

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: [Women, peace and security](#), HC 782

Tuesday 14 October 2025

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Sarah Champion (Chair); Tracy Gilbert; Monica Harding; Noah Law; Alice Macdonald; Brian Mathew; David Mundell; James Naish; Sam Rushworth.

Questions 1 - 42

Witnesses

[I](#): Fawzia Koofi, former Afghan politician, first female Deputy Speaker, and women's rights activist; Hanin Ahmed, Sudanese activist and Emergency Response Room Leader, Emergency Response Rooms, Sudan; and Stephanie Siddall, Director of Global Policy and Advocacy, Women for Women International.

[II](#): Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, former Special Representative on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict; and Fiona Kilpatrick-Cooper, Director of Weapons and Ammunition Management, HALO Trust.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Fawzia Koofi, Hanin Ahmed and Stephanie Siddall.

Q1 **Chair:** I will start this session of the International Development Committee. We are looking at women, peace and security. We are very lucky to have some amazing women in front of us, both in person and virtually. I will start by asking you to introduce yourselves. Fawzia, could I ask you to introduce yourself and why you are here today?

Fawzia Koofi: Thank you, honourable members of the International Development Committee, Ms Sarah and friends, for the opportunity. My name is Fawzia Koofi. I was the Deputy Speaker and a Member of Parliament in Afghanistan, and a member of the peace negotiation with the Taliban until 2021, when the collapse happened. Since then, I have been engaged in promoting women and human rights in Afghanistan, including the women, peace and security agenda and empowerment of women in the political and peace processes. Thank you for the opportunity.

It is the 25-year anniversary of WPS and Security Council resolution 1325. I am here to basically talk about this agenda and the impact of it on the situation of women and girls in Afghanistan, but also share my experiences and expertise on this issue and this topic globally. I think it is very timely and important because today women are affected by conflicts and wars more than ever. All over the world, women's rights are stripped away due to conflict, dictatorship and imbalance of power. Women's bodies are also used as a tool, as a weapon of war. Today it is important to talk about this topic more and hold our Governments accountable for what they have done on this topic. Thank you for the opportunity and I look forward to the conversation.

Chair: Thank you. We really appreciate you being here today and the global leadership role you have taken on this. You are doing very powerful work, so thank you.

Fawzia Koofi: Thank you.

Q2 **Chair:** Hanin, could I ask you to explain who you are and the work that you are doing, which is equally powerful?

Hanin Ahmed: Good afternoon, honourable excellency Ms Sarah. Thank you so much for giving me this platform and giving the grassroots movement and women-led and youth-led organisation to be on such a platform to reflect the situation in Sudan in the worst humanitarian crisis across the world. My name is Hanin Ahmed. I am the external relations officer of Sudan Emergency Response Room and a founder of Old Omdurman Emergency Response Room. I have been through a long journey of being founder and co-founder of different youth organisations. Recently, we were nominated for the Nobel peace prize for the second time, beating President Trump, but unfortunately it goes to another



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outstanding woman in Venezuela. So congrats to her and hard luck for us. I won a DVF award for extraordinary women for leadership. Thank you.

Chair: Thank you. Hanin, just to be nominated is an amazing recognition of the work that you do. When we have had sessions on Sudan, a number of witnesses say that what is happening there is a war on women. Do you agree with that?

Hanin Ahmed: Yes, I do.

Q3 **Chair:** We will ask you more about it as we go on. Stephanie, could you introduce yourself and your work, please?

Stephanie Siddall: Thank you so much for having me. My name is Stephanie Siddall and I am the director of global policy and advocacy at Women for Women International. I have been with the organisation for over seven years now, and in that time I have seen first hand how central women's rights and gender equality are to building lasting peace in conflict-affected settings.

For over 30 years Women for Women International has worked at the intersection of gender inequality, extreme poverty and conflict to uphold and protect women's rights. We do that through our own programmes. Through our programmes we have reached over 570,000 women in Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, South Sudan and, with our sister organisations, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Rwanda. We also track crises in real time, and we identify women-led partners on the ground to meet the urgent needs of women in places where we do not have a physical presence, countries like Burkina Faso, Mali, Ukraine, Syria, Sudan and Myanmar.

What sets us apart is our holistic approach. We combine social and economic training. We engage men and we invest in long-term partnerships. We advocate for women's leadership and participation at every level, whether that is in community dialogues or at the UN Security Council.

Here in the UK we have a long-standing track record of advocating for progress on the women, peace and security agenda and for providing evidence-based policy advice to decision makers, whether that is Ministers, parliamentarians or civil servants. That advocacy is grounded in evidence from our programmatic work as well as our research and our consultation. For example, ahead of this milestone year for WPS, we led our most ambitious consultation project to date. This was called From Asking to Action, partnering with 54 women's rights organisations and 6,500 women across 14 conflict-affected contexts. Yes, it was a lot of work. We gathered crucial data-driven insights and recommendations.

The reason I wanted to share that is that everything that I will share today is grounded in that evidence, evidence generated through our



programmes, expertise generated through our consultations, so that we are really centring the lived experiences of women affected by conflict.

Chair: Amazing. Thank you very much. Noah, I will pass to you.

Q4 Noah Law: To the whole panel, but maybe sticking with Stephanie to start with, it is 25 years since the adoption by the UN of the women, peace and security agenda. What is your assessment of its implementation and the success of that?

Stephanie Siddall: People often say, "What is the women, peace and security agenda and why do you work on it?" For us it is simple. The agenda recognises what women affected by conflict have always known, and that is that war uniquely impacts them, but that they have a role in shaping what peace looks like. I think resolution 1325, 20 years on, is still profoundly important and from our perspective it is meaningful and necessary.

Fawzia commented on the fact that conflicts are multiplying. They are becoming more protracted and they are increasingly targeting civilians. Resolution 1325 and the WPS agenda remains one of the most powerful tools that we have. It is something that I use as a foundation when I am engaging with decision makers. It makes something really clear, and that is that women's participation is not optional. It is essential for peace and security. Every member of the UN Security Council has endorsed the WPS agenda. More than 100 countries and regional institutions have national and regional action plans, and it has given women in the countries that we work in the language and the legitimacy to demand a seat at the table. For many women's rights organisations, it has become an accountability mechanism. It has given a tool for them to press their Governments to deliver on the commitments that they have made.

We see that it is not just a piece of paper; it is not just a resolution. We see that when women, peace and security is genuinely implemented, it has results. For example, in northern Nigeria, where we work, women from our community advocacy programme recognised that they had been excluded from past peace efforts. They brought women together from across divided communities to build trust and convene a peace dialogue. At the end of that peace dialogue, they reached a peace agreement. That was in 2019 and that peace agreement still holds. That shows what women, peace and security in action is.

However, it would be remiss of me not to comment on the fact that we are a long way from fully realising the vision of the WPS agenda that was set out in that original resolution. I think the political will and investment in the agenda has not matched the ambition. I hope we will be able to talk about that a bit more today.

Q5 Noah Law: Fawzia, do you want to comment on the success of the implementation?



Fawzia Koofi: As Stephanie mentioned, different countries have adopted action plans. According to the UN, women's participation in official peace processes increased from 6% in 2010 to 14% in 2022, according to a report from the Council on Foreign Relations. However, I think in some countries the women, peace and security agenda has totally failed. Afghanistan and Sudan, as you just mentioned, and many other countries where there is conflict are an example. I would like to use this opportunity to talk about how this agenda failed the women and girls in Afghanistan.

This is just a taste for the global community on how international instruments like the UN Security Council resolution or international conventions have been implemented in a double standard manner. For instance, in Afghanistan women were part of all the mainstream decision-making processes; you name it, from the Parliament, where we had 25% women parliamentarians, according to the Afghanistan Constitution, we had 35% civil servants, we had 6 million girls in schools and universities as students, and we had four women in the official peace negotiation. It was not easy to include four women in the peace negotiation, which actually was about the future of women, women's fate. Obviously, the main Taliban agenda is women. From all these figures now to 0%: 0% women in political processes, 0% women in government, 0% women—all the figures are now zero.

It is not only the Taliban that pursues this. Sometimes our international allies who are championing women, peace and security are in the same line with the Taliban and with other power holders. I am sure Hanin will also speak about her experience in Sudan. Starting from basic things, for instance, when there are delegations travelling to Afghanistan, you see they are all men, with due respect. We value the partnership and allyship of our main champions for this agenda, but you see they are all men. There is no woman even in the official delegation that travels to Afghanistan. On 29 and 30 September, the FCDO hosted the global summit. They called it special envoys for Afghanistan summit. If you look at the photo, all the special envoys, or most of them, were women and they did not even invite women and girls from Afghanistan at least to meet these special envoys. This agenda is not only pushed back by the dictators and people who use power as a means of suppressing women, but also, I must say, by our international allies. We are smashed between the two powers.

I think it is a fight that is a global fight. Yes, resources are important. Political will, meaningful political will, is the key for this, because I believe that only if more women were meaningfully included as part of these processes and their participation was ensured, the outcome would have been different. For me, Noah, political processes and peaceful processes are not just signing an agreement behind the cameras or before the press. It is more than that. It is about social cohesion, acceptance, listening to the war victims. It is about ensuring that the societies are included in that process.



Q6 Noah Law: Thank you. Hanin, do you have anything to add on the success of the agenda since its implementation?

Hanin Ahmed: I want to thank Fawzia and echo what she said. It has completely failed in Sudan. Although through the transitional Government we did the national plan, at the end of the day there is no real implementation right now on the war zone and war time. Even so, when SAF retakes some areas like Khartoum, Sennar and Al Jazirah, women are still facing unspeakable violence by soldiers, by the communities themselves, as there is no protection plan or protection mechanism. Unfortunately, the international community just stood idly by. There is no actual actions on the ground or actual sanctions on warring parties or those who are doing these shameful things. Personally, I left Sudan not because I am afraid of being killed, but I am afraid of being raped. Thank you.

Q7 Noah Law: Thank you. Maybe just briefly, Hanin, is the international community leading by example one of the key changes we need to make here to progress this from warm words and a vision and a commitment to a change in practice? That is what I was getting from Fawzia here.

Hanin Ahmed: Yes, exactly. You need to change that and you need to change it through the Security Council. You need to change it through the programmes and projects that you are implementing in this country. It should chime in with the situation on the ground and it should take us as consultees from the earlier stages of consultation for those projects and programmes to being able to implement. In the case of Sudan, I remember at the beginning of the war when the international community spoke with the warring parties and told them that we are evacuating our staff and we need to have a real ceasefire because we are watching, and at that time they were genuinely watching the war from the satellite. Then, since their staff evacuated, no one has been watching or seeing what is happening for Sudan and Sudanese civilians and women especially.

Q8 Chair: Fawzia, I will follow up on the point that Hanin made about accountability. One of the things that this Committee has become very aware of is that we get the resolutions or the conventions but they tend not to include accountability and the mechanisms to hold member states to account if they breach. Is this another example of that when it comes to women, peace and security?

Fawzia Koofi: Absolutely. First of all, thank you all for championing this. I am glad that Alice was talking about this topic on her social media, because I think every step we take is important. It raises awareness. On the particular question of accountability, I think multilateralism, including internationally recognised accountability mechanisms like the ICC, the ICG, the Security Council resolution 1325 and the UN as a whole, is now being challenged. Probably this issue of multilateralism and the impact of these institutions is not relevant to the global north, to these countries more. I must say that whatever steps these multilateral organisations



take, it actually does make an impact on our life in the global south or global majority.

I will give an example. In June 2025, just three months ago, the ICC issued an arrest warrant for two Taliban leaders for committing crimes against humanity and for violating their own statute. Probably it was one of those decisions that the ICC makes. For many of us, including myself, sometimes I want quicker action. I want quicker results. I want the international organisations to be bolder in their decisions about protecting the rights of the voiceless on the ground in the countries that are affected.

However, this small step had a huge impact on the morale of the 18 million-plus women in Afghanistan. I am sure it has opened a window of hope for women in Sudan, probably for other conflict-affected countries that we are working in, that at least there is somebody who listened to us. Accountability mechanisms are very important, and I think there should be something in the national action plan on accountability when it comes to women, peace and security, because there is a double standard in enforcing these agendas.

Human rights accountability mechanisms like the Human Rights Council, the ICC, mechanisms recently—the Human Rights Council adopted a resolution, which the UK also initially supported, about an investigative mechanism for Afghanistan on the situation of violation of human rights and women's rights. I think these human rights protection mechanisms and Security Council resolutions on ensuring women in political processes such as 1325 should work together closely because human rights mechanisms are used as a leverage to ensure women progress in peace processes.

I believe it is women who are the first to be affected. Not only that, their rights are stripped away, Sarah. In my case, I was the first generation of being a victim of the Taliban and the ban on women's education. I could have been a medical doctor today, but they banned women from it. Today, millions of girls in Afghanistan's hopes are stripped away from them. It is not only us. We are the frontline defenders of this or standing as the first victim. It can reach anywhere, any country. Just two days ago, Sarah, the Taliban Minister of Foreign Affairs went to India for an official trip. He had a press conference, and there he did not allow women journalists to enter the press conference. Afghanistan, Sudan, other countries; when is it coming to the UK and the US? Shall we wait for that or should we be proactive in making a bold decision to ensure that these mechanisms actually work?

Chair: Thank you. You are right to recognise Alice. She has been pushing this agenda very hard and she is the reason we are having this inquiry now.

Q9 Alice Macdonald: Thank you for coming. I should also say that I am the vice chair of the APPG on Afghan women and girls. It is as I said, if you



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care about women's rights, you have to care about Afghanistan. Thank you for coming.

To follow up on that question, I know there is the case at the moment at the ICJ using the convention on the elimination of discrimination against women and girls. There is also a movement to get gender apartheid recognised as a crime against humanity. Do you think those things could make a difference? Do you think the UK could potentially be playing a greater role in using some of those mechanisms?

Fawzia Koofi: Yes, Alice. Once again, thank you and the APPG for amplifying our voice, for giving millions who are watching now, today maybe also the hope that Afghan women and girls are not forgotten.

There are four countries leading the ICJ case. The UK has supported the case, definitely. There are many articles of the CEDAW convention that have been violated by the Taliban, and I think we need to hold them accountable. We had expected some quicker outcome, because it has been one year since the countries expressed a willingness and intention to file against the Taliban in the ICJ. I was in the ICJ in June and I learned that there is no case in the ICJ about Afghanistan. We hope this will be expedited, because at the very least these cases have an impact by causing division among the Taliban, and there are already signs of that. One of the things that they were very proud of was their unity. The more divided that group is, the more leverage that gives us to work with the group that is probably willing to ensure women's rights are protected.

We had a meeting last week with the UK special envoy on human rights of women and girls. We are very happy that there is now a special envoy, along with the envoy for Afghanistan. My request was very specific to them and I would like to repeat it here. I think that the UK, given the history of civilisation and having all these powerful women and men who believe in equality and a better world, should lead on some of these issues for an accountability mechanism on Afghanistan. Currently, the UK is not leading on any of that. The UK is not leading on gender apartheid. I know Baroness Helena Kennedy has produced a report. We are working with her. The UK is not leading on ICJ, it has just supported it. The UK is not leading on ICC. I heard—I hope I am not correct; I hope my information was wrong—that last week, when the Human Rights Council adopted the resolution, anonymously, on an investigative mechanism on the situation of women's rights in Afghanistan, the UK was one of the supporters, but later I heard that it had stepped down.

I suggest that the UK should lead one of these causes for us, because it is not only for us. As I said, I think no country on earth has experienced the same situation that women and girls in Afghanistan experience, so we should actually stop it.

Q10 **Sam Rushworth:** Just on that point, is it possible to share who you feel is leading on those things?



Fawzia Koofi: Different countries are leading on different topics. For instance, on ICJ the four countries that demonstrated intention to take the Taliban—or Afghanistan in this case, which is now led by the Taliban—to the ICG are Australia, Germany, Canada and Netherlands. We are hoping that more Muslim countries will become involved, because I think multilateralism is more beneficial to our part of the world because what the Taliban does is against the principles of Islam as well.

On gender apartheid, there is a coalition; different countries are engaged. On ICC, again, five countries expressed an intention and took Afghanistan to the ICC. They included Spain, Chile, Mexico and France. We hope that the UK will also lead on the investigative mechanism, because it is one of the stronger mechanisms. We are working with Richard Bennett, who is the special rapporteur on the situation of women and human rights in Afghanistan, to pursue this agenda, but investigative mechanism on what is happening in Afghanistan and recording that is crucial for the women, peace and security agenda.

Today, some women of Afghanistan are not just victims; we are victims on many fronts, but we are also leading our fight. We are providing the space and using any small, shrinking space that we have to empower our agenda. We are leading the dialogues. Last week I was part of a dialogue in Pakistan where we brought men and women from across the world, all women and men who were leading Afghanistan before, part of many progress, to talk about the future on women, peace and security and what could be done post Taliban, because we believe the Taliban will not last long.

Q11 **Alice Macdonald:** I have one final question for Fawzia. You were in Doha. You mentioned there were four women as part of the negotiations. Have you ever really felt that there was meaningful participation of women in peace processes? Some of the evidence we have received has said that often it can be tokenistic. Could you talk briefly about your experience of politics and the peace process in Afghanistan and whether it has ever really worked and what could have been done differently to make it work?

Fawzia Koofi: Alice, it was a big achievement to ensure that there were four women included, and it was the first time in our history we included women in the peace process. You think it was easy? No, because some of our foreign diplomat friends, when we knocked on their doors to ask them to make sure our Government included women, were like, "This is the domestic agenda". Since then, all these international mechanisms became only domestic agenda for Afghanistan. However, we managed to mobilise civil society and political parties. The media was our ally. Finally, we were able to include four women.

Women's inclusion in the peace process is the first step, but their meaningful participation, as you said, is the next challenge. The Taliban perspective towards us was that we are a tokenistic American agenda, there to promote Americans. Then the Americans were like, "This is your



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domestic agenda". So, as I said, we were smashed. However, throughout my one year of experience negotiating directly with the Taliban and three years of experience of dialogue, which was pre-negotiation, one lesson learned is that inclusion is one thing; meaningful participation is something that we need to constantly monitor and ensure that women actually are given a role. This was my constant fight.

At the end of the day, I must say that we were very proud because women's participation brought diversity and different knowledge, representing, as Hanin said, the community-level voices and the victims of war. When I went to the negotiation, I went with my hand in a cast just one month after I was attacked by the Taliban. I told the Taliban that I am not only representing the voice of my sisters from back home and my country but also victims of war. Millions of them are not there with us today, but some of them have the same mark as I have from the bullet that I got. The mark is now fixed. I do not have that pain, but the pain in my heart, Alice. What is happening to my sisters every second is taking away not only my time, my emotions, but the time and emotions of 18-plus million women in Afghanistan.

Chair: That is a very powerful example. Thank you for sharing that. Sam, you had another question.

Q12 **Sam Rushworth:** Fawzia has already touched on a good example of this, but my question to you all is about safety concerns, including physical threats—I think we have lost Hanin—and online threats that affect yours and other women's participation in peace processes. Hanin, were you able to catch that? I think you cut out for a second.

Hanin Ahmed: Yes. The barriers from safety concerns is the single greatest factor suppressing the participation of women and girls in public life. In humanitarian terms, in Sudan we are facing unspeakable violence when we provide dignity kits for women. I was personally dealing with one of the rape cases. She had been violated before her disabled child's eyes. It was too hard for a human heart to face such violence, and it was with sharp tools, but we were able to save her life and empower and provide some psychosocial support to her. At the end of the day, this is GBV, or sexual and gender-based violence, that is used as a weapon of war to suppress women and to stop them participating in public life.

In Emergency Response Room we are providing safe spaces for women and meaningful participation, in the communal soup kitchens and community dialogue. We are sewing the fabric of the community itself, which has been destroyed by war. But at the end of the day, without any pressure from the Security Council, the UK Government or those Governments that are elite to stop this violence against the women and girls on the ground, we will not be able to do that alone.

You also have to speak about the protection of volunteers. We have a volunteer; she has also faced unspeakable violence by the RSF. When we spoke about that on our social media, they re-violated her. They do



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enforced disappearance for a lot of women. We are working with some networks on the ground to bring them back to their families, but at the end of the day, because of our morals in society, some families deny receiving their girl or to welcome them. We have a lot of those cases. I used that network to save 500 women who are being sold in Chad and South Africa and different countries out of Sudan.

We have faced a lot of online threats like hacking accounts, hacker attacks, and for the journalists and doctors and activists, there is a lot of polarisation when someone speaks about their own opinion on social media. These are the kind of threats being faced.

- Q13 **Sam Rushworth:** Just to be clear, obviously levels of sexual violence and use of that as a weapon of war is very high, but does it make a woman a particular target because she tries to enter the civic space and tries to engage in peace-building processes?

Hanin Ahmed: Exactly.

Sam Rushworth: Fawzia, could you speak to the same?

- Q14 **Chair:** I am just very minded of time. Stephanie, could we come to you? Have you seen any awareness by the international community that they need to put additional protections around women and girls working in this space?

Stephanie Siddall: Yes. It is interesting. We are definitely seeing the trend that Hanin is sharing at the global level. Thinking about Security Council participation, in 2021 a record 62 women briefed the Security Council, but so far this year only 20 women have briefed. We know that that is to do with the trends of online risks and intimidation and backlash that they are facing.

Chair: You know that?

Stephanie Siddall: It is being tracked by an organisation called the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security. While it is not the only sphere of influence for women peace builders, it is a very important metric to see whether women are able to speak at the highest level in the UN.

Chair: You need to make sure they give us the evidence.

Stephanie Siddall: Yes. What is concerning is that what we are seeing is member states retreat from wanting to support women to participate because the risks are high. The message I will give here to the UK and other member states is that having zero tolerance for risk does not mean not participating at all. We do really need to balance protection and risks with the importance of women participating. The UK has an important role to play in reinforcing that, providing political support, technical support and financial support to make sure those spaces remain open even when the risks are increasing.



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Q15 James Naish: I will come back to Hanin. You talked a little bit there and you might want to go into a bit more detail about the work that you have been doing specifically to help protect women and girls. I am interested in building on that. How do you think programmes could better support women and girls who have experienced sexual violence or general violence?

Hanin Ahmed: Thank you. I think this is a great question, which takes us to direct action by Governments. There is a gap in the protection on the ground. There is a huge gap between the actual, physical protection for the women themselves and the funding coming from those different Governments. I remember when we faced a funding cut from the US. At that time we had the mass evacuation from Al Jazirah state to the surrounding states. At that time we were providing safe shelter for women for six months, but because of the loss of that funding, we are unable to continue that work even for the safe spaces, for the protection itself, for the women and the evacuation. We have completely stopped and we lost a lot of lives due to that, and even the psychosocial clinics related to the protection.

I think also that digital safety is completely neglected by the international community. Governments should support digital security for women to minimise the risk and the lack of provision to secure their communication tools. In Sudan, we are in the area controlled by the RSF. We do not have networks, so we use Starlink, which is also unsafe because it is usually in a public area where they go to use that network. They have also been exploited.

Refugee women are being exploited in Egypt by Egyptian citizens; they are being exploited in Kampala and in Chad. The UNHCR and the UN women should also focus on that. I think that the UK should put pressure on those organisations to give more to the Sudanese and other refugees outside Sudan. On the top-down approach, you have to take us as visionaries and as planners; the international community must stop seeing Sudanese women and girls as passive recipients. The grassroots Emergency Response Room and Women's Response Room are flexible and we are a rapid response. We have a lot of experience in dealing with the situation in different areas because we are working in such a decentralised way with the centralised co-ordination. We have the ability to manage and operate in different areas.

Q16 James Naish: That is great. Thank you. I will just jump into the room. On the point about how programmes could better support women who have experienced violence or sexual violence, Stephanie, do you want to jump in?

Stephanie Siddall: Yes, I am happy to share. I mentioned in my introduction that Women for Women International takes a holistic approach to supporting women, I suppose acknowledging that justice cannot be achieved in isolation from conflict prevention work to promote gender equality and so on. One of our programmes, Stronger Women,



Stronger Nations, is built around that understanding and that principle. We support women to break the isolation of war, conflict and discrimination through training. We do rights training, financial management training and health support. We support women to build businesses and learn vocational skills.

That programme also focuses on connection, so bringing women together, women who have often experienced violence against women and trauma. We provide them with access to referrals to organisations that can provide services to them. I know this has been a big subject for this Committee, but all this programming depends on sustained funding and political will, and the outcomes of programmes like ours really depend on that. When budgets are cut, it is often the legal aid, the access to justice, the counselling, the safe spaces that go first. It is the very things that enable the things we are talking about in this room, like justice, access, being able to participate in decision making. It is just to think about that from a big picture perspective on what the UK needs to do. I know that we are not in a fiscal situation right now to return to a 0.7% budget, but I think we need to see a recommitment to that happening as soon as possible.

When it comes to gender programming and programmes that we are talking about, we want to see that where there is existing budget that programmes and support for gender equality programming are ringfenced. Where mainstreaming has to happen, we need to see mainstream happening properly, really prioritising technical support and making sure that gender equality is seen as an important strategic priority across government and not just a technical add-on. It is things like that that really make these programmes a success.

Q17 Alice Macdonald: On that point, obviously we look at the FCDO as a Department, but the Ministry of Defence also has a clear role to play in women, peace and security. Have you seen any examples of other countries where they have used some of the budgets from other Departments to support this agenda?

Stephanie Siddall: I cannot speak to the Ministry of Defence, but I can speak to the use of the integrated security fund to advance women, peace and security priorities. There are two programmes that spring to mind that Women for Women International has been involved in implementing. One was called Resourcing Change and finished earlier this year. That was implemented in Yemen, Nigeria and South Sudan. There is one ongoing that we are implementing in Iraq. Both those projects aimed to provide women's rights organisations with core flexible funding, technical support and connection, and movement building.

The impact that we have seen has been really successful. We have seen a de-prioritisation of gender in those mechanisms like the integrated security fund. Only recently we saw the portfolio within the ISF that was historically the gender, peace and security portfolio changed to be the gender and national security portfolio. The Resourcing Change



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programme that I mentioned ended earlier this year and for our Iraq programme the budget was cut as we entered year two.

I suppose all that is to say we are seeing some examples of how this is being prioritised in other parts of government, but that is not to be taken for granted. I am concerned that we will see a move away from that.

Q18 James Naish: I will come back to Fawzia. What barriers have you or others faced when seeking access to security and justice? Where have you seen and felt those barriers? We have talked about funding and a few other things there, but what is the real impact of that?

Fawzia Koofi: I think the real impact of the lack of access to meaningful participation for women in women, peace and security is, of course, resources and political commitment. However, above all it is the limited and now declining role of internationally recognised multilateral organisations. For instance, the UN itself in some of the countries is not relevant any more. In some countries, the UN itself, to have a space, is following the same footsteps of the ruling power.

I will give an example. In Afghanistan, the UN is led by an organisation called UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. UNAMA recently adopted a programme called Mosaic Approach. In Mosaic Approach, they developed a proposal for a political process, they call it, for Afghanistan, where it only talks about how the international community and the Taliban will normalise their relationship. When it comes to women and civil society and other groups, they just put somewhere, in the two or three-page paper, "other groups". So women and political and civic groups are regarded as others, even in the UN terms and language.

I think the internationally recognised Government and internationally recognised mechanisms should be held accountable, empowered by donor states, by member states like the UK—because the UK has an embassy in Qatar that works for Afghanistan—to ensure that women are there and women are protected.

Q19 James Naish: Is that an actual barrier to justice, or is that just a general indication that support for women and girls has slid? Do you see it as an actual barrier to—

Fawzia Koofi: In the case of Afghanistan, it is a barrier that stops women from being part of any processes in Afghanistan. Inside Afghanistan, women cannot do anything. When the aid cut happened, to your question before, I thought that maybe it would not actually impact women in the villages in Afghanistan. However, we had a consultation with 400 women through an organisation where I am leading the board called Women for Afghanistan. It provides dialogue space and accountability space for women. We organised a consultation with women in the villages, and I was listening to the women in Helmand Province, where the British troops were, and another province called Bamyán Province. I asked them, "How are the aid cuts impacting you?" They are



dependent on humanitarian aid and NGOs are the only source of creating jobs for women in Afghanistan, and they told me that the only source of income for their family was taken away from them.

Outside of Afghanistan, the culture of making the Taliban happy is stopping us from being part of the process. For instance, last week, on 29 September, there was a meeting of special envoys in the UK and no women from Afghanistan. While you have some of the most prominent women now living in exile in the UK, we were not included.

I raise this and I hope that with your support the UK becomes the lead in some of those platforms. I think that change is possible in Afghanistan and will happen very soon, but women need to lead that change. We can do it together.

Q20 Tracy Gilbert: Thank you all for what you are doing to give voice to women's desperate circumstances. To pick up on a point, and a lot of this has already been covered, you have all spoken about examples of where women, peace and security programmes have championed local voices and them being the most important parts of your work. I will come to Stephanie first. Can you tell us a bit more about specific programmes that have done that and what makes them successful compared to ones that maybe do not work as well?

Stephanie Siddall: Yes. I mentioned the programmes we are implementing with support from the UK Government and I think they are good examples of that. We have been supporting women's rights organisations with core flexible funding, technical support and space and funding to be able to come together and strategise. What we see is that women's rights organisations, which are on the frontline of conflict and crisis and know what their communities need, can be there when conflict breaks out. They can often prevent it before it happens. When they have the resourcing and support and connections with each other, they can advance their own self-defined priorities. They are not having to fit in with what a donor is asking them for or meet donor priorities. They can do what they know their communities need.

We have seen great examples of organisations in Nigeria, for example, where a group of women's rights organisations came together to campaign. They were able to have a law passed in Bauchi state so that now free period products are provided in schools there. That was very much led by the women's rights organisations that identified that as an issue and drove that action forward. We see the real community-led change that is happening when those movements and organisations are resourced and supported effectively.

We have talked about backlash. Again, it is not just all about the money; it is about creating a safe civic space for those organisations to thrive and do the work that they need to do. I think that is what we really need to be protecting and enabling more programmes like that to happen.



Q21 **Tracy Gilbert:** Other than finances, what do you think the international community could do to help to bolster these projects to ensure that local women and girls have those voices and have access to justice?

Stephanie Siddall: In addition to funding, which of course is important, we have talked a bit about meaningful participation today. I think we have not seen the benchmarks that we have set out to be met by the international community. Women for Women International, along with some other partners, in 2019 developed the Beyond Consultations tool. This was designed to support donors, Governments and other organisations to be able to meaningfully consult with women affected by conflict on the decisions impacting their lives, the design of programmes and policies. The UK Government have endorsed that tool, but we are seeing examples where that is not really happening and is not being embedded into the design of UK policy.

Now, 25 years on from resolution 1325, we should not be seeing any programme or humanitarian response or peace agreement being advanced without the inclusion of women, but we see that more often than not. I think, beyond funding, we need to see that championed by the UK. The UK has a lot of convening power on the international stage and historically, using its role on the Security Council and applying its commitment to WPS consistently across contexts and conflicts, and using that to set an example as well.

Chair: Thank you very much. Panel, we really appreciate not just you being here today but all the work you do. We know it goes on day in and day out. We know it is very personal and I have the deepest admiration for you for persevering because what you are trying to do is get justice, recognition and security for 50% of the world's population. It is painful that it is just a handful of women who are trying to do this. As a Committee, we will keep the focus on what is happening in the real world and we will keep holding our Government's feet to the fire. You have given us some amazing recommendations for our reports, which we will follow through. Thank you so much for sharing your experiences and skills. Please, you are friends of the Committee, so if we can stay in touch we would be very grateful, if only to celebrate when one of you gets your Nobel peace prize. Thank you all very much.

We will just pause and I will invite the other witnesses to come forward, please.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon and Fiona Kilpatrick-Cooper.

Q22 **Chair:** Lord Ahmad, Fiona, thank you so much for coming. I am very aware, Lord Ahmad, that you have votes in the other place.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: The joys of Parliament, as you all know well.



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Chair: We will focus the first set of questions on you, Lord Ahmad, because I know that your first vote might come shortly. We will make them as quick-fire as we can. If you are able to come back after your first vote, that would be fantastic, but we understand what this place and, indeed, your place are like. I will first focus the Committee's attention on you.

Personally, in the last Committee, David Mundell and I worked with you in your former role. I know that women, peace and security and preventing gender-based violence was very much a passion and a drive that you championed. Thank you for all your work on this. We would like to focus on the new Government and the new world that we are finding ourselves in. Could you speak first, in the light of the recent cuts to UK aid, on how the UK can continue to be a world leader for women, peace and security on the international stage?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: First of all, it is a pleasure to be back, albeit in a different capacity. I was just speaking to Fiona outside and I said I have done Committees a lot of times but not giving evidence. I have been on the receiving end as a Minister, so it is a different perspective.

You are quite right, Chair, that I have felt this, and just listening to the back end of the last contribution, that is not just about women championing women's causes and gender equality. You need men, because when we look around the world at the moment it is still a tragic fact that it is not through the lack of qualified women; it is the lack of political will and change that we have seen around the world that means that there is still a massive gap in women's representation. Perhaps we will come on to that later.

I feel that the current cuts—I felt the same when the reduction was made by the previous Government, from 0.7 to 0.5—put forward a lot of challenges. I remember talking to Baroness Sugg at that time, who resigned from Government over that decision. I felt the reason for staying—David will recall this—was that fighting from within on something, often when you are a single voice, is equally important to defend a particular principle or priority. That is the attitude I took.

I led on various elements, most notably on preventing sexual violence in conflict. I feel that it is not just about money. It is about representation and engagement at the highest level through multilateral causes. It is also about thinking outside the box. It is about who you can get to add convening power so that there is attention drawn to this particular agenda, broadly on women, peace and security but specifically in my case on PSVI.

A suggestion that immediately comes to mind is the level of investment we have made on technical support. Using PSVI as an example, we set up a specialist pool of people. When we were addressing issues of conflict-related sexual violence, if we needed legal expertise, we could call upon



that pool. If we needed emotional support or mental health expertise, we could call upon that pool. That was not a financial commitment; it was an expertise commitment from the individuals or groups concerned. We were then able to deploy them appropriately.

Q23 **Chair:** Is that pool still available?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: The short answer is: I don't know. If I may say, it is a source of profound regret. You have to fight the cause. You have to dig in your heels and fight for a particular priority. I attended many a meeting within the Foreign Office, or the FCDO as it became, or with other Ministers about the prioritisation we needed to give. There is also the headlining. You will recall, Chair, the campaign we led on girls' education. It became a mantra: 12 years of quality education for every girl in the world. Why? Because you empowered not just the girl but the family, the community, the nation, and so on. I think that momentum has been lost and it is not, as I said, just about money. It is about sustaining expertise. When covid hit in 2020, the moneys were not quite there at that time but we kept the expertise going. We looked at out-of-the-box thinking. It sounds like that is not out of the box today, but how could we get IT enablement? How could we get 3G, 4G and 5G enabled in places? We were just hearing about Afghanistan. We did that with teacher training. I think there are things that can be done.

I was looking at the exchange of correspondence as well. We are down to about £8.5 billion. Even when the funding was cut, because of the level—yes, there was growth at that time. In the last year of the previous Government, we were spending about £14.5 billion on ODA, but it was spent on technical support and expertise. It was, again using the PSVI example, champions who could be appointed. I did that in 2019. They continue on PSVI today, survivor champions who went through the ordeals, courageous survivors who then came forward as advocates.

I have put it out there to the current Government. It is no skin off my nose, frankly, and this was not just in the context of the WPS agenda but across the foreign policy agenda. I served for seven and a half years. There was something very much part and parcel left in intellectual property and institutional knowledge. I think when we are representing our country abroad, when we are advocating for the priorities we have, it should not be politicised in any way, and that offer stands today.

Chair: I would say that this of all topics should not be politicised. Thank you for carrying the baton for so long and thank you for trying to hand it over. I hope that that offer is picked up.

Q24 **David Mundell:** Thank you for everything that you have done. It did make a difference. The FCDO equality impact assessment published in September 2025 said that the cuts of funding for WPS may result in 50 fewer new women's peacebuilding organisations supported by the UK in fragile conflict-affected states. What do you make of that decision?



Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: I think it is tragic. There is no other word for it. When we look at conflict, inevitably the most vulnerable are impacted. You could talk about Sudan, what is happening in the middle east, in Gaza, what happened in Afghanistan and continues. The people who are targeted first and foremost are the most vulnerable with least representation. Tragically, again, quite often it is women and girls who suffer. The lack of champions in that field I think again is a sad reflection of what needs to happen. At a time of resources being cut and being withdrawn, the focus on prioritisation of girls and women and vulnerable groups to me is a priority.

If I may give one example during our time in office—and it was something I do not take credit for; Norway was quick off the mark on women mediators—I was also the Commonwealth Minister. I remember launching the Commonwealth women mediators network. When you look at the evidence base, peace agreements last longer. They stay longer. By ignoring generally 50% of the population across the world, that means that you are not involving them at a time that is the most crucial. The whole idea of setting up the mediator networks, including within the Commonwealth, is that these are qualified, experienced women leaders across the world who could be deployed quite directly.

Here is a free one for the Government when they sit at the UN Security Council. Had we been re-elected, one of the champion causes I was saying is that in mandates given by the UN Security Council, it should be mandated that the former women mediators networks are deployed directly as a category within each resolution that is passed. The Government can pursue that today.

Q25 **David Mundell:** How do you think the cuts will impact on the UK's national action plan commitments to support inclusive building under the participation pillar?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: The national action plans were a great achievement across successive Governments, and there have been statements made to recommit themselves to the national action plans. Just a bit of context and history, I recall when the FCO was separate to DFID and the MOD. Generally speaking, the three Departments worked very well on the national action plan, but it does need backing with technical expertise. It needs insight and experience with each country we are doing national action plans with, but it needs money and support.

There will be a rolling back of some of the achievements we have made in key countries with national action plans. For example, it is not completed in Iraq; it is not a job done. Women and girls are still facing many challenges and NAPs is a very good example of how they can actually work with a given Government or a given Administration, that we can achieve some of our goals.

Again, referring back to something Fawzia said before she left, unfortunately, because of the pressures that are currently on the



multilateral system, there is almost an acceptance that where there is a change of Government or, as we saw in Afghanistan, a very draconian Administration such as the Taliban taking over—I sometimes look back on our history, and we sort of replace the Taliban with the Taliban after our 20-odd years of intervention, but the Taliban 2.0, to use that term quite specifically, is even more aggressive than what we saw.

Let us be very clear, as I have said before the Committee as a Minister, it is nothing to do with the religion or Islam, which on the contrary was a religion that empowered women. For them to use that narrative, there is a need for us to work through the national action plans, get other countries within the wider world involved with them but also to take up that false narrative head on. Women's participation empowerment can be achieved through the narrative being also extended by countries who share the same faith or the same culture.

Chair: Lord Ahmad, just because of time, I will bring Tracy.

Q26 Tracy Gilbert: *The Independent* has reported concerns about possible reductions in the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative following the UK ODA cuts. What impact do you think those UK aid cuts could have on the efforts to prevent sexual violence in conflict?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: The Chair introduced me to have passion. I served seven and a half years, and I served under six Foreign Secretaries. It was not easy, and every time there was a change I assure you it was not easy. You had to go in and convince the individual concerned. It is not something that I created. I took on a heavy legacy, and a powerful one—William Hague created it with Angelina Jolie. I had to bring my own political determination with a little sparkle and profile as well.

My great achievement in convening power—she is a great friend of mine—I pay tribute to the Duchess of Edinburgh. She and I started talking about this initiative. I knew it was not about money. I talked earlier about convening power, and she looked at this agenda for about six months. We spent a lot of time briefing her, and we did a lot of visits together and I saw her direct engagement, her ability to reach out beyond. Here was someone of our royal family—we often talk about the soft power, where we see the influences, and I think that was a real achievement.

I mention that because it did not involve money. We sometimes get engulfed in that. Had we stayed, there was an opportunity to get the private sector involved. For example, one of the live initiatives we were working on, on the PSVI agenda, was with the International Criminal Court, where we had spent some degree of money, seed funding, on creating a virtual courtroom. If you are a victim, a survivor of sexual violence, you have gone through the worst ordeal imaginable, you want to ensure that when you are going into that environment you are familiar with your surroundings.



We created that kind of atmosphere and used AI, virtual techniques. That would have been funded more medium and long term from the private sector. Companies out there, someone who worked in the private sector for 20 years before Government, are now in a different area when it comes to social responsibility, social contributions, doing their part. That certainly is one area of focus if there is a reduction in funding.

Q27 Chair: Lord Ahmad, you are being very generous in examples of what the Government could do with no money, but some of the cuts will be to PSVI programmes. What do you think the impact of that will be?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: Can I be blunt? It will be devastating to a lot of programmes we run. For example, we funded TRIAL International in the DRC. What did TRIAL International do? I visited a number of times, including with the Duchess. It meant that we took mobile courts into the community. There were some really draconian ways that a survivor of sexual violence would literally be put under a hood to try to give evidence to protect her. That was unacceptable. How could we work in a more effective way to ensure the voice of the victim—the survivor who is coming forward—could be heard?

There is a lack of funding at a very local level—I have looked at some of the figures. We shifted the balance of that £15 billion in our last full year in office; about £10 billion was given to localised groups, to country-based spending. Why? I feel—I am trying to be constructive with the new Government—that if there are ways and means of identifying localised projects that have fewer overheads, you can still try to support some of the specialised groups in key conflict zones.

Q28 Chair: Why is it important to fund locally?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: Local expertise. We have got a massive network of investors and high commissioners at the FCDO. Let us empower them. I always felt that very strongly. This was something that because they are more local to it rather than a centralised decision-making process—salami slicing with “Let’s have this here”—by all means there still needs to be some degree of ringfencing of the wider WPS agenda but then put it out for bids. We used to do that quite regularly for bids to be made, as they did for ministerial visits for moneys that could be allocated to localised groups. That is not rejecting the multilateral system, but it is recognising local expertise and it reduced overheads.

Q29 Alice Macdonald: Can I ask for more follow-up on that? You are a politician and you know how difficult it can be to make the case for aid being spent in certain areas. How do you think we can make the case for continuing the funding of things like the trials in DRC, which are not the things that necessarily poll as the most popular? It would be good to get your context on that based on your experience.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: In 2019 I appointed Nadine and Kolbassia, who Sarah and others know, as survivor champions, one a man, one a woman, not for end delivery but for policy setting. They were able to



identify what survivors needed most. It was not always just about money; it was about the social network, the support.

When we hosted the PSVI summit a few years back, for the first time we brought together survivors from across the world. It was the first time that was ever done, and that meant they were able to establish their own social networks. In literally my last few months in office, I established an international alliance on preventing sexual violence in conflict. We have about 23 members. It has not increased.

That does not cost money. It means a Minister going in. Canada is not part of it. Mélanie Joly was the Foreign Minister and every time she saw me she said, "I can see Tariq coming. He is going to bend my ear on lack of involvement". When you make that case, and internationalise it, it brings focus to it. It is an easier argument to make for the Minister, the Foreign Secretary, to others to say, "This is giving us credibility". We have history in this particular area and on the broader WPS agenda; we need to back it.

I am not saying that it is easy. I have sat through many spending rounds, particularly when we saw the 0.7 to 0.5. As I said, you sometimes need to really fight your cause but fight it with evidence.

Q30 Alice Macdonald: Can I turn to the national action plan for women, peace and security. If the Government were to launch a new one, what should be its priorities and why? Also, Sudan is not one of the currently listed countries. Do you think there is enough flexibility? You would have thought maybe 18 months ago that we would have added Sudan to the list, but is there flexibility in those programmes? What would the new priorities be if you were doing it now?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: I do not know what the count is. When I was in office, I often used to say if you count all the wars in conflict—there were about 60 wars and conflicts, and we had to make decisions on prioritisation. The first question is: where does the UK have leverage? Where do we have influence? I have said this to the current Administration even on the middle east. Sometimes you have to take the heat as a Minister for the public lines you are taking, to ensure you have the access you need to leverage your influence. That is the first decision that needs to be taken.

On Sudan specifically, there are countries such as the UAE and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia who are partners and friends across different areas. While people will have different perspectives, it is how we can influence them, because clearly they have leverage on the ground to influence the bigger agenda.

On PSVI specifically, if you look at places like Darfur, the problems on sexual violence did not end when the conflict ended. I remember visiting a camp specifically where women who had been raped and tortured



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several times over thought they would now get some respite. Regrettably and tragically, when they went into the camp that continued from within.

I will come back to an earlier point about people who can represent effectively the voice of the distressed. As one example, I remember visiting Pakistan a few years back on multilingual and certain Pakistani languages, and that was after the flooding in Sindh. The tragic consequence was what the person was telling me, because I understood the language, was not what the translator from the local administration was telling me. We circumvented it, but after I left I am sure it went back to the same way of working. We have to be nuanced on who has got influence on the ground. On the cutbacks we see, yes, we have to prioritise, but let us use and leverage our international relationships to see which country in which area has the greatest influence.

Q31 **Alice Macdonald:** Do you think if you were writing that national action plan now, you would have included Sudan and Gaza?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: Yes. We have invested. Just because the money is not what it was should not mean that we walk away totally from the technical support we lent or the advancements we made on representation. Representation, even vocally, is an important way of representing the voice that does not have a voice on the ground.

Chair: Lord Ahmad, you are no better than we are on business of the House, so we are optimistic that might mean we have got you—

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: I will look at my phone, but as soon as you see the red bell going, do say to me.

Chair: We will shout.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: I will attempt to come back as well if I can. It is a procedural vote followed by some on legislation.

Q32 **Chair:** We are going to be optimistic and include Fiona. Fiona, could you introduce yourself and your organisation please, and then we have some questions for you?

Fiona Kilpatrick-Cooper: Good afternoon, I would like to thank the Committee for inviting me to give evidence today. I am Fiona Kilpatrick-Cooper, the Director of Weapons and Ammunition Management for the HALO Trust. HALO is a humanitarian NGO working in over 30 countries and territories around the world that are affected by conflict. We protect lives and restore livelihoods through the clearance and safe management of weapons and ammunition and also mines and other explosive remnants of war.

I personally have been fortunate enough to be technically trained in the British military as an ammunition technician and bomb disposal operator. In HALO, for the last 11 years, I have managed our human security work over four continents. I come from an operational background, as might



have been obvious, from a technical background rather than a policy one, so I hope to be able to talk to what women, peace and security looks like on the ground for us.

- Q33 **Sam Rushworth:** Thank you. It is a great organisation. I had the privilege of working with your people in northern Sri Lanka a year ago. Could you tell us about how, through your work, you see the importance of women as agents of change in conflict and fragile states?

Fiona Kilpatrick-Cooper: As long as women can have just a little bit of empowerment and encouragement, they can be agents of change in anything they do. Empowered women and girls lead recovery, challenge norms, and build safer and more resilient communities. Inclusive, locally-led programming means giving meaningful leadership opportunities to them that are essential for sustainable peace.

HALO's women managing weapons programme is a Canadian-funded initiative. We have so far trained 20 women in technical and leadership roles. They have gone on to leading operations themselves and even training other people in weapons and ammunition management. Now we see our women leading large-scale construction projects across Africa, advising defence and security ministerial offices and contributing to national strategies and even international technical standards and practices. They really are true role models, of whom I am very proud, and their leadership is absolutely crucial to lasting change.

- Q34 **Sam Rushworth:** Could you also explain a good example of the work that HALO has done in a conflict or post-conflict setting that supported the lives of women and girls in that area?

Fiona Kilpatrick-Cooper: Aside from mine clearance in weapons and ammunition management, we reduce the root causes of arms and ammunition proliferation, which are inextricably linked to gender-based violence and sexual violence in and post conflict. For us, enabling host nations to be able to safely and accountably secure their stockpiles of weapons and ammunition, and prevent them getting out there into the illicit flow globally is quite an easy fix to the causes rather than dealing with the consequences.

- Q35 **James Naish:** I am happy for either of you to answer this first. How do you think the UK should adapt its approach, if at all, to women, peace and security given the emerging transnational threats to the agenda?

Fiona Kilpatrick-Cooper: It is all about reaffirming commitment to the women, peace and security agenda, and embedding it across defence, diplomacy and development. They are not siloed areas of action or siloed sectors. They complement one another and should be looked at holistically. Passing the Women, Peace and Security Bill will be an incredible step forward for that. It will be a powerful demonstration of the UK's leadership and a meaningful step forward.



Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: On that final point, absolutely. It is a private Member's Bill that came forward. It has strong support within and outside Government, because it then embeds the WPS agenda. I have a few quick suggestions on this. You have to champion WPS. Whether it is at the UN, the G7, the G20 in multilateral forum—I mentioned the Commonwealth before—we have to put it forward. I stand corrected if I am wrong, but I think around 58% of our spending of ODA from the FCDO was on gender-based programmes. There was an ambition that 85% of it should be.

There is the argument of: do we use the narrative "feminists"? I always step back from that, not because I do not want to fight the cause, but it should be a natural occurrence. It should not need labelling. We were headed in that same direction and the former Foreign Secretary—now Justice Secretary—said he could not give the kind of endorsement or commitment that the previous Government did. It is not rocket science. That will help as well, because it sets the agenda with others.

The third element is, I talked about ringfencing the wider envelope, and that is across the Department. There has been a change with the defence spending going up, but this is a joint combined agenda between the FCDO and the MOD, so that being spent on valuable initiatives.

I will give you a practical example: the Elsie Initiative that Canada started. I am glad the current Government have given half a million pounds to it. That was a consistent place of spending for us as a Government in multilateral spending. All credit to Canada, but you saw women peacemakers within the UN mandate in specific countries leading at the front.

I can give you another practical example. If you are a vulnerable woman or young girl who has just been raped and tortured by men in uniform, the last thing you want to see is more men, even if they have a blue hat or a blue beret on. That applies across the piece. We need more women in the frontline. Initiatives such as that—not just funding it, but supporting it and championing it—is another good example.

On accountability, I do not think there has been an assessment done, but have regular assessments every six months of where the objectives are on the WPS. We talked about the national action plans; review them more regularly. I was very open about transparency on PSVI to have annual accountability of what was being achieved. There were two reasons for it. Coming back to a point that Alice raised, as Minister it gave me the impetus to say, "I will be questioned in Parliament; we collectively as a Government will be questioned". Accountability and transparency are key as well.

Finally, on women's networks, we have lots of really incredible champions, and they are women across the piece. We can do more. We should have—I do not think it has been established—an Arab women's



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mediators network. That can be done, and with the current crisis that we are dealing with in the middle east, it would be well placed.

We have some incredible women Ministers. You see the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In Qatar, Lolwah Al-Khater has now become the Education Minister and was previously the Development Minister. Lana Nusseibeh is the Assistant Foreign Minister in the UAE and she was the ex-representative ambassador. Reem Al Hashimy is the Development Minister for UAE. I name but a few, and my apologies to other great women Ministers who are emerging in these countries. You heard from people like Fawzia and Shukria Barakzai. We have the women here to be able to set this agenda today. We have the expertise in the UK for countries like Afghanistan.

Q36 James Naish: What more do you think the Government need to do to ensure that women and young girls can be agents of change within their own countries? You have given examples of women who have made it to that position. What more can we do to try to facilitate that from the UK?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: We have worked well with organisations like GAPS when they came in and advised the Government. There are a lot of APPGs—I always had a good relationship with the chairs of various APPGs. I always felt there should not be a detachment from what the APPG does in visits, and the FCDO in this case should fully brief them. When the APPG returns, they should fully download and debrief the Government. That does not mean that they have to align themselves to government policy, far from it, but you are living and learning from the insights and experience of people who are genuinely interested. That is one thing.

We have women's networks set up in the Foreign Office—or certainly did—including Afghan women. I used to convene once a quarter, certainly once every six months, with the Afghan women that we had here to ensure that the policies and agenda we were setting were reflective of the priorities. There has been a lot of chatter over the last few months, and a lot of challenge, about the rich diversity of our incredible country. Well, we are. Let us leverage it, because we have people with insights and experience. They are educated, well informed, experienced women who we should engage across the piece.

Q37 James Naish: Fiona, the same question: how do you think the Government can make sure that more women and girls overseas are agents of change within their very difficult circumstances?

Fiona Kilpatrick-Cooper: I would like to reinforce what Lord Ahmad said, particularly about male-dominated police forces and military. We are trying to combat this in HALO by training women in technical and leadership positions. It is not just our own staff that we train to be these voices, but women in the police forces and the military so that they can be the face and the voice in their own communities of women being included, promoted and trusted.



Just seeing women will in the longer term promote trust between the communities and the police or the military in general. All too often the security forces have a monopoly on violence and it is not used well internally. We need to be building up that trust. Making sure that women can access those career opportunities and peer support networks as we grow women in these industries will be incredibly important.

Lord Ahmad talked about protecting and ringfencing funding, particularly for addressing PSVI and sexual and gender-based violence but also making it flexible to address root causes of this kind of violence. UN Women cited that in 2023 there were around 4,000 cases of PSVI, in 90% of which small arms and light weapons were used. It is all very much interlinked.

Q38 Alice Macdonald: Picking up on that last point, it looks like there will be more of a shift towards multilateral aid instead of bilateral aid. Lord Ahmad, do you think there is more that we can be doing through institutions like the World Bank where a lot of money is going through IDA, for example, to make sure there is more of a push around fragile and conflict-affected states? In your role, did you see that the UK was able to point to things like the women, peace and security agenda and say that we want some of our multilateral funding to be there? Do you think we could be doing more of that in the future as resources are getting limited?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: We sit on the board of the World Bank, and it comes back to the words “passion” and “principle”. If you believe in something, present it, fight for it. The World Bank is as good as its constituent parts, of which we are a key component, not just with money but in setting policy and direction. The short answer is yes.

The other thing is the UN itself. While there is a lot of challenge to the UN—I was the UN Minister for a long—I believe in the UN. It needs fundamental reform. Under its Deputy Secretary-General, Amina Mohammed, it has set up the concept of resident co-ordinators across the world. That translates very easily for any country because it is like having specialist ambassadors.

I made it a duty every time I went to a country to meet with the resident co-ordinator to support their agenda. They often had competing UN bodies trying to say, “You are not important; the UN will not be doing that”. The whole point of the RC was to bring it all co-ordinated and together. That sent a message that the UN was relevant, but it comes back to a point I made earlier that the decision making is best done when it is localised and specialised.

In short, whether it is within the UN system or the World Bank, or indeed, as I said, a wider agenda where we can bat, like the G7 or G20—and let us be frank, if you look at what has happened in Azerbaijan, Armenia, the middle east, between India and Pakistan, wherever you are, I pay tribute to the US and President Trump because he managed to convene. A



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convening power of whichever country or power is extremely important. But it is ensuring—when we were, for example, totally removed from this particular freedom of religion or belief, we were working with the United States on that under Trump 1. We were trying to convince the American Administrations of the word “or belief” for people who were humanist, atheists, agnostics.

It was the UK’s advocacy and representation—including my own—that led to that extension of the word “or belief”. It sounds like two words, but it meant that when we went out and fought for a particular priority, we were able to leverage our influence over that agenda. The same applies on the WPS agenda when there are specific PSVI close to my—I am not letting it go just for everyone’s benefit. I am looking for opportunities to see how we can keep this very much our focus. It is not a legacy of William Hague or Tariq Ahmad; this is the legacy of the United Kingdom.

Coming back to your earlier point on Sudan, if we have made inroads, we have established networks, we have put in place structures—yes, the money may not be at the level it was, unfortunately and in some cases tragically, but it does not mean that we pull back altogether.

A quick word for the HALO Trust: it was a key partner for us when we were looking at de-mining, for example, in war zones. Afghanistan is a good example. I was thinking about you this morning, not just for this session but with what is happening in Gaza, where you have children playing with unexploded devices, bullets, and so on. We need specialist experts to go in, and if the current UN set-up is not effective, which country has the influence? How can we get the experts in? Then let us work with the expertise on the ground to support the agenda.

Q39 Alice Macdonald: One more general question: how effective are the UK and other international partners in supporting the genuine inclusion of women in women, peace and security programmes? Maybe Fiona first and then I will come to Lord Ahmad.

Fiona Kilpatrick-Cooper: From my experience, they are incredibly supportive and organisations like HALO have been given quite a lot of opportunities to be able to—

Alice Macdonald: Are you talking about the UK Government? You said “they are incredibly supportive”. Did you mean the UK Government?

Fiona Kilpatrick-Cooper: Yes, the UK Government and multilateral institutions as well. HALO has had plenty of opportunities to speak on that, but there is rather a disconnect between the policy and the diplomacy side and how grassroots operations are informed and supported.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: On the policy and diplomacy, the principle of bringing DFID and the FCO together was a good one. I did three incarnations. I was an FCO Minister, then I was a joint Minister, then I



was an amalgamated Minister under the FCDO. Quite often, when I was just the FCO Minister, because the money was coming from development, your influence would not be as extended. Joint working in a single unit is a lot more helpful, whereby you can then ensure, as our national action plan, that you have development, defence and diplomacy—the three Ds—working in tandem, not on a separate agenda.

That is why the national action plans are important. Money is key—yes, it is important—but there are other things you can be doing to ensure that convening under the three banners; it is not the end, if money has been allocated to the MOD. If I was a FCDO Minister right now, I would be fighting and biting at the heels of the defence team to make sure these initiatives are properly funded.

Q40 Chair: A final two questions from me. You touched on this earlier, Lord Ahmad, when you were talking about marginalised communities. How much do you think WPS or the agenda considers additional inequalities that may compound women and girl's experiences of sexual violence and conflict violence?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: That is where the national action plans are important, because they are tailored to a given country and reflective of the nuances or cultures or faiths that are prevalent in the particular area. If you are doing one in Sudan as opposed to Afghanistan, there will be certain principles that are common, but you have to deal with the reality on the ground. That is why one of the areas the current Government should be looking at is how they can expand the national action plans with buy-ins from countries who have influence. Again using Afghanistan, countries such as Qatar have influence, a good development agenda and money that it is now spending on development.

Also looking at key partners, there are partners in Afghanistan—I will not name them, in order to protect them, but I am happy to share that behind the scenes in private—that continued to do good work on girls' education in Afghanistan when NATO pulled out. We ensured that the support that we were giving to them also continued, because they had the support of their regional partners in dealing with that.

When looking at certain conflicts, particularly on gender, we also have to challenge head on the issues when religion is used. I feel very passionate, being Muslim myself, when I see that the narrative of Islam is used to suppress the rights of women. I find that repulsive because that is not the Islam I grew up with and that I know. The most empowered people around me in my private life, professional life and indeed political life have always been women—women who took a chance on me, who saw an ability. I used to hate maths and meeting people. It was my mother's mentoring that got me to be a banker and then go into politics.

Personal examples aside, you have got to take it head-on. That is why I was lobbying Amina Mohammed and Sima Bahous, the head of UN



Women, to go to Afghanistan. Not that they were going to change the Taliban's ways, but suddenly, with the narrative they were pedalling to their domestic audience that women are not important, women cannot be influenced, women do not know positions of power, Amina turned up with Sima and, in Amina's case, yes, she was the second senior person in the multilateral system, yes, she was Muslim—an hijab-wearing Muslim—and, yes, she is a woman. I used to say to Amina, and still say to her, "Without saying a word or opening your mouth, you sent a message".

We need that practical working to tackle some of the more sensitive issues that should not be the UK presenting or leading on it. In conflict zones where countries have influences, where they are perhaps more familiar with the nature, culture and indeed religion, we can see how we best play best supporting actor to them as well. We have seen massive changes happening in places of the middle east and some really quite exemplary women coming forward. We need to ensure we collaborate on that particular agenda.

- Q41 **Chair:** Fiona, we have seen the new Government's language shifting, thinking particularly around the integrated security fund. It is much more of a focus on conflict and less on the peace and security side of things. On the ground, is that having an impact in where the funding is going? What sort of shifts would you like to see so that all women and girls are protected, not just when they are in conflict but in the build-up of hate crimes and in the aftermath of conflict?

Fiona Kilpatrick-Cooper: HALO receives FCDO's global mine action programme funding at the moment. Thankfully, we have not seen any cuts to that, although we are quite uncertain about the future of it. Changes to that will have absolutely devastating consequences for women and girls, particularly in fragile and conflict affected states. The GMAP programme is a good, shining example of how we can continue not only saving lives and restoring livelihoods, but giving opportunities to women in the communities to be leaders, to employ them and bring them into their own economy, participating in that themselves and empowering them that way.

On the build-up to conflict, the prevention of conflict, cutting it off at the head with prevention, like stemming the flow of illicit weapons and ammunition, will play an absolute key part in that. If I could cite MAG, Mines Advisory Group, in its recent evidence to this inquiry, the number of women killed in armed conflict doubled in 2023. UN data also shows a 50% rise in conflict-related sexual violence in the same year. We need to continue the GMAP programme, which helps us to clear land mines and explosive remnants of war in 10 countries around the world, but only until March 2026. We have seen a reduction in ISF funding, but that would be absolutely crucial to the prevention of armed violence in the future.

- Q42 **Chair:** Ten years ago, I got very cross that if a woman got shot in the leg in a conflict situation, there might be some action, whereas if she was



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raped by the same soldier, there would be no action whatsoever. We have moved forward from that. I think that people are recognising it and, sadly, Sudan has brought attention to it. I am fearful that the level of international outrage, prevention and action to hold perpetrators accountable is still woeful.

Thank you for the work that you have done and continue to do. You are both fighters when it comes to this. If you have any follow-up thoughts that you would like to feed into our inquiry, or indeed other people that we should reach out to for evidence, oral or written, we would be very grateful. This is our first session. You have given us a lot to think about and we really appreciate your participation. Thank you very much.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: Chair, if I can say on that final point—again, it is something that could be done—individual accountability for soldiers in the field and when we have conflicts. They all sign contracts and a reminder in there about their actual responsibilities specific to this agenda, about what is expected from them, is something that could be done within UN mandates. For a soldier going out on a mission, he or she will know that part of their mandate is to ensure that if they commit such heinous crimes, they will be held accountable. That reminder will act as an important point. Our country has a very good record on this, but we help to train other areas. That is why the Elsie Initiative for Canada remains very important. Thank you.

Chair: When you mentioned the example of a girl being raped by someone in uniform, and why it is better to have a woman out of uniform giving them support, I was also thinking that, sadly, some of those soldiers have blue helmets or berets on. That draws us back to a previous inquiry on sexual violence in aid organisations that this Committee did. You are absolutely right to raise it, and we need to do much more on so many levels. Thank you both very much. It is appreciated.