateral exchanges could provide opportunities to learn best practices from other regions and organizations. For instance, it was suggested by another participant that to resolve the issue of the overlap of YPS and WPS efforts, best practices can be learnt from the operations of an organization such as the African Union (AU) which have effectively managed to coordinate collaboration between YPS and WPS without risk of one dominating the other.

Cross-Cutting Reflections

Throughout the roundtable, several cross-cutting themes emerged. These themes are summarized below.

Operationalization and Adaptation

Both presenters stressed the importance of ensuring WPS frameworks are flexible and adaptable to the unique political and social contexts of different regions. For instance, some countries have several action plans while others like Cambodia have none. Conceptualizations of gender and gender equality tend also to be context specific. Hence, adapting WPS agendas to local perceptions and policies promotes effective and inclusive bottom-up approaches. Amplifying the contributions of actors that are implementing WPS principles without the specific label of WPS like Women Human Rights Defenders and ensuring WPS principles are embedded in mission planning were highlighted as critical steps.

Representation and Meaningful Inclusion

The need to move beyond superficial inclusion to ensure women have meaningful input and participation was a recurring theme. This would mean that intersectionality should be the foundation of aspects of WPS operations in ways that value grassroots and diverse inputs and foster bilateral exchange. Furthermore, to mitigate the issue of inadequate inclusion of women in WPS programs like peacekeeping, it was suggested that the identification of the barriers that prevent women's participation is necessary for a definitive resolution. Also, to prevent biases that interfere with women's recruitment, emphasis was placed on the importance of process orientation.

Male Buy-In and Advocacy

Achieving the WPS agenda requires engaging men as allies. Participants discussed leveraging operational effectiveness narratives to build male buy-in and institutionalizing gender-responsive leadership to create lasting cultural change.

Canada's Role

Canada has emerged as a central actor in advancing the WPS agenda. Through its leadership roles in NATO and ASEAN, Canada has championed intersectional approaches and fostered partnerships that drive the agenda forward. The deployment of gender advisors, bilateral partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, and Canada's ability to facilitate mutual knowledge exchange were highlighted as key contributions.

Participants encouraged Canada to continue exploring new areas for leadership, including the intersection of WPS and human security, and to address transboundary challenges like cybersecurity and climate change through a gender lens. Additionally, it is important for Canada to facilitate avenues for bilateral exchanges so that they can incorporate lessons from other regions into their agenda and prevent top-down approaches to WPS. Essentially, to effectively promote the WPS agenda, Canada needs to facilitate a community of practice that includes experts from fields like academia, civil society and defence.

Looking Ahead: Opportunities for Growth

The roundtable concluded with a discussion of future priorities for the WPS agenda. Key areas for research and action include:

- Enhancing the intersection of WPS and human security to address emerging threats.
- Investigating barriers to women's participation in peacekeeping and identifying best practices for recruitment and retention.
- Developing sex-disaggregated data frameworks to improve representation and policy outcomes.
- Exploring the coexistence of WPS and YPS agendas to ensure complementary progress.
- Ensuring accountability of nations and organizations for the implementation of the WPS agenda, which may include robust systems for follow-up and evaluation.

Participants agreed that sustained engagement, innovative solutions, and renewed commitment are essential to keeping the WPS agenda at the forefront of multilateral security governance.

Final Thoughts

This roundtable highlighted the evolving nature of the WPS agenda and its transformative potential within multilateral security governance. By addressing the challenges and opportunities discussed, Canada and its partners can continue to advance gender equality and foster inclusive, resilient security systems worldwide. The RN-WPS remains committed to supporting these efforts through research, dialogue, and collaboration.

The Speakers

Stéfanie von Hlatky is the Canada Research Chair on Gender, Security, and the Armed Forces, Full Professor of Political Studies at Queen's University, and Fellow with the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation. She previously held positions at Georgetown University, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Dartmouth College, ETH Zurich and was a Fulbright Visiting Research Chair at the University of Southern California. She has published over 50 articles and chapters, including in the Canadian Journal of Political Science, Contemporary Security Policy, International Affairs, International Politics, the Journal of Global Security Studies, Armed Forces & Society, International Journal, the Journal of Strategic Studies, European Security, Asian Security, as well as the Journal of Transatlantic Studies. Her latest books are Deploying Feminism: The Role of Gender in NATO Military Operations (2022) and a co-edited volume, Total Defence Forces in the 21st Century (2023). Overall, she has published two books with Oxford University Press, as well as five edited volumes with Georgetown University Press and McGill-Queen's University Press. She is the founder of Women in International Security – Canada and the Honorary Colonel of the Princess of Wales' Own Regiment.

Emma Fingler (she/her) is a SSHRC-funded doctoral candidate researching gender, disaster response operations, and regional governance in South and Southeast Asia. She is a Fellow with the Climate Security Association of Canada and is a Graduate Research Fellow with the Centre for International and Defence Policy (CIDP) at Queen's University. Emma was the 2023 Graduate Scholarship recipient of Women in Defence and Security (WiDS). She was previously a Canada-Asia Young Professional Fellow with the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada and 2022-2024 Graduate Fellow with the Research Network on Women, Peace and Security (RN-WPS). Emma has experience working abroad on humanitarian, development, and coordination issues. Prior to joining Queen's, she was the Special Assistant to the United Nations Resident Coordinator in Kathmandu Nepal, and a Junior Professional Consultant with the UN Resident Coordinator's Office in Kathmandu. She holds an M.A. in Global Governance from the University of Waterloo's Balsillie School of International Affairs and a B.A. Hons. in Political Studies from Bishop's University.

Research Network on Women, Peace, and Security
The Research Network on Women, Peace and Security (RN-WPS) is a Canada-wide, bilingual research hub. The research hub was proposed within the framework of the Mobilizing Insights in Defence and Security (MINDS) program which is designed to facilitate collaboration and mobilize knowledge between the Department of National Defence, the Canadian Armed Forces, and academia and other experts on defence and security issues. The network aims to mobilise Canadian-based expertise on issues related to the WPS agenda, and more broadly, to the intersections of militarism, (in)security, settler-colonialism, gender, race, sexuality, and disability.