



POLICY BRIEF: WOMEN, PEACE, AND SECURITY IN LIBYA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Libyan women have remained at the forefront of peacebuilding, humanitarian response, and local mediation despite the country's protracted conflict, political fragmentation, and institutional collapse. Their leadership, often informal and rooted in community networks, has filled critical governance voids, providing conflict resolution, aid distribution, and social support where the state has faltered.

However, efforts to institutionalize the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda have faced entrenched resistance. The 2021 attempt to adopt a National Action Plan (NAP) on UNSCR 1325 was derailed by a coordinated campaign from conservative actors, which framed the WPS agenda as a foreign threat to national and religious values. The backlash culminated in the suspension of the MoU supporting the NAP and a formal fatwa against the concept of "gender," illustrating the ideological volatility surrounding women's rights in Libya's public sphere.

In this hostile context, women peacebuilders continue to face targeted violence, digital defamation, legal harassment, and marginalization from formal decision-making. Yet they persist in leading reconciliation efforts, mediating tribal disputes, and sustaining local governance, often under threat and without institutional protection or resources.

This brief draws on the latest field-based assessment to examine the political and security environment, the gendered impact of the conflict, and the evolving dynamics of the WPS agenda in Libya. It identifies both the achievements of Libyan women and the systemic challenges they face. The brief concludes with practical, context-specific recommendations for Libyan institutions, civil society, and international partners to ensure women's inclusion is not symbolic but foundational to the country's recovery and peace.

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Since 2011, Libya has endured a prolonged crisis marked by armed conflict, political fragmentation, and institutional collapse. Women in Libya have emerged as critical actors in sustaining social cohesion, leading humanitarian responses, and mediating local disputes, often without institutional recognition, formal protection, or consistent support. While their contributions have been essential to maintaining community resilience, efforts to formalize the WPS agenda remain limited, contested, and largely donor-led.

The absence of a nationally adopted WPS framework has created a vacuum in strategic coordination and policy alignment. Attempts to advance UNSCR 1325 principles have faced ideological resistance, procedural barriers, and political backlash, including the suspension of a draft National Action Plan and the criminalization of gender equality discourse in public institutions. Despite these challenges, Libyan women continue to innovate at the grassroots level, navigating informal systems and bridging divides in deeply polarized environments.

This brief synthesizes insights from civil society leaders across Libya. It examines the political and security context, gendered impacts of the conflict, and the opportunities and obstacles for advancing WPS in the current transitional landscape. It concludes with a series of recommendations tailored to Libyan institutions, local actors, and international partners seeking to build a more inclusive and durable peace.

POLITICAL AND SECURITY CONTEXT

Libya remains deeply fragmented, with two competing governments, multiple militia coalitions, and a fragile patchwork of local authorities. National elections, initially proposed as a pathway toward reunification, have repeatedly stalled due to unresolved constitutional disputes and entrenched elite interests. Foreign influence, through direct military backing and proxy politics, continues to entrench divisions and distort accountability mechanisms.

The security landscape is dominated by armed groups operating largely outside of state authority. These actors shape political outcomes, influence judicial proceedings, and control access to public space. In many areas, particularly in eastern Libya, militia-aligned religious institutions have imposed conservative ideologies that significantly curtail women's mobility, visibility, and civic participation.

The civic space for women is shrinking under both ideological and securitized pressure. Women peacebuilders, civil society actors, and political aspirants face systemic intimidation, online and offline smear campaigns, arbitrary arrest, and surveillance. In some cases, entire organisations led by women have been forced to close or work underground due to targeted repression.

Despite the continuation of international mediation processes, women remain largely excluded from official political negotiations. Formal peace efforts continue to privilege armed actors and elite figures, sidelining civil society and failing to reflect the lived realities and contributions of women. This exclusion undermines the legitimacy and

sustainability of any negotiated political settlement while also weakening pathways for inclusive governance.

WOMEN'S ROLES IN CONFLICT RESPONSE AND PEACEBUILDING

Across Libya, women have led local efforts to mitigate conflict, deliver aid, and rebuild trust in fragmented communities. They have mediated tribal disputes, negotiated ceasefires, and facilitated humanitarian access—often acting independently of formal institutions.

Women's networks have coordinated across regions, linking urban and rural efforts in conflict de-escalation, reconciliation, and early recovery. In cities like Zuwara, Sabha, and Tawergha, women have helped reopen schools, supported displaced families, and created safe spaces for dialogue.

Several women's coalitions have contributed to national peace discussions, including the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum, where they advocated for quotas and human rights protections. While some gains were achieved—such as a temporary 30% quota proposal—implementation has lagged.

These contributions remain underfunded, largely unprotected, and frequently unacknowledged in official peacebuilding frameworks. Still, women continue to fill governance vacuums and push for inclusive recovery in both visible and discreet ways.

GENDERED IMPACT OF CONFLICT

The Libyan conflict has profoundly exacerbated gender-based disparities, placing women and girls at increased risk of violence, marginalization, and institutional neglect. In regions controlled by militias and fragmented authorities, women face acute threats including sexual violence, forced displacement, and public harassment. Gender-based violence (GBV) is widespread and underreported, with protection mechanisms either absent or undermined by political and security actors.

Women human rights defenders, civil society leaders, and NGO staff—particularly those working on international programs or WPS-related advocacy—have been subject to intimidation, arbitrary arrest, and online smear campaigns. In eastern Libya and other conservative strongholds, travel restrictions and public surveillance curtail women's ability to engage in civic and public life, limiting their access to healthcare, legal recourse, and livelihood opportunities.

The conflict has driven mass displacement, with women and children forming the majority of those uprooted. Female-headed households are disproportionately affected, often living in precarious conditions without access to basic services. In many areas, informal settlements lack safety, sanitation, or social support systems—exposing women and girls to heightened risks of violence and exploitation.

Access to justice remains elusive. Survivors of GBV encounter stigma, fear reprisals, and often lack confidence in the judicial system. Mental health and trauma care are

critically underdeveloped, leaving survivors especially those affected by conflict-related detention or violence—without pathways to healing and reintegration.

The protracted crisis has not only deepened inequality but also eroded the enabling environment for women’s resilience, activism, and recovery. Addressing these intersecting vulnerabilities is essential to rebuilding a peaceful and rights-based social fabric.

EVOLUTION OF LIBYA’S WPS AGENDA

Libya has not yet adopted a functioning National Action Plan (NAP) on UNSCR 1325. A draft NAP developed in 2021 through UN-supported civil society consultations was derailed after a severe backlash led by conservative groups. The campaign mobilized online disinformation, anti-gender equality narratives, public protests, and legal challenges, culminating in a formal fatwa denouncing “gender” as immoral and foreign to Libyan values. The resulting administrative tribunal decision suspended the NAP’s related Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), citing procedural errors, and triggered an official investigation into the Minister of Women’s Affairs. This coordinated attack on UNSCR 1325 marked a significant regression on Libya’s WPS agenda and reflected the broader political and ideological resistance facing gender equality in governance.

Since then, no national WPS policy has been reintroduced. Line ministries remain politically constrained, lack mandates, and do not coordinate WPS-related initiatives. Government discourse around women’s rights remains largely symbolic and reactive, with no sustained mechanisms for gender mainstreaming. In the absence of national leadership, civil society has taken the lead in localizing WPS efforts, embedding peacebuilding, protection, and relief initiatives into service delivery, often using coded language such as “community resilience” or “women’s empowerment” to avoid political targeting. These localized efforts have preserved the agenda but remain fragile and uneven without formal policy backing.

Meanwhile, the UN Women Strategic Note for Libya (2022–2025), developed under the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework, has emerged as a parallel platform advancing WPS-aligned priorities. While not a substitute for a nationally owned NAP, it outlines targeted outcomes on women’s leadership, inclusive governance, GBV prevention, and the rule of law. UN Women has co-led the Gender Working Group, supported NAP consultations, trained over 200 women candidates, and collaborated with international and national actors on gender-responsive legal reform and political inclusion. However, implementation remains primarily donor-driven and confined to Tripoli, with limited public ownership or integration into transitional justice and state-building processes.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

- **Women’s participation in national dialogues:** Women played a visible role in the 2020 Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF), contributing to the 30% quota proposal and demanding a gender-sensitive transitional roadmap.
- **Inclusive peacebuilding initiatives:** Local women’s groups have facilitated dialogue in conflict-affected areas such as Tawergha, Misrata, and Sabha,

contributing to social reconciliation and trust-building across divided communities.

- **Formation of national women's coalitions:** Platforms like the Libyan Women's Network for Peacebuilding and the Libyan Women's Platform for Peace have connected actors across regions, advocated for inclusion, and documented rights violations.
- **Legal advocacy and human rights monitoring:** Women lawyers and CSOs have led campaigns on missing persons, conflict-related detentions, and community reparations, particularly in displacement contexts.
- **Service delivery and protection efforts:** Women's organisations have provided psychosocial support, GBV case management, and legal aid, often in the absence of functioning state institutions.
- **Adaptation under threat:** In areas hostile to gender discourse, activists have adjusted language and formats—using terms like “social harmony” or “community resilience”—to preserve space for women's work.

KEY CHALLENGES

- **Failure of the NAP process:** The 2021 attempt to launch a National Action Plan collapsed under ideological pressure, including a religious fatwa rejecting gender-related policies. No alternative framework has since emerged.
- **Criminalization of civil society:** Women activists face surveillance, smear campaigns, and detention. Associations working on women's rights or international cooperation are often labeled as corrupt or foreign agents.
- **Militia control and fragmented governance:** Armed groups exert influence over justice, security, and civil space. In many areas, protection systems are either aligned with militias or non-existent, undermining safety and access to redress.
- **Restrictive norms and religious opposition:** In eastern Libya, movement restrictions such as mahram requirements are enforced. Gender discourse is suppressed, and women working in NGOs risk social backlash and institutional obstruction.
- **Institutional vacuum:** Ministries of women's affairs or human rights are weak, underfunded, or politically marginalized. There is no national coordination or accountability for gender equality.
- **Lack of legal protection:** Libya lacks a national law on GBV, and survivors face social stigma, limited services, and fear of retaliation. Law enforcement and courts are inaccessible or hostile to women's complaints.
- **Uneven service delivery:** Most support services are urban-based and NGO-run. Rural women and displaced populations lack access to healthcare, legal aid, and psychosocial support.
- **Dependency on donors:** Local initiatives often rely on international funding, which is short-term and administratively burdensome. Localization and sustainability remain limited.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For National Authorities

- **Revive the NAP process** with wide civil society consultation and clear protection from political and religious interference.
- **Establish legal frameworks** to prevent GBV, regulate detention practices, and ensure freedom of association and expression for women's groups.
- **Integrate women into all peace and security processes**, including ceasefire monitoring, transitional justice, and disarmament programs.

For Civil Society

- **Continue cross-regional coordination** through women's coalitions that engage on reconciliation, protection, and legal reform.
- **Document violations and local peace initiatives**, especially in under-reported areas, to shape future policy.
- **Develop flexible advocacy strategies** using culturally acceptable language in high-risk areas to maintain access and legitimacy.

For International Actors

- **Provide long-term, flexible funding** for grassroots women-led initiatives, especially those in conflict-affected or marginalized regions.
- **Support capacity-building** in law, advocacy, and trauma recovery, tailored to regional risks and limitations.
- **Push for women's inclusion** in all mediation and political dialogues, not just as observers but as decision-makers.

Cross-Cutting

- **Create safe operating space** for women through protection mechanisms, legal assistance, and diplomatic pressure against repression.
- **Invest in community-based mental health support** and mobile service delivery models for hard-to-reach areas.
- **Recognize women's informal roles in peacebuilding** as legitimate contributions and integrate them into national recovery frameworks.

CONCLUSION

Libyan women have carried the burden of war while actively shaping the foundations of peace—often without recognition, resources, or protection. Their work in local mediation, humanitarian relief, and community rebuilding has sustained social cohesion where formal systems have failed.

Yet the absence of a national WPS framework, combined with shrinking civic space and militia domination, continues to marginalize women from decision-making and policy reform. The failure of the 2021 NAP attempt reflects deeper resistance to gender equality in Libya's political and institutional culture.

Without renewed commitment from national actors and sustained support from the international community, women's contributions will remain informal, undervalued, and under threat. Advancing the WPS agenda in Libya requires not only legal and political reform, but recognition that peace cannot be achieved without women at its core.

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