Policy Brief: advancing the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda in the Great Lakes Region

Linking Field Priorities to EU External Action and the Next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF 2028–2034)

Executive summary

Women across the Great Lakes Region, particularly in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), remain at the forefront of peacebuilding despite facing disproportionate violence, displacement, and exclusion. Local women's organisations lead efforts in mediation, justice, and reconciliation, yet operate with minimal institutional support.

As the European Union (EU) prepares its **next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF 2028–2034)**, it has a critical opportunity to translate its foreign policy commitments into tangible action. This policy brief consolidates the outcomes of the **Workshop on Women, Peace and Security organized during the EURAC (the Europe-Central Africa network) Conference on the role of the EU in the Great Lakes Region (2 October 2025, Brussels)**, into strategic recommendations aligned with the **EU Gender Action Plan III (GAP III), the Strategic Compass, and the Global Gateway.**

Key message: Sustained peace in the Great Lakes Region depends on women's full participation, protection, and leadership. The next MFF must structurally embed gender equality and WPS priorities in all EU external action instruments.

Context: insights and structural challenges

During the Brussels workshop on WPS at the EURAC conference organized by the MAnU 2.0 program (focusing on Women, Peace and Security) together with other partners, participants uncovered the visible, structural, and deep-rooted barriers to women's participation in peace and security:

Layer	Challenges
Visible	For example sexual and gender based violence, displacement, underrepresentation in decision making
Structural	For example, weak justice systems, poor enforcement of protective laws, economic exclusion
Deep-rooted	For example, discriminatory norms and practices, deep-rooted power dynamics, cultural acceptance of certain cases of impunity

Women's rights defenders reported growing insecurity and threats, particularly in conflict-affected zones. Many operate without government recognition or resources but continue to strengthen community cohesion and document human rights violations.

These realities underscore the need for long-term, flexible EU engagement with local women's movements as strategic peace actors, not as beneficiaries but as partners.

EU policy alignment

Based on the outcomes of the workshop clear links can be made to EU policy and how they can be improved to increase their impact.

EU Policy Framework	Relevant Commitments
Gender Action Plan III (2021–2027)	Eliminate (S)GBV, promote women's participation in peace processes, strengthen access to justice
Strategic Compass for Security and Defense	Integrate WPS principles into CSDP missions and conflict prevention
Global Gateway Strategy	Advance inclusive governance, resilience, and gender equality through sustainable partnerships
MFF 2028–2034 (in preparation)	Opportunity to mainstream gender and WPS across NDICI–Global Europe and European Peace Facility

Policy recommendations

1. Strengthen Legal Frameworks and Justice for (S)GBV Survivors
    - Build the capacity of judicial and legal actors at all levels to handle (S)GBV cases effectively.
    - Support enforcement of (S)GBV laws in the DRC and advocate adoption of comprehensive (S)GBV legislation in Burundi.
    - Fund survivor-centred legal aid and local justice mechanisms.
    - Disseminate protective laws in local languages using community-based communication tools.
    - Strengthen coordination to develop and implement protective laws and expand survivor-centred justice.

2. Advance Implementation of National Action Plans (NAPs) on UNSCR 1325
    - Ensure dedicated budgets for NAP 1325 in Burundi and DRC.
    - Support implementation, monitoring, and regular reporting through national steering committees.
    - Fund annual data collection on WPS indicators.
    - Continue capacity-building for women mediators, peacebuilders, and political leaders.

3. Empower Women-Led Civil Society
    - Provide direct, flexible funding to women-led CSOs via small-grant and micro-credit mechanisms.

- Strengthen their institutional capacity to engage in peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and advocacy.
- Support women's economic empowerment initiatives as tools for stability and political participation.
- Align efforts with Global Gateway governance and resilience pillars.

4. Mainstream Gender Across Peace and Security Programming
    - Embed gender analysis and WPS principles in DDR, SSR, and CSDP missions.
    - Ensure European Peace Facility (EPF) operations integrate gender perspectives.
    - Promote peace education and gender equality curricula from primary to university levels.

5. Deepen EU Dialogue with Women's Civil Society
    - Establish regular consultation mechanisms between EU Delegations, local women's networks, and authorities.
    - Engage grassroots women's groups—not only national representatives—in programme design and monitoring.
    - Ensure EU Delegation programming explicitly references UNSCR 1325 commitments.

6. Country-Specific Priorities

    Burundi:
    - Integrate WPS across all EU programmes and political dialogues.
    - Support the adoption of a National Strategy on Positive Masculinity in Burundi.
    - Support the revision of the Burundian family code with regard to inheritance.

    DRC:
    - Support normative reforms with temporary special measures to increase women's participation rates in institutions at different levels.
    - Prioritize funding to address (S)GBV in conflict-affected areas (North & South Kivu).
    - Support CSO's who have a long track record of peacebuilding initiatives in conflict affected areas (North & South Kivu).

7. Moving Forward: Integrating WPS into the Next MFF (2028–2034)
    - Embed WPS as a cross-cutting priority within NDICI–Global Europe and the European Peace Facility.
    - Increase dedicated funding for gender-responsive peacebuilding.
    - Support EU Delegations to monitor and report on WPS progress in external actions.

Conclusion: from commitment to implementation

The Women, Peace and Security agenda remains a cornerstone of the EU's feminist foreign policy. As the EU shapes its next MFF, it must ensure that women's leadership, protection, and participation in peace processes are not side projects but central drivers of sustainable

peace. The Great Lakes region offers both a challenge and an opportunity to demonstrate this commitment in action.

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Date: November 2025
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