



## Women, Peace, and Security in NATO: Seeing the Whole Field through 25 Years of UNSCR 1325

### From Dutch Football to Modern Defence Thinking

**This CIMIC spotlight uses Johan Crujff's metaphor to explore NATO's progress, challenges, and next steps in integrating WPS. It reflects on both internal and external dimensions and considers how the Alliance, through CIMIC, can "see the whole field."**

On 31 October 2025, the international community marks the 25th anniversary of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS). The WPS agenda has evolved from a moral imperative into an operational framework. It helps military organisations act with legitimacy, remain resilient, and perform effectively in an increasingly complex world.

When first adopted in 2000, WPS represented a moral commitment: the recognition that women, men, boys and girls experience conflict differently, and that the exclusion of women from peace processes undermines both justice and stability. Rooted in principles of human rights and equality, it reflected the belief that peace is more sustainable when it includes the perspectives and participation of all members of society. Initially seen primarily as an ethical or humanitarian concern, WPS was complementary rather than central to military planning.

Experience has shown that gender is not peripheral to security. It is, in fact, a central and essential element of how security is understood. From the Balkans and Afghanistan to Ukraine, operational lessons have demonstrated that ignoring gendered dynamics means overlooking vital sources of information, influence, and legitimacy.

Protection of civilians and social cohesion depend on understanding how power and vulnerability are distributed within societies, as well as fostering cooperation with local communities. Over time, this understanding has transformed WPS from a normative ideal into an operational necessity, offering a framework that strengthens situational awareness, informs risk assessment, and supports more effective decision-making.

For NATO, this evolution has been significant. WPS principles—participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery—are no longer confined to post-conflict settings; they also shape NATO's core task, Deterrence and Defence. The integration of gender perspectives enables commanders and planners to anticipate how populations may react to military operations, how adversaries might exploit social divisions, and how resilience can be strengthened through trust and inclusion. In this way, WPS enhances NATO's credibility by reinforcing the human dimension of security.

As NATO confronts renewed warfare in Europe, strategic rivalry among major powers, and hybrid threats that exploit social and informational vulnerabilities, WPS offers a lens for understanding the whole operational environment. It helps the Alliance to see “the whole field” and to recognise not only adversaries and terrain, but also the networks of trust, influence, and resilience that underpin civilian stability.

**The Dutch football legend Johan Crujff famously stated, “Je gaat het pas zien als je het doorhebt”-“You only see it when you get it.” Real operational value emerges when gender is not added as an afterthought, but when it becomes instinctive, an internalised way of seeing. In practical terms, this is the difference between reacting to events and anticipating them, between focusing solely on the ball and understanding the space around it.**

## **Internal Dimension: Building Coherence, Leadership, and Ethical Readiness**

The internal dimension of WPS lies within NATO itself: building an inclusive and balanced force that reflects the diversity of the societies it defends. Gender balance in leadership, recruitment, and career progression is not just a moral goal but a determinant of operational effectiveness. A force that draws on the full spectrum of talent—across gender, background, and experience—develops stronger problem-solving capacity, moral resilience, and adaptability.

NATO's focus on gender inclusion helps improve leadership, ethics, and decision-making within the Alliance. By treating inclusion as a core value, NATO demonstrates the legitimacy it expects to show in its operations and missions abroad or on its own soil. Trust, respect, and cohesion are essential for a ready and effective force. Without genuine inclusion, these qualities cannot fully develop. The internal WPS agenda thus provides the ethical foundation for NATO's credibility and performance externally.

Over 25 years, NATO has institutionalised many commitments, including the integration of gender advisors into command structures, the establishment of a WPS office within NATO Headquarters,

and the development of (national) action plans to promote inclusive recruitment and retention. Yet the challenge remains internalisation rather than mere compliance. Gender awareness must become second nature, guiding everyday leadership and decision-making, so that NATO can respond with greater insight and adaptability.

The latest NATO Policy on WPS, adopted in 2024, reinforces this approach, placing gender-responsive leadership and accountability as a cornerstone of implementation. It requires commanders and senior staff to integrate gender perspectives into operational planning and to link leadership evaluation with ethical and inclusive behaviour.

The policy also tackles emerging challenges, such as Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV). Online harassment, sexualised disinformation, and cyber manipulation pose threats to both personnel and civilians, weakening morale, trust, and collective well-being. By addressing these risks, the 2024 WPS policy ensures that inclusion and accountability extend into the digital domain, keeping WPS relevant to modern security challenges.

Gender-responsive leadership and accountability are both moral and strategic. It is moral because leaders have a duty to act inclusively, treat personnel equally, and protect civilians. It is strategic because ethical and inclusive leadership reinforces credibility within NATO and among partners, strengthening deterrence. Gender-balanced leadership enhances adaptability and situational awareness by allowing teams to value multiple perspectives, thereby identifying risks and opportunities sooner. When inclusion becomes instinctive, NATO itself becomes more resilient and agile. This is not about political correctness; it's about operational competence.

In football, no team wins by relying solely on one style of play. The strength of NATO lies in its diversity—of nations, disciplines, and people. Yet, as in any team, perspectives differ. There are ongoing discussions across the Alliance about how to balance traditional military readiness with evolving approaches that focus more on inclusion, societal engagement and Human Security.

Some say that the focus must remain squarely on “warrior ethos”, cautioning against initiatives they perceive as a restraint to deterrence. Others believe that inclusion and diversity are not distractions but operational enablers. NATO doctrine clearly supports the latter view: the principles of WPS are embedded within Deterrence and Defence, recognising that legitimacy, societal trust, and human understanding are essential to military strength, not separate from it. Building an inclusive and gender-aware Alliance makes collective defence stronger, because it helps every player on the field see the whole picture.

### **CIMIC as the Midfield of NATO Operations**

**Civil–Military Cooperation (CIMIC) is central to this perspective. As a joint function, CIMIC links military operations with civilian realities by integrating civil factors and engaging with non-military actors to achieve military objectives, ensuring operations are more effective and sensitive to societal impacts. Like the “midfield” in football, it allows WPS principles to inform commanders’ planning and decision-making, ensuring that gender dynamics, local networks, and community perspectives are integrated into the thinking for operational outcomes.**

## External Dimension: CIMIC, WPS, and the Operating Field

The external dimension of WPS refers to how NATO perceives and engages with all actors in the operating environment. Unlike the internal dimension, which changes who we are and how we act, the external dimension changes what we see and how we plan.

**Within CIMIC, two interlinked core activities—Civil Factor Integration (CFI) and Civil-Military Interaction (CMI)—facilitate the implementation of WPS in practice.**

CFI involves systematically mapping civilian populations, leadership networks, and social norms, with attention to gendered roles and vulnerabilities. This knowledge feeds the planning for protection and resilience.

CMI focuses on mapping and understanding the roles, priorities, and perspectives of IOs, NGOs, the private sector, authorities and local communities. This helps ensure that military operations are informed, culturally sensitive, and aligned with the broader societal context.

Together, CFI and CMI transform CIMIC from a set of coordination tasks into a tool for a deeper understanding of the operating environment. They reveal who holds informal authority, whose voices are overlooked, and how men and women experience conflict differently. Ignoring these dynamics is like watching only the ball—you may act quickly, but you miss the full play.

CFI and CMI also shape responses to non-kinetic threats. Gender-aware analysis revealed patterns in which women leaders and activists are targeted by disinformation and online abuse. This understanding guided protective measures, strengthened social cohesion, and blunted adversary influence campaigns. WPS-informed CIMIC thus contributes to “deterrence by resilience”: robust, cohesive, and informed communities are less vulnerable to coercion and manipulation.

Ultimately, CFI and CMI demonstrate how WPS becomes operationally meaningful. Internal inclusion builds the Alliance’s capacity and legitimacy; external integration ensures that this capacity translates into effective action on the ground, enhancing civilian protection, situational awareness, and strategic resilience.

### Ukraine

**Lessons from Ukraine illustrate the operational importance of this approach. Civilian resilience—often maintained through women’s networks—has proven decisive in sustaining logistics, communication, and morale. Women have led humanitarian responses, coordinated information flows, and maintained local governance during bombardment. Military and humanitarian organisations in Ukraine used these insights to protect corridors, prioritise medical and civilian routes, and tailor information campaigns. Recognising these dynamics allowed the military to support a resilient society more effectively.**

## Conclusion: Seeing the Whole Field

**Anniversaries are not endpoints but moments of renewal.** The 25th anniversary of the WPS agenda reminds NATO that commitment must go beyond policy. In Europe today, war is again being waged with brutal force. Great-power rivalry shapes strategic calculations, and emerging threats—from terrorism to cyberattacks to disinformation—blur the boundaries between peace and conflict. As NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte noted, the Alliance must take greater responsibility for its own defence than it has in the past decade.

**WPS requires deep internalisation, foresight, and the ability to act ethically under pressure. Internally, WPS strengthens leadership, accountability, and institutional trust. Gender-responsive leadership builds cohesion and credibility, qualities that reinforce deterrence as much as military capability. Externally, WPS sharpens NATO's understanding of the civilian environment, improving situational awareness, protection of civilians, and resilience. Lessons from Ukraine make this tangible: women's networks sustained governance and communication, while gender-informed analysis improved responses to vulnerabilities and threats.**

Military effectiveness, like **Crujff's football, is both art and science.** The science provides structure, encompassing data collection, mapping, and analytical frameworks. The art lies in perception: ethical awareness, empathy, and the intuitive reading of human dynamics. When both converge, WPS becomes a strategic advantage by enhancing foresight, reinforcing legitimacy, and transforming deterrence from a posture of power to one of understanding.

The synergy between internal inclusion and external engagement amplifies NATO's effectiveness. A force that embodies WPS values internally can better read and influence its operating environment, turning credibility into a strategic advantage. In this sense, power rests not only on weapons but also on legitimacy and the ability to anticipate and adapt to changing circumstances.

**Crujff's insight remains the perfect metaphor: you only see it when you get it.**

NATO's next phase of WPS must strive for that depth of understanding—where inclusion and ethics are not external obligations but internal reflexes. To “see the whole field” is to grasp the human, ethical, and societal dimensions that shape every operation. Defence and football share a common truth: success depends not only on strength but also on vision.

**After 25 years, the enduring lesson of WPS is that you win not by chasing the ball, but by understanding the game.**

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