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The WPS Agenda 25 Years After Beijing

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I. Introduction

In some respects, it is difficult to see the women, peace and security agenda as anything but a success in the quarter century since the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) placed “women and armed conflict” (Section E) squarely in the mainstream of international policymaking. Gender issues have become embedded in the normative and institutional architecture of the United Nations and many other international bodies, and is reflected in the emergence of explicitly feminist foreign policies in a number of countries (Sweden, 2014; France, 2018; while Canada and the Netherlands claim to follow feminist principles in their overseas aid programs). The CEDAW committee now assesses national performance in bringing gender equality into security and peacebuilding work (following the 2013 General Recommendation 30). The Security Council has adopted nine resolutions instructing parties to armed conflict to engage women in conflict prevention and resolution, protection and recovery, and affecting everything from how sanctions committees do their work to the role of key peace and security agencies. Detailed “Action Plans”, Rules of Engagement for peacekeepers, and bureaucratic structures to channel gender expertise into key decision-making and implementation bodies, such as the Integrated Mission Task Forces that oversee the establishment of peacekeeping operations, have been put in place. Other multilateral institutions have followed suit, with the African Union, for instance, setting up a network of women mediators working under the AU’s Special Envoy for women, peace and security. Over 80 countries have developed National Action Plans on resolution 1325 to engage women and gender perspectives in domestic and overseas peacebuilding efforts. Considering the marked male dominance of national and international institutions of peace and security, the inclusion of gender equality concerns in the mandates of peacekeepers, mediators, and humanitarian actors is a remarkable achievement.

On the other hand, there are persistent shortcomings in implementation that no amount of multi-stakeholder coordination seems to address. This paper addresses persistent challenges (insufficient funding, inadequate representation of gender equality in peace-making, and weak institutionalization), and reviews emergent challenges (the illiberal drift in the geopolitical landscape, the rise of China, and the changing nature of conflict). It concludes by reviewing the surprisingly important impact of one response to some of these problems (the Security Council’s Informal Experts Group).

II. Long-standing challenges

a) Insufficient Funding

Nowhere near adequate resources have been dedicated to women, peace and security issues. This is depressingly true across all phases (before, during and after conflict) and in all sectors (even in the area of protection from and response to sexual violence in conflict, which some allege absorbs the bulk of funding, but also in service-delivery, governance, justice, economic recovery). There has been a particularly notable failure to provide resources in support of the key “empowerment” pillars of resolution 1325 – those relating to women’s engagement in agenda-setting and policy reform. To get women’s voices into key negotiating decision-making forums requires an investment in the basic infrastructure (office premises, communication equipment, travel – in other words, operational rather than project costs) that women’s organizations need in order to play a serious role. Attempts to fill such gaps, such as the UN Women Gender Acceleration Instrument (now the Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund), are incommensurate with the scope of the need. The GAI, set up in 2016, has received contributions totaling

\$28 million, and currently funds 70 women’s organizations in 12 conflict-affected countries.ⁱ Low levels of funding for women’s organizations is a problem everywhere – a decade-long study by the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID) shows that after the Beijing moment, funding shrank dramatically for autonomous feminist mobilization,ⁱⁱ and today, in spite of a major increase in commitments in 2018 – 2019, only 1% is dedicated to organizational strengthening of feminist associations. Only a fraction of this tiny proportion goes to conflict contexts, where there are significant challenges in supporting women’s mobilizing in the absence of adequate banking and other infrastructure.ⁱⁱⁱ

Even more worryingly, a decade after the Secretary-General’s 2010 Report on Women’s Participation in Peacebuilding, almost none of the major agencies of the UN responsible for peacebuilding have fulfilled their shared commitment to devote at least 15% of spending on gender-equality-focused projects (with the notable exception of the Peacebuilding Fund, which devotes 30% of its rapid-response project funding to gender equality initiatives and has now set itself a target of 40%). Twenty-five multi-donor trust funds were established between 2010 and 2017 to support post-conflict recovery. Only three of them (for Afghanistan, Colombia and Somalia) mention use of a gender marker, and only one (the Joint Peace Fund for Myanmar) committed to a 15% spending target.^{iv} In fact, there is almost no way of knowing the gender breakdown of UN spending on such big ticket items as health services, public-employment programs, nutrition assistance, or local economic development. An initiative that began in 2009 to develop and implement a common, UN-wide, system for scoring the gender content of peace and security expenditures has made almost no tangible progress. This is despite explicit direction from the UN’s highest policy making bodies, and despite at least one UN agency having a unit dedicated to assisting member-states in establishing systems for “gender budgeting.”

b) Inadequate Representation

It has proven extremely difficult to ensure the substantive, automatic, and sustained involvement of women in all forms of international deliberations relating to conflict and post-conflict situations, and structured consideration of gender issues by forums such as peace negotiations of various types and post-conflict planning conferences. Commitments by the UN’s Department for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA, formerly the Department of Political Affairs), which deploys and supports UN mediators, to encourage parties to conflict to engage women or to bring their concerns onto the agenda of negotiations, have not been matched by substantive action. It is noteworthy that a number of the places where women have been most able to engage substantively in peace processes – countries such as Colombia, the Philippines, and Northern Ireland – are also those where the UN has *not* been the primary instigator of either the negotiations or the implementation process. Moreover, even beyond the UN system, western powers involved in regional talks, through contact groups and similar arrangements, do not generally deploy their diplomatic leverage to prioritize gender issues or women’s representation. Feminist foreign policy notwithstanding, Sweden was unable ensure significant engagement by women in the ceasefire talks for Yemen held in Stockholm in December 2018 – only one Yemeni woman was present as a negotiator.

Continued failure to ensure effective inclusion of women leaders, women’s organizations, and gender equality perspectives in peace negotiations is taking place at a time when empirical evidence of the constructive contribution that this can make is stronger than ever. Although it can lead to instrumental over-claiming, there is now considerable and well-tested analysis available to show that the participation of women in conflict-resolution, in a wide range of roles (Paffenholz et al 2016 outline seven modalities

of inclusion that appear to be meaningful^v), but particularly in negotiating positions in peace talks, provided there are linkages with women's networks on the ground^{vi}, generates more durable agreements with stronger governance reform and socio-economic provisions, generating broader social buy-in.^{vii} Nevertheless, UN mediators and the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs have either been resistant or unable to find effective means of persuading negotiating parties to include or consult with women. Indeed, the cultivation of peace leadership has been a vividly male-dominated process, both because domestic elites making political settlements are mostly men, and because international actors are too.^{viii} Research shows that women's participation is strongest where there is already a high level of women's national political representation, and where women's civil society organizations are numerous and able to engage intensively with peace negotiators^{ix}, but these are unusual circumstances in contexts of sustained crisis and inadequate funding. Since there are no sanctions for failing to include women in peace talks or in post-conflict donor conferences, the omission of women remains the norm.

c) Organizational Instability

The UN's "peace and security architecture" has been undergoing a period of more or less constant reorganization – driven by a seemingly endless series of reviews and reports and commissioned studies – for almost the entire period since the passage of resolution 1325. The creation in 2005 of the Peacebuilding Commission, as well as the Peacebuilding Support Office and the associated Peacebuilding Fund, was in theory a means of providing operational flexibility, which had been the priority behind a succession of high-level reports (notably the Brahimi report of 2000 and the report of the panel on threats, challenges and change of 2004). Instead, it prompted a prolonged struggle for influence within the bureaucracy, while creating an intergovernmental body, the PBC, that proved incapable of translating its unique membership structure (in which both donor and recipient governments were represented, alongside troop contributing countries and those engaged in or recently emerged from armed conflict) into concrete action to address key peacebuilding issues, including gender equality. Resolution 1645 that created the PBC and the PBSO included specific references to gender equality, but no investment in dedicated gender experts was ever made, and junior staff were seconded from other entities (for instance UN Women). The PBSO, which previously had a direct line to the Executive Office of the Secretary General, has now been absorbed into the larger Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, part of a major restructuring that saw DPKO become the Department of Peace Operations. All this restructuring has presented major challenge for WPS advocates, as gender units get reorganized, repositioned, re-staffed, and repurposed.

The gender parity strategy – introduced in 2017 with a target of gender parity across all staff areas by 2026^x -- is the Secretary-General's main gender equality initiative at the UN, and suffers from a predictable reduction of the gender equality project to a matter of 'jobs for the girls'. From the start he had to acknowledge that obstacles to women's employment in the UN's peacekeeping and peacebuilding work (post-conflict elections, mediation, political analysis, conflict prevention, policing etc) are more severe than other areas, so peace and security institutions were given a longer time-frame in which to reach parity (2028). The proportion of women in the management levels of peacekeeping and peacebuilding at about 22% is far below other parts of the UN, while women are still just 3 and 10% respectively of military and police peacekeeping personnel (military and police).^{xi} At current rates of recruiting women for political and peacekeeping operations, it will take 703 years to reach parity. The strategy has been further slowed by backlash from male-dominated staff unions, particularly those representing staff in 'hardship stations'.^{xii}

However, in some areas the focus on parity – and the introduction of financial and other incentives -- has triggered institutional strengthening for gender equality efforts. Canada’s 2017 ‘Elsie Initiative’, which provides Troop Contributing countries with top-up funding and training to increase the numbers of women in peacekeeping military and police contingents, has already produced increases in the proportion of women in Ghana’s military and Zambia’s police contingents. It has also elevated the importance of the gender unit in DPO, which now reports directly to the Under-Secretary General and is being pushed to deliver reforms to accommodate women uniformed peacekeepers in the field more effectively. It has emboldened the UN SG to make a rule of prioritizing for deployment those countries with higher proportions of women in the military, triggering country-level conversations in contexts like Nepal (with women only 3.9% of its peacekeepers) about how to recruit more women to the armed forces. ^{xiii}

III: New Challenges: Shifts in the Broader International Peace and Security Landscape

These and other efforts to advance WPS are taking place against epochal shifts in the distribution of global economic and political power, and severe challenges to liberal political model on which multilateral approaches to peacebuilding (and efforts to promote gender equality) have been based. Four trends in the international political context are poised over the next five to ten years to exert a strong influence on the pace and vigor with which a gender-focused conflict prevention, resolution, reconstruction and state-building agenda can be advanced:

- (1) the ‘illiberal drift’^{xiv} in the established democracies that have sponsored the liberal peacebuilding paradigm, threatening the eclipse of the liberal political model on which multilateral approaches to peacebuilding (and efforts to promote gender equality) have been based;
- (2) the increasing tendency for ‘strongmen’ in regional middle-income countries to respond to insurgencies and other threats to state power with ‘authoritarian modes of conflict management’;
- (3) the rising influence of China, and its development model, among post-conflict governments;
- (4) an increase in the amount of armed conflict (measured as battlefield deaths, a limited metric), particularly challenges from non-state actors, rising since 2012^{xv}, including an increase in violence driven by extremist ideologies, and forms of insecurity arising from efforts to combat terrorist violence.

1. The ‘illiberal drift’ amongst leading democracies

The first trend is the erosion of liberal norms and institutions in the established democracies of the global north – most notably, the United States, which in 2016 elected a president with a demonstrated aversion to norms of institutional accountability, and the United Kingdom, whose citizens voted the same year to begin seceding from the European Union. The trend extends, to greater or lesser degrees, to political developments in Italy, Austria, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany, Sweden, and Australia. In these and other countries (such as some Eastern European states), attacks on the media, the demonization of immigrants and ethnic minorities, and other signs of illiberalism are appearing, including attacks on women’s rights defenders, the anathemization of feminism, and increasingly virulent homophobia. State responsibility for some of this violence has been documented by the UN’s special rapporteur on the

situation of human rights defenders, who makes connections between misogynist language by populist leaders and attacks on feminist activists.^{xvi}

Some of the affluent democracies drifting towards illiberalism are also the same countries that have largely funded, provided diplomatic support for, and constructed institutions to implement the array of international peacebuilding efforts that have been undertaken in the three decades since the end Cold War. They have promoted a paradigm of *liberal* peacebuilding – in which inclusive political institutions, human rights, and the rule of law have been held up as preconditions for securing lasting peace after conflict – and this has included a call for women’s involvement in the humanitarian, security, and development dimensions of post-conflict reconstruction. This is not to minimize the role of local women peacemakers, who remain the core drivers of any successful effort to bring a gender perspective to conflict resolution and peacebuilding. But while not exaggerating the extent that liberal peacebuilding approaches have embraced and advanced gender equality (gender mainstreaming has been a slow and difficult process), clearly a diminution in the international community’s commitment to a rights-based approach to peacebuilding poses immediate threats to the agenda-setting capacities of local and national WPS advocates.

Nowhere has the impact of the lurch toward illiberalism been more significant than in the US, because of the country’s importance as the de facto anchor of the international liberal settlement (in spite of the fact that it has recused itself from major international justice treaties and institutions such as CEDAW, CRC, and the ICC). The Trump administration as launched significant attacks on the funding and legitimacy of the UN, including the withdrawal from the Human Rights Council and attacks on key elements of the Beijing settlement via the CSW (where it has sought to dismantle reproductive rights, dismiss the idea state engagement in social protection to mitigate the costs women bear for their unpaid reproductive work, and delete references altogether to the word and concept of ‘gender’). In March 2019 it supported Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, members of the Commission, in an attempt to break consensus in the CSW’s annual meeting.^{xvii} In April 2019 the US threatened the first-ever veto of a WPS resolution that addressed the needs of victims of sexual violence in conflict, on the grounds that a reference to ‘reproductive health services’ could mean abortion. China and Russia, who abstained from the resolution, have never been enthusiastic about the WPS agenda and can now rely on disunity amongst former allies on this matter to weaken any pressure for compliance.

2. The (return to) ‘authoritarian modes of conflict management’ among erstwhile Global South WPS champions

The second trend of relevance to the future scope, direction, and effectiveness of WPS advocacy is the embrace of “authoritarian modes of conflict management”, or “illiberal peacebuilding”^{xviii} by a number of large, influential regional powers, including Brazil, Nigeria, India, Pakistan, the Philippines and Turkey. This is characterized by state willingness to commit human rights abuses in order to secure outright military victories instead of a negotiated peace (as in the 2009 crushing of the LTTE – and extermination of its leadership – by the Sri Lankan army), avoidance of power-sharing concessions to disgruntled groups, avoidance of transitional justice or other arrangements to address war crimes and reckoning with the past, and at its worst, surveillance and securitization in public and private life.

The rightward shift in the politics of many regionally important middle or emerging powers in the global south matters because these countries are of strategic or diplomatic importance to the international community, as well as within their regions. This makes them influential actors, both in terms of the

example set by their behavior and the positions they articulate in international settings, particularly as leading voices of longstanding the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). These countries also have large women's movements. Some of these states have in the past been effective promoters of gender-equality goals in multilateral forums. Because the international community regards these increasingly illiberal middle and emerging powers as strategically important, their approaches to conflict and its aftermath are closely watched in other countries. There is thus an outside effect when governments of such countries engage in systematic human rights violations, including attacks on women human rights defenders, use or encourage forms of hate speech, or politicize security and justice institutions.

Some of these countries, such as Nigeria or Pakistan, have embraced almost none of the social inclusion, group reconciliation, or institutional reform agendas that are at the heart of liberal peacebuilding,^{xxix} and which can provide entry points for addressing gender issues. Some, however, such as the Philippines, Brazil and Turkey, have been important defenders of women's rights in international forums. In the early 2010s, there was hope that Turkey might become an ally for those seeking a gender-responsive (and otherwise largely liberal) approach to peacebuilding, notably with respect to the government's relations with the country's Kurdish minority. But the Turkish government did little to involve women or address gender issues in its engagement with Kurdish-majority regions.^{xxx} Turkey's location on Syria's border, as a major thoroughway both for refugees and for extremist recruits has generated a more aggressive approach to security issues in general. Despite occasional rhetorical support by the government to gender equality and WPS priorities, including an offer to host a fifth world conference on women (made in 2012), and to build a UN gender and mediation training center, few actions have been taken. Under these circumstances, the hope that Turkey would help to promote gender-responsive peacebuilding internationally has been supplanted by a far grimmer reality domestically, one chillingly characterized as "women's authoritarian inclusion," in which women's rights laws and institutions have been weakened, and ruling-party-linked organizations mediate women's access to public institutions and their ability to collectively challenge state practices.^{xxxi}

Brazil, though not a conflict country, has a major influence on UN peacekeeping policy, and has also been a crucial voice in supporting the normative framework of women's rights. The election of Jair Bolsonaro in October 2018 signaled a significant rejection of its experiment with the political left. Even before the presidential shift, Brazilian authorities had increasingly "militarized" the state's approach to reasserting public safety and security: heavily armed neighborhood sweeps, helicopter patrols, frequent curfews.^{xxxi} Poor women, in both urban and rural areas, face extremely high rates of violence – including at the hands of state security forces in regions where violence has already skyrocketed.^{xxxi} Addressing the gender dimensions of insecurity, not least by reforming the security services, has not formed part of the government's militarized approach, and seems unlikely to do so anytime soon.

Misogynistic rhetoric and an increasingly threatening environment for women human rights defenders has featured alongside the use of significant force to address public safety and security matters in the Philippines. President Rodrigo Duterte has attracted international criticism of the extrajudicial killings that have characterized his war on drugs, and the brutality of his approach to the multiple conflicts in which his government has been engaged. In late 2018, Duterte was criticized by the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders for the way his "promotion and reinforcement of misogynistic and hetero-patriarchal norms" had contributed to an increase in threats to and attacks on women and feminist human rights defenders.^{xxxi}

Nigeria has embraced almost none of the social inclusion, group reconciliation, or institutional reform agendas that are at the heart of liberal peacebuilding,^{xxv} and which can provide entry points for addressing gender issues. Security forces have been criticized for slow responses to the kidnapping of almost 300 schoolgirls from Chibok by Boko Haram, and for failing to respond to warnings about impending attacks on schoolgirls more recently.^{xxvi} In international forums, such as the annual Commission on Population and Development at the UN, Nigeria has for years collaborated with other states hostile to reproductive rights, LGBT issues and adolescent sexuality education, and worked to prevent the Commission from reaching consensus.^{xxvii}

That states of this size and importance systematically violate not only domestic civil rights, but also the laws of armed conflict, without substantial international sanction, provides powerful incentives for peer governments to act likewise. A significant contagion effect of normalizing violations of international law is already evident. Sri Lanka's President Sirisena, for instance, declared his intention to emulate Duterte's approach to prosecuting the country's "war on drugs," which has involved as many as 20,000 extra-judicial killings since 2010.^{xxviii} And because Nigeria is a regional and international provider of both development assistance and uniformed peacekeepers through ECOWAS, the African Union, and the UN, its violations of international norms could have adverse demonstration effects.

Taken together, these first two trends have contributed to paradoxical outcomes: there is resistance to external scrutiny of domestic human rights abuses such as commissions of inquiry, international criminal investigations, and the entire, short-lived notion of a 'responsibility to protect'. 'National sovereignty' is invoked, belligerently, as a defense against critiques of human rights abuses. Yet there is surprising tolerance – or relative international acquiescence – for some emerging trends, such as covert foreign engagement in conflicts (for instance non-insignia-bearing fighters such as those seen in eastern Ukraine), and there is relative inaction over the annexation of sovereign or contested territory (such as in Crimea or the Mischief Reef islands in the South China Sea). These developments point to a realignment of the international peace and security landscape. While the implications for WPS are as yet not entirely evident, the de-democratizing dynamic linking newly emerging alliances is not promising for efforts to advance gender equality.

3. China's rising influence as an alternative supplier of diplomatic support, foreign aid, and development models

By far the most significant manifestation of the changing distribution of power in the international system is the continued rise of China. This is evidenced in military terms – in its approach to regional maritime disputes, for instance – but also in how China uses its economic leverage to provide and gain support among a broad range of governments.

As far back as 2012, Mawdsley called China's expanding program of external assistance the primary force behind "the changing developmental landscape."^{xxix} China's approach to foreign assistance consists of a core set of principles: a focus on productive economic infrastructure such as ports, roads, and pipelines; assistance via loans rather than grants; and direct, planned involvement by Chinese firms, public and private. China also, in theory, refrains from interfering in domestic social and political affairs.^{xxx} This appeals to aid-recipient governments, particularly those in post-conflict settings, who resent conditionalities – such as adherence to a western model of governance and development -- attached to aid from traditional sources.^{xxxi}

China's development finance is free of requirements that social impact assessments be undertaken – a major drawback from a WPS perspective.^{xxxii} For instance, China imposed no such requirements on its post-conflict assistance to Angola, a paradigmatic case of illiberal peacebuilding, where the absence of women in the process of post-conflict economic and political reconstruction was notable, and no obstacle to Chinese support.^{xxxiii} The financial institutions China has helped to create do not prioritize gender issues, either. Activists, economists and international officials have called on the management of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), a major Chinese initiative launched in Beijing in 2014, to adopt a more gender-responsive approach to project financing.^{xxxiv} The AIIB's management considered a gender policy too prescriptive and bureaucratically cumbersome.^{xxxv}

Without exaggerating the extent to which the economic orthodoxy of the IFIs and Western states has facilitated gender equality, the good governance pillar of that aid, designed to make institutions more transparent, accountable, and effective, can be an entry-point for women's inclusion efforts. The absence of these objectives – to say nothing of multiparty democracy – in China's development programming, is notable. Good governance programming have been an entry point for donor initiatives to mainstream gender equality into post-conflict situations^{xxxvi} -- partly, as Chaney argues, because almost every aspect of a comprehensive peacebuilding agenda, such as designing a post-war country's institutions of justice, "presents an opportunity to redraft structures and processes of governance to embed gender equality."^{xxxvii} To the extent that China's governance-free model of peacebuilding assistance influences international doctrine and practice, it could deprive gender equality advocates of a potentially useful channel through which to institutionalize women's participation in post-conflict contexts.

China is also aggressively seeking to enhance its leverage within the UN system.^{xxxviii} China is using its status as a major contributor to UN peacekeeping to press for changes in how peace and security are themselves conceived – for instance, by emphasizing post-conflict economic development as the key to sustaining peace. China has maintained lip service to gender equality – often referring to its role as host of the 1995 fourth world conference on women,^{xxxix} but its rhetoric on women's empowerment is mostly not matched in reality. In 2016, as chair of the G20, China pledged to push for a focus on gender equality,^{xl} but the chair's summit memorandum included only a couple of perfunctory references to women.^{xli} This was consistent with China's approach to development assistance, which does not stress the promotion of social equality. China's hands-off approach enhances the capacity of post-conflict authorities to resist donors advocating for equal-rights and social justice-oriented peacebuilding processes.

This may not only fail to consolidate peace; it may foster conditions conducive to the outbreak or resumption of armed conflict. Chinese aid and investment have been linked to increases in the use of violence against citizens by state authorities in African countries.^{xlii} In African countries where China is a large donor, resources flow disproportionately to the home regions of the country's political leaders.^{xliii} Hence two key authoritarian tendencies that are seen to drive conflict – state repression and private-sector-driven clientelism and corruption – are associated with Chinese economic engagement.

Myanmar and Sri Lanka show how Chinese support can deflect attention by the UN's human rights instruments. No resolutions on either Myanmar or Sri Lanka were ever passed in the UN Security Council, thanks to the threat of a Chinese veto. Efforts in the Human Rights Council, particularly in relation to Sri Lanka, have been a slightly different matter: no member possesses a veto, and China was not a member when, in early 2015, pressure in the HRC for post-conflict accountability in Sri Lanka had grown strong enough to persuade the country's newly elected government to co-sponsor an HRC resolution committing

Sri Lanka to create institutions to address war crimes; to unearth the truth of what happened during a quarter century of armed conflict; to assist families in find missing persons or their remains; and to reform public institutions to address the marginalization of the country's Tamil minority. The HRC resolution incorporated provisions to achieve justice for women and to ensure their participation in post-conflict reconciliation and reconstruction. Since 2015, however, the Sri Lankan government has wavered on these commitments. Sri Lanka's western aid donors have failed to take action in response to the government's double flouting of international law – first, through the mass atrocities of 2009; and second, through the post-2015 government's failure to abide by the terms of the HRC resolution. The most compelling explanation for this reluctance is fear by western donors that alienating Colombo will enhance China's influence in the region.

4. Changing nature of conflict

There has been an upward trend in both the incidence and the destruction related to armed conflict since 2012, according to the Uppsala Conflict Data program (and this does not keep track of criminal violence such as the conflict-levels of homicides caused by gang violence in central America for instance). Data on the increase in the amount of armed conflict since 2012 is strongly skewed by the extreme violence and devastation in Syria. This, as well as war in Yemen, South Sudan, and serious instability in Mali, Nigeria, Niger, Libya, among others, has triggered humanitarian catastrophes and the highest levels of displacement since the second World War.

Non-state extremist violence is seeing the fastest rise, fueled by the swift growth of ISIS in Iraq and Syria between 2012 – 2017. The role of extremists in these conflicts and their capacities to recruit and attack internationally has generated a counter-terrorism industry that has looked to women as a potential resource for de-radicalization (this is a major role in which women are cast in the US's 2019 National Strategy on Women Peace and Security^{xliiv}).

Violent and extreme misogyny shapes the state-building projects of extremists who deploy religious arguments to justify violence against non-believers (Islam and Buddhism both have been implicated) – nevertheless these groups have been able to recruit women. While this poses obvious threats to the WPS agenda, so too do the extreme and often rights-violating approaches to counter-terrorism by states.

These threats are of several types. First, countering violent extremism (CVE) has involved the imposition of restrictions on civil and political rights that can make the logistics of peace activism more difficult than they already are – restrictions on the receipt of foreign funding, curfews, limits to group meetings and protests, and censorship.

Second, and perhaps more perniciously, excessively harsh counter-terror measures taken by governments can quickly delegitimize the project of cooperation with all government officials, civilian as well as military, thus narrowing options for women's organizations to engage with state actors, since to do so, even in the interest of protecting women, can be viewed as a form of disloyalty to nascent forms of resistance.

And thirdly, as counter-terror and counter-insurgency campaigns grow and evolve, they have often attempted (as noted above) to expand their community-outreach efforts, which also frequently includes efforts to “engage women in CVE/PVE,” something that many are uninterested in participating in, or that can make women into targets of extremist violence, but which they may well be pressured into doing, so as to retain a positive relationship with security and other officials.

These new set of circumstances presents WPS advocates in conflict contexts with difficult dilemmas – notably, concerning their willingness to work on peace negotiations and implementation with political leaders who are undermining democratic institutions. Similar dilemmas face women’s groups contemplating collaboration with some de-radicalization efforts. That is, they face potential reputational damage with the progressive left civil/political society within their countries, and at least some international opinion as well, if they work with illiberal leaders to support the implementation of peacebuilding efforts such as the new arrangements in the Philippines granting limited autonomy to the Bangsamoro region of Mindanao. But they may face penalties from the state if they remain aloof, for instance refusing to take part in even non-offensive forms of gender-and-CVE/PVE programming.

Unfortunately, aspects of the WPS agenda lend themselves to appropriation by conservatives. If the challenge of women’s participation is construed as ensuring a visible presence amongst decision-makers, this can be engineered while excluding feminist gender equality goals.^{xlv} Protection of women from sexual violence sits easily within a conservative framing of family honor and can be achieved without addressing the asymmetrical gendered power relations that make it such a potent tactic of warfare. The essentialist assumptions about women’s inherent advantages as peacebuilders that are embedded in resolutions such as 1325 can be exploited by illiberal actors (by increasing numbers of women in armed forces or by taking strong action against violence against women) to provide a veneer of legitimacy in efforts to play a bigger role in international peacebuilding and humanitarian action.

IV. Cooperation behind the scenes: The Security Council’s Informal Experts Group

On the whole, these trends threaten prospects for the WPS agenda. But there are some signs that away from alarmist headlines, quieter initiatives are underway to sustain the deeper reform intentions of the WPS agenda, and are producing at least some results. One area of progress towards strengthened accountability for promoting women’s participation in conflict resolution and prevention comes from an unexpected quarter: the UN’s intergovernmental domain – notably, in the Security Council’s approach to considering the gender dimensions of peacebuilding.

As noted earlier one of the most serious deficit areas of WPS work is in the UN’s main business, diplomatic efforts to address threats to peace, through diplomatic use of the Secretary-General’s ‘good offices’ and behind-the-scenes peace-making, as well as creating and instructing UN peacekeeping or political missions, which has lacked specificity about measures to advance women’s participation in conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

A practical response to this problem, called for in Resolution 2242 (2015) was the creation by the Security Council of an Informal Experts Group (IEG) on WPS. It is designed to make up for what the 2015 High-level Independent Panel on United Nations Peace Operations noted was the Security Council’s “inconsistent application of the [WPS] agenda (...) including during mandate formulation and renewal consultations, which is exacerbated by the lack of attention to those issues in briefings and reports to the Council by the Secretariat and senior mission leaders.”^{xlvii} The IEG, sometimes called the 2242 Group, is not a formal subsidiary body of the Security Council in the way that sanctions committees or the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict are.^{xlviii} The ‘informal’ title was designed to sidestep the burdensome legalistic constraints on information-gathering, analysis, and circulation that hobble the

Council's formal bodies, particularly those that assess cases where grave rights violations are reasonably believed to have occurred, in order to sanction the parties deemed responsible.

Since the inauguration of the IEG in February 2016 (its first meeting was on Mali), every member of the Council has been invited to send its WPS expert and its experts on the country situation under review to deliberate on specific cases. The IEG's main role is proposing country- and sector-specific remedies to women's exclusion within the language of peace operation mandates passed in the form of Council Resolutions or Presidential Statements. Remedies include the consideration of electoral quotas for women, and the deployment of gender experts on such issues as land law, employment-creation schemes, and health service-delivery systems. The remit of the IEG, covering a range of conflict and post-conflict issues beyond security and protection, allows its members to identify linkages across traditional sectoral boundaries.

The measurable result of the IEG's work has been new or more-focused demands (in Council's mission-authorizing resolutions) for actions at the country level to make conflict resolution and peacebuilding more inclusive of women.^{xlviii} Three dynamics account for the IEG's effectiveness in its first few years. First, it has opened space for strategic maneuvering by some of the 'Elected Ten' (E10) non-permanent members to influence Security Council actions in the conflicts that attract less global attention (and where the Council is less deadlocked by great-power polarization) than Syria, Israel-Palestine, or Myanmar. Second, the IEG's requests for information on the gendered dimensions of political, security, and recovery processes has stimulated demand for improved local-level gender and conflict analysis. Third, the IEG's relative informality has created more willingness to receive briefings from civil society during IEG deliberations, in the Security Council's formal meetings, and during the Council's missions to conflict countries.

Anecdotal evidence suggests it has been effective in some cases. The quality of the IEG meetings and of the gender and conflict analysis appear to have translated into the inclusion of actions to promote gender equality in Council mandates for some of the conflict situations that the IEG has addressed. For instance, the IEG's deliberations led to significant Council pressure on the Iraqi government to legally protect NGO-run shelters for domestic-violence victims. Information from international CSOs provided evidence and legal argumentation to justify instructions on this issue in the Council's mandate renewal for the UN Mission in Iraq. IEG deliberations also resulted in Council demands that international protection and humanitarian response strategies paid attention to the gender implications of the Mosul and Raqqa offensives.^{xlix} The IEG's deliberations on CAR prompted lobbying that prevented the field mission from downgrading the rank and status of the gender advisor position.

The IEG's focus is on women's participation, but SGBV is also addressed. The IEG built consensus among Council members for the systematic inclusion of sexual violence in the designation criteria used by sanctions regimes. Of the 14 sanctions committees, only four explicitly addressed sexual violence in 2017 (CAR, DRC, Somalia and South Sudan). Two others included sexual violence as part of other human rights abuses (Cote d'Ivoire and Sudan). In November 2018 Sweden and Netherlands used discussions in the IEG to generate unanimity on the need to add sexual violence to the designation criteria for the Libyan sanctions regime. The E10's solidarity on the matter persuaded China and Russia to abstain rather than veto the resolution.^l Analysts remain skeptical about the impacts of sanctions in preventing sexual violence,^{li} but the combination of sanctions with the IEG's attention to building women's leadership and empowerment may introduce a more effective and enduring means of addressing this issue.

Some countries that are indifferent or even hostile to the WPS agenda have shown subtle shifts in their perspectives, partly as a result of the IEG. Russia and China initially failed to appear for IEG meetings. Gradually, Russia began sending lower-level representatives, though China continues to be absent. As part of a face-to-face community, diplomats from even the most hostile states encounter pressure to affirm core UN values. Over time, strategic alliances and institutional innovations have helped to bring feminist values and priorities to the heart of the Security Council's work.

V. Conclusions

Section E ('Women and Armed Conflict') of the Beijing Platform for Action was written at a high point of the post-Cold War honeymoon, where it seemed that liberal peacebuilding (human rights-centered approaches such as transitional justice and war crime trials, inclusive post-conflict governance, decentralization and democratization) was the accepted approach to ending wars and preventing conflict. The WPS agenda, as it emerged via the provisions of the Rome Statute and Security Council resolution 1325, is a paradigmatic expression of that liberal consensus that may now unravel in the context of attacks on multilateralism and democracy.

The UN's own half-hearted approach since 2000 to implementing the WPS agenda in its core peace and security agencies means that it has not institutionalized a robust capacity for response to this backlash. This is particularly true of its mediation, conflict prevention, and post-conflict elections work, where UN leaders have not risked political capital – let alone significant funding – to support women's participation. The quiet work of the IEG shows that much can be done to amplify efforts to engage women leaders and grassroots groups in peace-making.

Several actions will make a significant difference at the UN level. The success of the Peacebuilding Fund in dedicating over 30% of spending to supporting gender equality shows that funding can be redirected. A stronger instruction is needed – along with real consequences for non-compliance -- from the SG to all UN entities to meet the 15% target, increase operational support for women's peace organizations, and to harmonize gender marker systems (and convert them from ex-ante to ex-post analyses of actual spending). The stimulating effect of the gender parity strategy (with the addition of incentives from the Elsie Initiative) on the long-stalled efforts to increase women's numbers amongst uniformed peacekeepers suggests that similar strategies might be effective in compelling the civilian components of political and peacekeeping missions to recruit and retain more women. It will be harder to break the male and patriarchal hold on conflict resolution and here, the important achievements of feminist peace-makers in Colombia, Northern Ireland, the Philippines and elsewhere indicate that support for women's organizations' engagement in peace talks, and support for the engagement of feminists among the political elite, is crucial. The IEG can use its Security Council tool to demand more of the DPPA in this regard. The IEG would also do well to continue its efforts to ensure that the Council supports gender equality interventions in domestic economic policy in post-conflict countries to enable the development of post-conflict economies in which women can profit from their labor and thus build the economic leverage to support stronger influence in peace-making (Jacqui True's contribution to this EGM expands on this point).

The broader shifts in the geopolitical landscape pose extremely complex challenges. A pushback against illiberalism is already underway, and indeed women are leading it, as captured in the iconic image of

democratization in 2019, the photo of the 22 year old engineering student, Alaa Salah, standing on the roof of a car, leading the call to topple Bashir in Sudan. But significant international cooperation will be needed not just to hold back the tide of assaults on women's rights and democratic freedoms, but the economic architecture that has created the extreme inequalities that fuel not just populism but violent extremism. In this project, it is clear that smaller countries, younger democracies, and newly emerging economies have a crucial role to play, as already evident from the way that the fiercest defenders of the Beijing settlement in recent CSW meetings have been countries such as Uruguay, Chile, Argentina, Nepal, Ireland, Tunisia.

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