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**Letter dated 3 October 2025 from the Permanent Representative
of Spain to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General**

I have the honour to transmit herewith the Chair's summary of the annual retreat on international humanitarian law, on the women and peace and security agenda (see annex), which was organized by the Permanent Mission of Spain to the United Nations at the Greentree Foundation on 1 and 2 April 2025.

I should be grateful if the present letter and its annex could be circulated as a document of the General Assembly, under agenda item 26, and of the Security Council.

(Signed) **Héctor Gómez Hernández**
Ambassador

Permanent Representative of Spain to the United Nations



Annex to the letter dated 3 October 2025 from the Permanent Representative of Spain to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

Chair's summary of the annual retreat on international humanitarian law, on the women and peace and security agenda (1 and 2 April 2025)

On 1 and 2 April 2025, the Permanent Mission of Spain to the United Nations in New York, in cooperation with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), held the annual retreat on international humanitarian law for members of the Security Council at the Greentree Foundation. A total of 23 delegations participated in the retreat, including 12 States members of the Council.

The retreat was centred around the women and peace and security agenda in the context of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the agenda and the thirtieth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, offering a timely platform to explore the interlinkages between international humanitarian law and the women and peace and security agenda to enhance the protection of women and girls during armed conflict, ensure their participation in peace processes and address gender-based violence. The retreat also addressed challenges in the implementation of the existing international framework. Field practitioners, humanitarian experts, academics and representatives of Member States, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, ICRC and civil society organizations participated in the retreat.

The retreat was conducted under the Chatham House Rule and organized across three sessions. The first session concerned interlinkages between the women and peace and security agenda and international humanitarian law, specifically focusing on Security Council resolutions and the legal framework for protecting women from gender-based violence and discrimination in conflict. The second session focused on mechanisms for preventing and responding to sexual and gender-based violence in armed conflict, and how the women and peace and security agenda and international humanitarian law address such issues. Finally, the third session examined the practical implications of international humanitarian law and the women and peace and security agenda for military operations in armed conflict, including means by which armed forces can integrate gender-sensitive approaches to conflict situations.

A rich complement of ideas and perspectives were brought together across all three sessions. While by no means exhaustive, the following list contains key points raised during the discussions.

1. From the outset of the discussions, it was clear that the interaction of international humanitarian law and the women and peace and security agenda is multifaceted, beginning with the ways in which gender inequality influences much civilian harm in today's conflicts. For example, gender inequality is typically more pronounced in conflict-affected States. Women and girls are at far higher risk of experiencing conflict-related sexual violence, and while men are more likely to die in combat, women and children die at higher rates from the indirect effects of conflict, such as food insecurity. Gender-based discrimination may also affect the treatment of detainees or equal access to healthcare. It was noted that the objective of international humanitarian law to protect humanity from the worst excesses of war can only be realized when parties fully account for how gender inequality shapes the diverse experiences of civilians in the planning and conduct of military operations.

2. Conversely, several panellists noted evidence that lower levels of gender inequality are correlated with reduced likelihood of armed conflict and increased quality of a State's relationships with neighbouring States. It was also emphasized that the meaningful participation of women in peace processes has been shown to increase the durability of the resulting peace.

3. It was agreed that international humanitarian law is more closely embedded within the women and peace and security agenda than often recognized, with participants noting that its 10 thematic resolutions call on States to respect and implement international humanitarian law that protects women and girls, to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence, and to prosecute war crimes. Thus, the agenda invokes rich – yet poorly implemented – obligations under international humanitarian law regarding women and girls, namely non-discrimination, obligations regarding the reduction of civilian harm in the conduct of hostilities, specific rules on the treatment of women and girls, and the categorical prohibition of sexual violence. At the national level, international humanitarian law currently features in approximately 43 of 93 women and peace and security national action plans surveyed by ICRC; only 29 of those national action plans contain clear commitments related to international humanitarian law. It was suggested that States consider whether international humanitarian law could be better reflected in their national action plans, in consultation with civil society, in particular women's organizations, in accordance with Security Council resolution [2242 \(2015\)](#). It was recalled that such plans are most effective when linked to a living strategy with allocated budget and responsibilities regarding implementation.

4. A clear point of convergence within the discussion was that the richness of the existing legal framework means that focus should be placed on concrete measures to ensure the implementation of existing laws, rather than on new instruments or products. Given that the current geopolitical environment is un conducive to the normative expansion of the women and peace and security agenda, it was agreed that in multilateral forums, the focus should be on “holding the line” for women and peace and security and international humanitarian law, including in Security Council outputs. It was suggested that advocates of the women and peace and security and international humanitarian law nexus should look beyond the multilateral forums in which women and peace and security is traditionally discussed to alternate networks and means of connecting key stakeholders, especially those with influence over the planning and conduct of military operations. Participants agreed that women's participation, both in United Nations forums and in national conflict-related decision-making, was pivotal. Concern was expressed regarding decreases in funding for women and peace and security-related activities and concurrent increases in funding for military budgets, with UN-Women calling for States to pledge at least 0.07 per cent of defence spending on women and peace and security.

5. Throughout the discussion, it was emphasized that while there is no single solution to ensure the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence in armed conflict, respect for international humanitarian law remains the backbone for prevention, alongside the tackling of root causes of social norms that discriminate against women and girls or create a culture of impunity around sexual violence. Ensuring respect depends on the implementation of a results-oriented and contextualized framework, triggering positive behavioural change among weapons-bearers. This includes training that ensures that political and military leaders are committed to prevention and communicate this clearly throughout the chain of command. The prevention of sexual violence must be integrated into all military curricula, and instructors furnished with the necessary knowledge, skills and resources to ensure the implementation of relevant doctrine. It was noted that significant gaps persist in this regard, with 65 per cent of military commanders

surveyed by ICRC reporting never having received any training on the prevention of sexual violence. Moreover, it is crucial that States integrate international humanitarian law into their legal frameworks, criminalizing sexual violence in non-international armed conflicts as well as international armed conflicts, and ensuring a safe, confidential process for survivors to report their experiences of sexual violence. Domestic laws should also feature broad, non-exhaustive definitions of sexual violence and ensure the protection of survivors.

6. During discussions on the reasons for the underreporting of sexual violence, a common thread was the importance of working on the internal culture of armed forces regarding conflict-related sexual violence and shifting the stigma associated with sexual violence from the survivor to the perpetrator. Several panellists spoke of the link between internal and external conduct, noting that where sexual harassment is tolerated internally within armed forces, these same forces are more likely to commit sexual and gender-based violence against the civilian population. Ensuring that individual weapons-bearers are penalized for lower-level transgressions sends a clear message that the behaviour is unacceptable and can thus reduce the incidence of sexual and gender-based violence more broadly. Addressing stigma against victims and survivors among communities more broadly also increases reporting of violations, while drawing from contextually relevant customs and traditions to emphasize prohibitions against civilian harm can increase the effectiveness of relevant messaging to weapons-bearers.

7. Survivors' access to justice was widely recognized to be highly contingent on their access to services. While safe, accessible and survivor-centred services can constitute pathways to reporting of sexual and gender-based violence and conflict-related sexual violence, inability to access services or harmful experiences at service delivery points will deny or constrain survivors' reporting of their experiences and subsequent access to justice. The critical importance of funding for such services was emphasized, and the need to ensure access to sexual and reproductive health services was also noted. The annual report of the Secretary-General on conflict-related sexual violence was referenced as particularly important in this regard, as it not only provides a global overview of trends and emblematic cases, but also amplifies survivors' voices, highlights gaps in service provision and underscores the correlation between lack of services, low levels of reporting and impunity.

8. Participants recalled the history of the prosecution of rape and other forms of sexual violence as war crimes for the purpose of highlighting lessons learned and underlining continued challenges to combating impunity for this category of crime. To better respond to sexual and gender-based violence in conflict zones, it was stated that the international community should continue to invest in international investigation and prosecution mechanisms, while fostering sexual and gender-based violence expertise through the deployment of personnel to international and national courts with expertise in gender-sensitive investigation and prosecution, and ongoing training for both senior and junior international investigation and prosecution personnel already in position. Investment in sexual and gender-based violence investigation and prosecution expertise has resulted in convictions at the international level as well as in national courts in recent years. Relatedly, it was noted that much more can be done to unlock avenues for universal jurisdiction, and the need to embed the prevention of sexual violence upstream – in ceasefire and peace negotiations and in transitional justice mechanisms expressly – was repeatedly emphasized.

9. The integration of gender analysis into the planning and conduct of military operations was agreed to be both vital to the prevention of gender-based civilian harm during conflicts and to the promotion of the women and peace and security agenda more broadly. The role of well-trained legal advisers and gender advisers in positions

of influence within armed forces was said to be useful in this regard. It was observed that being a woman is not to be confused with having the skill set to be a gender adviser. As noted by another panellist, the most effective gender advisers tend to be laterally recruited from within armed forces. The skill set and experiences of such personnel should be sufficient to bolster their credibility among military peers. The retention of qualified personnel should be encouraged through opportunities for career advancement.

10. There was a nuanced discussion about the function and importance of women's representation in militaries. Panellists stressed that any presumptions about simply adding women to military institutions in order to improve the protection of civilians or compliance with international humanitarian law must be avoided. It was broadly agreed that civilian-military coordination with women's groups and representatives, including by involving partners from civil society, is helpful to ensure that armed forces can take practical, contextualized measures to uphold international humanitarian law and protect civilians in the planning and conduct of military operations. Some panellists emphasized that the participation of women in militaries, and the example of mixed-engagement teams, can contribute to better operational efficiency through the broadening of information analysis, perspectives and, potentially, access to civilian populations. Others cautioned that numerous barriers remain in place for women's meaningful participation in militaries, and that the training and expertise of women personnel will determine what they will be able to contribute. Overall, it was emphasized that the role of women should not be instrumentalized and that the precise roles of women within armed forces may vary depending on national contexts. The initiatives that have promoted women's involvement in peace operations should be examined carefully for lessons learned.

11. It was agreed that both in regard to upholding the obligations of international humanitarian law and to the women and peace and security agenda more broadly, commanders should lead the way in ensuring gender responsive analysis and reconnaissance in the planning of military operations, as well as the incorporation of related obligations into all operations. This should be an overarching effort for militaries to integrate into all doctrines beginning in peacetime, and should be clearly articulated as part of mandates or missions by the political leadership.
