

U.S. Civil Society Working Group on Women, Peace, and Security



U.S. CSWG POLICYbrief September, 2018

POLICYbrief

Promoting Women's Political Participation: A Pathway to Peace

*A Policy Brief in the 2018 U.S. Civil Society Working Group on Women, Peace and Security Policy Brief Series
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"It is the sense of Congress that—

- (1) the meaningful participation of women in conflict prevention and conflict resolution processes helps to promote more inclusive and democratic societies and is critical to the long-term stability of countries and regions;*
- (2) the political participation, and leadership of women in fragile environments, particularly during democratic transitions, is critical to sustaining lasting democratic institutions; and*
- (3) the United States should be a global leader in promoting the meaningful participation of women in conflict prevention, management, and resolution, and post-conflict relief and recovery efforts."*

—Women, Peace and Security Act of 2017

The Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Act, which the US Congress passed in October 2017, recognizes that women's political participation is essential to peace and security. The act mandates a national strategy on WPS; training of relevant personnel at the Departments of State and Defense and at USAID; stakeholder consultation; and progress reporting. US support and commitment will be essential to overcome the serious barriers women around the world face as they seek increased political participation and leadership in peacebuilding processes.

Women can be powerful actors in achieving and sustaining peace in their communities and nations.¹ Advancing or transforming women's empowerment and increasing gender

equality are important levers to move a country forward democratically and have proven, long-lasting effects on countries' democracy, stability, and peacefulness. A study of 40 peace processes in 35 countries showed that when women substantively influenced a peace process, an agreement was almost always reached, countries experienced higher rates of implementation, and peace was 35 percent more likely to last 15 years or more.³ Similarly, post-conflict peacebuilding has been more successful in societies where women are empowered.⁴ A cross-national study of postwar contexts with a high risk of conflict recurrence found that peacebuilding efforts are more successful in societies where women have relatively higher social status (box 1).⁵

An International Peace Institute study of 182 signed peace agreements between 1989 and 2011 found that there is a 35 percent increase in the probability that a peace agreement will last 15 years or more when women are effectively included.⁴⁴

Peace processes provide historic opportunities to promote women's participation and high-level decision making and to embed gender equality goals in emerging political settlements.⁶ Women's participation in politics tends to increase in post-conflict settings: Across Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, the percentage of women in parliaments is significantly higher in post-conflict countries than in countries without conflict.⁷ Nonetheless, women are frequently excluded from critical peace processes, and as a result, women's interests and political leadership are not reflected in resulting agreements.⁸ For example, between 1992 and 2011, women made up just 2 percent of mediators and 9 percent of negotiators in 30 official peace talks.⁹ Accordingly, only 7 percent of agreements signed between 1990 and 2010 referenced gender equality or women's rights.¹⁰

The Democratic Republic of Congo peace talks that were held in Sun City, South Africa, in 2002 illustrated the relationship between women's exclusion from peace processes and their continued exclusion from political participation and leadership. The Congolese government and other warring parties claimed, "Women did not have any right to participate [in the peace process] because they were not fighters, nor had they enjoyed meaningful representation in national decision-making bodies before the war."¹¹ In essence, those who decide the former continue to decide the latter.

Women in every part of the world continue to be largely marginalized from the political sphere.¹² Globally, just one in five parliamentarians is female (23.5 percent), and there are 37 states in which women account for less than 10 percent of legislators in single or lower houses.¹³ Only 11 countries (out of 195) are led by female heads of state.¹⁴ Despite multiple international agreements, regional frameworks, and national laws recognizing and upholding women's right to participate in politics and reach leadership positions, the widespread absence of women in political and decision-making bodies persists. Recent estimates from the World Economic Forum predict that gender parity in politics will not be achieved for another 99 years at the current pace of change (box 2).¹⁵

As of July 2017, women made up 23.5 percent of parliaments worldwide, varying widely by region. Nordic countries lead the rankings with 41.7 percent, followed by the Americas with 28.1 percent, Europe (excluding Nordic countries) with 26.5 percent, Sub-Saharan Africa with 23.6 percent; Asia with 19.4 percent, and Arab States and the Pacific.⁴⁵

Even when women are elected or appointed to positions of political leadership, underlying inequality and discrimination limit their political power and influence. For example, female ministers hold 18 percent of cabinet-level positions globally but are disproportionately assigned portfolios such as social affairs, health, and education—roles traditionally considered "more fitting" for women—while men dominate defense and finance, portfolios with larger budgets and "hard" power.¹⁶

Nevertheless, growth in women's political leadership is considered one of the most important trends of this century.¹⁷ Over the past two decades, women's representation in national parliaments has doubled.¹⁸ Since 2000, the number of female heads of state or government has increased from 4.7 percent to 8.8 percent. In countries where legislated quotas are in place, women secured twice as many seats as countries without quotas (24 percent versus 12 percent). Even in countries with voluntary quotas, women still obtained 10 percent more seats.

Despite such progress, there is still a long road ahead to achieve gender equality in the political sphere. Structural barriers and socioeconomic inequities continue to hinder gender parity in national governments around the world.

Supporting and increasing women's participation and political leadership is a well-established goal of US foreign policy. Post-conflict peacebuilding and state-building processes are strategic moments to dismantle the cross-cutting structural inequalities, hierarchies, and systemic marginalization that undermine democratic integrity and hinder sustainability and resilience in the transition out of conflict. Executive Order 13595, which instituted the US National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security, along with the WPS Act of 2017 together outline the US commitment to promote the meaningful participation of women in peace processes and their political participation and leadership in fragile and transitional environments.¹⁹

Why Advancing Women Matters for Peace and Security

A 40-year study on international crises found that a state is five times less likely to use violence when faced with an international crisis when the percentage of women in parliament increases by 5 percent.²⁰ Further, higher levels of female participation in parliament reduces a country's risk of civil war, as well as the risk of relapse into conflict once war has ended.²¹ When 35 percent of a nation's legislature is female, the risk of relapse into conflict is near zero (box 3).²²

Conflict prevention efforts, including countering violent extremism are found to be more effective when women are involved. Women frequently have critical knowledge of impending conflicts that can help to prevent the escalation of violence before it begins. Interviews with 286 people in 30 countries across the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia further suggest that women are the first in their communities to stand up against terrorism.⁴⁷

Countries with more women in government also enjoy better standards of living across multiple sectors of society, leading to increased peace and stability.²³ For example, in India, women political leaders tend to favor wealth redistribution, support child-related expenditures, and invest more than men in schools, female teachers, primary education, and beds in hospitals and dispensaries.²⁴ In West Bengal, villages with more women in political leadership saw an increase of investment in drinking water, and facilities and roads were almost twice as likely to be in good condition.²⁵ In ethnically diverse countries, “the presence of a female national leader is correlated with a 6.6 percent increase in GDP growth in comparison to having a male leader.”²⁶

When women are elected in sufficient numbers, they tend to introduce norms essential for good governance and progressive democracies.²⁷ A World Bank study of more than 100 countries showed that higher percentages of women in parliament correlated to decreased corruption in government.²⁸ In post-conflict or fragile states, women's active inclusion in government strengthens transitions to democracy. As elected or appointed officials, they can increase the legitimacy of nascent institutions, broaden the political agenda, and promote consultative policymaking. In the Philippines, women with direct access to high-level peace talks between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front advocated for a more inclusive process and led national consultations across 13 regions to ensure that participants represented religious, indigenous, youth, and

other groups.²⁹ More inclusive policymaking undergirds a “human security” approach to establishing sustainable peace and reframes security as an individual's ability to live with dignity, free from fear and want, rather than as state protection (box 4).

In Northern Ireland, women leaders secured language in the Good Friday Agreement on victims' rights, as well as provisions for reintegration of political prisoners, integrated education, and mixed housing.⁴⁹ During the political transition in Afghanistan, women in the constitutional assembly that convened in 2003 and 2004 advocated for the rights of the disabled and supported the Uzbek minority's efforts to gain official recognition for their language.⁵⁰ In South Africa, women leaders of all races played a key role in developing a new national security framework based on human security during the country's transition from apartheid to political democracy.

Political bodies with more female legislators generally introduce a greater number of laws to promote human rights and advance the rights of women and girls. In Argentina, for example, female parliamentarians introduced 78 percent of the bills related to women's rights.³⁰ After a parliamentary gender quota was introduced in Morocco in 2011, amendments to the Family Code, Penal Code, and labor and property laws substantially advanced women's rights. In places as diverse as East Timor, Croatia, Rwanda, and South Africa, an increase in the number of female lawmakers is correlated with legislation related to antidiscrimination, domestic violence, family codes, inheritance, and child support and protection.³¹ While the causal connection is not yet clear, overwhelming evidence shows that when women are more empowered, “countries are less likely to go to war with their neighbors, to be in bad standing with the international community, or to be rife with crime and violence within their society.”³² Gender equality and women's empowerment is proving to be a better indicator of a country's peacefulness than commonly used metrics such as democracy, religion, and GDP (box 5).³³

Statistical analysis of data from a majority of countries between 1977 and 1996 shows that the higher the proportion of women in parliament, the lower the likelihood that the state carried out human rights abuses such as political imprisonments, torture, killings, and disappearances.⁵¹

Barriers to Women's Increased Political Participation

The disparity in women's political representation is a result of social, cultural, and economic barriers. Violence, lack of funding, and corruption stand out as significant barriers (box 6).

The Honorable Iyabo Obasanjo, former Nigerian senator (2007–11), stated, “As a senator in Nigeria, I experienced violence, media bias, and targeting by various groups, opposition parties and government operatives. My reaction, like that of many women, was to leave politics. In developing countries, women legislators are routinely targeted for intimidation, they are the last to enter politics and the first to leave.”⁵²

Violence

Women political leaders and candidates face psychological, physical, and sexual violence. Women are often targets of intimidation and coercion specifically because they are women, with the goal of pressuring them to leave politics, resign as candidates or political officials, withdraw from their membership in political parties or other political institutions, or to otherwise remain silent on the political issues they care about.³⁴ This violence affects politically active women around the globe, regardless of their roles, whether as activists, civil society leaders, voters, candidates, or elected or appointed officials.

A 2016 Inter-Parliamentary Union global study found that more than 80 percent of the women surveyed experienced psychological violence; nearly 45 percent received threats of death, rape, beatings or abduction; and 20 percent of the women legislators had been physically attacked during their electoral term.³⁵ Similarly, in political party assessments by the National Democratic Institute, approximately 55 percent of women surveyed indicated that they had personally experienced violence while carrying out political party functions, with 48 percent saying that they had experienced psychological violence, which is the most widely reported type of violence against women in politics.³⁶ Bias and unequal access to the media further widen the gap between male and female candidates, where women candidates are at best underrepresented and marginalized, and at worst are targeted, ridiculed, and distorted.³⁷

Lack of Financial Resources

Lack of financial resources remains one of the most significant deterrents for women in politics, and women face unique economic and financial challenges in campaigns for political office.³⁸ These restrictions range from women's exclusion from circles of power and moneyed networks to their often inferior economic status. Across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, women are reluctant to become political candidates for a variety of economic reasons: They do not feel they ought to invest family resources in political campaigns; they are unwilling to ask for credit or risk their own or their family's capital; they are unable to pay for domestic and care work that they would no longer be able to do; and they are unwilling to leave their jobs to campaign and risk labor market uncertainty if they are not elected.³⁹ Not only do women struggle to raise funds to run a campaign, they often receive little or no financial assistance from their political parties.⁴⁰ Without means for securing the necessary funds, women candidates either choose not to run, run at significant disadvantages compared with male counterparts, or rely on external funding that may be tied to political favors or suspect agendas.

Corruption and Conflict

In conflict-affected contexts and emerging democracies, these barriers to women's political participation increase exponentially. Increased security concerns add significant physical, psychological, and financial burdens. Corruption widens the gender gap in politics. In post-conflict environments, the use of “black money”—earned during the war or through weapons sales—to fund political campaigns deepens the inequity between male and female candidates, where women generally have less access to such profits and a weak rule of law makes the enforcement of campaign finance regulations unlikely.

A well-known Afghan woman parliamentarian, the Honorable Shinkai Karokhail, shared an example of how inferior economic status, compounded by corrupt campaign practices and weak rule of law, can substantially hinder female candidates. During a campaign for parliament, her male challenger hosted a reception for their constituents on the same day (and same time) as her campaign event. Despite the illegality of “vote buying,” he provided lavish food for attendees and gave everyone new clothing and winter hats. Even though she was the incumbent, only 300 people attended her event while over 2,000 attended his. Karokhail said she could not compete because she did not have the same financial resources that he did.⁴¹

Recommendations

The WPS Act of 2017 commits the US government to support and increase women's political participation as a core principle of its foreign policy. The WPS Act mandates a national WPS strategy that coordinates the efforts of the Departments of State, Defense, and Homeland Security as well as USAID. This mandated strategy gives the current administration an opportunity to recommit to and update the principles of the 2016 NAP while increasing support for gender-primary programs that uphold women's political participation as a catalyst for peace and stability.

Additionally, through the training mandated in the WPS Act, the administration can support staff across the Departments of State, Defense, and USAID by providing them with knowledge and best practices for addressing barriers to women's political participation. Such training can truly provide value at all levels of the US government—from equipping USAID staff who design programs around women's political movements, to State Department diplomats who work with women political leaders internationally, to those who reduce threats of violence against women in politics by providing security assistance. This whole-of-government approach is critical to creating sustainable impact on such complex social and political issues.

Funding

Currently, only about 2 percent of American foreign aid dedicated to peace and security efforts goes to activities where gender equality or women's empowerment is the principal objective.⁴² Additionally, while USAID supported women's political leadership in 55 countries across five regions between 2008 and 2013, many of these programs were gender-integrated rather than gender-primary, and as a result the support for women's political participation was merely a secondary objective in a larger democracy promotion effort.⁴³ During this period, funding for half of the gender-primary program was less than \$150,000, and durations of all programs were usually three years or fewer. The current administration therefore can improve on previous administrations' efforts by allocating more peace and security funding to gender equality or women's empowerment programs, especially gender-primary programs. Additionally, the administration should prioritize gender-primary programs, or programs with the primary objective of transforming gender norms, in its WPS strategy and departmental implementation plans.

The United States should seize the opportunity that the WPS Act presents to strengthen its support of women globally and ultimately to ensure the security of its own citizens.

To take advantage of this opportunity, the US government should take the following actions:

1. Uphold the NAP, WPS Act, and national strategies to promote women's increased political participation and leadership.

- Continue to implement the US National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security and conduct the planned review in 2020 in consultation with civil society.
- Mandate gender integration in US foreign policy initiatives related to women's political participation and leadership.
- Provide training to relevant personnel at DOD, DOS, and USAID on the importance of promoting women's political participation and decision making in line with the WPS Act, NAP, and other US foreign policy strategies.
- Continue to support the special envoy for global women's issues.

2. Increase protection for women in politics and high-level decision making.

- Fund and mandate gender integration into electoral violence prevention efforts.
- Promote increased awareness of widespread gender-based political violence and preventative measures.
- Provide training to relevant personnel at DOD, DOS, and USAID on prevention and protection initiatives to reduce violence against women in politics.

3. Promote increased “upstream” support to increase women's political leadership (e.g., education, healthcare, economic empowerment)

- Continue to support women and girls' education, access to health, and economic empowerment efforts.
- Increase funding for gender-primary programs that promote and strengthen women's political participation, including grants to local civil-society organizations that support women's leadership.
- Engage with traditionally marginalized women to build capacity and support networks to increase their access to political participation and leadership.
- Provide training and mentorship networks for newly elected female politicians.

4. Support women's equal political participation and remove barriers that limit women's access to political leadership.

- Pressure governments with weak or exclusionary election laws that limit women's equal access to political participation.
- Support political party reform efforts that focus on reducing barriers to entry and participation by women, especially in party leadership roles.

- Challenge harmful gender norms and resulting discriminatory practices in all foreign assistance and policy.
- Pressure repressive governments to open civil society space to ensure women's organizations can organize and build networks of support for women candidates.
- Support anticorruption initiatives and free and fair electoral processes in post-conflict countries and new and emerging democracies.
- Provide gender-sensitive training to relevant personnel at DOD, DOS, and USAID on advancing free and fair elections.

5. Increase US foreign aid funding for gender-primary peace and security initiatives.

- Increase funding allocations to activities that promote women's equality and empowerment.
- Increase funding allocations to activities that promote women's effective participation in peace and security processes.
- Increase funding allocations to activities that advance women's equal political participation and leadership.

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POLICYbrief

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The U.S. Civil Society Working Group on Women, Peace, and Security (U.S. CSWG) is a nonpartisan network of 39 civil society organizations with expertise on issues involving women, war, and peace. Established in 2010, the working group acts in its capacity as an engaged, voluntary coalition to support the U.S. government’s efforts to implement national strategies, plans, and policies related to Women, Peace, and Security (WPS).

