

Webinar summary: Women, Peace and Security: The Role of Women in Peacebuilding in the Eastern Partnership

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Speakers:

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Organizers: ForumCiv and Winnet Sweden as part of the EaP Network.

I. The current state of women's peacebuilding

In the Eastern Partnership region, women are at the forefront of peace efforts at the grassroots level yet remain largely invisible in formal peace processes. Representation in parliaments, official negotiations, and leadership within the security sector remains low—often below 20%. Despite this, women are instrumental in maintaining social cohesion, leading humanitarian responses, and initiating informal dialogues. They often do not frame their work as “peacebuilding” but as activism, community support, or humanitarian action, though it fulfils essential peace functions.

In Azerbaijan, for example, women have long been engaged in community-level peacebuilding despite being largely absent from formal Track 1 peace processes—that is, official negotiations between state actors. Engagement does exist at the Track 1.5 level, where informal dialogue platforms bring together a mix of officials and non-state actors, but participation remains limited and repetitive. Several mixed-gender dialogues coordinated by international bodies continue to involve the same small group of participants, restricting diversity and the inclusion of fresh perspectives.

In Ukraine, the war has further complicated inclusion. While women lead community resilience initiatives and form the backbone of local responses, international actors often avoid discussing gender equality in security reform, assuming it is secondary in times of war. This misunderstanding ignores the very gendered nature of conflict, from disproportionate male conscription and trauma to the caregiving and economic burdens placed on women. Additionally, domestic violence, economic hardship, and disrupted access to education and work have intensified gendered vulnerabilities, particularly among displaced women.

Belarus was also noted as part of the region's peacebuilding landscape, with civil society facing severe repression and thousands of political prisoners in exile, including women. Gender equality is often deprioritized by democratic forces due to competing political urgencies, yet efforts continue to ensure women's rights remain part of the broader regional agenda.

At the policy level, the Eastern Partnership framework now includes a working group on gender equality—a positive step. However, discussions on women's participation in peacebuilding rarely reach the highest political levels in the EU-EaP relationship. Women's rights remain largely absent from EU-level foreign ministers' meetings and other high-level political forums despite growing calls for these issues to become a permanent part of the agenda.

2. Key challenges

- **Exclusion from formal processes**

Women continue to be underrepresented in formal peace negotiations, with zero peace agreements globally in 2023 including women's groups as signatories. Even in informal dialogues, women are often invited only when the agenda is specifically "gendered," rarely as experts on broader peace and security issues. Furthermore, a small number of recurring participants limits the inclusion of younger or regionally diverse voices. Women's peace contributions are still viewed as social rather than political acts.

- **Crackdown on civil society**

In countries like Azerbaijan, civic space has shrunk dramatically. Human rights defenders and women peacebuilders face regular police summons, harassment, and public defamation. The environment is increasingly unsafe for feminist and rights-based work. International actors' caution often results in further isolation of local civil society, especially when invitations to speak or participate are withheld in the name of "protection."

This "protective silence," while well-intentioned, was strongly critiqued as disempowering. They stressed that international actors must let local leaders decide whether to participate, rather than making assumptions on their behalf. Risk should be shared—not shielded—from the activists.

- **Lack of direct funding**

Women's rights organizations in the region face chronic underfunding. In Ukraine, less than 1% of international aid has reached local women-led groups. Long-term, core funding remains elusive, with most support arriving in the form of short-term, restricted projects. This dynamic undermines sustainability and limits impact, particularly during times of crisis. It also limits women-led groups' ability to influence national recovery and EU accession processes.

- **Militarization and gender norms**

The deepening militarization of the region reinforces patriarchal systems. The assumption that peace and security are inherently male domains persists, both locally and within international organizations. Discussions around gender in security settings are often dismissed or delayed, despite the clear need for more inclusive, gender-sensitive approaches. In Ukraine, resistance to gender mainstreaming in security reform stems from perceptions that it undermines wartime priorities.

In addition, rising conservatism among youth in Russian-speaking regions, fuelled by disinformation through social media and online platforms, poses a long-term threat. Research shows that young men in these communities now often hold more regressive

views on gender than their parents, complicating peacebuilding and democratic reform efforts.

- **Institutional fragility and over-reliance on individuals**

Even when gender commitments are made, implementation often depends on the personal initiative of dedicated individuals. Without strong institutional backing, progress remains vulnerable to turnover, burnout, and political shifts. This fragility is evident both within EU institutions and among national governments.

3. Success stories and good practices

- **Women's Dialogue School – Azerbaijan**

A pioneering initiative that trains women in mediation, conflict transformation, and negotiation. The school combines intensive training with mentorship and European fellowships. It aims to bring new, diverse voices into peacebuilding at a time when the same limited cohort dominates informal dialogues. It is especially notable given the shrinking civic space and state repression in Azerbaijan. The programme also fosters cross-generational knowledge sharing and seeks to elevate women into high-level Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues—informal spaces where peacebuilding actors, including civil society, experts, and in some cases officials, engage in trust-building and policy-shaping discussions outside formal negotiations.

- **Young Women Peace Academy – Regional**

An earlier Kvinna till Kvinna initiative, this programme cultivated a network of young women peacebuilders from Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the Western Balkans. Many of its alumni now hold influential positions in civil society, policy, and international diplomacy. The programme's success lay in combining technical training with confidence-building and feminist political consciousness.

- **Task Force on Women, Peace and Security – Armenia**

Initially envisioned as a cross-border initiative, this task force evolved into a powerful national network following the 2020 Karabakh war. Its members now lead local peacebuilding work, liaise with the EU Monitoring Mission, and engage in national-level advocacy—without external funding, driven by commitment and community legitimacy.

- **Unbreakable Points – Ukraine**

In the early days of Russia's 2022 invasion, families of firefighters sought refuge in fire and rescue stations. This grassroots response inspired the creation of over 4,000 government-supported "unbreakable points" across Ukraine—civilian centres offering shelter, electricity, heating, and medical aid. These points primarily support women and children, becoming a cornerstone of Ukraine's civilian resilience infrastructure.

- **Gender-Responsive Leadership – Institutional Reform**

Through the Folke Bernadotte Academy, senior officials from the EU, UN, OSCE, and now national institutions in Ukraine and Moldova receive training in gender-responsive leadership. In Ukraine, ministries involved in reconstruction and EU accession are being trained to make these processes inclusive and gender-aware.

Sweden committed 22.5 million SEK in new funding to UN Women for work in Ukraine, specifically targeting women's leadership in public life and combating sexual and gender-based violence.

- **Global Advocacy – Women’s UN Peace Agenda Initiative and Women’s Baltic Peacebuilding Initiative**

These platforms engage in high-level advocacy, submitting policy papers to CEDAW, challenging UN language shifts that dilute feminist analysis, and calling for institutional reform. Their work includes proposals for a UN General Assembly on Women’s Rights led by grassroots organizations.

4. Recommendations and strategic priorities

- **“Rescue civic space”**

Civil society in several Eastern Partnership countries no longer needs just support—it requires protection. The international community must speak out against repression, bring local voices into diplomatic and global platforms, respond through démarches when human rights defenders are targeted, and avoid “protective silence” that further isolates vulnerable actors. Embassies and donors must be held accountable when they fail to act. Women human rights defenders must be recognized and protected through diplomatic and public channels. Civic actors should be involved in decision-making from the start—not merely consulted afterward. Silence isolates, visibility is protection.

- **Adopt and implement National Action Plans**

Azerbaijan remains the only South Caucasus country without a national action plan on UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which recognises the vital role of women in peace and security and calls for their full participation in conflict prevention, resolution, and post-conflict rebuilding. This is despite years of civil society drafting and advocacy. Regional symmetry, accountability, and meaningful implementation of National Action Plans are urgently needed. These must include clear mechanisms for monitoring, budgeting, and inclusive participation, be co-created with civil society—especially women’s rights organizations—and address emerging threats like climate change, digital repression, and displacement.

- **Sustain women’s movements through core funding**

Peacebuilding is a long-term effort with long-term returns. To strengthen resilience and strategic influence, women’s rights organizations need flexible, core, and multi-year funding—not just project grants. They must be recognized as political actors, not only service providers, and be equipped with resources for both rapid response and long-term agenda-setting. Investing in feminist movements means investing in durable peace and democratic resilience.

- **Embed intersectionality and promote diverse leadership**

Peacebuilding must reflect the lived realities of women across lines of age, ethnicity, religion, disability, displacement, class, and sexual orientation. Processes must intentionally avoid tokenism, expand beyond the same familiar faces, prioritize the inclusion of marginalized voices, and treat intersectional analysis as a core expertise—not a niche concern.

- **Shift the lens: from capacity to power**
Labelling exclusion as a “capacity gap” misplaces responsibility onto women. The real barrier is structural inequality and lack of access to power. Leadership and institutions must be held accountable for inclusion. Gender equality should be a leadership mandate, not a training objective. The issue isn’t women’s capacity—it’s their access to decision-making.
- **Broaden the definition of peacebuilding**
Peacebuilding doesn’t just happen at the negotiation table—it happens in classrooms, communities, and grassroots organizing. Feminist peacebuilding recognizes these everyday actions as political. Support must prioritize intra-societal dialogue and bottom-up reconciliation—not just elite diplomacy.
- **Institutionalize gender in political frameworks**
Gender must be structurally embedded, not dependent on individual advocates. This includes gender-disaggregated data, accountability mechanisms, mainstreaming in foreign policy, recovery and donor agendas, strategic leadership development for women, and mandated gender expertise in EU-EaP institutions. Women must be included not only in civil society roles, but also in formal peace negotiations.
- **Engage youth and counter backlash**
Young people—especially young women—must be treated as political actors, not passive participants. They are essential voices in civic education, counter-disinformation, and social norm change. Support must include targeted programmes in conservative Russian-speaking communities, safe digital spaces, and strategic media engagement.
- **Strengthen the Eastern Partnership framework**
The Eastern Partnership remains unique in embedding civil society as a core pillar of cooperation. With shifting donor landscapes, particularly USAID’s exit, it is essential that the EU and Sweden reinvest in EaP mechanisms. Civil society—especially women-led organizations—must remain central to shaping peacebuilding and policy, with gender equality and civic space upheld as strategic priorities.

5. Conclusion

Women are not just stakeholders in peace—they are strategists, first responders, and leaders. Across the Eastern Partnership region, they have sustained communities, advanced dialogue, and pioneered new models of peacebuilding under immense pressure. Yet their exclusion persists—not due to lack of capacity, but due to entrenched power structures, underfunding, and institutional inertia.

For peace to be sustainable, inclusive, and just, the international community, donors, and governments must move beyond rhetoric. They must act with funding, protection, political will, and structural change. The women of the Eastern Partnership are already doing the work. It’s time they are met with action, not just recognition.