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# Gender backlash in disarmament and arms control: Safeguarding progress amid rising resistance

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# Executive summary

Efforts to strengthen gender equality and embed gender perspectives in multilateral disarmament and arms control are facing unprecedented pressure.

Recent political shifts – most notably the Trump administration's resistance to initiatives promoting gender, diversity, or inclusion – have lent momentum to anti-gender narratives. This has fuelled opposition to gender-inclusive language and intensified the contestation of gender equality policies in multilateral disarmament and arms control diplomacy.

Resistance by even a small number of powerful states could erode hard-won gains. If unaddressed, the backlash could lead to a failure to tackle the gendered impacts of weapons violence, reduce space for civil society engagement, and erode normative commitments on gender equality across multiple disarmament and arms control fora. Gender perspectives are integral to credible, effective, and inclusive disarmament and arms control.

In this context, undermining gender perspectives would not only weaken the legitimacy of multilateral processes; it could also trigger broader setbacks for humanitarian and human-centric approaches and further marginalise underrepresented voices. Safeguarding progress on gender equality and gender perspectives is therefore a strategic imperative.

States, international organisations, and civil society must therefore act collectively to defend and further advance gender perspectives.

To this end, this policy brief proposes a two-track strategy:

- First, countering the gender backlash through protective action, including systematic monitoring and early detection of regressive developments, strategically framing the backlash as a security risk, and pursuing active diplomacy to prevent regression;
- Second, building long-term resilience by embedding gender perspectives structurally and normatively across disarmament and arms control regimes, and by strengthening broader networks of like-minded states and civil society.

# Introduction

In recent years, efforts to embed gender perspectives within multilateral disarmament and arms control fora have presented both transformative opportunities and contested battlegrounds.<sup>1</sup> Since the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and the UN Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda in 2000, the crucial role of gender equality in preventing conflict and building peace has been increasingly recognised across the wider field of weapons governance. Treaties and outcome documents now routinely reference gender perspectives and gender mainstreaming. Dedicated programmes have been established to enhance the participation of women and marginalised groups in negotiations, while research and civil society initiatives have increasingly addressed the gendered impacts of weapons and emerging technologies.

Yet from the outset, multilateral disarmament and arms control regimes have also faced pushback against the inclusion of gender perspectives, gender equality policies, and gender-sensitive human rights. While a majority of states has been supportive of initiatives to strengthen gender perspectives,<sup>2</sup> a vocal minority has consistently expressed resistance. This has now been bolstered by shifting policies in the United States.

The resistance has taken multiple forms: It includes passive or discursive opposition – where gender perspectives are dismissed as ‘irrelevant’ or ‘too progressive’ – as well as deliberate efforts to block agenda items, weaken conference outcomes, fight gender-inclusive language in treaties or resolutions, or even roll back previous commitments. These developments are not unique to disarmament and arms control; they reflect a wider global trend of anti-gender and anti-human rights movements in international politics.<sup>3</sup> This resistance is also not new. However, the political shifts in the United States, alongside broader geopolitical trends such as the rise of illiberalism and a retreat from multilateralism, have emboldened opposition and amplified the risk of regression.<sup>4</sup>

A gender backlash – active, deliberate, and concerted efforts against the inclusion of gender perspectives or gender equality objectives – poses a real and strategic risk to multilateral disarmament and arms control.<sup>5</sup> Resistance by even a small number of powerful states can erode hard-won gains in integrating gender perspectives, including the recognition of gendered impacts of weapons technologies and the inclusion of marginalised groups in disarmament and arms control fora. As polarisation deepens, gender perspectives risk becoming a bargaining chip – sacrificed first for the sake of consensus. Such concessions on inclusiveness and diversity not only undermine the legitimacy of multilateral processes, but also weaken humanitarian and human-centric approaches to disarmament more broadly.

To prevent regression and safeguard progress, states, international organisations, and civil society actors must act now. This requires monitoring regressive trends, defending gender-inclusive language, and embedding intersectional perspectives in policy and practice. The challenge is not just to preserve past achievements, but to ensure that gender equality remains central to the future of credible, effective, and inclusive disarmament and arms control.

Against this backdrop, this policy brief identifies emerging risks and offers strategies to ensure that progress on gender equality and gender perspectives can be defended and expanded.

**While a majority of states have been supportive of initiatives to strengthen gender perspectives, a vocal minority has consistently expressed resistance.**

# Progress on integrating gender perspectives

**The integration of gender perspectives into multilateral disarmament and arms control has advanced significantly since the adoption of UNSC Resolution 1325 and the WPS agenda.**

The integration of gender perspectives into multilateral disarmament and arms control has advanced significantly since the adoption of UNSC Resolution 1325 and the WPS agenda.<sup>6</sup> These frameworks explicitly recognise women's essential role in sustainable peace and security, as well as the differential impacts of conflict on women and girls, and call for gender perspectives to be integrated across all aspects of peace and security – including in disarmament and arms control.<sup>7</sup>

Within disarmament and arms control regimes, most discussions on the topic have focussed on questions of representation and equal participation – addressing persistent gender imbalances, as well as unequal representation between the Global North and Global South.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, official outcome documents, reports, and working papers have increasingly referenced the 'meaningful participation of women' and the integration of 'gender perspectives'.<sup>9</sup>

The most substantial progress has taken place in humanitarian disarmament frameworks. Among other developments, the 2014 Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) institutionalises risk assessments of gender-based violence linked to arms transfers, which member states are expected to use for their export decisions – acknowledging that small arms are used in almost one-third of all femicides.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the UN Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons (UN PoA), the Mine Ban Treaty (MBT), and the Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM) commit States Parties to collect gender-, age-, or disability-disaggregated data on weapons-related harm with a view to enabling a gender-responsive implementation of arms control treaties, including the design of gender-sensitive victim assistance.<sup>11</sup> Various treaty regimes, including the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) have also established gender focal points to support the implementation of gender-responsive policies and equal representation in negotiations.<sup>12</sup> Civil society and academic research have further deepened understanding of the gendered impacts of weapons, from gender bias in military AI to the gendered consequences of nuclear testing and gender-based cyberviolence, which are now more widely discussed in multilateral disarmament and arms control.<sup>13</sup>

However, progress has remained uneven across regimes: humanitarian disarmament frameworks tend to be more receptive to gender, humanitarian, and human-centric approaches than those traditionally dominated by state-security logics and masculinised conceptions of security, such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Even where gender-inclusive language has been advanced, major gaps persist. Much of the momentum has relied on civil society and a small group of like-minded states who have succeeded in rallying broad support from a wide set of states – an achievement that is politically significant but leaves gains vulnerable to shifting priorities and shrinking resources. Civil society organisations, in particular, increasingly carry the dual burden of keeping momentum on gender perspectives while navigating highly polarised multilateral fora.

A further challenge lies in the inconsistent understanding of gender-related concepts, including gender perspectives, and how these should be applied in practice. Many approaches prioritise numerical representation over a focus on participation

quality, power dynamics, or intersectional vulnerabilities, risking the homogenisation of 'women' and 'marginalised groups' as undifferentiated categories and a tokenism that adds individuals without transforming underlying power structures.<sup>14</sup> Few state-led efforts address the deeper hierarchies shaping the global security architecture, including great-power dynamics and deterrence relationships. Intersectional dimensions – such as how gender intersects with race, class, disability, and geography – remain largely absent from disarmament debates, despite their importance for understanding gendered experiences of weapons violence and insecurity.

# Gender backlash in multilateral disarmament and arms control

**The backlash reflects broader global anti-gender trends, in which some states and organisations seek to maintain patriarchal norms under the guise of tradition, religion, or national sovereignty.**

As gender perspectives have gained traction in multilateral disarmament and arms control diplomacy, they have also become the target of political resistance – from subtle obstruction to overt attempts at reversing established norms and gender-inclusive language. The resistance reflects broader global anti-gender trends, in which some states and organisations seek to maintain patriarchal norms under the guise of tradition, religion, or national sovereignty.<sup>15</sup> Regressive actors have become more vocal in claiming that sexual orientation and gender identity lack grounding in international human rights law, portraying gender-inclusive human rights as ‘Western imports’.<sup>16</sup> The recent regressive turn in the United States has further aggravated this trend, with Washington’s retreat from gender, diversity, and inclusion initiatives lending momentum to anti-gender narratives in multilateral diplomacy.<sup>17</sup>

Within multilateral disarmament and arms control processes, opposition to gender perspectives or gender equality measures is often framed as being neutral or apolitical. This is reflected in claims that disarmament and arms control fora were not the right place for discussions on gender, diversity, or inclusion, or that such debates were irrelevant to the mandate of a given forum. This can lead to a depoliticisation of the gendered dimensions of security if official documents or resolutions begin to resort to seemingly more apolitical notions of ‘equality between men and women’ or ‘women’s empowerment’, thereby narrowing the debate and reinforcing binary understandings of gender.

In other cases, resistance has become more explicit. For example, during the 2025 UN First Committee debates, the US rejected gender-inclusive language on a vast number of resolutions on the grounds that they had “unacceptable and unnecessary text on or related to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), gender, and/or the Pact for the Future on gender or diversity”.<sup>18</sup> Similar resistance emerged at the 11th Open-Ended Working Group (OEWG) on security of and in the use of information and communications technologies (ICT) in 2025, where the United States formally dissociated from paragraphs referencing gender or the SDGs.<sup>19</sup> Russia’s Working Paper submitted to the 2025 NPT Preparatory Committee dismissed gender perspectives as ideological manipulation and divisive, while explicitly questioning the relevance of gender mainstreaming.<sup>20</sup> By invoking technical competence, merit, and professionalism as supposedly neutral alternatives, this approach delegitimises gender equality measures and gender perspectives as political. These actions are endorsed, at least informally, by a growing coalition of ‘non-like-minded’ states – including Russia and the US, but also Iran, members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, Hungary, and the Holy See.

In some instances, resistance has sought to reverse normative progress and roll back previously agreed language in disarmament and arms control fora. By invoking the consensus principle, Iranian diplomats, for example, have repeatedly blocked the adoption of outcome documents containing gender-inclusive language or pushed for the removal of gender references from official texts within Vienna’s disarmament institutions.<sup>21</sup> At the IAEA’s 2024 International Conference on Nuclear Security in Vienna, this strategy resulted in the failure to adopt a ministerial declaration after Iran objected to language on gender equality.<sup>22</sup> These developments illustrate how procedural mechanisms can be used

in ways that limit the inclusion of gender perspectives and slow institutional change.

The backlash extends beyond formal negotiations, with civil society and international organisations working on gender issues increasingly facing marginalisation. Feminist and disarmament organisations have long been portrayed as ideological, divisive, or irrelevant to 'hard security', reinforcing masculinised diplomatic hierarchies.<sup>23</sup> More recently, this has extended to restrictions on access and accreditation for organisations considered 'problematic' for political reasons or perceived ideological bias – including in the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) and the OEWG on ICT – and growing pressure to reframe projects or to focus on less political topics to retain funding and access.

This pressure risks progressing from subtle resistance to more visible and concerted pushback across multiple disarmament and arms control fora. This comes at a time when support for gender equality policies is waning in some countries, as exemplified by the reversal of feminist foreign policies in Sweden and Germany. While the majority of states (including Sweden and Germany) continue to support the inclusion of gender perspectives in multilateral disarmament and arms control, fewer states may be willing to visibly fight against coordinated opposition in the future, especially if gender perspectives are played off against consensus decisions. This risks eroding normative commitments on gender equality and producing a chilling effect, as actors concentrate on protecting past gains rather than pursuing new initiatives.

# Implications of a gender backlash in multilateral disarmament and arms control

**When gender perspectives are contested, sidelined, or compartmentalised, portrayed as controversial or political, states and actors advocating for gender equality will become increasingly marginalised.**

Integrating gender perspectives into multilateral disarmament and arms control is far more than a normative or symbolic objective. Beyond representation, gender perspectives are essential for embedding humanitarian, human rights, and human security considerations in disarmament and arms control and addressing the intersectional humanitarian consequences of weapons violence.<sup>24</sup> Weapons and armed conflict affect populations differently, producing intersectional vulnerabilities that state-centric approaches often overlook.<sup>25</sup> Incorporating insights on the gendered impacts of weapons and how social roles shape patterns of weapons violence into policy and operational frameworks ensures that treaty obligations and negotiations align with humanitarian and human-centric disarmament objectives and reflect the lived realities of affected populations.

A backlash on gender equality and gender perspectives directly undermines these goals. When gender perspectives are contested, sidelined, or compartmentalised, portrayed as controversial or political, states and actors advocating for gender equality will become increasingly marginalised.<sup>26</sup> The consequences are significant: weakened consensus, diluted language not only on gender perspectives but broader humanitarian and human-centric considerations in official documents, reduced participation and influence of civil society and marginalised groups – all of which contribute to a broader erosion of institutional legitimacy.

When gender equality and the inclusion of gender perspectives are treated as secondary in pursuit of consensus, states may become willing to reduce gender-inclusive language or omit references to gender entirely, effectively sidelining these considerations as not important enough. Such compromises can quickly spill over and lead to a reversal of progress in other disarmament and arms control settings. This could result in the removal of gender-inclusive language from treaties and policy documents and reduce the capacity to address the full spectrum of intersectional risks posed by weapons violence. Rolling back on gender-inclusive disarmament and arms control policies, such as systematic data collection, risk-assessments of gender-based violence, or gender-sensitive victim assistance, would therefore also undermine broader humanitarian and human-centric disarmament objectives.

A gender backlash also weakens multilateral cooperation and marginalises critical and disarmament-oriented, as well as humanitarian and human-centric perspectives, voices, and actors; it could constrain engagement with civil society and reinforce criticisms of progressive states. In this context, addressing the gender backlash is not simply a matter of advancing gender equality; it is a strategic imperative for credible, effective, and human-centric disarmament and arms control.

# (Beyond) damage control

**The gender backlash should be treated not as a symbolic issue but as a strategic risk with tangible implications for treaty regimes, negotiation outcomes, and the legitimacy of multilateral disarmament and arms control processes.**

It is essential to proactively engage with setbacks before they become entrenched to safeguarding progress and ensure that multilateral disarmament and arms control negotiations are inclusive, human-centric, and credible. The gender backlash should be treated not as a symbolic issue but as a strategic risk with tangible implications for treaty regimes, negotiation outcomes, and the legitimacy of multilateral disarmament and arms control processes.

To preserve progress on gender equality and intersectional gender perspectives in multilateral disarmament and arms control, states, international organisations, and civil society actors should focus on two complementary approaches: (1) countering a gender backlash through reactive and protective measures to prevent regression; and (2) building resilience through proactive, capacity-building measures that embed gender perspectives structurally and normatively and reduce vulnerability to backlash.

## **Actively countering the gender backlash**

To prevent regression and sustain progress on gender equality, the integration of gender perspectives, and gender-inclusive language, states, international organisations, and civil society actors need to actively identify, respond to, and mitigate immediate threats across negotiations and fora. This includes monitoring both progress and regressive developments, highlighting the strategic risks of the gender backlash, and taking active steps to defend gender perspectives. Proactive engagement will enable states and international organisations to detect early signs of rollback, respond swiftly to emerging challenges, and ensure that multilateral disarmament and arms control processes reflect inclusive, intersectional perspectives.

### **Monitoring and early detection**

- States, international organisations, and civil society should systematically track regressive developments, including weakened language, reduced participation of women and other marginalised actors, and lapses in reporting or gender equality commitments.
- Research institutions and civil society actors should flag instances where regressive actions and compromises threaten existing gender commitments – they should conduct comparative analysis across disarmament and arms control fora to identify patterns of resistance, and enable targeted institutional responses.

### **Framing gender backlash in strategic terms**

- States, international organisations, and civil society should treat the gender backlash as a strategic security risk, rather than a marginal or symbolic issue. This includes highlighting operational and political consequences of the backlash to foster broader buy-in, especially among states that might otherwise deprioritise gender equality.
- States should integrate risk-based and resilience-oriented thinking into strategies for integrating gender perspectives and

intersectional approaches, ensuring they are recognised as essential to international security and institutional effectiveness.

### **Active diplomacy to counter backlash**

- States, international organisations, and civil society should publicly and consistently defend gender equality, gender perspectives, and intersectional approaches in multilateral fora, avoiding concessions on gender-inclusive language. They should also actively protect related norms and policies, such as the WPS Agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals, or the UN Agenda for Disarmament, which have also come under attack.
- Like-minded states should coordinate positions and define non-negotiable points in advance. If necessary, they should be willing to cast votes to uphold gender-inclusive language rather than accept regressive compromises.<sup>27</sup>
- States should partner with civil society, international organisations, and feminist networks to prevent rollbacks, develop coordinated counter-strategies, and reinforce gender perspectives as central to effective and equitable disarmament and arms control.

### **Building resilience to prevent set-backs**

While countering the gender backlash requires immediate and proactive responses, long-term resilience requires strengthening the institutional and normative foundations of feminist and intersectional approaches and cultivating networks to safeguard progress. Building synergies between different disarmament and arms control regimes, and linking them to other gender-inclusive norms, can help ensure that progress is able to withstand political pressure and shifting diplomatic dynamics.

### **Institutional safeguards**

- States should actively advocate for consolidating and reinforcing existing mechanisms, such as gender focal points, and ensure that established practices for systematically integrating gender perspectives are maintained – and enforced where necessary – within disarmament and arms control treaties.
- States and international organisations should further enhance coordination across treaty regimes on the structural integration of gender perspectives to share best practices and strengthen institutional memory and resilience.
- States and international organisations should enable consistent civil society participation, recognising the critical role of civil society in accountability, agenda-setting, and translating gender norms into practice. Attempts to restrict civil society space in multilateral disarmament and arms control should be actively countered by all states.

## Anchoring gender perspectives in international norms

- States, international organisations, and civil society should advocate for anchoring gender equality and gender perspectives in established international norms, including the WPS Agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals, and the UN Agenda for Disarmament, providing a stabilising framework against political reversal.
- In multilateral disarmament and arms control debates, states should link gender perspectives to broader human-security, humanitarian, and human-rights objectives to reinforce their legitimacy and position them as integral to effective disarmament rather than 'dispensable' considerations.

## Network-building

- States should develop resilient networks, for example further connecting states with institutionalised feminist foreign policy commitments with other like-minded states and civil society to facilitate dialogue, joint advocacy, and coordinated responses to anti-gender positions.
- European states should deepen cross-regional cooperation and expand networks with like-minded states from the Global South – many of whom have long championed gender perspectives. Strengthening these partnerships can counter narratives that portray gender equality as a Western concern or ideological agenda and bolster diverse leadership on these issues.
- Like-minded states should conduct regular consultations, information-sharing, and coordination on gender-inclusive language, including with civil society, to prevent fragmentation and amplify the influence of progressive coalitions.
- Civil society organisations, research institutions and think tanks, and other non-governmental stakeholders should also reach out to domestic audiences, policy makers, and parliamentarians, including through public dialogues, media engagement, and expert briefings, to communicate the implications of a gender backlash in accessible, evidence-based terms.
- States should sustain and increase funding for feminist civil society and international organisations advancing gender-transformative approaches, ensuring their capacity to continuously support gender perspectives in disarmament and arms control.

Together, these measures could provide a strategy to safeguard progress and ensure that multilateral disarmament and arms control processes remain inclusive, legitimate, and responsive to humanitarian and human-centric priorities, as well as gender objectives.

**Building synergies between different disarmament and arms control regimes, and linking them to other gender-inclusive norms, can help ensure that progress is able to withstand political pressure and shifting diplomatic dynamics.**

## COUNTERING BACKLASH

Recommendation	Actionable Steps	Purpose
Monitoring and early detection	Monitoring negotiations, tracking regressions, reporting/researching (regressive) developments.	Identifying risks early, ensuring transparency, and reinforcing adherence to gender equality policies.
Strategic framing of gender backlash	Highlighting operational and political consequences of backlash, integrating risk-based and resilience-oriented thinking into strategies for integrating gender perspectives and intersectional approaches.	Ensuring urgency and securing buy-in from states.
Pursuing active diplomacy to counter backlash	Coordinating, speaking up, developing counter-strategies among like-minded states.	Preserving progress, preventing rollback, and ensuring inclusive negotiations.

## BUILDING RESILIENCE

Recommendation	Actionable Steps	Purpose
Building institutional safeguards	Consolidating and reinforcing practices for systematically integrating gender perspectives, coordinating across treaty regimes, enabling civil society participation.	Maintaining gender perspectives and civil society space under pressures and reducing vulnerability to backlash.
Furthering normative integration of gender perspectives	Further embedding gender-inclusive language in treaties, reporting, and review; linking gender perspectives to established international gender norms and to human-security and humanitarian objectives.	Strengthening legitimacy of policies and aligning gender with broader disarmament goals.
Building networks	Developing resilient networks, coordinating with like-minded states, building partnerships with civil society.	Facilitating dialogue and coordinated responses, supporting civil society to amplify gender perspectives in multilateral fora.

# Defending hard-won gains

**A widening gender backlash – now reinforced by political shifts in key states, growing illiberalism, and intensifying geopolitical competition – risks eroding hard-won progress and narrowing space for inclusive policymaking.**

Over the past two decades, progress on gender equality and gender perspectives has strengthened negotiation outcomes and treaty implementation in multilateral disarmament and arms control. Beyond questions of equal representation, the promotion of gender perspectives has contributed to embedding humanitarian, human rights, and human security considerations in disarmament and arms control and highlighting the intersectional vulnerabilities and gendered impacts of weapons on diverse populations. Yet the gains made remain deeply vulnerable. A widening gender backlash – now reinforced by political shifts in key states, growing illiberalism, and intensifying geopolitical competition – risks eroding hard-won progress and narrowing space for inclusive policymaking.

The consequences of this backlash extend far beyond the question of gender equality. When gender perspectives are dismissed, contested, or traded away, broader humanitarian and human-centric approaches are weakened as well. Civil society participation becomes more constrained, already marginalised actors lose influence, and treaty processes risk becoming less legitimate, less representative, and ultimately less effective. Even resistance by a small group of states could undermine commitments that took years to build.

Preventing regression therefore requires sustained and coordinated action. States, international organisations, and civil society must monitor emerging forms of resistance, actively defend gender perspectives in negotiations, and collectively respond to procedural and political efforts aimed at reversing established norms. At the same time, longer-term resilience depends on embedding gender perspectives in institutional structures and in the wider normative frameworks, and on cultivating cross-regional networks capable of withstanding political shifts.

Ensuring that gender perspectives remain embedded in multilateral disarmament and arms control is essential, not optional. Strengthening these perspectives enhances the legitimacy, resilience, and effectiveness of disarmament and arms control processes – enabling them to respond comprehensively to the gendered risks and humanitarian impacts posed by weapons technologies and include marginalised voices in the discourse, while keeping disarmament at the centre of the international security agenda. By acting collectively to safeguard past achievements and consolidate future resilience, actors can secure hard-won progress, prevent rollback, and ensure that negotiations and implementation remain inclusive, intersectional, and aligned with broader humanitarian and human-centric disarmament objectives.

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