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Reimagining security through gender: insights from the Italian and Swedish armed forces on the WPS Agenda

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Reimagining security through gender: insights from the Italian and Swedish armed forces on the WPS Agenda*

Sofia Sutera**

Abstract

This article examines the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda within the armed forces of Italy and Sweden, two European countries characterised by distinct defence models and approaches to gender equality. Drawing on a multi-level, human-rights-based analytical framework and combining document analysis with semi-structured interviews, the study investigates how WPS principles, prevention, protection, participation, and relief and recovery, are translated into military structures, cultures and practices. The analysis explores how the WPS Agenda has shaped women's leadership and participation in both military institutions, revealing persistent gaps between formal commitments and operational realities. While Sweden has historically pursued a feminist and proactive integration of gender perspectives in defence and security policies, the recent rollback of its Feminist Foreign Policy highlights the fragility of such commitments even in progressive contexts. Italy, by contrast, continues to adopt a more reactive and externally driven approach, with WPS implementation often linked to peacekeeping deployments. Set against a rapidly evolving security environment marked by rising militarisation across Europe, the article argues that meaningful WPS implementation requires intersectional, rights-based and context-sensitive reforms capable of transforming military institutions beyond symbolic inclusion.

Keywords: Women, Peace and Security (WPS), Gender and Military Institutions, Human Rights and Security, Militarisation, Sustainable peace.

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Abstract

Questo articolo analizza l'attuazione dell'Agenda Donne, Pace e Sicurezza (DPS) nelle Forze Armate italiane e svedesi, due Paesi europei caratterizzati da modelli di difesa e approcci alla parità di genere profondamente differenti. Attraverso un quadro analitico multilivello basato sui diritti umani e combinando l'analisi documentale con interviste semi-strutturate, lo studio esamina come i principi DPS, prevenzione, protezione, partecipazione e soccorso/recupero, vengano tradotti in strutture, culture e pratiche militari. L'analisi mostra in che modo l'Agenda DPS abbia influenzato la leadership e la partecipazione femminile nelle due istituzioni, evidenziando persistenti divari tra impegni formali e realtà operative. Sebbene la Svezia abbia storicamente promosso un'integrazione proattiva e femminista delle prospettive di genere nelle politiche di difesa e sicurezza, il recente arretramento della sua politica estera femminista rivela la fragilità di tali risoluzioni anche in contesti considerati progressisti. L'Italia, al contrario, mantiene un approccio più reattivo e poco interiorizzato, con un'attuazione dell'Agenda DPS spesso legata alle operazioni di peacekeeping. In un contesto di sicurezza in rapido mutamento, segnato da una crescente militarizzazione in Europa, l'articolo sostiene che un'attuazione significativa dell'Agenda DPS richieda riforme intersezionali, basate sui diritti e sensibili al contesto, capaci di trasformare le istituzioni militari andando ben oltre una mera inclusione simbolica.

Parole chiave: Donne, pace e sicurezza (WPS), Genere e istituzioni militari, Diritti umani e sicurezza, Militarizzazione, Pace sostenibile.

1. Introduction: where are the women? A commitment to inclusive and equitable peace and security

The pursuit of peace and security is inherently linked to the protection of human rights, forming the normative backbone of global stability. Since 1945, the United Nations has affirmed this principle: the UN Charter pledges to “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war”, while the Universal Declaration of Human Rights places human rights at the foundation of freedom, justice and peace. Yet traditional understandings of peace and security have long overlooked women’s experiences and contributions, reproducing gendered hierarchies that shape conflict and its aftermath.

For peace to be inclusive and sustainable, it must incorporate the perspectives and leadership of half of the world's population. Research shows that women's participation in peace and security processes contributes to more durable and legitimate outcomes (Coomaraswamy 2015; O'Reilly et al. 2015). These insights underpin UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) and the development of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda, which reframes security from a state-centric, militarised approach to a human-centred one grounded in participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery.

Twenty-five years on, the persistent under-representation of women in peace processes and military institutions remains a major challenge. Despite institutional endorsement, implementation is uneven and often symbolic, constrained by entrenched forms of hegemonic masculinity within defence structures (Carreiras 2006; Sjoberg 2014). Scholarship highlights how WPS practices are shaped by competing narratives and power dynamics (Davies and True 2019; Shepherd 2016), and how operational environments, particularly peacekeeping, continue to reproduce cultural resistance, stereotypes and structural barriers (Karim and Beardsley 2017).

These gaps have become more pressing as Europe undergoes a shift towards rearmament and militarisation, driven by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, instability in the Middle East, and the recalibration of NATO and EU defence priorities. This evolving landscape raises critical questions: to what extent can an agenda rooted in human rights and gender equality be advanced when hard-security logics regain primacy? Scholars warn that WPS risks being instrumentalised for operational effectiveness rather than transformative gender justice (Kirby and Shepherd 2016; Shepherd 2016), a concern amplified by recent retrenchment of feminist foreign policy in Europe, including Sweden (Wright and Bergman Rosamond 2024).

National commitments to WPS are also evolving. Italy's Fifth National Action Plan (2025–2029) introduces structured monitoring mechanisms, SMART indicators and a stronger focus on institutional capacity-building. Sweden's National Action Plan 2024–2028 reaffirms its long-standing commitment to gender equality in peace and security, emphasising inclusive participation,

protection for marginalised groups and the integration of gender perspectives across security policy. Yet these commitments operate within a context of rising defence budgets, intensified geopolitical competition and, for Sweden, NATO integration, trends that may constrain the feminist potential of the WPS framework.

Against this backdrop, this paper examines how Italy and Sweden, two countries with distinct political cultures, military traditions and gender-equality trajectories, have incorporated WPS principles into their armed forces. Drawing on a multi-level, human rights-based analytical framework and empirical data collected between 2018 and 2022, the study explores the cultural, structural and institutional factors shaping WPS implementation. The analysis addresses three research questions: how Italy and Sweden have interpreted and operationalised the WPS Agenda within their armed forces; which cultural, structural and institutional factors shape implementation; and how evolving security dynamics, including increasing militarisation and Sweden's NATO accession, affect the transformative potential of WPS within military institutions.

Ultimately, the article assesses whether the WPS Agenda can function as a transformative framework within the Italian and Swedish armed forces in a context of growing militarisation, and reflects on whether it can continue to promote substantive gender equality or risks being subsumed under renewed hard-security priorities.

2. Literature review: women's leadership and participation in an international peace and security perspective

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda has generated extensive scholarship since the adoption of UNSCR 1325 in 2000. Early analyses emphasised the importance of recognising women's roles in conflict prevention, peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction, highlighting the transformative potential of gender-responsive security governance (Cohn et al. 2004; Anderlini 2007). Over time, this literature has expanded to examine the structural, cultural and institutional barriers that limit women's participation and the integration of gender perspectives into security institutions.

A central theme is the critique of traditional security frameworks dominated by hegemonic masculinity (Enloe 2000; Sjoberg 2010). Militaries are conceptualised as gendered organisations that reproduce power hierarchies through norms of toughness, discipline and combat readiness, often marginalising leadership styles and expertise associated with women (Carreiras 2006; Kronsell 2012). Research on gender integration shows that increases in women's representation do not necessarily translate into influence, as organisational cultures may resist or neutralise feminist insights and practices (Duncanson 2015; Sasson-Levy 2011).

Within this broader feminist analysis of military institutions, the implementation of the WPS Agenda has become a key area of inquiry. Scholars have explored the gap between rhetorical commitments and practical outcomes, identifying "implementation deficits" in national policies and armed forces (Shepherd 2011; Davies and True 2019). Studies of peacekeeping missions demonstrate how gender mainstreaming is often instrumentalised to enhance operational effectiveness rather than promote gender equality or human rights (Karim and Beardsley 2017), risking the reduction of WPS to a technical add-on rather than a transformative framework.

Recent scholarship adds further complexity, especially in light of the 25th anniversary of UNSCR 1325. Feminist authors highlight increasing attention to backlash, co-optation and the geopolitical reshaping of security priorities (Lindsay 2025). Global crises, renewed militarisation and intensifying geopolitical competition are reshaping the conditions for WPS implementation (Haastrup 2025; Aggestam and Bergman Rosamond 2022; Ní Aoláin 2016). Rising military spending and strategic competition in Europe fuel concerns that WPS may increasingly be framed through national defence, deterrence and alliance politics rather than human rights or conflict prevention (Wong and von Hlatky 2025), raising questions about its future direction and transformative potential.

Comparative studies explore how national contexts shape WPS operationalisation. Scandinavian countries, particularly Sweden, have attracted

attention for efforts to advance gender equality in the armed forces and integrate feminist principles into defence policy (Bergman Rosamond 2020; Rosén Sundström and Elgström 2019; Aggestam and Bergman Rosamond 2016). Yet recent analyses show how Sweden's earlier feminist foreign policy commitments have been recalibrated in light of shifting political dynamics, NATO accession and changing security priorities (Wright and Bergman Rosamond 2024). Research on Southern European countries, including Italy, highlights more fragmented approaches, often driven by international commitments rather than domestic gender-equality agendas (Azara 2024; Del Turco 2020; Ammendola et al. 2016).

3. Theoretical framework and methodology

This study draws on human rights research and feminist security studies to analyse how gender norms shape security institutions. A human rights-based perspective situates individuals at the centre of security analysis and highlights participation, accountability and non-discrimination as essential components of legitimate governance. Feminist security scholarship further shows how armed forces function as gendered organisations shaped by norms of hierarchy, discipline and combat orientation. These insights guide the analysis but remain in the background, as the article's primary focus is empirical and institution-oriented.

Building on this theoretical foundation, the study employs a qualitative, interpretative and inductive approach to explore how the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda is understood and operationalised within the armed forces of Italy and Sweden. The objective is not only to document formal commitments but to examine how institutional cultures and informal norms shape the implementation, or dilution, of gender-equality goals.

The core empirical material consists of 25 semi-structured interviews conducted between 2018 and 2022 with military personnel, defence officials, policy experts and practitioners involved in WPS implementation. Interviewees were identified through purposive and expert sampling to ensure variation in institutional

position, rank, functional expertise and exposure to WPS-related tasks. The sample included officers and non-commissioned officers, personnel assigned to gender or diversity units, members of training schools, ministry officials, and researchers working on gender and peacekeeping. This diversity allowed for comparison across hierarchical levels and institutional domains, particularly regarding awareness of WPS, institutional constraints and the influence of military culture on gender-equality initiatives.

Interviews followed a flexible guide focused on four thematic areas: understandings of gender and security; institutional approaches to WPS; organisational culture and leadership; and opportunities and obstacles for integrating gender perspectives in defence structures. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, were conducted in person or online depending on access, and were recorded with consent and transcribed.

Interview transcripts were analysed through thematic coding, combining deductive categories informed by the WPS pillars with inductive codes emerging from the data. This combination ensured sensitivity to participants' experiences and alignment with the conceptual architecture of the WPS Agenda.

To contextualise and triangulate interview findings, the study incorporates analysis of policy and institutional documents, including National Action Plans, defence strategies, military directives, training curricula and doctrinal publications. These documents were examined to identify formal commitments, strategic priorities and institutional narratives surrounding gender equality and WPS. Comparing documentary commitments with interview insights was key to identifying implementation gaps, symbolic compliance and tensions between normative aspirations and organisational realities.

The research also included field observations during gender-related training activities and peace operations, which facilitated an understanding of

organisational routines and the practical interpretation of gender mainstreaming in operational settings.

Italy and Sweden were selected as contrasting cases due to their divergent political cultures, defence traditions and gender-equality trajectories. This comparative approach enables a nuanced understanding of how institutional contexts shape WPS implementation. Sweden, associated with progressive gender-equality policies and a more explicit integration of gender perspectives, offers a contrast with Italy, where gender mainstreaming has been more fragmented and externally driven.

As with most qualitative research in defence settings, this study faces limitations. Access to military environments is mediated by institutional gatekeepers, which may affect the diversity and openness of participants, and hierarchical structures can inhibit frank discussion on sensitive topics. The sample cannot fully represent the complexity of large military institutions. Although the empirical data were collected between 2018 and 2022, WPS policies have continued to evolve; recent developments in Italy's 2025–2029 and Sweden's 2024–2028 NAPs have been incorporated analytically but could not be observed directly. Despite these limitations, the triangulation of interviews, documents and field observations provides a robust empirical basis and enhances the validity of the findings.

4. Case study I: Italy

Italy represents a compelling context in which to analyse the institutionalisation of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda within a Southern European military system shaped by hierarchical traditions, persistent gender imbalances and a slow but steady process of constitutionalisation. As a major contributor to UN, EU and NATO missions, particularly in the Mediterranean, Italy's international standing has often contrasted with the more limited internal transformation of its defence structures.

4.1 *Historical background, constitutional framework and normative commitments*

Any examination of gender and security in Italy must be anchored in the constitutional framework established in 1948. Article 11's repudiation of war and Article 52's framing of national defence as a civic duty "in the spirit of the democratic Republic" have progressively shaped what scholars describe as a *constitutionalisation* of the military system, marked by increasing attention to legality, accountability and rights-based governance.

This constitutional grounding provides an important basis for the reception of the WPS Agenda in Italy. The human-centred conception of security embedded in WPS resonates strongly with Italy's pacifist constitutional ethos, while the focus on participation and non-discrimination aligns with broader commitments to equality under Article 3 of the Constitution. Nevertheless, as interviewees noted, this normative convergence does not automatically translate into organisational transformation.

With the entry of women into the Armed Forces in 2000, a comparatively late reform in the European landscape, the Ministry of Defence introduced a series of measures intended to align military structures with constitutional principles. The 2017 *Guidelines on Equal Opportunities, Protection of the Family and Parenthood* remain the central policy instrument in this regard. They consolidate previous efforts by reaffirming that equality, rooted in Articles 2, 3, 37 and 51 of the Constitution, cannot remain "a mere formality" without targeted measures to mitigate social and economic disparities. The establishment of the Equal Opportunities and Gender Perspective Unit (2012) and the Joint Council on the Gender Perspective (2014) further institutionalised gender mainstreaming across legislation, training and organisational practices, in line with NATO Bi-SCD 40-1¹.

Recent ministerial documents, such as the 2024 *Technical Guidelines on Leaves, Permits and Rest Periods for Military Personnel*, adopted by the Ministry of Defence, signal continuity in the broader effort to harmonise personnel management with principles of equal treatment and work-life balance.

¹ NATO Bi-SCD 40-1 is the Alliance's core directive on gender mainstreaming, setting out guidance for the integration of the gender perspective in NATO operations, training and organisational processes.

Although these new guidelines focus specifically on administrative aspects of military employment, rather than on gender mainstreaming in operational or organisational terms, they nevertheless reflect an ongoing institutional attention to equality and welfare within the Armed Forces.

Within this broader architecture, National Action Plans (NAPs) on WPS have provided the overarching normative structure. Notably, the 4th NAP explicitly affirms that Italian policy will make specific reference to “children and in particular girls”, reflecting both the spirit of the WPS Agenda and Italy’s consistent emphasis on girl-child protection in its international commitments. The 5th NAP (2025–2029) reinforces this direction by introducing expanded monitoring mechanisms, more precise institutional responsibilities and strengthened roles for Gender Advisors and Gender Focal Points. Yet, as interviewees emphasised, normative alignment, however advanced, does not, on its own, guarantee meaningful organisational change.

4.2 Organisational culture and gendered dynamics

Despite significant legal progress, the Italian Armed Forces remain shaped by entrenched gender norms. Interview data underline the persistence of stereotypes linking femininity to emotional fragility, reduced operational readiness or limited suitability for leadership roles, with such assumptions influencing expectations regarding both performance and leadership potential. One interviewee described the military as “*a very closed reality... symbolised by the walls that surround military bases*”, emphasising not only internal hierarchical rigidity but also a structural distance from broader societal debates on gender equality. This separation reinforces an organisational environment where change is slow and often perceived as externally imposed.

Several interviewees highlighted that gender integration measures are frequently understood as formal or bureaucratic requirements rather than substantive strategic objectives. While Gender Advisors are increasingly present across commands, they may be relegated to compliance-oriented activities rather than integrated into operational design, planning cycles or decision-making structures. This limited institutionalisation contributes to the

perception that gender perspectives remain an “add-on”, disconnected from core military priorities.

Overall, these dynamics reveal a structural contradiction. While Italy’s constitutional and policy frameworks support gender equality and human-rights approaches to security, everyday practices within the Armed Forces often remain resistant or ambivalent. The gap between formal commitments and the lived organisational culture underscores the challenge of translating normative advances into transformative change, particularly in institutions historically defined by hierarchy, tradition and a narrow understanding of security.

4.3 Training, professional military education and peacekeeping

Training remains one of the clearest channels through which WPS principles can be institutionalised. Italian personnel preparing for missions receive instruction on gender, human rights and civilian protection. Yet interviews reveal pronounced inconsistencies:

- gender modules are sometimes treated as peripheral or “soft”;
- integration into operational planning is uneven;
- local engagement is often delegated to women without a broader gender analysis;
- quality varies across services, commands and training institutions.

Some practices, however, demonstrate more holistic approaches. One interviewee described pre-deployment psychological support aimed at strengthening “family resilience” during deployment, noting that the wellbeing of families directly affects operational readiness. These sessions allow soldiers to reflect on the impact of their absence on children and partners, acknowledging the human dimension of military service, a pillar consistent with the WPS Agenda.

Experiences from the field further illustrate how gender can be operationalised in contextually sensitive ways. Several interviewees described scenarios in which female personnel facilitated contact with local women in peacekeeping

missions, not because of essentialist assumptions but because gender analysis identified specific barriers and opportunities in the local cultural environment.

4.4 Current challenges in a changing security landscape

Italy's defence posture is being reshaped by a rapidly evolving European security context, marked by increased defence expenditure, NATO recalibration and heightened strategic tensions following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In this climate, interviewees noted that WPS priorities risk being overshadowed by "hard-security imperatives", especially during periods of operational pressure.

Operational experiences underscore the complex interplay between gender, culture and military effectiveness. Field accounts from Lebanon highlight how trust-building with local women was facilitated not only by the gender of the soldiers but also by cultural proximity, linguistic familiarity and relational dynamics. As one interviewee observed, "*what matters in fostering these relationships is not only gender but also culture*". Attempts to replicate such initiatives in Afghanistan proved more difficult due to starkly different social norms and levels of female emancipation.

Other insiders emphasised the importance of CIMIC structures² and the role of gender advisors in reducing harm and enhancing resilience. They described gender analysis as an instrument to "minimize the recourse to force and collateral damage" and to strengthen local capacities, an approach consistent with the more transformative ambitions of the WPS framework.

Yet concerns persist regarding the governance of WPS in Italy. Interviewees criticised the lack of a strategic vision, limited expertise within key institutions, fragmented implementation and insufficient monitoring. This reflects a well-documented tension between Italy's strong peacekeeping record, widely characterised by a human security approach, and the weaker institutionalisation of gender equality within the military.

² Civil-Military Cooperation units that coordinate interaction between military forces and civilian actors during operations.

5. Case study II: Sweden

Sweden has long been regarded as a global norm entrepreneur on gender equality and one of the strongest international advocates of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda. This leadership is rooted in a political culture characterised by a robust welfare state, a strong human-rights orientation and a foreign policy tradition centred on multilateralism, mediation and conflict prevention. Sweden's approach to WPS combines domestic institutional reforms with international norm diffusion, making it a valuable case for understanding how political culture and security priorities shape WPS implementation.

5.1 Normative leadership, institutional evolution and policy shifts

Sweden was among the first countries to adopt a National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security in 2006, progressively expanding its focus from diplomacy and development cooperation to defence institutions, operational planning and military training. The most recent NAP 2024–2028 continues this evolution by embedding intersectional approaches, strengthening monitoring tools and linking WPS implementation to Sweden's accession to NATO.

However, unlike Italy, Sweden's constitutional framework does not contain explicit pacifist principles or detailed provisions on the role of the armed forces. The Instrument of Government (Regeringsformen)³ establishes that public power must be exercised with respect for equality and non-discrimination, and that the Government holds responsibility for national defence. Yet it lacks equivalents to Article 11 (repudiation of war) or Article 52 (democratic character of national defence) of the Italian Constitution. In Italy, these articles provide a strong normative anchor for interpreting security through human rights and democratic values; in Sweden, the constitutional emphasis lies instead on administrative legality, equality before the law, and the autonomy of public agencies.

This difference matters. While both countries endorse WPS, Italy's constitutional pacifism shapes a human-centred understanding of security that aligns

³ The Instrument of Government (Regeringsformen) is one of Sweden's Fundamental Laws, defining the structure of government, the separation of powers and constitutional rights.

organically with the Agenda. Sweden's constitutional structure, by contrast, provides a more neutral administrative base; the normative impetus for WPS integration comes primarily from policy rather than constitutional doctrine.

This policy-based structure is clearly reflected in the regulations governing the Swedish Armed Forces (Förordning med instruktion för Försvarsmakten), which explicitly require the SAF to promote gender equality and prevent discrimination. To operationalise these commitments, Sweden developed a comprehensive Gender Handbook for the Armed Forces (2016), produced by the Nordic Centre for Gender in Military Operations (NCGM). The handbook provides concrete guidance for commanders and staff, defining gender perspectives as integral to operational effectiveness and stipulating that gender analysis must inform planning, conduct and evaluation of missions. It identifies key responsibilities at each command level, explains how to integrate gender considerations into situational assessments, rules of engagement and intelligence gathering, and emphasises that gender-sensitive approaches contribute both to mandate fulfilment and to the protection of civilians.

These institutional frameworks demonstrate how Sweden has compensated for the absence of constitutional pacifism by constructing a dense network of policies, guidelines and training instruments. Yet the political environment surrounding these structures has shifted. The discontinuation of Sweden's Feminist Foreign Policy in 2022 signalled a recalibration of the political discourse on gender equality, even if many institutional commitments remain intact. Interviewees noted that the increasing importance of territorial defence and NATO integration risks placing WPS within a more instrumental logic, dependent on leadership and sectoral priorities rather than on overarching constitutional mandates.

5.2 Gender equality within the Swedish Armed Force

The Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) are often considered among Europe's most progressive military institutions. The reintroduction of gender-neutral conscription in 2017 marked a major step toward equalising access to military service and reframing defence as a shared civic duty.

Yet empirical evidence highlights persistent gender imbalances. Interviewees described structural legacies from the historically male-only conscription system, limited retention of women and recurring stereotypes that portray femininity as incompatible with combat readiness or leadership. One interviewee observed that Swedish society often assumes that new recruits “are raised in a gender-sensitive society”, a perception that creates high expectations for women in uniform without addressing the underlying structural challenges.

Institutionally, the SAF benefit from an advanced gender mainstreaming architecture: long-established Gender Advisor systems, Gender Focal Points in operational planning, internal guidelines and sustained investment in gender competence. However, gaps remain. One interviewee noted that only five full-time Gender Advisors were employed at the time, an insufficient number given the breadth of responsibilities. Others pointed out that body armour and equipment still follow male standards, posing material limitations for women across different branches.

A recurring theme is the symbolic and operational value of mixed teams. As a military officer explained, they convey that “we do not treat men and women differently, unless it is necessary”. Nonetheless, recruitment challenges persist, partly due to what interviewees described as a limited understanding among young women of what a military career entails, reflecting the historical distance between Swedish society and its armed forces.

5.3 Training, peace operations and operationalisation of WP

Sweden plays a globally recognised role in WPS training through the Nordic Centre for Gender in Military Operations (NCGM). Established in 2012 under Nordic Defence Cooperation⁴ and later appointed NATO Department Head for the Gender Discipline, the Centre provides internationally accredited training for integrating gender perspectives into operations. It focuses on demonstrating that gender perspectives enhance operational effectiveness: *“it is not just the right thing to do, but also the effective way to reach your mandate”*.

⁴ That is a defence cooperation framework created in 2009 by the five Nordic countries to enhance interoperability, capability development and operational collaboration.

However, interview material also highlights challenges. Gender advisors sometimes face expectations to cover multiple areas beyond their expertise, and gender considerations may be sidelined in high-intensity operational environments. Experiences from Afghanistan showed that Female Engagement Teams (FETs), when deployed without proper preparation or purpose, risked segregation or tokenism. Interviewees stressed that engagement teams should not be “side organisations”, but part of a broader approach to reaching the entire population.

Civilian agencies also play a crucial role. The Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA), Sweden’s agency for peace, security and development, supports peacebuilding, conflict prevention and civilian deployments. Interviewees emphasised the importance of adequate gender analysis, noting that much of the WPS agenda risks “lip-service” without sufficient leadership commitment and resources. They also highlighted the need to avoid burdening women with symbolic responsibility as representatives of gender equality: *“you put more responsibility on women just because they are women”*.

Field experiences confirm these dynamics. In peace operations such as Afghanistan, female personnel were underrepresented in tactical units and CIMIC teams, limiting their ability to engage with local women and gather essential contextual information. While mandatory pre-deployment training and gender advisors strengthened institutional capacity, personnel still reported difficulties translating UNSCR 1325 into daily practice.

5.4 Changing security context, militarisation and NATO membership

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 triggered a profound reorientation of Swedish security policy. Sweden’s accession to NATO in 2024 marks the most significant shift in defence doctrine in generations. This transition has major implications for the country’s WPS commitments.

NATO’s relatively robust WPS architecture, comprising Gender Advisors, a Human Security Unit⁵ and institutionalised commitments to UNSCR 1325,

⁵ That is the NATO body tasked with integrating human security considerations, protection of civilians, human rights, counter-trafficking, cultural property protection, into NATO policies and operations.

creates opportunities for Sweden to further mainstream gender perspectives within multinational structures. Yet interviewees cautioned that the increased focus on national defence, total defence and territorial protection risks subordinating WPS to traditional security concerns. As one interviewee observed, there is growing emphasis on “protecting Sweden in Sweden”, which may reinforce militarisation trends and reduce attention to the more transformative elements of the WPS framework.

The Swedish case illustrates the complex interplay between normative ambition and evolving security imperatives. Sweden continues to project itself as a leader in gender equality and WPS implementation, supported by a sophisticated institutional apparatus and long-standing political commitment. Yet the country is now navigating a period of profound transition: the combination of increased militarisation, the end of the FFP and NATO accession creates new pressures that may reshape the contours of its gender and security policies.

6. Comparative analysis

The comparison between Italy and Sweden reveals how two European states, both formally committed to the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda, pursue gender mainstreaming within armed forces shaped by markedly different constitutional orders, political cultures and security trajectories. Beyond surface-level contrasts in policy design and institutional capacity, the two cases illuminate deeper structural tensions in the governance of WPS, particularly the risk that the Agenda becomes subsumed into logics of militarisation rather than enabling a transformative rethinking of security.

6.1 Constitutional normativity and the foundations of security

The constitutional frameworks of Italy and Sweden provide fundamentally distinct starting points for interpreting the role of the armed forces and the meaning of security.

Italy’s Constitution embeds a human-centred, pacifist orientation: Article 11 repudiates war, while Article 52 situates national defence within the democratic

character of the Republic. These provisions create a normative environment where security is explicitly bounded by legality, rights and restraint. Yet, as the Italian case demonstrates, this normative richness has not generated a fully endogenous feminist reinterpretation of defence. Rather, WPS implementation remains largely compliant and externally oriented.

Sweden's constitutional architecture, by contrast, contains no pacifist clauses and frames security through administrative objectivity, equality and the rule of law. The absence of constitutional limits on the use of military force means that the normative impetus for WPS integration derives primarily from policy-based commitments (NAPs, defence directives, the Gender Handbook), not from constitutional doctrine. This distinction underscores a paradox: while Italy holds the stronger constitutional foundation for a feminist, human-rights-based conception of security, Sweden has developed the more coherent institutional machinery to operationalise it.

6.2 Divergent institutional logics: compliance vs. ownership

The two countries differ not only in their constitutional baselines but also in their institutional motivations. Italy's engagement with WPS is predominantly externally driven. International obligations, UN, EU, NATO, provide the bulk of the normative pressure, and gender perspectives tend to be framed as requirements rather than strategic principles. The resulting pattern is one of fragmented implementation: advances occur, but they are uneven, contingent on specific commands, and often disconnected from broader defence planning.

In Sweden, WPS has historically emerged from internal political and cultural drivers: a long-standing commitment to gender equality, a strong tradition of multilateralism and the institutionalisation of gender-sensitive governance across public administration. Even after the discontinuation of the Feminist Foreign Policy, domestic ownership of WPS remains more consolidated than in Italy. Yet Sweden's shift toward NATO and territorial defence has introduced new tensions, raising questions about whether feminist commitments can withstand growing strategic pressures.

6.3 Organisational cultures, military histories and the reproduction of gender norms

Beyond policy frameworks, the two armed forces embody organisational cultures shaped by distinct historical trajectories and internal narratives. In Italy, the evolution of military identity has been closely tied to broader efforts to consolidate democratic legitimacy and redefine the social role of the armed forces. As Ruffa (2018) notes, this process fostered a self-representation of Italian soldiers as “good humanitarians”, a narrative aligned with Italy’s peacekeeping tradition yet insufficient to unsettle deeper layers of militarised masculinity. Within this context, strong hierarchical structures, persistent gender stereotypes and essentialist assumptions about women continue to constrain the transformative potential of WPS implementation.

Sweden presents, in many respects, a contrasting path. Its armed forces have cultivated a gender-aware, cosmopolitan military identity (Egnell 2019), supported by long-standing Gender Advisor systems, Gender Focal Points and codified training standards such as the 2016 Gender Handbook. Yet Swedish interviewees also report persistent cultural resistance, retention challenges and the ambivalent construction of women as both “operational resources” and “operational risks”. As Farina (2004) reminds us, armed forces operate as social laboratories where gender norms are continuously renegotiated, though not necessarily transformed. This insight applies to both contexts: even advanced gender frameworks may be accommodated without significantly altering underlying power relations.

These dynamics also help explain the limited presence of women in senior roles, demonstrating a clear gap between WPS commitments and institutional realities⁶.

6.4 Converging limitations in a militarised Europe

Despite divergent histories and organisational cultures, Italy and Sweden converge on several structural limitations. The accelerating militarisation of

⁶ For updated figures on female personnel in Italy, see: Camera dei Deputati, “Il personale militare femminile nelle Forze Armate” (updated 2023), available at: https://temi.camera.it/leg19/temi/19_il-personale-militare-femminile-nelle-forze-armate.html. For Sweden, see the official personnel statistics of the Swedish Armed Forces (Försvarsmakten), “Personalsiffror” (data as of 31 December 2023), available at: <https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/sv/organisation/om-var-organisation/personalsiffror/>.

Europe, shaped by rearmament trends, rising defence budgets and strategic realignments following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, risks narrowing WPS into a functionalist tool aimed at enhancing operational effectiveness, force protection or situational awareness. This instrumentalisation manifests differently across the two contexts: in Italy through external compliance with international obligations, in Sweden through increasing alignment with NATO's hard-security priorities.

Across both cases, the expansion of women's participation has not automatically challenged entrenched hierarchies or redistributed authority within defence institutions. Essentialised narratives about women's roles, the persistence of militarised masculinities and the marginal positioning of Gender Advisors all point to enduring structural barriers. Feminist critiques of WPS are especially relevant here: the Agenda is often absorbed into existing security paradigms rather than used to question them. In this respect, both Italy and Sweden illustrate the broader paradox of WPS governance in Europe, namely, that a transformative feminist project can be weakened when implemented within institutions that remain fundamentally shaped by gendered power relations.

7. Findings and discussion

The comparative analysis of Italy and Sweden highlights a set of structural tensions that sit at the core of contemporary debates on the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda. While both countries demonstrate formal adherence to UNSCR 1325, their experiences expose enduring contradictions between normative commitments to gender equality and the militarised systems through which these commitments are expected to be implemented. These findings resonate with the feminist human-rights framework that underpins this study, confirming that the central question, *where are the women, and under what conditions do they participate?*, remains only partially resolved.

7.1 Participation without power: the limits of representation

Across both contexts, increases in the number of women in uniform have not translated into equivalent gains in decision-making power, agenda-setting authority or operational influence. Women's participation remains concentrated in specific roles, often those linked to communication, community outreach or

gender duties, while access to strategic planning structures and command positions remains limited.

This pattern reflects a broader problem in WPS governance: an institutional focus on presence rather than power. Participation becomes an indicator of progress, yet the conditions under which women participate, organisational cultures, hierarchies, and gendered expectations, continue to constrain their agency. As feminist scholarship has long argued, representation alone is insufficient when underlying power dynamics remain intact.

7.2 Gender as a technical tool vs. gender as transformation

A recurring theme in both countries is the instrumentalisation of gender perspectives. Gender is frequently framed as a technical tool that enhances operational effectiveness, for example by increasing situational awareness, facilitating engagement with local communities, or reducing civilian harm.

While such outcomes are valuable, this instrumental logic risks hollowing out the transformative aspirations of the WPS Agenda. The integration of gender analysis becomes a procedural requirement, detached from broader questions about how security is defined, whose security is prioritised, and which forms of violence are rendered visible or invisible.

In this sense, both Italy and Sweden illustrate how WPS can be absorbed by militarised institutions without fundamentally reshaping them, generating a form of “bounded” gender mainstreaming: structured, measurable, yet limited in political depth.

7.3 Organisational cultures as persistent barriers

The findings reveal that organisational culture remains one of the most powerful determinants of WPS outcomes. Regardless of constitutional frameworks or institutional mechanisms:

- militarised masculinities continue to shape expectations about leadership, authority and competence;

- gender stereotypes persist in both progressive and conservative military environments;
- Gender Advisors, despite growing recognition, may lack influence in strategic planning cycles.

Even in Sweden, where gender mainstreaming structures are robust, interviewees report subtle forms of resistance and the persistence of narratives that associate femininity with emotional fragility or operational risk. In Italy, hierarchical traditions and the symbolic separation between armed forces and civil society amplify these dynamics.

This suggests that cultural change lags behind policy change, reinforcing the feminist critique that transformative WPS implementation requires addressing the gendered foundations of military institutions, not simply reforming their procedures.

7.4 WPS in a converging climate of militarisation

Both countries operate within a European context increasingly shaped by hard-security priorities, rearmament and alliance politics. The war in Ukraine and the consolidation of NATO structures have intensified pressures on armed forces to prioritise readiness, deterrence and territorial defence.

In such environments, WPS risks being reframed as:

- an operational asset rather than a human-rights imperative;
- a contributor to military effectiveness rather than a challenge to militarised logics;
- a set of compliance measures rather than a transformative agenda.

This convergence demonstrates a central insight of feminist peace research: militarisation compresses the political space for gender-equality governance, reorienting the Agenda toward tasks that support military objectives while constraining its potential to interrogate those objectives.

7.5 Governance gaps: fragmentation, monitoring and policy coherence

A further dimension emerging from the comparison concerns the persistence of significant governance gaps, which directly shape the transformative potential of

the WPS Agenda. In Italy, the recent advances introduced through the Fifth National Action Plan, including enhanced monitoring tools, stronger interministerial coordination and structured engagement with civil society, constitute important progress. Yet implementation continues to display notable unevenness. The impact of these measures depends heavily on the commitment of individual commanders, the availability of resources, and the presence of gender expertise within units. This results in considerable variation across services, branches and hierarchical levels.

In Sweden, where the institutional infrastructure for WPS is more firmly established and grounded in a long tradition of egalitarian policies, similar difficulties nonetheless emerge. The mechanisms are more stable and comprehensive than in the Italian case, but recent political shifts and the strategic reorientation linked to NATO accession introduce uncertainties regarding the long-term sustainability of commitments developed during the years of the Feminist Foreign Policy. As a consequence, the quality of monitoring, the diffusion of genuine gender competence, and the integration of WPS considerations into strategic planning cannot be taken for granted.

In both contexts, moreover, cooperation with civil society remains limited, often confined to formal consultation rather than constituting a sustained and structured partnership. Taken together, these challenges highlight that the effectiveness of WPS governance depends not only on the existence of plans, mechanisms and institutional structures, but also, and perhaps more crucially, on coherent political vision, stable leadership engagement and the ability to frame gender equality as a substantive security priority rather than a peripheral or merely procedural concern.

Conclusions

This comparative study set out to examine how Italy and Sweden have interpreted, institutionalised and operationalised the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda within their armed forces, and to identify the cultural, structural and political conditions that shape its transformative potential in a context of increasing European militarisation. By bringing empirical material into

dialogue with a feminist human-rights framework, the analysis shows that while both countries formally embrace the principles of WPS, the depth and direction of implementation differ substantially, and neither case has yet succeeded in realising the agenda's transformative promise.

First, in response to the question of how WPS has been operationalised, the findings reveal two distinct trajectories. Italy's engagement with WPS has been strongly influenced by external obligations linked to UN, EU and NATO operations, leading to a form of implementation that is often compliance-driven and uneven across services. The Fifth National Action Plan (2025–2029) represents an important step towards consolidation, yet its effectiveness remains conditioned by leadership priorities, resource constraints and cultural resistance within a traditionally hierarchical military institution. Sweden, by contrast, has historically pursued WPS as part of a broader normative project rooted in national commitments to gender equality and multilateralism. An elaborate system of gender advisers, specialised training and cross-government coordination has long supported internalisation of WPS principles. Nonetheless, recent political shifts and NATO accession have introduced new tensions, revealing that even well-institutionalised frameworks are vulnerable to strategic pressures and changing political will.

Second, the analysis shows that implementation in both cases is profoundly shaped by organisational cultures and the gendered norms embedded within military institutions. Echoing feminist scholarship and empirical findings from both field sites, militarised masculinities continue to influence recruitment, tasking, leadership pathways and the perceived legitimacy of gender-related work. In Italy, gender initiatives often remain peripheral and administratively framed; in Sweden, despite more progressive structures, women remain underrepresented and gender competence is inconsistently diffused. Across both contexts, increases in women's participation have not translated into equal influence over decision-making or into the reconfiguration of institutional power.

Third, the evolving European security environment, including heightened defence spending, intensified geopolitical tensions and, in Sweden's case, NATO membership, raises critical questions about whether WPS can continue to function as a transformative framework. The findings suggest that the current

phase of militarisation risks narrowing WPS to operational tools that enhance mission effectiveness, rather than advancing the agenda's original aims: conflict prevention, human security, gender equality and structural change. This instrumentalisation is not unique to Italy or Sweden; it reflects broader international trends that feminist scholars have long cautioned against.

At the same time, the research underscores that the transformative potential of WPS has not been exhausted. Both cases reveal pockets of institutional innovation, Italy's strengthened monitoring architecture, Sweden's long-standing gender training infrastructures, the work of the Nordic Centre for Gender in Military Operations, and the active role of agencies such as the Folke Bernadotte Academy. These mechanisms demonstrate that when accompanied by political vision and sustained leadership, armed forces can act as important sites for advancing human rights and inclusive security.

However, a critical feminist human-rights perspective reminds us that transformation requires more than institutional architecture. It demands continuous interrogation of the gendered logics of security, meaningful participation of women in all their diversity, and a commitment to address the structural inequalities that underlie both conflict and defence institutions. As highlighted in the broader literature and reaffirmed through interview data, the core question remains not only *where are the women?* but also *which women, with which voice, in which structures of power?*

Looking ahead, the role of armed forces in maintaining international peace and security will depend on their ability to reconcile rising militarisation with a substantive vision of human security. This requires institutionalising gender analysis as a standard element of strategic planning; strengthening accountability frameworks beyond procedural compliance; resourcing gender expertise adequately; and fostering organisational cultures that challenge, rather than reproduce, the hierarchies that underpin violence and insecurity.

Ultimately, this study suggests that the WPS Agenda retains the capacity to act as a critical normative compass within European defence sectors, but only if its foundational principles, participation, protection, prevention and relief/recovery understood through a lens of equality and human rights, are defended against

both symbolic dilution and instrumental co-optation. The cases of Italy and Sweden illustrate that the future of WPS in military institutions will depend on our collective willingness to foreground human dignity, inclusive governance and feminist analyses even in times of geopolitical uncertainty.

There is, thence, a need to re-politicise the WPS Agenda, which was primarily conceived as a feminist political project: indeed, this means adopting a transformative approach that puts gender equality and equal participation of men and women in leadership positions back at the heart of the Agenda.

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