

SALO Public Dialogue on:

South African Foreign Policy and Its Evolution: The Implementation of Women, Peace, and Security Over the Last 30 Years



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Executive Summary

On 10 December 2024, the Southern African Liaison Office, in collaboration with the Rosa Luxembourg Foundation, hosted a virtual public dialogue celebrating the recent policy milestones in South Africa's Women, Peace and Security agenda, including the launch of the Gertrude Shope Women Mediators Network by South Africa's Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) on International Women's Day 2024.

South Africa's National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security (2020–2025) approaches its conclusion in 2025. SALO utilised this dialogue to reflect on its successes and challenges.

The session explored:

- The evolution of South African foreign policy over the last three decades in implementing Women, Peace, and Security.
- Entry points to strengthening South Africa's approach to Women, Peace, and Security during the 7th administration and beyond.

Speakers included **Ambassador Lindiwe Zulu**, member of the ANC International Relations subcommittee, and ANC National Executive Committee member; **Ambassador Charlotte Lobe**, DIRCO; **Ella Mangisa**, Director - Ilitha Labantu; **Suraya Bibi Bhyat Khan**, National Council Observer - South African Women in Dialogue; and **Stella Mystica Sabiiti**, formerly of the AU's Peace and Security Department

Context and Importance

The dialogue was held at an auspicious time for reflection on women, peace and security – as the 10th of December is both International Human Rights Day, and the last day of the local 16 days of Activism campaign against gender-based violence. As 2024 draws to a close this month, it is also notable that 2025 marks the celebration of 30 years of the Beijing Platform for Action.

The WPS agenda is a global policy framework that recognises the unique and disproportionate impact of conflict on women and girls, and emphasises their essential role in peace and security efforts. It is primarily guided by United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 (2000) and its subsequent resolutions.¹

South African foreign policy and its evolution

Ambassador Charlotte Lobe gave an overview of South Africa's foreign policy evolution. She started by explaining that for women, and particularly for African women, the WPS agenda is crucial.

South Africa recognises itself as an integral part of the African continent and therefore understands Africa's stability, unity, and prosperity as being in its national interest. Over the last thirty years, the government has worked hard to ensure that when political stability is discussed, this encompasses the continent, not just South Africa in isolation.

¹ United Nations Peacekeeping. 2025. *Women, Peace and Security*. Available: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/women-peace-and-security-0> [19 February 2025].

South Africa's international relations over the past 30 years have aimed to shape and strengthen national identity, cultivate national pride and patriotism, and address the injustices of the past - including those of race and gender. The government aims to bridge the divides in society to ensure social cohesion, stability, and to grow the economy for the development and upliftment of the South African people.

Ambassador Lobe focused on the third pillar of the WPS agenda – preventing war:

“One of the things that we need to focus on as the global community is ending impunity, strengthening women's rights, and implementing gender-sensitive policies as an anchor for the kind of wealth that we wish to build. The overarching objective of the WPS agenda, in fact, is preventing war and not making war safe for women. It is about creating a world free from conflict, a particular armed conflict, and violence in which human rights are protected and women and men equally empowered to take part in decision-making structures and processes”.²

In 2000, under the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Presidency of Namibia, women brought their demands for a WPS agenda to the Security Council. They called for the prevention of war to be a central component of the Security Council's agenda, alongside the recognition of the capacities and capabilities of global health in addressing the complex challenges of peace and security.

During this historic moment, women advocated for full and equal participation and representation at all levels of decision-making, including in peace processes and electoral processes, both as candidates and voters. Additionally, they called for United Nations positions and structures to become more gender-sensitive and for a broader socio-political transformation that would positively contribute to building the principles of equity and equality.

At the core of their advocacy was the promotion of a peace continuum that emphasised conflict prevention through strategies aimed at anticipating and averting conflicts, such as early warning and fact-finding missions. These mechanisms are integral to the South Africa National Action Plan (NAP), where early warning systems are identified as essential tools for conflict prevention. Such systems are crucial in detecting potential outbreaks, escalations, or resurgences of violent conflict, as well as in responding to natural and humanitarian disasters.

South Africa is a member of the **Contact Group for the Elsie Initiative for Women in Peace Operations**, promoting women's participation in peacekeeping and supporting the UN Secretary-General's efforts to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse in UN operations.

In 2022, South Africa co-chaired the **Women, Peace, and Security Focal Points Network** with Switzerland, focusing on implementing UNSC Resolution 1325 and sharing best practices in women's leadership, national action plans, post-conflict recovery, and countering violent extremism.

Aligned with **AU Agenda 2063**, South Africa plays a key role in **FemWise-Africa**, a platform for advocacy, capacity-building, and networking to enhance women's

² Lobe, C. 2024. SALO Public Dialogue on South African Foreign Policy and Its Evolution: The Implementation of Women, Peace, and Security Over the Last 30 Years. *Southern African Liaison Office*. 10 December. Available: <https://www.salo.org.za/salo-public-dialogue-the-implementation-of-women-peace-and-security-over-the-last-30-years-10-dec-2024/> [19 February 2025].

inclusion in peace-making. The government has also developed training programs to equip peacekeepers for challenges in peace operations, particularly in increasing women's participation in mediation. Additionally, the **Gertrude Shope Annual Dialogue Forum**, initiated by DIRCO, has been running for nearly a decade, bringing together African women leaders to strengthen their role in peacebuilding and conflict resolution.

Ella Mangisa from Ilitha Labantu noted that:

"We applaud initiatives such as the Gertrude Shope Women Mediators Network, which show South Africa's recognition of women as essential mediators and leaders in fostering peace. These milestones should be celebrated. Yet as we approach the conclusion of the current national action plan, it is crucial to ask how much of this progress has truly reached the ground. For many women in vulnerable communities, peace is not just the absence of conflict; it is the presence of opportunity, security and dignity".³

Women in Conflict

Ambassador Zulu emphasised the crucial role women play in conflict scenarios:

"Women play a crucial role in terms of peace and conflict. Unfortunately for us, if we look at the conflicts that are happening across the African continent and in the world ... those who are involved in the conflict do not regard women as people who can participate to end the war".⁴ "Women enhance the effectiveness and contribute to sustainable and inclusive outcomes in conflicts. Women offer unique perspectives on mediation and peacebuilding that reflect the need of communities and not the spoils of war. Generally, women tend to focus more on reconciliation, peace, stability and economic development – rebuilding communities. However, the role of women in conflict mediation remains minimal".

Ambassador Lobe added to this:

"Despite the ground-breaking UNSC Resolution 1325 and the formative framework of the WPS, challenges remain in realising the meaningful participation of women in peace and security building and peace-making processes. This is primarily because the root causes of conflict include but are not limited to poverty, scarce resources, political instability, and abuse of human rights. Moreover, women remain excluded in peace processes, including in the drafting of peace agreements. The involvement of women in UN peacekeeping roles within the military, police, and civilian components in conflict also remains dismal. Gender perspectives should be incorporated, and the participation of women in preventing the emergence, spread and reemergence of violent conflict should be ensured. A holistic perspective of peace based on equality,

³ Mangisa, E. 2024. SALO Public Dialogue on South African Foreign Policy and Its Evolution: The Implementation of Women, Peace, and Security Over the Last 30 Years. *Southern African Liaison Office*. 10 December. Available: <https://www.salo.org.za/salo-public-dialogue-the-implementation-of-women-peace-and-security-over-the-last-30-years-10-dec-2024/> [19 February 2025].

⁴ Zulu, L. 2024. SALO Public Dialogue on South African Foreign Policy and Its Evolution: The Implementation of Women, Peace, and Security Over the Last 30 Years. *Southern African Liaison Office*. 10 December. Available: <https://www.salo.org.za/salo-public-dialogue-the-implementation-of-women-peace-and-security-over-the-last-30-years-10-dec-2024/> [19 February 2025].

human rights and human security for all, including the most marginalised in society, needs to be adopted globally”.

Regional Cooperation

Ambassador Zulu stressed the importance of regional cooperation:

“We continue the conversations under the liberation movements, and the aim of keeping the liberation movements together is not to be sentimental about our history, but it is to say our history brought us here. What are the things that we can learn from each other as liberation movements, from building democracy and building institutions of democracy ... and [empowering] women in education, in health, etc. What lessons are we learning?”⁵

Beyond 2025

Ambassador Zulu noted the various mechanisms for the empowerment of women – the African Union Special Envoy on Women, Peace and Security; the African Women Leadership Network; the WPS agenda; the UNSC Resolution 1325, and various other resolutions:

“South Africa has the NAP, Peace and Security, 2020/2025. What then, after 2025? What plans do we have to make sure that we look back at the impact of the national action plan and whether the most ordinary women in South Africa across the board can relate to some things that they can say have happened in their lives in the implementation of this plan?”⁶

Ambassador Zulu continued by emphasising that after the advancement of women's rights in 30 years of democracy in South Africa, women's inclusion in politics, the economy, and education is not yet adequate:

“The National Policy Framework for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality is showing signs of progress, however challenges remain. The challenges identified at the conceptualisation of the policy framework remain similar – challenges in gender relations, poverty, HIV and AIDS, violence, and access to basic resources. The success of the National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security 2025 is a mixed bag; however, it did provide a guiding framework towards creating a safer and peaceful South Africa, Africa, and the world for women and girls and gender non-conforming persons to be able to participate fully in society”.

Ambassador Lobe added:

“Gender mainstreaming has been a key hallmark of South Africa's post-1994 transformation. This strategy has enabled government departments to make great strides in the representation of women and in adopting gender-sensitive

⁵ Zulu, L. 2024. SALO Public Dialogue on South African Foreign Policy and Its Evolution: The Implementation of Women, Peace, and Security Over the Last 30 Years. *Southern African Liaison Office*. 10 December. Available: <https://www.salo.org.za/salo-public-dialogue-the-implementation-of-women-peace-and-security-over-the-last-30-years-10-dec-2024/> [19 February 2025].

⁶ Ibid.

and responsive policies. This is what the WPS agenda is all about. It's about ensuring that we use our agency as women in the different spaces that we occupy to amplify the voices of women, but also to make sure that the voice of women is not just a voice, but a voice that transforms our society, our continent, and of course, one that is heard in the different spaces globally".⁷

Ella Mangisa noted that NGOs often bear the weight of unmet needs with limited funding and resources to address the immense challenges in communities. While South Africa's commitment to the WPS agenda is clear, implementation on the ground frequently lags behind. The disconnect between international policies and local realities leaves NGOs struggling to bridge the gap, often with minimal support. Additionally, women remain underrepresented in decision-making spaces.

The next phase of South Africa's National Action Plan must prioritise greater investment in grassroots organisations. Funding and resources must flow to the local level, where the impact of policies is felt most. Strong partnerships between government, NGOs and civil society are essential to ensure that the WPS agenda reaches every corner of the country. There is a need for increased accountability and monitoring through robust mechanisms that track progress, identify gaps, and ensure that stakeholders are held accountable. Effective oversight and evaluation are essential in order to strengthen implementation and achieve meaningful outcomes.

Stella Mystica Sabiti added:

"We are there to support each other. Without each other, I don't know what we would do. We go beyond as women; we support each other and our communities. We have just heard from our sister who works in the community; it really is fantastic. We are there! We join hands, and we go ahead!"⁸

Finally, it is crucial to include men and boys in these efforts. While recognising the strength and impact of women, it is equally important to embrace men as partners in building peace and equality. This also highlights the need to address mental health and psychosocial support, particularly for men and boys who often struggle in silence due to cultural or societal norms. Ensuring accessible and effective support systems is essential for fostering holistic well-being and sustainable peace.

Policy critiques

- I. Weak Implementation of the National Action Plan (NAP)
 - i. The South Africa NAP (2020–2025) lacks robust implementation mechanisms, hindering its ability to meaningful impact grassroots level communities in general, and marginalised women in particular.
- II. Lack of Consistent Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E)

⁷ Lobe, C. 2024. SALO Public Dialogue on South African Foreign Policy and Its Evolution: The Implementation of Women, Peace, and Security Over the Last 30 Years. *Southern African Liaison Office*. 10 December. Available: <https://www.salo.org.za/salo-public-dialogue-the-implementation-of-women-peace-and-security-over-the-last-30-years-10-dec-2024/> [19 February 2025].

⁸ Sabiti, S. M. 2024. SALO Public Dialogue on South African Foreign Policy and Its Evolution: The Implementation of Women, Peace, and Security Over the Last 30 Years. *Southern African Liaison Office*. 10 December. Available: <https://www.salo.org.za/salo-public-dialogue-the-implementation-of-women-peace-and-security-over-the-last-30-years-10-dec-2024/> [19 February 2025].

- i. Despite South Africa having strong institutional frameworks (AU, UN, and national plans), M&E systems generally remain weak.
 - ii. There is no clear post-2025 plan for assessing the effectiveness of the current NAP on WPS - raising concerns around continuity.
- III. Limited Women's Participation in Peace Processes
 - i. Women remain underrepresented in decision-making spaces - including peace negotiations - despite the existence of policies advocating for their inclusivity. The issue lies in the absence of any institutionalised mechanism to sustain or expand their participation.
- IV. Funding and Resource Constraints
 - i. Grassroots organisations, such as Ilitha Labantu, often bear the burden of implementing WPS initiatives with limited financial support.
 - ii. Government funding for WPS programmes remains inadequate, forcing NGOs to rely on external donors to sustain essential community-based interventions.
- V. Failure to Prioritise Prevention (Pillar 3 of UNSCR 1325)
 - i. Despite early warning systems being identified as essential in the NAP, South Africa's WPS implementation has focused more on response than on prevention.
 - ii. There is a lack of proactive measures to prevent conflict before it escalates into violence.

Policy Recommendations

- I. Strengthen Implementation & Accountability
 - i. Develop a comprehensive post-2025 WPS Action Plan with clear accountability mechanisms to measure impact.
 - ii. Government and civil society must collaborate more effectively to bridge policy gaps and to ensure that women from grassroots and marginalised communities benefit from WPS commitments.
- II. Enhance M&E
 - i. Introduce robust tracking systems to assess progress, identify gaps, and to hold stakeholders accountable.
- III. Increase Women's Representation in Peace Processes
 - i. Institutionalise mandatory quotas for women's participation in peace negotiations and mediation processes.
 - ii. Expand platforms like FemWise-Africa and the Gertrude Shope Women's Dialogue Forum to train and deploy women mediators regionally and internationally.
- IV. Increase Funding for Grassroots Organisations
 - i. Allocate sustainable government funding for community-driven WPS initiatives.
 - ii. Improve access to international funding mechanisms for local women's groups engaged in peacebuilding.
- V. Prioritise Conflict Prevention & Early Warning Mechanisms
 - i. Strengthen early warning systems to anticipate and avert conflicts before they escalate.
 - ii. Integrate local community-led prevention strategies into national security frameworks.
- VI. Mainstream Gender in Security Sector Reform

- i. Train peacekeepers, security forces, and policymakers on gender-sensitive responses in conflict zones.
- ii. Implement gender-responsive security sector reforms to combat sexual violence and ensure accountability.

Conclusion

South Africa has made commendable strides in embedding the WPS agenda into its foreign policy, particularly through initiatives such as the Gertrude Shope Women Mediators Network, and its leadership within international WPS platforms. However, discussions during the session underscored critical gaps in implementation, particularly in ensuring that the progress made at the policy level translates into meaningful change for women on the ground – especially marginalised women at the grassroots level.

While South Africa has demonstrated commitment to the WPS agenda through national and international frameworks, there remain concerns about weak implementation, inadequate M&E mechanisms, and the underrepresentation of women in peace processes.

The dialogue reinforced the importance of strengthening accountability mechanisms, ensuring sustainable funding for grassroots organisations, and prioritising conflict prevention alongside response strategies. Participants also emphasised the need to institutionalise women's representation in decision-making spaces and enhance regional cooperation to promote peace and security on the African continent.

The analysis and recommendations included in this brief do not necessarily reflect the view of SALO or any of the donors or conference participants, but rather draw upon the major strands of discussion put forward at the event. Participants neither reviewed nor approved this document. The contents of the report are the sole responsibility of SALO and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the donors who provided financial assistance for this policy dialogue session.

About the Southern African Liaison Office:



The Southern African Liaison Office (SALO) is a South African-based not-for-profit civil society organisation which, through advocacy, dialogue, policy consensus and in-depth research and analysis, influences the current thinking and debates on foreign policy especially regarding African crises and conflicts.

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