TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF MEN, BOYS AND MASCULINITIES IN THE WPS AGENDA

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I. Introduction

The women, peace and security (WPS) agenda, which marked the 25th anniversary of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 in October 2025, is at an urgent crossroads. Global military spending is increasing and many governments across the world are reducing material support for non-military conflict management and peacebuilding while ramping up defence capabilities. At the same time, international law and normative frameworks such as the WPS agenda are being sidelined by state interests.[1]

The now decade-long international backlash against women's and LGBTQ+ rights, as well as gender equality more broadly, appears to be reaching new heights as right-wing authoritarian movements spread. This anti-gender movement, typically taken up by right-wing or extremist religious groups or governments, positions WPS as a 'radical' agenda. At least partly due to this hostility, WPS advocates have cautioned against any action at the strategic level that could open up the agenda for further debate and potential regression, such as introducing new resolutions in the Security Council. Instead, they argue that improving and scaling-up the agenda's implementation must be the focus, in particular through localization or reclamation of its grassroots and feminist origins, to counter the hyper-securitization that has taken place in recent years.[2]

Amid these discussions, the topic of where men, boys and masculinities fit (or do not fit) into the WPS agenda is still underexplored, despite longstanding calls to decouple 'gender' from 'women' in policy and practice, and to use a holistic gender lens or masculinities perspective to understand and counter the geopolitical trends noted above. Men, boys and masculinities should be considered in all four WPS pillars, especially conflict prevention and addressing root causes of conflict.

This SIPRI Research Policy Paper takes stock of the sub-field of men, boys and masculinities within the WPS agenda, and provides recommendations for policymakers at the national and international level, as well as WPS prac-

SUMMARY

● The conflation of 'gender' with 'women' is a persistent problem in peace and security, including in the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda's policy and implementation ecosystem. Decision makers still resist a definition of gender that includes men and boys, as well as LGBTQ+ people. Despite this, the gendered experiences of these groups and how those experiences are formed are critical to understanding social cohesion, insecurity and armed conflict and its effects more widely.

This SIPRI Research Policy Paper explores how men and boys can be considered in the WPS agenda's implementation beyond simply 'adding men and stirring'. While there is a some history of men and masculinities being included in discussions on the agenda, long-term, meaningful overlap between work on men and masculinities and the WPS agenda remains rare. In a moment of increased geopolitical tensions and fast-advancing wars, it is essential that civil society, researchers and states alike include men and masculinities across the four pillars of the WPS agenda.

[1] Baldwin, G., 'Pursuing peace on a shoestring: Conflict management in an increasingly complex world', SIPRI Research Policy Paper, Oct. 2025.

[2] Saleh, O. and Elias, J., 'Returning to the radical roots: The WPS agenda as an anti-colonial and liberation framework', *PAX*, [n. d.]; Rhinehart, B., 'Meeting the moment: Women, peace and security in 2025', *Kvinna Till Kvinna*, 2025; Conciliation Resources, 'Peacebuilders from across Africa emphasise the importance of engaging men in the women, peace and security agenda and agree recommendations for UN Security Council', Oct. 2025; and Baldwin, G. and Bertea, M., 'Where next for the women, peace and security agenda?', SIPRI WritePeace blog, 1 Oct. 2024.

titioners. It integrates the findings from three closed-door, expert meetings in Amman, Jordan; Nairobi, Kenya; and New York, United States, with an extensive literature review.[3] It also draws on five expert interviews intended to contextualize the discussions and debates of 2025 with the longer history of global programmatic and policy work on masculinities within peace and security.

This paper argues that including men and masculinities in the work of the WPS agenda is essential for its full implementation, even amid hostile geopolitical trends. It begins by historicizing men, boys and masculinities as a sub-topic within and outside of the WPS agenda (section II). It then lays out the context of and results from the agenda's 25th anniversary, including overviews of the three events mentioned above (section III). Finally it proposes where a masculinities lens can and should be applied in WPS work (section IV) and concludes with recommendations for civil society, researchers and states (section V).

II. Men, boys and masculinities in the WPS agenda

The conflation of 'gender' with 'women', 'women and girls' or 'women and children' is a persistent problem in peace and security, including in the WPS agenda's policies and implementation.[4] Women and girls are assumed by default to always be having gendered experiences, while men and boys are far less frequently understood as gendered subjects. And while the wider inclusion in peace and security of women and girls and their unique needs and experiences has been an enormous win over the past 25 years, policymakers still resist an inclusive definition of gender. For example, even gender mainstreamed policy documents and implementation guides only rarely discuss the specific needs or vulnerabilities of men, boys and/or LGBTQ+ people. The result is that policies often just 'add men and stir'—a play on the adage long used by feminists to describe the process of superficially adding women to existing institutions, programmes or processes.[5] This is done by taking an individualized rather than a systemic approach and typically does not meaningfully explore how unequal systems of power that subjugate women and LGBTQ+ people can also create vulnerable situations for some men, for example, even as they valorize and empower other men.

Similarly, the gendered experiences of men and boys, and how these are shaped by social structures, are critical to understanding social cohesion and how men and boys perpetuate or experience insecurity and violence. This is especially important at the local level, in evaluations of holistic community needs and dynamics related to gendered drivers of conflict and insecurity,

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[3] The Amman round table was co-organized by SIPRI, ABAAD-Resource Center for Gender Equality, PAX and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), and co-hosted by the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa on 9 Oct. 2025. The Nairobi round table was organized by Conciliation Resources on 22–23 Oct. 2025. The New York round table was co-organized by SIPRI, PAX and Conciliation Resources, and co-hosted by the Permanent Mission of Sweden to the United Nations on 30 Oct. 2025.

[4] Watson, C., 'Begging the question what would a men, peace and security agenda look like?', *Connections*, vol. 14, no. 3 (2015), p. 48; and Wright, H., 'Masculinities, conflict and peacebuilding: Perspectives on men through a gender lens', Saferworld, Oct. 2014.

[5] Schulz, P. and Lewis, C., 'Pieces of the same puzzle: Men, masculinities, and the women, peace, and security agenda', *Politics & Gender*, vol. 21, no. 3 (Sep. 2025), pp. 711–17; and Nairobi round table participants (note 3).

as well as at the systemic level, where certain men's and boys' gendered experiences can form the basis for excluding other groups (including women and other men) and often form the foundation of unequal or unresponsive systems of governance.[6] Understanding the privileges that come with certain gender identities—and how they intersect with other identity factors such as age, race, class and nationality—is critical to understanding the vulner-abilities created by others. Men and boys are 'not just perpetrators of violence or champions/allies of gender equality but have their own deeply personal experiences of conflict'.[7]

A brief history of 'men and boys' in and outside of the WPS agenda

In 2025, as in previous years, men, boys and masculinities were not strongly represented in publications or events related to the WPS agenda, particularly at the United Nations. Throughout the anniversary year, familiar critiques continued to be highlighted, including that the agenda has become securi-tized, hyper-focused first on conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) and then on women's participation in security institutions, and disengaged from its roots as a radical, grassroots agenda focused on conflict prevention.[8] From the beginning, there was a lack of consensus at the core of the agenda, as some early advocates called it an agenda for women's participation in political pro-cesses while others perceived it as an effort to end and prevent wars above all else. There has arguably been even less consensus on the appropriate role, if any, for men, boys and/or masculinities in the agenda.[9]

Men and boys were introduced into WPS language in 2013 in UN Security Council Resolution 2106, which identified them as allies in the prevention of violence against women. Shortly thereafter, the 2015 Global Study on Resolution 1325 implementation characterized the initial movement for 1325 adoption as a demand that 'prevention of war be a key aspect of the Security Council's agenda . . . [The] objective was, at its core, the prevention of armed conflict'.[10] Despite this objective and the clear role that men and boys must play in conflict prevention, however, they (and masculinities) have been char-acterized as 'a present absence'.[11] Their existence and role in peace and secur-ity is implicit but—frustratingly for scholars and practitioners alike—rarely named in the agenda beyond as partners in enabling women's participation or in the prevention of CRSV, or as victims of CRSV themselves.[12] In the broader WPS policy ecosystem, references to 'men and boys' are often included only as an add-on—occasionally alongside references to LGBTQ+ identities—with

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[6] Myrttinen, H. et al., 'Masculinities in conflict and peacebuilding: An introduction', eds. H. Myrttinen et al., *Routledge Handbook of Masculinities, Conflict, and Peacebuilding* (Routledge: New York, 2025).

[7] Conciliation Resources (note 2).

[8] Amman and Nairobi round table participants (note 3).

[9] Wright, H., '"Masculinities perspectives": Advancing a radical women, peace and security agenda?', *International Feminist Journal of Politics,* vol. 22, no. 5 (2020), pp. 652–74.

[10] Coomaraswamy, R., *Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace: A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325* (UN Women: New York, 2015), p. 194.

[11] Wright (note 9), p. 654.

[12] Brown, M. E. and de Jonge Oudraat, C., 'Mainstreaming masculinities in the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda', eds. H. Myrttinen et al., *Routledge Handbook of Masculinities, Conflict, and Peacebuilding* (Routledge: New York, 2025); and Watson (note 4), pp. 45–60.

little substance and few actionable recommendations to accompany them. With few exceptions, policies designed to substantiate WPS implementation have 'only just begun to reckon with the plurality of gender'.[13]

Provocative proposals for a men, peace and security agenda or a gender, peace and security (GPS) agenda have arisen at different times in the past 25 years, but have remained thought exercises or failed to gain momentum.[14] When GPS is used now, it is frequently still using gender as synonymous with women and does not meaningfully differ from WPS in practice. Some WPS advocates have been and remain wary of calls to include men, boys and masculinities in the agenda because of resource scarcity, expressing concerns that the finite pool of political will, funding and other political or material support for WPS implementation will be diverted rather than expanded.[15]

Whatever the reasons, and there are many, the mainstream WPS agenda has by and large seen only superficial inclusion of men, boys and masculinities. Masculinities work has largely been a separate field with its origins in men's pro-feminism movements, taking on issues of violence against women and work on HIV/AIDS in the 1990s.[16] Mention of men as a social category reached the UN only in 1995, highlighting men's responsibility to fully participate in gender equality and care responsibilities.[17] The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action contained progressive language along these lines but five years later, Resolution 1325 failed to institutionalize it further.

More recently, a focus on 'positive masculinities' has surfaced in policy discussions, reaching the African Union (AU), the European Union and UN peace operations such as the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO).[18] Positive masculinities refers to 'norms of manhood that are pro-social, advance peace and equality and reject the use of aggression, domination and violence'.[19] This is part of a long tradition of typologizing masculinity, most commonly as toxic, militarized, positive or violent. Some argue that this impulse to categorize over-pathologizes marginalized categories of men such as racial minorities or less powerful economic classes, or reinforces gender essentialism and binaries.[20] The AU's rhetoric on positive masculinity, for example, focuses on violence rather than political power or security and defence, and on the individual and

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[13] Kirby, P. and Shepherd, L., *Governing the Feminist Peace: The Vitality and Failure of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda* (Columbia University Press: New York, 2024), p. 76; see also Hagen, J., 'Queering women, peace and security', *International Affairs*, vol. 92, no. 2 (Mar. 2016), pp. 313–32.

[14] See e.g. Watson (note 4), pp. 45–60; and Myrttinen, H., 'Locating masculinities in WPS', eds S. E. Davies and J. True, *Oxford Handbook of Women, Peace and Security* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2019) pp. 88–97.

[15] Brown and de Jonge Oudraat (note 12); Riccoboni, G., *Mapping the Role of Men and Masculinities in WPS Regional and National Policies in Africa* (Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Aug. 2024); Duriesmith, D., 'Engaging men and boys in the women, peace and security agenda: Beyond the "good men" industry', London School of Economics Centre for Women, Peace and Security, Working Paper Series 11/2017, 15 Dec. 2017; and Myrttinen (note 14), pp. 88–97.

[16] Masculinities expert no. 1, virtual interview with the author, Jan. 2026; and Masculinities expert no. 2, virtual interview with the author, Jan. 2026.

[17] Watson (note 4), pp. 46–47.

[18] Sharland, L. et al., *Women, Peace and Security in MONUSCO: Trends, Lessons and Emerging Practices* (Norwegian Institute of International Affairs: Oslo, 2024); Tornius, K., 'African Union, gender violence and the positive masculinity approach', eds A. M. Fejerskov et al., *Norms and Violence Against Women in Ethiopia* (Edward Elgar Publishing: Cheltenham, 2026); and New York round table participants (note 3).

[19] Riccoboni (note 15); and Masculinities expert no. 2, virtual interview with the author, Jan. 2026.

[20] Masculinities expert no. 1, virtual interview with the author, Jan. 2026; and Riccoboni (note 15).

non-state actors rather than systemic, institutional or state forces.[21] At times, the conversation on positive masculinity has also become 'a men's conversation without the women', which is not the goal of incorporating masculinities into the WPS agenda.[22] Finally, typologies and co-optation tend to 'individualize the challenges facing men, and, at the same time, essentialize these challenges as somehow intrinsic to sexed-as-male bodily and reproductive characteristics'.[23]

III. The WPS agenda at 25 years

Amid geopolitical shifts now referred to ad nauseum as 'unprecedented', the 25th anniversary of Resolution 1325 was arguably less aspirational than the previous major anniversary in 2020. Instead of an opportunity for fresh commitments and a focus on opportunities, the anniversary year was largely marked by renewed conflicts around the world, continued degradation of international norms related to WPS such as international law or the protection of civilians, global backlash against women's rights and gender equality, shrinking civic space and record-breaking military spending. Just a few years ago, some progress was being made on linking masculinities practitioners with WPS work. Recent developments, however, particularly funding cuts, have stymied these inroads. These trends do not make for a promising future for the WPS agenda, and some even warn that without strong member state support in the Security Council it risks being lost entirely.[24]

The anniversary in the Security Council

New York has long been the policy centre of the WPS agenda, since it hosts the UN headquarters. However, feminist civil society has long argued that New York is not the ideological centre of the agenda; nor should it be.[25] Compounding this concern for WPS stakeholders was the fact that Russia held the presidency of the Security Council in October 2025. Advocates—particularly the more vulnerable subsets of global civil society—were concerned about a combination of the hostile-to-WPS state presiding over the anniversary in the Security Council and the general antagonism of the USA, as the host country to UN headquarters, towards global work on gender, as well as its tightening of immigration restrictions. Calls to host 'alternative WPS weeks' in Global Majority countries began early in the year, with some success.

A hostile geopolitical landscape

Increasing militarization, shrinking civic space and far-right political movements are three major concerns for WPS actors. The links between authoritarianism, and opposition to gender equality and 'non-traditional' gender

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[21] New York round table participant (note 3).

[22] New York round table participant (note 3).

[23] Mackay, F., 'Positive humanity, when? Is masculinity worth saving?', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 12 May 2025, pp. 1–19.

[24] NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security, 'Open letter to Permanent Representatives to the United Nations in advance of the annual Open Debate on women, peace and security', 29 Sep. 2025.

[25] Saleh and Elias (note 2); Conciliation Resources (note 2); and Rhinehart (note 2).

norms are well understood—and these links are playing out globally.[26] Authoritarian governments use gender in various ways as a tool to undermine democratic norms and institutions.[27]

Militarization is often linked within these movements to a 're-masculinization' narrative, which typically equates masculinity with a strong, militarized state, warrior men and heteronormativity. At the same time, traditionally feminine qualities are cast in this narrative as weak and undesirable, which in turn prompts backlash against women's and LGBTQ+ rights, including in places where these values had been at least briefly or nominally institutionalized, even if not culturally enshrined.[28] A component of this global backlash that tends to be under recognized is that it did not happen organically, but is rather the result of decades of organizing and planning by institutions with huge resources and very clear goals, including through the 'phantasm' of so-called gender ideology.[29]

Massive reductions in funding for women-led organizations, women's rights organizations and programming, programming targeting men, boys or masculinities, and non-military conflict management and peacebuilding, as well as a global loss of civic space and access for civil society organizations (CSOs), can make it difficult to imagine a viable future for the WPS agenda.[30]

Given all of these factors, experts have noted that the anti-militarism aspect of the WPS agenda is incredibly fragile. The logic that 'conflict is normal, conflict will never end' drives militarism and militarization globally, offering a justification for endless armament and recruitment cycles.[31] The evolution of the WPS agenda has also been critiqued for accepting this logic as a given, mainly discussed as 'making war safe for women' rather than demilitarizing, ending and preventing wars.[32] For the foreseeable future, appetites to prioritize prevention in the WPS agenda and other gender policy efforts such as Feminist Foreign Policies are likely to atrophy 'if everyone thinks they have to prepare themselves for World War III'.[33]

Localization and reclamation

Many advocates argue that the dire nature of current geopolitics makes a grassroots reclamation of the WPS agenda all the more important.[34] At the heart of the original agenda was women's civil society focused on challenging patriarchal power structures and advancing a truly transformative agenda on inclusive, sustainable peace. In recent years, however, multilateral and

[26] Brechenmacher, S., 'The new global struggle over gender, rights, and family values', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 2025.

[27] Bjarnegård, E. and Zetterberg, P., 'How authoritarians exploit gender', *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 37, no. 1 (Jan. 2026), pp. 160–71.

[28] Amman and New York round table participants (note 3).

[29] Butler, J., *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (Farrar, Strauss & Giroux: New York, 2024).

[30] UN Women, *At a Breaking Point: The Impact of Foreign Aid Cuts on Women's Organizations in Humanitarian Crises Worldwide* (UN Women: Geneva, Apr. 2025); Baldwin (note 1); and Nairobi, Amman and New York round table participants (note 3).

[31] New York round table participant (note 3).

[32] Weiss, C., 'We must not make war safe for women', *Open Democracy*, 24 May 2011; and Shepherd, L. J., 'Making war safe for women? National Action Plans and the militarization of the women, peace and security agenda', *International Political Science Review*, vol. 37, no. 3 (2016), pp. 324–35.

[33] Academic expert, virtual interview with the author, Jan. 2026.

[34] Saleh and Elias (note 2); and Rhinehart (note 2).

national efforts on WPS implementation have focused, both rhetorically and materially, on women's participation in security institutions or on heavily securitized issues such as terrorism or sexual violence.[35] This securitized version of the WPS agenda fails to challenge the very dynamics it was created to transform and perpetuates acceptance of certain kinds of masculinity—militarized, warrior or protector—as the status quo for which all members of security institutions should strive. It also makes prioritizing prevention harder. In an attempt to redirect and re-centre focus back to the original core of the WPS agenda, alternative WPS weeks, which convened grassroots civil society in Global Majority contexts, took place in Amman and Nairobi in October 2025.

Regional snapshot: Amman

SIPRI, ABAAD, PAX and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) co-organized a day-long expert round table and high-level panel discussion hosted by the Swedish Dialogue Institute for Middle East and North Africa in Amman on 9 October 2025. Participants from CSOs and academia from five Middle East contexts and several international organizations discussed 'WPS in the Middle East and North Africa: Men, militarization and masculinities'.

Women's civil society in the region generally want men to engage around women's participation in political and peace processes, although the extent to which they feel this needs to happen or is already happening varies along generational lines. The importance of family and having supportive male relatives was especially emphasized. Gender equality was described as needing to be rooted in cooperation around common interests and common ground, rather than competition between men and women. At the same time, participants stated that women must continue to lead the WPS agenda, even as more men come on board in support roles.

Occupation, resistance and genocide were major themes of current WPS discussions in the region, given Israel's ongoing actions in Palestine, as well as Lebanon and Syria. This is where conversations around militarization and militarized masculinities become especially thorny. Men throughout the Middle East—most clearly currently in Palestine—are being targeted by state violence on the basis of their gender, religion and race. They are often denied civilian status and their victimhood under siege or occupation is either downplayed or erased entirely. There is also a hypocrisy in discussions of militarization in the region, as calls for disarmament tend to be one-sided. The perception of hypocrisy, which reaches far beyond the Middle East, is unlikely to change as long as powerful nations in other parts of the world are arming governments that are carrying out invasions, genocide and other atrocities in this region.

Harmful masculine norms are instilled in boys at a very young age, including through religion and the concept of martyrdom. In some contexts, conflict, violence and military action are glorified. Engaging youth and providing alternative means of resistance and non-violent action—not telling them not to fight, but rather 'teaching them to fight in a different way'—is at the core of conflict prevention, social cohesion and transformative gender dynamics.

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[35] Kirby and Shepherd (note 13), p. 154.

Finally, it has become difficult—in some cases impossible—to use the word 'gender', including the phrase 'gender equality', in peace and security work. Women and men alike are still doing work on these issues, but contextualization is key. Rooting efforts in community realities and preferences has enabled practitioners and CSOs to continue to work towards WPS agenda implementation without caving in to the regressive and restrictive terminology being introduced at the state policy level.

Regional snapshot: Nairobi

Conciliation Resources (CR) hosted a two-day event in Nairobi on 'Recentring the roots of women, peace and security and engaging men' on 22–23 October 2025. The programme was developed in discussion with PAX and SIPRI to achieve complementarity with similar events in Amman and New York. WPS practitioners from eight African contexts participated.[36]

At the community level, expectations placed on men and boys can drive violent behaviour, including joining armed groups or perpetrating domestic violence. For example, in the Central African Republic, young men are taught through initiation rituals to protect their clans from outside interference and to demonstrate bravery at all times. Failure to protect their communities leads to a loss of identity and belonging, and such stigma exacerbates an already profound lack of psychosocial support in these communities. This perpetuates cycles of violence, revenge killings, domestic violence, and recruitment and exploitation by armed groups. More broadly, harmful gender norms are instilled at a young age in girls as well as boys through school and family structures. Religious and cultural leaders play significant roles in forming masculinities and femininities in all the contexts represented in the Nairobi meeting, in both positive and negative ways.

WPS practitioners in much of Africa are tired and burned out. Participants in the workshop described feeling traumatized and fatigued from 'fighting the fight alone' for so long. There was a strong sense that the WPS community and advocates need to move outside of their bubble to explore new solutions to persistent challenges by engaging with men as co-implementers of the WPS agenda. Men should take shared responsibility, recognizing that WPS is an agenda that benefits everyone not only women and girls. Participants also noted how new security challenges, such as climate change, misinformation and disinformation, and advances in technology, heighten militarized masculinities and gender inequality, and contribute, for example, to technology facilitated gender-based violence.

Strategic snapshot: New York

SIPRI, PAX and CR co-organized an expert round table hosted by the Permanent Mission of Sweden to the UN in New York on 30 October 2025. Twenty-four participants from academia, civil society, the UN and UN member states discussed 'WPS at 25: How can men and masculinities help to advance the agenda?'. The organizers' twin goals were to share outcomes from the Amman and Nairobi meetings and to discuss strategic, policy-level perspectives on men, boys and masculinities within the WPS agenda.

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[36] Participants came from Central African Republic, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia and Sudan.

Engaging with men and boys and incorporating a masculinities perspective are loosely accepted as useful but are little understood in practice. Despite positive developments in the past five years, chasms still exist between WPS practitioners and masculinities practitioners. One development noted in the New York round table was the incorporation of work on positive masculinities within MONUSCO, see above. In addition, a 2021 Arria Formula meeting on violent extremism and masculinities, at which UN member states shared progressive statements on structural gender inequality was 'the most progressive I've ever heard', according to one round table participant.[37]

At the policy and strategy levels, all peace and security work involves engaging men, even if it is not discussed in that way. Men are present at all times as gatekeepers, antagonists and allies, so everyone in this field is technically engaging with them (a point that was made in Amman and Nairobi as well). At the same time, much of the argumentation around women's participation still advances a false idea that women will innately act differently to their male counterparts. However, deeply held norms and structural factors mean that this is not always the case. This is true not only in traditional security institutions, but also in fields such as mediation.

Finally, engaging men, boys and masculinities cuts across all pillars. Just as with the more traditional approaches to the WPS agenda, it is not helpful to isolate or silo areas of work. These need to be seen as inherently and unassailably interconnected.

IV. Applying a masculinities lens to the WPS agenda

Building on the above and recognizing that decision makers and practitioners are often unsure about how men, boys and masculinities fit into the WPS agenda, this section offers some guidance on how a masculinities lens could be incorporated into the skeleton of the WPS agenda, its four pillars and the broader narratives around and within WPS.

Participation

The men as partners component of the existing WPS agenda plays out most strongly in the participation pillar. Men in positions of power at every level, including family structures, can support the participation of women and marginalized groups (including certain other men and LGBTQ+ people) in social and political spaces as allies and door-openers. This pillar can also be useful in more explicitly identifying the structures and institutional norms that keep certain men in power and most other groups out. Several round table participants in Amman and New York noted that peace and security is already about 'engaging men', insofar as men make up the majority in these institutions and have much of the decision-making power. At the grassroots level, community engagement work in peace operations or peace processes, for example, has engaged primarily (or sometimes only) with men, which

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[37] United Nations Security Council, Counter-Terrorism Committee, 'Security Council holds Arria-formula meeting on "Preventing terrorism and violent extremism through tackling gender stereotypes, masculinities, and structural gender inequality"', *United Nations News*, 28 July 2021.

produces a certain gendered outcome regardless of whether that was the intention.[38]

Gender can therefore be used as a lens to critically assess men's and women's participation according not just to the numbers but also to *which* men and *which* women are participating and why. Critically examining which men are included and the conditions for inclusion gets to the heart of how global peace and security is undertaken. In many cases, for example, militaristic tendencies are rewarded, while cooperative or peace-forward work is less well represented in decision making.

Calls to include language referencing men or masculinities could also be added to the participation pillar, as conceptual expansion of policy and implementation documents typically enables broadened ranges of engagement. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the existence of masculinities work of any kind in MONUSCO's mandate implementation should help to normalize it and open doors for more in the future.

Protection

The protection pillar can be applied to three key aspects of men's and boys' inclusion. First, more widespread and explicit discussion of men as power brokers and perpetrators of violence is a necessary component of real protection work, as it enables WPS practitioners to highlight the systemic enabling factors that perpetuate violence and armed conflict.

Second, men and boys are regularly denied status as civilians and rights bearers in armed conflict, which in turn denies them protection. Women and children—sometimes stylized as 'womenandchildren' to further highlight the issue with this framing—or women and girls is often the only group explicitly quantified in civilian casualty reporting.[39] This exacerbates widely accepted gender stereotypes that almost automatically sort men and boys into the violent combatant category, meaning that they may not be counted as civilian casualties but are instead assumed to be combatants. Men and boys are not only denied a particular dignity but also misrepresented in conflict dynamics in state-versus-non-state conflicts.[40] For example, civilian men and boys are likely to be direct targets of state violence without any proof of combatant status. Boys are then often doubly denied their status as children.[41]

Finally, as discussed above, men and boys are currently acknowledged as potential victims of sexual violence in the WPS agenda's text and some resulting policies and practices.[42] This could go further, beyond sexual violence, to improve understanding of certain men's and boys' vulnerabilities and right to life and dignity, and to offer counter-narratives. An ongoing example of this is how gendered and racial stereotypes are deployed to profile black and brown

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[38] See e.g. Baldwin, G., 'From female engagement teams to engagement platoons: The evolution of gendered community engagement in UN peace operations', *International Peace Institute*, 4 Nov. 2021; and Duriesmith (note 15).

[39] Enloe, C., *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1990).

[40] See e.g. Kreft, A. and Agerberg, M., 'Imperfect victims? Civilian men, vulnerability, and policy preferences,' *American Political Science Review*, vol. 118, no. 1 (2024), pp. 274–90.

[41] Ní Aoláin, F., 'Gendering the boy child in the context of counterterrorism: The situation of boys in Northeast Syria', *Just Security*, 8 June 2021.

[42] Watson (note 4), pp. 45–60.

men in the USA. They are cast as 'terrorists' or 'gang members' without proof, which positions them as innately violent threats to society and leaves them vulnerable, among other abuses, to indefinite detention or deportation to foreign prisons.[43] Men and boys are also targeted by extreme gendered messaging and pressure to join state and non-state armed groups.[44] Among the other vulnerabilities and notions that clash with basic human rights but receive minimal attention in protection work are conscription, suicide linked to participation in or experiences of armed conflict, torture and extrajudicial detention or killing.

Prevention

Peace is at the heart of the WPS agenda, yet 'the prevention of war is barely visible in the policy field'.[45] While the prevention pillar is frequently—and not incorrectly—invoked as prevention of violence against women and girls, this is its 'constrained form', piecemeal and not focused on the full range of root causes of conflict. This is arguably the most straightforward entry point for a masculinities lens in the agenda.[46] Addressing root causes of conflict and structural drivers of violence goes far beyond changing the behaviour of individual men or boys, although early intervention, education and deradicalization programmes can fall into this category. Experts note, however, that systemic change—the type which often aligns with the WPS agenda's roots in transformative change—is the key. Engaging on issues such as demilitarization and disarmament are core to this.[47]

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence has recently become a major area for action highlighted by WPS experts, and one that would clearly be better understood through a masculinities lens. Practitioners frequently invoke the 'manosphere'—a broad swath of the internet that promotes misogyny, certain types of masculinities and opposition to feminism and gender equality.[48] This is widely understood to be a tool for young men's radicalization and has been directly linked to acts of violence, including mass shootings.[49] It also normalizes everyday violence against women, girls, LGBTQ+ communities and racial minorities, as well as other men and boys.[50] Addressing the threat presented by the manosphere, including by providing alternative means of connection and counter-narratives for men who are susceptible to its messaging, is essential to the prevention of violence called for in the WPS agenda.

[43] Reichlin-Melnic, A., 'These men were deported to El Salvador with no due process: Their stories show why an investigation is necessary', *American Immigration Council*, 3 Apr. 2025; Center for Constitutional Rights, 'Guantánamo by the Numbers', Updated Apr. 2023; and Ní Aoláin (note 41).

[44] Dier, A. and Baldwin, G., *Masculinities and Violent Extremism* (International Peace Institute: New York, June 2022).

[45] Kirby and Shepherd (note 13), p. 46.

[46] Amman, Nairobi and New York round table participants (note 3).

[47] Masculinities expert no. 1, virtual interview with the author, Jan. 2026; and Amman and New York round table participants (note 3).

[48] Equimundo, 'What is the manosphere? Exploring male-dominated online spaces promoting misogyny', 16 Aug 2024.

[49] Dier and Baldwin (note 44).

[50] Perliger, A., Stevens, C. and Leidig, C., 'Mapping the ideological landscape of extreme misogyny', *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) Research Paper* (Jan. 2023); and Baekgaard, K., *Technology-facilitated Gender-based Violence: An Emerging Issue in Women, Peace and Security* (Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, 2024).

Relief and recovery

Although the least mentioned pillar in the ecosystem of WPS policy, relief and recovery also has potential for the application of a masculinities lens and better inclusion of men and boys.[51] Men (and to some extent boys) are typically part of standard disarmament programmes in post-conflict reconstruction. Without a holistic, gendered perspective on recovery processes, however, disarmament may not stick or may not reach everyone it needs to.

Reconciliation processes are also critical for shifting gender norms over time. The expectations often coupled with men's privileges often require them to slip back into pre-conflict roles, boosted for many by their status as combatants. Grievances often simmer long after fighting ceases and can be highly gendered, particularly for men whose ability to meet societal expectations might have been disrupted by the post-conflict reality. Gender responsive recovery processes can meet more particular needs in communities by addressing stigma against people who do not align with norms, such as women former combatants, gender minorities, or civilian men and boys who chose not to fight.[52]

Narratives

Although uncomfortable and understandably difficult to discuss, WPS language, policies and practices often reinforce gender essentialism.[53] This can happen in the way statistics are framed or through decisions on what kind of data to highlight. For example, the claim that conflict 'disproportionately affects women' is ubiquitous but rarely explained in detail. There are also aspects of conflict that impact men and boys more than women and girls, as well as some that impact LGBTQ+ communities more than other groups. The use of a term like 'disproportionate' exacerbates the imagined competition between women and other groups, including men.

Statistics can also be used to inadvertently exclude. Civilian casualty counts or CRSV statistics are common examples of this. Even policymaking or reporting intended to highlight gendered targeting of civilians or gendered protection needs rarely provides numbers on the men who have died—even when the number of civilian men killed is significantly higher than that of other gender groups. While the number of men can be extrapolated by subtraction from the total, not explicitly disaggregating and naming them as civilians perpetuates the erasure of men's and boys' civilian status discussed above. Sexual violence receives similar treatment. In cases where data is collected on CRSV experienced by men and boys, the numbers are often very high, but mainstream reporting rarely acknowledges this.[54]

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[51] Kirby and Shepherd (note 13), p. 72.

[52] See e.g. Naujoks. J. and Myrttinen, H., *Re-assessing Gender Norms After Conflict: Gender in Peacebuilding in Nepal* (International Alert: London, Nov. 2014).

[53] See e.g. PRIF blog, '25 years of women, peace and security: Between promises, backlash and feminist reimagining', 15 July 2025; Kirby, P. and Shepherd, L., 'Futures past of the women, peace and security agenda', *International Affairs*, vol. 92, no. 2 (Mar. 2016), p. 375; and Aroussi, S. (ed.), *Rethinking National Action Plans on Women, Peace and Security*, Proceedings of the NATO Advanced Research Workshop on National Action Plans on Women, Peace and Security, Dublin, 11–12 May 2016 (IOS Press: Amsterdam, 2017).

[54] See e.g. Watson (note 4), pp. 45–60.

In addition, when narratives on gender from the WPS community position men and women as binary, opposing categories, there is—intentionally or not—an exclusionary impact on LGBTQ+ communities.[55] These groups are usually left out of WPS narratives as a blind spot, although some gender equality advocacy deliberately aligns with trans-exclusionary feminists invested in an anti-LGBTQ+ agenda.

Grievances are a big part of narratives on and around gender. Extremist movements and authoritarian governments with regressive attitudes to gender often cite progress on gender equality—together with immigration and LGBTQ+ rights—as anti-man. This can encourage hateful rhetoric, extremist political choices and discriminatory or violent behaviour. WPS and masculinities work should be cautious about encouraging narratives about these grievances that cast marginalized groups fighting for basic human rights as the enemy. At the same time, such grievances drive behaviour and therefore cannot be ignored.[56] Without legitimizing extremist or discriminatory behaviour, this nuanced reality should be part of the discussion on political messaging and community outreach.

Finally, state violence against certain groups of men plays out in distinctly masculine ways but the impetus to change nearly always falls to the non-state.[57] State institutions tend to turn outward rather than inward, which is seen as deeply hypocritical by grassroots WPS practitioners.[58] These behaviours are also embedded in international institutions, and often result in non-military, human security approaches to peace and security, which tend to be coded as more feminine, being devalued or sidelined. Among other things, the masculine norms embedded in state security institutions and policies drive militarization and can feed into and mutually reinforce extremist non-state masculinities.[59] Shifting narratives to counteract the chasm between state and non-state behaviour would be one critical step towards changing such behaviours.

V. Conclusions and recommendations

After a brief flurry of opportunities to include masculinities in WPS work, experts note that 'we find ourselves at a really different place than we were even a year and a half ago'.[60] Following many years of work, there was an opportunity to concretize the linkages between WPS and masculinities practitioners, both in policy and programming, building on the successes of the WPS agenda at the international and national levels. Now, however, both sides of the coin find themselves in a state of retrenchment. Work on women's rights, gender equality, masculinity, and engaging men and boys is

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[55] Hagen, J., 'Queering women, peace and security', *International Affairs*, vol 92, no. 2 (Mar. 2016), pp. 313–32.

[56] Peacock, D., 'Understanding and addressing gender polarization and backlash against women's rights: A call for nuanced and research-based narrative frames to increase men's advocacy for gender equality' (forthcoming 2026).

[57] Dier and Baldwin (note 44).

[58] Amman and New York round table participants (note 3).

[59] See e.g., Rothermel, A., 'Gender in the United Nations' agenda on preventing and countering violent extremism', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, vol. 22, no. 5 (2020).

[60] Academic expert, virtual interview with the author, Jan. 2026. This sentiment was also shared in the Amman and New York City round tables in Oct. 2025.

disappearing from view. One interviewee noted that within the UN system, some departments are even 'running down the clock', quietly shelving projects or publications on these topics until project funding is exhausted, and then not renewing.[61]

It is no longer clear what the WPS agenda will look like even five years from now, in large part because it is no longer clear what the UN will look like five years from now. Even though the WPS agenda is seen by some as an international, overly institutionalized and 'NGO-ized' resource, it remains an essential means through which gender is discussed, introduced and considered within peace and security architectures the world over. Particularly given the ongoing and worsening backlash against gender equality efforts, the WPS agenda arguably remains the most logical tool through which discussions about men and boys as gendered actors, as well as more complex dynamics related to masculinity can take place, at least formally. The push to include men and boys in the WPS agenda must integrate systemic approaches to ensure that activities contribute to transformative approaches that advance gender equality, human security and sustainable peace.

While the lack of consensus on key priorities, stakeholders and implementation methods can be frustrating for WPS practitioners and policymakers, the agenda's wide range of possible applications makes it a powerful tool for human security even in such a hostile geopolitical landscape. For this reason, this paper concludes with recommendations for civil society, researchers and states.

Break down silos, broaden alliances and move outside the WPS bubble

Practitioners and researchers working on WPS and those working on masculinities must improve their collaboration, as these two interconnected workstreams are essential to sustainable peace. Similarly, civil society and states alike should break the silos where WPS is relevant, linking it to issues such as education, democracy, climate justice, digital literacy and health, among others, while also making the practical link between other international norms and frameworks, such as the youth, peace and security agenda.

Invest in counter-narratives

Militarized, securitized and misogynistic narratives around gender norms are incredibly powerful. Countering them is highly sensitive work and can take a long time. Counter-narrative work can be integrated into household practices all the way up to multilateral policies and need not be constrained by certain types of masculinity. Over time, this can shift expectations of both men and women while also re-coding certain roles, such as provider or protector, as demilitarized and positive characterizations. Gendered narratives should not advance gender essentialism or stereotyping; nor should they place men, women or LGBTQ+ people in competition with each other. Rather, they should reflect a holistic reality on the ground, emphasizing the dignity of all and supporting solutions that address every person's needs.

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[61] Academic expert, virtual interview with the author, Jan. 2026.

Shift focus from individual men and boys to systems and institutions

While work at the individual level will always be important, returning to the transformative goals of the WPS agenda's origins is the way to sustainable peace. At the state and international levels, legislation and regulation are needed to address root causes of and catalysts that exacerbate violent conflict, notably highly racialized and gendered socio-economic systems, the global arms trade, technology-facilitated GBV and online radicalization. WPS stakeholders can drive progress in this area by linking the gendered aspects of these issues to their advocacy. Peace processes and subsequent post-conflict reconstruction can also be a good entry point for building in solutions that address systemic issues that might have gone unacknowledged previously.

Re-centre the WPS agenda on grassroots work in Global Majority countries, including through material support

Donor states must decouple notions of security from hyper-militarization and think further into the future towards holistic, sustainable peace both domestically and externally. This should include filling existing funding gaps that are creating an existential threat to essential grassroots work on conflict prevention and peacebuilding, including through a gender lens. It is essential that material and rhetorical support is redirected to keep this work alive.

Root all WPS work in the ultimate goal of conflict prevention

WPS stakeholders must reassess priorities within the agenda's implementation. Band-aid solutions to a worsening global peace and security landscape, such as increasing the number of women in existing institutions, cannot be the only, or even the primary, focus of WPS work. Instead, serious consideration needs to be given to how all WPS work is aiming for transformation and a holistic, gendered approach to achieve lasting peace for all.

SIPRI RESEARCH POLICY PAPER

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF MEN, BOYS AND MASCULINITIES IN THE WPS AGENDA

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CONTENTS

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