

# AFTER 20 YEARS, WPP CLOSES ITS DOORS

7 DEC '17

*A Letter from the WPP Team*

Dear friends,

Today, on the 13th day of the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence Campaign, we bring you the sad news that from 15 December onwards, the Women Peacemakers Program (WPP) will have to close its doors.

It is extra bitter we had to make this decision in a time when the world, and women in particular, are facing the impact of strong backlash forces fueling misogyny, xenophobia, the undermining of human rights, militarism, the exploitation of the earth and its people, and the growing divide between the have and have nots.

It was a very hard decision to make for us as WPP team and board, especially after 20 years of pioneering with so many of you around the world, feeling more convinced than ever that our work matters, makes a difference, is appreciated, and remains needed. We would like to ask for your time to read what has driven us to make this decision.

Over the past three years, we have put all our efforts into sounding the alarm<sup>[1]</sup> about the challenges that are increasingly undermining progressive forces in society, including women's rights activism. One of

## NEWS

**Event Summary:  
Pulling the Rug  
from Under Civil  
Society's Feet -  
We Must Create  
Our Own Rugs!**

7 NOV '17 On

Thursday, 26 October 2017, a side event entitled, "Pulling the Rug from Under Our Feet: What is the UNSCR 1325 Without Civil Society Freedoms?" was hosted on the margins of the 17th anniversary of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325. The event was hosted by the Women Peacemakers Program (WPP) and the Dutch Mission, in collaboration with Duke Law's

these concerns access to financing, which is playing a role in shrinking women's civil society space, everywhere.

This phenomenon is global, and comes from different angles: donors' grantmaking policies that do not meet the organizational reality of most women's groups; fierce civil society competition; banks' de-risking behavior; and a general difficult climate for those doing controversial, critical, political, and rights-based work.

We increasingly find ourselves in a schizophrenic reality, where on the one hand women's rights and gender equality activists around the world are facing strong opposition from different sides while on the other hand many in government and donor positions loudly commit to supporting women's rights and gender equality. Yet their grantmaking increasingly fails to provide an effective financial infrastructure catering directly and sustainably for the women frontliners and feminist pioneers in global South, North, East and West.

Which is ironic, considering it is the women's movement, which put these issues on the global policy map and funding agenda in the first place. It would only make sense if those who have been sowing the seeds can also be amongst the ones that are able to reap the fruits.

At WPP, based in Europe, we also have experienced this changing reality first hand. Tender procedures, which we used to be able to access directly, are no longer accessible, despite the fact that we have a successful track record for 20 years. Application criteria have become too demanding, such as requiring minimum annual budgets that are unrealistic and unreachable for a middle-sized organization. We are not alone in this, as the vast majority of most women's organizations around the globe fit in the categories "small" or "middle sized".

Increasingly, the only option left for us to access funding was to try and find a large organization willing and able to take us along, which increasingly put us in a dependency position, clashing with the core feminist empowerment principle of "financial access and control".

Increasingly, we have also found ourselves in a constant rat race of measuring and (over)reporting, tying us to our desks. Like so many in civil society, we too often find ourselves caught up in a paralyzing bureaucratic reality, generated by a donor reality that locates accountability in paper. This is going at the expense of the real work we as activists set ourselves out to, which is about changing women's lives, and by women's lives, everyone's lives on this shared planet.

International Human Rights Clinic, Al-Hayat Center for Civil Society Development, Arab Women Organisation of Jordan, NOVACT, Free Sight Association, Iraqi Al-Amal Association, Women Empowerment Organisation, NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security and Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. This article briefly looks at the main issues discussed during the event.

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## Happy 22nd International Women's Day for Peace and Disarmament!

**24 MAY '17** A message from WPP staff on the 22nd International Women's Day for Peace and Disarmament!

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Let there be no doubt that, as an activist organization, we wholeheartedly support civil society partnerships for social transformation and solidarity. As nonviolence teaches us, large-scale economic, political and social transformation always depend on the ability to create “mass” amongst a wide diversity of constituencies. A diverse civil society – one in which unregistered groups, movements, small activist organizations, large international actors, and individual activists can work together on an equal footing – is a key component of this.

Any effective partnership should therefore be shaped by different changemakers coming together on an equal basis to develop bottom-up strategies based on shared values, drive, trust, and transformation agenda.

Partnership should always be a matter of free choice.

Yet nowadays, too many partnerships end up being pushed by top-down donor incentives (driven by donors’ manageability needs), combined with civil society’s financial survival needs, with the smaller actors often ending up as the subcontracted implementors of an externally set up agenda, dangling at the end.

The current competition-fuelling grant industry is increasingly pitting civil society against each other, and too often merely caters for a narrow segment of civil society, the one that can swallow large budgets, immense amounts of bureaucracy and which can produce enormous paper trails, all under the name of “accountability”.

This increasingly cuts off direct support to those who do crucial work on the ground across the globe – the people movements, the brave young activists organizing themselves in the face of war, the women human right defenders risking their lives on a daily basis, the activist groups that keep a critical eye on those in power. It is the very people that cannot tick the many donor boxes, are not able to swallow huge amounts of funding at once, nor have the time and resources to produce endless piles of paper. But let there be no doubt that they are accountable – they make up the immune system active in any corner of our global world, always on the look out, to protect the lives of the people they serve, often at their own expense.

With deep concern we see that the above is fueling a reality where women’s organizations increasingly lose access to direct financial support, and have come to depend on large organizations (often based in the global North), willing to subcontract them in their tender procedures, so they can get at least some scraps of financial support.



## Video Panel Discussion: "What Countering Terrorism Financing Costs Gender Equality & Security"

**18 MAY '17** In this panel discussion, hosted at Duke University on March 22, 2017, the research "Tightening the Purse Strings: What Countering Terrorism Financing Costs Gender Equality and Security" was presented. This research represents the culmination of research, interviews, surveys, and statistical analysis carried out by the International Human Rights Clinic at Duke Law and the Women Peacemakers Program to begin to fill the gap in understanding how responses to terrorism and violent extremism may in practice squeeze women's rights and their defenders

When women's flexible, bottom-up driven, long-term, activist and globally connected movement agenda for social, economic, political and environmental transformation becomes subcontracted into short-term, top-down oriented, isolated project agreements, we should start asking ourselves what kind of accountability we are talking about in these times of global turmoil.

In the past years, we have felt how this changed financial infrastructure started interfering with WPP's mandate and ways of working. Since 1997, we have existed as an activist actor, as part of a global community of fellow activists, who work together for peace and gender justice from a holistic perspective. We have always shaped our work around priorities defined by our activist partners. It has been exactly this feature that has made WPP's work cutting edge, daring and pioneering. These are not our own words, but is how our work has been consistently described by many others over the years.

This also meant that our activism around the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda has always been in line with its "civil society birth mother" – the Beijing Platform for Action (1995). This was a political and transformative peace and security agenda from the onset, formulated by women activists pushing for investments in women's leadership for peace, conflict prevention and nonviolence ("people power"), human security, disarmament and addressing global militarism. As years have progressed, we have seen the WPS agenda under pressure, increasingly moving away from its civil society origins.

We have seen it turn into one which hardly reflects the global economy of war and militarism. One in which civil society's role is increasingly relegated to being an implementer of state-defined security priorities instead of driving force of human security for all people. One in which civil society's mandate in "the North" is too often framed around helping to build "the capacity of the women in the South", instead of women activists in the North having the space to critically reflect and address the many issues in their own backyard and the spill-over effects on the rest of the world, so that women activists everywhere can unite and play their role in healing a global war system that needs fixing. One, in which we struggled to find the financial support we need to play our part in global transformative activism for peace and gender justice.

## As WPP,

We do not feel comfortable to continue our work by squeezing ourselves into an ever-narrowing funding framework, which forces

between terror and counter-terror.

[Read more](#)



our global transformative activism into top-down project approaches.

We do not believe in fitting ourselves into narrow security paradigms that frame conflict and war as something that needs fixing elsewhere, leaving hardly any room to addressing its drivers and root causes, including those in our own backyard.

We do not believe in taking on a Northern civil society role framed merely around telling civil society elsewhere how to do things better, while the whole system needs fixing.

We do not believe in perpetuating an accountability idea that draws on a rigid and linear outlook on social change, and which too often ends up transforming activism into a paper tiger. A complex world needs flexible and daring responses. Current notions of accountability are feeding a dangerous practice of risk avoidance, while also taking critical time away from the real work activists need to focus on.

We do not believe in squeezing ourselves into a gender equality financing architecture that does not follow the feminist “access and control” empowerment principle, and as such moves women back into the reality of disempowering dependency roles.

We can no longer try to make sense of how civil society is supposed to combat the world’s major challenges while constantly being pitted against each other by competition-fueling funding frameworks.

## **Instead,**

We believe in providing unwavering support for the resilient and brave women activists in society, that work relentlessly for nonviolent social, economic and political transformation in a world that needs it desperately.

We believe in holistic security paradigms that address the root causes that fuel injustice and violent conflict globally, that recognize our human interdependency, and that focus on delivering human security by investing in the human rights and equality of all.

We believe in resilient societies, where diverse civil society forces in North, South, East and West can exist and work together as equal partners, drawing on each other’s strengths and expertise, for the benefit of all people in a global world that is connected in the challenges it faces.

We believe in civil society accountability that is centered around the people and change it intends to serve. Accountability that allows for flexibility and stimulates risk-taking, so that pioneering activists can use the full potential of human creativity to address the challenges the world faces.

We believe in a gender financing framework that recognizes the long-term nature of women's struggle for social, political, economic and environmental justice. One, which puts trust in the power of women and feminist groups to create transformation that will benefit all, by providing them with the financial autonomy and sustainability to do so.

Let's not forget that what is nowadays a huge and dynamic 16 Days Campaign, started from the coming together of local women activists from across the globe during the early nineties, who were determined to put women's rights issues firmly on the global human rights agenda. It is a testimony of the power of "women united" to change the world.

Thirty years later, we should not be sounding alarm bells about women activists being left on the side. We should not be hearing about women's groups that can no longer make ends meet while policy screams "gender matters!".

There are indeed some things we cannot control easily in an ever-changing world. And there are some things we can. Making sure we stand firmly behind the myriad of committed women's rights groups and feminist activists that operate globally, so they can continue doing the long-term activism that is needed to heal a world in need, is one in the category of a loud "Absolutely, we can!"

We want to thank everyone who has been part of our twenty-year journey. You have blessed us with your knowledge, energized us with your laughter, inspired us with your activism, baffled us with the changes you have created, gave us hope with your courage, warmed us with your care, stood with us when times got tough. You have inscribed in us the deep conviction that it is indeed ordinary people speaking up who transform the world. And wherever we end up next, we promise you, we will continue to act according to that conviction.

Much love to you all,

The WPP Team



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[1] Duke Law International Human Rights Clinic and Women Peacemakers Program, Tightening the Purse Strings: What Countering Terrorism Financing Costs Gender Equality and Security (2017).  
<https://law.duke.edu/sites/default/files/humanrights/tighteningpursestrings.pdf>



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