



# WHAT ABOUT WOMEN? PURSUING THE WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY (WPS) AGENDA IN THE EURO-MEDITERRANEAN REGION

**Mariam Mecky**  
Independent Researcher

## Introduction

In October 2000, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, calling for women's increased participation in conflict resolution and peace-building as well as the protection of women and girls in armed conflict. The resolution was a landmark in the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda, being the first to recognise the gendered nature of conflict and warfare and the role women should play in conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction. It has been regarded as a result as a milestone acknowledging and promoting the role of women in the global security arena, having the potential to resolve conflicts and sustain peace (UNSCR 1325 at 20 Years, 2020).

In recent years, the world has been facing growing and persistent security challenges that threaten peace and stability, from economic crises and climate change to authoritarianism and extremism. In the Euro-Mediterranean region, crises and instability have been flaring; from the security situation in Libya to Palestine-Israel and economic deterioration in Lebanon and Tunisia. Amid that, a strong pushback against gender issues and women's rights is being witnessed across the world, risking a concerning retreat of generational gains, as stressed by the United Nations (UN) Reports (Report of the Secretary-General on women and peace and security, 2023; Report of the Secretary-General on women and peace and security, 2022). As various efforts have been exerted for conflict resolution and peace-building, most successes seem to be short-lived (O'Reilly, 2015), and the pursuit of sustainable peace in such contexts has become more relevant than ever, with pressing questions on utilisation of international mechanisms,

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such as Resolution 1325. It is no secret that United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 has so far fallen short of its aspirations. Against the backdrop of decades-long conflicts and warfare mounting in Europe and the Middle East, increased militarisation around the world, and persistent gender-based structural violence, it has become imperative to unpack the progress and potential of UNSCR 1325.

Hence, this policy brief tackles UNSCR 1325 as a milestone for the WPS Agenda focusing on the ever-changing dynamics in the Euro-Mediterranean region. In that vein, it aims to demonstrate the importance of utilising the WPS Agenda as an inclusive agenda to sustain and push for stability and conflict resolution in the region. The brief attempts to provide a nuanced approach to the WPS Agenda by critically examining UNSCR 1325 while outlining opportunities for engagement. It aims to highlight takeaways and entryways on pursuing sustainable peacebuilding rather than only pause violence. The brief starts with a concise overview on key stability and security challenges in the Euro-Med region. The following section unpacks and reviews UNSCR 1325 and its implementation. Afterwards, it zooms in on Mediterranean Women Mediators Network as a case study in the Euro-Mediterranean region. The last section outlines key recommendations for the effective implementation of the WPS Agenda towards achieving sustainable peace.

## Key challenges in the Euro-Mediterranean region

As countries in Euro-Mediterranean region were embarking upon post-pandemic economic recovery like the rest of world, they encountered growing tensions and persistent challenges, from terrorism and warring conflict to looming climate crisis (Borrell, 2020). While Europe rallied to respond to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region struggled further with persistent conflicts such as Libya and Yemen, expansion of terrorism throughout the Sahel, and violent outbreaks of interstate conflict in Sudan with proxy wars and geopolitical spillover tensions.<sup>1</sup> Currently, conflict and political reconciliation attempts are palpable in Libya and Syria, albeit differently, and now the most recent violent escalations in the Palestinian-Israeli issue have ignited further tensions in a highly volatile region. Furthermore, the economic situations are worsening in Egypt, Tunisia and Lebanon, for instance, where inflation has hit skyrocketing levels. This has been coupled with energy and climate issues. On the other side of the Mediterranean, as Europe grapples with its highest militarisation rate since the Second World War, it has shared challenges with its southern neighbours, such as energy crises and economic setbacks.

The Euro-Mediterranean region, like other regions around the world, faces challenges on governance and socioeconomic issues, including gender. Progress on women's representation remained either rather slow or inexistent on both sides of the Mediterranean. According to the latest Global Gender Gap Index,<sup>2</sup> published in 2023, none of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) member countries, with the exception of Lithuania, are among the top nine countries that closed almost 80% of their gender gap. Europe has the highest gender parity of all regions at 76.3%. At this rate, Europe is projected to reach gender parity in 67 years. Meanwhile, for the MENA region, gender parity stands at a 62.6% parity score, and, with this rate, full regional parity will be attained in 152 years. In such a context, the role of women, along with the WPS Agenda and specifically UNSCR 1325, holds great relevance for stability and security.

### Unpacking 1325 and its progress

<sup>1</sup> See more: Szalai (2023) & Pierini (2020).

<sup>2</sup> The Global Gender Gap Index, published annually by the World Economic Forum since 2006, as a framework for capturing the magnitude of gender-based disparities and tracking their progress among the key thresholds of political and economic empowerment, education and health.

UNSCR 1325 has represented the culmination of efforts by feminist and women's civil society, activists and scholars<sup>3</sup> around the world to push gender onto the international security agenda, highlighting the importance of gender perspective to militarism, warfare and conflict, and setting the stage for the WPS Agenda (Pratt & Richter-Devroe, 2011). The Resolution covers four main areas: participation of women at all levels of decision-making; the protection of women and girls from sexual and gender-based violence; the prevention of violence against women; and relief and recovery measures to address international crises through a gendered lens (Resolution 1325, 2000). 1325 articulated critical issues pushing it to mainstream political rhetoric as the disproportionate impact of violent conflict and war on women and girl redefining wartime rape and sexual assault as a weapon of war rather than a mere outcome or collateral damage as well as the importance of women's active, full and equal participation in conflict resolution processes. The Resolution not only recognises women's role but pushes for their increased participation at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international conflict prevention and resolution initiatives, as well as peace-building, humanitarian response and post-conflict reconstruction, promoting the role of women as active actors rather than just victims. The Resolution also calls upon local actors and member states, as well as the UN system itself, to adopt a gender approach in peace operations, negotiations and agreements. In that sense, UNSCR 1325 has most prominently created a linkage between gender/social change and political transformation in the mainstream international relations sphere, laying the path for new initiatives at the international, governmental and non-governmental level (Pratt & Richter-Devroe, 2011). Nine resolutions<sup>4</sup> followed 1325, expanding issues pertaining to the WPS Agenda and furthering its objectives (UNSCR 1325 at 20 Years, 2020). By October 2020, 86 countries had launched their own National Action Plans (NAPs) as a follow-up for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 on national policies and security systems reform, with some countries on their second or third versions of their NAPs (What is UNSCR 1325?, n.d.).

Twenty-three years later, the implementation of UNSCR 1325 and the WPS Agenda overall has fallen short of its desired impact, stated objectives or transformative potential (Report of the Secretary-General on women and peace and security, 2023; UNSCR 1325 At 20 years, 2020). In the latest follow-up, the Report of the Secretary-General on women and peace and security (2023:1) stated that "in peace processes, negotiating parties continue to regularly exclude women, and impunity for atrocities against women and girls is still prevalent..." While the UN highlights that countries' calls for support of women's participation in peace processes and for increased representation have been growing in the past few years from public statements to explicit support for regional and national women's mediator networks, the level of actual representation in peace processes has remained rather low (Report of the Secretary-General on women and peace and security, 2023; Report of the Secretary-General on women and peace and security, 2022). Women's representation as negotiators or delegates on behalf of parties to conflict in active peace processes led or co-led by the UN stood only at 16% in 2022, compared to 19% in 2021 and 23% in 2020 (Report of the Secretary-General on women and peace and security, 2023).

Women's formal representation globally in political leadership has been rather limited; there are 26 countries where 28 women serve as heads of state as at September 2023, but only 3 of them are in UfM member countries: Denmark, Italy and Lithuania (Facts

<sup>3</sup> This was following lobbying efforts in different multilateral fora, such as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995.

<sup>4</sup> 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009), 1889 (2009), 1960 (2010), 2106 (2013), 2122 (2013), 2242 (2015), 2467 (2019) and 2493 (2019).

and figures: Women's leadership and political participation, 2023). The level of women in national parliaments has reached 26.5% worldwide and in local government 35.5% of elected seats, higher than at the national level (Report of the Secretary-General on women and peace and security, 2023). The case largely remains the same in regional data, where representation in national government, national parliaments and regional assemblies across the European Union (EU) stands at 34%, 33% and 30% respectively, according to the Gender Equality Index (2023) published by the European Institute for Gender Equality. For the MENA region, women's representation in national assemblies was 16.3%, as per the latest data in April 2023 published by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) (Global and Regional Averages of women in national parliaments, 2023).

Furthermore, it is particularly important to unpack the impact of the WPS Agenda beyond the numbers of formal representation. UNSCR 1325 has pushed the issue of women's representation and participation to mainstream rhetoric in the international security fora. Yet, in that process, it risked the essentialisation of women from being only "victim" to solely a "peace-maker". While it is imperative to recognise women's agency, this resulted in a reductionist approach to women's role that is equally restrictive. Later resolutions have elaborated on and rectified this notion of women's participation, but women have been predominantly represented in UNSCR 1325 and related mainstream policy documents and processes solely in such gendered connotations and stereotypes (Pratt & Richter-Devroe, 2011). This was also reflected in the development aid sector, which tends to tailor programmes centring on representation of women as the sole objective in conflict-affected areas or fragile contexts in humanitarian and development fields without a further assessment of such representation. Within that process, it is vital to debunk the assumption of women's formal representation as the sole or immediate solution; women's leadership does not in turn automatically mean improving the status of women and girls or women taking part in peace negotiations; it does not simply mean more stability or peace. While women's representation and participation are an inherent right in international law, the gender perspective in peace-building enhances the "efficiency, comprehensiveness, effectiveness of the process, and, in the end, (in pursuit of) for a truly sustainable post-conflict stability and security" (Teodorescu, 2019). A study of 182 peace agreements signed between 1989 and 2011 showed that those that included women were 35% more likely to last a minimum of 15 years (O'Reilly, 2015). Promoting the role of women in peace processes is not about women as peace-makers but is a push for an inclusive process and just post-conflict society. This is not about just the inclusion of women per se, but it concerns pushing for an inclusive peace process that is attained by including women in other marginalising groups through an intersectional perspective that allows the presentation of structural issues at the negotiation table, enabling the pursuit of sustainable peace and stability. A study on women mediators in Libya, Syria and Yemen argued that the women shared common concerns on how formal negotiations, represented in Track I processes, often dominated by men, focused on narrow security issues disregarding daily issues that affect the stability of the communities (Parry, 2022). In Libya in 2020, 17 out of 75 negotiators (23%) in the UN-facilitated Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) were women, signifying a leap in women's representation in the official Libyan peace process. They were able to expand the agenda to include transitional justice and accountability for human rights violations, return of displaced persons and freedom of movement, as well as the reopening of the road between Misurata and Tawerga. However, moving forward, women demanded a minimum of 30% female representation in the new Government of National Unity, but only 18% representation was achieved before the recent collapse of the roadmap (Parry, 2022).

Hence, assessing the progress of the WPS Agenda requires a closer look at representation than taking it at face value. In the limited percentage of women's

representation, political actors have used women as tokens for legitimacy in negotiation, peace processes and other aspects, leading to window-dressing without an efficient or meaningful participation. Moreover, in many cases, representation in conflict-affected areas at the formal negotiation table consists largely of political elite with an absence of actors with an intersectional background or engaged with the communities. This is demonstrated by the exclusion and sidelining of women and feminist civil society participation in peace process and conflict resolution mechanisms. This has been the case with key players in the Syrian negotiations over the years, such as in 2014, for example, which in turn has aided the marginalisation of women's civil society representation (Enloe, 2017).

Women and feminist civil society organizations (CSOs) continue to face massive structural and practical barriers, despite the increased calls for women's participation in peace processes, according to the Report of the UN Secretary-General on women and peace and security (2022). Professor of Political Science and Feminist International Relations (IR) scholar Cynthia Enloe has a remarkable piece with a subtitle of "where are the women", which asserts the importance of examining power dynamics and structures and posits that the lack of representation does not mean lack of influence. Enloe in her piece contends that the marginalisation of women does not suggest the lack of agency or power, and, thus, it is not about women's lack of presence in power structures but lack of recognition or acknowledgement of power dynamics (Enloe, 2014). Acknowledgement of this power structure enables us to utilise local efforts to pursue such transformative potential of the WPS Agenda. Women's CSOs are particularly active in peace initiatives in the Euro-Mediterranean region, engaging with local communities and other feminist groups across countries, and developing alternative tools to the political realities (Teodorescu, 2019).

The Regional Guidelines for the Implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in the South Mediterranean (2022), published by the EuroMed Feminist Initiative, stresses the necessity of civil society participation in all stages and levels of the processes of policy-making and monitoring of the WPS Agenda in the region. It highlights that not only do women and feminist CSOs have knowledge and skills in terms of the local dynamics and situation on the ground, but also how they are aware of the linkages between the local women's situation, structures of oppression and how far this is linked to their security. In the South-Med region, women's CSOs have already played a vital role in pushing or developing national NAPs. In the NAP process, women's groups in Jordan, Lebanon and Tunisia took part in the coordination process., while in Iraq, women's CSOs have led the development of the first Iraq NAP for UNSCR 1325, which is the first NAP 1325 in the region.

In the Euro-Mediterranean region, the local and regional women's and feminist CSO landscape is quite dynamic (Regional Guidelines for the Implementation of Women, Peace and Security Agenda in the South Mediterranean, 2022; Skalli, 2014), with a long history of rich activism from collective movements to formal groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Over the past decade, young feminist groups in the Euro-Mediterranean region have arisen, working against systematic violence and structural inequalities (Mecky, 2019; Zaki, 2019). Meanwhile, the alienation of women and feminist CSOs, let alone young feminist groups, is a trend in political processes as well as political negotiations, in light of growing instability, restrictive political environments, and gender pushback. Moreover, in the field of peace and security, international funding for women and feminist CSOs has been limited, where donors rarely had gender equality as the primary focus of aid in fragile contexts, despite the

vocalised increased focus. Some statistics indicated that only 2% of funding dedicated to peace and security was allocated to gender issues or women's empowerment in 2013, with a slight increase until 2020 (Aid Focused on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, 2020; Financing UN Security Council Resolution 1325, 2015). Yet, transnational women and feminist civil society engagement has been an effective tool, such as the work of international NGO EuroMed Feminist Initiative,<sup>5</sup> headquartered in Paris, which for instance has supported the Regional Civil Society Observatory in the South Mediterranean as well as Swedish NGO Operation 1325<sup>6</sup> bringing women and feminist civil society actors together to work on the WPS Agenda.

The implementation of the WPS Agenda extends beyond the eruption of violence or armed conflict, encompassing a holistic approach to security. A major point made by women and feminist civil society concerns how women's security is still excluded from national and international security policies, given the mainstream lack of acknowledgement of the continuum of violence, and the intrinsic link between violence against women and girls and women, peace and security (Regional Guidelines for the Implementation of Women, Peace and Security Agenda in the South Mediterranean, 2022). Feminist IR scholarship has engaged with various debates on the definition of peace (Sjoberg, 2018; Wilcox, 2011). With more divergence, the most common pattern has been that peace is conceived as far more than simply the end of violence, but rather as a process that transforms multiple structures of exploitation and injustice, including gender hierarchies. As armed conflict is not a static gendered condition, recognising structural violence is imperative. Thus, it is critical to recognise sustainable peace as the elimination of structural violence. Further, as Enloe (2017) puts it, this approach arguably produces a peace agreement that will not sustain peace but will perpetuate structural violence. In that vein, it is vital to address the WPS Agenda beyond times of warfare, and in turn reflect on how states as well as donors approach humanitarian and development aid and the Humanitarian Development Peace nexus overall. Female local mediators in Syria and Yemen reported the divergence they found between Track I and Track III, where Track I actors, who are typically politicians and military leaders, usually emphasise peace as a matter of "ending the war", whereas local communities, and women in particular, often define a more complex peace that encompasses pressing economic, development or social inequalities and accessing stable and secure livelihoods (Parry, 2022).

## Women mediator networks

Women mediator networks have evolved most notably since 2015, showcasing the potential of collaboration to support and promote full and meaningful participation of women. These include the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network, the Arab Women Mediators Network of African Women in Conflict Prevention and Mediation (FemWise-Africa), Women Mediators across the Commonwealth, and Nordic Women Mediators. These networks have joined efforts through the Global Alliance of Regional Women Mediator Networks in 2019 engaging in multilateral settings, most recently in the Global Congress for Women Mediators in October 2023 in New York.

Launched in October 2017, the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network (MWMN) is an apt example of transnational alliance by civil society and supported by Italy as a member state to adequately push for the WPS Agenda. The Network aims to promote women's role in peace-building efforts and mediation through advocacy, networking, outreach, and capacity-building (Mediterranean Women Mediators Network, n.d.). Bringing together women members from diverse backgrounds that have been active in different arenas of public life, it works to increase

<sup>5</sup> On Euro-Med feminist Initiative: <https://www.efi-ife.org/en/>

<sup>6</sup> On Operation 1325: <https://operation1325.se/en/operation-1325-2/>

the number of women involved in peace-making efforts and facilitate the appointment of high-level women mediators at local and international level. Thus, the Network not only works against the exclusion of women but also consolidates a “gender consciousness” in women’s contribution to social change and peace-making efforts by fostering dialogue across the Mediterranean region (Teodorescu, 2019). Now with 50 members, the Network’s main activities include conducting capacity-building activities, such as mediation capabilities and networking programmes, and strengthening women’s participation at local levels, as well as engaging and supporting local initiatives and launching such advocacy campaigns in the international arena. In that vein, the Network not only promotes women’s participation but gives impetus to local initiatives for regional stability. A notable example is the close MWMN work with Libyan members to engage with local actors and ensure women’s participation with the changing dynamics, succeeding in lobbying to include three women in the formal Libyan delegations at the Palermo Conference for Libya in 2018. Furthermore, the Network demonstrates the potential of transnational engagement of feminist and active women in government, non-governmental entities and academia and the dialogue and impact it brings to the table as they face similar challenges. Thus, in relation to Syria, the MWMN launched an initiative in 2021 working with 25 Syrian women activists and various network members to address the marginalised role of women in the peace process, the challenges facing Syrian women in the diaspora, and the legal and traditional barriers that hinder Syrian women from playing a key role in society and in the political space, concluding with a list of recommendations for the international community.<sup>7</sup> While enhancing women’s participation as mediators is a much-needed outcome, the impact of transnational feminist activism such as the MWMN goes beyond promoting dialogue, fostering alliances and coordination, and advancing political engagement.

## Recommendations

This policy brief aimed to engage with UNSCR 1325 and the WPS Agenda and outline key recommendations to further the WPS Agenda to its transformative potential and intended objectives of sustainable peace. Formal representation of women is critical as a step forward to achieve peace and social justice, but the debunking of the essentialisation of women as merely “peace-makers” as well as the formal representation of women as the sole key for achieving stability, peace and security is equally important. More work is required for adequate and intersectional representation and meaningful participation of women ensuring that gender issues and social justice measures are on the table. The state of implementation of UNSCR 1325 showed the importance of pushing for civil society and especially youth-centred feminist engagement and also for a gender transformative approach to the Humanitarian, Development and Peace Nexus,<sup>8</sup> where humanitarian relief is tied to long-term development goals in pursuit of peace. The protection of women and girls from sexual violence in humanitarian settings must be coupled with approaches that sustain peace and security. In order to do so, it is vital to employ an inclusive approach to security and a holistic approach to peace that addresses not only eruption or the breaking point of the physical violence but structural violence against women and vulnerable groups.

As women mediator networks hold potential for formal representation of women in the peace process, it is essential to ensure systematic support for them and promote further engagement in the national, regional and multilateral fora. Moreover, systematic access to funding for these networks and CSOs promoting the WPS Agenda is required. According to the Report of the Secretary-General on women and peace and security (2023), there continues to be a “significant shortage” of financing for women’s meaningful participation in the peace process and gender-responsive peace processes. Therefore, increased support for existing dedicated mechanisms like the Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund is needed. The Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund, established in 2019, has supported more than 100 CSOs in 22 countries through its rapid response window for pushing for women’s participation in peace processes.

<sup>7</sup> Syria: The Role of Women in the Elaboration of Durable Solutions to the Syrian crisis. See [https://womenmediators.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Key-recommendations\\_Syria.pdf](https://womenmediators.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Key-recommendations_Syria.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> See more: <https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/content/humanitarian-development-and-peace-nexus>

It is crucial for policy-makers to enhance support for women and feminist civil society at local, national and regional level to work and engage as a central actor in the WPS Agenda. In that line, it is essential to further promote transnational networks across the Euro-Mediterranean region between the Northern and Southern Mediterranean. Promoting such civil society engagement and networking across the region with a particular focus on civil society partnership not only enhances capacities but strengthens partnerships and participation in the WPS Agenda. It is also particularly important to pay additional attention to support for grassroots young women and feminist groups working on an array of sources of violence, and to ensure their capacity-building and participation in the WPS Agenda. Supporting transnational gender activism and mobilisation enables and facilitates dialogue that helps to bridge gaps beyond the official state rhetoric. This in turn not only allows for effective participation and representation but also for a comprehensive engagement with conflict resolution and peace initiatives.

Therefore, it would be increasingly relevant for the development aid sector to develop the commendable focus of programmes on women's leadership and participation to adopt and support the intersectional and encompassing approach to representation, promoting inclusive participation and meaningful engagement. There are several examples in the region of an inclusive approach to the WPS Agenda to support women and feminist CSOs and activists such as the Arab reform programme, Supporting Arab Women at the Table (SAWT)<sup>9</sup> that aims to bring together women advocates of inclusive peace and security policies.

Hence, the WPS Agenda is not just about the inclusion of women but about ensuring an encompassing perspective that promotes an intersectional representation of women, as well as centring the participation of women and feminist CSOs in peace-building, conflict resolution and beyond to address the crises and sustain peace in this ever-dynamic region.

<sup>9</sup> Information on SAWT Project. <https://www.arab-reform.net/project/supporting-arab-women-at-the-table-sawt-arab-women-as-political-actors/>



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