

# Women, Peace, and Security Initiative: Advancing U.S. Interests Through Women's Empowerment

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Strong, peaceful and prosperous societies are built on the unique value brought by women participating fully in civic and economic life.

The Women, Peace, and Security initiative could be a high-yield tool for advancing U.S. security interests if it addresses conservative concerns.

Congress should ensure WPS programming meets rigorous accountability standards, considers country-specific factors, and upholds long-standing pro-life life protections.

Over the past 21 years, the United Nations Security Council has worked to advance women's empowerment through its Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) initiative with mixed success. Although a number of member states have developed national-level strategies to implement WPS, these strategies have not translated to legal action except in the United States. The United States codified WPS into law in 2017 and made it one of the top five priorities of its 2017 National Security Strategy. Since then, the United States has continued to embrace women's empowerment through the WPS initiative.

WPS is an opportunity for U.S. policymakers to advance U.S. national security priorities. To do this Congress should verify that WPS activities are tied to the U.S. National Security Strategy, ensure that

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TEXT BOX 1

## How Conservatives Can Advance WPS

Conservatives can play a significant role in advancing long-standing U.S. leadership on WPS in two ways.

1. Conservatives understand the unique value of women in families and communities, sharing many of the same traditional principles held by close-knit societies in other countries.
2. Conservatives regularly engage with religious leaders and faith-based groups. This engagement is particularly useful in conservative societies, which look to religious leaders on sensitive topics related to marriage, the family, children, and roles of men and women in society.

U.S.-funded WPS activities align with the goals of National Action Plans, avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to implementation, ensure that faith-based and civil society organizations are able to participate, and promote accountability through data-driven programming alongside rigorous monitoring and evaluation.

## What Is WPS?

In 2000, the U.N. Security Council adopted Resolution 1325, which recognized the disproportionate impact of war and disaster to non-combatants that falls on women and children and reaffirmed their role in the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict. Most importantly, the resolution urged actors to increase the participation of women and incorporate the perspectives of women in all U.N. peace and security efforts.<sup>1</sup>

The resolution 1325 (2000) addresses the impact of war on women and the importance of women's full and equal participation in conflict resolution, peacebuilding, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction. The resolution also calls for special measures to protect women and girls from conflict-related sexual violence and outlines gender-related responsibilities of the United Nations in different political and programmatic areas.

The resolution encouraged member states to create National Action Plans (NAPs) that detailed how they would implement WPS. As of September 2021, 98 out of 193 U.N. member states have adopted WPS NAPs.

U.S. engagement on WPS originated with the George W. Bush Administration's creation of the Afghan Women's Council in 2002. The United

States released its first NAP on WPS in 2011, spearheaded by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. From there, early WPS policy remained relatively consistent across the Obama and Trump Administrations, with a few key differences. Under the Trump Administration, the United States passed Public Law 115–168, becoming the first and only nation to codify WPS into law. The 2017 National Security Strategy emphasized the empowerment of women and youth, signaling that WPS was a priority for the Trump Administration.<sup>2</sup>

The Trump Administration released the most recent comprehensive WPS strategy in 2019, which focused on four main objectives:<sup>3</sup>

1. **Participation.** Seek and support the participation of women in resolving international conflict and crises.
2. **Rights, access, protection.** Promote the protection of women and girls' human rights, access to humanitarian assistance, and safety around the world.
3. **Internal U.S. capabilities.** Adjust U.S. international programs to improve outcomes for women.
4. **Partner capacity and commitment.** Encourage partner governments to improve the meaningful participation of women in peace and security and decision-making processes.

Four agencies currently implement WPS policy: the Department of Defense (DOD), the Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). All four released WPS implementation plans in 2020.

## WPS Impact Thus Far

Since the WPS program is in the early stages of implementation, there are very few impact studies. However, the July 2021 release of the first annual report provides some insight.<sup>4</sup>

Between fiscal year (FY) 2018 and FY2020, over \$545 million funded WPS activities, affecting over 14 million people in Africa, the Indo–Pacific, Latin America, and the Middle East.<sup>5</sup>

USAID implemented the most WPS programming, assisting 13.6 million individuals in over 26 countries on peace-building, Countering Violent

Extremism (CVE), and leadership programming,<sup>6</sup> including working with local partners in Somalia to promote dialogue on the legal rights of women and their role in conflict mitigation.<sup>7</sup>

WPS activities at the State Department focused on peace and reconciliation, security and criminal justice, and gender-based violence, impacting 544,000 individuals in over 27 countries.<sup>8</sup> The department also “strengthened the capacity of partner governments, supported women-led civil society organizations, and pursued multilateral diplomacy to bolster international support for WPS.” For example, the U.S.–Colombia WPS partnership brought together women leaders in the Colombian government and Colombian civil society to promote women in law enforcement, women’s participation in peace and security policymaking, and WPS provisions in Colombia’s peace accord.<sup>9</sup>

DHS operated on a much smaller scale, using funds from the State Department and USAID for law enforcement, customs and border protection, and immigration services at the domestic level and with partner countries in Latin America through the International Law Enforcement Academy.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, the DOD appointed full-time gender advisers and gender focal point staff members to outline and implement WPS programs. Improved internal capacity and education programs were then used to implement over \$3 million in FY 2020 to build partner capacity to advance WPS principles.<sup>11</sup> Many of these activities included WPS symposiums and trainings to advance the role of women in the security sector.<sup>12</sup>

## Why Conservatives Should Care About WPS

Women play a vital role in preventing and resolving conflict. Research has shown and—various U.S. administrations have echoed—that societies are more peaceful and prosperous when women participate fully in civic and economic life and are involved in conflict prevention and resolution.<sup>13</sup> Women’s empowerment is therefore not just a “feminist issue” but can be high-yield tool to advance peace and stability. (See “Empowering Women Can Advance Peace and Stability.”)

Further, research indicates that there is a correlation between political inclusion of women and the durability of peace.<sup>14</sup> Involving women increases the likelihood of success of peace agreements by 64 percent.<sup>15</sup> There are two reasons for this: First, women are perceived as honest brokers who can work across cultural and sectarian divides. Second, women can access community networks and information to guide negotiations.<sup>16</sup>

TEXT BOX 2

## Empowering Women Can Advance Peace and Stability: Recent Examples

- **Liberia.** The 2003 Accra Peace Agreement to end the four-year civil war in Liberia can be credited to the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace campaign. This non-violent campaign brought together Christian and Muslim women to demand an end to the war, pushing for peace talks; holding negotiating parties accountable; building nationwide public support; and aiding in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration efforts. Shortly after in 2006, Liberia elected its first female president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who served until 2018.
- **Sudan.** Since 2014, the Task Force for the Engagement of Women has played a central role to mediate fighting between different warring factions. Made up of female civil society activists from Sudan and South Sudan, this task force worked together to communicate local priorities to negotiators, mediate peace treaties among tribes, and address recovery efforts. Their efforts are ongoing as Sudan and South Sudan continue to suffer from violence and instability.
- **The Philippines.** Throughout peace negotiations between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, women's participation made up 22 percent of negotiators and 27 percent of the signatories. Leading the Philippine government's negotiating team was Miriam Coronel-Ferrer, the only female in history to sign a major peace accord. To support her efforts, women's groups and civil society organizations conducted national consultations with various ethnic and religious groups to monitor inter-communal violence. These grassroots campaigns provided a road map for the Comprehensive Agreement signed in 2014 to end the decades-long armed conflict. The implementation process is ongoing, but Filipino women continue to help resolve conflict and promote stability throughout the country.

Regrettably, however, between 1992 and 2019, women made up only 14 percent of negotiators, 11 percent of mediators, and 6 percent of signatories in major peace agreements.<sup>17</sup>

## WPS and U.S. Interests

WPS can provide the United States with strategic opportunities in a post-pandemic environment to open doors to potential partners in security cooperation.

In many countries, such as China and Iran, women are severely repressed under the law or face horrifying abuse.<sup>18</sup> Investing in women is therefore a strategic tool in an era of great-power competition. The United States can use WPS to both increase its influence around the world and ensure long-term development and stability shaped by U.S. values and interests.

The strategic value of women in the context of WPS is in bringing their experiences and leadership to peace and security processes. It is also

strongly rooted in their ability to both access and influence members of the community that men cannot. This makes them an asset for U.S. national security efforts.

**Countering Violent Extremism.** In Morocco, the “Morichidat” program, introduced in 2006, trains young female religious scholars to conduct school and home visits to young Muslims who show signs of radicalization.<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, women may be the key for long-term intervention in the fight against terrorism.

However, it is important to acknowledge that women can also be involved with perpetuating violence and extremism. Over the past several decades, women have actively participated in 60 percent of armed rebel groups and have also led recruitment efforts for extremist groups. A 2016 study found that female recruiters of online pro-Islamic State groups were more effective than their male counterparts were.<sup>20</sup> This finding is particularly important given the impending threat of “ISIS cubs,” who, if radicalized by their mothers or other women, could become future leaders of a resurrected Islamic State.

**Combat Effectiveness.** Women frequently have access to populations and venues that are closed to men in conservative communities. This allows them to gather intelligence about potential security risks.

The United States military learned this lesson early on in Afghanistan and Iraq. Insurgents and smugglers used local women to conduct terrorist attacks and smuggling operations.<sup>21</sup> To address this weakness, the U.S. Marine Corps and U.S. Army integrated female servicemembers to support special operations through their Lioness Task Force, Female Engagement Teams, and cultural support teams. Not only were these teams able to interact better with village elders, women, and children, but they were also able to gather critical intelligence on high-value targets and hidden weapons.<sup>22</sup>

## Strengthening WPS

All sides of the political spectrum agree that women play a vital role in family, politics, the economy, and the security sector. Therefore, Congress can incorporate WPS with existing counterterrorism, peacebuilding, human trafficking, and civic leadership policies. However, a number of areas for concern remain.

**Abortion.** Some advocates of WPS inside and outside the United States have used WPS to address conflict-related sexual violence, but in many cases, these funds are also used to provide abortions. For example, in Germany, “safe abortions” are included as part of the sexual and reproductive health pillars of the WPS agenda.<sup>23</sup>

In the United States, Senator Jeanne Shaheen (D–NH)—a leading voice on women’s empowerment in Congress and one of the two main sponsors of the WPS act—has been a strong advocate for U.S.-funded abortions abroad.<sup>24</sup> To ensure buy-in from conservatives, Congress should respect the right to life in all aspects of WPS programming.

Conservatives are also concerned that long-standing pro-life protections will not be upheld in the congressional budget process. In July, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the FY 2022 appropriation bills without including the Helms amendment, which protects taxpayer dollars from being used to fund abortions in foreign programs. Although the budget resolution has yet to make it through the Senate, there is a valid concern that appropriated money by Congress in the future may circumvent these restrictions.<sup>25</sup>

**Budget.** Public Law 115–168 did not include a budget line item to fund WPS activities but instead encouraged implementing agencies to use existing funds. For example, USAID claims that in FY 2017–FY 2018, it invested over \$200 million in programming indirectly related to WPS, \$27 million of which was solely used to fund WPS activities.<sup>26</sup> However, the State Department claims to have spent \$138 million in FY 2019–FY 2020, leveraging funds from existing appropriations for WPS. Meanwhile, DHS claims that it will “secure additional funding when required.”<sup>27</sup> The DOD is the only implementing agency that received congressional support earmarked for WPS, totaling \$8.25 million for FY 2021.<sup>28</sup>

While this method leveraged existing resources, it is difficult to identify the total cost required to fund WPS activities, as each agency tracked total cost across different fiscal years. Funding therefore may jeopardize the success of the program, especially if it is not tied to rigorous monitoring and evaluation.

**Oversight.** It is less clear which agency will oversee and direct inter-agency programming. As it stands, interagency coordination on WPS is limited to three National Security Council meetings a year, a set of standard metrics, and an annual review. There are no specific guidelines on country selection or a steering committee to guide implementation.

Duplication and contradiction may be the result of poor interagency coordination. In Kosovo, for example, the State Department and USAID are carrying out one program that addresses post-conflict reconciliation, another that targets wartime sexual violence, and a third that focuses on building the capacity of women political party activists. It is unclear whether these programs overlap or target different groups. Neither agency discloses any information about its selection process.

Further, both USAID and the State Department use the term *individuals* instead of *women* to describe program participants, suggesting that WPS programming may be targeting groups other than women. However, DHS and the DOD use the term *women* exclusively. Without criteria on program implementation that is connected to national security priorities, WPS activities will operate in a vacuum.

**Metrics.** Current WPS collection methods are inconsistent across implementing agencies. For instance, the State Department and USAID both use Foreign Assistance Indicators, but the DOD claims that its “systems are not configured to track gender-based policies, planning, operations, exercises, activities, and investment.”<sup>29</sup> These differences leave room for incomplete and inconsistent data to properly monitor and evaluate WPS programs.

The 2021 annual report also mentions an effort to increase collection of sex-disaggregated data. In theory, this practice would shed light on the different experiences of men and women. In practice, many countries lack the resources to collect sex-disaggregated data. To do so would require increased funding to train researchers to collect data via surveys and interviews on sensitive topics.

Finally, the annual report and the implementation plans fail to provide information on the types of women being targeted. Women are not a monolithic entity. In Jordan, for example, women participate at some of the lowest rates in the formal economy, even though they outpace men in pursuing university degrees.<sup>30</sup> Western scholarship has traditionally placed blame on neo-patriarchal structures in Arab society for the low employment rate of women; however, education level via socio-economic status, marriage, and financial need have the greatest impact on employment outcomes for Jordanian women. Without good data on what kinds of women WPS programs target, it is impossible to evaluate their effectiveness.

## U.S. Policy Recommendations

WPS could be a high-yield tool for advancing U.S. interests. To ensure that WPS is implemented wisely, Congress should shore up weaknesses in programming. Specifically, Congress should:

- **Prioritize WPS activities in the U.S. National Security Strategy.** The 2017 National Security Strategy made women’s empowerment one of the five priority actions of the Trump Administration. However, the Biden Administration’s Interim National Security Strategy vaguely

references women's empowerment twice—but there are no specific guidelines on the WPS. The Biden Administration should prioritize women's empowerment and make sure that WPS programs align with U.S. national security priorities.

- **Verify that U.S.-funded WPS activities align with the goals of National Action Plans.** In FY 2019 and FY 2020, the State Department provided direct technical assistance to at least three governments for WPS, promoted NAPs with at least five other governments, and “supported countries politically as they developed or revised NAPs, including G7 counterparts in Sri Lanka and NATO Allies in Ukraine.”<sup>31</sup> Such efforts ensure buy-in from high-level government officials who can advance WPS activities.
- **Designate an interagency steering group with a lead coordinator to monitor interagency cooperation.** Congress should create an interagency coordinating body charged with reviewing or approving funding proposals, identifying eligible countries for WPS activities, and preparing the report to Congress mandated in the legislation.
- **Increase transparency on spending allocation.** The 2021 annual report does not break down spending on a country-by-country basis. Congress should require implementing agencies to provide an annual country-by-country breakdown of programmatic spending to understand how much and where money is being spent to implement WPS programming.
- **Streamline data collection alongside rigorous monitoring and evaluation.** It is currently unclear why certain countries are being selected for WPS programming. Therefore, implementors need to provide criteria and methodology that is used to select countries with baseline assessments to evaluate policy performance as part of their yearly report to Congress. Further, data collection methods should be consistent across the board. Congress should mandate annual audits by third-party agencies. This would allow lawmakers to monitor progress toward specific benchmarks so that successful programs can be scaled up and less effective programs can be discontinued. Congress should look to the Millennium Challenge Corporation, particularly its selection criteria and benchmarks, as a model for reforming WPS.<sup>32</sup>

- **Avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to implementation.** Women face different challenges that are specific to the communities that they live in and the various cross-cutting identities that define their role in society. Social and cultural perceptions of sex may limit women's ability to become decision-makers, restricting political agency. To achieve success and community buy-in, programming and project design would benefit from close consideration of the socio-cultural context in each target location.
- **Partner with faith-based and civil society organizations.** Social and cultural perceptions of women can limit their access to certain male-dominated networks and spaces. Since these issues are highly sensitive, it is important to work with relevant stakeholders who can ensure buy-in from the target community. Partnering with in-country faith-based and civil society organizations can help in carrying out WPS program policy goals. For example, in South Sudan, UNICEF worked with faith-based organizations to identify religious leaders who educated parents and the community on harmful practices such as child marriage.

## Moving Forward with Women's Empowerment

Women are often the first and last lines of defense against violence, radicalism, and corruption within their communities. Investing in their futures will have a ripple effect on future generations, decreasing the likelihood of political instability and ensuring that vulnerable populations are less likely to experience sexual violence, abuse, human trafficking, and other forms of exploitation.

The WPS initiative has great potential to elevate women's status and eliminate obstacles to their full participation in society, which is a critically important component of peace and stability around the world. Moving forward, WPS should be driven by rigorous metrics that also consider country-specific factors that may impact project success. Doing so will ensure that WPS becomes an impactful and sustainable foreign aid tool.

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