

A Gendered Global Fragility Act: Seizing an Opportunity for Change

Jessica Margolis, Tahina Montoya

Introduction

Over the past several decades, the United States (U.S.) has worked to develop conflict mitigation and prevention strategies in response to growing crises and poor governance in conflict-affected states. These stabilization missions have given significant attention and resources to women's rights and gender programs, but U.S. gender policy has had varied and limited success.¹ Well-intentioned programs were marred by poor coordination and expertise, as well as a lack of integration throughout all aspects of the stabilization process. The last twenty years of Afghanistan reconstruction offer numerous examples, and recent developments underscore an urgent need for the U.S. to review its approach to stabilization, especially when it comes to gender and women's rights, and assess how to implement new strategies more effectively.

Fortunately, comprehensive bipartisan legislation that promises to serve as a mechanism for better stabilization programs is inching toward implementation. The Global Fragility Act (GFA) was signed into law in December 2019 and lays out a transformative and innovative approach for the U.S. government to prevent violent conflict and address the root causes of state fragility.² Though lauded for its efforts to revise stabilization, the GFA reflects old thinking regarding gender relations. The Act ignores countless studies that prove the vital role gender sensitivity can and should play in successful peace processes and stabilization programs, as well as the importance of gender inclusion for conflict prevention.

Gender-sensitivity attempts to understand how the social hierarchies attached to stereotypes of gender exclude or endanger certain groups. This includes an analysis of how

gender intersects with inequalities stemming from other socio-economic factors (intersectionality). Applying a gender-sensitive lens to GFA implementation will put gender issues at the forefront of the policy-making process and enhance U.S. stabilization programs. This is more than just an opportunity to make more durable gains for women's rights; it is essential to achieving the U.S. government's overall stabilization goals, including a secure environment, a stable economy, general social well-being, and the rule of law. It will also allow the U.S. to re-establish its credibility and commitment to stabilization.

GFA implementation strategies are still being crafted, hence action now will enable a gender-sensitive approach to shape both the beginning of the bureaucratic process and the ten-year period allotted for GFA goals. In addition to improving gender outcomes for future stabilization operations, a gender-sensitive GFA will enable the U.S. to redefine its international image and lead the development of a feminist approach to international development.³

This policy brief analyzes the shortcomings in the GFA process and policies regarding gender with specific reference to previous stabilization efforts, before outlining how a gender-sensitive GFA can improve future U.S. stabilization and reconstruction programs. Gender issues are, of course, broader than just the experiences of women and girls; however, this brief focuses primarily on women because most U.S. "gender" programs are designed for women and girls. The GFA itself also specifically singles out women as a marginalized group to support because violence is so often perpetrated against women in fragile contexts. It is our hope that enhanced programming for women and girls spurs more support for other underrepresented gender groups. Our analysis and

recommendations emphasize actionable next steps for gender-sensitive implementation, ensuring the GFA is effective and transformative. These recommendations include using gender-focused indices to identify GFA priority countries and analysis; enhancing coordination and gender integration through an interagency task force; applying intersectional analysis to ensure diverse civil society engagement; leveraging existing policies; and employing gender-inclusive language.

The GFA: Opportunity for Change

U.S. foreign policy has relied on a disparate, reactionary approach to assistance rather than a coordinated and proactive strategy that addresses the underpinnings of armed conflict. Short-term incentives have outweighed long-term goals. The difficulties experienced in countries like Afghanistan forced a reevaluation of U.S. stabilization strategies in fragile and conflict-ridden countries. A new approach was needed.

Seventeen years after the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan, the U.S. government formally recognized that past stabilization efforts were limited by a “lack of strategic clarity, organizational discipline, and unity of effort.”⁴

The Stabilization Assistance Review (SAR), approved by the State Department (DOS), the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Defense Department (DOD) in 2018, was the government’s first joint step to reconsider stabilization and move towards a whole of government approach. The SAR defines stabilization as “a political endeavor involving an integrated civilian-military process to create conditions where locally legitimate authorities and systems can peaceably manage conflict and prevent a resurgence of violence.”⁵ This was followed by the GFA’s passage as part of the 2020 Consolidated Appropriations Act, signed into law by President Trump on December 20, 2019.⁶ As novel legislation that prioritized long-term strategy over short-term solutions, the Act sought to improve global, regional, and local coordination of multilateral development; expand and enhance the effectiveness of U.S. foreign assistance programs; support research efforts; and improve the tools for proper assessment and monitoring and evaluation (M&E).⁷

The Act mandates the U.S. government select at least three countries or regions for stabilization and three countries or regions for conflict prevention, guided by data in existing global fragility indices and U.S. watch lists.⁸ These sources address specific categories and levels of violence, including violence committed by state actors and extremist organizations, as well as violence committed against children and youth.⁹ The GFA also requires interagency coordination to streamline government efforts to stabilize conflict-affected areas and prevent violence and fragility globally.¹⁰ Lastly, the Act earmarks \$230 million annually for five fiscal years to fund these efforts.¹¹

Enacted in December 2019, the GFA was to be implemented along three key deadlines, all of which have been missed, postponing overall implementation.¹² First, within 270 days after the GFA was enacted, in September 2020, lead organizations were to submit: a detailed strategy with department and staff roles and responsibilities; the identification of authorities, organizational steps, and processes; and a list of priority countries.¹³ Second, within one year after the establishment of the Act, in December 2020, the executive branch was required to submit to Congress a report detailing a ten-year plan for each country selected, along with updated conflict analyses and interagency plans, policies, and tools to implement the GFA.¹⁴ Third, within two years after submission of the ten-year plan, in December 2022, and every two years thereafter (for ten years), the president is to submit a biennial, unclassified report on progress and lessons learned with assessments to the Government Accountability Office for review.¹⁵

Excluding Gender: The Crucial Flaw

While the GFA is innovative in driving interagency coordination and requiring transparent reviews and reporting, it has one major flaw: it largely overlooks gender. The Act only mentions women once, when listing violence against women and girls as an area of concern in fragile countries, and never mentions the concept of gender more broadly. Box 1 provides an example of poorly coordinated gender programming during stabilization to contextualize the following discussion of how GFA implementation has fallen short on gender.

The September Report and Global Fragility Strategy

The GFA strategy documents offer some improvements from the Act regarding women and girls but neglect to consider their rights in a way that will catalyze durable change. Furthermore, implementation of the GFA has been slow, and priority countries are yet to be identified.

Box 1: Afghanistan's Troubled Gender Policy

Afghanistan offers many lessons for why gender—specifically the experiences of women and girls—needs to be better integrated into U.S. stabilization policy and practice. The reconstruction and stabilization process in Afghanistan was well-funded, extensive, and explicitly mandated to incorporate gender mainstreaming, though almost all its gender programs were built for women and girls. This led to some achievements in education, employment, and health. Women were able to attend universities and girls' access to education expanded, with a 23% increase in the number of girls enrolled in primary school between 2003 and 2017.¹⁶ By 2019, 25% of civil service jobs were held by women, and maternal mortality had declined significantly, moving from 1,100 to 396 per 100,000 live births between 2000 and 2015.¹⁷

However, despite the attention and resources, U.S. government gender policy in Afghanistan had limited success overall. Reports from the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) reveal that the U.S. lacked a comprehensive and coordinated gender strategy as well as staff with gender expertise. It took more than ten years for the U.S. Embassy in Kabul to create the first mission-wide gender policy and a unified understanding of gender priorities.¹⁸

Along with poor coordination was a shortage of gender expertise. USAID only required that gender be addressed in its programs in 2008, and “it was not until 2014 that USAID placed staff with gender expertise in each of the agency’s technical offices in Kabul.”¹⁹ This meant that gender analysis was often delayed or ineffective.²⁰ Conditions improved with the creation of an Afghanistan Gender Task Force in Washington, D.C. and a Gender Working Group in Kabul, but the utility of this system was impaired by inconsistent support from senior leadership.²¹

U.S. officials often failed to understand and address the underlying social and cultural context that fueled gender inequality in Afghanistan, consequently designing programs that did not reach a diversity of women.²² Gains were primarily felt by women in elite urban areas, while many women in conservative, rural, and ethnic minority communities continued to live with gender-based restrictions that limited their access to services.²³ Furthermore, Afghan women were often excluded from leadership or decision-making roles, especially at the local level where decisions can have a more immediate impact on daily life. Analysts sometimes highlight women’s participation in Loya Jirgas (“grand council”) meetings of the country’s regional leaders and the national parliament as evidence that they held positions of power.²⁴ However, even when women were in decision-making positions, they comprised a significant minority and had difficulty gaining respect or garnering support for their ideas.²⁵

To comply with the GFA, the “Report to Congress Pursuant to Section 504(c) of the Global Fragility Act” (hereafter referred to as the September Report) was sent to Congress on September 17, 2020.²⁶ The September Report was supposed to present a comprehensive strategy but, on many levels, failed to do so.²⁷ Only five pages long, it briefly summarized the 2017 National Security Strategy and identified four goals—prevention, stabilization, burden-sharing (multilateral coordination), and management (internal coordination)—but did not provide details on how to achieve these goals.²⁸ Additionally, while the September Report mentions both “women” and “gender,” it does so in a cursory, and arguably performative, manner.

A second document, “The U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability,” also known as the Global Fragility Strategy (GFS), was released on December 18, 2020. This marked “the first time that the U.S. has had a strategy, an enduring—a 10-year strategy—to address conflict prevention and stabilization.”²⁹ This unique strategy was intended to address fragility at its core and encourage the development of strong and secure countries that could be U.S. partners.³⁰ The GFS elaborates on the four goals mentioned in the September Report by committing to developing new partnerships with civil society, the private sector, regional partners, and bilateral and multilateral contributors, with an emphasis on “supporting locally driven political solutions.”³¹ Though it still does not widely address gender, the GFS specifically highlights the need to meaningfully engage women and girls and promote their rights, which is more detail than contained in the GFA and September Report. It also describes the need to strengthen local civil society organizations that are inclusive of women, address the WPS strategy, and consider the United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP) Gender Inequality Index.³²

Here, the GFS provides needed details on, for example, the creation of a working-level secretariat and a senior-level GFA Steering Committee composed of USAID, DOS, DOD, the Department of Treasury, and the Office of Management and Budget, convened by the National Security Council. Additionally, it identifies the Chief of Mission as the lead for field-level planning and declares U.S. embassies responsible for coordination of national government counterparts and local civil society organizations.³³ Finally, the GFS highlights “compact-style country and regional partnerships” to promote mutual accountability and the facilitation of political dialogue.³⁴

As a stabilization document, the GFS is far more promising in bringing women and gender to the forefront. However, a strategy is meant to have implementation guidance, and despite a greater emphasis on gender, the GFS fails to address *how* the GFA will integrate gender throughout its activities.

Gender-Sensitive Implementation Can Close the Current GFA Gap

The gender gaps in the GFA and GFS include using gender-blind language, confusing gender-based terminology, and using indices that do not measure gender. As a starting point, using language that acknowledges different gender groups and their needs when implementing the GFA will prove critical for the legislation's success, because fragility and conflict affect women and girls differently than men and boys.³⁵ Failure to deliberately consider the needs of women specifically will stymie intended change. Researching the lived experiences of underserved groups helps "fill a gap in the understanding of conflict and instability and improve[s] conflict-sensitivity of policies and programs."³⁶ This type of analysis is necessary to understand the consequences of outside intervention on stopping or changing an ongoing conflict, which is vital to the GFA's goals.³⁷ Paired with gender, this will reveal how "women's everyday experiences with broader regional and global political processes and structures inform violence."³⁸

As a final example of how the GFA overlooks gender, countries or regions for GFA implementation are to be selected based upon several sources, including U.S. government conflict and atrocity early warning lists, levels of in-country violence, and five indices (see Box 2), referred to as "recognized global fragility lists."³⁹ A careful review of these five indices reveals that while some of them mention gender-related information, none of them use gender-related indicators to determine their country rankings. For example, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) States of Fragility Report cites gender statistics for fragile states, like maternal mortality ratios, in its infographics, but it sources this information from other databases and does not actually gather its own data on gender.⁴⁰ More specifically, none of these indices directly measure gender equality or gender-based violence (GBV).⁴¹ The Fund for Peace's Fragile States Index mentions countering GBV as one of its organizational missions, but the index itself does not include data or GBV as an indicator.

Improving on the GFA, the GFS adds seven additional indices to be referenced when selecting countries (see Box 2).⁴² However, while these indices consider women's well-being in their mission statements or vision, none of them gather detailed gender-disaggregated data on women's safety. Further, the GFS document does not highlight rates of GBV as indicators of violence, meaning GBV may not be meaningfully integrated into implementation strategies. Reliance on indices that do not measure GBV or violence against children means that these forms of violence will not substantially influence country selection.

Box 2: Recognized Global Fragility Lists

GFA Listed Indices:

1. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development States of Fragility Report
2. Fund for Peace Fragile States Index
3. The World Bank Harmonized List of Fragile Situations
4. The Institute for Economic and Peace Global Peace Index
5. The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Early Warning Project Risk Assessment

GFS Listed Indices:

1. The Armed Conflict and Location Event Data Project
2. Fund for Peace Fragile States Index
3. Freedom House Freedom in the World Index
4. Legatum Institute's Prosperity Index
5. The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Early Warning Project Risk Assessment
6. Varieties of Democracy Project
7. UNDP's Gender Inequality Index
8. World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators
9. World Justice Project Rule of Law Index

Why Focus on Women?

Put bluntly, gender does not equal women. However, policymakers often focus on women as victims during stabilization and reconstruction, instead of also considering their contributions to peace negotiations or the duration of peace settlements. In fact, data show a positive link between women's activities and conflict stabilization:⁴³

- *Peace Negotiations Succeed More Often.* Peace deals that include women in negotiations have higher chances of success and are more likely to bring armed groups to the negotiating table. An Inclusive Peace & Transition Initiative study of 40 peace deals since 1990 has shown that parties were significantly more likely to reach an agreement when women's groups had strong influence on the negotiation process.⁴⁴
- *Peace Settlements Last Longer.* Women's participation had a statistically significant and positive impact on the duration of peace.⁴⁵ After analyzing 181 peace agreements signed since 1989, researchers found that agreements resulting from negotiations that directly included women were 35% more likely to last beyond 15 years.⁴⁶ This is because women who are actively involved in negotiations often have decision-making authority or access to those involved in peace implementation.⁴⁷

- *Women's Advocacy Yields Direct Benefits for All.* Women advocate for specific provisions or work that addresses the roots of conflict or builds programs for other social groups in need. This is because, in addition to advocating for women's rights, women also advocate for measures that help prevent relapse into violence, contributing to a broader change in power relations and benefiting the broader community.⁴⁸ As an example, "in Burundi women succeeded in inserting into the peace agreement provisions on freedom of marriage and the right to choose one's partner [regardless of gender]."⁴⁹

The active participation of women in all aspects of stability and development increases the likelihood of positive change. Therefore, it is imperative to recognize that there are societal-based differences in gender, reflected in practices, customs, and law that have important political consequences for nation-states.⁵⁰ The U.S. will not succeed in achieving basic stabilization goals if its implementation strategy does not integrate critical gender components.

Policy Recommendations

Integrating a gender-sensitive approach into GFA implementation will improve conflict prevention and stabilization and set ground-breaking precedent for future missions. The ten-year plans presented to Congress for each selected country should integrate the following recommendations, taking care to customize them to each country's cultural context rather than apply a one size fits all approach.

1. Use Gender-focused Indices to Identify GFA Priority Countries and Inform Analysis

A gender-focused index with gender-disaggregated data should be used in identifying priority regions and countries for GFA implementation. None of the country selection indices listed in the GFA or GFS account for rates of GBV or violence against women (VAW) and do not present gender-disaggregated data.⁵¹ Relying solely on the existing indices will make it impossible for analysts to gain a comprehensive picture of the status of women in different countries, especially in relation to conflict and violence. Fortunately, the GFS leaves an opening for other "third-party data sources and indicators to help inform selection of priority countries and/or regions and monitor overall progress."⁵²

We recommend including the WomenStats Database, the Women Peace and Security Index, and the World Bank Gender Data Portal. The WomenStats Database assesses the relationship between security, stability, and gender and proves it is possible to predict organized violence based on the mistreatment of women.⁵³ Vetted at the UN, the DOD, and Congress, with over 350 indicators for 176 countries, the WomanStats Database is "the largest cross-national

compilation of data, statistics, and maps on the status of women worldwide."⁵⁴ The Women Peace and Security Index, maintained by the Georgetown Institute of Women Peace and Security and the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) Centre for Gender Peace and Security, measures inclusion, justice, and security for women using 11 indicators for 170 countries.⁵⁵ This index is unique in that it offers a snapshot of women's status in a country based on numerous social realities and could directly inform progress on WPS commitments made by the U.S. and partner countries. A third option is the World Bank Gender Data Portal, which is the World Bank Group's most comprehensive source for "sex-disaggregated data and gender statistics covering demography, education, health, access to economic opportunities, public life, and decision-making and agency."⁵⁶ Mandating the inclusion of one or more gender-specific indices will ensure that gender programming is informed by a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between women and country-specific violence.

In addition to using the indices listed in the GFA, researchers at the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs suggest establishing "critical criteria" to guide country selection.⁵⁷ Establishing critical criteria that are deliberately gender-inclusive (like rates of GBV) would take analysis one step further by ensuring that the treatment of all gender identities, not just women, are included in GFA decisions.

2. Enhance Coordination and Gender Integration Through a New Interagency Task Force

The GFA requires robust interagency coordination, and the GFS outlines a senior-level steering committee for oversight, the creation of a working-level secretariat—managed by DOS with members from relevant implementing agencies—and one in-country designee for field-level planning, nominated by the chief of mission.⁵⁸ However, this plan needs details on tactical and operational level personnel, and on the type of expertise the in-country designee should have. It also neglects to address gender training. To enhance interagency coordination and efficiency, the secretariat should also establish an interagency task force composed of teams both in Washington, D.C. and in each chosen country. In addition to adding gender and M&E leads, task force teams should include leads from the three primary implementing departments.

Under the staffing structure currently proposed in the GFS, personnel would undertake GFA activities as additional or collateral duties. In contrast, task force personnel will be dedicated to GFA activity, serving as full-time staff focused on overall implementation that are independent from individual programs. This will empower a centralized group to gather best practices and guarantee more continuity of bandwidth and institutional knowledge throughout the ten-year duration of GFA. It will also prevent the shortage of coordination, gender expertise, and M&E resources that has plagued gender

programs in stabilization missions, such as Afghanistan. Together a steering committee, secretariat, and interagency task force will fulfill strategic, operational, and tactical dimensions of implementation.

3. Apply Intersectional Analysis to Ensure Diverse Civil Society Engagement

The GFA and GFS require engagement and consultations with civil society in the development of in-country programming, offering the chance to amplify intersectionality along with gender-inclusivity. The GFA and GFS specifically acknowledge the need to work with civil society and local groups led by underserved populations, like women and youth, to advance inclusive peace and women's leadership "in all aspects of conflict prevention, stabilization and peacebuilding."⁵⁹ This is important, but the ten-year plans should mandate that consultations be held with intersectional groups made up of diverse women of various races, ethnicities, religions, classes, and sexual orientations.⁶⁰ Utilizing intersectionality in this way will meaningfully incorporate different perspectives in the design of programming, ultimately enabling programs to reach and benefit women from more backgrounds, an achievement missing from past conflict and stabilization efforts but crucial for the future. It will also create space for more women to influence decision-making at the local level.

In order to do this correctly, U.S. personnel should hire local representatives who understand the intersecting identities within the communities where programming is conducted. Local consultants will be able to provide crucial background knowledge on community identities and more easily secure participation from targeted groups than foreign officials. The GFA provides for this in its calls for future strategies to identify the "authorities, staffing, and other resources" needed to effectively implement the GFS.⁶¹

4. Leverage and Connect Existing Policies

Strategically and efficiently, the GFS asserts it will draw on existing U.S. legislation and directives throughout its programming process, which creates a chance to streamline gender agendas across government entities and policy topics. The GFS already mentions the 2019 U.S. Women, Peace and Security (WPS) strategy, which is a great start.⁶² The process would also benefit from including the comprehensive WPS implementation plans that the USAID, DOS, and DOD each created in response to the passage of the WPS Act of 2017. The DOS plan, for example, sets clear objectives for increasing women and girls' safety and participation in peace efforts and lays out M&E metrics to achieve these objectives.⁶³ Thus far, GFA implementation strategies do not include this degree of specificity; they lack clear objectives or indicators for women's rights, empowerment or safety, and details on how these will be measured to determine GFA programming success. Relying on existing policies that have already been integrated into the three primary implementing departments would be a tactical way to take a more gender-sensitive approach.⁶⁴

The GFA should also build upon the recently released National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality, drawing on the White House, its resources, and the attention of the current administration to advance gender equality. This first-of-its-kind gender strategy also emphasizes a whole of government approach, stating: "in order to mainstream gender equity and equality across our domestic and foreign policy, we will elevate gender in strategic planning and budgeting, policy development, management and training, and monitoring and evaluation efforts."⁶⁵ The strategy is especially forward-thinking in that it promotes a focus on intersectional identities, something currently lacking from the GFA, and interprets them broadly to include sexual orientation.⁶⁶ In fact, one of the strategy's objectives—to elevate gender equality in security and humanitarian relief—is already poised to correct a GFA gap by committing to using diplomatic fora and resources to support the leadership of local civil society groups led by women.⁶⁷ Building on this strategy, a stated priority of the Biden administration, will make for more harmonious domestic and foreign policy.

5. Employ Gender-inclusive Language in Future Strategy Documents and Reports

This brief has largely focused on women because U.S. gender policies usually target women's issues. However, GFA strategy documents, including revisions made to the GFS, country plans, or biennial reports, should use language that serves people belonging to all marginalized gender identities. For example, the Act should have stated that it serves to empower "groups underserved for their gender" rather than just "women" in GFA programming implementation.⁶⁸ More inclusive language will encourage gender programming to be designed for any group that may need protection or empowerment because of its gender identity or expression. Additionally, to prevent GBV from being conflated with VAW and to acknowledge that all genders can experience violence, future documents should define each term and use them deliberately.

Lastly, language that essentializes groups, such as use of the word "vulnerable," should be left out of future documents.⁶⁹ Using the word "underserved," for example, instead of "vulnerable" better showcases that certain groups face difficult circumstances not because of their own actions but because a system or society has failed to adequately support them. This kind of language underscores a structural problem that needs to be fixed, rather than a group that needs to be saved.

Conclusion

U.S. efforts to integrate and implement gender programming in conflict settings need a new approach to improve the lives of women and other marginalized gender groups. The GFA is an innovative policy with a progressive approach to solving violent conflict, but thus far the implementation process is predominantly gender blind. A course correction is still possible. The GFA's ability to drive change will be determined by its implementation, and country strategies that incorporate intersectional and gender-sensitive lenses will strengthen the

Act's efficacy and better serve groups in need. This unique lens will also promote more accurate conflict analysis because women are important contributors to conflict resolution, despite also being targets of violence. If implemented properly, a gender-sensitive GFA promises a fresh start for stabilization efforts and, hopefully, human rights on the ground.

This policy brief was prepared by the authors in their personal capacity. The opinions expressed here are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the official views or policy of WIIS or the Embassy of Liechtenstein.

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About the Authors

Tahina Montoya is a Political/Military Analyst in the Air Force Reserves and a WIIS 2021 Next Generation Gender, Peace, and Security (GPS) Fellow. She is a Doctoral Candidate in Liberal Studies at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, focusing on Gender, Peace and Security.

Jessica Margolis works on global cooperation and regional governance issues and is a member of WIIS. She holds a Master of Arts degree in Conflict Resolution from Georgetown University in Washington DC, with a focus on the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

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