

Election crossroads: Harris vs. Trump and the future of the WPS agenda in transatlantic cooperation

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The future of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda depends on the outcome of the US elections, with Kamala Harris likely to support international cooperation and WPS principles, in contrast to the previous administration of Donald Trump, which reduced support for gender equality efforts. Effective implementation of the WPS agenda requires coordinated efforts between US agencies, EU institutions, NATO, UN entities and civil society, prioritizing inclusive gender analysis and diversity in women's participation in peacebuilding and security operations. Transatlantic actors must mandate comprehensive gender analysis across all departments and support regional initiatives, such as the WPS centres in Kosovo, Colombia and Indonesia, to foster collaboration and promote the WPS agenda on a global scale.

UN Resolution 1325 & US Action Plans in history explained

In 2000, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS), urging member states to enhance women's participation in peace processes and protect them from sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Alongside nine subsequent resolutions, it established a robust framework to promote women's involvement in achieving peace and security. Resolution 1820 (2008) was pivotal in recognizing sexual violence as a weapon of war and a potential war crime (Congressional Research Service 2023). UN Security Council Resolution 1325 highlights key priorities, including increasing women's participation in peace mechanisms, safeguarding against SGBV, strengthening women's legal rights and supporting local women-led peace initiatives (United Nations Security Council 2000).

The US played a significant role in advancing WPS, introducing its first National Action Plan in 2011 under the Obama administration, updated in 2016, to align with UNSCR 1325 by promoting women's participation in conflict prevention and access to humanitarian aid (Kinsella 2021).

In 2017, the WPS Act mandated the creation of national strategies to advance the WPS agenda, marking a distinct shift from the global framework. In 2020, the Trump administration released a *WPS Strategy*, followed by President Biden's 2023 strategy, reaffirming WPS as "a cornerstone of U.S. efforts to prevent conflict" (Congressional Research Service 2023).

US National Action Plans: Trump administration vs. Biden administration

The approach of the Trump administration to the WPS agenda seemed to be one of neglect, characterised by indifference to women's issues, incompetence in diplomacy and an infatuation with the military. Trump's drifting away from diplomacy and toward militant rhetoric threatened the critical space for WPS. The lack of diplomatic personnel and policy direction on WPS had a harmful effect. In Trump's world, protecting women has been the job of strong men (Frey 2017).

Whereas the Trump administration had set out so-called “constructive” objectives within its WPS Strategy for sustaining peace and security, the administration was notorious for undermining the rights of women and girls and LGBTQ+ individuals, especially in multilateral forums. Their actions have been generally in direct conflict with and positioned in contrast to the twisted positions structured within the strategy. Although the language in the WPS Strategy seemed promising at first glance, it came at odds with the actions of the administration (Dennis 2019).

To give a couple of examples, within the Strategy’s Line of Effort 2, it is indicated that the US should be “*supporting multilateral efforts, including at the UN, to address violence in conflict, including sexual violence...*” And called for equal access to “*... medical care and psycho-social support for survivors of violence, exploitation and abuse*”. Yet, the Trump administration’s manners and actions at the UN conclusively demonstrated that the administration supported no such thing (Dennis 2019).

Secondly, one of the most disheartening aspects of the WPS Strategy was the lack of inclusive language. Trump’s strategy included no language emphasising the principle of inclusion, for instance of marginalised groups, consisting of those with disabilities, ethnic, racial and religious minorities, indigenous groups and LGBTQ+ individuals. The strategy did not contain any mention of LGBTQ+ people and underpinned a strict gender binary (Dennis 2019).

The strategy also consisted of many references to rights. However, the Trump administration’s record on human rights, especially on women’s rights, were wretched. One of the administration’s initial actions was to strengthen and vastly expand the Global Gag Rule, restraining the ability of women and girls to practice their right to access sexual and reproductive health care. The Global Gag Rule constrains the ability of organisations to support comprehensive reproductive rights within society (Dennis 2019).

Trump’s 2018 budget proposal for the Department of State and USAID—core entities within the WPS Agenda—proposed to cut 30 per cent of the budget for the State Department and USAID. The budget request was almost completely silent on women. Instead, the priorities were covered with phrases such as “defeating terrorism”, “improving cybersecurity”, and “strengthening economic imperatives” (Frey 2017).

Despite the actions of the Trump administration, the Biden-Harris administration has made historic advances in strengthening the rights and representation of women, and supporting the WPS agenda. WPS is also the main priority within the US National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality, enshrining the improvement of gender equity and equality as a strategic imperative within US domestic and foreign policy (The White House 2023).

For instance, in March 2021, the Biden administration publicly announced the formation of the first ever White House Gender Policy Council that focuses on advancing gender equity and equality through collaborating with civil society, governmental agencies and the White House to present policy recommendations and program support on gender-related matters. In October 2021, the administration published another first – a new national gender strategy drafted by the Council, explicitly indicating it would develop an intersectional approach to comprehending gender issues, containing economic security, climate change and gender-based violence (Kinsella 2019).

In 2022, the United States announced an additional \$400,000 for the Office of the UN Special Representative to the Secretary General (SRSG) on Sexual Violence in Conflict, backing efforts to promote justice and accountability and get to the root causes of conflict-related sexual violence. Through the Women, Peace and Security Incentive Fund, USAID has supported the implementation of the WPS Strategy by investing in programs that support women's participation in peacebuilding and decision-making, increasing access to justice for GBV survivors (The American Presidency Project 2024).

The Biden-Harris administration has taken a comprehensive approach to enhance women's participation, protection and leadership across various sectors. In the military, the administration has prioritised women's safety and inclusion, implemented historic justice reforms and expanded support for survivors of gender-based violence as recommended by the Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military. The Department of Homeland Security's Women in Law Enforcement Mentoring Program offers mentorship and career guidance to women in federal agencies (The White House 2023).

To strengthen women's roles in conflict prevention and resolution, USAID's WPS Incentive Fund invests in leadership development to break cycles of violence, counter extremism and build peace. Since 2017, the fund has provided over \$70 million to 17 countries, including \$6.5 million in 2022 for countries like Haiti, Burundi and Libya. The administration has also advanced women's civic and political leadership through initiatives launched at the Summits for Democracy. The USAID-led program targets barriers to women's participation in politics, peacebuilding and transitional processes, with \$15 million invested in countries like Nigeria, Tanzania and Yemen. Additionally, the Transform Digital Spaces Initiative addresses technology-facilitated violence against women in politics, with a \$6 million investment aimed at fostering safer digital environments (The White House 2023).

The institutionalisation of WPS principles is central to the administration's strategy. The Department of Defence has established a Gender Advisor workforce to integrate gender considerations across its operations. The administration also incorporates WPS principles within the Global Fragility Act implementation, focusing on gender-responsive strategies in partner countries to build sustainable peace and prevent conflicts. Addressing the gendered impacts of climate change is another priority. The US government has launched initiatives to elevate women as leaders in climate adaptation, response and policymaking. Programs like the US Strategy to Respond to the Effects of Climate Change on Women ensure that gender-sensitive approaches are embedded in environmental justice efforts (The White House 2023).

In its promotion of global partnerships, the US co-chaired the UN Women WPS-Focal Points Network in 2023 with Romania. The partnership brought together representatives from various countries to discuss strategies for strengthening WPS initiatives and bridging the gap between policy and practice. The administration also launched international initiatives to combat online harassment and technology-facilitated gender-based violence, prioritizing the protection of women leaders, journalists and activists (The White House 2023).

The future of equal peacekeeping: Trump vs. Harris

Based on the different perspectives and approaches of the Trump-Pence administration and Biden-Harris administration, the future of UN Resolution 1325 and the WPS Agenda is in the hands of two candidates: Donald Trump and Kamala Harris.

His contradictory WPS agenda aside, Trump's discriminatory discourse towards women and marginalised groups will most likely make his second term threatening not only for American women, but it will also adversely affect the future of transatlantic cooperation with the European Union and EU-related institutions.

On the other hand, Kamala Harris may be a hope for continuation on peacekeeping by sustaining WPS and UN Resolution 1325. Harris spent a significant portion of her career as a prosecutor working to protect women and girls from violence. As vice president, she has continued this leadership globally, working to assure that CRSV—and promoting the status of women and girls—remained at the forefront of her national security policymaking (The American Presidency Project 2024).

Accordingly, Harris has launched the Dignity in Documentation Initiative, aimed at offering support for survivor and civil society-led efforts to monitor and document CRSV with respect to the Murad Code, named after Nobel Laureate and survivor Nadia Murad. This program, supported with a \$10 million investment from the US Department of State, backs justice for survivors through promoting accountability for crimes punishable under international law (The American Presidency Project 2024).

Recommendations

Transatlantic actors, including the US, EU institutions (such as the European Commission, the EEAS and European Parliament), NATO, UN agencies, EU member states and EU-based civil society organizations like the European Women's Lobby (EWL) and Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), must adapt their strategies based on the US election outcome to effectively advance the WPS agenda.

If Kamala Harris wins, transatlantic actors should capitalize on her administration's alignment with WPS principles. Under the leadership of Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission, along with NATO, should collaborate closely with the US to implement a unified approach to gender analysis, integrating WPS principles into all programming. EU institutions like the EEAS and the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) can coordinate with Harris's administration to establish transatlantic training programs that empower women in security and peacebuilding. NATO's partnership with the US can focus on expanding women's roles in defence operations, while cooperation with the White House Gender Policy Council can align policies with support from organizations such as EWL and the European Network of Migrant Women.

On an international level, with Harris's backing, NATO, the European Commission and UN entities should collaborate to implement WPS resolutions, ensuring that gender equality is integrated into defence policies and women are involved in decision-making roles. Regional WPS centres in Kosovo, Colombia and Indonesia can be expanded through joint investments, leveraging expertise from both sides of the Atlantic.

If Donald Trump wins, transatlantic actors will need to act more independently. The European Commission, along with NATO and UN agencies, should uphold comprehensive gender analysis without relying on US support. Collaboration with like-minded agencies in the US that remain committed to WPS principles will be crucial. Much can still be done at a working level, without leadership involvement. The EU and NATO must lead efforts to train women for key security roles, engaging civil society organizations such as GAPS to maintain progress. EU

member states and institutions should strengthen and fund gender councils to ensure robust WPS strategies.

If the US disengages from the UN under Trump, the European Commission, NATO and UN entities must take a more assertive role, ensuring WPS resolutions are effectively implemented. EU member states should collaborate with international allies like Canada and Norway to diversify funding and continue advancing the WPS agenda, even with diminished US participation.

By adjusting their strategies based on the US election outcome, transatlantic actors can either deepen collaboration with a Harris administration or sustain and expand WPS principles independently if Trump wins, ensuring that global peace and security initiatives remain inclusive and impactful.

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