UN Women: Who's at the peace table?

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About 756 million women and girls live within 50 kilometres of armed conflicts, and more than 37,000 civilian deaths across 20 armed conflicts occur, in which one in four of those killed was a female, according to the UN Women. There has been a surge in conflict-related sexual violence, attacks on healthcare, displacement and education disruptions of girls in conflict zones. The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, initiated through UNSC in 2000, reaffirms the role of women in prevention and resolution of conflicts, peacekeeping, peace-building, peace negotiations and humanitarian response. Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs Giorgos Gerapetritis chaired the annual debate held on October 27. It offers an opportunity for Greece to take specific steps to advance the implementation of the WPS agenda.

Historically, the United Nations has been institutionalising women's rights and addressing violence through initiatives, including the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), aimed at promoting gender equality, the CEDAW convention and the Beijing Declaration over decades. The establishment of WPS also emphasised monitoring and protection against sexual violence, accountability, and women's leadership. The initial phase was critiqued for settling for the principle of formal equality while neglecting patriarchy. The subsequent phases were scrutinised for marginalising perspectives from the Global South and overlooking intersectionality. For many scholars, perceiving women as mere victims of violence within militarised State-centric institutions that essentialise the patriarchal 'myth of protection' was unsettling. The current phase is assessed for its global racial hierarchies and limited scope of localisation.

The four pillars of WPS—participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery—are also subject to feminist critiques. Participation poses the question of reducing women's representation to numerical terms, and protection perceives women as mere victims of violence. Prevention treats conflict as a security problem rather than as a systemic issue. Relief and recovery is all about institutional recognition rather than female resilience. The WPS mandate faces the contradiction of the institutional setting being shaped by traditional military security, unequal political power and geopolitical competition over national interests.

A male chair of WPS may not discard its primary objectives. However, it must be critically engaged to raise the institutional question of women's political authority. The gender imbalance within the UNSC is not merely about a male presidency. The veto-power-holding permanent members represent privileged great-power national interests. When the veto power blocks actions on conflicts affecting women and children, it sidelines the WPS cause. The proposed humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza, where women and children continue to face displacement, violence and lack of healthcare, was vetoed by the US recently. The resolution for freedom of navigation through the Strait of Hormuz vetoed by China and Russia points out the impact of military blockages of maritime chokepoints on vulnerable populations, including women. A ceasefire, which would have prevented Ukrainian women facing displacement and economic insecurities, was vetoed by Russia. Although vetoes aren't explicitly intended to hinder gender justice, they depict the structural contradictions embedded in the UNSC decision-making process. Such security priorities reflect hegemonic masculinity that undermines women's lived experiences and depoliticise women's representation without interrogating the gendered nature of wars.

Another concern is the West-centric treatment of the Global South. For women scholars and activists of the Global South, peace is not only about protection from sexual violence and participation in political negotiations but also about their active role in political self-determination and freedom from modern forms of imperial and capitalist interventions. Nevertheless, treating Global South as homogeneous undermines differences in experiences of women shaped by colonial history, race, religion, caste and sexuality in conflict zones.

When international institutions frame protection as a tool of treating vulnerable sections to superficially meet the progressive commitments, it is another form of institutionalised patriarchy. The role of women in building and negotiating peace through resistance movements in communities challenges conventional notions of security. There is a need to redefine women's role in ceasefire decisions, the resource distribution in settlements and the recognition of survivors of conflict as agents of peacebuilding. Can effective implementation of the WPS agenda address injustice and transform the structures that shape conflict and peacebuilding to democratic and inclusive spaces for women?

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