

CLOSING THE BLIND SPOT

CONFRONTING CORRUPTION TO ADVANCE WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY



On the 25th anniversary of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, recognising corruption as a driver of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV); and gendered insecurity is essential if prevention, protection, participation, and recovery are to be fully realised in practice rather than only in principle.

Corruption in defence and security fuels the daily insecurity of women and girls. From sexual extortion and trafficking to bribery and patronage, corruption drives gender-based violence, denies survivors justice, and keeps accountability out of reach.

Yet despite these harms, the anti-corruption and the WPS agenda is still pursued largely in isolation, leaving critical risks unaddressed. Integrating anti-corruption into WPS is not a technical add-on: it is about recognising corruption as a structural driver of gendered insecurity.

How to close this blind spot?

1



ACKNOWLEDGE THE RISK

Name sexualised corruption explicitly in WPS frameworks.

2



ASSESS WITH A GENDER LENS

Embed gender-sensitive corruption risk assessments in Security Sector Reform (SSR), Arms Control, Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR), and peacekeeping processes.

3



EMBED SAFEGUARDS

Integrate integrity systems, oversight, and survivor-safe reporting.

4



ENABLE ACCOUNTABILITY

Strengthen parliaments, national human rights institutions, and civil society watchdogs.

5



ALIGN INTERNATIONAL TOOLS

Connect WPS, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) General Recommendation 30, and United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) obligations into a coherent policy framework.

The Blind Spot: Corruption as a Driver of Gendered Insecurity

Once corruption takes root, it sets in a self-reinforcing loop that progressively weakens institutions and deepens insecurity.



Corruption in the defence and security sector is not an abstract governance problem; it is a lived reality that shapes the daily insecurity of women, girls, men, boys, and LGBTIQ+ individuals. Defence and security personnel have been implicated in sexual extortion, survival sex, and trafficking—all forms of sexualised corruption that amount to both corruption and SGBV. Bribery, political interference, and judicial manipulation often prevent survivors from accessing justice, while entrenched patronage systems, that exclude women and other marginalised groups from power, compound those harms and keep accountability out of reach.

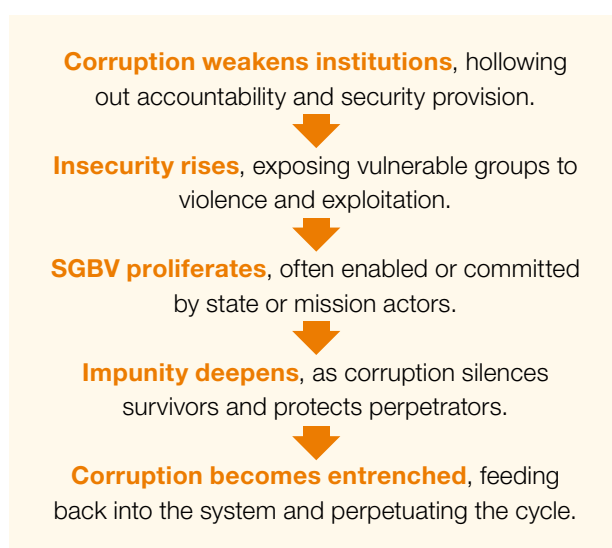
Twenty-five years after the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325), the WPS agenda remains a cornerstone of global peace and security, reshaping how participation, protection, prevention, and recovery are understood. Yet, corruption continues to erode each of these pillars. Weak governance in defence and security not only wastes resources but also enables SGBV, fuels impunity, and blocks women's meaningful participation in security decision-making.

These patterns remain largely invisible in WPS strategies, which rarely integrate anti-corruption safeguards, and are absent in anti-corruption policies, which rarely apply a gender lens. Though conflict analysis consistently finds corruption to be a driver of insecurity, organised crime, and normalisation of violence, this insight has not been mainstreamed into the WPS framework. Corruption continues to be treated primarily as a governance issue, while WPS focuses on the four pillars of prevention, participation, protection, and relief and recovery. The result is two parallel policy systems, with little convergence, that fail to confront the ways in which corruption actively drives gendered insecurity.

In fragile and conflict-affected contexts, this problem manifests in two ways. First, it enables sexual and gender-based violence directly: through sextortion, where sex is demanded as the price for services—a form of corruption recognised by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and Transparency International—through sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) in peace operations—which UN conduct and discipline data confirmed as widespread—and through collusion with trafficking networks at borders and checkpoints. Second, it undermines accountability indirectly: through bribery of police and prosecutors, manipulation of evidence, and retaliation against whistleblowers and survivors.

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The consequences are profound. Corruption erodes institutional legitimacy and the capacity of the state or peace operations to provide protection. Insecurity, in turn, increases exposure to SGBV: displaced women coerced into “sex-for-aid,” LGBTIQ+ individuals extorted under threat of exposure, or men and boys subjected to sexual violence in detention. Survivors who attempt to seek redress face additional layers of abuse, in the form of corrupt courts that demand bribes, officials who retaliate against complainants, or institutions that serve patronage networks and block accountability. Over time, this produces a self-reinforcing loop, as seen on page 2.



This loop is documented across multiple contexts, where corruption and SGBV are not separate crises but part of a single political economy of abuse. In Somalia, Human Rights Watch showed how survival sex became routine in Internally Displaced Person (IDP) camps where aid distribution was corrupted. In Nigeria, Global Network of Women Peacebuilders reports found women excluded from camp governance while officials colluded with traffickers. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Haiti, UN reports revealed SEA by peacekeepers enabled by corrupt and opaque accountability systems.

What makes this a true blind spot in the WPS agenda is that neither side of the policy divide has fully addressed it. WPS National Action Plans (NAP) rarely integrate anti-corruption safeguards in SSR or DDR priorities. Conversely, anti-corruption strategies rarely apply a gender lens, leaving invisible the specific ways corruption exploits or excludes women, girls, men, boys, LGBTIQ+ individuals, and marginalised groups. CEDAW’s General Recommendation 30 already calls for gender-sensitive security sector reform and oversight, and UNCAC provides binding obligations on states to prevent abuse of entrusted power. Yet, in practice, these instruments are rarely linked.

Bridging these silos is essential if the next 25 years of WPS are to deliver on their promise of building inclusive, accountable, and gender-equal peace and security. It also means transforming peace and security by placing women’s agency, rights, and protection at the centre of efforts to prevent conflict and rebuild societies, recognising that peace cannot be sustained without equality, accountability, and inclusion.

How Corruption Undermines the Four Pillars of WPS

Prevention

At WPS@25, prevention must widen its lens: corruption must be recognised as a root cause of insecurity, not just a background risk.

The prevention pillar was designed to address both conflict and the gendered violence that accompanies it, but narrowing it to focus on SGBV alone has led to ignoring structural drivers like corruption. Corruption undermines prevention by enabling arms diversion, facilitating trafficking networks, and normalising abuse, such as survival sex. In northeast Nigeria, security personnel in IDP camps exploited displaced women, demanding sex for food and shelter, while turning a blind eye to traffickers. In Thailand, investigations uncovered military complicity in trafficking Rohingya asylum seekers.

Protection

At WPS@25, anti-corruption must be framed as essential to protection, and embedded in the relevant instruments.

Protection commitments aim to safeguard women and girls from sexual and gender-based violence and to hold security actors accountable. But when judicial systems are compromised by bribery, case manipulation, or retaliation against complainants, protection becomes hollow. Survivors often face threats or dismissal of cases when perpetrators have the means to pay off officials. In the DRC, UN investigations found that SEA by peacekeepers occurred alongside corruption, including diversion of resources, showing how corruption and misconduct reinforce each other. (UN, 2005). In Somalia, African Union troops demanded survival sex from displaced women for food aid (HRW, 2014). In Kenya's Kakuma refugee camp, LGBTIQ+ asylum seekers faced physical and sexual violence, extortion, and hate crimes amid impunity and reports of corruption among camp staff (Amnesty International, 2023).

Participation

At WPS@25, participation cannot be genuine if corruption continues to block women's access to power and decision-making processes.

Women's meaningful participation in peace and security decision-making is a cornerstone of the WPS agenda. Yet patronage and bribery reinforce exclusionary systems that block women and minorities from meaningful influence. In many security institutions, recruitment and promotion are shaped less by merit than by loyalty networks or illicit payments, sidelining women despite their integrity. In Yemen, an all-female counter-terrorism unit was praised for professionalism, but entrenched patronage systems stalled their advancement. In Peru, women police officers are often perceived as less corrupt, yet corruption combined with gender bias limits their authority. In Nigeria, women excluded from IDP camp governance were denied both voice and protection, illustrating how corruption and gendered exclusion reinforce one another.

Relief and Recovery

At WPS@25, anti-corruption must be embedded into humanitarian oversight and transitional justice to ensure survivor-centred recovery.

Relief and post-conflict recovery efforts are meant to provide safe access to aid, services, and justice. But corruption distorts these processes, diverting humanitarian resources and exploiting the desperation of survivors. Corruption in transitional justice further denies survivors redress, eroding trust in institutions meant to deliver recovery and reconciliation. In Nigerian IDP camps, women reported being forced into sex in exchange for food, shelter, and jobs, a direct overlap of corruption and SGBV. At borders, from the US-Mexico crossing to refugee camps in Europe, LGBTIQ+ asylum seekers have been extorted and abused by officials. In Haiti and Bosnia and Herzegovina, peacekeeping deployments were linked to trafficking and sex exploitation networks.

The examples throughout this brief show that corruption and gendered insecurity reinforce each other. The following lessons stand out across contexts:



LESSONS LEARNED

- **Safeguards matter (Prevention):** Without strong integrity controls, sexual corruption becomes systemic, enabling abuse rather than preventing it.
- **Participation matters:** Excluding women and marginalised groups from decision-making magnifies vulnerabilities and entrenches inequality.
- **Accountability underpins protection (Protection):** When corruption captures aid distribution or justice systems, protection mechanisms collapse and insecurity grows.
- **Integrity in peace operations is essential (Relief & Recovery):** Missions that lack anti-corruption safeguards and an integrated gender lens risk fuelling exploitation, undermining survivor trust, and weakening community recovery.
- **Justice requires clean institutions:** Judicial corruption silences survivors, dismisses SGBV cases, and shields abusers in uniform.

Confronting the Evidence Gaps

Despite growing recognition that corruption fuels gendered insecurity, the WPS agenda is yet to deliver on its core commitments. One crucial challenge is a still fragmented evidence base, which undermines the credibility of WPS strategies and prevents survivors' access to justice mechanisms.

At the **conceptual level**, there is still no internationally agreed definition of sextortion. CEDAW General Recommendation 30 calls for gender-sensitive security sector reform and oversight, yet states rarely apply this lens to corruption in defence and policing. As a result, survivors remain in a legal grey zone, with abuse neither fully captured under anti-corruption laws nor consistently recognised as gender-based violence.

At the **data and measurement level**, few corruption risk assessments are sex-disaggregated, and most governance surveys are not designed to capture sexualised forms of abuse such as survival sex or trafficking-related corruption. Intersectional vulnerabilities of men and boys, LGBTIQ+ people, and persons with disabilities remain under-researched. New frontiers like cyber-enabled sextortion and image-based abuse (including deepfakes and blackmail of women human rights defenders) are almost entirely absent from WPS diagnostics. Data gaps persist and are themselves a corruption risk rather than just a technical weakness.

The 2025 GDI gender indicators

fill these gaps by integrating four cross-cutting themes:

- gender-related legal and normative commitments,
- gender balance strategies,
- gender mainstreaming strategies, and
- prevention and response to SGBV, including SEA and sexual corruption.



At the **institutional level**, oversight actors such as parliaments, national human rights institutions (NHRIs) and ombuds remain weakly integrated into WPS monitoring, while peacekeeping misconduct data are fragmented and opaque. Without survivor-safe reporting and transparent investigations, impunity persists. Civil society often fills the gap, but watchdogs remain under-resourced and exposed to reprisals.

Without definitions, there is no data; without data, oversight cannot act; without accountability, impunity thrives. Closing these gaps requires states to treat sexual corruption as both an integrity breach and a form of violence, embedding gender-sensitive risk assessments, survivor-safe reporting, and oversight systems that meet the standards already envisioned in CEDAW and WPS frameworks.

From Blind Spot to Pathways for Action

WPS@25 must close the blind spot: corruption is not background noise, it is the fault line on which gendered violence and insecurity are built.

The 25th anniversary of UNSCR 1325 is an opportunity to take stock and look forward, for course correction. Corruption is not just a governance failure; it is a driver of gendered insecurity, which enables sexual violence, silences survivors, and hollows out commitments to prevention, protection, participation, and recovery. Integrating anti-corruption into WPS is not optional, it is essential if the agenda is to remain credible.

How to do that? Through five consecutive steps, each linked to concrete opportunities.

1



ACKNOWLEDGE THE RISK

Corruption, especially sexualised forms such as sextortion and survival sex, must be explicitly named in WPS frameworks. Otherwise, abuse remains invisible and survivors remain unprotected.

- Regional organisations can embed anti-corruption in WPS policy language.
- States should ratify and implement CEDAW, UNCAC, and the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT).
- States can update WPS NAPs with clear definitions of sexual corruption and embed anti-corruption safeguards to ensure that sexualised corruption is addressed as both a governance and a gender-based violence issue.
- Parliaments and NHRIs can demand corruption risks in annual WPS reporting.

2



ASSESS WITH A GENDER LENS

Defence, police, and justice institutions must set up mechanisms to map how corruption exposes women and marginalised groups to violence.

- Regional organisations can embed anti-corruption in WPS policy language.
- Integrate gender-sensitive corruption risk assessments in SSR, DDR, peacekeeping, and humanitarian operations.
- Develop gender-sensitive red-flag indicators for SSR and DDR.
- Adopt gender strategies in defence and security sectors, link them to integrity and accountability frameworks, and ensure representation of women and under-represented groups in decision-making and oversight roles.
- Link ATT Article 7(4) GBV assessments with corruption risk screening in arms transfers.
- Train women's organisations, LGBTIQ+ groups, and oversight actors in forensic auditing and risk mapping.
- Apply corruption proofing to WPS NAPs and a commitment to provide gender training to all defence and police personnel.

3



EMBED SAFEGUARDS

Institutions must build integrity safeguards that address both corruption and gender-based abuse.

- Criminalise sextortion and align laws with GBV statutes.
- Establish integrity units, survivor-safe complaint mechanisms, and vetting in defence and police institutions.
- Updating codes of conduct to prohibit sexual corruption and SEA, with public reporting on enforcement.
- Share model toolkits and peer learning at regional level.

4

**ENABLE ACCOUNTABILITY**

Oversight bodies must strengthen transparency and protect civic space to expose corruption and gendered violence, ensuring that critical watchdogs can operate without fear of retaliation.

- Mandate independent audit and oversight of defence budgets and procurement.
- Equip NHRIs and ombuds to monitor sexual corruption complaints.
- Support and protect women's groups, LGBTIQ+ individuals, journalists, and NGOs exposing abuse.
- Adopt robust whistleblower protections, to ensure individuals can safely report corruption and gendered forms of corruption.

5

**ALIGN INTERNATIONAL TOOLS**

Transparency is both a deterrent and a tool for accountability. Information must be accessible to those most affected by corruption and violence to enable oversight, empower survivors, and drive reform.

- Publish case data on complaints, investigations, and outcomes.
- Create regional observatories on corruption and gendered insecurity.
- Provide mandatory training on gendered corruption risks and survivor-centred responses to reinforce transparency and accountability.
- Use global mechanisms such as the UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and the ATT reporting to hold states to account.

Targeted Recommendations

For International and Regional Organisations

- Update SSR and WPS frameworks to include explicit anti-corruption safeguards.
- Require gender-responsive corruption risk assessments as a condition for peace operations.
- Establish regional peer review mechanisms on defence integrity.
- Support cross-border observatories on corruption, trafficking, and SGBV.

For States

- Explicitly criminalise sextortion as both corruption and GBV.
- Incorporate sextortion in national anti-corruption strategies and link to WPS NAPs.
- Revise WPS NAPs to integrate anti-corruption into SSR, DDR, and justice reform.
- Create survivor-safe complaints systems in defence and police, backed by whistleblower protections.
- Publish defence procurement and budgets in open formats, subject to audit.

For Oversight Actors (Parliaments, NHRIs, Ombudsman, Civil Society)

- Monitor WPS implementation with a corruption-integrity lens.
- Hold hearings on corruption in security forces and its link to SGBV.
- Expand mandates of parliaments and NHRIs to cover corruption risks in WPS.
- Build coalitions between women's and LGBTIQ+ organisations and anti-corruption NGOs to expose and address sexual corruption.

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