



Briefing

Women, peace and security and US foreign policy

Introduction

The women, peace and security (WPS) agenda aims to ensure that women can meaningfully participate and lead in local, national and global policy discussions around peace and security issues – from preventing conflict and making peace to post-conflict recovery – and that women’s issues are actively considered by decision-makers. The WPS agenda and its goals have been part of US foreign policy since its adoption in 2000. However, it faces increased attacks under the Trump Administration, aimed at defunding and marginalizing it. As a result, its future role in US foreign policy remains uncertain.

What is the women, peace and security agenda?

Since the end of the Cold War, US foreign policy has gradually shifted from a focus on national security to an approach that prioritizes human security. This has reframed security provision from an emphasis on protecting the state to ensuring an individual’s ability to live in dignity, free from fear and want. Women’s inclusion and equality is inherent to this approach, but in practice is rarely achieved.

The WPS agenda, which was codified in UN Security Council Resolution 1325, recognizes that women’s inclusion is not only vital to the success of peace processes but that gender equality is essential for just and sustainable peace. The WPS agenda continued to evolve, with seven further UN Security Council resolutions providing further recommendations on issues such as: sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) as a weapon of war; increasing funding for WPS; responding to the needs of women in conflict and post-conflict settings; and gender equality as a cross-cutting issue in disarmament, countering violent extremism (CVE), and counterterrorism (CT). Nevertheless, four ‘pillars’ have remained at its core: participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery.

Since its inception, the WPS agenda has evolved to encompass a broader view of gender. This broader agenda is often referred to as the gender, peace and security agenda. It now seeks to include and understand a more diverse and holistic picture of how conflict affects women, men and gender minorities – and how women, men and gender minorities can affect conflict dynamics. Gender is a system of power which determines opportunities, rights and access to resources for women, men and gender minorities. Gender norms, or the societal expectations of how each gender should behave, are unique to each society and can change as society changes. Across its four pillars, the WPS agenda aims to challenge and transform gender norms that perpetuate violence and conflict – a necessity for sustainable peace.

How it makes a difference

The core pillar of ‘participation’ within the WPS agenda advocates for women’s full inclusion in peacemaking, peacebuilding and governance. Women’s meaningful participation can make or break peace processes.

However, traditional negotiation approaches that focus on cease-fires and the division of power in post-conflict contexts often exclude women's unique concerns and needs. A study of 40 recent peace processes found that in all cases but one, the processes that had meaningful participation of women also resulted in peace agreements.ⁱ Further research has shown that women's meaningful participation as negotiators, mediators, witnesses, and signatories means that the agreements will be 20 per cent more likely to last for two years and 35 per cent more likely to last for 15 years.ⁱⁱ However, women have continually been left out despite the evidence. Between 1992 and 2011, women made up only four per cent of signatories to peace agreements and less than 10 per cent of negotiators, despite the adoption of resolution 1325 in 2000.

Women's participation is also key to building sustainable peace, with numerous empirical studies clearly showing the positive effects it can have. For example, a study of 58 conflict-affected states between 1980 and 2003 found that "when 35 per cent of the legislature is female, [...] the risk of relapse [into civil war] is near zero." On the other hand, the risk of relapse increases over time without women's political participation.ⁱⁱⁱ The evidence finds that women's political participation is also crucial. For every five per cent increase of women in parliament, a state is five times less likely to use violence when faced with an international crisis.^{iv} Additionally, as the percentage of women in parliament increases, the probability of the state committing human rights abuses reduces. This trend is especially stark in 'semi-democracies' that blend authoritarian and democratic institutions.^v

Additionally, while women's political participation increases the sustainability and durability of peace agreements, the reverse—gender-based discrimination—has been shown to increase the likelihood of violence. A 2015 study found that of the countries graded as having "very high" levels of discrimination on OECD's Social Institutions and Gender Index, 82 per cent experienced conflict in the last two decades.^{vi} These countries include Syria and Yemen which are currently mired in devastating civil wars.

Women's meaningful participation in decision making, whether within political institutions or as part of peace negotiations, ensures more sustainable peace by challenging the gender norms that perpetuate conflict. Gender norms that perpetuate patriarchal notions of masculinity have been shown to fuel and sustain violence and conflict.^{vii} Violent notions of masculinity, for example, can be used by leaders as a tool to recruit and train combatants and build support for war. These patriarchal notions of masculinity pressure men and boys into proving their worth and their courage, encouraging aggressive and competitive behaviors, and repressing emotions and sensitivities.^{viii} Similarly, feminine gender norms cast women as weak and defenseless, furthering pressure on men to be strong and aggressive and to serve as protectors. Women's participation challenges these harmful patriarchal interpretations of masculinity and femininity and reduces a society's tendency towards violence and conflict. Recent research has found that higher levels of gender equality in a country mean lower chances of intrastate armed conflict.^{ix}

The women, peace and security agenda is fundamental to US foreign policy interests

Since 2000, one in every two people worldwide has been affected by political violence.^x Domestic instability increasingly drives violence,^{xi} and unstable regions are further strained by increasing numbers of refugees and IDPs displaced by violence. Worse still, instability creates cycles of violence and fragility that dampen democracy and threaten human rights, and in turn provide fertile ground for the growth of violent movements and the weakening of economic, development and governance gains. Ninety per cent of civil wars between 2000 and 2010 took place in countries that had already suffered through a civil war within the previous 30 years.^{xii}

American foreign policy traditionally aimed "to shape and sustain a peaceful, prosperous, just, and democratic world and foster conditions for stability and progress for the benefit of the American people and people everywhere."^{xiii} To achieve these aims, every effort must be made to reverse the trend of growing political violence. The WPS agenda is critical to achieving sustainable peace and breaking the vicious cycle of violence.

Each new administration has a responsibility to define American international assistance and engagement. Since the Cold War, gender equality, support for peace and the promotion of democracy have all been central to American foreign policy – even if each had their own approach. Resolution 1325 provided an integrated framework for connecting these core aims and increasing effectiveness.

The women, peace and security agenda is under threat

The US foreign policy apparatus has steadily improved in its commitment to women's participation: women now make up 53 per cent of USAID civil servants^{xiv}, 31 per cent of senior Foreign Service officers at the State Department^{xv}, and the percentage of women on active duty has tripled since the mid-seventies to just over 15 per cent^{xvi}. In 2011, Executive Order 13595 put in place the first US National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, (NAP) focusing the whole US foreign policy architecture on the goals of WPS. The Women, Peace and Security Act, which would codify US commitment to the WPS agenda, has been introduced annually to the US Congress since 2012 with bipartisan support. In 2017, the Women, Peace and Security Act successfully passed both chambers of Congress, indicating growing bipartisan political support, and is expected to become law during the 115th Congress. The current American political climate and dysfunction within the government, however, threatens this progress.

The nascent Trump Administration has attempted to cancel programs that encourage recruitment of women and minorities into the State Department and USAID,^{xvii} and have pushed back on formal foreign policy mechanisms that support the WPS agenda. The administration has also proposed reorganizing the State Department and USAID and reducing their budgets by 28 per cent to a combined \$25.6 billion.^{xviii} The reorganization effort, which began in March 2017 and with the final plan not yet released, has included a failed attempt to eliminate special envoys within the State Department. In August 2017, Secretary Tillerson advised the Senate of his intention to eliminate half of the special envoys.^{xix}

One of these was the Special Envoy on Global Women's Issues (GWI) and their associated office, which for the last two decades have been crucial in creating and implementing a cohesive interagency WPS strategy.^{xx} The current administration's efforts to remove this special envoy and associated office would directly affect the US government's ability to achieve its foreign policy objectives to implement the WPS agenda. Senator Shaheen (D-NH) introduced an amendment to the State Department Reauthorization Bill for the 2018 fiscal year to preserve the Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues, which was successfully passed into law. However, Secretary Tillerson has since proposed the demotion of the position from the Office of the Secretary of State, where it currently reports directly to the Secretary of State, to the Bureau of Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights, where it would report to the Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights.^{xxi} The ongoing efforts to restructure the State Department and USAID could result in gender advisors in offices and bureaus being eliminated to reduce staff levels, WPS training for staff getting reduced and relevant grants and programs being eliminated due to budget constraints.

One of the few areas that the current administration sees a strong role for women's participation is in countering violent extremism. Unfortunately, the approach the administration has adopted removes much of women's agency and their voices. It does not treat women as partners or leaders but as tools to be used as part of their military strategy. This is directly opposed to the WPS agenda.^{xxii} Women are already working to build peace in their communities, advance gender equality and prevent and counter violent extremism – however, women are being instrumentalized as informants and counter narrative messengers who can use their access to family and cultural networks to support US national security objectives. The WPS agenda calls for a more effective approach where women meaningfully participate in setting the CVE agenda and are able to challenge discriminatory gender norms and the use of violence by all actors. Civil society must continue advocating for women's inclusion and monitoring progress so that these efforts don't become side-tracked or co-opted by the CVE agenda or any other.

Ensuring the WPS agenda's future

In order to address current threats and ensure a strong, stable future for the WPS Agenda in US foreign policy architecture, the US government should:

- recommit to the US National Action Plan on Women Peace and Security and prioritize civil society consultation in future revisions
- pass and fully implement the Women Peace and Security Act to ensure the WPS agenda is integrated into US foreign policy
- mandate gender parity and representation in all relevant US foreign policy agencies in order to ensure women's meaningful participation and leadership^{xxiii}

- ensure gender parity and meaningful representation from all parties in negotiations and peace processes in which the US is involved
- pressure global partners to remove barriers to women’s meaningful participation in political life – including restrictions on citizenship, voting, candidacy and government civil service positions – and ensure their safe and meaningful participation
- provide technical support and apply pressure to encourage more openness and the safe inclusion of women in the security sector in countries to which the US provides security assistance
- increase funding to WPS efforts, including achieving the WPS-recommended threshold that 15 per cent of all peace and security assistance should be allocated to support gender equality and women’s participation^{xxiv}
- continue to expand education on the WPS agenda across the departments of state, defense and USAID, as well as the departments of the treasury, justice and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) to ensure staff are able to integrate its core tenets into their work
- fund and support the Office of Global Women’s Issues to help further their mandate of “advancing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls through US foreign policy.”^{xxv} Efforts should also be made to maintain the Office of Global Women’s Issues’ current placement under the Office of the Secretary of State
- ensure that the US National Security Strategy does not co-opt or instrumentalize women and women’s organizations in pursuit of US national interests and that women maintain full agency

About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. With programmes in nearly 20 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and Europe, we work with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. We believe that everyone should be able to lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from insecurity and violent conflict.

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- ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*
- ⁱⁱⁱ Demeritt J, Nichols A (2014), 'Female participation and civil war relapse', *Civil Wars* **16** (3), p 362.
- ^{iv} Caprioli M, Boyer M (2001), 'Gender, violence, and international crisis', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* **45**, p 514.
- ^v Melander E (2005), 'Political gender equality and state human rights abuse', *Journal of Peace Research* **42** (2): pp 149-166.
- ^{vi} The Clinton Foundation (2015), 'No ceilings: The full participation report' (<https://www.clintonfoundation.org/our-work/no-ceilings-full-participation-project>)
- ^{vii} Wright H (2014), 'Masculinities, conflict and peacebuilding: perspectives on men through a gender lens' (<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/862-masculinities-conflict-and-peacebuilding-perspectives-on-men-through-a-gender-lens>)
- ^{viii} *Ibid.*
- ^{ix} Ekvall Å, 'Gender equality, attitudes to gender equality, and conflict', in Marcia Texler Segal, Vasilikie Demos (ed.) *Gendered Perspectives on Conflict and Violence: Part A (Advances in Gender Research, Volume 18A)* Emerald Group Publishing Limited, pp 273-295.
- ^x OECD (2016), 'States of fragility 2016: Understanding violence' (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264267213-en>)
- ^{xi} Weak institutions, systemic economic and political discrimination, powerful criminal networks and weak rule of law characterize domestic instability. *Ibid.*
- ^{xii} 'Women, peace and security', conference call, *Council on Foreign Relations*, 29 September 2017 (<https://www.cfr.org/conference-calls/women-peace-and-security>)
- ^{xiii} US Department of State, 'Mission Statement' (<https://www.state.gov/s/d/rm/index.htm#mission>)
- ^{xiv} US Agency for International Development, (2017) '2016 Fiscal Year USAID U.S. Direct Hire Demographic Statistics' (https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1874/2016_Fiscal_Year_USAID_U.S._Direct_Hire_Demographic_Statistics.pdf)
- ^{xv} US Department of State (2017) 'Department of State -- Full-time Permanent Workforce as of 6/30/2017' (<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/254216.pdf>)
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- ^{xvii} Gardiner H (2017), 'State dept. restores job offers to students after diplomat outcry', *The New York Times*, 30 June (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/30/us/politics/state-department-students-foreign-service.html>)
- ^{xviii} Arshad M (2017) 'Trump plans 28 percent cut in budget for diplomacy, foreign aid', *Reuters*, 16 March (<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-budget-state-idUSKBN16N0DQ>)
- ^{xix} Letter from Secretary Rex Tillerson to Senator Bob Corker, August 2017 (<http://www.politico.com/f/?id=0000015e-2b43-db52-a75e-ff7b3bfa0001>)
- ^{xx} GWI's broad mandate has meant that it has: provided internal training and guidance to USAID and State Department staff and contractors on WPS issues; funded programs like the Global Women, Peace, and Security Initiative which gave \$16 million in small grants to efforts that advance women's leadership in peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and decision-making across 30 conflict-affected countries; and supported the inclusion of women in peace processes by mentoring and training them in negotiation and advocacy skills and pressuring parties to include them.
- ^{xxi} Letter from Secretary Rex Tillerson to Senator Bob Corker, August 2017 (<http://www.politico.com/f/?id=0000015e-2b43-db52-a75e-ff7b3bfa0001>)
- ^{xxii} Möller-Loswick A (2017), 'The countering violent extremism agenda risks undermining women who need greater support', Saferworld, April 26 (<https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/news-and-analysis/post/221-the-countering-violent-extremism-agenda-risks-undermining-women-who-need-greater-support>)
- ^{xxiii} Recent studies have found that the positive impact of women's participation does not manifest until they break the 30 per cent threshold. Noland M, Moran T, Kotschwar B (2016), 'Is gender diversity profitable? Evidence from a global survey', Peterson Institute for International Economics, February (<https://piee.com/publications/wp/wp16-3.pdf>)
- ^{xxiv} Peace Women, 'Member states and WPS financing' (<http://peacewomen.org/node/95584/>)
- ^{xxv} US Department of State, 'Priorities' (<https://www.state.gov/s/qwi/priorities/index.htm>)