



Understanding U.S. Obligations to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence Under the U.S. National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security

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Governments — including the United States — increasingly recognize that war and conflict are too often borne on the bodies of women and girls. This is an egregious violation of their human rights, as well as of international law and various normative frameworks on peace, security and development.

During and following conflict, women and girls face numerous forms of violence, including trafficking, child, early and forced marriage, sexual assault and coercion, and increased rates of intimate partner violence (IPV) within the home. However, donors too often focus exclusively on sexual violence, often to the exclusion of other forms of violence that also increase during and following conflict and necessitate immediate and comprehensive response.

This brief overviews the various forms of violence associated with conflict and crisis; analyzes relevant U.S. policy and programs that could or should address such violence; and makes recommendations for actions the United States can take to ensure its investments comprehensively address all forms of violence faced by girls and women around the world.

I. Background on Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in Conflict and Crisis Settings

Statistics suggest that 25 percent of all women in complex humanitarian emergencies experience sexual violence, compared to about 7 percent of women worldwide.¹ Yet contrary to most headlines, perpetrators of violence in conflict and crisis settings are not exclusively armed actors, but also family and community members who commit increased acts of violence as the social fabric begins to unravel. Troublingly, violence is often perpetrated—by both armed *and* non-militant actors—with impunity, as a result of a weakened state, decreased policing and social order.

The form of violence that most survivors will experience in their lifetimes, whether during war or peacetime, is violence conducted at the hands of a spouse or intimate partner, known as intimate partner violence or IPV.² This has been documented in numerous conflict settings. In South Sudan, decades of conflict have created instability and social upheaval, exacerbating harmful gender norms.³ A recent study reports 70 percent of those surveyed knew at least one woman who was beaten by her husband in the past month.⁴

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where conflict has been ongoing for decades, 64 percent of women report experiencing physical or sexual violence at the hands of a partner in the last year,⁵ compared to a global prevalence

of 30 percent.⁶ In Colombia's conflict, the incidence of IPV was 12 percent higher in areas that had experienced intense conflict than in areas that had not. LGBTI individuals may also be at an increased risk of violence in times of instability, and although data is scarce there are documented cases of "social cleansing" of LGBTI persons in Colombia by paramilitary groups, including threats and acts of violence and rape.⁷

In conflict and crisis settings, intersecting forms of violence are also of concern. Child marriage, another form of violence, increases the likelihood of experiencing other forms of violence by 22 percent.⁸ This means that as one form of violence increases, women and girls become more susceptible to other forms as well, and the cycle perpetuates. The conflict in Syria has resulted in skyrocketing rates of child, early and forced marriage: rates were shown to nearly triple among Syrian refugee communities in neighboring Jordan. Child marriage rates similarly spiked in the Sahel during the drought crisis of 2012, underscoring the importance of applying protection efforts in contexts of natural disaster as well as during and after conflict, as the updated NAP now acknowledges. Women and girls also face increased vulnerability to trafficking for labor and sex, as evinced by the recent abduction and sale of Yazidi girls and young women in Iraq.

Years of GBV programming and rigorous evaluations have established a growing evidence base as to what works—and what does not—in preventing and responding to these various forms of violence. We also know that there are staggering social and economic costs when the GBV is not sufficiently prevented and addressed.^{9,10} As such, it is both in the interest of and incumbent upon the United States to draw upon this literature in an evidence-based approach to its various policy commitments, most notably under the recently-updated U.S. National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security.

II. Understanding U.S. Protection Obligations under the National Action Plan (NAP)

The NAP finds its roots in UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), the first binding resolution recognizing women's vulnerability to the violence of war and centrality to efforts to secure lasting peace. The U.S. NAP was promulgated under the Obama Administration (2011) and was updated in 2016. The NAP builds on several goals articulated in the US National Security Strategy (2010, 2015), the Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (2010, 2015), and several specific agency-level gender strategies.

Under its protection pillar, the NAP requires the United States to go beyond the headline-grabbing 'rape as a weapon

of war' and take various steps to prevent and respond to various forms of violence in its foreign assistance efforts, including protecting women and children from harm, exploitation, abuse and trafficking; holding perpetrators accountable for crimes; and working with communities to prevent violence in the first place. This requires coordination across myriad agencies, bureaus, and offices, starting from the very onset of a conflict and consistently applied through the continuum of recovery to development. Perhaps most critically, it requires adequate funding—something that continues to be an issue, as we will explore.

The U.S. is obligated to "integrate GBV prevention efforts into areas such as education, economic growth and health, including through local partnerships, stronger service provision and improved accountability to ensure that judicial systems appropriately address perpetrators."¹¹ As of the 2016 NAP update, these actions are not just required in conflict settings, but also in the wake of natural disasters and climate-related crises. This means that the U.S. is equally obligated to provide support to survivors of Boko Haram's abductions of schoolgirls in West Africa, as it is to child brides affected by drought in the Sahel. Additionally, the 2016 updated version of the NAP includes language inclusive of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) persons, meaning the U.S. must provide a comprehensive approach to ending not only violence against girls and women, but against persons of all genders. New training modules on the WPS agenda for State, USAID, Department of Defense (DoD) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) staff and contractors will include information on gender and specific to LGBTI populations.

III. U.S. Investment to Date

Of all the National Action Plan pillars, there has arguably been the most direct U.S. investment in the protection pillar, although even this remains too small to adequately address the scope of the challenge, as the above-cited rates of violence attest. Congress has appropriated \$150 million dollars annually since 2014 (fiscal years 2013- 2016) to prevent and respond to gender-based violence,¹² and has stated that appropriated funds under Development Assistance, the Economic Support Fund, and International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement be made available to support women,

a GBV is an umbrella term for any harmful threat or act directed at an individual or group based on actual or perceived biological sex, gender identity and/or expression, sexual orientation, and/or lack of adherence to varying socially constructed norms around masculinity and femininity. It is rooted in structural gender inequalities, patriarchy, and power imbalances. GBV is typically characterized by the use or threat of physical, psychological, sexual, economic, legal, political, social and other forms of control and/or abuse. GBV impacts individuals across the life course and has direct and indirect costs to families, communities, economies, global public health, and development.

peace and security goals. A suite of GBV indicators by which progress in these efforts can be measured was included in recent revisions to USAID’s evaluation policy. Yet there are no such indicators for peacebuilding or conflict prevention, and investments in those areas have consistently been lower than the growing, but still modest, investments in violence prevention and response.

Various humanitarian programs have also been geared toward protection efforts. The United States held the presidency of the Call to Action to End Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies from 2014-2016, under which it created the Safe from the Start initiative. Launched in September of 2013, Safe from the Start was designed to mobilize funds to immediately prevent and respond to multiple forms of violence at the onset of an emergency. From 2013-2015 the United States committed nearly \$50 million to projects and activities in support of Safe from the Start. This joint effort between USAID and the State Department is led by the State Department’s Population, Refugees and Migration Bureau, one of the largest funders of humanitarian response. The USAID effort responds to internally-displaced persons and crisis-affected persons, including within Syria, while State efforts focus on the refugees outside of the country. While public information on programming is limited, there has been public record of investment in countering forms of violence such as forced marriage and trafficking of Yazidi women by ISIS.

Happily, there is growing evidence that the existence of gendered foreign policy frameworks—including but not limited to the NAP—are effective in increasing U.S. efforts on these issues. As a part of its commitments under the U.S. Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence Globally, for instance, USAID reports that it was able to increase programming on gender-based violence to 40 countries, including increased investment in addressing multiple forms of violence. This is essential if the U.S. is to take a comprehensive—and effective—approach to violence prevention and response.¹³

IV. Recommendations for Action

As such, the following actions should be taken by the various agencies participating in the NAP, in order to improve the overall impact of U.S. efforts in this area:

- Relevant agencies and offices (State Department (PRM), USAID (OFTA, DCHA) and DoD), and implementers must intensify efforts and planning to prevent and respond to all forms of GBV from the very beginning of every crisis, both through Safe from the Start and other mechanisms, and to serve as a global leader on the issue, including through efforts to eliminate all forms of violence within U.S. programs and personnel.

- This work is important and should be reflected in the President’s budget request. The FY18 Budget will be presented by the new President and is an opportunity to signal intent to honor, if not increase, existing commitments. As part of the new President’s policy budget, there should be a robust request for implementation of all pillars of the NAP; within the protection pillar, requests for GBV prevention and response should reflect the comprehensive spectrum of forms of violence we know are associated with conflict and crisis settings. State Department and USAID leadership should then socialize that request—and the rationale for it—to Congress, committing to report back on the nature and impact of those investments in a timely manner.
- Strengthen accountability in the international system by working with other governments, international organizations and NGOs to ensure that commitments made under the Call to Action and in other processes are implemented and evaluated, with successful efforts scaled according to identified need.
- Programs funded by the USG must meet agreed upon inter-agency standards for GBV prevention and response, including essential reproductive health care and psychosocial services for survivors.
- Collect age- and sex-disaggregated data, especially on needs of populations where it is currently lacking, e.g. adolescent girls (10-14 and 15-18) and older women (over 49), and create responses that address their unique needs.
- Nothing about us, without us. Women and girls, including lesbian, bisexual, disabled, and gender-non-conforming women and girls, must be consulted as a part of early warning, preparedness and response initiatives, and not as an afterthought.
- Strengthen partnerships with local civil society and women’s groups to address GBV. Often those best positioned to deal with this culturally complex issue are those who already understand the local context and may already be working with communities and individuals affected by GBV.

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Established in 2010, The U.S. Civil Society Working Group on Women, Peace, and Security (U.S. CSWG) is a network of civil society organizations with years of experience working on issues involving women, war, and peace. The U.S. CSWG informs, promotes, facilitates, and monitors the meaningful implementation of the U.S. National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security.

