

# STORIES OF COURAGE, HOPE AND RESILIENCE

Why the WPS agenda matters for peace and  
stability in the OSCE region and beyond



# Foreword by Dr Lara Scarpitta, *OSCE Senior Adviser on Gender Issues and Head of the Gender Issues Programme*



Imagine a world where women lead in global peace and security. A world where gender equality is the norm and women have full and equal access to all decision-making tables. For the past 25 years, United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security has tried to achieve just that. It has shown us that women inclusion makes peace sustainable, and that we will succeed in preventing conflicts and guarantee global stability only if women - 50% of the population - is included.

Twenty-five years on, the WPS agenda is more relevant than ever. In a world where armed conflicts continue to rage, and new and persistent threats continue to challenge the global order and the very foundations of our democracies, we must invest even more in gender equality and women's meaningful inclusion in all peace and security efforts. It's not just a matter of rights; it is a matter of democracy, legitimacy, and lasting stability.

Today, the stakes are simply too high, and the cost of excluding women too great.

Comprehensive and lasting peace urgently needs the expertise, vision, and perspective of women. Short of this, any efforts at global stability will lack legitimacy and fall short of ambition.

At the OSCE, we will continue to invest in gender equality and women's leadership in peace and security, because we know what women do and the impact they have: they lead in peacebuilding, they fight for human rights, they protect the most vulnerable, and they rebuild communities affected by wars.

As we mark this historic anniversary, I pay tribute to the bravery of all the incredible women leaders we support. Their stories of courage, hope, and resilience must inspire all of us. Their work shows how women continue to stand up for peace, justice, and human dignity, often in the face of great challenges. Their voices remind us that peace is not just the absence of conflict, but the presence of equality, inclusion, and respect for human rights.

May these stories inspire action to ensure every woman is heard and included in the decisions that shape her life and her community.

The Women, Peace and Security is not a dream, it is a necessity! It is about our collective responsibility to ensure we live in peaceful and safe societies and this can only be achieved when women lead equally.

World peace demands nothing less.

Dr. Lara Scarpitta

# INTRODUCTION:

Recognizing the crucial role of women's networks in advancing leadership in peacebuilding, conflict prevention and conflict resolution, the OSCE has addressed both the persistent lack of meaningful participation of women in decision-making and the disproportionate impact they experience in conflict settings. This challenge called for a prompt and effective action to empower and support women across the region.

To support women's leadership in all peace and security efforts the OSCE Networking Platform for Women Leaders including Peacebuilders and Mediators was launched on 7 December 2021 under the auspices of former OSCE Secretary General Helga Maria Schmid. The Platform provides a safe space to connect and empower women peacebuilders across the OSCE region for learning, networking and sharing best practices. Its fundamental aim is to strengthen women's ability to meaningfully engage in and influence peace processes at all levels. Through this approach, the Organization promotes a more inclusive and sustainable peace, recognizing and valuing the unique perspectives and solutions that women bring to the table. The Platform encourages collaboration and mutual understanding, fostering an environment of equality, respect and solidarity.

Since its launch, the Platform has evolved into a vibrant community of women leaders, driving real change on the ground. It has hosted regional discussions on women's leadership in peace and security, addressed violence against women and girls in conflict settings and provided direct support to women affected by conflicts, including in the areas of recovery and reconstruction.

## Key Initiatives of the Platform:

→ **The Women's Peace Leadership Programme (WPLP)**, launched in 2021, is a flagship OSCE initiative designed to strengthen women's capacity to meaningfully engage in and influence peace processes at all levels. With three editions to date, the high-level mentoring initiative was designed to support and empower women peacebuilders from across the OSCE region and Afghanistan through extensive training on leadership, mediation, and communication skills, as well as mentoring by internationally renowned women leaders. The programme has continued to offer tailor-designed opportunities to engage with concepts and skills relevant to peacebuilding work. Of equal importance, it has also created regular, structured time to gather with fellow practitioners to foster reflection and deepen relationships within the group and with the group of external mentors that supported them. By creating opportunities for networking and peer support participants are better placed to meaningfully engage and influence peace processes at different levels. Building on this foundation, in 2025, the WPLP continued to evolve, with its third edition focusing specifically on women, climate, and mediation.

→ **The Young Women for Peace Initiative (YW4P)**, launched on 8 March 2023, is a crucial new pillar of the Networking Platform, dedicated to bringing young women's essential perspectives on peace and security to the forefront to ensure their right to be included is respected. Funded by the European Union, this initiative aims to advance the meaningful participation of young women in peacebuilding and security across Central Asia. Launched in 2023, the first edition supports 18 emerging leaders from all five Central Asian states and Afghanistan. Through targeted capacity building, awareness-raising and regional networking, YW4P highlights positive examples of young women leaders advancing peace and gender equality, amplifying their voices and establishing the first-ever regional network for young women working on peace and security in Central Asia.

→ **Support to Ukraine and regional exchanges:** The Platform has been actively engaged in supporting women leaders from Ukraine responding to the humanitarian crisis caused by war. It also promoted peer-to-peer exchanges with their counterparts in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which have provided a valuable forum for the sharing of experiences in recovery and reconstruction, fostering solidarity, practical co-operation and mutual learning among women leaders navigating similar post-conflict challenges.





# STORIES

In the year marking the 25th anniversary of landmark resolution 1325, the following personal stories of courage, resilience and leadership from across the OSCE region highlight the essential contributions of women peacebuilders. They also illustrate the transformative impact of the Networking Platform's initiatives in strengthening women's ability to engage meaningfully across all three dimensions of security.

## Central Asia

### Empowering through knowledge

"When I was first told that I hold strong feminist values, I laughed and said, 'Oh, I'm not a feminist'," recalls Farangis Davronova. Coming from Tajikistan, a country with strong patriarchal influences, Farangis initially did not strongly embrace the idea of women's rights, peace, and security. "There are many stereotypes surrounding feminism, and because of my preconceived notions I used to think there was nothing good about it," she says.

However, her early exposure to the unequal treatment of girls within society, particularly in education, sparked her interest in advocating for gender equality.

"My journey into advocating for gender equality began with my involvement in the international network of volunteers Y-PEER in Tajikistan, where I gained deeper insights into gender issues and started sharing this knowledge through peer-to-peer interactions. A pivotal influence on me was Vesna Ivanovic – Kastared, who previously worked with the OSCE and now serves as the Head of UN Women in North Macedonia. Vesna's guidance was transformative. She broadened my perspective on gender equality," recalls Farangis. "She helped me articulate my beliefs and made me realize that I am indeed a feminist, something I had always known but hadn't fully acknowledged."

Inspired by this realization, Farangis was looking for a hands-on engagement. Soon she joined the Network of Youth for Gender Equality under the Programme Office of OSCE in Dushanbe. Here, she deepened her understanding and contributed to several projects advocating for gender equality across various regions of her home country. Additionally, she became actively involved in journalism, raising awareness and advocating for women's rights and their more active role in peacebuilding through her work. Her engagement with the Women's Peace Leadership Program (WPLP) brought more multifaceted knowledge and learning, allowing her to see herself in the roles of those leading peace and equality efforts.

**FARANGIS  
DAVRONOVA**

**Tajikistan / WPLP**



*I was motivated to be a part of the WPLP because I believe in the immense potential of women in leading and sustaining peace processes. Joining the programme was like finding the perfect puzzle piece for my career. Here, I see a mirror reflecting my future self."*

"I was motivated to be a part of the OSCE WPLP because I believe in the immense potential of women in leading and sustaining peace processes. Joining the program was like finding the perfect puzzle piece for my career. Here, I see a mirror reflecting my future self. A vision where I am not just observing the world but shaping it, creating ripples of change that begin in Tajikistan and extend far beyond its borders," Farangis says.

"I am very grateful for the opportunity to be part of this strong global network of women peacebuilders, mediators, scholars and activists. The WPLP's focus on leadership, security, peacebuilding and gender equality has given so many new perspectives and opportunities. I had a chance to learn and work with experienced women professionals, expanding my professional network. The programme has given me the chance to do more and go further," she concludes.

Farangis adds that perseverance and strong reserves of steely determination are key, "As a woman leader, your journey may not always be easy. You have to forge your path with extra courage, determination, and unwavering belief in yourself."

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## Envisioning a New Era of Participation

Guncha Annageldiyeva from Turkmenistan is fortunate to have a nurturing support network, including family, teachers, and supervisors, that have helped her during her volunteering journey.

Her upbringing greatly influenced her perspectives on peace and security. The turning point for activism came in 2015: "I joined the Youth Peer Education Network (Y-PEER), a youth-to-youth initiative pioneered by UNFPA that promotes healthy lifestyles and empowers young people and was being taught to educate my peers using non-formal learning methods on sexual and reproductive health and rights and gender equality. I realized that it can actually have an impact, and I wanted to raise awareness, break stereotypes and advocate for better addressing these issues."

She now volunteers as the Y-PEER International Coordinator and works with youth from Y-PEER National Networks to combat gender-based violence and taboos surrounding sexual and reproductive health issues in Eastern Europe and Central Asia and the Middle East and North Africa regions.

Additionally, she co-ordinates the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA) Preventive Diplomacy Academy Alumni Network, collaborating with Central Asian youth on the Youth, Peace and Security agenda and inspiring the next generation of female leaders, particularly those coming from less developed regions.

**GUNCHA  
ANNAGELDIYEVA**  
Turkmenistan / WPLP



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*The Women Peace Leadership Programme is more than a programme to me; it's a journey of professional growth and connection with women changemakers. I am surrounded by the inspiring presence of both current and future women leaders, shaping a brighter tomorrow for our global community."*

"It is difficult to sustain activism without support. My message is for those in power to devise programmes: please consider supporting networks for women at the beginning of their journey. The OSCE Women Peace Leadership Programme is a great example in this regard!" she stresses.

"I also want to reiterate the importance of bringing the Central Asian perspective to the global stage in shaping policies and programmes. I advocate for not leaving behind the needs of grassroots activists and communities, and for providing hand-in-hand support and allocating the relevant funding," Guncha says.

"The Women Peace Leadership Programme is more than a programme to me; it's a journey of professional growth and connection with women changemakers. In this Programme, I am surrounded by the inspiring presence of both current and future women leaders, shaping a brighter tomorrow for our global community. I am deeply grateful for the practical support extended by OSCE Secretary General Helga Maria Schmidt in empowering young women peacebuilders like myself to make a difference on the ground".

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## Diplomacy as Grassroots Resilience

Farima Nawabi has also had to face adversity in the course of her advocacy. A former diplomat from Afghanistan, now in political asylum, her past life as a representative of her nation is now impossible. Her transformation into a human rights researcher and advocate was born out of necessity following the Taliban's takeover of her country in August 2021.

"After the collapse of the country into the hands of the Taliban, I started to connect with individuals and organizations working in the human rights field. I began attending conferences, workshops, and events to advocate for the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan. It's now my full-time job and main goal in life."

Despite losing her country, job and identity in one fell swoop, Farima's transition from diplomacy to human rights advocacy showcased remarkable tenacity and deep wells of resilience and strength of character. She is now more committed than ever to using her diplomatic experience and wide network to advocate for human rights and peace-building, albeit, informed and driven by a profound loss of identity and homeland. "I joined the WPLP program with the expectation of gaining valuable insights and skills to inspire and motivate other women. My motivation stemmed from a deep belief in the power of individuals to make a positive difference in the world. My biggest takeaway from this experience is the understanding that leadership in peace processes is not just about resolving conflicts, but also about creating a culture of understanding, compassion, and co-operation," she concludes.

**FARIMA NAWABI**  
Afghanistan / WPLP



*My biggest takeaway from this experience is the understanding that leadership in peace processes is not just about resolving conflicts, but also about creating a culture of understanding, compassion, and co-operation."*

Founder of FemAgora – a grassroots feminist organization that works in Central Asia – Leyla Zuleikha interconnects local issues of violence prevention, conflict resolution and peacebuilding to spotlight the regional coherence. While participating in WPLP, she researched the theories underpinning this work through a Master's in Gender, Violence and Conflict at Sussex University as a Chevening Scholar. This dual 'fellowship,' as she calls it, has helped her to advance the peacebuilding programme at FemAgora.

## Understanding the context

The conflicts in Central Asia are often referred to as latent, intractable or too small to pay attention to. There simply aren't enough articulated ways to define and address them. For me, it was very important to understand how my experience and that of the people around me translate into the existing language of conflict resolution so that conflicts in our region are understood better.

WPLP has had a very strong influence on me. Talking to fellow participants from Central Asia has been especially valuable, as we share the same borders. Also, I understand that it is a privilege to be in the space of women peacebuilders. With European male experts dominating the security sector, few Central Asian women have access to platforms where we can learn from each other as equals. I came into the programme to understand how the path of women peacebuilders could look, and to better be able to visualise the careers, activities, and experiences of other women in peacebuilding.

I appreciate that WPLP is built on mentorship from more established women experts in peacebuilding and mediation. The supportive relationship I have built with my mentor Dr. Odetta Barbullushi, an Albanian foreign policy expert, will definitely outlive the 1-year programme.

## A shared vision for Central Asia

At WPLP, I was also looking to meet and exchange with women in security in the Central Asian context. How does it work for us, where are we now, what are the shared challenges we face, how do we support each other, and what is our vision?

The challenges that we have in Central Asia are not exclusive to an isolated local or national context. We intersect in so many ways, and we share so many vital resources over the borders, which are the most populated areas in Central Asia. That is why for our region, which faces a persistent risk of incidents in the border areas, it is so important for us, the people who live there, to take a regional perspective.

We have much in common: we share water resources, land, heritage, kinship, and history. We need to appreciate that and find ways to trust each other. At FemAgora, our vision is to do it through supporting and resourcing women-led organisations and initiatives in the region.

**LEYLA ZULEIKHA  
MAKHMUDOVA**  
Kazakhstan / WPLP



*I came into the programme to understand how the path of women peacebuilders could look, and to better be able to visualise the careers, activities and experiences of other women in peacebuilding."*



## Feminism as anti-violence work

I am a survivor of gender-based domestic violence. Part of the work that I lead within FemAgora is about including survivors of gender-based violence as stakeholders in anti-violence programmes, which is not very common yet.

For me, feminism is more of an approach to how we can resolve issues: it is about the agency of those who may not have the right resources right now. At FemAgora, we recognise the agency and expertise of local practitioners and help them find the resources they need. It is also about including us, as local women who are most affected by these issues, in the decision-making processes.

Feminism is also about not just gratifying activism and achievements of women at the grassroots level, but about ensuring adequate financial support for us as well.

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## Learning from the ancestors

Generations of women in my ancestry - my mother and grandmothers – have been engaged in forms of peacebuilding. I found out that my grandmother used a sophisticated, risky and very intricate method to protect her daughters with her own body, by lying on the doorstep of their room every night, so that nobody would enter and exercise violence. There are a myriad of strategies and ways of preventing violence and reinforcing peace practiced by women in Central Asia from generation to generation.

I don't think that I consciously decided to be a peacebuilder at any point in my life. I just acquired the knowledge and the language to articulate my experiences and my work in peacebuilding.

Previously a regional coordinator in inclusive peace projects and a legal counsellor, Maryam has worked with survivors of gender-based violence who were seeking help from a local Family Protection Centre managed by the International Medical Corps. Although she had to flee Afghanistan in 2021, Maryam continues to support women and girls in the country.

While being part of the OSCE Women's Peace Leadership Programme, Maryam graduated from the American University of Central Asia with an L.L.M in International Law and is determined to continue her practice as a human rights defender, advancing the fundamental rights of Afghan women.

## Childhood aspirations

As a child, when we visited rural areas in my country, I encountered many instances of women's rights deprivations. I remember seeing a young mother, desperately trying to connect with her son who stubbornly resisted her efforts to communicate.

**MARYAM RANJBAR**  
Afghanistan / WPLP



*I will miss this programme which gave me so much more than I expected. Now I see myself as a peacebuilder with the broad set of skills that this role requires."*



But when an elder family member reiterated her request, the boy complied. Another vivid memory is of a woman in tears, opposing her teenage daughter's early marriage, which was ultimately determined by male authorities. Even back then, men in many areas of the country had more favourable prospects than women. I knew that I would come back to these areas and work to make things better.

While working as a gender-based violence specialist and as a legal counsellor, I wanted to support these women no matter what. People there were surprised I dared to speak to men – it was not common at all. On several occasions, I also wanted men relatives of the women we consulted to join our conversations, but the colleagues wouldn't let me do that for security reasons. Because of my education and the work that I did, I was subjected to many threats. But I was determined to study and to work, so that later I could use the experience and knowledge I gained to become a parliamentarian and represent Afghan women.

## Seeking justice for women

This is not just about me - all Afghan women hope to have the opportunities that they are denied in Afghanistan right now. I grew up in a family that valued education, but it's also about access to basic rights – right to life, to move freely, to have a voice, to make choices – that all women are entitled to.

My country has been entangled in conflict for the past four decades. People have endured the pain of losing loved ones, essential liberties, and fundamental rights. With my work, I want to foster the awareness that women deserve not only respect and dignity but also should play pivotal roles in society. Women are capable of contributing to a nation's progress as effectively as men. I believe that addressing these concerns would make people think and live according to the values of an open, democratic government.

## Let girls learn

Although I no longer live in my country, I was able to implement several projects for women and girls who continue to live there. For almost a year, we offered online English classes for female students from universities and schools. They were so happy about this project. In 2022, I also implemented several smaller projects like capacity-building symposia for women on their roles in decision-making processes. All that would not be possible now.

I have been always saying: let girls learn and work to become doctors, teachers, decision-makers and members of parliament. Who knows, maybe one woman in your family or community that you helped and empowered will someday change the country.

## Thriving sisterhood

Throughout the year, I got tremendous support from my mentors and fellow mentees in the WPLP. I would reach out to my mentors any time of day and could always rely on getting a prompt response. They were remarkably supportive, and their guidance and availability remained unwavering.

I will miss this programme which gave me so much more than I expected. Now I see myself as a peacebuilder with the broad set of skills that this role requires. There were moments during the year when I lost hope, but then I would hear from my fellow mentees - whether in one of the programme sessions or simply through our WhatsApp exchanges – and I'd feel strong, knowing that I am surrounded by the most powerful women I've ever known and I should follow in their footsteps.

## They wouldn't give up, so neither will I

Noziri, peacebuilder and participant of the first edition of the OSCE Women's Peace Leadership Programme, one of the flagship initiatives of the Networking Platform on Women Leaders including Peacebuilders and Mediators launched by the OSCE Secretary General in December 2021. (OSCE/ Luiza Puiu). Tajikistan.

As a gender expert focusing on peace and security, Nushofarin has designed and worked on projects bringing together community leaders, young people and policymakers to advance the Women, Peace and Security agenda in Central Asia. Seeing herself as someone who connects people and transfers knowledge, Nushofarin draws from her experience in feminist thought, foreign policy, preventing violent extremism, and countering human trafficking.

## When women mediators take over

I think that the role women play in their communities and families, in part, comes from their experience of practising a certain gender role throughout their lives. Even though it usually fits the patriarchal society, it also opens a door to shaping and influencing communities and families.

When we include more women in mediation processes, they represent not only themselves, but the whole community at large. I see it often in my work when decision-makers and practitioners are only men, who may be representing important social structures, and not their communities.

I am originally from Tajikistan, and I find it painful to see more conflicts with our neighbours on our borders. When these happen, it is often the women mediators and community mobilizers that step in to promote dialogue and peace. Unfortunately, many of the mediators on the ground are not fluent in foreign languages. This becomes a barrier when international opportunities are available for strengthening their capacities in mediation processes. My personal hope is that I will be able to transfer the skills that I learn from the OSCE's Women Peace Leadership Programme to local partners on the ground.

**NUSHOFARIN  
NOZIRI**

**Tajikistan / WPLP**



*My biggest takeaway from this experience is the understanding that leadership in peace processes is not just about resolving conflicts, but also about creating a culture of understanding, compassion, and co-operation."*



## Learning from the sisterhood

Now that I am part of the Programme, I know that I am not only getting this enhanced capacity in peacebuilding and mediation but also access to networks in different regions. This is what being part of a community of practice is all about, and I wouldn't have this connection without becoming a mentee here.

As part of the kick-off week, we had a fireside talk with Catherine Fearon, OSCE Deputy Director at the Conflict Prevention Centre and former Co-founder of the Northern Ireland Women Coalition. I was truly inspired by her in so many ways, her work and commitment to peacebuilding across the world. It made me think of the women who have reached very high positions and yet are so approachable. I have also seen this humbleness in both mentors and other mentees of the programme.

## Reflections on accountability

It is important to me that in whatever project I take on, I always follow the do-no-harm principle. I suppose this is something my previous experience has taught me. People may wish well with their words and actions, but may unknowingly harm a person or even a community. So, in anything I do professionally and personally, I stand by the principle that in no way should my actions and statements promote the gender stereotypes that we try so hard to break.

The projects I have worked on are usually funded by various governments, internal and international donors, which is essentially taxpayer's money. I feel very much responsible and accountable and do my best to make sure that the funds trusted upon a project are committed to achieving the impacts and results promised.

## Ideological ancestors

My parents always emphasised the importance of education. Growing up, I might have not always agreed but I am so thankful to have had this support because I see the value of it now reflected in my work in so many ways. My mother, who earned her PhD in her early 30s, is one of the smartest and most results-oriented people I know, and she has always been a true inspiration to me.

Coming from a diplomatic family, I have been so privileged in my life. I acknowledge this and want to share the knowledge and opportunities that I have had with my fellow Tajik women.

In our region, women are usually disenfranchised and yet they stand so tall. Perhaps the most inspiring stories are the ones told by women coming from the most difficult situations and with the greatest achievements, like those I heard from my other mentees in this programme from Afghanistan and Ukraine.

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Human rights defender and aspiring peacebuilder, Elham fled Afghanistan in December 2021, five months after the Taliban's take over. Currently a peace activist and gender advocate with the Swedish Institute Leader Lab, she sees the Women's Peace Leadership Programme as part of a new beginning to achieve peace in Afghanistan.

## From school banishment to one day becoming a lead negotiator

When the Taliban first came to power, I was in primary school, and like thousands of other Afghan girls, I was banned from attending school for five years. Both my parents are teachers and my mother started a school for girls in our home, so I could continue my education, hidden from the sight of the Taliban. When the government changed, I was able to resume my studies and complete high school. During my first university years, I realised my heart lies with activism and I went on to pursue my Master's studies in International Relations at Kardan University.

My education path was tough, but I was able to get a good job, working at the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) as a national gender specialist and prior to that with the Swedish committee for Afghanistan as a senior human rights officer. One of the reasons I joined the OSCE Women's Peace Leadership Programme is to be trained as a peacebuilder. Someday, at the negotiations table with the Taliban, I can tell them face-to-face that 'here I am, one of those Tajik girls you once banned from education, and now you have to listen to what I am saying'. Women are not weak. Men and women can achieve what they wish and can work equally and together toward peace and prosperity.

## Afghan women who managed to flee

For us, it feels as if our bodies are right here, but our souls are still in Afghanistan. It was really difficult for me to leave my home. Before, whenever I travelled, I saw it as an achievement, but this time I was confused: should I feel happy that I saved my life or sad because I lost my country? I can't quite describe it, but it was the worst feeling I've ever experienced.

When I arrived in Sweden, I had no home, no job and was just waiting for the government's support. It was really tough to accept the 'refugee' label. I feared that I would lose my identity. In Afghanistan, my education and my experience had value. I was worried that it would not matter in Europe. Being selected to join the Programme helped me realise that there are opportunities for me here, although I do have to build my career anew. Not from scratch, but it is definitely a new beginning.

**ELHAM KOHISTANI**  
Afghanistan / WPLP



*Throughout the history of our country, there have been generations and generations of Afghans who did not get to experience a peaceful environment. My message as a mediator would be that at least yours and my generations, now, should achieve peace for Afghanistan."*





For Asel Zhatkanbay, studying public law is more than a professional path, it is a personal commitment to justice. Having witnessed violence and abuse in her community, she was struck by the silence surrounding these issues. “That silence pushed me to act,” she says.

Her turning point came at age of 19, when she joined an educational programme, organised by the Kazakhstan Foundation for Cultural, Social, and Educational Development, aimed at empowering young women to lead social projects across different sectors. There, she met her mentor whose authentic leadership and dedication to expanding access to education for girls left a lasting impact. “It was during this period that I first realized I, too, had the ability to challenge injustice and create meaningful, positive change,” she recalls.

In 2021, Asel launched a volunteer-led project: an online video course designed to help parents prevent child sexual abuse. The project featured powerful personal testimonies and reached over 2.5 million people across various social media platforms. “By sharing personal stories from both women and men, we challenged taboos and created an open dialogue around issues long considered too sensitive to discuss,” she shares

Asel’s participation in the YW4P expanded her perspective and helped her to find allies across borders. “YW4P brought sisterhood, practical skills and powerful connections,” she says. “Visiting Kyrgyzstan or Uzbekistan for the first time broadened my worldview and broke down my own stereotypes. This project fuels my motivation.”

Today, her leadership blends legal expertise with empathy and action. “I have come to understand that leadership isn’t the absence of fear, it’s the courage to act in spite of it.”



### ASEL ZHATKANBAY

Kazakhstan / YW4P



*YW4P brought sisterhood, practical skills and powerful connections”.*

## Where leadership listens first

Growing up in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, Shohista Kayumova often questioned why fundamental rights like access to education or freedom from early marriage were treated as privileges. “Getting an education and not being forced to marry at 18 is not luck; it is a basic human right,” she says.

Now pursuing a degree in international relations and preparing for a master’s degree in human rights and sustainability at the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, Shohista brings a deep commitment to gender equality. She has hosted a gender-focused podcast, contributed to inclusive media platforms, and led research projects on online gender-based violence.



### SHOHISTA KAYUMOVA

Uzbekistan / YW4P



*I learned to be bold, to stop self-censorship and to embrace failure as part of growth. Confidence doesn’t come all at once. It grows when you’re surrounded by people who both challenge and support you.”*

"I am most proud of creating supportive and inclusive spaces for women in my community – whether that's through grassroots projects or simple acts of empathy," she shares.

Shohista's approach to leadership was shaped by her father, who taught her that true leadership begins with listening and lifting up others. "In a society where power is often seen as masculine and forceful, he showed me that true strength can also be calm, kind, and reflective," she says.

The YW4P was a turning point in her life: "I learned to be bold, to stop self-censorship and to embrace failure as part of growth. Confidence doesn't come all at once. It grows when you're surrounded by people who both challenge and support you," she says. "The programme gave me tools, but also a renewed sense of purpose and belief that young women, including myself, can shape change, even in complex environments."

Her message to other young women: "Failure has no gender. Growth looks different for everyone. What matters most is building a culture of solidarity, because real progress happens when we support each other."

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## Education as resistance, leadership as a hope

Zakia Alizada is a graphic designer and dedicated advocate for education, youth inclusion and women's rights. Originally from Afghanistan, she now lives and works in Tajikistan, where she leads initiatives to empower refugees and strengthen peacebuilding. Her early experiences shaped her strong belief in justice and education. "The deprivation of Afghan girls from education and the closing of schools was one of the most serious crises that made me reflect," she says. "It motivated me not to remain silent in the face of inequality and to do my best to empower women and defend the right to education."

With a degree in mathematics and computer science, Zakia combines technical skills with socially impactful work. She co-founded the Youth Committee of the Afghan Women Immigration Council, organising leadership and peacebuilding workshops for young refugees. She also initiated community awareness programmes and helped establish a kindergarten within the Council with support from the OSCE.

Her work has also reached across borders, advocating for Afghan girls and women. "Gender equality is not only a human right, but also a foundation for social stability," Zakia says. "In Central Asia, women's participation in peace processes and decision-making can pave the way for a more just, safe and sustainable society."

### ZAKIA ALIZADA Afghanistan / YW4P



*"This opportunity broadened my perspectives, strengthened my professional relationships and increased my motivation to continue working in peace and gender equality."*

Through the Young Women for Peace Initiative (YW4P), Zakia gained new skills and confidence to expand her work. “This opportunity broadened my perspectives, strengthened my professional relationships and increased my motivation to continue working in peace and gender equality,” she says. “I developed stronger communication and facilitation skills and deepened my understanding of how gender intersects with peacebuilding and youth engagement.”

Zakia believes that a stable and peaceful Central Asia must include women’s voices. Her message to other young women leaders is clear and empowering: “Your background does not define your future. Be fearless in using your voice. Every step you take is a step forward for many others.”

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For Shahnaz Haidary, leadership means building bridges. Raised as a refugee in Quetta, Pakistan, and later relocating to Kabul, Afghanistan, she witnessed firsthand how gender-based discrimination can limit a woman’s future. Her family’s deep belief in the power of education motivated her to break the barriers. “My mother inspired me to challenge norms and see education as a tool for empowerment. Watching her navigate a male-dominated society with strength and determination was a powerful example of leadership.”

Shahnaz’s academic journey took her from a U.S. Embassy scholarship to a master’s degree in business administration, and now, a second master’s in sociology at the American University of Central Asia. In 2023, she launched Good Mental Health, a digital initiative addressing the often-overlooked psychological impacts of conflict, displacement and gender-based violence. Though still in its early stages, the project has already reached thousands through online learning sessions and safe virtual spaces for women.

A passionate advocate for gender equality, Shahnaz sees inclusion as critical to sustainable peace. “When women are excluded from decision-making, peace processes and public life, societies lose half their potential to build inclusive and lasting solutions.”

Joining the YW4P marked a key moment in her leadership journey. “I joined the YW4P to connect with like-minded young women across the region and strengthen our collective peacebuilding efforts,” Shahnaz shares. The initiative equipped her with practical skills in negotiation and strategic communication, but also with something deeper: “It reminded me of the value of regional solidarity and how our diverse experiences can shape more inclusive approaches.”

Through the YW4P, Shahnaz has also refined her leadership style. “It helped me grow as a leader and better understand regional peace dynamics through dialogue and learning exchanges.” Her message to young women is simple, but powerful: “Know your worth and the values you bring to every space. Your leadership is part of a larger movement toward equality.”

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**SHAHNAZ HAIDARY**  
Afghanistan / YW4P



*I joined the YW4P to connect with like-minded young women across the region and strengthen our collective peacebuilding efforts. It reminded me of the value of regional solidarity and how our diverse experiences can shape more inclusive approaches”.*



## Integrating gender justice into climate action

Growing up in Almaty, Kazakhstan, Nailya Mussayeva was raised in a supportive household, but societal expectations still loomed large. “Even with encouraging parents, I was told things like ‘girls don’t need to study too hard,’” she recalls. It wasn’t until she moved to South Korea for university that she began to unpack those experiences. “A professor introduced me to feminism and social justice. I finally had the words for what I had been feeling all along.”

**NAILYA MUSSAYEVA**  
Kazakhstan / YW4P



*I lacked female role models growing up. Being surrounded by women who understood feminism and even climate activism was empowering.”*



Her return to Kazakhstan after four years abroad marked a turning point. “It was a shock. I saw my environment differently. I realized how much I had changed and I felt a responsibility to share what I had learned.” Rather than working exclusively in the gender sector, she chose to bring inclusive values into the climate field – a space where gender perspectives are often overlooked.

With a bachelor’s degree from Pusan National University and a master’s in international law, she now works at the intersection of climate policy, sustainability and human rights. “My focus is environmental and climate policies with a strong gender lens,” she says.

Joining the YW4P filled a personal gap. “I lacked female role models growing up. Being surrounded by women who understood feminism and even climate activism was empowering.” She was especially moved by how the YW4P embraced inclusion. “When some participants became mothers, the programme adapted to support them fully. It showed us that we don’t have to sacrifice one dream for another.”

Today, Nailya writes articles about climate justice, designs educational board games and organizes human rights and climate change training courses. “I’m proud to work independently in a field that reflects my values,” she says. Her advice to other young women is clear and confident: “There are enough opportunities for all of us. Support other girls boldly, it’s always worth it.”

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## The power of language in peacebuilding

Born in a small town in the Namangan region of Uzbekistan, Laylo Azimboeva grew up in a place where girls’ education was often undervalued. “Most people thought a girl’s future should be about marriage, not education,” she recalls. But her parents believed otherwise. They always said, “Education first.”

**LAYLO AZIMBOEVA**  
Uzbekistan / YW4P



*YW4P reminded me that we are not alone in this work and that young women have a real role to play in shaping the future.”*



Her academic journey took her across borders—from Uzbekistan to Türkiye, Germany and beyond. But her path was not always easy.

“As a young woman in a field of international security, I often had to prove myself twice as hard to be taken seriously,” she shares. Rather than backing down, she leaned on her values. “I leaned on my values, stayed focused and always tried to take every setback as a lesson. These experiences helped shape my belief that women can and should lead.”

A turning point came during her time in Paris, working on the EU-funded PROACTIVE project, where she translated complex security data into accessible information for both policymakers and the public. “That’s when I realized how powerful communication can be in building peace,” she says. She brought this skillset to her work in Berlin and Tashkent, helping organizations strengthen governance through better storytelling.

For Laylo, the connection between peace and gender equality is clear. “Women have such important insights and leadership qualities, but for a long time their voices were unheard. That’s changing, slowly. I believe when we invest in girls’ education and let women lead, we create stronger communities.”

That’s why she joined the YW4P Initiative. “I wanted to learn and grow with other young women who share the same passion for peace and gender equality,” she explains. Through the programme, she gained leadership tools and learned to see peace and security through a gender lens. “YW4P reminded me that we are not alone in this work and that young women have a real role to play in shaping the future.”

Today, Laylo is passionate about inspiring future changemakers: “Don’t be afraid to take the harder path. Leadership is about caring, trying and lifting others up. If I could do it, so can you.”

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Born in Isfara, a small border city in northern Tajikistan, Sahobakhon Juraeva grew up witnessing how misinformation and lack of dialogue could deepen divides. “Living near a conflict-prone border, I saw first-hand how misinformation and lack of dialogue affect communities,” she says. “That’s what motivated me to empower youth with digital literacy, media skills and the confidence to lead.”

While still in high school, she launched the Young Journalists project, sharing her skills in digital media and communication with peers. Often the only girl in math competitions, she challenged gender stereotypes early on. At 16, she began working as a regional journalist and later earned a scholarship to study digital media and communication in the U.S.

Through the YW4P, Sahobakhon now co-leads a cross-border digital peacebuilding project with her teammate Adinai from Kyrgyzstan. “Looking at digitalization through the lens of peace is new and powerful,” she says.

Beyond skills, the YW4P has given her a strong sense of solidarity. “The sisterhood in this programme reminds me that I’m not alone in my mission. We support and lift each other up.”

**SAHOBAKHON  
JURAEVA**  
Tajikistan / YW4P



*The sisterhood in this programme reminds me that I am not alone in my mission. We support and lift each other up.”*



A strong advocate for gender equality, Sahobakhon believes that peace and inclusion go hand-in-hand. "For me, gender equality is not about competing with men," she explains. "It's about equal opportunities - in education, in leadership and in life."

She draws inspiration from many women leaders and change-makers like Sheryl Sandberg, Malala Yousafzai, Maryam Mirzakhani, and Marilyn Josefson, the former EU Ambassador to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Looking ahead, Sahobakhon remains hopeful and driven to continue her mission. "I haven't done everything I dreamed of for my community yet," she says. "But good intentions are a powerful start. If you ever think you're not good enough - that's not true. You'll find your strength when you take your first step."

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### Curiosity, courage, impact: Adinai's voice in peacebuilding

Adinai Kurmanbekova, a dedicated professional from northern Kyrgyzstan, is advancing peace and security in Central Asia with a focus on conflict prevention, disarmament, and the role of technology in peace processes. Her journey into international security and women's empowerment began during her undergraduate studies, with a training on countering gender discrimination. "That's when I truly understood the power of women's leadership. This belief grew even stronger when I started working in the security field, where I saw how much we need more women to achieve sustainable peace," she notes.

Breaking into the male-dominated field of security, Adinai often encountered skepticism. But instead of stepping back, she stepped up: "In a field where age and gender shape how you're seen, I chose to stay curious, speak up, build resilience and prove myself through action."

She believes that inclusive societies foster stronger, more peaceful communities. "Gender equality improves decision-making and contributes to more effective and sustainable policies, all of which are critical for ensuring long-term stability in the region," she explains.

Adinai has contributed to numerous peacebuilding and development initiatives, including representing youth voices at the 2024 OSCE-wide Chairperson-in-Office Conference on Cyber/ICT Security. "I'm most proud when I can see the impact of what I do - this is what motivates me most."

Now, through the Young Women for Peace Initiative, she continues to champion the inclusion of women and youth in peacebuilding, especially in digital and security sectors. "This programme gave me the support I needed as a young professional and motivated me to dream big and become a true change-maker," she says.

**ADINAI  
KURMANBEKOVA**  
Kyrgyzstan / YW4P



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*"This programme gave me the support I needed as a young professional and motivated me to dream big and become a true change-maker."*

“From gender and peacebuilding to negotiation and project management - it helped me to build skills I now apply to support cross-border youth collaboration for peacebuilding.”

To other young women leaders, her advice is simple but powerful: “Just stay curious, be kind, and have courage.”

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## Reaching for change: Shasenem's cross-cultural impact

Shasenem Amanova from Turkmenistan holds a degree in International Trade and works as a digital communications consultant. Currently on maternity leave, she remains deeply committed to advancing peace and women's empowerment through her work and leadership.

Growing up in culturally vibrant environment of Ashgabat, Shasenem was inspired to connect local traditions with global values, especially around women's leadership and peacebuilding. One of her biggest inspirations has been her mother, whose words still guide her today: “Women's education and literacy are the core tools of empowerment for us.”

Along the way, Shasenem faced many challenges - including limited opportunities to share her ideas and lack of support from her family. But Shasenem learned valuable lessons in persistence and respectful dialogue. “Leadership also means listening and building bridges,” she reflects.

She has led impactful campaigns on child rights, girls' education, and safe learning environments. One of her proudest achievements was launching a digital early childhood development campaign, which reached thousands of young people and contributed to raising national awareness.

Joining the YW4P was a turning point. “I wanted to connect with like-minded women and grow as a leader,” she says. “The programme gave me the tools to turn ideas into action and reminded me that my voice matters. It's been a space for learning, encouragement and shared purpose across cultures.”

She now co-leads Girls for Girls, a mentorship programme supporting young women across Central Asia with academic and professional development.

Through the YW4P, Shasenem has enhanced her skills in facilitation, negotiation and peacebuilding, while embracing gender-sensitive approaches. “I've joined a network of powerful women change-makers, each of whom has expanded my worldview and sense of what's possible”, she affirms.

Reflecting on her journey, she offers this advice to future changemakers: “You don't need to be perfect to lead. You just need to care deeply and act consistently. Start where you are, with what you have.”

**SHASENEM  
AMANOVA**

**Turkmenistan / YW4P**



*The programme gave me the tools to turn ideas into action and reminded me that my voice matters. It's been a space for learning, encouragement and shared purpose across cultures.”*

Fatema Hosseini grew up in Afghanistan, where insecurity and gender-based restrictions were part of daily life and shaped her drive for peacebuilding and women's empowerment. At just 19, while interning in the education office of the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, a Swedish non-governmental organization dedicated to providing humanitarian aid and development support to the people of Afghanistan, Fatema's passion for women's empowerment began to grow: "Each time I reviewed assessments, I could see how deeply social norms and systemic barriers held women back from leadership, education and development," she says. "Today, the situation is even worse."

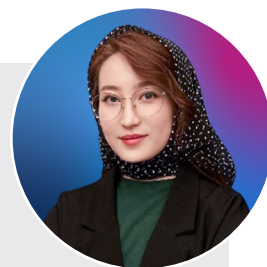
With women now completely excluded from public life in Afghanistan, her resolve has only grown stronger. In response, she stepped into leadership roles in youth programmes and launched initiatives focused on digital skills training for women, life skills for youth and mental health awareness - often leading remotely and coordinating tirelessly from afar.

She led the Women in Business project, a digital training programme designed to equip Afghan women with the skills to launch and run small online businesses, an initiative she considers her proudest achievement. Leading her own project without mentors was a challenge, but Fatema drew strength from the women around her. "I wasn't guided by a single mentor, but by the quiet strength of the women around me: mothers, teachers and colleagues, who carried the weight of life with dignity. Their resilience showed me what leadership looks like in everyday acts of courage."

### FATEMA HOSSEINI Afghanistan / YW4P



*The programme gave me tools, networks and inspiration to move forward during one of the most uncertain times of my life. It reminded me that I'm not alone and that our stories, even in pain, carry strength."*



She joined the Young Women for Peace Initiative (YW4P) to connect with other change-makers across the region and amplify the voices of Afghan women. "The programme gave me tools, networks and inspiration to move forward during one of the most uncertain times of my life. It reminded me that I'm not alone and that our stories, even in pain, carry strength," she explains. Through YW4P, Fatema gained leadership, advocacy and strategic skills that continue to fuel her work.

She believes: "When women are excluded, peace is lost." And to every young woman navigating adversity, she says: "Even when everything around you falls apart, your spirit can remain whole. Your dreams are still valid."

### Leading women's rights in rural Tajikistan

Growing up in Kulob, a rural town in southern Tajikistan, Mavzuna Odinaeva faced the weight of traditions, social constraints and conservative expectations. But instead of accepting limitations, she used them as fuel: "They were the very factors behind my growth. They were contributing to my out-of-the-box thinking, transforming a challenges-to-opportunities mindset and consequently contributing to my empowerment."

### MAVZUNA ODINAEVA Tajikistan / YW4P



*The programme exceeded my expectations. Not only did I fulfil my original goals, but I also discovered new aspirations and set fresh goals for my future in peacebuilding."*



Mavzuna's leadership journey began in her sophomore year and has since expanded through a variety of roles. Her focus lies in women's rights, youth development and education. "I'm super proud to see outcomes in my community," she says, recalling a project that helped students from low-income families become U.S.-funded scholars.

Her passion for gender equality was shaped by what she witnessed around her: "Noticing my literate peers who did so well in their studies but not pursuing their passions and giving up on their dreams after marriages was another factor influencing my passion for women's empowerment. They shaped my goals, personality and views differently."

This drive led to national activism and launching community-focused awareness campaigns like "Violence has no excuses" and "Stereotypes – a barrier for Women's Development", both funded and supported by the OSCE.

She encountered various challenges along the way, especially in engaging village elders who were skeptical of change. But those moments taught her how to lead with purpose: "I learned the importance of patience, the power of empathy and the effectiveness of communication."

The YW4P initiative helped her grow personally and professionally: "The programme exceeded my expectations. Not only did I fulfil my original goals, but I also discovered new aspirations and set fresh goals for my future in peacebuilding. The experience broadened my understanding of regional challenges, deepened my commitment to new initiatives and helped me refine my leadership style. It has been a truly transformative journey."

Her message to others is simple but powerful: "Remember the ones contributing to your empowerment, and try to empower others as the legacy left by generations."

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## Building peace one business at a time

"From Kostanai to Central Asia, I carry with me a belief in the transformative power of women. My goal is to continue nurturing spaces where women can thrive, lead and become builders of lasting peace, one initiative, one business and one story at a time."

Botagoz Kozhakhmetova comes from the green city of Kostanai in northern Kazakhstan, where her deep respect for nature grew alongside her strong belief in women's power to drive change and transform their communities. One story that shaped her vision is that of Assemgul - a woman who left her job to start a business making an instant mix for boursak, traditional Kazakh bread. "My story shows that entrepreneurship is not only about making money, it's about dignity, independence and helping others."

**BOTAGOZ  
KOZHAKHMETOVA**  
Kazakhstan / YW4P



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*What I found was far more profound - an inspiring community of women, each with her own story, mission and unwavering commitment to build, change and co-operate."*

With more than six years of experience in gender equality, development and economic empowerment, Botagoz has worked to support women at both local and regional levels. As a project manager of the Women Entrepreneurship Development Center, an organization providing tailored support programmes for women-owned small and medium-sized enterprises, she helped more than 700 women-led businesses grow through training, mentoring and support.

She is also the founder of EmpowHERment, a community initiative that supports rural women in northern Kazakhstan. In addition, she mentors young women across the region through Girls for Girls: Central Asia Edition, a mentorship programme that promotes education and helps girls unlock their full potential. She is driven by the belief that “women’s economic empowerment plays a key role in achieving sustainable development and building stronger, more inclusive societies.”

Joining the Young Women for Peace Initiative was a turning point for Botagoz: “What I found was far more profound - an inspiring community of women, each with her own story, mission and unwavering commitment to build, change and co-operate. I built everlasting connections and learned from other incredible young women.”

Thanks to YW4P’s tailored training, peer exchanges and regional collaboration, she strengthened her ability to drive impact across the region. “The opportunity for the development and implementation of cross-border project initiatives and the endless support from the OSCE WIN Project team has been priceless,” she says.

Her message to others: “Leadership is not about being the loudest in the room. It is about being brave enough to stand up, speak out and lift others as you rise.”

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Growing up in Kyrgyzstan, Mira Dzhakshylykova was shaped by both the breathtaking nature and the pressing environmental challenges it faces. “Witnessing environmental degradation and underuse of our natural potential early on nurtured my deep commitment to peacebuilding, women’s empowerment and inclusive leadership,” she says.

With a background in environmental management, sustainable development and water diplomacy, she now works as a junior climate change specialist and emerging advocate for inclusive leadership in Central Asia. Her journey began by leading youth workshops on environmental justice, where she saw the potential of young women to drive change. “Taking leadership in climate and peace advocacy was a natural path. Sustainable development isn’t possible without gender equality.”

From representing youth at global water diplomacy forums to launching eco-education projects for minority youth, Mira’s work combines climate action with social inclusion. One of her proudest achievements is an eco-education project for children from minority communities in her hometown. “The project focused on waste reduction and climate action, while also empowering children to see themselves as change-makers,” she explains.

**MIRA  
DZHAKSHYLYKOVA**  
Kyrgyzstan / YW4P



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*The programme has connected me with inspiring peers and helped me to integrate gender perspectives into my environmental and policy work. It strengthened my voice as a young woman peacebuilder.”*



Navigating a male-dominated field hasn't always been easy, but Mira draws strength for her purpose. "Gender equality is essential to stability in Central Asia. It enables inclusive decision-making and fosters social cohesion. Women bring unique perspectives to peacebuilding and are often at the frontlines of climate and community resilience."

Through the Young Women for Peace Initiative, Mira has strengthened her voice as a peacebuilder and enhanced her skills in gender-responsive policy work.

"The programme has connected me with inspiring peers and helped me to integrate gender perspectives into my environmental and policy work. It strengthened my voice as a young woman peacebuilder," she says.

Her message to young women is a call for action: "Lead with purpose - don't wait for permission. Let's build a more peaceful and just Central Asia, together."

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## New generation leading climate action

In her early years in Turkmenistan, Gulshat Ayydova witnessed the impact of environmental degradation on communities and chose to act. With a master's degree in education management, she has since dedicated her career to climate advocacy and youth empowerment, with a special focus on young women leading in peacebuilding and sustainability. "I witnessed firsthand the environmental challenges our region faces. This experience fueled my passion for sustainable development and for supporting young women to lead in peacebuilding and environmental initiatives."

Early on, she organized an eco-camp that deepened her understanding of youth empowerment. Though she initially faced skepticism in climate activism, Gulshat built strong networks and led impactful initiatives across the country. "I learned resilience and the value of community support," she reflects.

She co-founded @climate\_action.tm, a youth-led platform promoting climate awareness in Turkmenistan. Since 2022, she has organized Local Conferences of Youth on Climate Change, reaching more than 400 young people annually. Her work, in partnership with government actors, has influenced national youth and climate policies. "My goal is to create a community of young people who are equipped with knowledge and skills and passionate about climate action and taking an active role in shaping climate policies," she adds.

Gulshat describes the YW4P as a turning point in her career: "The programme enhanced my skills in project management, negotiation and advocacy and gave me the platform to connect with like-minded young women across Central Asia."

### GULSHAT AYYDOVA Turkmenistan / YW4P



*The programme enhanced my skills in project management, negotiation and advocacy and gave me the platform to connect with like-minded young women across Central Asia."*



She is now co-leading a regional project with YW4P peers from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, organizing negotiation workshops for youth in Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan. "It's a blessing to meet and work with such talented and enthusiastic young women. They inspire and motivate me every day."

To the next generation, she offers this advice: "Believe in your capacity to affect change. Seek mentorship, embrace challenges as learning opportunities and remember that your unique perspective is invaluable in shaping a more equitable and peaceful world."

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## From an isolated town to a regional change-maker

Raised between Samarkand and the isolated town of Zarafshan in Uzbekistan, Nigina Rakhmatova witnessed firsthand the impact of limited information, harmful gender norms and environmental neglect. "I saw a society where natural resources were overused without concern for the future, and violence against girls was normalized and survivors were blamed. These realities shaped my deep commitment to peacebuilding, women's empowerment and leadership."

At just 16, the loss of two classmates to forced marriage became a defining moment. Encouraged by her mother to pursue her dreams, Nigina launched a campaign with her peers providing free language and art workshops for youth - despite resistance, even from women she admired. "If someone says you can't do it, it's often because they recognize your strength and fear your potential," she learned.

Her activism continued through her volunteer work with NGOs, leading initiatives to prevent gender-based violence and improve access to education. One of her most meaningful experiences was working with an organization supporting youth with disabilities, where she helped create inclusive spaces for all young people to thrive and lead change. "My proudest achievement has been creating safe, inclusive and creative spaces where youth from all backgrounds can believe in their power to make a difference."

Nigina sees gender equality as a foundation for progress and peace in Central Asia. "It's not about losing our identity, it's about ensuring everyone has access to education, decent jobs, and equal pay for equal roles."

Joining the YW4P was a transformative step in her journey. "It reaffirmed my commitment to peacebuilding and gave visibility to the challenges and victories of many young women across the region. Most importantly, it gave me the opportunity to work on cross-border projects with emerging leaders from Central Asia - something I had long dreamed of. Together, we are shaping history."

**NIGINA  
RAKHMATOVA**  
Uzbekistan / YW4P



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*Most importantly, YW4P gave me the opportunity to work on cross-border projects with emerging leaders from Central Asia - something I had long dreamed of. Together, we are shaping history."*

Her message to young women is powerful and clear: “Leadership isn’t about titles. It’s about purpose, courage and action. Never forget that your voice matters - and the world needs it now more than ever.”

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Salkynai Emilbekova, a young change-maker from Kyrgyzstan, is committed to advancing opportunities for women and youth through education, mentorship, and innovation. With a degree in Business Administration from the American University of Central Asia, she now works as an acceleration analyst, helping to build Central Asia’s startup ecosystem. Her focus lies in helping youth- and women-led IT startups become sustainable and ready for investments.

Growing up in the mountainous, remote region of Naryn, Salkynai saw first-hand the limited opportunities available to girls in rural communities. A year abroad in the United States broadened her horizons and inspired her to advocate for women’s rights and social change. Determined to make a difference, she launched Girls for Girls - a mentorship-based programme designed to empower young women across Kyrgyzstan. Over the past three and a half years, the initiative has reached more than 800 girls in all seven regions of the country. “Through this project, we create safe spaces where young women can learn about their rights, develop leadership skills, and engage in community dialogue,” she explains. “Turning this vision into a sustainable, growing programme has been incredibly fulfilling.”

Promoting gender equality in a conservative society was challenging. Salkynai often faced resistance from communities when addressing topics such as reproductive health or mental wellbeing. “Some parents questioned our sessions and prevented their daughters from attending. But that only confirmed we were addressing issues people were too afraid to confront - and that’s exactly why this is so important.”

Through the YW4P, Salkynai strengthened her skills and built regional connections. “I saw it as a unique space to share perspectives and explore how we could support each other’s work. The programme’s focus on capacity building for changemakers already active in their communities, which made it the perfect fit,” she says.

One key outcome has been expanding Girls for Girls into a regional mentorship programme. “I realised that many of the barriers we face as women are shared across Central Asia. When we come together, we can amplify our efforts and create more impactful solutions.”

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**SALKYNAI  
EMILBEKOVA**  
Kyrgyzstan / YW4P



*I saw YW4P as a unique space to share perspectives and explore how we could support each other’s work. The programme’s focus on capacity building for changemakers already active in their communities, which made it the perfect fit.”*

## Guiding girls towards a brighter future

“Never doubt your potential. Beyond academic and professional trainings, finding a resourceful, supportive mentor is halfway to success.” These words from Mengli Veliyeva are more than a motto – they reflect the heart of her mission to empower young women in Turkmenistan and beyond.

Mengli’s journey began through the Technovation Girls programme, an initiative helping girls become leaders in science and technology. As a team lead, she guided high school girls in the fields where women in Turkmenistan remain significantly underrepresented. “It was a truly rewarding experience,” she recalls. “Most of the girls I worked with were accepted into top-tier IT and software engineering programmes,” Mengli says. However, the biggest challenge she observed was the girls’ self-doubt. “That’s when I realized how essential strong mentorship is in shaping women’s professional and academic journeys.”

Currently working with the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), Mengli continues to support efforts to advance the rights, health, and dignity of women and girls. With an academic background in international relations and experience in leading youth initiatives, her commitment to inclusive development shines through every step she takes. She also runs a blog in Turkmen, where she shares free educational resources, book recommendations, and tips to help young people succeed.

The YW4P offered new tools and a supportive network for Mengli. “The programme significantly enhanced my project management, negotiation, and advocacy skills,” she says. “It also gave me a chance to meet like-minded changemakers and learn effective strategies for driving social change.”

Together with fellow YW4P participants, she co-founded the Girls for Girls: Central Asia Edition – a mentorship initiative connecting young women across the region with senior women professionals. “I am delighted that young women from Turkmenistan can connect with inspiring mentors, participate in workshops led by international experts and feel part of a larger community,” she shares.

For Mengli, gender equality means ensuring that all women and girls have access to education and career opportunities. She believes that inclusion is key to building peaceful, prosperous societies.

**MENGLI VELIYEVA**  
Turkmenistan / YW4P



*The programme significantly enhanced my project management, negotiation, and advocacy skills. It also gave me a chance to meet like-minded changemakers and learn effective strategies for driving social change.”*



## Empowering women in finance and beyond

Growing up in Tajikistan, Parvina Saidova was surrounded by traditional expectations where women were often expected to support the family rather than lead. But despite these cultural norms, she carved a different path. “I developed into an independent and open-minded individual. Along the way, I was fortunate to have my family’s support and the guidance of various mentors who enriched my journey,” she says.

Parvina holds a degree in international relations and currently works as an operational analyst at the International Finance Corporation’s programme, supporting regional investment and sustainability efforts across Central Asia and Türkiye. “Currently, I work for one of the world’s leading financial organizations, and I envision my future in this sphere,” she shares. Her long-term goal is to see more women thrive in leadership roles within the business and finance sectors.

Her mother’s support and belief in her dreams played a pivotal role in Parvina’s success. “My mother gave me wings, and I learned to how to fly.” Despite facing systemic stereotypes like ageism, Parvina never gave up and pursued her values and aspirations with curiosity, enthusiasm, and unwavering dedication.”

Her commitment to youth empowerment began with the Network by Consensus, a Central Asian youth network set up with the support of the [OSCE Programme Office in Dushanbe](#) in 2017. It championed initiatives that supported personal growth and leadership among young people. “Watching someone’s personal growth or a positive transformation in their life was a powerful reward,” she says.

The YW4P helped her expand her reach. “I wanted to both learn and give back, to share inspiration and motivation through the work we do together,” she says. The initiative strengthened her skills in project design and helped her build meaningful, lasting connections. “These relationships go beyond professional networking — they represent a community of like-minded individuals who inspire and uplift one another.”

Parvina’s message to young women is simple yet powerful: “Believe in yourself. Don’t let excuses or doubts hold you back. Stay strong, stay resilient, and most importantly, stay curious.”

**PARVINA SAIDOVA**  
Tajikistan / YW4P



*“These relationships go beyond professional networking — they represent a community of like-minded individuals who inspire and uplift one another.”*





# South Caucasus

## From witness to advocate

If Ana Nemsadze could be said to have experienced a moment of profound realization of herself as a feminist, it was more gradual. Ana bore witness to the critical roles women undertake in sustaining resilience and instigating change amid turmoil, as she was raised in Georgia during a period of conflicts and instability.

“Witnessing the struggles of women, including family members, friends and colleagues who endured the ravages of war, fuelled my determination to advocate for change and foster an inclusive environment for all.”

Ana found inspiration in the resilience of the women in her community and began to dedicate herself to peace-building, conflict resolution, and advocating for women’s rights. Soon she ventured into more leadership roles, advocating for gender equality and spearheading initiatives for peace and inclusivity.

Her journey started in Lithuania with an immersive stint in the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) volunteering program that soon blossomed into a year of self-revelation. Ana started to see peacebuilding as a vocation. A valid and worthy career choice. This brought her into the orbit of women-led initiatives in Georgia, reflecting her values and eventually propelling her to lead the Women, Peace, and Security initiative.

“My motivation to join the WPLP stemmed from a desire to collaborate with young women activists working in conflict-affected countries.

The program itself is an invaluable tool for young women leaders in peacebuilding. The high-level conferences, meetings with ambassadors, and the support we receive from this program are priceless,” she says.

“I truly believe that such a strong network can contribute significantly to peacebuilding initiatives and collaborative work at regional and local levels. From this network, I expect to build lasting connections that will foster collaboration across borders, enabling us to collectively address and resolve conflicts more effectively. I hope to gain access to a wealth of knowledge, resources, and best practices that will enhance my capacity as a peacebuilder. Additionally, I look forward to contributing to a supportive community where we can uplift and empower each other,” Ana underscores.

“Navigating a male-dominated field is a significant challenge, but the support I have been receiving from peers, mentors, and my senior colleagues has also been a source of strength and resilience,” Ana says.

**ANA NEMSADZE**

Georgia / WPLP



*My motivation to join the WPLP stemmed from a desire to collaborate with young women activists working in conflict-affected countries. The programme itself is an invaluable tool for young women leaders in peacebuilding.”*



## Gulkhanim's Journey

Gulkhanim is a researcher focused on gender and conflict transformation in Baku-based think tank Topchubashov Center.

"Growing up in Tovuz, a conflict-affected region of Azerbaijan, war was a constant presence in my life," says Gulkhanim. "My family often had to flee our home to escape shelling and fighting. These experiences planted a deep hatred for war in me from an early age. I wanted to understand and address the roots of conflict so I pursued a master's degree in Peace and Conflict Studies and focused my master's thesis on women's participation in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. This marked the beginning of my journey into the areas of conflict transformation and peacebuilding."

Gulkhanim immediately noticed that the arenas of peacebuilding and activism remained predominantly male-dominated and saw a gap and a vital need to advocate for women's inclusion in the discussions and decision-making process.

"Our presence," she says, "signifies a right to be heard, a right to influence the discourse." As she envisions the future role of women in peace processes, Gulkhanim emphasises the necessity of recognizing and amplifying the invaluable contributions of her female colleagues and counterparts. "Encouraging young women to pursue careers in security, diplomacy, and policy-making is essential," Gulkhanim advocates. "I want to live in a world where peacebuilding efforts are enriched by the diverse experiences and insights of both women and men," she says.

Gulkhanim is also engaged with networks that underline the power of solidarity and support in a women's leadership journey.

"I decided to join the Women Peace Leadership Programme to enhance my leadership skills and contribute to building a more peaceful society. I expect to benefit from the rich network of like-minded women, which will not only expand my professional connections but also provide me with valuable insights and support for my future initiatives," she says.

"The mentorship I received is profound," Gulkhanim reflects. "My mentor listened and showed me that my opinions mattered and that the perspectives of every team member had value. It increased our ability to have collective input in decision-making."

**GULKHANIM  
MAMMADOVA**  
Azerbaijan / WPLP



*I decided to join the WPLP to enhance my leadership skills and contribute to building a more peaceful society. I want to live in a world where peacebuilding efforts are enriched by the diverse experiences and insights of both women and men."*

The founder of two NGOs, 'NEOGENI' and 'Alert,' Tsira brings to the Programme more than 16 years of experience in peacebuilding and local development by working directly with women and young people in the Georgian conflict context. 'NEOGENI' supports conflict-affected communities through providing socio-economic assistance, while 'Alert' implements confidence-building initiatives between different ethnic communities.

## Women in conflict-affected areas

I work with local communities in a conflict-affected area – in my home place Abkhazia. I see how all the hard work is done by women, who are doing everything to support their families. They make money but no decisions.

I believe that women's participation in decision-making on the community level starts at home. We work systematically to break the existing gender stereotypes, to empower women and show them how they can have a say in their communities.

**TSIRA KAKUBAVA**

Georgia / WPLP



*This programme is, first of all, an opportunity for me to further grow my skills, but also the place where I connect with women mediators and peacebuilders, like myself."*



## Recognising the unique needs of beneficiaries

Work related stress is most commonly associated with a conventional urban workplace, but stay-at-home rural women are often very stressed as well. They have the same long working hours but receive no appreciation. We can provide them financial support but it will not help them to challenge harmful social norm and stereotypes. The only sustainable solution is to empower them so they can become role models for wider social and behavioural change. It is a very challenging task. This is why I am very proud to see what our interventions help to achieve.

We come in with concrete examples - and my personal story also helps. I tell them how I started from having nothing, and how I was motivated to work on my skills, to learn, to listen and then also to help others.

## What creates a long-lasting peace

Through one of our recent projects in rural areas of Samegrelo region, we found so many capable stay-at-home women that don't realise their voices actually matter. They joined us, spoke up and acknowledged that it was very inspirational to connect with others and to feel part of society. We trained these women, and as a result, they got jobs.

Working with young people, and young women in particular is rewarding in a different way. Young people are very direct and driven. Every time I join activities of our Young Leaders' Hub, I am amazed by how many innovative ideas are put forward. And I see how these young Georgians bring really quick changes to their communities. By implementing small-scale initiatives for their peers, they work on raising awareness about the importance and relevance of peace and security in the region.

## Leveraging women's mediation skills

Men still dominate peacebuilding processes, especially in my country. I would love to see more women being engaged in mediation. We excel at problem-solving and we are good at making smart decisions. Women should have the same opportunities as men do in peacebuilding as well.

If we, competent and experienced women leaders, are each fighting separately, we will not be able to achieve our goals. But together we can build something very tangible and bring transformational changes for all. That is why I applied to join the Women's Peace Leadership Programme, and when I got accepted I was simply speechless. I am 43, and I never stopped learning. This Programme is, first of all, an opportunity for me to further grow my skills, but also the place where I connect with women mediators and peacebuilders, like myself.

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Iulia Kharashvili chairs the women's association for internally displaced people Consent in Georgia, which currently acts as the Secretariat for the regional Women's Peace Dialogue Platform (WPDP). As such, it is an implementing partner of the OSCE project WIN – Women and Men Networking for Gender Equality. Dedicated to building capacity and leadership skills for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, the WPDP unites women's organizations from 12 post-Soviet countries. When the war started, they immediately mobilized their financial and networking resources to support women's organizations in the country.

**IULIA KHARASHVILI**  
Georgia / WIN



*We need to ensure the safety and security of the women, girls and vulnerable people in Ukraine, first and foremost. All our thoughts are about this."*



## Which women's organizations does WPDP support under the OSCE's WIN project?

We support the Mariupol women's association Berehynia, a member of the WPDP. The staff of this organization were evacuated from Mariupol on 17 March and are now working from Dnipro. At first, we sent money and now we also provide humanitarian aid packages with medicines that are difficult or expensive to procure in Ukraine. Secondly, we support Gender Rada, based in Khmelnytskyi in western Ukraine. With the funds provided by the OSCE project, they are providing 40 internally displaced families from Chernihiv, one of the Ukrainian cities most affected by the ongoing hostilities, with food, medicine, personal hygiene items and other necessities.

The third organization is Stantsiia Kharkiv, led by outstanding women who have been working with internally displaced persons in Ukraine since 2014. It provides food and supplies, especially for women and children in Kharkiv, the city in eastern Ukraine which has experienced some of the most intense violence and destruction during war in Ukraine.

At the same time, we also make sure that we have enough resources to continue our work in other countries in the WPDP area of responsibility. We must not forget that as the terrible crisis rages in Ukraine, there are also protracted conflicts that can still escalate: the tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan; periodic clashes between communities located near borders in Central Asia, and; the situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The women in countries with protracted conflicts require our continued attention.

## **Beyond immediate humanitarian aid, what further support do women and girls require?**

One very important thing to be done immediately, together with providing humanitarian assistance, is to start planning for early recovery. We need to do it now and not wait until after the conflict ends. We need to lay the foundation that will allow women, when the war is over, to start talking about sustainable peace.

It is difficult to talk about peace at this particular moment; sometimes you have to rename things. Instead of “peace” we can say “resistance” or “safety and security” or “sustainable livelihood”. For me, “early recovery” is the best word now. We need to encourage people and give them a reason to look forward to the future with hope. Only then can they recover from the war, both physically and psychologically, and only then you can talk about sustainable peace, but not before.

This is why we need to initiate not only projects on providing humanitarian aid, but also practical projects: to organize small kindergartens, for example, and teach volunteers how to work with conflict-affected children. We also need to ask women what they need, because they know best what communities require. This advice comes from our years of post-conflict experience in Georgia. Women need to have the opportunity to conduct projects, and to connect with local authorities, so that in the future they will have a say in the rehabilitation of their communities.

Our second proposal is more ambitious: the promotion of women’s political participation. People may say this is not the right time to talk about women’s participation. But it is always the time to talk about it. Looking at the reports of massive violence against women and children, we believe that the negotiations between the sides need to focus also on the prevention of violence. And women should be involved in this discussion. It will be a difficult task to get agreement from the sides on this. Because up until now most negotiators and decision-makers were men. And here we think the OSCE can play a role.

In a situation like the one we have today in Ukraine, we need to make maximum use of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, to advocate for women’s participation at all levels. We need to work with communities, the military, and with the authorities. People need to understand that when you speak about Women, Peace and Security you are talking mainly about human security.



## What is your vision of the OSCE's role in implementing the Women, Peace and Security agenda in Ukraine?

We believe that OSCE should be more involved. It has enormous technical expertise, it has extremely dedicated experts in gender issues and conflict prevention. The Organization should mobilize all of its resources, its large roster of international experts, and its platform for women mediators, for all kinds of bilateral and multilateral co-operation, to achieve progress. Progress is urgently needed as more people are killed every day.

We need to find a way to protect women and girls, also in the occupied regions, from violence. This will not be possible without international facilitation. The OSCE has a role to play because both the Russian Federation and Ukraine are participating States. We need to mobilize the international community in support of the core values of the Helsinki Final Act, in line with the OSCE comprehensive security approach, which always includes the human dimension. This is something the OSCE can do and has the full right to do.

We need to ensure the safety and security of the women, girls and vulnerable people in Ukraine, first and foremost. All our thoughts are about this.

The Georgian writer Guram Odisharia once said that war comes like a wild animal, with huge leaps, while peace comes with the short steps of a small child. You need to care for this child, constantly, if you want it to have the opportunity to grow.

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# South Eastern Europe

## From Innocence to Advocacy

“Ever since I heard from my first-grade teacher the inspiring story of Rosa Parks, who refused to give up her seat to a white passenger on a segregated bus and initiated the political and social protest campaign against racial segregation, the sense of activism came into me,” says Maylinda Bajrami.

Maylinda’s unique childhood shared between the USA and Albania, shaped her perspectives on societal norms, gender equality, and the need for change. She realised early the power of standing against injustice. “Growing up partly in the USA and Albania helped me to gain a diverse experience in the field of peace-building, women’s rights, and conflict resolution,” explains Maylinda.

This dual perspective also came with a healthy dose of pragmatism. “Sometimes I’d ponder on the fact how late in the history of humankind women got the right to vote and can’t help but think, we still have a lot to accomplish.”

Maylinda is seeking to do her part to help women catch up on this historic imbalance through academic and professional advocacy focusing on endeavours dedicated to addressing gender disparities and contributing to peace-building efforts. Her observations of Albania inspired her to take leadership in challenging gender stereotypes in particular. “Coming to Albania, where I live nowadays, I noticed that in specific areas the patriarchy is still in place or has left quite a mark.”

“For me, the Women Peace Leadership Programme has been a game-changer, as it has created a sisterhood where we, young women, connected by a passion for peace, can share our struggles and visions for the future. The fireside chats, peer mentorship and training have all provided me not only with skills, but also instilled confidence in me. I’m eager for this initiative to grow further and look forward to being able to convey the knowledge I received back in Albania,” Maylinda says.

**MAYLINDA BAJRAMI**  
Albania / WPLP



*For me, the WPLP has been a game-changer, as it has created a sisterhood where we, young women, connected by a passion for peace, can share our struggles and visions for the future.”*

## Milena's Advocacy

Milena is a psychologist turned Roma gender expert and an advocate for the Romani community in Serbia.

Milena's background in psychology enabled her to bring a trained eye to her world — a world rife with embedded disparities. "I got into psychology to better understand human behaviour," she reflects, "A big reason was the discrimination I faced based on my nationality since I was old enough to remember." She found herself confronting discriminatory societal norms that could lead to real neglect of her community, the Romani people.

As the founder of the Homeostasis Group, the organization that strives to improve the lives of young people by tapping into their natural leadership qualities, and a fervent advocate for the Romani community, she is now a leading voice. "To me, leadership is having influence. Influencing people to become the best they can be and be leaders themselves," Milena says.

Her expertise in psychology equipped her well for the challenges she faces when engaging in gender-based advocacy and peacebuilding. "Being able to compare my experiences with these of other women peacebuilders has been grounding and made me realize where the real priorities lie," Milena says.

"This is why I joined the Women Peace Leadership Programme driven by the belief that inclusive, diverse leadership is pivotal for sustainable peace. By participating, I aim to amplify my capacity to navigate complex conflicts with empathy, resilience, and innovation. My journey here is not just about personal growth but also about fostering collaborative solutions that transcend boundaries and transform societies," she emphasizes.

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A lawyer, environmental activist and passionate mountaineer, Evgenija dedicated her career to negotiating access to drinking water. Currently working with Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation, a Swiss independent organization for development, she is also a member of multiple global initiatives working on addressing key environmental security challenges. Having also delved into the issues of water protection in North Macedonia in her academic research, Evgenija seeks to raise awareness about the connection between mitigating climate change and conflict prevention.

### MILENA RELJI

Serbia / WPLP



*My journey here is not just about personal growth but also about fostering collaborative solutions that transcend boundaries and transform societies."*



### EVGENIJA KRSTEVSKA

North Macedonia / WPLP



*I was so grateful to see that this programme is a space for exchange on the professional struggles we share, also as women, even though we represent different cultures and countries."*



## Finding allies

I come from the field of environmental and water protection, where a lot of stakeholders are men and financial interest usually dominates the discussion. They were mostly surprised to see a young woman attorney arguing on behalf of local communities and often did not take me seriously. There would also be a lack of empathy for the communities that I used to represent. So quite often I found myself under attack, and that can be difficult to deal with – both professionally and personally.

In this male-dominated field, there are few allies you can build in the first place. That is why I was so grateful to see that this programme is a space for exchange on the professional struggles we share, also as women, even though we represent different cultures and countries. Everyone speaks up about their experiences and emotions, and the space we created with other mentees and mentors is highly supportive. It's so healing to know that you are not alone.

## Respect for nature

A few years ago, I joined the work of several NGOs working on a campaign to stop the development of a small hydropower plant in a new national park in North Macedonia. I gave it my full energy: a few weeks before I joined WPLP, the government made concessions and decided that there won't be any hydropower plants built in the new national parks. It was a small win for us, but it is a big step for environmental protection. It's really rewarding to start seeing your efforts paying off and bringing tangible results for local communities.

I am trying to bring more nature and its balance into my work and my personal life. I grew up in the mountains - and the women there are brave. Whenever I face a problem, I go to the mountains, and I know that if respect the nature, I will find all the answers. I observe how the river flows and watch the animals move.

## Negotiating with men

I've been representing cases related to water protection in front of national and international legal institutions. This often requires working with different stakeholders, many of whom are men, and negotiating on the policy recommendations.

One of the reasons I decided to apply for WPLP is because I need to build my skills on how to negotiate better the interest of my clients, also if I find myself in the position of being a mediator - between municipalities, the government and local communities.

## Water conflict prevention and mitigation

I see how women negotiators in this line of work tend to have more empathy towards their opponents, and I do believe that communicating empathically is a critical skill for us. All need to understand the urgency of the issues we are raising at the table. The consequences of climate change will continue to become more visible and we need to be aware that this is also a matter of security.

Everyone has an interest in having stable access to water. I try to always bring in the human dimension because we tend to forget just how much we all share the same basic need of having drinking water.

An experienced peacebuilder, Bojana has been supporting peacebuilding organizations in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) through her advocacy work at the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, which promotes women's rights in conflict-affected areas. The work of the Foundation's 140 local partners span the Middle East and North African region, sub-Saharan Africa, the South Caucasus, and Europe. Bojana is focusing on achieving lasting peace in her own country through the implementation of the Western Balkans EU Advocacy Strategy.

## The necessity of continuous learning

I am experiencing the repercussions of what happened 30 years ago on a daily basis. Peacebuilding is more than a profession; it is something to which I am personally connected.

As someone who has been supporting local peacebuilding initiatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina for more than 16 years, I know that this work, above all, requires motivation. This is not an easy process and very often we feel exhausted. There is a lot of divisive political language, and even hate speech, dominating the public spaces, with peace rhetoric mostly missing from the political agenda. This complicates the work of the peacebuilders and, honestly, it is simply tiring.

I also constantly need to learn how peacebuilding is approached in different contexts: what are the good practices, and what didn't work. Unsuccessful stories are especially valuable. I am grateful to be able to pass on these lessons and learn others' challenges and perspectives within the OSCE Women's Peace Leadership Programme (WPLP). We worked through real-life and hypothetical scenarios, sharing how we would approach the challenge and reflecting on the different solutions. It is a win-win because I see how others find my experience helpful too.

## What brings peace that lasts

'Peacebuilding' as a word is worn-out in our context. Over the years, there have been different peace initiatives, programmes, and actors coming to do the peacebuilding work and contributing to some extent to creating a better society, but we still live in very divided communities. There are three different narratives in Bosnia and Herzegovina based on ethnicity. Now when I have kids and I realise that if we were not doing this work, one of these narratives would become a part of their education. But now we have actors who offer alternative narratives. I am proud that there is a civil society working on peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina and that I am part of it.

### BOJANA MUMIN

Bosnia and Herzegovina /  
WPLP



*I now have 'sisters' from different regions I can reach out to for assistance, but above all, for information - sometimes this is all that is needed. It gives you a different perspective when you read reports and when you hear directly from the people who were there."*

## Through a feminist lens

Being a feminist and a peacebuilding activist is an important part of my identity. Being a peacebuilder is not popular, so taking on this identity is quite an achievement for me.

In our country, it is usually seen as something that women work on. During the 90s and early 2000s, peacebuilding was receiving a lot of support from international donors and many men were engaged. However, when donors shifted their focus to other areas, women were the ones who actually stayed in the field. Women were the first peacebuilding actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina: they were the pioneers and now they are the seniors.

## Being part of Women's Peace Leadership Programme

I now have 'sisters' from different regions I can reach out to for assistance, but above all, for information - sometimes this is all that is needed. It gives you a different perspective when you read reports and when you hear directly from the people who were there.

Let me give you an example. I tried to understand better the situation in Afghanistan, so I wanted to speak to a local woman who was in the conflict and could share how this experience influenced her and the community. And here I am, speaking in person to one of the WPLP participants from Afghanistan, Elham Kohistani, and other women peacebuilders from so many different regions about their experiences in mediation, leadership and peacebuilding efforts. This is one of the key benefits of being part of this programme: knowing that I can tap into the expertise of this incredible network of women leaders and also offer my support should anyone need it.

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# Ukraine / Eastern Europe

## Bridging Gender Gaps Amid Conflict

Anna Popsui, Ukrainian activist and Head of the Young Peacebuilding Leaders (YPL) network, remembers first encountering sexism and gender-based discrimination during her first year at university. At the time she was studying International Relations and English for the Bachelor's Degree. Anna had hardly imagined encountering institutionalised sexism in the supposedly "enlightened" halls of academia, yet she quickly began to notice everyday discrimination stretching like a shadow across her new life.

**ANNA POPSUI**

**WPLP**



*I believe WPLP is a rewarding journey for me to embark on and explore peacebuilding, conflict resolution and prevention with prominent decision-makers, while also expanding a network of young women activists."*



"It pushed me into women's rights and gender equality activism," says Anna. "Encountering sexism and gender-based discrimination first-hand, and later at my first workplace, sparked my awareness of the need for change and made me realize that the status quo should not be tolerated."

She chose not to recoil, but to engage, to delve deeper into the discourse of young women's roles in decision-making. Today she combines her work and studies with a non-governmental organization, the Young Peacebuilding Leaders (YPL) network which was established under the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 2250 and is involved in day-to-day dialogue activities on national and local action plans. Her commitment to advancing the cause of gender equality and the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda found a new focus with the calamitous events of February 24th 2022 and the tragic effects of war in Ukraine. "I believe the Women's Peace Leadership Programme is a rewarding journey for me to embark on and explore peacebuilding, conflict resolution and prevention with prominent decision-makers, while also expanding a network of young women activists," she says.

"My world fell apart on February 24th 2022," Anna says. "But a prominent Ukrainian poet, Taras Shevchenko once wrote, 'everyone has their destiny, and one's path is wide.' I am convinced that one should do what is dear to their heart, and for me, that is eliminating gender disparities. We need to realise that there will be no durable and inclusive peace without women at the negotiation table."

In practice, the spirit of all women living in Kyiv has been sorely tested in the last couple of years since their world was utterly shattered by war in Ukraine. Even in the face of such extreme adversity, women are digging deep to empower themselves and build resilience. Despite the fear and uncertainty caused by war in Ukraine, Anna has found the strength and courage to make every effort to support young women in Ukraine and transform adversity into advocacy.

## Feminism as Lifelong Commitment

Meanwhile, Galyna Kotliuk's feminist convictions crystallised against the backdrop of resistance to war in Ukraine. "There wasn't a one single moment in my life that made me realise I had to be engaged in the feminist movement," Galyna says. "It was rather the sum of many moments and my life choices."

Growing up in a Ukraine that just gained its independence, Galyna's worldview was grounded in the struggle for democracy and human rights. From a young age, she harboured a keen awareness of the injustices that seeped into her everyday life, fuelling her drive towards feminism and activism.

"During my teenage years, I began to openly identify myself as a feminist. Over the years, my interest in the feminist movement and activism has only grown. I often joke that I've turned my personal and political convictions into a full-time career."

In the world of peacebuilding and activism, Galyna found her battles were not just against external adversaries, but also against the stereotypes that sought to confine her and her peers to roles that stifled their potential. "Women are not defined by stereotypes, but by their capabilities and ambitions," Galyna stresses.

The influence of mentors and the solidarity found in networks like the Women's Peace Leadership Programme became her bedrock, providing not just support but a shared vision for a future where peace was not a lofty ideal but a tangible reality. "The peer mentorship aspect of the programme has been incredibly valuable, allowing me to forge connections with colleagues from diverse backgrounds and countries," she reflects. "My motivation to join the programme was to learn more about peacebuilding processes and mechanisms of their implementation to be able to facilitate effective peacebuilding initiatives in Ukraine and ensure that Ukraine's recovery is sustainable, just and gender-sensitive. My expectations were to gain valuable knowledge and expertise in this area, connect with other peace leaders and get more empowered. I think all of them were fulfilled," Galyna says.

Galyna offers a final message of hope and relentless pursuit of change to young women leaders, "One should never be afraid to act and stand up, taking the space, and interfering when one is certain in their beliefs. Forge your path with determination, courage, and a commitment to building a world where peace and democratic values thrive. Believe in your potential to make a difference and never hesitate to advocate for what you believe in."

**GALYNA KOTLIUK**

WPLP



*The peer mentorship aspect of the programme has been incredibly valuable, allowing me to forge connections with colleagues from diverse backgrounds and countries."*



Having supported Track 2 dialogues, focused on inclusive multi-stakeholder initiatives at the expert level in Crimea during 2012-2014, Irma continued her practice in Ukraine as an expert in mediation, peace process and dialogue facilitation working closely with the CMI Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation. To underpin this practice with a theoretical background, she also completed the Mediation in Peace Processes Master's programme at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich (ETH Zürich). Irma is seeking to connect more women in the peacebuilding field to better understand, and if needed redefine, what the future of mediation holds.

## Attending to emotions

The best allies you can have are people who experienced the same difficulties as you. For me this is the main value of the Women's Peace Leadership Programme (WPLP): not only the inspirational experiences I observe from my brave colleagues here but also being an inspiration myself - we all keep the door open for others to achieve the same things we have.

**IRMA PIDTEPA**  
**WPLP**



*For me, the main value of the WPLP is not only the inspirational experiences I observe from my brave colleagues here but also being an inspiration myself."*



Mediators experience conflict first-hand on a daily basis by directly witnessing what people are going through, the traumas they are fighting and the emotions they are dealing with. Professor Donna Hicks said that at some point in her career, she understood that talks happening at the negotiation table are not the ones you necessarily need to attend. Rather, the key is witnessing and understanding the emotions 'beneath the talks'. Once you attend to those, they become a valuable resource for the practice of mediation that helps advance the process of conflict settlement.

## Heading towards peace, one step at a time

I come from a family that was devastated by a violent conflict. As a teenager, I did not even know that 'mediation' was a career path, and I did not consciously choose it. But along the way it appeared as if I may have the exact skills that anyone working in this area needs in order to build trust in a conflict context: empathy, being able to focus on others before yourself, and neutrality in the face of often heated discussions. Above all, the trauma that my family experienced has made me sensitive to the pain of others.

Over the years, I've seen how even small steps of empowerment can make a huge difference. It is hard work, and usually, women are the first ones to roll up their sleeves. There is a big community of women professionals who are working relentlessly, often with little or no recognition.

## Not leaving anyone behind

For every insider mediator, as soon as your wounds start to bleed, your impartiality might hit a wall and you are forced to face the question: why do you think you can do this job? I am no exception. The lesson I learnt is that self-preservation and healing are equally important for being able to help others. The main driver for me is remembering that this work is about people.

I am lucky to have met great women on my path. As a young professional, I got to work with Tuija Talvitie, the late Director of CMI, who showed me the value of developing new and innovative approaches to conflict resolution in Ukrainian society. Just as she created spaces for people on the ground to engage in peace processes, she also created spaces within her own team to help young women colleagues like myself to grow as leaders. In my work today, I strive to overcome the stereotypes and cultural barriers that may hinder the very success of mediation and make sure that women's perspectives are heard.

## Swimming against the tide

I want my nieces and other girls to know that no matter which path they choose and how hard or scary it may get, you have to step out of your comfort zone and do it if you know that it is the right thing to do. Sometimes I feel like I may be swimming against the tide, but that also means that I am carving a path for others. Being a woman in this particular field means that there are a lot of other fights we need to fight on a daily basis.

Global security is shifting, and there are hard questions about where we are as mediators, what we can do and how we should be doing it. I value the opportunity to be immersed in spaces like WPLP, where we can pose difficult questions to each other, and share experiences in a safe space with women mediators from different regions and diverse backgrounds. It is so valuable and extremely needed. This is what I want to continue to pursue in the coming years.

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A gender scholar, peacebuilder and activist, Hanna Manoilenko had just joined more than 200 experts from all around the country to work on the implementation of the National Action Plan (NAP) on women, peace and security when war in Ukraine began on 24 February 2022. As the needs of Ukrainians have changed drastically since then, the Plan itself had to be revisited. Currently, a PhD Candidate at the University of Melbourne, Australia, Hanna works closely with the Ukrainian civil society, and continues her humanitarian work through the grassroots feminist initiative FemSolution and the Feminist Network for Freedom and Democracy.

## People experience conflict differently

Democracy is a continuous process and not a point – it can never be fully accomplished. By the time I applied for WPLP I have already become a refugee, and at that point in the crisis, I knew that it was up to us, civil society, to make a change. Working with the community, we can include as many different voices and experiences of vulnerable population groups as possible. That's my motivation: I want to make sure that I live my life in a way that makes sense and that I am part of a transformative change for democracy, inclusion, freedom, diversity and peace.

**HANNA  
MANOILENKO**  
WPLP



*Networking is a value in itself and learning from the other WPLP participants has been an immense privilege."*



The greatest reward for me would be seeing how the Ukrainian society succeeds in standing for its independence and right to self-determination while remaining inclusive and democratic. It would be knowing that the women, the feminists who are doing the work on the ground in this very moment, are heard and that their experiences are accounted for. Using my privilege of having the connections and being admitted to WPLP, I want to make sure that the prominent role of women in Ukraine in responding to this crisis is acknowledged and respected.

## **Turning to Ukrainian feminists**

My inspiration is my Ukrainian sisters, the brave women that I work with. I used to look up a lot to feminist thinkers from the West, trying to find answers to my questions, especially on militarism and the way feminism should look like. However, since the invasion, I realized that these are the people around me that I should first listen to. While recognizing the value of exchange and mutual learning, at this point in my life, I understand that knowledge comes from within, and no one knows our context better than we do.

People I work with are academics and activists. Some have become full-time volunteers, some joined the military even though had never planned to. I want to make sure that the experiences of these women are known and their ideas respected. For the women living in territories outside government control the mere act of survival, of preserving themselves and the people they care for, is such a strong political act. These are the people I look up to and learn from.

## **When others matter no less than yourself**

Networking is a value in itself and learning from the other WPLP participants has been an immense privilege. Getting access to new tools has been very helpful too. For example, we've learned about multiple frameworks on how to approach conflict resolution, in particular, through mediation. We learned how to break a huge problem into segments thus making it easier to tackle.

We all here have plenty to contribute, and we all need to express our solidarity. In my work, I see solidarity as the key to making sure that the gendered issues are addressed, and that the conflicts are taken care of – in a sustainable manner.

Solidarity also means that others matter no less than you do. Because we do share common issues, common threats, and it's only jointly that we can make an impact.

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These influential women are recognized leaders and experts contributing to the OSCE Networking Platform and the WIN Project. Their involvement showcases specialized expertise in conflict response and providing direct assistance to survivors of gender-based violence. These stories highlight their resilience and contributions to knowledge-sharing and capacity-building efforts supported by the OSCE Gender Issues Programme, underscoring women's critical role in conflict response and recovery.

## Ukrainian feminists at war

'The Lead Feminist' - this is how Svitlana Dubyna is unofficially referred to in her city of Vinnytsia, in west-central Ukraine. Although an experienced activist, Svitlana finds this title complicated: the attitudes towards feminist movements vary and, due to a lack of knowledge, women feminists are still treated with caution. "I simply laugh back saying we don't eat men for breakfast unless it's dessert," Svitlana jokes. As head of the board of the human rights NGO "VIS" ("Axis"), she shares what was her path to feminism and how the movement has survived since the beginning of the war in Ukraine.



## Where would you be if there were no feminists?

Svitlana agrees with Virginia Woolf's saying that "A feminist is any woman who tells the truth about her life." Yet, she admitted that she was only able to identify herself as a feminist later into adulthood, even though she has always shared feminist values. "I once even said that I supported gender equality, but wasn't a feminist," the activist recalls.

As a child, she resisted the idea that girls in Soviet schools had to wear bows in their hair and choose "female" professions. Due to her rebellion, she was labelled as a "complicated child" and received lowered grades for her behaviour.

"My feminism came from an awareness of injustice and the need for justice," Svitlana says. Today, Svitlana is a certified human rights training specialist. This year, the NGO VIS, which she leads, will mark its 13th year. "But it was not until 2017 that we began seeing our organization as feminist, when we held the first "Femencamps" – feminist camps for girls," Svitlana emphasizes.

One of the first VIS projects was an awareness campaign against breast cancer. In Ukraine, one woman dies of cancer every hour, mostly due to delayed treatment. Svitlana and her colleagues researched why women were not going for check-ups on time.

"The answers were shocking," recalled Svitlana. "Most women were afraid to be abandoned by their partners. What do they put into the minds of women and girls? To what extent are women pressured to risk their own lives?"



Despite the long-standing achievements of the feminist movement, society tends to forget about the tremendous efforts made by women to gain their rights: “When do people notice human rights violations? When they face them directly. In all my feminist trainings, I ask participants to consider where would they be, if there were no feminists,” Svitlana stresses.

## Supporting women who suffered from war

The war in Ukraine has only intensified the challenges Ukrainian feminists are facing.

“I was not ready for the war, even though there were plenty of warning signs. Ten days before the invasion began, we even received a proposal from the Global Fund for Women to redirect grant funds if necessary,” recalls Svitlana.

On the first days of the war, VIS and other local NGOs established a humanitarian hub to provide aid to internally displaced persons. During that time, evacuation trains were regularly arriving in Vinnytsia. Together with her female colleagues, Svitlana was handing out humanitarian aid at the railway station. Her phone was ringing day and night.

“From the end of February until August, we worked non-stop, seven days a week, 24 hours a day. I would sometimes come home, sit in silence for about 45 minutes without even taking off my jacket. Now I understand that this was how I saved my mental health,” says the volunteer.

Since then, VIS has helped about 10,000 people. “We no longer distribute packages. We agreed with a retail store chain and came up with a voucher system, allowing people to choose what they need. How does this relate to feminism? It is specifically about respecting individual needs,” she explains.

Another project carried out by VIS is focused on the economic empowerment of women who have suffered from war. It offers essential resources to help women implement their own business ideas. The organization purchases equipment, such as sewing machines or baking ovens, enabling women to start and expand their own businesses.

Svitlana says that the organization now consists of dedicated members who work full-time and volunteers who participate in projects on an ad-hoc basis.

## A dialogue between the countries

“Ukrainian women feminists do not stand with their “hands outstretched”, because their hands are busy with other things”. With these words, Svitlana Dubyna now addresses her international colleagues. She explains that an invitation to participate in the [OSCE’s WIN project](#) meeting helped her understand the significance of dialogue between countries that have experienced military conflicts.

“This meeting in Vienna taught me the importance of extensive communication. About three months ago, I began attending such platforms. Before, I used to consider it a waste of my time. I believed I was more useful here in Ukraine,” Svitlana admits.

She highlights the role that the OSCE as a platform for communication among human rights defenders can play in peacebuilding. As an option within this co-operation, Svitlana suggests organizing study tours to post-conflict countries to gain practical experience and learn from them. She considers the importance of talking to witnesses and survivors of conflicts, as they are the ones who can share the most valuable information.

## When the war is over

Svitlana Dubyna admits that she does not believe in achieving peace without a victory, but dreams of Ukraine winning with minimal losses. “So much time has passed, yet every morning I still wake up and think: God, this cannot be our reality,” she says.

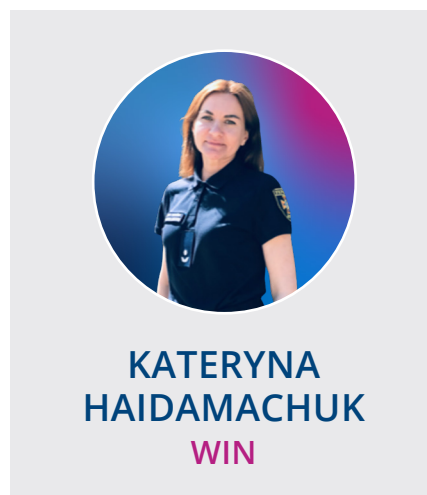
Svitlana firmly believes that after the war, Ukraine will succeed in building a just society where human rights are protected. Her dreams of justice prove that any crisis presents an opportunity to fix past errors and shape a better future.

“I have a dream that this war “burnt the tares”. And once it is over, we will need to carefully protect human rights and justice. I dream of justice,” she concludes.

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## Save Our Souls: a Ukrainian psychologist working in hotspots

During the first month of the war in Ukraine, Kateryna Haidamachuk, a senior psychologist from the General Directorate of the State Emergency Service of Ukraine (SES) in Kyiv oblast, was part of the efforts to rescue civilians from the grip of Russian forces. She witnessed the horrifying aftermath of the atrocities in Borodianka.



## Rescuers hope for a miracle

Before joining the SES, Kateryna had spent a decade working in the Psychiatric Department of a Regional Substance Abuse Hospital in Kyiv oblast. When she left the hospital for good, she recalls that people around her seemed like aliens – such was the stark contrast between her new normality and the lives of her former patients. However, it was in the hospital that she learned to work in crises where every second mattered.

“While my job at the hospital required more pathology diagnostic work and psycho-correctional sessions, I joined the SES expecting a deeper involvement in crisis psychology. I understood that I could work in emergencies and I liked the idea of being helpful,” she says.

Kateryna vividly remembers her first deployment. In 2014, just a week after she had joined the SES, there was an explosion at a petrol station in Pereiaslav-Khmelnytskyi, a city in the east of Kyiv oblast (now Pereiaslav). Six people lost their lives: four station workers and two visitors.

One of the crucial rules in Kateryna's work is never to make empty promises. "You can't give false hope, you can't say 'everything will be fine' because you have no idea how things will be. Instead, it's essential to bring people back to reality so that they can regain their footing," she explains.

## Constantly shelled evacuation routes

On 24 February 24, 2022, Kateryna's sleep was interrupted by explosions. "Of course, deep inside I wasn't ready for the war, because I just didn't want to believe in it even though at work we were obliged to have our bug-out bags with essential items ready. The discussions in media had been quite tense in preceding weeks, so we were instructed to get ready on the highest alert," she says.

When the alert rang, at first she thought the reason was a fire in the oil depot in Kyiv oblast, not far from where she lived. She got herself ready quickly, put on her uniform, and ran to the nearest fire and rescue station. "I asked: 'Have you guys been called yet?' 'No, it must be the war,' they answered. In 10 minutes our phones rang — we were told to go on alert," Kateryna recalls.

She got to the State Emergency Service Kyiv headquarters by suburban railway. Many passengers of the early train were not aware that the war in Ukraine had begun. As the train was getting closer to Kyiv, the news spread. People were doubtful and confused.

As the situation became increasingly dangerous, Kateryna stayed at the headquarters for three days. "There were shootings everywhere, so we could not leave Kyiv. Then we were placed on duty in the nearest units," says Kateryna.

As soon as the first evacuation began, when people were leaving Irpin, a city northwest of Kyiv, on their own, the emergency personnel was sent there. "People were being shot at while walking out of town. It was like a deadly lottery," says Kateryna.

Starting from 10 March 2022, rescuers brought refugees from the towns captured by the Russian forces to the village of Bilohorodka, in Kyiv oblast, where a large evacuation camp was set up.

"Even though the official evacuation through the green corridors was already underway, this did not stop the Russians. The routes were constantly shelled. One of our operational rescuers was taken captive. He is still in captivity, but, thank God, he is alive. It's been over a year now," adds Kateryna.

## The human moment at work

According to Kateryna, people's behaviour in stressful situations can be unpredictable. Some get hysterical, others go into a stupor. The main task of a psychologist in such cases is to make sure their work does not cause additional harm or trauma.

However, most people are naturally resilient. "If such a tragedy hadn't occurred, we might not have realized the depth of goodness within us," says the psychologist.

She is convinced there are no bad or good people, only qualities that are more or less revealed during stressful events and crises. "A common example from Bilohorodka was a mother with a breastfed baby. We offered her yoghurts, baby food, and a large package of diapers for the journey, but she said: 'No, I'll only need 5 pieces to get to my destination. But you still have many children staying here,'" recalls Kateryna.

When the Russian forces left Borodianka, the rescuers went to clear the rubble. There, Kateryna provided psychological support to relatives and friends of those killed and injured during the search and recovery of bodies and helped those who remained in their homes and survived the horrors of the occupation to recover.

“People were dying of suffocation, without food and water, under the rubble. We retrieved fragments of bodies that relatives had to use to identify their loved ones. All this was an enormous burden,” the psychologist says. “It is a tragedy, and you can never be prepared for it. And even if you have professional skills, sometimes you have to work as a human being and show your human qualities.”

## Instead of an epilogue

At the end of the interview, Kateryna Haidamachuk shared a quote by Albert Einstein that matters to her: “Strive not to be a success, but rather to be of value.” Kateryna has already found out how to be of value: she rescues souls.

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### Challenging stereotypes – how war gives young Ukrainian girls new opportunities

Yuliya Sporysh's work days are diverse and extremely busy – one day she is giving speeches at international conferences and the next she is connecting with survivors of gender-based violence in Ukraine. As the founder and director of the Ukrainian NGO “Girls”, Yuliya's work has increased tenfold and has already supported 150,000 women and girls, since the start of the war in Ukraine.



### The idea is born

Back in 2016, while staying in the maternity hospital, Yuliya observed confused young women around her who were not ready to face the new reality of being a mother and caring for a baby. This was how she came up with the idea of creating the NGO “Girls”.

“I gave birth to my son in 2016. In intensive care, I realized that many young women and girls, the same as me, did not understand all the changes that were happening and were about to happen in their lives. Later, I talked with my doctor about how there was a lack of sexual education and information about women's physiology in Ukraine,” Yuliya says. To prevent women from making mistakes that can negatively impact their lives in the long term, she teamed up with gynecologists to organize lectures on sexual education for teenage girls.

As these lectures became more popular, Yuliya started thinking about expanding the scope of her work in this area. On a 14-hour flight from Singapore to Berlin, she decided to fundraise systematically and create an NGO.

By 2020, she launched the NGO “Girls” and started working successfully on sexual education and preventing gender-based violence.

## Adapting to meet new challenges

“We never planned to work in the humanitarian sector. But when the war started, the first thing we did was donating money to support people fleeing,” Yuliya says.

During the first days of the war, Yuliya herself had a chance to leave Irpin, a suburb of Kyiv, which became an epicentre of hostilities. As soon as she and her children reached Poland safely, Yuliya called the partners of her NGO to use 2022 projects’ funds to support the affected areas of Kyiv oblast. “There was no time to prepare. On the fourth day they already received first aid,” she says.

Today, the NGO “Girls” is engaged in complex projects supporting women and children in Ukraine – from organizing shelters to providing humanitarian aid. They have a large team of psychologists working on the rehabilitation of children who have suffered from the war.

“We organise many camps and sports activities for children and we also provide safe places for women. We offer training courses for women and legal aid for everyone. We don’t turn anyone down,” Yuliya says.

Last year only, “Girls” could support 150,000 people. They work all over Ukraine in more than 120 locations. “During the war, our team has increased tenfold, and 99% of us are women. So far, we have worked with more than 150,000 women and girls in Ukraine,” the activist says proudly.

## Reducing the digital divide

Yuliya quickly managed to get major donors’ help and start cooperation with international organizations such as OSCE. Now, “Girls” is a part of the [OSCE Networking platform](#) for sharing expertise between women’s organizations and experts who are engaged in helping survivors of gender-based violence, including conflict-related sexual violence.

In early March 2023, with the support of the OSCE, Yuliya delivered a speech in New York, within the framework of the 67th [UN Commission on the Status of Women](#). She spoke about women’s digital empowerment in times of war, specifically focusing on the barriers preventing Ukrainian women from entering the digital era.

“We are a country with a well-developed digital infrastructure. But we offer practically no guidance to women and girls on how to build a career and become independent. After graduation, many would shelve their diplomas and become highly educated housewives,” Yuliya reflects.

Her team observed that many women do not have their own devices, which is often an obstacle to teaching them new digital skills. “The war made it even worse, as people fleeing their homes took only documents and essentials, often leaving computers and laptops behind. In some cases, electronic devices have been confiscated by Russian forces during the so called ‘filtration’,” Yuliya says. (A system of security checks and personal data collection - e.d.)

## Collecting data to understand the barriers

A sociologist by training, Yuliya has recently fulfilled her long-held dream: conducting the [“Women and Stigma”](#) research that her organization has just finalised.

According to its findings, Ukrainian families still teach girls that their main role is to be good wives and raise children. In particular, 73% of mothers are convinced that a woman should go on maternity leave because “no one can do a better job of raising a child.” Also, 64% of women surveyed believe that abortion leads to infertility, and 60% of women believe that children be born in marriage. Patriarchal stereotypes have only been intensified during the war. Many women were forced to put their careers on hold when leaving Ukraine and taking their children with them to safer places.

“Why do I call it a great sociological dream? Because no significant research has been conducted in Ukraine about teenage girls in particular. We want to understand the barriers that prevent Ukrainian girls from being healthy, successful and independent. The answer is quite simple: it is due to parents’ stereotypes, their unawareness of the importance of this part of life, the lack of information and the absence of examples of good female leaders,” she explains.

According to Yuliya, this was the first research in a series. “Girls” plans to conduct this research every five years to assess how the organisation’s activities, alongside government programmes and international projects, promote changes in the behaviour of teenage girls and their parents.

## Invisible women

“When you have ten meetings a day, you don’t have time to sit peacefully and write about how good you are,” Yuliya answers when asked why the work of women’s organisations in Ukraine is often left unnoticed.

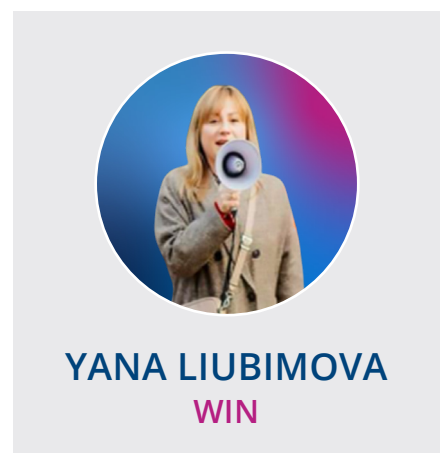
“Maybe people have yet to realise how much has been accomplished by women. If you think about it and look around, you will see women carrying, gathering, packing, knitting, and so on,” she points out.

War in Ukraine did not stop Yuliya and her team. Instead, it encouraged them to act with more determination and to expand their dreams. “Our motto is ‘You Are Not Alone’, and if a woman faces a problem she can’t handle, I urge her to come to us. Ultimately, our mission is to make Ukrainian women self-sufficient, economically independent, and help them enjoy their lives,” Yuliya says.

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## A job to help people in a country that now needs it most

Yana Liubimova, a former volunteer and social activist, knows what it feels like to seek shelter in unfamiliar cities because of war. Twice a displaced person herself, she continues to help people, even after she has taken the position of Deputy Head of the Secretariat of the Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian Parliament – e.d.) Commissioner for Human Rights.



At the beginning of our interview, Yana recalls the tragic morning of February 24, 2022. “It was a massive flashback - a déjà vu of hypertrophic proportions.”



Nine years ago, armed conflict in Donbas forced Yana to leave her home in Kadiyivka, Luhansk region. The war in Ukraine caught her in Starobil'sk, where she moved with her family and founded the NGO "Dieva Hromada" in 2016. Together with other activists, she helped internally displaced persons settle in a new place and launched several important projects focusing on community engagement through socio-cultural and creative projects, the development of civil society, social protection, and sustainable socio-economic development of the Luhansk region.

"I didn't sleep at all that night, watching the news and the address by the Russian Federation president as he announced the offensive. As I heard it, I said to my husband 'Pack it up! We should go.' I understood that being in the Luhansk region, we were short of time to leave."

## Into the unknown

"We drove for three days, into the unknown. Passed the city of Dnipro, heading westwards. Those three days and nights felt so long, almost endless. There was neither food and water, nor fuel at gas stations," recalls Yana.

Driving with her headphones on, Yana kept in touch with colleagues who stayed under shelling and started organising delivery of humanitarian aid. "I was afraid of falling asleep because I felt if I did, someone might have died without the aid. That feeling lingered upon me for a long time until the Luhansk region was almost occupied," she says.

## Promise you will get us home

From a distance of thousand kilometres, Yana organised evacuations of people with reduced mobility. "I perfectly remember my first evacuation. I still keep the list of those people. Most of them were elderly women and those with disabilities. They could barely talk due to the stress. After we had taken them from Rubizhne, which was under the shelling, their first words to me were: "Promise you will get us home".

Later, answering a question about her dream, after pondering for a while, Yana confessed: "I used to dream every night of walking around in my house. My dream is to return home".

## Winning back 'European Ukrainian-ness'

Well ahead of the war in Ukraine, Yana Liubimova had joined the Coalition 1325 Women. Peace. Security. The coalition is a network of civil society organizations, local authorities, and private entities aiming to increase the role of women in promoting change, restoring peace, and preventing conflict at the regional level in Ukraine.

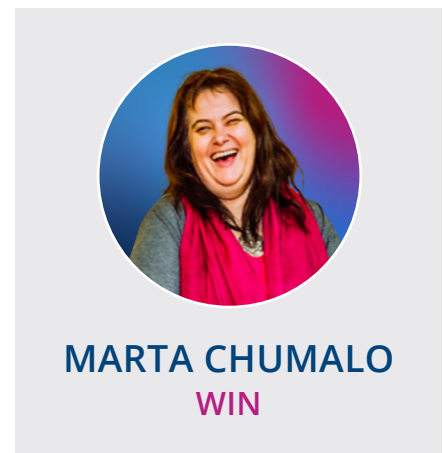
"As an expert, I was a member of the Luhansk Coalition. Later, I was invited to join the ICAN network supported by the [OSCE WIN project](#). When we had already felt we were on the brink of war, we decided, as part of the network activities, to contact communities and find out whether they had evacuation plans and how they were going to respond. In other words, as a women's movement, we were planning our activities for what was about to happen".

Yana believes that Ukraine's experience in implementation of the National Action Plan for the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security at the local level amidst the ongoing war will help other states to develop effective plans. She strongly believes that the women of Ukraine have to be involved in the global expert society. Along with her colleagues, Yana will continue the endeavour to relieve the burden of migration and internal displacement on women. The path has already been laid through involvement of women in peacebuilding and decision-making. "We are winning back our European Ukrainian-ness (Ukrainian identity – e.d.) where there's no place for discrimination," she summarises.

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## The invisible frontline: How the fight for women's rights changes in times of war

"I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept." These words by American civil rights activist and scholar Angela Davis resonate with the life philosophy of Marta Chumalo, one of the founders of the "Women's Perspectives" Centre in Lviv. Marta is a feminist, gender expert, psychologist and the first Ukrainian woman to receive Olof Palme Prize, the prestigious international annual Swedish award for outstanding achievements in protecting and promoting human rights. Since 2014, and specifically after war in Ukraine started on February 24, 2022, Marta Chumalo has been helping internally displaced persons (IDPs), defending the rights of women survivors of domestic violence, and calling the world's attention to horrific consequences of this war.



## White on white

Among the recipients of the Olof Palme Prize are notable figures such as the former president of the Czech Republic Václav Havel, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, and Russian prominent journalist and human rights activist, Anna Politkovskaya. This year, the prize was awarded to Turkish activist Eren Keskin, Iranian journalist Narges Mohammadi, and Ukrainian activist Marta Chumalo for their efforts to secure women's freedom when human rights are threatened by war, violence, and oppression.

"At first, I thought it was a joke. A stranger wrote to me that I had won the prize. I didn't think it was true until people I knew began sending congratulatory messages," recalls Marta.

For the ceremony, Marta chose to wear a white vyshyvanka, which is Ukrainian traditionally styled embroidered blouse, to demonstrate how women are invisible in their struggle for human rights.

"There is a Ukrainian book called 'White on White' which puts a spotlight on women's achievements throughout history. For me, this book is a symbol of the visibility of women's role in human rights activism, in modern times. In other words, one has to look closer to spot the white embroidered pattern on a white vyshyvanka. It is a powerful metaphor," says Marta.

"It is such a rare opportunity for us to reach out and meet colleagues from Syria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and other countries. These experiences from different war contexts should be recorded and reflected in international documents and new conventions that would help reduce the devastating impacts of war," she says.

"Such meetings lay the foundations for future productive cooperation between feminist rights activists. We invited a Bosnian activist Gorana Mlinarevic to our feminist retreat called "FemNe Intensive", just a month after we had met with her at the OSCE Gender Issues Programme event in Sarajevo. She arrived in Ukraine and told us about her experience, and why the Istanbul Convention did not work in Bosnia. We would like to learn from others' lessons," Marta says.

## **What does the Istanbul Convention change?**

Ukraine ratified the Istanbul Convention in June 2022. On 1 November, the Convention became part of Ukrainian legislation. According to Marta, had the Istanbul Convention been ratified sooner, special facilities for sexual violence survivors would have already been available in the country. She defined the current situation as a 'safari': "We have to search for survivors. They are compelled to flee abroad for more security than they have in Ukraine," the activist explains.

Marta also stresses that the Istanbul Convention changes the entire environment, making it more responsive to the needs of survivors. The state should periodically report to the Council of Europe about how well it is progressing towards the standards set in the Convention.

"The Convention creates very good opportunities for law enforcement agencies. The very logic of their training courses has to change. They should always be on the survivors' side and respect the survivors' rights above all other rights," she urges.

"Under the current circumstances, we cannot demand that our government pays full attention to the Convention, because we understand that the war is ongoing, and there are more urgent priorities," says Marta. "However, we have started the work to define the current state of women's rights, so that in the future we can measure the changes."

## **Woman for woman' platform**

"This war is like a lens, magnifying the best and the worst of human behaviour. On the first day, I saw some people breaking into evacuation trains, shoving others away with their elbows and preventing the weaker ones from boarding. But at the same time, at the same train station, I saw others distributing jars of food and hot beverages, and setting up reception points to offer their support to strangers," Marta recalls.

Previously, Marta's organization, the "Women's Perspectives" Centre, supported women survivors of domestic violence and organised March 8 rallies in Lviv. Since the war started, they immediately began assisting the most vulnerable women who had stayed in territories closed to the frontline and were unable to leave. The Centre sent them weekly shipments of 50 to 60 boxes of humanitarian aid, each containing 8-10 kg of basic goods.

“We have an active online platform called ‘Woman to Woman’. Any woman in crisis can contact the platform, and other women can offer her help directly. It is a form of solidarity: instead of fundraising, the Centre helps one person support another,” Marta explains.

The platform was launched during the COVID-19 pandemic. At that time, it would receive up to two requests per week. Today, there are hundreds.

From the very first days of the war, the “Women’s Perspectives” Centre opened shelters for internally displaced persons in Lviv.

“Shelters were urgently needed, especially in Lviv, as it became one of the cities with the largest concentration of IDPs,” says Marta. Today, there are seven shelters in the city, some of which specifically host mothers with many children, elderly women, and women with mental disorders.

“It’s hard to accommodate women with mental disorders because psychiatric institutions are overcrowded. We take them in our shelters and our psychiatrist provides care,” Marta explains.

The residents of the shelters actively work as volunteers, knitting camouflage nets, baking cookies, and making candles to be sent to the frontline. “We want them to regain power and control over their lives to the degree possible - to make decisions, get jobs, and get back on their feet,” Marta says.

## No rose-coloured future

Marta is fully aware of the serious challenges that Ukraine will be facing once the war is over. She is worried that women’s rights will be under attack: “There will be attempts to ban abortions because the nation will be ‘getting extinct’ as there might be attempts to stimulate birth rate”.

“There are risks that domestic violence will increase as men return from the war zone. We have to consider in advance how to cope with this - adjust the current programmes and develop new ones,” warns Marta Chumalo.

After 25 years of gender equality activism, Marta admits that the war and its consequences have become the hardest challenge she has ever faced.

“I am dreaming of us organizing the rallies in Ukraine again. I am dreaming of implementing the already ratified Istanbul Convention. I am dreaming of getting back to our peaceful lives without raid alerts in the middle of the night,” she says. However, the reality requires action and preparedness. It is possible to foresee the challenges ahead of the Ukrainian society, reminds Marta, and start shaping the response.

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## Young women speaking out for peace in Ukraine

At twenty-one, Anna Popsui, an activist and master's student at the Kyiv Institute for International Relations, combines her work and studies with leading a non-governmental organisation, the Young Peacebuilding Leaders (YPL) network. Despite the fear and uncertainty caused by war, Anna has found the strength and courage to make every effort to support young women in Ukraine.



**ANNA POPSUI**  
**WIN**

### Fleeing the war to join the “merezhinkas”

On February 24 2022, Anna woke up in Kyiv to a friend's call. “We hadn't been in touch for over six months, so I instantly thought something had happened. Why else would he be calling me at five in the morning,” she recalls. “He told me that the war had begun.”

Anna and her mother headed to a gas station, but instead of fuel, they encountered a mile-long queue with no gas to be had.

“We considered staying in Kyiv. That evening, a column of tanks was moving along the Chernihiv (a city in northern Ukraine – Ed.) roadway. That rumble still haunts me.”

Anna's family decided to leave Kyiv the next day despite the lack of fuel.

And, eventually, Anna found herself in a village in the Cherkasy region where she would spend the next several months. It was there that she came across a Facebook ad where the Young Peacebuilding Leaders (YPL) network (The network was established within the project “Strengthening the Capacities of Young Women from Target Communities of the Donetsk and Luhansk Regions to Advance the Women, Peace and Security Agenda at the Local Level” – auth.) was inviting new members to join.

“Around April, I became tired of sitting idly. I realised I needed to get rid of constant thoughts of the horrors of war. The post said, ‘if you support gender equality and share the feminist outlook, join us.’ I applied and hoped for the best.”

Two weeks later, she was invited to join a YPL chat and became one of the “merezhinkas” – as the project's members call themselves – a word that combines the Ukrainian terms “merezha”, a network, and “zhinka”, a woman.

“At that time, the network had existed for several years, sponsored by many international donors like UN Women, Internews Ukraine, and others. The project has become a true escape from a grim reality for me. I have found like-minded women there,” Anna says.

## Finding the strength to advance women's voices

Shortly after Anna joined the Young Peacebuilding Leaders' team, a decision was made to institutionalise the project by creating an NGO. Together with two other "merezhinkas", Anna accepted the proposal to lead it and promote matters of peacebuilding and the involvement of women in decision-making processes.

On its Facebook page, the network speaks about the concerns of young women affected by the war in Ukraine. Mental health is a big concern, and Anna, like many others, has her own ways of coping - her "rules of strength." She claims it is essential for her to manage her energy consciously and not to exhaust her "built-in battery".

"I believe it is critical to avoid forcing myself to do what I can't do immediately and take opportunities to rest, both emotionally and physically. You have to keep track of your well-being, not delay doctor's appointments, and just be yourself.

## A young NGO with an ambitious agenda

Today, the Young Peacebuilding Leaders network continues to actively promote the Women, Peace and Security Agenda among youth. Despite the war, they have already organized regular marathons, ZOOM-conferences, and international training programmes.

"I am particularly proud of three issues. First, our participation in the revision of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 National Action Plan, for the Luhansk region. Second, my colleagues and I addressed the UN Conference on Localisation of the 2250 Action Plan on Youth, Peace and Security. Finally, last October one of the YPL co-founders was selected for training on conflict mediation held by Clingendael Institute in the Hague. Why is it so crucial? Since we are a pretty young team in terms of participants' average age - to have your voice heard when discussing national plans and colleagues invited to one of the prominent educational centers in Europe is marvellous, especially considering this happens amidst the ongoing hostilities," Anna says.

At times, when meeting leaders of existing women's organizations in person, Anna hears the echo of her impostor syndrome. "When that happens, I may feel like I am not as skilful and knowledgeable as they are. Yet, at the same time, I see how these women support the young generation like myself so we can take over someday and become agents of change."

Anna wants to see the Young Peacebuilding Leaders network expand across Ukraine and become the voice of young women in the country. The organisation's next step is to create a psychological support group for young people. This service will include therapists and psychologists helping members address mental health issues, heal from a post-traumatic stress disorder and maintain long-distance relationships.

"We may not have much experience, yet young people's ideas are the breaths of fresh air. We want our voices to be heard," she concludes.



## On the frontline of working with internally displaced women in Ukraine

Our interview with Tetiana Baieva, Head of the Podillya Gender Council Centre, took place via Zoom the day after massive strikes against civilian infrastructure in Ukraine. After the first question the lights went out in Khmelnytskyi, a city in Western Ukraine. Tetiana immediately came up with a solution so we continued the conversation by phone. Tetiana is not new to overcoming obstacles. Despite the war, she works tirelessly both on supporting internally displaced persons (IDP), and implementing the national strategy related to United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security at the local level.



**TETIANA BAIIEVA**  
**WIN**

### Recognizing the needs of IDP women

Tetiana's organization, Podillya Gender Council Centre, was established in 2007 to support and ensure gender equality in the political, economic, social, and humanitarian spheres, and promote women leaders at all levels. However, with first the illegal annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Donbas, and then the war in Ukraine, it shifted its focus towards addressing the needs of IDPs.

In 2014, with the conflict in Donbas on her doorstep, Tetiana's team joined an International Organization for Migration project that has been distributing equipment worth 10 million UAH (~520 000 EUR) for self-employment and business development of IDPs in Ukraine. More than half of the beneficiaries were women.

On 24 February 2022, when the war in Ukraine started, Tetiana was in Kyiv at the UNSCR 1325 National Action Plan Conference. At the same time, in her hometown, Khmelnytskyi, civil society representatives gathered at the premises of her organization to form the volunteer group "Protection". On the outbreak of the war, this volunteer group would send 60 cars of humanitarian aid daily.

"When I returned from Kyiv, I promised myself that helping IDP women would be one of key objectives for our organization. My son's friend offered us his warehouse with an office area, and over there we began to actively help women with children," Tetiana recalls.

Aside from providing much needed humanitarian aid, Podillya Gender Council Centre is also helping women to adjust to the new circumstances and rebuild their lives by providing career guidance and trainings.

"The war is not going to be over soon and you need to raise and feed children," Tetiana says, noting that often difficulties finding a job are related to childcare. "Some women have three or four kids and no one to look after them. They told me that they were ready to work from home, so we came up with a two-hour training to develop a business plan. If the business plan was well-prepared, then the applicant received a certain amount of money to kick-start her business."

## Doing the work and what it takes

The weekend before our interview, Tetiana was handing out hygiene kits to those in need. She explained, “some women are already working. Weekends are more convenient for them to receive aid. So my usual week has no weekends. Today is a rare chance for me to stay at home.”

But long working hours cannot withstand any comparison with enormous challenges and risks that war brings.

“On 23 February, I concluded my speech at a conference in Kyiv wishing all of us to win. Later, I was asking myself why did I say that. At half past four in the morning next day, when I heard the first explosions, I stood near the window and could not believe all that was happening. I grabbed my stuff and rushed to the metro station, and I was shocked to see that people there were not panicking,” recalled Tetiana.

As the war continued, the circumstances have not eased. In early August, she was distributing humanitarian aid in their organization’s warehouse when a roll of fabric fell. A woman standing nearby dropped down terrified. “I was shocked, because she was so lost and confused. Then I found out she came from Kramatorsk, and she was at the train station when it was bombed. 70 people died there, including children,” Tetiana says.

Working in such circumstances has been extremely challenging, Tetiana admits. But the unprecedented scale of needs and risks leave no opportunity or time to rest.

## The vision for a revived Ukraine, with women front and centre

Today, Khmelnytskyi is one of Ukraine’s regions that welcomes the highest number of internally displaced people. “More than 2 million people passed through our region on their way to Europe. Around 50,000 are staying in Khmelnytskyi city alone. Most of them need support,” Tetiana says.

The other thing that inspires Tetiana and her colleagues is the bravery and resilience of women across Ukraine. Just recently, Tetiana participated in OSCE-organized event in Georgia, where she brought a military helmet painted by her colleague’s daughter Alina. Young artist used to paint beautiful artworks, but after war in Ukraine started, she turned helmets into canvas for her paintings. “I was so deeply moved and my voice was trembling when I handed this helmet to our OSCE colleagues. They were really grateful.”

After the war is over, Tetiana is committed to working with her colleagues to ensure women’s participation in every aspect of future in the reconstruction of Ukraine: “It’s not just about involving women in the processes. It is about state policy.” The groundwork for this has been laid by Tetiana, her team and fellow activists, who are helping Ukrainian women rebuild their lives every day.

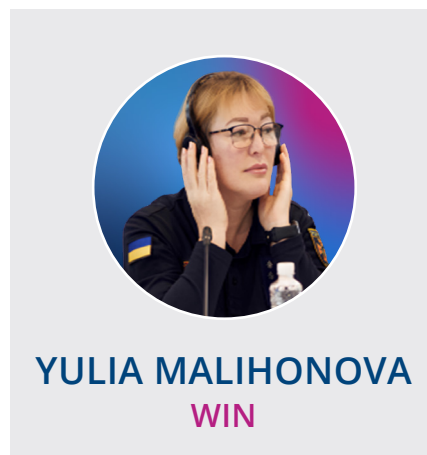
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## Women leaders fearlessly serving people in need in Ukraine

Women are often portrayed as passive observers and victims of conflicts around the world. But speaking to Yulia Malihonova, Head of the Gender Unit in the State Emergency Service of Ukraine (SESU) confirms that this view is one-sided. In fact, today in Ukraine women are taking action to keep their country resolute and resilient, side by side with men, in every field.

This is especially true in the SESU, which is the government agency responsible for protecting people during emergencies, remedying the impact of emergencies, and extinguishing fires. As such, SESU has been at the centre of Ukraine's response to the war.

When we interviewed Yulia Malihonova, the OSCE Secretariat's Gender Issues Programme was conducting a series of capacity-building activities for the SESU. The Gender Unit she leads is transforming the way women are perceived in Ukraine's security sector. Yulia explains how the tragic events of war in Ukraine shifted the way Ukrainian women think about themselves.



### Point of no return

"A lot has changed in the emergency service's approach. Previously, no one understood how it was related to gender equality and why gender equality was essential. Now Ukrainians, including our colleagues, are paying more attention to it; they try to read the regulations and understand how the SESU works and how we ensure equal rights and opportunities in our work," says Yulia.

It is generally assumed that the security sector is dominated by men. But women are now well-represented in the SESU system. Over the last five years, the number of women employees has increased by an average of one and a half per cent per year and these numbers continued to increase after 24 February 2022.

"Women work on an equal basis with men. They simply realized they could do it. And they stopped being afraid to prove themselves at work. In the past, women often thought that men can do it better. But not anymore," Yulia says.

How the SESU works has also changed. There is an overall understanding that women are capable leaders and can respond to critical situations like shelling and explosions. Yulia clarifies: "Not only do they lead on par with men, sometimes they do it even better."

### True heroes

Yulia sees women's leadership in action every day. "There are so many examples of extraordinary women leaders. There was a woman in Lviv who was operating evacuation trains. She started her service in early 2022 and she never imagined she would be able to work 24/7 for two months. She operated evacuation trains, helped and organised people into psychological support units, without a day off. But she managed."

Yulia also speaks about a woman who leads one of SESU's diving units. She took a pyrotechnic course and became a diver-pyrotechnician. She performs tasks that only a few people in the world can do. She also inspired many other women who are now following her example and studying pyrotechnics.

## Not leaving anyone behind

Much has also been done to promote a disability-inclusive approach in the work of SESU. The Gender Unit and Gender Focal Points internally raise the awareness of the employees and conduct extensive training courses on supporting people with disabilities. They also started cooperating with various international organizations and NGOs. For instance, during the training sessions, SESU employees are being taught how to properly use a wheelchair, provide assistance, and move people out of the house during gunfire in a way that does not cause harm.

Moreover, the rescuers are being taught the gestures of sign language. This knowledge is essential when evacuating people that have a hearing impairment in the event of a building being shelled or a fire. The ability to communicate can truly save lives.

SESU also created videos about personal security in various situations that are accessible to people with sensory impairments.

## Priceless support from partners

Some of these changes were introduced before February 2022, and the efforts to promote gender equality and inclusiveness go back to 2020–2021 when the State Emergency Service of Ukraine underwent a gender audit.

In 2023, the Secretariat's Gender Issues Programme through its WIN project, initiated new activities to build SESU employees' capacity on gender-sensitive and disability-inclusive humanitarian response, and women's leadership. "The opportunity to gather a large group of the SESU specialists in person is extremely precious especially these days when we are still going through the war," stresses Yulia.

"We are very grateful for the opportunity to bring SESU Gender Focal Points and a cohort of prominent women leaders from across Ukraine together in person to work on issues that some of them simply have not had the opportunity to work on even online because of their duty stations distant location or their massive workload," Yulia says.

Every kind of help from the partners is highly appreciated, as we can see that this is changing the reality of women leaders in Ukraine every day. "We have summarized one of the training sessions of the OSCE WIN project: Now women leaders in SESU are better equipped to lead smarter, not harder, and that is our goal," Yulia concludes.

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# Europe

Tina Kurath grew up in the tranquillity and prosperity of Switzerland. The mountainous centre of Europe is known for its staunch neutrality, political stability, and high socio-economic standards. Yet, it is also a country which had a long road to women's suffrage, comparatively speaking.

"My home is a peaceful place with high living standards, but it was relatively late in granting women the right to vote compared to many of its neighbours. Even today, in Switzerland women remain underrepresented in politics and leadership positions," says Tina. This awareness sparked her interest in advocating for gender equality and challenging systemic gender barriers.

The social dissonance of Switzerland's belated recognition of women's suffrage informed Tina's early worldview, instilling a nascent drive to challenge systemic inequalities.

She was also inspired by the testimonies of women such as Pakistani activist Malala Yousafzai and Yemeni journalist Tawakkol Karman. The inspiration and courage of these and other activists who dared to dream of a different future, as well as their resolve and status as global women peacebuilders, left their mark. She strongly believes that for a community or society to thrive truly, all voices must be represented and meaningfully included.

"The voices are usually there, but sometimes passing on the megaphone is needed. In this sense, I see my role as a facilitator, who ensures that everyone has the opportunity to build a more just and equitable society," Tina says.

This belief inspired her to take on leadership roles. Currently, she contributes to social development programmes with the UN in Somalia, where she witnesses daily the tangible impact of addressing gender disparities amid development and peacebuilding efforts.

"Having a solid support system to exchange experiences and insights with peers and like-minded people is crucial in a field where the personal is so closely interlinked with the work we are doing. For me, the OSCE WPLP is such an amazing programme because it combines technical skills with building a community, networking opportunities, and mentorship."

**TINA KURATH**  
Switzerland / WPLP



*For me, WPLP is such an amazing programme because it combines technical skills with building a community, networking opportunities and mentorship."*



## From Belgium to the World: Unveiling Global Gender Disparities

Maureen Walschot grew up in Belgium, an equally prosperous and developed country, one at the heart of political power in Europe. “Early exposure to feminist literature and the guidance of progressive high school teachers set off my interest in geopolitics and gender analysis. I was also able to travel and experience different cultures around the world from the age of 18 when I first left my home country to go and work in Australia for a few years. This experience really emphasised the interconnectedness of environmental and gender inequalities.”

During a university exchange in Mexico, Maureen encountered first-hand the stark realities of gender disparities, igniting a fervent passion for advocacy. “Moving to Guadalajara for my Erasmus exchange year during my bachelor’s degree was a transformative experience. It exposed me to the harsh realities of a more patriarchal society where women’s rights are often violated, compounded by widespread violence,” she says.

During a second university exchange in Chile, Maureen’s understanding of gender disparities was further deepened as she witnessed the repercussions of inadequate sexual education and the unequal distribution of working hours and household tasks, a manifestation of the systemic barriers hindering women’s economic empowerment. Nevertheless, amidst these challenges, she observed a growing wave of female political engagement and activism. “Despite the historical entrenchment of traditional gender roles and patriarchal culture, it was beyond powerful to witness women in both Mexico and Chile increasingly asserting their presence in political spheres and protest movements. This resilient spirit of defiance against inequalities nourished my understanding of the transformative potential of collective action and advocacy,” Maureen underscores.

Throughout her career and professional experiences in Europe, Latin America and the Middle East, Maureen honed her ability to drive an independent approach that acknowledges both the unique challenges and invaluable contributions of women in peace processes. “I tuned out unfounded criticism, stayed true to my principles, and built a strong support network. Along the way I’ve embraced challenges as opportunities for growth and refined my leadership style to prioritise authenticity and empathy.” She now hopes to leave a mark on the global landscape of gender advocacy and social change with her NGO The Tide, which she recently co-founded to build a community to stimulate creative, innovative solutions to environmental challenges, gender inequality, and global insecurities.

**MAUREEN  
WALSCHOT**  
Belgium / WPLP



*I tuned out unfounded criticism, stayed true to my principles, and built a strong support network. Along the way I've embraced challenges as opportunities for growth and refined my leadership style to prioritise authenticity and empathy.”*



## American Perspectives: Identity and Influence

Nina Ullom was raised under the guidance of a forward-thinking mother and carried with her the ideals of independence and empowerment while growing up in Chantilly, Virginia, a suburb of Washington D.C. Her childhood, shadowed by the terrorist attacks of 9/11 (the Pentagon was only a few miles from her school) and the subsequent geopolitical turmoil, gave her a heightened awareness of the global impact of local actions. “I started to understand that for better or worse, the U.S. and its decisions – good and bad – have an outsized impact on the world,” Nina said.

**NINA ULLOM**

**United States / WPLP**



*The most important thing young people, and especially young women, need to know is that they have power and are powerful. I'd encourage young women, in all their diversity, to take the time to understand and value themselves.*



There were also deep-rooted challenges that affected Nina's understanding of the unseen barriers women are facing. For example, the struggle to be taken seriously as a woman. “I have felt more adversity from being Black and female in the U.S. The challenges for me in 2024 are the subconscious thoughts colleagues and peers hold about me and Black women in general. Because of my identities, I know I need to be more patient, gracious, and pleasant than my white or male counterparts overall. I know I must present professionally and ensure my work is unimpeachable because any presentation of weakness can and will be used against me.”

Despite the everyday struggle to be taken seriously that Nina faced, her resolve strengthened. Having worked with the leading networks in the field of conflict prevention, peacebuilding, refugee rights, and gender equality, she highlights the power of authenticity and self-worth in her personal journey. “The most important thing young people, and especially young women need to know, is that they have power and are powerful. I'd encourage young women, in all their diversity, to take the time to understand and value themselves.”

In her current role as the Human Rights and Development Policy Advisor at the British Embassy in Washington, Nina strives to transform the discourses on the roles of women in peacebuilding so that existing barriers can be removed. This long-awaited change can only be achieved by bringing together a wide range of expertise, knowledge and experience.

It is often the earliest encounters with the world's harsh realities that can have the most profound impact.

"I was shocked to see images of children my age carrying guns as child soldiers in conflict zones. I felt inequality and, at the same time, helplessness," Hanna Hirose recounts, marking the moment a lifelong interest in peacebuilding processes seeded in her consciousness.

"I was born to a Japanese mother and a German father who travelled across the world and worked in international co-operation in the development field before they settled in the countryside of northern Japan. I grew up always being told by my parents that I am lucky."

"My interest in peace and security especially grew when I worked as a Political Affairs Analyst at the Embassy of Japan in Spain. Currently, I am covering the work of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) at the Permanent Mission of Japan. Unfortunately, women continue to be underrepresented in nuclear disarmament, particularly in multilateral forums. I am attempting to incorporate a gender perspective into my responsibilities and duties, as well as to demonstrate gender awareness and sensitivity, for instance by participating in expert-level consultations with other member states."

Hanna's background highlighted the contrast between her peaceful upbringing in Japan and Germany and the stark realities of conflict for millions of people across the world. Her parents fostered a sense of responsibility towards those less fortunate.

"The fact that I am not from a region that is in conflict and has never lived through a war or conflict has always given me a sense of drawback. However, when I was admitted into the Women's Peace Leadership Programme (WPLP), I felt as if I had finally been "given permission" to pursue a career in the field of peace and security," Hanna says.

"The Programme helped me to sort through my thoughts and identify my core values. Meeting people through networks and mentorship who can connect to what you have been going through for a long time, or meeting someone who has already overcome similar challenges, broadens your horizons and introduces fresh perspectives and ideas. That is exactly what I experienced through this Programme," she emphasizes.

**HANNA HIROSE**  
**Germany/Japan / WPLP**



*The programme helped me to sort through my thoughts and identify my core values. Meeting people through networks and mentorship who can connect to what you have been going through for a long time, or meeting someone who has already overcome similar challenges, broadens your horizons and introduces fresh perspectives and ideas."*



An experienced conflict mediator, Caroline defines her works as building connections between political and diplomatic efforts and the realities on the ground. Currently with Amnesty International, Caroline has worked in many sectors and contexts, but was always strongly focused on fostering inclusive and sustainable peace.

## Peace as a process

The last time I travelled to Lebanon, I was working with Syrian partners on building a 'Citizen's Charter' - an inclusive vision for a peaceful and just Syria grounded in the experiences and hopes of young Syrians. It was rather a large and complex process. My role was to provide support with the strategy, advocacy, communication, and connection to other negotiation processes. I also worked on research into inclusive peace processes, linking theory to practice, and doing it in a participatory way.

**CAROLINE BROOKS**  
UK / WPLP



*Being part of WPLP is not just an opportunity for skills development, but also for relationship building and growth through community."*

I derive a great sense of satisfaction from small wins, because I recognize that they add up to bigger achievements. Even if it's just a really positive meeting, a fruitful conversation, a decision that moves us in the right direction, or a change we make based on a lesson learned or a research finding - those small wins are very encouraging.

## Learning by doing

I realized quite early on that peacebuilding, mediation, and conflict transformation was the path I wanted to take. Even though it's extremely hard and sometimes chaotic, I believe if you are doing something you love, it feels right.

Becoming a conflict mediator and a peacebuilder was not a very straightforward path. I did my Master's in Middle Eastern studies in London, and many people were telling me to get a job in the city, which would have been a logical next step. But I thought, there is no way that I can just study a place from the outside. In order to really understand a situation and context, you have to live there and engage with it, so I moved to Jordan and started working on the humanitarian response to the war in Iraq.

Then I pursued a job in risk consulting and worked in Iraq and Afghanistan. That gave me completely different skills and perspectives. After about five years I decided to move into an area where I could be more directly connected to peacebuilding and conflict transformation. International Alert - a global peacebuilding charity - was looking for someone who could manage a very complex project in a high-risk environment, so I joined them to work as the Syria programme manager, then later as the Ukraine programme manager.

## Solutions developed by community

I spent 7 years working with Syrian civil society, peacebuilding activists, diplomats, political negotiators and other NGOs, donors, and communities directly affected by violent conflicts. I also worked a lot with children affected by the conflict in Syria, including with refugees in Lebanon and Turkey. Most of this work happens through in-person connection. I find joy and inspiration in working on issues together, and finding solutions together.

A lot of my experience was gained through learning by doing, and I am a little embarrassed to say that I didn't really have peacebuilding training before I joined Alert. My training was really 'on the job' and by following the example set by Syrian and Ukrainian peacebuilding activists.

## Building everlasting connections

Within the WPLP I have learned so much from my fellow participants. I had a limited understanding of some of the contexts that the other women in the WPLP come from, and they have taught me a lot about what works for them, what doesn't, what are the gaps, and what are their struggles. Beyond that, they are sources of inspiration, solidarity and resilience – a real sisterhood.

Being part of WPLP is not just an opportunity for skills development, but also for relationship building and growth through community. What is unique about this programme is not only its duration, which allows us to develop and sustain these incredible connections over time, but the truly supportive environment that we created together – something which is fundamental to being the leaders we want to be.

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With a focus on the Middle East and North Africa, Kelly has been committed to stepping up European action around key foreign policy issues such as protecting refugees, humanitarian and human rights issues. In her work, Kelly has researched and published work on the situation of Ukrainian, Syrian, and Palestinian refugees and their rights in various countries. Kelly continues to advocate for a coherent European approach to Syrian refugees through her work at the European

Council on Foreign Relations, calling for European support to refugees in host countries that is more adapted to the local contexts and led by civil society, including refugee-led organizations.

### KELLY PETILLO (Italy) WPLP



*The Women's Peace Leadership Programme (WPLP) really spoke to me - largely due to its focus on networking. But even coming here was very uncomfortable. I thought, what if I am not good enough? Now I see that imposter syndrome affects us all."*



## Never have I ever

I have been reflecting on my decision to move towards researching and advocating for refugee rights while being part of a think tank that works more on geopolitics and so-called 'hard security' topics, such as defense. I had to come up with my own strategy, my own messages, and my own network and tap into a slightly different set of stakeholders than the ones we traditionally work with.

I have seen it done so many times, but I found it really hard to find the right people and build alliances across the political spectrum to reflect on existing nuances. The Women's Peace Leadership Programme (WPLP) really spoke to me - largely due to its focus on networking. But even coming here was very uncomfortable. I thought, what if I am not good enough? Now I see that imposter syndrome affects us all.

One of the projects we run at the think tank brings together women activists and peacebuilders from Yemen and Iraq. For that, I had to find participant candidates, interview them and make decisions on whom to enlist. Doing something you have never done before is hard, but then I look back and I see how I went through with it and it worked. This is the most rewarding feeling.

## In a position to learn

The fact that I am not coming from the geographic area I work on sometimes still makes me feel like I can offer less than others. I truly believe in working at the grassroots level, but I also believe the value of my work is at a policy level – in Brussels, European capitals and beyond.

I'm learning so much from the others in the programme, even simply by talking to my fellow participants. Observing how others within the group approach similar issues made me realize that in my day-to-day work, I would sometimes push for something that is actually not important at all for my overall career or wellbeing. Being able to compare experiences with these wonderful women peacebuilders has been really grounding

## Values that matter

For me, making sure that the way I do my work and that my work in and of itself speaks to a higher purpose and doesn't get compromised along the way is really important.

I also believe that empathy is a critical component of advocacy work. Part of that means trying to get into the minds of those you seek to influence and understand how they operate. But it's also about empathy towards those affected by the policies we work on, like someone who may be affected by conflict. And then, finally, also being empathetic in my workplace and at home: trying to find out what can I do to better understand those around me.

To me leadership is finding strength in other people and in myself and leveraging that strength. I imagine that some men in my field may approach working on these issues very differently than me, perhaps with more confidence – assuming they already know much more than I do. In my work, I always got the feeling that men are more self-assured and this may result in them having better access to these spaces. They would come to the table thinking 'I got this, I'm doing this'. They wouldn't put much effort and time towards self-reflection. I don't know whether this conversation would be happening if I was a man.





*The third edition of the Women's Peace Leadership Programme (WPLP) is taking place at the time of this booklet's publication. More stories from its inspiring participants will be shared soon. Stay tuned and follow the OSCE Gender Issues Programme website and social media channels for updates.*

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