

**ASSESSING  
UK  
GOVERNMENT  
ACTION ON  
WOMEN,  
PEACE AND  
SECURITY IN  
2023**

## About GAPS

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Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS) is the UK's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) civil society network. We are a membership organisation of NGOs and experts in the fields of development, human rights, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding. We were founded to promote and hold the UK Government to account on its international commitments to women and girls in conflict areas worldwide. GAPS welcomes its collaborative relationship with the UK Government as it develops, reviews and implements its WPS commitments. The dedication of the UK Government's cross-Whitehall working group, which GAPS and its members participate in, is clear and remains an important mechanism for the implementation of the fourth UK National Action Plan (NAP) on WPS and the newly published fifth NAP on WPS moving forward. This report builds on previous GAPS documents (including previous annual shadow reports) which include analysis of, and recommendations for, the UK Government's work on WPS Introduction.

## Introduction

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In late 2022 and early 2023, GAPS supported the UK Government in finalising their fifth iteration of the UK's National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) by facilitating consultations, providing technical recommendations, holding thematic workshops, reviewing drafts of the NAP and providing feedback. The NAP came into force in February 2023.

GAPS welcomed the consultative nature of the NAP development, as well as the strong representation and participation from civil society at the NAP launch, which we were pleased to join in February 2023 at the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). Furthermore, we were pleased to see an explicit recognition of the importance of civil society as a "[vital policy and programme partner](#)" within the NAP itself. However, we are disappointed with changes made to reporting on the progress of implementation of the NAP, which now takes place biennially instead of annually. These reports have provided an important route for civil society to hold the UK Government to account on its WPS commitments and their implementation through Parliament, especially through the presence of the Ministers responsible. Through GAPS's annual Shadow Reports, we have played our role as a critical friend to improve delivery and offer recommendations for the progress of the NAP. Given the changes to reporting, GAPS will still be providing an assessment every year, but it will be adapted: this year's assessment will be taking stock of progress in its first year.

This assessment focuses on the increasingly challenging environment for women's rights in four conflict contexts, two of which are UK NAP focus countries. Living up to our commitments to meaningful consultation practices, this assessment includes four case studies co-created by women's rights organisations (WROs) and women human rights activists on the WPS focus countries of Afghanistan and Ukraine, and the non-focus countries of Sudan and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Considering the commitment in the NAP that the UK will work responsively when appropriate, in conflict-affected countries beyond the list of focus countries, all of these case studies are relevant to the UK's foreign, development and defence policies. Read together, they demonstrate how women's rights are being restricted and rolled back globally, and how WROs continue to provide their solutions and recommendations for a pathway to inclusive peace.

By reflecting this learning in the next year of implementation, the UK can demonstrate an agile and adaptable NAP. We hope that, as we highlight the impact of heightened conflict and insecurity in these contexts throughout 2023, the UK Government will demonstrate a significant shift in its implementation of WPS commitments during the second year of implementation of the NAP.

## UK NAP Implementation 2023

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Throughout 2023, the implementing environment for WPS has deteriorated; as the [White Paper for International Development](#) acknowledged, conflict is increasing in many parts of the world and humanitarian needs are at their highest since 1945. In Afghanistan women's lives are increasingly policed; in Ukraine women continue to be excluded from decision-making and access to gender-based violence (GBV) services; in Sudan WROs at the forefront of the humanitarian crisis continue to be at high risk of targeted violence; and in the occupied Palestinian Territories, an estimated 70% of all Palestinians killed in Gaza are women and children. Transnational challenges are having increasingly extreme consequences, with climate change having been a significant factor in the floods that killed thousands in Derna in Libya; and the anti-gender movement having significant successes in the rollback of reproductive and LGBTQI+ rights in the United States, Ghana and Uganda. As *Assessing UK Government Action on Women, Peace and Security in 2023* shows, the UK's commitments to WPS are failing to meet this challenge and have continued to miss and reduce opportunities for enabling women's rights in fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS).

We were pleased to see recognition in the new NAP of the need to embed the WPS agenda into the UK's domestic systems, policies, military cooperation and diplomacy. GAPS members recognise an attempt at an integrated approach to conflict response and resolution across Whitehall on WPS related issues throughout 2023, including WPS approaches integrated into the International Women and Girls strategy, and the International Development White Paper's commitment to "promote inclusive and sustainable resolution to conflicts, champion women peacebuilders, and work with partners and the UN to improve international stabilisation efforts", alongside its mentions of partnerships with WROs. However, GAPS was disappointed not to see any direct mention of WPS or the WPS agenda in the White Paper, as an existing framework that the UK has signed up to.

The Integrated Review refresh also failed to mention WPS; a missed opportunity to reaffirm the UK Government's commitments to gender equality and WPS integral parts of security and development policy. This is also reflected in the confirmed transition of the Conflict Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) into the Integrated Security Fund (ISF). The CSSF has been a funder of WPS programmes over the last few years, [funding meaningful partnerships with WROs](#) leading peace and security in FCAS, and enabling learning exchanges and movement-building opportunities. The merging of conflict prevention and WPS funding windows in the new ISF structure, reducing WPS and prevention from two of four thematic priorities to one of six (with no clarity on the distribution of funding across priorities), reflects a disconnect between the UK Government's enthusiastic rhetoric around WPS and the de-prioritisation of funding and substantive action behind the policy commitments. The Government's response to the [Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy's](#) (JCNSS) report on the ISF failed to mention any of the UK's commitments to gender equality and the rights of women and girls. This has weakened the earlier progress towards policy coherence and raised questions about the UK Government's level of commitment to WPS, gender equality and women's rights. Which leaves us asking: for whose security is the new ISF?

We are pleased to engage with the Ministry of Defence as part of the cross-Whitehall working group with responsibilities for the delivery of the NAP, and strongly encourage the focus to be on building UK peacekeeping capacity and equal participation of women in this. [We remain concerned](#), however, that the challenging implementing environment globally and the deprioritisation (both financially and politically) within the UK Government has been a barrier to the full implementation of this first year of the fifth NAP.

Furthermore, while we welcome policy commitments and language supportive of women's rights and protection against violence, the impacts of this rhetoric, and of flagship initiatives such as PSVI, are undermined when they are used as a fig leaf to cover the deprioritisation of other development and peacebuilding approaches that would contribute to a holistic, more effective WPS policy. For example, the parallel dilution of policy commitments to conflict prevention and tackling upstream drivers of conflict, and of the language used to describe them – previously a strength of the UK's foreign, development and security policy – has also weakened the 'prevention' pillar of the UK's approach to WPS. This shift in funding priorities with an explicit focus on 'protection' raises the question: is the UK's approach to WPS primarily about 'making war safe for women', rather than working to prevent violent conflict in the first place?

Against this backdrop of increasing conflict and broken promises to women globally, we have also seen the continued worsening of the UK's domestic policies related to the WPS agenda. The WPS agenda is a cross-border and transnational framework, but when women seek asylum in the UK these principles are often abandoned. Following increasingly draconian policies and legislation such as the compliant environment (previously known as the hostile environment), the two-tier asylum system and the Rwanda plan, the Illegal Migration Act 2023 has [removed the right to asylum](#) for anyone who arrives in the UK having travelled through a country the Government deems as 'safe'. There are no exceptions for women and girls nor for survivors of gender based violence. The UK is not only repudiating its responsibilities under the Refugee Convention, including the principle of shared responsibility. This behaviour causes loss of credibility in multilateral spaces as the UK advocates for gender equality and respect for human rights while doing the opposite at home. More than that, it causes real harm to the women and girls that the UK states are a priority in development and foreign policy, thus undermining its goals and perpetuating colonial and racist practices and power structures. GAPS continues to call for an immediate stop to these racist and dehumanising policies.

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# Case studies

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## Afghanistan

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Women and girls and other marginalised groups in Afghanistan have long highlighted the need to address root causes and gendered drivers of insecurity to achieve sustainable peace in their country. The continued [rollback of](#) women's rights by the de facto Taliban authorities [since 2021](#) has exacerbated [pre-existing](#) and [emerging challenges faced by women](#) and other marginalised groups, including neglect, violence, trafficking, [early and forced marriage](#), sexual exploitation and abuse. Additionally, the de facto Taliban authorities have been unable to [sufficiently respond to the humanitarian need](#) following recent [droughts](#), [floods](#) and [earthquakes](#), which will only worsen as the impacts of the [climate crisis](#) deepen. The [2022 ban on women working for NGOs, and the subsequent ban on women workers in Afghan-based UN offices](#), has also disproportionately impacted the ability of local, national and international organisations to reach women through humanitarian and other forms of assistance. In 2023, a group of UN experts [determined](#) the “extreme situation of institutionalised gender-based discrimination in Afghanistan is unparalleled”. [The enforcement of over 80 restrictions on every aspect of women's lives – including exclusion from any meaningful form of public or political participation](#) – have had particularly harmful effects on women with diverse identities, including those with disabilities, ethnic minorities, those seeking access to refugee routes and women from the LGBTQI+ community. [This last group](#) have faced increased sexual and gender-based violence resulting in documented cases of sexual violence, torture, disappearances and death.

Through the [International Women and Girls Strategy](#), published in 2023, the UK Government has explicitly committed to putting women and girls at the heart of the work of the FCDO. Minister Andrew Mitchell specifically cited the women and girls of Afghanistan and the need for empowerment in order to achieve other government commitments and ambitions including tackling poverty and hunger. This intersects with the commitments of the UK's [fifth NAP](#); Afghanistan is a focus country which requires a nominated WPS focal point, an up-to-date gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) conflict analysis and WPS as a priority within country business plans. In support of this work, the UK Government has set a target that [50% of its bilateral aid to Afghanistan must reach women and girls as beneficiaries](#). Despite this important target, there is no specific action on the inclusion of WROs or women being in leadership in this service provision. While the UK has made some funding commitments that cite women's participation as a priority through the World Bank-administered [Afghanistan Resilience Trust Fund](#) and a [call through the CSSF](#) for bids for Afghanistan programmes in 2022, overall funding to Afghanistan has dropped significantly and is not meeting the pressing needs of the population. Bilateral aid spend peaked at £286 million in 2021/22, but will have fallen by 47% with a spend of only [£100.4 million in 2023/24](#). Funding is still not earmarked for WROs, despite them being some of the few actors able to get funding into Afghanistan and to deliver services to those most made vulnerable by the Taliban and other groups.

Supporting the WPS agenda in Afghanistan and supporting women to safely push back against the state repression enacted by the de facto Taliban authorities requires long-term, sustainable funding and resources; withdrawing those services once initiated is counterproductive and serves to further destabilise the women's rights sector and the work of women human rights defenders. The Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI)'s 2023 [updated note](#) reiterated that the FCDO does not have a clear plan to move beyond humanitarian aid and has been reducing its support to Afghanistan, which has led to

operational challenges in fulfilling [self-identified needs](#) and priorities – many of which would directly respond to both immediate humanitarian needs as well as longer-term peacebuilding and development goals. Despite immense challenges in civil society organisation (CSO) and WRO operations since 2021, rights-based and peacebuilding activities beyond humanitarian efforts are still continuing at the local and regional levels and WROs/CSOs still need long-term sustainable support from the donor community to continue their work.

There has been a disconnect between the UK Government's internal approach and how it has been using its presence on the global stage to influence agendas on women's rights in Afghanistan. The UK and the international community are not doing enough to ensure that Afghan women's voices, priorities and experiences are heard and influencing global response. Women in Afghanistan are seeing their rights being used as a bargaining chip and have called for a recognition of [gender persecution and apartheid](#) being carried out by the de facto Taliban authorities, which has been repeated by international legal experts and leading UN officials.

In the Doha meetings in 2023, [Afghan women's participation was not prioritised](#) even though we know women's issues cannot be solved in isolation from political, economic and social and human rights crises, which are all intertwined. The UK must use its power to ensure that Afghan women are consulted, included and prioritised at all future global meetings on Afghanistan. While UN Security Council members including the UK welcomed the UN Independent Assessment on Afghanistan as providing a roadmap, international human rights advocates were critical that the report [did not take women's and girls' rights sufficiently seriously or adequately represent the voices of Afghan women. It also supported UN Security Council Resolution 2721](#) on appointing a Special Envoy, and the UK must ensure that the Special Envoy is selected with the rights of women and girls at the centre of its considerations. This would help uphold UK-supported [UN Security Council 2681](#) which called on the reversal of gender-oppressive regimes in Afghanistan. The UK must leverage its full diplomatic influence to ensure civil society, including WROs working on Afghanistan both inside and outside of the country, have the opportunity to share their perspectives, concerns and recommendations, and will be better engaged and represented in future assessments and consultations.

The resettlement of Afghan refugees underscores the need for cohesive and integrated domestic and foreign policy approaches to the WPS agenda. The UK has prominently publicised their support to resettle Afghan refugees through [Operation Warm Welcome](#); with dedicated pathways for those at particular risk such as LGBTQI+ Afghans and women judges and journalists, but [thousands of eligible Afghans are still awaiting decisions](#) while in limbo in third countries, such as Pakistan, or facing [extended stays in hotels](#). Accommodation for Afghan refugees has [been suspended](#), pushing many into homelessness, where women and girls are especially at risk of violence.

## Recommendations

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In its diplomatic work, in its work with international partners, and in the fulfilment of its commitments in the fifth NAP, the UK should:

1. Apply coordinated, sustained, international pressure on the de facto Taliban authorities to reverse their decrees on women's rights, education, and employment and ensure that efforts towards "normalisation" with the de facto Taliban authorities do not undermine or weaken the UK's commitment to the WPS agenda or support for Afghan women and girls in-country or in the diaspora.
  2. Design, undertake and participate in meaningful consultations with Afghan women in and outside of Afghanistan, shape the agenda in advance with women's expertise and contextual knowledge and ensure participation in decision making and any dialogue on the future of the country for both women remaining in Afghanistan and those who have had to leave.
  3. Include Afghan Women representatives in all international and national fora on the future of Afghanistan. This will affirm their right to participation and ensure their voices are prioritised in these discussions.
  4. Ensure that all UK delegation in talks with de facto Taliban authorities in Afghanistan include women representatives, including in senior positions.
  5. Continue to provide financial and in-kind support directly to local Afghan women-led organisations/WROs, to ensure they can continue their peacebuilding efforts and work to enhance women's rights despite increasing constraints in civic space. Specific support should be given to civil society initiatives focused on improving women's livelihood opportunities and on countering GBV.
  6. Provide long-term funding that must be flexible to respond to rapidly changing needs, involving reduced compliance and reporting requirements to account for extremely challenging operational context. Establish a rapid response funding scheme to ensure funding arrives quickly to these and is not blocked by political decisions.
  7. Ensure safe routes for individuals and their dependents wanting to flee to reach safety and respond to the gender-specific needs of Afghan women, girls and other minority groups.
  8. Expedite and grant immediate protection to new and existing asylum claims and family reunification applications, and widen access to family reunification to include broader categories of family members and dependents, as they access the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme, Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy scheme, and asylum.
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## Case studies

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### Ukraine

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The UK Government has upheld its commitment to review and respond to emerging conflicts through its action in Ukraine. The fourth NAP did not include Ukraine as a focus country but since the escalation in violence in February 2022, the UK Government responded by implementing WPS commitments in Ukraine, including through providing funding for WROs, women leaders and those working to support the critical needs for women and children both inside and outside of Ukraine. GAPS welcome the inclusion of Ukraine as a focus country in the UK's fifth NAP as the multiple and intersecting crises facing women's rights, their participation and their role in the prevention of conflict are clear. With its inclusion of Ukraine as a focus country in the fifth NAP, the UK Government must continue and strengthen support to WROs and Ukrainian women both inside and outside of Ukraine to ensure their meaningful participation and the inclusion of their priorities and experiences in all decision-making on future policies and programmes in Ukraine.

The escalation of war in Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has had complex and multiple gendered impacts. CARE's research shows women represent [59% of internally displaced persons \(IDPs\) within Ukraine, and around 86% of the people who have fled Ukraine are women and children](#). This has also affected many African and Asian third-country residents who became refugees, many of whom were students in Ukraine, and who have faced multiple racially motivated challenges, as in the [Netherlands, for example](#). Prior to the current crisis, [Ukraine had the largest stateless population in Europe](#). Many of these are Roma, and an estimated 60% of Roma women and children do not have documentation. The Russian invasion continues to brutally disrupt life in Ukraine, causing extensive damage across sectors, impacting lives and livelihoods. Men constitute the vast majority of frontline soldiers and, as a result, many are exposed to horrific violence, leading to wide-ranging and long-term challenges around trauma and the militarisation of society. Women are often required to shoulder the associated care burdens which have also increased by more limited social services as a result of the war. While burdens have increased, [decision-making power within the household](#) is unchanged, and unpaid care work remains an issue. In addition to increasing care responsibilities there has been a rise in [gender-based-violence \(GBV\) such as domestic violence](#), conflict-related sexual violence, human trafficking, sexual exploitation, and abuse. As a result, survivors face a wide range of risks, such as unwanted pregnancies, and psychological and physical trauma.

At the beginning of the humanitarian crisis, local women-led organisations (WLOs), WROs and LGBTQI+ organisations were some of the first on the ground to respond to their communities' needs. Women comprise the majority of frontline workers, volunteers and first responders who support affected populations, either through formal and informal associations or ad hoc groups. The UK committed funding specifically for WROs in Ukraine, in particular those working on the frontline to support women and children including IDPs and refugees. The UK worked with the [National Democratic Institute \(NDI\) in Ukraine](#) to promote women's leadership at local levels during the conflict, establishing gender-focused caucuses in local councils.

While WROs and WLOs in Ukraine were among the first to provide emergency assistance, as we often see in war around the world, formal participation in and influencing of national decision-making processes has been inaccessible for many women due to centralised, increasingly militarised and male-led power structures. This has resulted in the [sidelining](#) of women's rights and gender equality amid pressing humanitarian and security concerns.



Despite the slow and limited acceptance of Ukrainian voices and WROs in the humanitarian response to the conflict, there have been some positive steps towards increasing inclusion and participation. The UK Government has played an important role in working to ensure the increased prioritisation of WLOs and WROs in national and international fora, with some activists and WRO leaders noticing a shift in UK and global attitudes towards listening to their priorities. Although the approach to UK-facilitated consultations has improved there is still a [long way to go to ensuring long-term system level change](#) by including a diverse range of Ukrainian voices the delivery of relief and recovery.

According to the CSSF's annual report 2022–2023, Ukraine has been, and remains, [a key priority for the UK Government](#). While the UK Government continues to provide military training and support to Ukraine's armed forces, it must ensure that the principles of the WPS agenda are integrated to ensure a human security perspective that includes women and WRO's priorities in the pathway to peace. The UK has shown some commitment to the principles of WPS in Ukraine through the [2022 - 2023 CSSF funding bids](#) that were published primarily for WROs advancing a localised WPS agenda in Ukraine; to ensure collaboration across the diversity of WROs working in Ukraine and to ensure that WROs and CSOs contributed to building a disaggregated evidence base for monitoring human rights abuses and instances of GBV and conflict-related sexual violence. The UK showed consistent support for Ukraine including through strongly advocating for [the resolution at the UN General Assembly which called for a "comprehensive, just and lasting peace"](#) and by abstaining on votes for a [draft resolution at the UN Security Council tabled by Russia](#). The [UK ambassador's intervention](#) for the successful resolution raised the matters of just peace, sovereignty and the impact on civilians, although there was no mention of women and girls or the gendered impact of war and the Russian invasion.

Furthermore, through its humanitarian funding in Ukraine, the UK Government has enabled an integrated focus on women's participation. For example, in areas where UK humanitarian assistance has been implemented, women form the vast majority of representatives on IDP local councils. This is a promising entry point that can be built on. The UK should continue humanitarian support that enables an integrated approach to building and strengthening inclusive democratic foundations to ensure women's needs and voices are reflected in national decision-making fora on issues impacting the future of their communities and their stabilisation.

## Recommendations

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In its diplomatic work, in its work with international partners, and in the fulfilment of its commitments in the fifth NAP, the UK should:

1. Fund increased GBV prevention and response initiatives and require partners to integrate GBV prevention and risk mitigation measures across all programme sectors.
2. Continue to provide support for the strengthening of quality and accessibility of GBV services, including holistic programming that aims to reduce social stigma and develops targeted services for marginalised groups such as older women, women in rural areas, women with disabilities, LGBTQI+ individuals, and female and male survivors of conflict-related sexual violence.
3. Ensure that consultation and planning for post-conflict reconstruction and democracy strengthening includes women's leadership and meaningful participation. Consultation and inclusion of CSOs, including women's rights and women-led organisations, and local IDP councils, should not be an add-on at the end of the process; their meaningful participation should be prioritised from the outset of the process.
4. Fund and uphold its [commitments to Minimum Initial Service Package](#) on sexual and reproductive health, including access to contraception and safe abortion care (in Ukraine and for the refugee populations), and increase information sharing and awareness.
5. Strengthen its localisation commitments for aid to Ukraine to ensure more official development assistance (ODA) goes to [local humanitarian leadership efforts](#), by regulating aid flows in ways that are gender responsive and reducing bureaucracy and compliance challenges - [in Ukraine and the region](#). This should ensure that WROs are included in the decision-making of how funding, including both ODA and large philanthropic contributions such as the [FC Chelsea Foundation](#), will be distributed in support of Ukraine's relief and reconstruction.
6. Ensure that WPS is more prominently featured in its military support to Ukraine, including in how [civil-military cooperation](#) is organised.
7. Work to apply the WPS agenda to encourage greater transparency and accountability, as well as democratic oversight during and after conflict that considers gender justice (including but not limited to the interests of men and women). Armed conflicts are often a critical juncture for societies, and transformative gender justice approaches should be considered and supported in supporting any political settlement processes between Russia and Ukraine. [Ukrainians](#) from across society (and gender spectrums) should be at the heart of peace settlement, mediation and justice processes.
8. Include the gender/WPS agenda in its threat analysis and response to Russia's action in Ukraine. This includes bilateral relations with Russia (the belligerent), such as restrictive measures such as arms controls on military aid to Ukraine. The UK should consider expanding support to [regional multilateral organisations](#) well placed to support human security efforts, including through gender-responsive politico-military engagement with Ukraine (as well as Russia).

### Occupied Palestinian Territories

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For over 70 years, Palestinians have been subject to human rights violations and abuses while living under Israeli occupation. This is made worse through increased and unabated settlement construction, forced displacement with the inability to return, a decades-long siege on Gaza, a failed internationally sponsored peace process, and flagrant Israeli impunity in the face of ongoing violations of international law. [The UN has described the deeply discriminatory dual legal and political system as apartheid](#). These violations have a gendered impact and have disproportionately affected women and girls. Palestinian women regularly face violence, threats, intimidation, restrictions on movement, and discrimination. Since Hamas' attacks on Israeli civilians on 7 October 2023, the situation has significantly worsened. While this has affected all parts of the occupied Palestinian territories, this case study will particularly focus on Gaza. Israel has bombarded the Gaza Strip relentlessly, leading to more than [31,000 Palestinians killed as of 20 March 2024](#). As per international humanitarian law, Israel as an occupying power has the duty of ensuring the food and medical supplies of the population. Despite this, the siege on Gaza and the destruction of civilian infrastructure, including health facilities, has led to an outbreak of epidemics and looming famine. Human rights organisations and humanitarian agencies have reported widespread human rights violations, serious violations of international humanitarian law and potential war crimes.

The lives and wellbeing of women and girls, including their reproductive rights and their ability to carry, deliver and care for their children, has been severely impacted. Almost [70% of those killed](#) are women and children, one million women and girls have been displaced. Women and girls, who carry disproportionate care burdens for the very young, older people and people with disabilities, are often unable to flee or to do so quickly. Every hour [two Gazan mothers](#) are killed by Israeli attacks. Over [180 women](#) are giving birth in Gaza every day, with women even undergoing C-sections without anaesthesia, as anaesthetics remain one of the prohibited medical supplies for entry into Gaza. Dire living conditions are exacerbating the risk of maternal and newborn mortality. Women are having to give birth in shelters, in their homes, in the streets amid rubble, or in overwhelmed health care facilities, where sanitation is worsening and the risk of infection and medical complications is on the rise. The UN has [reported](#) that girls and women are having to resort to cutting out small pieces of tents to use as a substitute for period products, as well as using menstrual products for longer than recommended.

On 26 January 2024, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ordered Israel to prevent and not commit genocidal acts against Palestinians, prevent and punish public incitement to commit genocide, ensure the provision of humanitarian aid, preserve evidence related to allegations of genocide, and submit a compliance report within one month. Depriving civilians in Gaza of necessities contravenes these provisional measures.

The UK did not support the ICJ's measures, nor has it called for Israel to ensure they are applied. Instead, the UK has continued to supply arms to Israel, and has refused to call for an immediate and permanent ceasefire. This is in direct contradiction with the UK's WPS commitments. The UK, through its role in creating the Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative, also has a duty to ensure justice and accountability for all survivors. This would include endorsing [the call](#) from Pramila Patten, UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict to ensure the Government of Israel grants, without further delay, access to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem and Israel, to carry out [fully fledged investigations](#) into all alleged violations. Continuation of the current UK approach harms the objectives of UK funding for programming within the occupied Palestinian Territories, reversing progress made through UK-funded projects on economic empowerment, access to education, and psycho-social support. The situation urgently demands a robust implementation of the UK's WPS NAP, specifically under "Strategic Objective 3: Humanitarian and Crisis Response". Strategic Objective 3 outlines a commitment to supporting the needs of women and girls in crises and emphasises ensuring their active participation and leadership in response efforts. The UK has a critical role to play to ensure all humanitarian aid is delivered in a gender-responsive manner. GAPS, its members and partners emphasise aid can only be delivered at scope and scale following an immediate and permanent ceasefire.

The occupied Palestinian Territories were not named as a focus country within the UK NAP and therefore commitments made in the NAP on focus countries to have a WPS focal point, gender strategies at posts in country and GESI analyses do not apply. However, the NAP makes clear non-focus countries can and should be considered and the occupied Palestinian Territories must not be an exception. The UK's failure to implement its WPS NAP in the occupied Palestinian territory, specifically in Gaza, will further exacerbate the suffering of Palestinian women and girls. In November the UK committed [£60 million](#) to address the humanitarian need, but nothing appears to be earmarked to women and girls specifically, nor does there appear a plan on how to deliver the aid as Israel continues its offensive. While GAPS welcomes the UK's support for [UN resolution 2720](#) on expanding access to humanitarian aid, we note with disappointment that the UK did not support prior resolutions and still does not call for an immediate ceasefire, which is essential to expand humanitarian access and delivery. The Foreign Secretary has explained to the [Foreign Affairs Committee](#) that the UK's actions are straining relationships with Global South states, and GAPS is concerned how its double standard may affect the integrity of the international legal system. Addressing the specific needs of Palestinian women and girls, promoting their participation and addressing the root causes of the conflict must become integral to the UK's approach for a more inclusive and effective response.

## Recommendations

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In its diplomatic work, in its work with international partners, and in the fulfilment of its commitments in the fifth NAP, the UK should:

1. Urgently call, and take measures, for the implementation of an immediate and permanent ceasefire, using its influence and position on the UN Security Council to cease the ongoing violence and military operations by Israel in Gaza.
  2. Immediately stop arms transfers and the licensing of arms and related equipment to Israel, including via third states such as the US, and to any state where there is a risk that these arms might be used in violation of international humanitarian law, or any other action prohibited or restricted by the Arms Trade Treaty.
  3. Demand the immediate, unconditional and unimpeded access of fuel and humanitarian aid, encompassing water, food and medical supplies – including those critical for the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women and girls – in the Gaza Strip, and reinstate and increase funding to UN Relief and Works Agency.
  4. Demand the lifting of the 16-year-long blockade, which continues to impede the entrance of humanitarian aid, including life essential support, and which will severely obstruct reconstruction and recovery of the Gaza strip in the longer term. This will allow the UK to then enhance its efforts by directing support specifically tailored to address the distinct needs of Palestinian women and girls, ensuring comprehensive access to healthcare, education and economic opportunities within the challenging context of occupation and reconstruction.
  5. Actively support and promote the participation and leadership of Palestinian women in peacebuilding and crisis response efforts. This involves facilitating their inclusion in decision-making processes regarding reconstruction and any potential political process.
  6. Hold Israel accountable for its actions in Gaza and implement the UK's obligation to prevent and protect against the crime of genocide and ensure Israel fully complies with the ICJ's provisional measures. The UK should also condemn human rights violations and potential war crimes, support international investigations, and advocate for measures such as an arms embargo and economic sanctions to curtail the ongoing crisis.
  7. Collaborate with Palestinian feminist, women's rights, centring their knowledge and experiences to work toward shaping effective, gender-responsive strategies for humanitarian aid and any peacebuilding efforts.
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## Case studies

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### Sudan

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On 15 April 2023, fighting broke out in Khartoum between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a paramilitary group. The power struggle between the two factions has been [weaponised](#) as a smokescreen through which the RSF and allied forces are also committing [mass ethnic killings](#) in West Darfur, especially against [Masalit civilians and other non-Arab communities](#). After ten months of fighting, more than [12,000 people have been killed in Sudan](#), more than eight million have fled their homes – two thirds of whom are women and children – and millions more are living in harsh humanitarian conditions. Even before the conflict started in April 2023, many women and girls in Sudan were experiencing gender-based violence, with [more than three million of them at risk](#). The current conflict has triggered a [spike of violence against women and girls](#), increasing this figure to more than four million. This violence has included sexual assault, rape, domestic violence, human trafficking and sexual exploitation, particularly against IDPs. In addition, hundreds of women have been [abducted by the Rapid Support Forces](#), held in inhumane or degrading conditions, subjected to sexual violence, and are at risk of sexual slavery. Lastly, with the deterioration in all services and supplies due to the war, women lack access to GBV services and sexual and reproductive health care, as well as education and economic resources. Due to the highly challenging operating environment and restrictions on humanitarian access, many organisations providing services, including WPS programming to promote women's peacebuilding and political participation, have been forced to reduce or withdraw their operations entirely.

As it is not a UK focus country, there is no public strategy on the UK's engagement in Sudan and the commitments made in the NAP on focus countries on having a WPS focal point, gender strategies at posts in country and GESI analyses do not apply. However, the NAP does state that the UK Government will take a flexible approach to where they work and will respond to crises as they emerge. The UK has already used its diplomatic channels to denounce the increase in conflict-related sexual violence in Sudan, has demanded an end to the violence, and has called for the provision of services to survivors via the UN Human Rights Council, Security Council and the [International Alliance on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict](#). In November 2023, the UK declared that it had [enhanced its atrocity risk monitoring](#), including monitoring of conflict-related sexual violence, and supported a Human Rights Council Fact-Finding Mission in October to investigate sexual violence abuses. In addition, the UK continues to support UN partners working with the Sudan Ministry of Social Development's Combatting Violence Against Women Unit. This is all welcome.

The UK has also announced [£36 million for humanitarian support](#) in Sudan and £5 million to neighbouring countries to address the urgent needs of people fleeing violence, with [£500,000 allocated to UNICEF](#) for gender-based violence protection services in South Sudan. However, it is important to view these announcements in the context of earlier cuts. Prior to April 2023, the [UK had been providing integrated sexual and reproductive services](#), family planning and GBV services in Sudan through the Women's Integrated Sexual Health Programme, but this programme was suspended at the onset of the conflict, resulting in the loss of [more than 600 community health workers in Sudan](#). In addition, the UK wound down the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund's [programme in Sudan](#) in 2021, which included localisation of United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 in Blue Nile State, a decision that was [criticised](#) by Parliament's Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy (JCNSS). While the [International Development Committee was told](#) that some aspects of this fund were transferred to the FCDO, it is unclear whether the aspects of the programme addressing GBV were continued. The UK has played a welcomed role in the Troika (with Norway and the United States) to raise [international awareness](#) of the atrocities and violence in Sudan, including support in establishing the [Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for the Sudan](#). The UK must continue to resource these initiatives and ensure they are conducted in gender-sensitive ways, with a focus on fulfilling all WPS pillars, especially participation.

## Recommendations

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In its diplomatic work, in its work with international partners, and in the fulfilment of its commitments in the fifth NAP, the UK should:

1. Support women's rights organisations and networks in Sudan who have been at the frontlines, working to provide humanitarian aid, addressing root causes and calling for peace. They are prominent members of Emergency Response Rooms and neighbourhood committees, and continue to organise through [founding campaigns and alliances](#), like Women Against the War and the Peace for Sudan Platform, and engage in monitoring and reporting on ceasefire commitments through the Ceasefire Initiative in Darfur.
  2. Encourage the African Union and Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) to engage in immediate and decisive action to facilitate the cessation of hostilities and pressure the warring parties to stop committing GBV abuses.
  3. Increase the support for humanitarian aid, urge increased and safe humanitarian access, and develop strategies to channel most of the aid through national organisations and groups, including WROs currently at the frontlines, to provide urgent humanitarian support to all women, men and children in need.
  4. Ensure that international organisations such as the UN, the African Union and IGAD prioritise efforts to end GBV in Sudan, particularly in conflict and post-conflict regions, minimise long-term psychological and physical harm, and tackle the structural inequalities that have reinforced insecurity for women and girls.
  5. Provide information on the results of the Human Rights Council Fact-Finding Mission in relation to GBV and the Atrocity Prevention Hub and use this information to pressure the international community and the conflict parties in Sudan, as well as collaborate with the International Criminal Court on the prosecution of GBV perpetrators.
  6. Foster women's participation in any upcoming peace process in Sudan, provided that the risks are managed and in accordance with the Do No Harm principle (women activists and human rights defenders [are at high risk of targeted violence](#)), by pushing the international community to ensure their meaningful participation in negotiating teams, training women activists and WROs in negotiation and high-level dialogues, and providing training and financial support to strengthen their advocacy campaigns.
  7. Advocate for the rights of Sudanese women refugees in Chad, South Sudan, Egypt and other neighbouring countries and ensure adequate legal and financial support through governments and refugee-supporting agencies.
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# Conclusion and Recommendations

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## Conclusion

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This was the first year of the UK's changed assessment and reporting structure, meaning there was no report for GAPS to respond to. GAPS was disappointed to not be able to consider the UK's own assessment of its progress on the implementation of its fifth NAP. By removing this, an important opportunity has been removed for civil society to meaningfully contribute in their role as a key strategic partner. Instead of a straightforward assessment of implementation, we have therefore selected four case studies as strategically relevant. This is because the four case studies are representative of the list of focus and non-focus countries, and are emblematic of the priority of addressing transnational challenges the UK has committed to. The selection of these four case studies underscores, rather than distracts from, the need for consistent application of WPS across crises. This includes situations this brief assessment did not cover, such as Haiti, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Myanmar.

While the four case studies selected for this report demonstrate some instances of the WPS agenda being prioritised and integrated through the implementation of the fifth NAP, they are isolated and inconsistent. Instead, the resounding theme of our assessment is the UK's failure to live up to its own commitments and the undermining of its own efforts.

In all the countries we assessed, the UK has shown a lack of cohesive and joined up strategy, often with contradictions between the public messaging, internal approach and funding committed. It is crucial to actively seek out the perspectives and expertise of women peacebuilders, women's rights activists, WROs and other locally led, women-led organisations, and yet it is a missing step in much of the Government's approach to these countries. There are clear inconsistencies – with women-led organisations being prioritised and funded in Ukraine, while the voices of women in Afghanistan and the occupied Palestinian Territories are overlooked. This should be a key deliverable of the UK NAP, as Strategic Objective 1 on decision-making states a commitment to increasing women's meaningful participation, leadership and representation in decision-making processes. Yet missing everywhere appears a concerted and joined-up effort to holistically address root causes of inequality and violence. In addition, newly announced tranches of funding are welcome and can make a significant impact for communities facing conflict, but do not repair or reduce the damage caused by the 2020 ODA cuts. This results in WPS implementation that is fragmented as well as lacking in ambition. The UK, as penholder, effective convenor, significant donor, and holding valuable expertise, has the opportunity to be a global leader and reinvigorate and innovate the WPS agenda.

Therefore, in addition to the country-specific recommendations included in the case studies, across the implementation of the government's commitments to WPS, GAPS recommends:

## Recommendation 1: Meaningful consultation and partnerships

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The UK should actively support and promote the participation and leadership of women and WROs in fragile and conflict affected settings in all decision-making, including crisis response and peacebuilding. This includes:

- Ensuring that the UK's programmes, policies and strategies in fragile and conflict settings are rooted in meaningful consultation and are co-created by those most affected, including women, girls, IDPs and traditionally marginalised and excluded groups.
- The GAPS member-led tool, [Beyond Consultations](#), is referenced in the delivery of the fifth NAP and we recommend the UK Government continue to embed the use of the tool into government policy and training for conducting consultations in FCAS. Ensure that the tool is disseminated and recommended for use across the UK Government, including posts, country offices and missions.
- Facilitating women and WROs' inclusion in decision-making processes in peace and political processes by pushing the international community to ensure their meaningful participation in negotiating teams, and training women activists and WROs in negotiation and high-level dialogues.
- Championing the role of local women's and girls' rights organisations and activists with UK partners to encourage the consultation of women in all contexts and fora. This must go beyond specific projects, and support the growth of a strong, active, and independent civil society that represents the views of people affected by conflict and advocates for their rights and interests.
- Mainstreaming commitments to locally led development and equitable partnerships included in the new UK International Development White Paper into its policies and practices for WPS, women's rights and gender equality.
- Ensuring the integration and consultation of women and girls into peacekeeping processes through the Ministry of Defence's commitments outlined in the fifth NAP.

## Recommendation 2: Core, flexible, long-term and multi-year funding

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As the Government has acknowledged, feminist organisations and movements need more core, flexible and multi-year funding in order for them to undertake their vital work.

- Funding must be flexible and long term to respond to rapidly changing needs. This means ensuring that funding allocations meet the self-defined priorities of women's girls' rights organisations, including core organisational costs and essential programmatic work to advance gender equality and WPS priorities strategically, in recognition of their greater knowledge and experience amid the challenging operational context in which they work.
- Through the creation of its new localisation strategy, the UK should work to strengthen its localisation commitments, reducing bureaucracy and compliance challenges, including translating reports into local context languages and enabling a greater amount of ODA to reach national women's rights and women-led organisations working on humanitarian, development and peace responses.
- Funding must provide the space for women's and girls' rights organisations to learn from each other with movement-building opportunities to enable them to strengthen their collective work beyond the lifespan of the funded project.

## Recommendation 3: Diplomacy and reform

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Despite reductions in ODA, the UK remains well-placed to leverage its considerable diplomatic and development assets to help reform the parts of the humanitarian system that still exclude women from leadership and decision-making. This includes:

- As the second biggest donor to the Country Based Pooled Funds (CBPFs) for 2020–2022, the UK can lead and reform the support provided by CBPFs to women’s organisations;
- As penholder to the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, the UK leads the negotiation and drafting of resolutions and can champion women’s leadership in emergency response at the UN Security Council; and
- As leader of a task team of the Call to Action on Protection from GBV in Emergencies, the UK can use its influence to improve the quantity and quality of GBV funding.

## Recommendation 4: Humanitarian access, conflict resolution and arms embargoes

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The UK should aim for the end of all conflicts as the number one objective. Therefore in its engagement with global conflict it should:

- Take immediate and decisive action to facilitate the cessation of hostilities where possible, including for example in the occupied Palestinian Territories and Sudan.
- Pressure all warring parties to stop committing GBV abuses.
- Fulfil its obligations under the International Arms Trade Treaty – to which the UK is a signatory – by implementing an immediate, comprehensive, two-way arms embargo on parties to conflict suspected of committing human rights abuses

In the meantime it must advocate for the immediate, unconditional, and unimpeded access of fuel and humanitarian aid, encompassing water, food, and medical supplies critical for the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women and girls, into conflict settings.

**A gender just world where all women  
and girls are free from violence.**



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