

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: Women, peace and security, HC 782

Tuesday 18 November 2025

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Members present: Sarah Champion (Chair); Janet Daby; Tracy Gilbert; Noah Law; Brian Mathew; David Mundell; Sam Rushworth.

Questions 43-72

Witnesses

I: Professor Toni Hastrup, Professor, University of Manchester; Eva Tabbasam, Director, Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS); and Reem Alsalem, Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women and Girls, United Nations.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Toni Haastrup, Eva Tabbasam, and Reem Alsalem.

Q43 **Chair:** Welcome to the International Development Committee's oral evidence session as part of our inquiry on women, peace and security. We are very lucky to have three witnesses in front of us today—two in the room and one virtually. Starting with those in the room, could you introduce yourselves and say a little bit about your organisations?

Eva Tabbasam: I am Eva Tabbasam, the director of Gender Action for Peace and Security. We are a UK civil society network working on WPS. We are a membership-based organisation of about 17 INGOs, as well as partners in-country—mainly women's rights organisations.

Professor Haastrup: I am Toni Haastrup, a professor in global politics at the University of Manchester, where I do research on gender-responsive foreign policies, as well as on the women, peace and security agenda, with a group of other colleagues.

Reem Alsalem: Good afternoon. I am Reem Alsalem, the UN special rapporteur on violence against women and girls. It is a global position that was created in 1994 to help states to prevent and respond to violence against all women and girls, wherever they may be. I am actually an independent expert, so I am not United Nations staff.

Q44 **Sam Rushworth:** It is a quarter of a century since the UN adopted Security Council resolution 1325. My question is what has changed since then with regard to the ability of women and girls to participate effectively in decision making. It is ok if they all answer that one, Chair? It is a pretty fundamental question.

Chair: Sure.

Eva Tabbasam: I wish I could give you a positive picture.

Chair: Give us a realistic one.

Eva Tabbasam: Unfortunately, the recent annual report on women, peace and security released by the Secretary-General for 2025—this anniversary year—has given a real sobering picture of the landscape for women's participation. It has actually declined. For example, since 2019, there has been only one woman present as part of a UN-led peace process delegation, and there are other statistics around that. Women's participation has declined, specifically in the high-level peace processes. There have been some gains in women's participation on a local level, which has probably progressed more. But these are also informal spaces, so they are not necessarily recognised as formal participation in peacebuilding or peace processes.

Q45 **Sam Rushworth:** In summary, you are saying that at grassroots level, there is a potential increase in participation, but not at high level. Is that



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uniform across the board, or would you say that we have done better in certain conflicts or settings than in others?

Eva Tabbasam: Yes. In certain contexts—Colombia is a big example—women’s rights organisations and women leaders have played a really important role at the local level and national level. But, for example, if you look at Afghanistan, Gaza or Sudan, women are not present in some of the key decision-making spaces or forums. Often, on the local and national level, women do not ask permission; they just organise, and they hold other spaces to participate and to get their issues heard. Then they think about working with other international actors to get those issues to the top table, but they are often not invited to the top table.

Professor Haastrup: To add to that, in the case of Sudan specifically, we saw women’s active participation in the transition towards democracy, but we have then seen an active retrenchment of that in the context of the current conflict, where women are not represented in peace processes. From speaking with and engaging with women’s rights activists and feminist activists, I know that they see this as a critical gap, because they are the ones at the coalface of the work. They are the ones organising peace committees in neighbourhoods, but the demands from those neighbourhoods are not being heard in the broader peace process.

The thing to emphasise is that we did see a situation where women were included and acknowledged as instrumental to this political transformation. Then it felt as if they were deliberately retrenched from that process, which means that now, in whatever sort of peace process we want in Sudan, it feels as though we are actively excluding women.

Reem Alsalem: I agree that over the last 25 years it has been a bit of a mixed bag. A positive consequence is that there is more recognition of the importance of including women in peace processes and mediation efforts. We have certainly seen a very concerted and tangible effort by the UN to include women in its mediation efforts, and we have seen good examples of including women—for example, in peace processes in Colombia, Liberia and the Philippines.

I also think that, at least on paper, most countries in their national action plans have recognised the importance of including women. At the same time, I agree with my fellow speakers that in more recent conflicts—especially in Sudan, but also in the DRC and, of course, Palestine/Israel—we have not seen that, and women are missing from the table.

There are two specific reasons that have also hampered effective women’s participation. One is that, as you know, women have increasingly faced online violence, including women in politics and women who are visible in society. They are threatened and undermine, and the verbal threats can result in physical violence. That has hampered women’s participation in such processes. It is similar for women human rights defenders. As you know, many of them are involved in transition processes and peacebuilding processes, and they are also coming under incredible attack.



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Sam Rushworth: That poses a very big question that we will probably get to later: why? I think if I were to ask that now, we could fill the whole session with that one question—I look to you, Chair, for guidance.

Chair: I am happy for it to be answered.

Q46 **Sam Rushworth:** We have said it is a mixed bag, but why are we doing so badly, given that 1325 has been there for a quarter of a century?

Reem Alsalem: How much time do you have? The main challenge I see today that affects women in general, but also women, peace and security, is the erosion of respect for international human rights and humanitarian law. Particularly in times of conflict, you know that international humanitarian law provides for specific protections for women in addition to the general protections they enjoy as civilians. All the red lines that we had have been crossed: women have been deliberately killed, maimed and tortured and sexual violence has been used on horrific scales as a tool of war and as a tool of genocide. That is the broader context.

Then there is weak implementation of the national and international commitments on the women, peace and security agenda. That manifests in the form of ignoring, for example, Security Council resolutions on this issue. The most noticeable example is Afghanistan and the Taliban, who have not, until now, reversed any single restriction on the horrific treatment of women and girls, despite multiple Security Council resolutions calling on them to do so. Another example is Sudan; the Secretary-General's personal envoy was encouraged to ensure women's participation in peace efforts, but the warring parties have also refused that.

In addition to the shrinking space for women in politics and for women human rights defenders, it is also a reality that there is not enough funding for these efforts, whether at national or international level. That is because austerity measures have hampered the financial resources that countries have put in place for the implementation of their own national action plans, and the overall austerity measures adopted by countries have led to the withdrawal of financial support more broadly from women's organisations and civil society groups.

I also point to the fact there are still very weak accountability mechanisms for crimes that are committed against women. In some of these crimes we are seeing the emergence of new forms of violence. For example, the concerted use of sexual and reproductive violence against women in times of conflict may have already been there, but we are now seeing it in a really aggravated form, and in remote areas accountability measures are of course even harder to come by. These are some of the reasons, in my view.

Q47 **Chair:** Let me ask another question, building on Sam's. The UK has always positioned itself as a leader on women, peace and security. I wonder if you think that it can still hold that mantle with confidence. Perhaps you could also comment on the fact that the US has now considerably stepped away from that stage. Eva, could I start with you?

Eva Tabbasam: I would say that the UK's leadership on women, peace and security is fragile, especially in the current situation, where we have seen cuts to ODA because—no doubt about it—that will affect implementation on women, peace and security, but also the resources going to do women, peace and security. The UK is the penholder on women, peace and security, and it has enjoyed a strong reputation on WPS—it has been the penholder on women, peace and security resolutions and the founder of initiatives like PSVI—but all that is going to be lost, and is being lost. We had the statement from the UK at the 25th anniversary, but unfortunately it was not backed up with any funding or resourcing. From our civil society perspective, that is just rhetoric; there is nothing to match it up.

We are also seeing, as you have rightly mentioned, a backlash against gender and the work on women's rights. That is happening in the multilateral spaces, and we need the UK to be leading the way there and being very strong and firm on language, and on supporting and resourcing this work, but we are not seeing that. Unfortunately, that gives weight to adversaries and other actors who try to downgrade women, peace and security and the work being done on gender equality—those regressive actors who claim that women, peace and security is merely a western agenda. It does not help us to do that work at all.

The UK needs to maintain principled leadership, even if the context is difficult—for example, in Afghanistan. It is not easy—we know that—but, if you work with women's rights organisations that are already doing the work, they are still able to get access and are still having an impact. That work and that support for WROs will be reduced and will be shrinking. It is not a priority for the Government, unfortunately, and that will create instability and more violence. In the spirit of national security, the UK really needs to consider WPS as part of that.

For us, we think the UK could do a lot more as a P5 member. It has considerable diplomatic clout, and it should be using it. The UK also really needs to recommit funds to the WPS agenda. How do we expect the women, peace and security agenda to move, especially when the US has rolled back on women, peace and security and has completely dismantled the Office of Global Women's Issues?

For context, when we spoke to civil society partners in Iraq, for example, I asked the question, "What's happening in the US, with the rollback on gender and the rhetoric on gender and women's rights—does that affect your work?". They said, "Yes, it does affect our work." It emboldens those actors who have always been trying to discredit them and makes it harder to do their work. They look to the UK as an ally to support them to continue that work in this ever-shrinking space.

Q48 Chair: Professor Haastrup, I wonder if I could ask you the same question, but from a slightly different angle. We know now that FCDO is looking at what its budget allocation will be, and that will lead to cuts. We know that it is looking at 25% staffing cuts, and we are hearing that all gender advisers might be cut. Eva spoke about the convening power and the



leading power. Does that require money, or could we still have that in a reduced budget?

Professor Haastруп: I think it requires money, because money pays for expertise. I would consider losing 25% of the expertise within the FCDO to be a very bad idea, not least because even beyond WPS, this is one area—around gender equality and inclusive international development practices—where the UK has historically done well. This is an area where colleagues around the world are familiar with the UK's work, and it has set some of the standards for best practice. In a sense, if we are looking at what money actually buys, in this context it is the expertise, so I think that would not be the right way to go.

I would echo all that Eva said. In the context of an increasing anti-gender backlash that requires campaigning and support to highlight why it is important to keep taking gender equality seriously for women and girls around the world and to keep linking the work that we do internally to the aspirations that we have externally, it is important that that is financed.

The other dimension is perhaps reputational where ODA cuts might have a negative impact, particularly among partners that are watching the UK. In a context where, again, we are facing a global crisis, how do you justify cuts that go to people's lives and livelihoods while funding support for those things that might actually harm them? If we are looking at cuts, including cuts to the FCDO, many folks around the world will be wondering, frankly, "Where are the cuts for the MOD?" For a lot of them, it is about where their next meal comes from, and some of the funding that goes to them comes from places like the UK.

Undoubtedly, the withdrawal—if you can say that—of the United States leaves a leadership vacuum that the UK is well placed to fill. It claims that it fills that and that as a penholder for WPS it is a leader. It would be very difficult to see an almost about-turn with the cutting of funding for gender equality issues and for the expertise that is needed to keep building on some of the gains that we have already seen.

Finally, the UK's leadership has also been a mode of its soft power in international politics broadly. Yes, it is doing that through the women, peace and security agenda, but it has also had an impact and the convening power that you mentioned earlier. To withdraw that—any sort of withdrawal—sends the wrong signal about how much the UK actually cares, even though it says that it does on paper.

Q49 **Chair:** Reem, you mentioned sexual and reproductive health and rights. There is a very clear link when we look at what is happening in Sudan, with executions in maternity units and pregnant women being targeted. When the US stepped away from the SRHR stage, did that have a direct impact on WPS work?

Reem Alsalem: I am sure it did. I do not have the exact figures, but every time a country like the UK or the US that has been at the forefront of supporting the women, peace and security agenda for decades steps away, it sets a very dangerous precedent. It basically gives the message

to other countries that you can step away from this and there are no consequences. After all, these are wealthy countries so if they cannot continue to prioritise that, what message are they giving to other countries?

As was also mentioned, we are then also contributing to the worsening of the situation in those countries—to the increase of refugee and migration flows, and to the destabilisation of countries and them being trapped in endless conflict and war. Those people will eventually also move to other countries and put pressure on the infrastructure, so it does not help anyone.

I would also like to come back to what was mentioned about walking the talk. The UK has a national action plan on WPS and it has to walk the talk. It is not enough just to fund mediation, peacebuilding and women's organisations; it also has to show, for example, that on defence expenditure and militarisation it will not fund or support actors that are aggressively engaged in ignoring the rights and lives of civilians and of women and girls. That is part of the WPS agenda and it is also important.

On ODA, I believe it was the Secretary-General who recommended that countries should allocate at least 1% of their national budgets to ODA. The UK has moved down from 0.7% to I think 0.5%, as I said in my report on my visit to the UK.

Q50 Noah Law: Professor Haastrup and Eva, you have both spoken about the resource challenges to a degree. How can the UK best continue to implement its commitments on WPS in the constrained 0.3% world?

Professor Haastrup: That is something we are all still trying to figure out: how do you do that in the constrained world? A starting point will be, and should be, the national action plan—the commitments that have already been made. The current national action plan has quite a bit of innovation within it. For me, some of that innovation comes from the attention to transnational threats: for example, looking at the impact of cyber-based violence, which transcends borders and the domestic/international divide, leveraging some of the expertise that there might be internally on how to deal with that and applying that externally as well, by sharing expertise both with those engaged in doing the work around WPS and with other Governments. That is one area.

At the moment, women, peace and security tends to be structured in the UK so that it is all happening here in London. There have been no attempts really to engage with lessons learned or with some of the work that Scotland, for example, has been doing. For me, to move that work forward it is important that we pay attention to the domestic dimension as well.

I also think there could be better synergies between those who co-own the women, peace and security agenda as it is articulated in the current national action plan: the FCDO, of course, but also the MOD and to some

extent the Home Office. Better synergies between them can also mean less duplication; one would hope that that would conserve resources.

Finally, one element that a lot of countries do not necessarily do well—moving forward after 25 years, I would hope this would be an area a country such as the UK could lead on—is accountability. We have a lot of promises via the national action plans, but we have not really had an in-depth, embedded institutionalisation of the women, peace and security agenda across not only all our practices of international development, but foreign policy in general.

It is important that, as part of the accountability mechanism, more work is done to ensure that WPS is integrated across areas. That way, again, resources may be shared and we may begin to reduce duplication. We may also learn new lessons to improve those areas where we might not be as strong.

A starting point, of course, is parliamentary scrutiny, but as I have previously suggested, we can follow the example of countries such as Canada, which appointed a special envoy on women, peace and security, who then made sure that we fully embedded women, peace and security. We can look at what can be done within some of those constraints you have mentioned, and at the same time make sure that the monitoring and evaluation is not superficial but one from which we can learn in order to reinvest in the aspirations that we have.

Eva Tabbasam: I completely agree. I want to pick up on resources and the question about potentially eliminating gender advisers. That is linked to the point about mainstreaming gender equality. There is a real concern that this attempt to move to gender mainstreaming and potentially not have principle standalone programming will dilute women, peace and security or effectively make it invisible. The worry is if mainstreaming is essentially going to be proposed as this substitute to women, peace and security standalone programming implementation. We have heard about the staff reductions and we are now concerned about what that means for the small amount of gender advisers that already exist. They provide the capacity across Government to think about how women, peace and security can be implemented in Government work and portfolios. Whether that is national security, for example strategic stability, counter-terrorism, those gender advisers are so crucial in enabling them to think about how we can have better effective responses by looking at gender and at the women, peace and security framework.

The integrated security fund, on which I have given evidence before to this Committee, used to have a fund level outcome on women, peace and security. Currently as it stands it no longer has that. That provided a lot of the work around resourcing and capacity building across Government on implementing WPS. We have heard, as you have, that these gender advisers within the ISF will no longer be retained. There is a possibility that they might be eliminated. That really begs the question of how we are going to mainstream if we do not have the institutionalisation to do that across Government.



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It feels bizarre to me that we are getting rid of the things we do best. For example, the ISF has a women, peace and security helpdesk. It has been brilliant to be able to work on that from a civil society perspective, because we have been able to provide support across Government on things that are not seen as traditional gender or women, peace and security. We have been able to integrate better responses, policy and programming and have been able to support that development. There is a real risk now with the cuts to ODA and the Government's new priorities that they will lose this. We are furiously making the case for making sure that this is protected as allocations are made this year, and that we do not lose that wealth of evidence, experience and expertise that is used across Government to position the UK as thought leaders in these areas.

Toni mentioned the transnational threats part. That is strategic objective five in the national action plan, and it very much links to the national security strategy of the UK Government. It would be a real missed opportunity if we did not think about how we can closely align women, peace and security with that national security strategy. In particular, VAWG is a massive priority for this Government—halving VAWG by 2030. We have seen that it should be a national priority, but the NSS did not mention gender, women, peace and security or VAWG. That is an oversight. We need to really make sure that WPS is not there on the side but really integrated. We will not be able to do that if we lose our expertise.

Q51 **Chair:** The problem with it being a bolt-on is that it is very easy to lop it off, and that is my concern with what is coming forward.

Reem Alsalem: A couple of things. As a matter of principle, I am for mainstreaming human rights responsive engagement. I am not against mainstreaming in principle. However, as was mentioned, it of course has to be done based on a proper evaluation of what has and has not worked. Here are three examples of where you can mainstream, or help mainstream, in a better way. One is to continue to support data-collection efforts. I would argue that being able to obtain better data has allowed us to keep better track of the achievements and failures of the WPS agenda. We know, for example, that gender data availability rose to 63% of the SDG indicators, from 26% in 2015, so gender-related data is more available globally, and that is a good thing. We have to continue to collect data and then analyse it across humanitarian, peacebuilding and crisis settings. Disaggregated data should also be disaggregated across sex to help us identify how the patterns of violations against women and girls are changing, analyse the trends and therefore adjust our interventions.

The second issue is what was mentioned about improving accountability. I think, in general, international, regional and national courts could do better in prosecuting and examining specific kinds of crimes that are committed against women and girls, and in adopting a more gender-sensitive lens. The Istanbul convention acknowledges that women flee because of gender persecution, but that issue is still very rarely used in courts as a basis for granting asylum. Once these women fleeing gender persecution arrive in a country, including the UK, I think Governments and

authorities could do better on how these women and their families are received and provided with appropriate services and care, accounting for the fact that they are survivors of violence.

Thirdly, on mainstreaming, you know that my mandate applies in a lot of countries affected by conflict and crisis. I am also part of a consortium of international and regional human rights mechanisms dealing with discrimination and violence against women. If the UK Government were also to support our mandates and our mechanisms in order to continue to engage, perhaps in a better way and in a more effective manner, and do more work on the situations that we are working on—documenting violations, highlighting the needs of women human rights defenders and women in society in those areas affected by crises—that would be of immense help to all of us.

Q52 Noah Law: A brief follow-up. On mainstreaming, Professor Haastrup suggested that proper oversight from an envoy-type role could work to address this, even if there is not necessarily the level of dedicated resource on the ground. Eva and Reem, would you agree with that?

Reem Alsalem: From what we have seen, an envoy position could be useful. As was mentioned, other countries have them. But an envoy without effective engagement capacity—so without any resources to be able to implement some of these recommendations and priorities—would not be useful.

Eva Tabbasam: I tend to agree with that. I think they need to have substantive support behind them to be able to do that work. Another thing about the fifth national action plan, which it might be helpful for you to note, is that, quite frankly, since the launch of the national action plan—I think in 2022—we have had a new Government and many reshuffles, and it has just been stalled.

It is going, and we are being told it is being implemented, but as to the way that the UK tracks implementation or spend on women, peace and security, we do not have a budget for the national action plan, despite our ask to have a budget so that we can track progress and spend. That would help us understand whether we are having an effective impact. But we do not have a budget, so we cannot really track what is really being implemented.

We were supposed to have a baseline; we do not have a baseline. We do not have a monitoring and evaluation plan. We are supposed to have a mid-term evaluation. There is nothing we can pinpoint or go back to that lets us say, “Okay, this is what we started off with, this is what we have been doing, and this has been achieved.” It is really hard to think about this national action plan having been implemented, because we cannot look to it.

The structure of the governance plan should require the Minister responsible for women, peace and security to be in certain meetings so that we make sure that we are integrating at the top. We need to make



sure that they are part of these meetings and speaking to the Ministry of Defence, which owns the national action plan, and that they are also speaking to key individuals within the delivery Departments who are committed to activities in the national action plan. We need that oversight structure to work better. Hopefully, with the revision of the national action plan that is supposedly under way, with a view to publishing early next year, we can really think about making sure that we are putting something in place so that it is actually being implemented with oversight, which this envoy role could do. We just really do not have that at the minute.

Noah Law: That is really concerning to hear.

Reem Alsalem: May I add something to that?

Chair: Briefly, please.

Reem Alsalem: I would argue that the UK also needs to look at its WPS agenda internally, together with its external engagement. You cannot really dissect them, and you cannot have engagement on each that goes against one another. That means that this envoy would also need to look at the implementation of the plan at a national level. For example, we go back to the treatment, services, support and reception of women fleeing countries in crisis. As I said in my report, there are many issues facing women migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, including the fact that they are exposed to further abuse and sexual exploitation, particularly in the homes where they reside pending their asylum claims. That is a very concrete problem inside the UK, and I would argue that it is tied to the WPS agenda. The question would be whether that falls under the scope of the envoy. Is this also something that they would be working on? Whatever national engagement there is internally, it needs to mirror the external commitments.

Q53 **Tracy Gilbert:** I think you have answered a lot of my next two questions, which were about how the UK national plan is working, and how the monitoring is working. What are the consequences of the women, peace and security national action plan not working?

Eva Tabbasam: The fifth national action plan was actually the most progressive to date. Reem mentioned domestication, and that is a really important part. Traditionally, the UK used to look outward. For the first time, the fifth national action plan, following a lot of advocacy, had a nod to domestication. For example, it noted Northern Ireland and gave reference to asylum and migration. For us, it is great that the UK is a leading country in the global north on this issue and looking at home, but there has been nothing since then.

What we now have is decision making that is not rights-based, and it is not meeting the commitments that we have signed up to, so it is weakening our position in an international landscape. We are also now seeing the inconsistent application of when issues related to women, peace and security matter. We have escalating crises globally, such as the response to Gaza. The UK, in its national action plan, commits to have



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gender advisers. We would have expected to have a gender adviser as part of the response so that, when we are looking at humanitarian aid, for example, we can make sure that those who are disproportionately affected—women and girls—are being responded to effectively in the response, but we did not have a gender adviser. When a crisis hits, or when conflicts happen, if we are not meeting what we said we were going to do in the national action plan, or do not have resources, we are not effectively responding.

Professor Haastrup: Thinking about consequences, for me, the domestication dimension is fundamental. That is partly because, as I mentioned earlier, the UK lives on its reputation of being a penholder and a leader in this area, and, in a sense, it feels quite hypocritical if it is not doing the same things internally. Domestication is underdeveloped, and, at this stage of the national action plan, it is very disappointing. For example, to what extent are the lessons from Northern Ireland being engaged with across the country and being used to inform what we do externally? To what extent is the UK implementing something like the Istanbul convention, which it has certain reservations to, and what is the impact on women and girls who are fleeing conflict-affected situations?

I am also thinking, for example, about the extent to which we apply a WPS lens to our militaries. Externally, it is one of the tools that we use as evidence to prosecute those who violate women in conflict-affected settings, but to what extent do we apply that internally, even in non-conflict-affected settings? I am thinking about the UK outfit in Kenya, where there have been allegations of sexual abuse. To what extent have we held anyone responsible, representing the UK using a WPS lens? The world is looking at us, so when we think about the consequences, that loss of trust is a major consequence, and certainly a loss of accountability.

To go back to what I said earlier, I completely agree with the idea that if you are going to have an envoy, they have to have the infrastructure behind them, whether that is financial or other means of resourcing. One of the things that impacts the extent to which we have good monitoring and accountability is the scattered nature—how can we collect anything when we don't know what the different parts are doing? An envoy, a Minister or someone with whatever title might be able to pull things together as a starting point, but they will not be able to do an effective job without having that support.

From my perspective, it has real consequences and I would echo what my colleagues have said, but beyond that, there are consequences for the UK's own international role.

Reem Alsalem: I very much agree with using any tools that the UK has available in terms of national jurisdiction or operationalising any universal jurisdiction with regard to grave crimes. Some of these things are not necessarily expensive and will not overburden the Government, particularly when it comes to being consistent in calling out violations and crimes committed against women and girls.



I agree very much with the previous speaker that inconsistencies in approaches have really undermined the UK's legitimacy and credibility on this issue. With regard to, for example, sexual violence committed against Israeli women on 7 October versus reports of sexual crimes committed against Palestinian men and women since 7 October, I have not heard the UK Government condemn the Israeli Government for the latter, which gives the message that the lives of all women and girls do not matter equally, and that is a very serious credibility issue.

Q54 Brian Mathew: The latest national action plan emphasises its flexibility in responding to crises in other countries. How effective has that been in practice, and could we perhaps have some examples?

Eva Tabbasam: It is probably similar to what we have just mentioned. For example, with Sudan and Gaza, the response team had asked for a gender adviser to be present as part of the response, and we never got an answer. At least with the Gaza team, there was not a gender adviser to support the integration of women, peace and security in that particular NAP. With the humanitarian response, we were making sure that it was gendered to meet the needs of women and girls.

Reem mentioned the sexual violence aspect. We had partners in town who were here for an advocacy trip. We had them sit in front of the PSVI team and the MENA regional director, to explain and to give witness about what was happening in terms of sexual violence against Palestinian women, not only in Gaza but of course across the west bank as well. It was not met with the response that we expected. You will be familiar as well with the report that came out from the UN detailing the crimes and what was happening.

For us, the UK is the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative leader—they put this together—

Q55 Chair: What was the response you expected and what was the response that you got?

Eva Tabbasam: For at least funding to go towards women's rights organisations to support in terms of the delivery service—or at least nodding to that and putting out a statement to follow up. I forget the correct title, but there is the international board of alliance for the PSVI, so there are like-minded states who work on eradicating or stamping out conflict-related sexual violence—commissioning that. Essentially, acknowledging that this is happening. That didn't happen.

These are examples where we have in the last two to three years tried to engage and to ask those who work on women, peace and security within Government, "What have you been doing to respond to these crises, from the view of the NAP? What has been done?" Nothing really was reported. Once we got a statement from the UK pledging a certain amount of money to humanitarian aid. One, that is a drop in the ocean, but also, what else? There is more that we could be doing, on the aspect of participation for example, or listening to women's rights organisations. There are those who might not be in Gaza, for example, but they are in the west bank and



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are giving support to those who are in Gaza. Sitting with them and finding out what is actually happening—that is the bare minimum. That is not asking for much. We were not even getting that.

A lot of the time it is us suggesting and telling them, “This is what you need to be doing. You need to be listening to this CSO. We need to be hearing this perspective. They are the ones who are doing the delivery”—when really what we wanted is for them to get into gear and kick-start it and start being able to respond.

That is where we say the work with women’s rights organisations is really important, because when you are in a context that you might not be able to get to, you have a trust and a partnership with them, so they can tell you what is happening. So if you need a gender analysis of the situation on the ground, you would be able to get that and you would be able to form one. We were providing that GESI analysis to teams to let them know, “This is what is happening; this needs to be on your radar. You need to be able to respond effectively.”

Q56 Chair: Reem, the UK seems to love collecting pens. We are the UN penholder for Sudan, we are the UN penholder for the protection of civilians, and we are the UN penholder for women, peace and security. From your perspective, what does having that title commit you to do? What is the point of being a penholder?

Reem Alsalem: It is a very important role. It carries with it huge responsibility. Of course, with the UK having the global political clout and leverage that it has, when it weighs in on a situation, it can really facilitate reaching consensus, reaching agreements, removing deadlocks, so I think it is a good thing that the UK is a penholder for a number of these issues.

The issue is of course to make sure that you have the most impact as a penholder. Beyond negotiating and passing resolutions, it is how then to follow through to make sure they are implemented on the ground.

It also means working on all pieces of the puzzle. I want to talk about Sudan, for example. Just last week, a resolution was passed at the Human Rights Council, which the UK Government very positively helped to broker, committing to investigating the horrible crimes that happened in el-Fasher. At the same time, nothing is going to move on that, and these crimes are not going to end, if we do not give the same attention to protecting the humanitarian space, to allowing humanitarian access and to putting pressure on the parties to stop committing violence against civilians, to stop raping women, to stop shooting and attacking health staff and to stop starving the population. No woman is going to engage in women, peace and security if she is starving, if she is at risk of being killed or if her family is being decimated. It is about looking at the bigger picture and working on all these issues simultaneously.

Q57 Chair: So as the penholder, you are the leading light and the convening power, and you are also making sure that others actually get the job done. All of that seems to require leadership and expertise, but not necessarily



money. Would that be correct?

Reem Alsalem: It also requires money. I would say it requires more money not to convene the parties and get them to agree, and not to put pressure on them. That does not necessarily require money, but money is required to fund humanitarian responses, to ensure safe spaces and perhaps to facilitate conversations and conflict resolution opportunities. A humanitarian response requires money, and that is one of the first things that is being slashed everywhere across the board.

Q58 **David Mundell:** Twelve per cent of ODA programmes have gender equality as a principal focus, which still falls short of the FCDO's aim of 80%. How effectively has gender equality mainstreaming been implemented?

Reem Alsalem: By the UK or in general?

David Mundell: By the UK.

Reem Alsalem: I want to mention some of the good examples of UK engagement on women, peace and security that I am aware of. For example, I know that through its support for Women Mediators across the Commonwealth, the UK has been active through that programme in Niger and Sierra Leone in engaging local civil society and more formal political structures. The conflict, stability and security fund in Yemen has invited bids for projects that support women's political participation and inclusion. That shows that the UK's foreign policy funds can be channelled, at least in part, into increasing women's role in national-level political peace processes.

Of course, the integrated security fund is a positive example. It supported the Philippines peace process, where we saw it was a very concrete component in advancing the inclusion and political participation of women. The programme supported hundreds of women leaders, activists and associations. The UK is also a major contributor to the UN peacebuilding fund, which also looks at gender-responsive conflict prevention. One example where we have seen the impact of the UK's funding is in Mali, where women's participation in land dispute resolution has increased.

There are several examples where we see, very concretely, gender mainstreaming and the positive impact of support for these initiatives.

Eva Tabbasam: Gender mainstreaming has been done really well in the ISF, mainly because it has GESI—gender equality and social inclusion—markers. There are six categories, and they correlate to the OECD's DAC markers, but they are a bit more substantive. For example, there is a GESI category E project that is stand-alone gender, outcome gender or women, peace and security. That is not across Government, unfortunately.

Given that gender mainstreaming is suggested as something that will happen, we really need to think about how we are going to track that. The worry is that when it comes to the OECD and GEM, if we do not have principal gender funding programmes that, at the end of the day, will



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support gender mainstreaming, we will not be able to respond to the threats that are part of the anti-gender backlash or threats to women's sexual reproductive health rights, for example.

The other worry is that the ISF is now completely changing what it is responding to and doing. It does not necessarily publish the spend on gender programming in itself—the detail. It gives you the total amount of money for, say, the gender and peace and security portfolio, but we do not know how much money is actually spent on gender mainstreaming across the portfolio, across the ISF. Without that data, it will be really hard to say how well gender mainstreaming will have gone across Government in two years' time, for example, especially if the indicators are not fit for purpose.

We cannot really track women, peace and security because there is no specific indicator for WPS. What we will have to do—we will try to share it with you after—is look at the national action plan and all the overarching thematic areas, such as participation, GBV and humanitarian, and then try to go to the OECD DAC database and see what spend has been done across the three GEMs in terms of a little bit of contribution and proper, stand-alone gender programming. Unfortunately, there is no indicator specifically tracking WPS.

Q59 **Chair:** Would this cut across many different areas if done correctly?

Eva Tabbasam: This is part of the whole budget dedicated for women, peace and security. Trying to integrate that across Government and tagging and categorising that spend would be an amazing way to track spend across Government and see implementation. But you first have to commit to the budget.

Q60 **Chair:** But if the argument were being made about mainstreaming, you would want the tagging to go alongside that.

Eva Tabbasam: Absolutely.

Q61 **David Mundell:** We have heard that involving local actors in the early stages of programme design makes programmes' implementation more effective. What institutional changes are needed to ensure that the FCDO does that when designing its programmes?

Professor Haastrop: At the moment, those who have access to the people who help co-design are mostly from civil society, but there are also, in my experience, academic researchers. My impression is that we are not used enough. We are a resource for different Government Departments, not just the FCDO.

In my university, for example, in my department alone five people work specifically on women, peace and security. That is one department; I can name several other departments where they do that. Civil society academic researchers are working directly with the folks who are underground. We can support with the data needed and the information on lived experience that helps to nuance some of the numbers to which the FCDO might not have access.



We can also serve a bit of the function of intermediary. We can all agree that trying to engage with a governmental actor might not feel smooth when in your own context that actor might be seen as threatening, particularly when it comes to women's rights organisations. From my perspective the issue is about making use of the expertise available, whether through reports coming from the UN or through gathering data for CEDAW reporting, for example—really making use of civil society and of the academic research already going on. Folks are really happy to share that data, but there has to be willingness to engage.

Q62 David Mundell: Why do you think that is not happening? Interestingly, we heard in a previous inquiry that, for example, rather than approach Kew Gardens about work it was doing, Government Departments were inclined to get a consultant or some other intermediary involved, who was then paid to ask those very questions, and the third party then supplied the answer. That ended up with the worst situation: they paid some consultant, and the people who were doing the work did not actually get any benefit.

Professor Hastrup: From my perspective, and I can only speak from the academic perspective here, it is really about priorities. For example, if we look at the areas of research interest that the Government and its Departments say are necessary, we do not really see anything specific on gender, and that means that WPS will fall further down. It is about what the actual priorities are. We are being told that things that advance national security are really important; why isn't gender there? I think we have all made different claims today that point to this one dimension: if you are really serious about security—for the United Kingdom, but also global security—you cannot ignore the gender dimensions, because a significant amount of insecurities that are faced globally are faced by women, girls and other gender minorities.

There is also an issue of institutionalisation. For there to be a change, there has to be a critical push to say, "Universities are one of the UK's biggest resources; why not actually make use of them? Why not prioritise gender equality as a fundamental area of research that the Government and parliamentarians want information on?" That should allow that to happen.

Reem Alsalem: As was said, one of the main challenges that we have all had is making sure that all kinds of women's organisations and women's human rights representatives and defenders are able to participate, and that those who may not align with Government policies are not excluded from these processes. Again, the issue is about using one's clout—political leverage as a country, which is something the UK has—to make sure that voices that may be marginalised are actually not marginalised and can participate.

I know you know that the UK substantially funds the UN trust fund to end violence against women. I would argue for, or recommend, the UK continuing to fund that trust fund, and in fact increasing support for it, because one of the great things that the fund has been able to achieve has



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been to grant financial support to civil society organisations that may be smaller or less known but do important work in remote and difficult areas by providing access to essential and multisectoral services for survivors, and work on strengthening the legal and policy framework. That is a concrete recommendation.

The other thing that I have noticed, and that I think we have to keep an eye on, is about reparations for women and girls who are victims of violence. I have noticed that, in a number of countries that are, let's say, emerging from conflict, or have a history of very gruesome conflicts, there is an attempt not so much to rewrite history but to erase or undermine the women-specific aspects of those stories. For example, we have to continue to watch the involvement of women in how Nepal remembers the conflict. That also applies to Japan and Korea regarding comfort women. It is important that societies record, register and recall the gruesome crimes that have been committed against women and girls.

- Q63 **Chair:** Professor Haastrup, you have a team of five; I would hazard a guess that that is probably about the same size as the FCDO's team across the road from where we are sitting. What engagement have you had with that team since you have been in position? What work have they included you in? What response have you had to your research?

Professor Haastrup: We definitely engaged with them in the formulation of the fifth national action plan, in the form of consultations. That tends to be the primary mode of engagement.

- Q64 **Chair:** Is that engagement or them putting a call out and you putting a paper in?

Professor Haastrup: No. This is specifically getting in touch with us by email, based on prior publication. We have had that, but it is quite sporadic. Speaking again from the university's perspective, a relatively well-resourced university might have a unit that deliberately reaches out to Government Departments and Parliament to say, "Look, our researchers are doing this sort of work. It might be something that you are interested in." However, it has to be two-way; you cannot simply rely on the same feedback loop, otherwise you never innovate.

From my perspective, I think that perhaps because I have published enough, they did reach out to me and some of my colleagues, but not necessarily beyond those consultations at key moments, whereas we continue the ongoing work.

- Q65 **Chair:** What more could you offer?

Professor Haastrup: At any given point, perhaps one of the distinctions with colleagues in civil society is that we have longitudinal research. We are conducting research not just in response to a particular crisis. It would be useful to have constant engagement. I have a project right now on Sudan, which is actually funded by a Swedish agency for peace and security attached to its Foreign Office. It will feed into the ways in which they are thinking about Sudan.



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However, we do not have a similar structure here in terms of asking: what is the actual value of knowledge exchange with civil society, think-tanks or universities? Something like that—even if it is not a formal structure, such as the Swedish example that I used—would be really useful.

Q66 **Tracy Gilbert:** You mentioned the nations within the UK. What is your experience of working with the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Senedd?

Professor Haastrup: I used to be in Scotland, and in my experience, there is perhaps better engagement and input.

Q67 **Tracy Gilbert:** How does that work in practice?

Professor Haastrup: It is also usually about reaching out, but there is more consistency.

Q68 **Chair:** Is it you reaching out to them, or them reaching out to you?

Professor Haastrup: It is them reaching out to us, and us reaching out to them because we have then made that rapport. For example, one of the differences is that Scotland recently created a multi-institutional framework that is looking specifically at peace and security issues, and it has done one recently around peace. It might be spearheaded by a specific university, but there is an insistence that all universities in Scotland are involved.

There is access to a tiny bit of funding to upscale research that might already be going on. Again, that sort of engagement ensures that there is more consistency and more of a dialogue between Government Departments and those who are making knowledge, wherever they might exist.

Q69 **Janet Daby:** Thank you for everything you have said so far. It has been very informative and concerning. We have heard that when the two Government Departments merged—the FCO and DFID—it resulted in a loss of technical expertise. You have already mentioned the gender advisers. I want to understand how that has impacted the UK's ability to deliver on the WPS commitment.

Eva Tabbasam: It is known to you that at the time of the merger, as of late last year, around 60% of Government development adviser positions were still vacant, for example. This year, we have had a mixed picture. There was recruitment, and now there is a freeze and restructuring. That has had an impact on women, peace and security. In particular, we had a strong champion for women, peace and security in DFID. Now, with the merger, it is diluted a little bit.

It is important that we think about some of the expertise and skills of the gender advisers and cadres. Where we had gender support, that did not necessarily transfer over as part of the merger.

On top of that, it has also given us a blurred line in responsibilities, including where things sit and who is responsible. Previously, for example, when DFID was very much engaged in women, peace and security, the



MOD took a little bit of a back seat—that has switched a little bit now. That is not to say that we should not have MOD engagement, but really we need more development work as well. It has been a bit of a mixed bag. On the DFID side, we were able to use a more bottom-up approach, and we could think about peacebuilding and conflict to look at root causes. I would say that we are not really looking at that any more. In fact, we are losing a lot of that, which is a real shame, because that was where we were quite strong.

Q70 Chair: It is about how you get prevention, rather than dealing with the consequences.

Eva Tabbasam: Absolutely. It is also a real worry now, with the restructure, that prevention is just nowhere. With the ISF, that is just completely gone. It puts us in a bit of a limbo with women, peace and security. Where does it sit? Who identifies it as their agenda? That is why I think having someone who can spearhead that and make the case for it across Government is really important.

Q71 Janet Daby: Can I press you on the proposed reductions to FCDO staff? What sort of impacts do you think that will then have on the ability to implement the women, peace and security agenda effectively?

Professor Haastrup: From our perspective, where would those cuts come from? We do not want to see cuts at all, but there is always a question about where those cuts will come from. If history tells us anything, across most other contexts, the cuts always go to things that are often related to inclusion and gender equality, so it is very concerning that there will be cuts in the first place. I think the reduction in staffing is also a reduction in knowledge and expertise—I have mentioned that before, but it is worth underscoring.

In the context of the merger, it could have been a good thing: a lot of countries have just one agency that deals with both development and foreign policy, so in that sense I do not think that the UK was necessarily going off-piste. In practice, however, it meant that, where DFID was not necessarily valued as much as the FCO in the merger, there was not only a loss of expertise but a loss of those folks who had those relationships on the ground—that is where you see the reverberations back. It also meant a loss of institutional memory when it came to women, peace and security, because now you do not have enough people to integrate it.

Again, it is not the first time that we have seen something like this—the merger of two separate things. Having worked with the European Union on the creation of the External Action Service, we had the same thing with folks coming in from the Commission and folks coming from the Council. A similar thing has happened here. What we then had was a relegation of concerns and aspirations for women, peace and security within that.

I want to emphasise that, if we have a further reduction, we might as well forget about conflict prevention. It is already the one pillar of the women, peace and security agenda that does not get as much attention. In a sense, it is perhaps the most important one; it is the one that brings



everything together and says, "Before we get to that bit of conflict, what are the things that we could do?" Reduction means a loss of not only expertise but institutional memory, and I think we can all agree that it is also not very useful for the morale of those people who are then left to do this work.

Q72 **Janet Daby:** Reem, did you want to come in?

Reem Alsalem: I actually need to leave in five minutes, so may I make some final remarks before I go?

Chair: Yes, please.

Reem Alsalem: In addition to what has been said, and thinking about the way forward, there are a number of countries that are like-minded to the UK and have similar contexts and backgrounds, and that have been heavily involved in WPS. You may already be contemplating this, but why not also exchange information with them to see how their engagement has been and what has worked well and less well in their context—for example, with Switzerland and Denmark. Switzerland has also had gender focal points. Why not speak to others who have gone down that route before rushing into cutting or making changes?

Coming back to things that can be done which are not necessarily costly, I suggest focusing on ensuring that there is a zero-tolerance policy for sexual exploitation and abuse, and that it applies across the board for representatives of the UK Government, institutions inside and outside the country and their partners. That also means those involved in peacekeeping, defence and so on.

On defence, as noted in my report, I still find it incredibly concerning that the UK does not pay sufficient attention to its own Export Control Act 2002. That Act underpins the strategic export licence criteria and requires the Government to deny licences if there is a clear risk of arms being used for internal repression and serious violations of international humanitarian law or gender-based violence. That is explicitly mentioned in the Export Control Act. It is concerning when the UK does not even pay attention to its own regulations and has been found by several human rights mechanisms to still be exporting arms to countries and actors which commit serious violations against human rights and humanitarian law—including against women and girls.

I will close by saying that another line of action is to look more at the responsibilities of peacekeeping operations, their conduct and how they may be involved in sexual exploitation and abuse. That is very relevant to the WPS agenda. There is not sufficient discussion and leadership in that area, although so many countries contribute to peacekeeping and peace troops around the world. Yet that issue persists, and with profound consequences not just for the women and girls who are violated but the children who may be born as a result of rape or sexual exploitation. There are a lot of policy areas there that I do not see any particular country taking the lead on. Perhaps that could be something for the UK to step in



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on. Finally, we should consider more targeted sanctions against individuals or groups found responsible for sexual exploitation, violence or abuse.

Chair: That is an extremely helpful summary. The Committee will follow up on all those recommendations. Thank you very much.

Ladies, it has been a pleasure having you here. You have been great advocates and have given us an awful lot to go on. Thank you so much for your time. As ever, if you think of anything else we need to know, please do get back in touch. The Committee will have the Minister in front of it in a few weeks, so we will be putting some of the bigger questions you have posed to them and will see what their response is.