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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ARTICLE

Whither Women and Peace and Security?

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UNSCR 1325, which in 2000 formally announced the international Women and Peace and Security (WPS) agenda for action, enjoins a battle that can never end, one in which women will always find themselves on the back foot—but one which remains worth fighting. It is the battle to make the ear of man listen to what women know about security and about peace that men might not. It is also the battle to understand that there will be no peace within and between nations until and unless there is peace between men and women. In this essay, penned in May 2025, I reflect on the current situation of the WPS agenda, with an emphasis on the United States, and what the future of that agenda may be.

The day I put the first words of this commentary to digital paper, the complete elimination of the US State Department's Office of Global Women's Issues was announced, effective 2 June 2025. I remember the original establishment of that office, right on the 7th floor where the offices of the Secretary of State are located, and the creation of the position of Special Ambassador for Global Women's Issues, first filled by Melanne Verveer. Those were halcyon days, and the first US National Action Plan (NAP) on WPS was penned shortly thereafter institutionalizing 1325 for the executive branch.

I also remember the enunciation of what came to be known as "the Hillary Doctrine," after Hillary Clinton, then Secretary of State, who asserted in 2012 that, "The subjugation of women is a threat to the common security of our world and to the national security of our country" (Hudson and Leidl 2015). And then came the WPS Act of 2017 which, though it did not mention UNSCR 1325, codified the WPS agenda into US law via bipartisan legislation. This was followed by meaningful changes in practice. These include the 2019 creation of the Gender Advisor (GENAD) position in the Department of Defense, USAID's stipulation that all proposals for funding include a gender analysis, and State's insistence that every employee receive a WPS 101-style training (Pelayo et al. 2025).

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While the US State Department's Office of Global Women's Issues was perhaps the most overt face of WPS in the United States, and so its announced elimination was tragic in its symbolism, many other important facets of US WPS were also decimated during the first 100 days of the second Trump administration. USAID was shuttered, the letters of its name stripped unceremoniously from its building's façade. There was a short siege at the beautiful United States Institute of Peace building, when its staff, who had been long-time champions of WPS, attempted to hold off those who saw this Congressional entity as part of the executive branch and therefore liable to be shuttered at will. Finally, the Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth, crowed on X on 29 April 2025 that:

"This morning, I proudly ENDED the "Women, Peace & Security" (WPS) program inside the @DeptofDefense WPS is yet another woke divisive/social justice/Biden initiative that overburdens our commanders and troops — distracting from our core task: WAR-FIGHTING. WPS is a UNITED NATIONS program pushed by feminists and left-wing activists. Politicians fawn over it; troops HATE it. DoD will hereby executive [sic]the minimum of WPS required by statute, and fight to end the program for our next budget. GOOD RIDDANCE WPS!"

He then somewhat opaquely added, "The woke & weak Biden Administration distorted & weaponized the straight-forward & security-focused WPS initiative launched in 2017. So—yes—we are ending the 'woke divisive/social justice/ Biden (WPS) initiative. Biden ruined EVERYTHING, including 'Women, Peace & Security'" (Phillips 2025).

How far the United States has regressed in its commitments to WPS, just within the space of a few months! And the US is not alone in this regression: fewer than half of countries created a NAP WPS in response to UNSCR 1325, and of those which did, at least two-thirds never renewed them. Today, only 35 countries have a current NAP on WPS. It's hard not to conclude that, like many movements that attempted to center women such as #MeToo and "feminist foreign policy," WPS has had its day in the sun, and powerful men have decided that day is over.

Well, yes. And no. Perhaps we should acknowledge that WPS is but one campaign in a larger ongoing battle. Is it possible that one phase of that battle may be passing, but new fronts have opened? Perhaps we need to leave the weeds of WPS institutional decline for a moment, and situate the spirit of WPS in a larger context before we can draw any conclusions about what has happened and what comes next.

I'd like to suggest that a bird's eye view would help us see that WPS is part of a larger struggle over the first political order, both at the national as well as the international level. The first political order is the *sexual* political order — the order established between the two halves of humanity, men and women, who literally must act together for there to be a future for their species (Hudson, Bowen, and Nielsen 2020). The struggle over the first political order determines the horizon for the stability, peace, prosperity, health, and governance of any human society. When the first political order of a given society is one of unmitigated male dominance — as we see in most societies historically as well as today — nearly all national outcomes suffer. To the extent that a society's first political order ameliorates male dominance, such as by granting improved status

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for women under law and in practice, or lower levels of violence against women, virtually all national outcomes improve. These trends are easily demonstrable through large-N statistical analysis (Hudson, Bowen, and Nielsen 2020).

In its time, WPS has been but one form that the battle over the first political order has taken in human history. WPS argues, in a truly revolutionary fashion, that the exclusion of women, women's perspectives, women's knowledge, women's skills, and women's concerns from the arena of human endeavor we call national and international security, makes insecurity much more likely for everyone. This is a bold assertion, because if any arena of human endeavor has been most fiercely guarded as being the preserve of men and men alone, it is precisely this realm of national and international security. The very definitions of manhood and of male dominance are tied to it; WPS is an attack levelled at the heart of the androcentric world.

In such a world, resistance to the WPS approach could only be expected, and it would inevitably be a resistance from all points along the political spectrum. For example, in the US, on the Left, we might expect rhetorical buy-in but practical indifference bordering on clear subversion, and on the Right, we would anticipate open animus often manifesting as a willful ignorance. The latter is obvious in Hegseth's X posts, noted above, but we too easily forget the equally obvious instances of the former, where under both the Obama and the Biden administrations, WPS was determinedly sidelined in practice despite occasional flowery genuflections. Who can forget, for example, the Obama administration official who spoke of Afghan women as "rocks weighing down our rucksack" that needed to be dumped by the wayside? (Hudson and Leidl 2015). Or that, as president, Joe Biden never once met with the White House Gender Policy Council that he created to much fanfare?

Men across the political spectrum are not prepared to give up their "masculine systems," as John Adams expressed it over 200 years ago (New York Historical Society nd). The subordination of women's interests to those of men, the determined closure of eyes and ears to what women know that men do not, the refusal to meaningfully share societal decision-making power with women are what women eternally fight, for it is these very things that undermine our collective security. The WPS agenda allowed women policymakers, advocates, and scholars to make that case with greater clarity and greater authority than ever before.

Though WPS now finds itself in the doldrums, it has not been eradicated, for it is impossible to eradicate what is real. *In reality*, women matter in peace and war. *In reality*, the situation of women is very determinative of national outcomes. Those who understand this, and who have studied these linkages, remain as leaven within institutions. Indeed, the elimination of the Office of Global Women's Issues simply means that WPS will no longer be siloed off, but rather will metastasize throughout the Department of State. In the Department of Defense, those who maintain WPS lenses will prove more situationally aware and operationally effective than those who do not, and the difference in operational success will be noted. For example, NorthCom's new mission to secure US borders will necessitate the expertise of those with WPS-related insights on issues such as human trafficking. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is

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likewise not in a position to jettison WPS insights on, for example, the relationship between misogyny and domestic political terrorism/violence, for DHS wrote the proverbial book on it. In short, those who understand the value added by WPS will continue to make the case, over and over again, until even those enamored of "masculine systems" can more easily see and recognize that value. That worthy fight to make the ear of man listen will go on.

But I remain bullish on WPS for yet another reason, for women hold a trump card in national security, so to speak. I believe the world is finally being forced to consider the character of male/female relations as a "hard" security issue. In 2020 the British medical journal *The Lancet* released a comprehensive world fertility study, which documented what one commentator describes as "a mysterious, unprecedented earth-shattering trend: a 50% decline in world fertility over 50 years, with no end in sight. Even the study's scholarly authors described their findings as "jaw-dropping" (Vollset et al. 2020).

Birthrates have gone from being merely "subreplacement" (<2.1 TFR) to being "extremely low" (<1.5 TFR). Populations are declining in poor countries and rich countries, large countries and small countries, democracies and autocracies, religious and nonreligious countries alike. Indeed, about 2/3rds of the world's population now lives in countries with subreplacement birthrates, about 92 nations. For example, projections are that by 2100, China will have fewer people than it had in 1960, and its working-age (and military age) population will be less than a third of what it is now. South Korea has never in its recorded history had as low a birth rate as it has now, even in the midst of the Korean War. Russia's demographic decline is so steep that some opine that Russia had to attack Ukraine now, because in the future it would be unable to do so due to manpower shortages (Morland 2022).

Populations are expected to halve in at least 20 countries by 2100 — and also the entire continent of Europe, which will have fewer people in total than the United States by that time. And in the US, projections are that the number of people aged 65 and older will surpass the number of those aged 18 and under in ten years' time. Some project the global population will peak in 2043 and decrease every year after that. As a result, the issue of birthrates has finally hit the radar of security establishments around the world (e.g., Minzer 2022; Kurtz-Phelan 2025).

As a WPS scholar, this is all so ironic. Women have been studiously excluded from the discourse and concerns of national security policymakers for as long as there have been nations. What has changed is that for millennia, women had no choice but to reproduce the nations into which they were born — thus assuring the perpetuation of the great geopolitical games played by men. But then women's access to effective contraception became a reality over the second half of the 20th century. And it is since that time that we have seen this stunning drop in fertility worldwide.

Apparently, when given a choice, women are choosing not to reproduce the nations that men have created, even though women often state they aspire to have more children than they are having. While I do not believe women are conspiring together in some type of global cabal, it is true that for the first time in history, women have an effective vote on whether their societies live or die —

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and women are voting, or feel that they are forced to vote, that their societies do not continue. It is now clear for all to see that men's great geopolitical games actually rest on a foundation of women's labor, and women are for the very first time able to demonstrate they possess the capability to derail those games. Whether or not one feels a decreased human population is a good thing for the planet — and there are many different views on the subject — there must be something quite amiss with their nations for so many women in so many nations to come to that same conclusion. We might want to ask what that is, especially since countries that have thrown serious money at women to get them to reproduce, such as Hungary, are failing spectacularly in their efforts (Carney 2025).

Perhaps women are finally revealing — finally *capable* of revealing — that the most important political order in the world is not the international system of nation-states, but the sexual political order — the first political order. Perhaps women are saying there is something terribly wrong with the sexual political order within their societies — an order that has to this point been largely dictated by men. Would a more fruitful approach to the global birth strike yield a different set of questions than we are currently asking, such as, "What kind of society would women want to reproduce?" and its inverse, "What kind of society do women not want to reproduce?" Could it be that security establishments need a WPS analysis of "the global birth strike"?

It is possible that only such a global birth strike can unmake a world made in men's image, a world designed according to men's priorities. For example, what woman wants to have children in a world where 140 women are killed every day by their male partners (UN Women 2024)? What woman wants to have children in a society where the men have chosen greed and war and depravity over life? Why would a woman want to reproduce any of that? Is it possible that a global birth strike is the only way to get this message across from women to men? The slogan that originated with Iranian protestors — "Woman, Life, Freedom" — takes on a whole new meaning in this light.

Furthermore, there are complex issues here for WPS advocates to wrestle with as well. Some pundits are already predicting a new resurgence of patriarchy in the world as those nations which most effectively subjugate women for purposes of increased procreation will grow in disproportion to those which do not (Dreher 2022). We may see — or can we say we are already seeing? — a significant curtailment of women's reproductive rights as a result (Ferragamo 2024). But consider also that, ironically, the countries with the most draconian restrictions on women's reproductive freedoms, such as Poland and El Salvador, also have extremely low fertility. Even Texas's fertility rate is subreplacement. The genie of women's choices will not so easily be put back in its old bottle of reproductive coercion.

Without WPS lenses, I argue, it will be impossible for states to effectively approach this existential issue. And that means, like it or not, one day it will be seen as laughably naïve that WPS was considered superfluous or irrelevant in securing the national interest. The fight for a sustainable future for humanity *inevitably* devolves to the fight for a just first political order, and WPS is

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indispensable to that undertaking. Does WPS have a future? It better have, for all our sakes.

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