



gender action for peace and security

Launch of the UK's 5th National Action Plan on Women Peace and Security

1. Introduction

On Thursday, 23rd Feb 2023, Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS) and its members welcomed the publication of the UK Government's 5th National Action Plan (NAP) on Women Peace and Security (WPS), and were pleased to attend and participate in the launch of the NAP at the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). GAPS and its members welcome the consultative nature of the current NAP's development, as well as the strong representation from civil society at the NAP launch, including the opportunity for Eva Tabbasam, GAPS Director, to speak. The consultations held prior to publication and CSO participation at the launch provided the UK Government an opportunity to learn directly from Women's Rights Organisations (WROs) and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), including those implementing the WPS agenda at national and local levels within focus countries.

2. Initial Reflections on the NAP

a. Policy Coherence

GAPS is pleased to see recognition of the importance of policy coherence throughout the NAP and welcomes reference to the need for cohesion between the NAP and the Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative (PSVI) and recently updated Integrated Review (IR), as well as the role of the NAP in operationalising the MOD Joint Service Publication 985 on Human Security in Defence and the FCDO Women and Girls Strategy. We hope to see the same for the Strategic Conflict Framework and refresh of the Integrated Review.

b. Domestic Implementation

GAPS welcomes the recognition that a domestic approach is beneficial to the overall commitment to WPS in the NAP, along with the recognition that foreign and domestic policies do not operate in isolation. This move to include a domestic approach to WPS is necessary to ensure the UK's commitments to women and girls on, within and across its borders are in line with the protection of rights they are advocating for internationally.

GAPS is pleased to see the commitments made on addressing Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) in the UK holistically, included in the NAP, and to see both the Home Office and Ministry of Justice identified as responsible lead departments for meeting these commitments. However, the policy and financial commitments for the domestic strand of VAWG are not new and it is not clear how it will be accounted for under WPS spending. It is also not clear how this commitment applies to each of the four nations. While GAPS welcome reference to a strategy on violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland, which to date has never had one, it is important to clarify how such a commitment can be extended to all four nations. It is also important to clarify how action can be accounted for under the NAP, when strategies on

violence against women and girls form part of devolved Programmes for Government and policy frameworks.

Whilst we welcome the overall strength of strategic objective 2 on GBV, we note that the only reference to the Home Office having a role in tackling VAWG across borders is through funding for the Home Office's Support for Migrant Victims Scheme and the joint Home Office and FCDO Forced Marriage Unit. This is disappointing as the Support for the Migrant Victims Scheme solely provides limited financial support but does not address the fact that having insecure status, very often caused by the perpetrators, is the main reason why migrant women do not trust they can safely report domestic and other forms of violence. In addition, the scheme is not on a statutory footing. To improve its support to migrant women the Government should withdraw its reservation to Article 59 of the Istanbul Convention and grant residence to survivors whose immigration status depends on an abusive partner. Although some progress has been made in this area, a commitment to addressing VAWG in the UK must be extended to all women and girls.

In addition, the NAP does not address wider issues of protecting the rights of refugees, asylum seekers and victims of modern slavery. The wider policy context in the UK, including the compliant environment - previously known as the hostile environment - two-tier asylum system, Rwanda plan, detention of women and girl survivors of GBV and the restrictions to family reunification for refugee women and girls, are all in direct opposition to the work the UK is doing on the WPS and PSVI agendas. The recently announced 'Illegal Migration Bill' further criminalises those seeking sanctuary in the UK who are forced to travel through illegal and dangerous routes because there are no safe alternatives: of the focus countries of the NAP none, except in a very limited way for Ukraine and Afghanistan, have safe routes for women to claim asylum. The rhetoric about young men seeking asylum ignores that women and girls disproportionately use family reunion routes and therefore rely on relatives to travel first. Particularly as the NAP is now owned and implemented by the Home Office and MoJ, it is essential to address the dissonance between these approaches.

GAPS strongly welcomes the inclusion of the Northern Ireland Office as a joint owner of the NAP as well as the commitment to recognise and promote the work of women peacebuilders in Northern Ireland. We hope that throughout the NAP's implementation, this new inclusion of Northern Ireland will enable the use of gendered approaches to legacy issues and processes for dealing with the past, so that gender equitable peace is advanced, as identified and driven by women-led civil society. In particular, we hope this can enable a new, gender responsive approach to peacebuilding overall, as this is vital to ensure a sustainable future, and create a framework where women can play a full and equal leadership role. Much of the discourse on peace and legacy builds on patriarchal social norms, overlooking the vital role of women's leadership both during the conflict and beyond. The language and concepts of WPS can significantly contribute to new conversations, potentially underpinning new solutions based on gender equality, community engagement and shared leadership.

c. Civil Society

GAPS welcomes the inclusion of Strategic Partnerships in the implementation of the NAP and the commitment to prioritising civil society as a strategic partner, with GAPS being recognised as such. We recognise the inclusion of measuring the percentage of funding that is attributed directly to local CSOs as strategic partners within the focus country model; this is a positive step in developing long-term partnerships.

To ensure that strategic partnerships developed during the implementation period of this NAP are meaningful, GAPS recommends adopting principles of solidarity and accompaniment of CSOs, specifically WROs, women human rights defenders (WHRDs) and women

peacebuilders, by building mutual, equal, respectful, and committed partnerships and focusing on strengthening each organisation's capacities, including for Girls' Rights Organisations (GROs). GAPS is pleased to see the recognition of the [Beyond Consultations tool](#) as central to supporting and protecting civil society as a key UK strategic partner, we look forward to working with and supporting the UK Government throughout the implementation of this new NAP.

GAPS would be pleased to provide input in the design of future consultations. This consultative work should be continued to outline how the NAP will work in practice to identify stakeholders who understand local gender dynamics best, including working with local community, girl, women, LGBTQIA+ and youth-led groups from diverse backgrounds. Actively identifying relevant stakeholders will ensure the delivery of the NAP effectively listens to the self-identified priorities of women peacebuilders, activists, WHRDs and WROs, ensuring both localisation and the power shift needed for successful implementation.

d. Language

GAPS welcomes the recognition of the additional and overlapping barriers and challenges specific groups may face due to their identities, particularly LGBTQIA+ persons, those from racial or ethnic minorities and those with disabilities as well as the recognition of the impact of masculinity and power dynamics on violence and experiences of conflict. It is positive to see a focus on the multiple and overlapping forms of discrimination women, girls and LGBTQIA+ persons face. GAPS recommend the UK Government explicitly prioritises this as an intersectional approach that addresses the discrimination and prevailing power relations that contribute to conflict and insecurity.

GAPS particularly welcomes the first inclusion of LGBT+ persons in a UK WPS NAP, an essential step in ensuring the protection of their rights. Through the implementation of the NAP, it would be beneficial to move towards seeing LGBT+ persons as peacebuilding actors, not just victims of violence and insecurity.

e. Conflict Prevention and Humanitarian Action

Conflict prevention should be a leading component of all strategic objectives and is critical to delivering on the broader aims of the Women, Peace and Security agenda. GAPS welcome the recognition that gender dynamics vary between contexts and that conflict and emergency situations can offer opportunities to challenge traditional gender norms and roles, where they prevent or limit women and girls from participating in political, educational or economic activities. However, we would like to see an explicit recognition of the role that gender norms play in driving conflict and a commitment to building the UK Government's capacity to apply gender-sensitive conflict analysis (GSCA) across all NAP strategic objectives. Working to transform these gendered root causes of conflict and violence should be a priority for all UK Government programmes, policies, and actions in FCAS and at the national level in the next 5 years of implementing the NAP. This will be a positive step towards building a gender-transformative approach and enable the more meaningful participation of women in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and humanitarian response and decision-making.

f. Funding

GAPS have consistently advocated through consultation with the FCDO on the importance of funding being set out as a key strategic objective within this NAP. A commitment to funding WPS work is embedded in the architecture of the agenda, with three WPS resolutions referring to funding. We are disappointed to see this NAP does not feature a budget that details WPS spending commitments, which would provide clarity and stability through the 5 year implementation period.

GAPS recognises and welcomes sustained funding via the What Works to Prevent Violence Programme, investment in the Global Survivors Fund, funding PSVI and allocations to WPS through CSSF. However, these funding commitments (set out in the new NAP) do not go far enough. GAPS have called for funding to extend beyond this to meaningfully support and fund WROs and CSOs directly. Whilst we acknowledge the funding commitments to CSOs through the focus country model, we are concerned that this approach lacks the flexibility that community-led CSOs need. As the UK Government implements this new NAP, it must commit to direct long-term, accessible, core, flexible funding to enable local and grassroots WROs, women peacebuilders, CSOs and GROs to undertake their vital work. This type of flexible funding enables groups to respond to their self-identified community needs even when the external conflict context changes.

g. Arms Trade Treaty

GAPS are disappointed to see that the NAP does not address the UK's national and international arms export obligations, which is a key component in realising the WPS agenda and ensuring policy coherence across the UK Government. Decades of evidence demonstrate a clear link between the arms trade and gender-based violence. The proliferation of arms contributes to a culture of violence against women, both during and after armed conflicts. It is also correlated with an increase in gender inequality and hinders women's economic empowerment and access to political agency. The UK, however, is a major global defence exporter, with the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia, being the main export market for UK arms. This glaring omission from the NAP undermines the UK's WPS efforts globally and stands in contrast to obligations stemming from instruments such as the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), which includes provisions limiting the transfer of weapons and ammunition where there is a risk that they will be used to commit or facilitate serious acts of gender-based violence.

3. Reflections on the Strategic Objectives

While GAPS welcomes the inclusion of the strategic objectives, it is important that the NAP ties the objectives together, making clear the links between them. This is important to ensure that the NAP will not be siloed. Similarly, GAPS is disappointed that some important topics have been predominantly limited to the delivery of the NAP rather than represented more consistently in the objectives and their outcomes, such as conflict prevention, climate change and engaging WROs. Whilst GAPS note that these topics have been signposted throughout the NAP we recommend concrete commitments be included in the delivery of the strategic objectives.

4. Focus Countries

As the NAP recognises, the UK Government's approach to WPS must apply to all foreign, development and defence policy as well as all FCAS and to institutions that the UK Government works with that work in and on FCAS. Therefore, GAPS welcomes the commitment within the NAP to monitor countries at risk of instability and conflict to ensure the UK Government's approach to WPS is responsive to rising insecurity in non-focus countries. It will be important for the Government to be transparent about how it plans to monitor and decide on new focus countries.

GAPS also recognise that in some contexts, insecurity and conflict are heightened. Therefore, GAPS welcomes the continuation and increase of focus countries. This will be beneficial for NAP implementation and the reach and scale of the impact the NAP will have. The increase in countries allows the UK Government to make commitments to and report on a broader number of countries that are at different periods within the conflict cycle. As the NAP has expanded its portfolio of focus countries GAPS would like to encourage the UK Government

to commit to translating bilateral plans into the official languages of the focus countries so that civil society groups can maintain effective oversight of UK activities and commitments. GAPS would also like to encourage the UK Government to agree funding for focus countries for the NAP implementation period, this will help drive sustained progress and encourage better early planning.

5. Implementation and looking forward

Implementing the NAP requires a sustained collective approach across HMG. GAPS is pleased to see this recognition set out clearly within the implementation commitments. As GAPS have recommended in previous years, commitment to WPS expands beyond the NAP, we would like to see recognition of WPS and gender in all conflict, security and peacebuilding policies, programmes and strategies, including the Integrated Review, the Women and Girls strategy and in the implementation of the International Development Strategy. We recognise the commitment to ensure this through strengthening WPS capabilities across HMG, utilising the CSSF WPS helpdesk that provides analysis and research on WPS to help deliver excellent programming and policy analysis.

Although GAPS are pleased to see positive movements in the NAP towards a holistic approach to WPS that centres women's experiences and champions the work of WROs in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, we are also concerned that the challenging implementing environment in the UK and within Government will be a barrier to the full implementation of this NAP, including its domestic component. The legacy of the FCO/DFID Merger continues to raise concerns that UK Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) becomes a vehicle for UK foreign policy, trade and political objectives rather than responding to where the need is most acute. This movement towards an approach that centres these objectives calls into question where the WPS agenda fits in this new FCDO world and raises concerns that the commitment WPS makes to women and girls in fragile and conflict-affected contexts may either be co-opted through securitised approaches to WPS or simply pushed out in a department where foreign affairs, trade and political ties become the driving forces of activities. In addition, the curbing of the rights of persons seeking safety in the UK will continue to undermine the NAP efforts to protection and support.

Further, as previously discussed, funding for the implementation of this NAP is essential, which is increasingly challenging in the context of substantial and ongoing cuts to the UK's ODA, with £1.7 billion worth of ODA cuts expected by March 2023, including an expected 30% cuts to bilateral aid, as well as potential further funding cuts to multilateral aid. This is the third major cut in three years. Prior to these expected cuts, UK ODA cuts have already had a severe and disproportionate impact on women and girls and funding for civil society organisations is decreasing. We are also seeing an increasingly challenging environment for FCDO Country teams who are working to implement WPS activities in FCAS on a shoestring budget. All of the above creates an incredibly difficult environment to meet the ambitious commitments set out in the UK's 5th NAP.

6. Working Together Going Forward

GAPS looks forward to working with the UK Government on the implementation of the new NAP and its monitoring and evaluation. We hope to build on the strong relationships we have with the Government and look forward to providing support and scrutiny. GAPS also looks forward to bringing the GAPS network and its global partnerships to collaborate with the Government to identify opportunities to further the integration of Women, Peace and Security into Government strategies, policies and programmes on peace, conflict, security and stability.

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