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(IN)SECURITY AND MILITARIZATION IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: IMPLICATIONS FOR WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY

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Introduction

The South Caucasus remains one of the most militarized and politically fragile regions in the wider European neighborhood. Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan are still influenced by long-standing, unresolved (or partially resolved) conflicts – Abkhazia, Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, and, until recently, Karabakh – whose roots lie not only in Soviet-era grievances, territorial disputes, and ethnic divisions, but also in Russia's imperial strategies of territorial fragmentation, military presence, and political instrumentalization to maintain its influence in the region. These conflicts continue to shape national identity, domestic politics, and foreign policy. These conflicts also fundamentally structure the environment in which the well-known Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda[1] is interpreted and implemented.

Over the past decade, both Georgia and Armenia have adopted National Action Plans (hereafter NAPs or plans) on UN Security Council Resolution 1325.[2] The different iterations of these plans (four in Georgia, two in Armenia[3]) formally commit governments to women's meaningful participation in peace and security, the integration of gender perspectives into security institutions, the protection of women and vulnerable populations in conflict-affected areas, and, ultimately, conflict prevention. Yet the reality is more complicated and a gap between rhetoric and reality remains. Conflicts in the South Caucasus provide a strong rationale for adopting NAPs, but they simultaneously limit their scope and transformative potential. WPS plans in both countries remain heavily influenced by national security logics, emphasizing defence and institutional reforms more than genuine conflict transformation. Women peacebuilders from civil society – who have long sustained dialogue, community resilience, and cross-conflict cooperation in the South Caucasus – continue their work regardless of state action (or inaction) but face rising constraints as militarization, democratic backsliding, and shrinking civic space undermine their capacity to organize safely and effectively.

This analytical paper examines these regional dynamics in three parts. First, the paper shows how conflicts in the South Caucasus both justify and constrain WPS implementation. Militarization fundamentally shapes WPS processes in the region, narrows their ambitions and potential for implementation, but also amplifies the urgent need for them. Second, the paper demonstrates how NAPs, despite significant progress, remain centered on traditional security logics rather than feminist peace and conflict transformation. Finally, I explain how women peacebuilders and their organizations on the ground persist in their work despite increasing pressures and shrinking resources – and how their grassroots peacebuilding work far predates and exceeds the formalized WPS NAP documents.

A note on methodology, conceptual terms, and time period

Combining both primary and secondary data, this analytical paper draws on fieldwork insights I conducted during my doctoral research (Santoire 2025) on the emergence, adoption, and implementation of the WPS agenda in four countries: Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia, where

1 The WPS agenda is an international framework originating from UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) and nine follow-up resolutions. It covers women's participation in peace and security, protection from gendered harms, and gender-sensitive post-conflict reconstruction. Driven by feminist advocacy and strategic lobbying, Resolution 1325 was the first to recognize conflicts' impacts on women and girls. Its four pillars –participation, protection, prevention, and relief & recovery – guide UN members in implementation, often through the development of a National Action Plan (NAP) to embed WPS into laws and institutions.

2 While Azerbaijani women peacebuilders have attempted several times to draft NAPs, none have been successful so far. However, a recent report by UN Women (2025) indicates that Azerbaijan's first NAP was drafted in 2024 and is awaiting official approval by the Government. For this reason, this piece focuses less on Azerbaijan and more on Georgia and Armenia.

3 A third NAP in Armenia has been created in 2025 and is awaiting official adoption by the Parliament.

I conducted over 80 interviews with women peacebuilders, women-led organizations, government officials, international organizations, and relevant experts across these countries between 2022 and 2023 (43 in total for Georgia and Armenia).[4] The paper does not cover the extensive history surrounding NAP adoption or the content of the documents. Unless referenced otherwise, all data comes from this research and reflects this particular time period.

This piece uses several terms that are worth defining. First, I use 'women peacebuilders' as an umbrella term to describe self-identified women activists – either individually or as part of an organization – working on peacebuilding issues at local, national, regional, or global levels, usually through a conflict- and gender-transformative approach (Santoire, Farion and Kostava, forthcoming). Second, 'militarization' – a concept that has been heavily theorized in feminist International Relations theory[5] – is a valuable concept for this piece, which seeks to emphasize the pernicious and widespread effects of protracted conflicts on their populations (institutionally, economically, politically, culturally), as well as the profoundly gendered impacts of militarization on women. But beyond its theoretical definition, militarization also reflects the tangible, material reality of increased military spending across the broader region, especially in Armenia and Azerbaijan (SIPRI 2025; UN Women Europe and Central Asia Regional Office 2025). Third, rather than using the heavily debated 'frozen conflicts' term in academia, I choose the more neutral 'protracted conflict' or 'unresolved conflict' terms so as not to obscure the *dynamic* human dimensions that a "no war, no peace" – or "negative peace" – setting has on its populations, despite their high-level diplomatic "frozen" status.

Since the completion of data collection in 2022–2023, the context in the South Caucasus has changed substantially. Key developments, including the Washington Declaration of 8 August 2025, the dissolution of Karabakh, and the initiation of state-led expert meetings between Armenia and Azerbaijan, have contributed to new political dynamics, particularly in Armenia, where peace is now prominently articulated in the official discourse. Armenia and Georgia have also taken divergent pathways since 2023. Armenia has made notable progress in co-creating its third NAP on WPS with civil society, expanding its scope beyond traditional national security concerns to incorporate elements of human security, localization, and emerging issues (such as climate change, digital security, and women in peacebuilding). At the same time, gender pushback is now less present in Armenia than it was when this research was conducted, unlike recent developments in Georgia following legislative changes and related democratic setbacks. Readers are encouraged to take these recent changes into account as they read the piece.

Conflicts as both rationale and obstacle for WPS National Action Plans

In the South Caucasus, protracted conflicts have been a key driver in the adoption of the WPS agenda in the past decades. In Georgia, the consequences of the conflicts and wars of the 1990s and the 2008 war remain unresolved, and the populations in the occupied territories of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia – and those living along the Administrative Boundary Lines (ABLs) (or occupation lines) of these regions – continue to feel the acute effects of these protracted conflicts, notably through illegal Russian troops movements, unlawful detentions, intimidation, and creeping occupation. In Armenia and Azerbaijan, despite recent declarative efforts to sign a peace

4 The research that this piece focuses on did not include fieldwork in Azerbaijan, though it is partially covered through documentary analysis and participant observations.

5 Militarization is famously theorized by Cynthia Enloe (2000)eminent feminist Cynthia Enloe shows that the people who become militarized are not just the obvious ones--executives and factory floor workers who make fighter planes, land mines, and intercontinental missiles.","event-place":"Berkeley","language":"en","number-of-pages":"437","publisher":"University of California Press","publisher-place":"Berkeley","source":"www.ucpress.edu","title":"Maneuvers : The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives","URL":"https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520220713/maneuvers","author":[{"family":"Enloe","given":"Cynthia"}],"accessed":{"date-parts":[["2019",7,22]]},"issued":{"date-parts":[["2000"]]}}}],"schema":"https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json"} as a "step-by-step process by which a person or a thing gradually comes to be controlled by the military or comes to depend for its well-being on militaristic ideas. The more militarization transforms an individual or a society, the more that individual or society comes to imagine military needs and militaristic presumptions to be not only valuable but also normal. Militarization, that is, involves cultural as well as institutional, ideological, and economic transformations." (p. 3)

agreement to end more than 30 years of devastating conflict over Karabakh and the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP), tensions between the two countries, now mostly political rather than military, remain, but a just and sustainable peace in the long-term – with women and civil society at the table – is still out of sight.

My research shows that, on the one hand, Governments have used WPS NAPs to signal (sometimes instrumentally) commitment to peace, conflict resolution, Euro-Atlantic integration, and/or respect for international norms, especially in moments of political transition or heightened insecurity. On the other hand, women peacebuilders and their non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) have pragmatically used the NAPs – and the WPS framework more broadly – to advance their advocacy goals, fund their work, hold their governments accountable, and frame their work within a globally recognized language.

For Georgia, the 2008 war with Russia accelerated the need for a policy framework addressing internally displaced persons (IDPs), civilian protection, and the role of women in crisis prevention, something that women peacebuilders have been advocating for on the ground since the early 2000s through various incremental efforts to bring WPS to the political agenda. In Armenia, the 2018 Velvet Revolution and the resulting new government provided an opportunity to formalize WPS efforts (previously led in the shadow by women peacebuilders since the early 2010s) institutionally.

My research shows that while those conflicts that justify the adoption of NAPs also severely limit their implementation. Large parts of the territories most affected by protracted conflicts remained inaccessible to national institutions or civil society. In Georgia, the Russian-occupied regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia are heavily restricted, making collaboration between women peacebuilders dangerous and extremely challenging. They are also out of reach for the Georgian government. In Armenia, the 2020 Second Karabakh war significantly disrupted the first NAP implementation due to the scale of displacement, collective trauma, and human and military losses. The subsequent events – the aftermath of the 2020 war, the border escalations in 2022, and the 9-month blockade of the Lachin corridor – further highlighted the importance of the WPS agenda but also delayed the second NAP process. In the (until recently) disputed Karabakh region, international isolation hindered collaborations with civil society in Armenia, and due to the nature of the conflict, collaborations between Armenian and Azerbaijani women peacebuilders were rare. As a result, women IDPs or living in these conflict-affected areas were largely absent from consultations during NAP drafting, monitoring, and implementation in Georgia and Armenia. Their needs are often informally mediated by national NGOs or international organizations, rather than heard directly, representing a significant shortcoming of these documents, as the lived experiences and voices of those at the margins of the margins remain absent.

This creates a persistent paradox. Conflicts make the WPS framework necessary and stress its vital importance, but the militarized environment produced by those same conflicts makes it extremely difficult to implement the agenda in ways that are inclusive, transformative, or genuinely responsive to the experiences of conflict-affected women. In this fragile landscape, the NAPs simultaneously become politicized and depoliticized.

(In)security priorities shape WPS processes and implementation

A second central trend in my research is how the protracted conflicts are shaping WPS NAPs, for example, through a traditionally (although this is changing) heavy focus on the defense and security sector, but also how actors understand these tools. While NAPs in Georgia and Armenia both reference all four pillars of Resolution 1325 – participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery – implementation has often tended to center on institutional reforms within police, defence, and security agencies, as these are where the most resources are allocated, as shared by my interviewees involved in the implementation process. WPS becomes a tool for modernizing state security sectors, increasing the number of women in uniform, or improving institutional gender

policies. These are all essential objectives, but they reflect a narrow understanding of what peace and security truly mean. This security-centric approach can limit WPS's transformative potential in several ways, notably by prioritizing security over women's and social issues, often deemed as "less" important issues compared to national security, as this was the case in Armenia after the Second Karabakh war.

First, women's political participation is often interpreted as integrating more women into existing structures rather than challenging the militarized logics that dominate those structures. Training programs for women in security institutions proliferate, while efforts to meaningfully include women in official negotiations – such as the Geneva International Discussions (GIDs) in Georgia[6], diplomatic talks, or high-level advisory bodies in the case of Armenia and Azerbaijan – remain minimal. Beyond formal peace processes, women remain significantly underrepresented in the security sector, the judiciary, the diplomatic and governance institutions in the South Caucasus (UN Women Europe and Central Asia Regional Office 2025). This reflects persistent gender barriers despite improvements in recent decades, notably increased political will to tackle this underrepresentation in leadership in Armenia.

Moreover, the heightened militarization – which varies depending on periods of escalation or heightened tensions – in both countries reinforces the idea that "hard security" issues must take precedence over broader and more long-term efforts toward gender equality or peacebuilding, which address the root causes of conflicts. Under these conditions, WPS is often treated as secondary by authorities – important for international visibility, but less urgent than immediate military preparedness, countering hybrid threats, or navigating relations with powerful neighbors such as Russia, Turkey, and Iran. And while this is not due solely to the conflicts themselves, this increases the risk that WPS NAPs can become a bureaucratic, check-box exercise. My research shows that deep-rooted fears of conflict revival can affect long-term programming and decision-making, as they can shape both the process (who is invited? Who leads?) and the content of the NAPs (what is prioritized? Which expertise is valued or not?).

This urgency and fearful dynamic are reinforced by political sensitivities and polarization at the domestic level: women peacebuilding organizations are often expected to align their messaging with national priorities or, at least, not be overly critical of them. In Georgia, for example, WPS actors must ensure that their critiques or policy suggestions do not appear to question the government's official stance on the occupied territories too much. For example, women's rights NGOs in 2022 have shared with me their concern that in order to remain invited to WPS consultations, their criticism had to be constructive and "toned down." In Armenia, while the situation is currently improving as peace is at the top of Nikol Pashinyan's political agenda, those who advocated for peace, dialogue, or genuine reconciliation with Azerbaijanis – in the immediate post-2020 war environment – were labelled as traitors or defeatists. As a result, women's organizations working on peacebuilding had to creatively reframe their activities using different words and strategies to avoid attacks.

Second, the hyperfocus on security and defense neglects other pillars of the WPS agenda, such as prevention, and may not hold up well during emergency crisis response or periods of heightened insecurity. My interviews with multiple women civil society leaders in Armenia and Georgia showed a clear consensus: the prevention pillar was not sufficiently integrated into the NAPs, either in early warning systems or in incident prevention in the border provinces of Armenia, or near the ABLs in Georgia. My research shows that transformative peacebuilding – cross-border dialogue, reconciliation, trauma work, and community resilience to crises – is often relegated to civil society rather than embedded in state policy. And while women's NGOs/CSOs carry out this essential work on the ground, their voices and meaningful participation remain limited in formal decision-making processes.

6 However, as UN Women Europe and Central Asia (2025) reports, while the GIDs have historically been dominated by men, women peacebuilders have played key roles in influencing them over time through parallel policy and advocacy networks, notably through the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism, raising the humanitarian and human rights dimensions around the conflicts' aftermaths, especially around the needs of conflict-affected and displaced women.

Finally, the ongoing various insecurities related to the conflicts continue to militarize people's lives and impact the work of women peacebuilders through interlinked and multidimensional factors and risks.

Women peacebuilders continue their grassroots work despite it all, but under increasing pressure

Despite these challenges, women peacebuilders in both Georgia and Armenia continue to engage in essential peace and humanitarian work – often informally and with limited support. Their roles span community mediation, humanitarian assistance to refugees and IDPs, psychosocial care, monitoring and documentation of human rights violations, and cross-border dialogue, as it was particularly visible after the Second Karabakh war in 2020 (and subsequent flare-ups in 2022 and 2023) and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. These contributions predate the adoption of NAPs and, in many ways, far exceed the formal ambitions and applications of national policies. These activities on the ground – whether WPS localization in municipalities and provinces or humanitarian aid, for example – are often conducted outside the frame of the official NAPs.

Historically, women's networks in the South Caucasus sustained communication across divides even during periods of intense hostility. Georgian, Abkhaz, South Ossetian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani women engaged in dialogue initiatives that provided rare spaces for empathy, care, capacity-building, and feminist solidarity. Although these channels have narrowed dramatically since the 2008 (between Georgian, Abkhaz, and Ossetian women) and 2020 wars (between Armenian and Azerbaijani women), the experience and commitment of women peacebuilders remain crucial sources of resilience for local communities. Regional networks of women peacebuilders facilitated by international NGOs like the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders and the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation provide crucial spaces of dialogue and common advocacy (Santoire, Farion and Kostava, forthcoming)

However, their work is increasingly threatened by militarization, political polarization, and shrinking civic space. Women peacebuilders and human rights defenders in the South Caucasus face surveillance, attacks, police brutality, and stigmatization (Dalan Fund 2025), in addition to restrictions on organizing and foreign funding. In post-2020 Armenia, public debate was intensely polarized, and peacebuilding was often framed as appeasement or betrayal. Women who were advocating for dialogue, demilitarization, or accountability reported harassment, online abuse, and social ostracization (Rhinehart 2025), although this is changing positively. Overall, the emotional and psychological toll of working in an environment marked by trauma, loss, and uncertainty further strains the sustainability of their precarious and fragile work.

My research clearly shows that women peacebuilders and grassroots women's rights organizations consistently fill gaps left by the state – often acting as first responders where the state and/or international organizations cannot reach during crises, and often without formal recognition, institutional backing, or adequate resources.

For example, gender-based violence (GBV) remains widespread and deeply underreported, particularly in contexts of multidimensional insecurity, such as conflict, displacement, and economic precarity. Displaced women and IDPs across the South Caucasus faced increased risks of trafficking and economic exploitation (UN Women Europe and Central Asia Regional Office 2025). Following the mass displacement from Karabakh to Armenia, women and girls faced heightened risks of intimate partner violence, psychological and physical abuse, and restrictions on movement and access to resources, work, and shelter (UNFPA Armenia 2024). Yet stigma, limited awareness of GBV, and women's economic dependence continue to silence many survivors. In these gaps, women peacebuilders and local women-led groups have stepped in to provide essential support and reach communities where state systems cannot, as they have unique trust-based relationships and access. Despite the very high needs across the region, the resources remain insufficient, especially in terms of state funding for NAP allocations.

Indeed, the humanitarian ecosystem is strained by donor fatigue, funding cuts that have far-reaching consequences (notably by USAID in 2025), and competing global crises, making the localization of gender-responsive humanitarian action more urgent than ever. Women-led and women's rights organizations play an indispensable role in delivering effective, inclusive, and community-grounded responses, yet they continue to receive an alarmingly small share of humanitarian funding. According to a new UN Women (2025) report, across Europe and Central Asia, bilateral aid dedicated to gender equality has sharply declined, and resources reaching women's organizations in humanitarian settings remain close to zero in many contexts. This is consistent with a recent report from the Dalan Fund (2025) showing that only 6% of human rights funding for the Eastern Europe, South Caucasus, and Central Asia regions is delivered in direct, flexible grants, the lowest rate of any region in the world. In the absence of sufficient state funding for the NAP, this chronic underfunding severely hampers the ability of local women-led groups to prevent violence, support survivors, and sustain their vital peacebuilding efforts across the South Caucasus, as they have to compete for scarce resources and work on a project basis to survive financially.

As such, women peacebuilders' contributions remain indispensable yet undervalued, operating within constraints that undermine both their safety and the long-term viability of their initiatives. With or without NAPs, women peacebuilders on the ground implement the core principles of the WPS agenda, for example, through localization of the Resolution 1325 in municipalities/provinces, cities, and villages. But the NAPs serve as invaluable tools that women peacebuilders can use to frame their advocacy, give international legitimacy to their work, and hold their governments accountable to live up to their commitments on paper.

Ultimately, although the environment in which women peacebuilders operate remains volatile and rapidly changing, their work on the ground endures. Both in Armenia and Georgia, women continue to mobilize, adapt, and carve out space for peace in contexts that often deprioritize it.

Conclusion: diverging paths, ongoing challenges, and space for opportunities

As elsewhere across the world, the WPS agenda faces a consistent gap between rhetoric and reality, and it is the women-led organizations at the grassroots level that drive the spirit and its core principles. Structural problems – weak monitoring mechanisms, chronic underfunding, and a lack of capacity and government-wide political will – are far from unique to the South Caucasus.

What is unique to this region, however, is that across the South Caucasus, long-standing protracted conflicts – as a result of Russian imperialism, among other things – continue to shape the contours of peace and security. They create compelling incentives for adopting WPS NAPs, yet simultaneously limit their implementation by reinforcing militarized priorities, political sensitivities, and a narrow understanding of security. As a result, WPS in Georgia and Armenia remains trapped between technical gender mainstreaming and the realities of deeply entrenched conflict dynamics left unaddressed, although this is slowly improving in Armenia.

During the two decades of NAPs in Georgia and Armenia, despite tangible improvements and incremental progress – such as increased civil society participation in NAP processes, legislative change and women's meaningful involvement in peace and security issues – women, especially conflict-affected, displaced, young, rural, poor, and those living with disabilities – remain largely excluded from high-level security decision-making, crisis response, and formal peace processes. In contrast, however, women peacebuilders on the ground continue to play essential roles in building resilience, sustaining dialogue, and supporting communities through crises. Their work predates – and often outpaces – state-led WPS efforts, yet they face growing challenges as civic space is shrinking in some places, new forms of violence, such as technology-facilitated GBV, are emerging and intersecting with WPS (Santoire and Sadellah 2024; UN Women Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia 2023), and militarization and authoritarian governance are intensifying across the region.

Since the data collection was conducted in 2022–2023 (Santoire 2025), the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus has shifted in consequential ways, reshaping – sometimes improving, other times worsening – the environment in which women peacebuilders operate. One of the most visible changes concerns Armenia and Azerbaijan. On 8 August 2025, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and President Ilham Aliyev, with US President Donald Trump acting as mediator, initialed an agreement and issued a joint declaration signalling their intention to move toward full ratification. These steps have been heralded as historic breakthroughs, yet the prospects for a durable peace remain uncertain. The process continues to be tightly controlled by political elites (overwhelmingly men), and the substantive inclusion of civil society, let alone women mediators or negotiators, is largely absent. Elite diplomacy may generate momentum, but it does not yet guarantee a sustainable and gender-sensitive peace architecture.

At the same time, Armenia and Georgia have moved onto markedly different domestic trajectories. Since 2023, Armenia has cautiously improved state–civil society engagement, particularly within the ongoing preparation of its third NAP on WPS. This new NAP process signals a widening of the agenda and is informed by the learning from its previous NAPs: alongside traditional security priorities, it now includes dimensions of human security, localization, climate impacts, digital protection, and more explicit support for women peacebuilders. Gender pushback, once a major constraint after the highly contentious post-2020 period, has improved, enabling for more constructive dialogue between feminist actors and state institutions.

Georgia, by contrast, has experienced a sharp reversal due to legislative changes and democratic backsliding, and it is currently unclear whether there will be a fifth NAP adopted or not.

Despite these differences, the vast majority of my interviewees agree that the WPS agenda remains indispensable across the region. It offers a common normative framework, an internationally recognized language, and one of the few tools through which women peacebuilders can press for accountability on peace and security issues. In settings characterized by militarization, elite-driven diplomacy, and persistent patriarchy, WPS continues to provide an entry point, however fragile, for visibility, solidarity, and feminist resistance.

In this constantly evolving context, there are opportunities to be seized. This is particularly true in Armenia, where the country's path to EU integration is rapidly developing and where relations between the government and civil society appear to be noticeably improving, creating space and unique opportunity for new actors to step in, particularly groups that have historically been underrepresented in these processes, such as young women, LGBTQ+ communities, and refugees from Karabakh.

If the WPS agenda is to fulfil its transformative promise in the South Caucasus, it must be reframed beyond institutional reforms and integrated more deeply into conflict-prevention, political dialogue, and peacebuilding strategies. This requires not only political will but also greater recognition of, and support for, the women peacebuilders who have historically carried the burden of peace work in the region. As conflicts transform and evolve, and geopolitical pressures intensify, their contributions will remain indispensable – yet they cannot be sustained without fundamental changes in how peace and security are envisioned and pursued, along with sufficient resources.

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