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Advancing Peace and Security: The Role of Gender Advisors

Evaluating Strategies, Progress, and Lessons Learned

Rachel George, Jessica M. Smith, and Carla Koppell

Overview

Among the influential outcomes of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, which helped launch the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda in 2000, has been the expansion of dedicated gender advisor positions in governments and multilateral institutions.[1]

Given women's persistent underrepresentation in peace and security,[2] the gendered impacts of conflict,[3] and evidence that addressing these issues increases the likelihood and sustainability of peace and conflict resolution,[4] gender advisors emerged as critical roles to help organizations better understand and address the needs of women and girls in their activities, policies, and programs. Sitting within a variety of institutions, these positions provide expert guidance on gender issues across peace and security policy and programming. Their proliferation within organizations that influence peace and development outcomes has been a hallmark of the 25 years since the start of the Agenda.

The number of gender advisor positions in relevant national and multilateral fora, as well as within private foundations and civil society, has grown substantially over the past 25 years of multilateral commitments to WPS. But recent political changes have threatened some of these posts, as institutions slash offices, programs, and funds where gender advising was once featured,[5] even as organizations increasingly recognize the centrality of gender equality for productive peace,[6] sustainable development,[7] and economic prosperity.[8] With growing evidence of these benefits, many development and security institutions are seeking to maximize how institutional expertise on WPS contributes to effective policies and programs, especially those facing dramatic cuts in resources.

Despite growth in the number of gender advisors and their centrality to contemporary peace and development practice, there is limited documentation available on how to maximize their impact. Existing studies that predate recent cutbacks paint a partial picture, indicating the importance of supportive factors such as funding, training, and leadership, but substantial gaps remain in understanding the experiences and effectiveness of these positions.

Inspired by Commitment 2025 (C-25),[9] an initiative led by Finland and Spain to track and advance progress on WPS by 2025, this brief analyzes what is known about factors that support effective gender advising. Led by the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security (GIWPS), the findings are based on desk research and targeted consultations conducted

in the lead-up to the 25th Anniversary of UNSCR 1325, including a June 2025 expert workshop that gathered gender advisors from across sectors in Washington, D.C., with hybrid global participation. The brief outlines key findings from this research and the related consultations, identifying common practices and factors that support the effectiveness of gender advisors. It also summarizes insights garnered from expert consultations about how organizations might prioritize the integration of gender expertise in light of cutbacks in global development and WPS.

What role do gender advisors play in peace and security?

Gender advisors, although diverse in their practices and titles, are generally responsible for providing guidance, training, and technical support on issues of gender equality and social inclusion to support an organization's work and mandate. Often, their role aims to help organizations with "gender mainstreaming," or the practice of ensuring that a "gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy-making."[10] The potential benefits of these activities are wide-ranging, given the aforementioned evidence of gender sensitivity for improved peace, prosperity, and development outcomes.

A review of job postings for "gender advisor" roles reveals common tasks that include support for program development, training and capacity building, mainstreaming, monitoring, evaluation, and learning, and other areas (table 1).

These positions operate at multiple entry points, including advising at the technical or working level, the program design level, and the institutional level. While the diversity of their activities can make it difficult to collectively assess their impacts, this report highlights what is known about how these positions have made a documented impact. It also provides lessons on how to maximize the impact of these roles, drawing on insights from experts who have served in these positions.

Table 1. Core duties of gender advisor roles

Gender Advisors: Common Responsibilities
Applying gender perspectives and expertise to program development
Institutionalizing gender mainstreaming
Developing gender-focused working groups
Strengthening gender perspectives within monitoring, evaluation, and learning practices
Training and providing technical support for staff on gender-related issues
Documenting good practices for gender-sensitive policy and practice
Sharing lessons learned on gender-related issues across the organization, for example, in relation to program or project design, or in relation to monitoring and evaluation

Even in offices and institutions that lack a mandate focused on gender or social inclusion, gender advisors can enable more impactful interventions using methods that improve operational effectiveness and program success (table 2).

Table 2. How gender advisors strengthen defense, development, and diplomacy

Reach	Gender expertise in program design, delivery, and monitoring can ensure staff are attuned to the needs of partners and populations they are trying to reach. This can improve community relationships and perceived legitimacy, which in turn enhances the likelihood of effective engagement.[11]
Harm Mitigation	Gender expertise across a policy or program lifecycle can avoid the potential for activities to cause harm, for example, when policies and programs ignore existing gendered norms, which can increase the risks of intrapersonal or societal violence.[12]
Information	Gender expertise to guide information collection and dissemination, such as sex-disaggregated data, can help fine-tune efforts to measure potential impacts of programs and interventions on different members of communities.[13]

The consultations found that gender advisors, or other positions with a similar mandate to bring gender perspectives into institutions, come from diverse backgrounds. Some are technical specialists trained in gender equality and social inclusion, while others are sector or policy specialists who gain skills in gender analysis on the job. Some roles have gender equality as a main priority, though others apply a gender perspective to additional issues of focus, such as wider work on violence prevention or reduction, peace negotiations, or security reform, or in relation to a country or geographic focus. Positions differ, too, in terms of seniority and institutionalization, with some organizations relying on contractors and others embedding gender-specific technical positions at different levels within the organization. These positions also vary in terms of available resourcing, the breadth of their portfolios, and the specific operational environments they navigate, from humanitarian crises to peacebuilding initiatives. Each of these factors can contribute to the scope and impact of gender advisors' work.

Despite these differences, these roles have become increasingly common today, with their impacts visible in the reports of major national, regional and international organizations that document diverse contributions (table 3).

Table 3. Illustrating impact: Gender advisors in action

Defense
Gender advisors in defense agencies are growing in number, supporting a range of activities to make military missions, operations, and activities more effective. • NATO has expanded the institutionalization of gender advisors, from "just a handful" in the early 2010s, to a "fully established and financed network of Military Gender Advisors across the civilian and military elements of its institutions and field commands."[14] Within NATO, the International Military Staff Office of the Gender Advisor "supports the operationalization of gender by providing strategic advice on the implementation of the WPS Agenda at NATO, and by supporting the integration of the gender perspective into NATO missions, operations, and activities."[15]

- In the U.S., the Department of Defense took steps to operationalize a WPS perspective in military operations through dedicated experts in each of its combatant commands. U.S. defense officials have noted that this work has helped improve military effectiveness through various activities that expand the reach and impact of military operations, thereby enhancing U.S. national security.[16]

- In Japan, since January 2024, a Taskforce on WPS within the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in collaboration with the Ministry of Defense formulated the "Ministry of Defense Women, Peace and Security Promotion Plan" to strengthen the implementation system for its WPS commitments and goals, which included plans to assign gender advisors to "facilitate the WPS initiatives in the agency through a comprehensive and cross-functional approach."[17] Since then, WPS experts have been deployed within the Ministry of Defense for activities including WPS seminars, capacity building and support for WPS initiatives by partner countries and organizations, and to develop a WPS handbook of internal case studies and lesson learning to guide effective programs.[18]

Development

Gender advisors have become prominent within development agencies, helping policymakers and implementers improve the reach and impact of economic, social, and political development programs.

- The UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO) has invested in expanding its cadre of gender advisors, with "skilling up an enhanced global network of gender and equalities advocates and advisers, across all disciplines, including through the FCDO's International Academy," a feature of its 2023-2030 International Women and Girls Strategy.[19]

- The UN Development Program has also expanded its corps of gender advisors. An assessment found that integrating gender advisors into project teams in Pakistan, for example, led to more inclusive development outcomes, particularly in areas like poverty reduction and environmental sustainability.[20] This assessment found that the presence of gender advisors facilitated the identification and addressing of gender-specific barriers, resulting in improved program effectiveness and greater empowerment of women in the targeted communities.

- Within the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), before its 2025 closure, experts remarked that gender advisor positions within USAID missions, regional missions, country offices, and headquarters were "key" to driving effective policies.[21]

Diplomacy

Diplomatic institutions deploy gender advisors across issues and engagements, working to leverage the benefits of more equal spaces for more effective political negotiations, conflict resolution, and peace outcomes.

- The European Union has deployed gender advisors in a variety of areas, recognizing the position as a "key player"[22] in supporting the organization's advisory mission to Ukraine (EUAM) as one example. The reported benefits of gender advisors in Ukraine included support to the more than 300 mission staff, who had varied knowledge of gender equality and its role in peace and security, to equip them with skills and knowledge to improve program effectiveness.

- The United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) is another example where gender advisors have grown in number to support the organization's mission. The UN DPPA notes these posts have helped to "strengthen the gender responsiveness of its peacebuilding commission, peacebuilding fund, and partnership work under the sustaining peace mandate."[23]

What sets gender advisors up for success?

Given the growth of these roles, what is known about how to optimize their effectiveness? Many gender advisors consulted agreed that advancing gender mainstreaming—whereby gender expertise is integrated across an organization alongside dedicated institutional functions devoted to gender and WPS—is critical for WPS effectiveness. But advisors remain divided on the appropriate balance between mainstreaming efforts and preserving dedicated aspects of the work that are separated rather than mainstreamed throughout an organization.[24]

Advisors stress the importance of ensuring that work on WPS is not relegated to the margins within institutions or isolated as too niche or inaccessible to engage in everyday practice. Structural positioning can matter significantly—in the security sector, for example, gender advisors consulted find that mainstreaming is often more effective when the advisor reports directly to the commander in charge of a military unit, and has direct ties to the mission or a military task and related planning. To help ensure that gender issues remain central in organizations rather than marginalized, development practitioners, for example, advised establishing budgetary minimums for programs to bring in activities to benefit women and girls and address gender inequality, and requiring targeted reporting across institutions on gender-related impacts and activities, with gender advisors monitoring and guiding implementation.[25]

Available research, though limited, finds that several factors contribute to gender advisors' success and impact in their roles, which were also validated and expanded on through our expert consultations.[26] These common supportive factors identified through the desk research and consultations include the following:

- **Institutionalization** of gender advisor positions into directly hired staff roles to enable longer-term impact and influence
- **Resourcing** that enables gender advisors to substantively advance their missions
- **Opportunities to socialize leadership** and staff through regular and cumulative **training** and other formal and informal engagements
- **Sufficient seniority** of advisory roles to enable them to **influence** other actors
- **Effective strategies for gender mainstreaming,** including through formal and informal channels
- **Skills and capacity building** for advisors themselves, to strengthen their own gender expertise, as well as their expertise on their institution and the politics around their sectors and organizations, and to support talent pipelines
- **Support for "case-making"** to continuously collect and share evidence about how WPS improves operational effectiveness, legitimacy, or brings other benefits to build support for the Agenda internally

Experts we consulted highlight that factors and actions to maximize the effectiveness of advisors are context-specific and require a deep knowledge of the institution and the sector in which they operate. A number of common factors and preferred approaches to support advisors surfaced from consultations (table 4).

BOX 1. FROM PROOF OF CONCEPT TO INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

A gender advisor working in defense remarked that hiring external, temporary consultants with expertise on WPS is critical for translating gender-related work and perspectives into the military language and concepts of operational effectiveness, particularly in the early years of implementing WPS for a defense institution. The defense institution was hesitant to dedicate resources for full-time civilian WPS personnel until it understood the purpose, role, and impact of those staff, explained in terms all members of the team could comprehend.

The external consultants demonstrated the operational value of WPS, which made it easier for the defense institution to justify future budget requests for full-time WPS staff positions. This proof of concept enabled the defense institution to secure resources for these positions, reduce its dependency on external consultants, and grow its full-time civilian WPS staff roles to meet the operational needs of its military components.

A gender advisor we consulted shared that the combination of effective funding paired with substantial institutional and operational knowledge by the gender advisor had "major effects," enabling the transition to more proactive, impactful work across the defense institutions' military operations with the "effective (wo)man power" behind it.

Table 4. Strategies for gender advisor success

Mechanism	Strategic Approaches
Institutionalization	**Staff positions,** embedded in teams, rather than short-term consultant roles, tend to enable deeper impact and advance learning and long-term efforts (although consultancies can offer flexibility and still have valuable impact—see box 1).
Resourcing	**Dedicated** and **consistent resources** can ensure predictable budgeting commitments that enable multi-year programming.
Training	Multi-year **training and capacity-building programs** enable follow-up and cumulative engagement, as well as **opportunities for local partners** to discuss insights and practical benefits that shape gender work, which can be critical. When resources are limited, functions where training has the most impact should be prioritized. Overly theoretical, top-down approaches are often seen as burdensome rather than strategic, and one-off sessions are far less effective than repeated training.

Leadership and Seniority	Strategic **leadership positions** or **access to leadership** and **high-level support** within the organizational context can ensure gender issues are not relegated to the margins. Expanding **men's participation** as gender advisors and in gender mainstreaming work can also deepen institutional buy-in, influence, and engagement to avoid gender work's perception as a "niche" or "women-only" activity.
Mainstreaming	Dedicated gender expertise and activities are most effective when matched with substantial investments in mainstreaming. This can include **developing sectoral strategies** and institutionalized touchpoints and strategies for gender-related work as part of existing sectoral teams, rather than building gender activities outside of existing programs. **Mandating gender and social inclusion analyses and considerations** at all levels of decision-making and through the program cycle can formalize attention to gender in daily practices.
Skills and Capacity Building	Gender advisors tend to excel when they are given extensive leadership development, authority, and technical **advancement opportunities across sectoral areas** and access to networks to better understand their institution, improving their potential influence. Institutions can also **integrate WPS objectives and gender-responsive outcomes into the performance reviews and accountability frameworks** of senior leaders and relevant staff, to enable gender-related metrics to influence accountability across the institution, not only gender advisors. Some suggest "**dual-hat**" roles that are not solely dedicated to gender advising can sometimes increase credibility and can help bring gender expertise into new areas, especially if a gender advisory role is combined with roles and responsibilities perceived as more influential.
Case-Making	Gender advisors who have resources to **collect and disseminate gender-related data** and to document how activities that incorporate a gender lens improve operational impact can secure increased support for their work.

Applying these principles in practice often requires flexibility and iteration, especially where a lack of resources or constraining political contexts make delivering this work challenging. Advisors shared examples where they have seen the impact of these strategies, including in conditions where advocating for WPS has been constrained (boxes 1 and 2).

BOX 2. FLEXIBILITY AND LOCAL ENGAGEMENT ENABLE WPS IN REPRESSIVE ENVIRONMENTS

A gender advisor working in development in Afghanistan noted the vital role that access to local partners played in enabling the organization to pivot when gender-related activities became forbidden by the government. The advisor remarked that conditions supporting success required gender advisors to have a good understanding of local conditions and politics, gained through deep and extensive consultation with grassroots organizations. This guidance helped them pivot their work to ensure they could continue to support WPS, while framing it in new ways to increase the possibility of its continuity under the latest Taliban government.

What stands in the way of gender advisor impact?

While advisors shared many promising practices, they also raised common challenges. Deeply connected to the areas that can enhance their work are factors that impede effectiveness. Challenges include:

- **Rotational** and **consultant-led roles** can undermine long-term buy-in and relationships and reduce capacity to influence long-term budgeting. Short-term flexibility can be beneficial in some cases, such as where there is not the capacity or buy-in for institutionalized roles.
- **Insufficient** and/or **inconsistent resources** undermine the ability to meaningfully advance the Agenda.
- **Short-term training activities** without continued reinforcement can undermine long-term capacity of teams to meaningfully pursue gender-related activities.
- **Weak political buy-in** at the top undermines advisors' ability to have sufficient influence on their institutions.
- **"Gender islands"** that **isolate** gender issues to one team limit opportunities for shared ownership and buy-in.
- **Inconsistent backgrounds** and **insufficient technical training** for advisors on both gender and wider sectoral and institutional issues are detrimental to success.
- **Lack of institutional buy-in** for and **knowledge** of the concrete benefits of WPS perspectives and approaches for institutional goals and outcomes.

Common across these reflections is a clear recognition of the importance of networks, positionality, and resources (box 3). As one advisor put it, "It is important that gender advisors are not relegated to 'gender islands',"

because their deep integration and connection into sectoral issues and networks is critical to success.

The issue of language is also an important factor shaping the ability of gender advisors to influence their organizations and advance their work. One advisor shared that their work requires thoughtful engagement that brings people along to influence them and does not intimidate or exclude them from conversation. Avoiding overly technical language and approaches can also facilitate better integration and uptake.

Another expert said that one challenge is that gender advisors "cannot be everywhere at one time" and cannot be "everything to everyone." Efforts to ensure gender advisors can strategically prioritize to maximize their impact are important (box 4). Actions advisors suggested that can help them with capacity constraints include:

- **Strengthening non-gender–focused teams' and individuals' skills** to integrate gender perspectives, reducing reliance on a single advisor or small team
- **Providing staff training** on WPS issues to prevent gender expertise from being siloed
- **Building gender advisors' capacity in broader sectoral issues** to better apply gender perspectives across programs
- **Expanding gender advisors' networks and access** to enable opportunities for strategic influence
- **Monitoring and learning from advisors' work** to **refine priorities and goals** to maximize impact within available resources

BOX 3. EFFECTIVE NETWORKS ENSURE GENDER ADVISING HAS A SEAT AT THE TABLE

A gender advisor working in development and diplomacy remarked that their work often faced roadblocks when they were seen either as a burden or a "box-ticking" exercise by those with competing priorities. They grew more powerful by expanding their networks and working with teams to better understand the institution's politics. Their influence relied heavily on personal relationships, which took time to build. Longer-term staff roles can help facilitate this engagement. In the case of consultants, setting up informal mentoring and networks and providing opportunities to learn about internal political environments and access political actors can improve their effectiveness when negotiating spaces where existing understanding of and support for WPS is limited.

Another expert remarked that gender advisors sometimes risk being seen as "isolated" when gender issues are maintained by gender teams, and interconnections and exchanges on gender issues are limited. Such reflections highlight the importance of establishing formal and informal networks and exchanges to maximize gender equality, allowing experts to serve as force multipliers for peace and security work and avoid issue isolation.

BOX 4. PROMISING PRACTICE: WPS HELPDESK

The UK FCDO WPS Helpdesk[27] is a dedicated service that provides expert, on-demand support to government departments working on conflict, security, and development issues. Established under the UK Conflict, Stability, and Security Fund (CSSF), the Helpdesk aims to enhance the integration of gender perspectives into foreign policy and programming. It leverages partnerships with civil society groups and academia, including through management by the NGO Saferworld in partnership with Conciliation Resources, Gender Action for Peace and Security UK (GAPS), the University of Durham, and the Women International Peace Centre (WIPC), and through supportive funding by the CSSF.

In 2024–2025, the WPS Helpdesk produced a report analyzing the intersection of transnational threats—such as cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, climate change, and organized crime—with the WPS Agenda. This report was instrumental in shaping the UK's new National Action Plan (NAP) for 2023–2027, which for the first time includes transnational threats as a strategic objective.[28] Advisors consulted highlighted how the Helpdesk's analysis provided evidence-based insights that have been crucial for integrating gender considerations into the UK's approach to emerging global security challenges.

What strategies support the influence of gender advisors?

Gender advisors have made significant contributions to efforts across defense, development, and diplomacy, though much of this work lacks formal documentation and is not celebrated widely within the institutions they serve. This is partly because their influence is sometimes informal, or because their contributions cannot be disentangled from other variables and factors that shape overall outcomes. These challenges can become even more difficult when resources for this work are constrained.

Advisors consulted offered a number of reflections on how to maximize the impacts of gender advisors in light of these challenges, including:

- **Invest in continued "case-making" and evidence gathering for WPS.** Gender remains a critical element of peace and security, and there is a continued need for access to up-to-date and detailed data, evidence, and resources to ensure that institutions understand the mechanisms through which attention to gender issues can improve peace and security outcomes and how gender advisors contribute to advancing institutional goals in concrete ways. Investing in case-making and evidence gathering can support gender advisors' effectiveness, ensuring that they are able to advocate internally around the benefits of WPS in terms that resonate with policymakers.

- **Leverage supportive internal and external resources.** Gender advisors highlighted that leveraging existing institutional resources, including gender champions who may have less formalized focus on WPS or gender but include them in their mandate, and support from private organizations and civil society can be especially important lifelines for their work in the face of resource constraints. These partnerships can facilitate exchanges of knowledge, learning, and evidence, and can also create opportunities for consultation and collective influence by gender experts on policymakers and institutions. For example, the U.S. Civil Society Working Group on WPS has helped to facilitate knowledge sharing and mobilize support, and has served as a consultative body for gender advisors from diverse sectors to inform government decision-making.

- **Help gender advisors operate in "politically smart" ways to prioritize their work.** Supporting issue prioritization and political acumen around relevant lexicons and technical knowledge enable gender advisors to develop context-specific goals based on an understanding of where gender and WPS perspectives can increase effectiveness. Enabling consultations with community actors, key leaders, and advisors can ensure an understanding of where the work can be most valuable, feasible, and impactful and enable advisors with limited resources to scale their work for maximum results. In some cases, using broader terminologies, such as local engagement, social inclusion, or human security, can improve the likelihood of buy-in and impact.

- **Enable wider sectoral training and access for gender advisors and gender-related training for technical specialists.** Gender advisors are often stretched thin across organizations and do not have the luxury of large, dedicated programs that focus on WPS. A number of advisors remarked that training, access to sectoral knowledge and networks, and political knowledge have been vital to their success. This support can be especially critical when these advisors are few in number and need to maximize their influence and retainability in organizations with resource constraints. Technical experts should engage with gender advisors from the start when developing programs, and institutions should maximize the ability of gender advisors and gender perspectives to be involved from the start of program design through project and program lifecycles to avoid their inputs being tokenistic.

- **Focus on institutional gender capacity building and mainstreaming outside of specific gender-related roles.** Deepening organizational capacity building to institutionalize gender and WPS perspectives and frameworks is critical, as this builds institutional resilience that enables gender-related work to continue even if gender advisor positions are not hired or maintained. Ensuring staff have goals and responsibilities related to gender equality across the organization is crucial to ensure that gender expertise is not relegated to a few gender-related experts and offices. As one advisor put it, "Having gender advisors is not enough—success is determined by institutions."

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Endnotes

1 We use the term "gender advisor," though a number of other related terms are sometimes used to define these positions or similar roles. The term "gender advisor" can overlap with other roles common in peace and security work such as "women, peace and security (WPS) advisor," "social inclusion advisor," and "social development advisor." These roles can also connect with others not solely focused on gender but that sometimes include similar functions, for example, under titles of "gender/WPS focal point," "gender point of contact," or others.

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