

Advancing Women's Role in Peace and Security

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Hearing on Women in Conflict: Advancing Women's Role in Peace and Security

Chairman Rubio, Ranking Member Cardin, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today about advancing women's roles in peace and security.

Let me begin by applauding the bipartisan lawmakers—led in the Senate by Senator Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH) and Senator Shelley Moore Capito (R-WV)—who in 2017 came together to pass the Women, Peace, and Security Act, the most comprehensive law in the world to support women's meaningful participation in efforts to prevent and resolve conflict. This week, the Donald J. Trump administration fulfilled one of the law's key requirements by launching a Women, Peace, and Security Strategy, laying out an ambitious agenda to ensure women are part of peace negotiations, security sector forces, and postconflict transitions, while addressing the effects of conflict on women and girls.

Including women in peace and security efforts is not just a matter of fairness—it is a strategic imperative. Research suggests that when women and civil society groups participate in a peace process, the resulting agreement is 64 percent less likely to fail and 35 percent more likely to last at least fifteen years.¹ As security and peacekeeping officials, women provide insights and information that can be mission-critical to stability efforts.² They also improve dispute resolution: women in police forces are less likely than male counterparts to use excessive force and far more likely to de-escalate tensions and build trust with the communities they serve, thereby advancing stability and the rule of law.³ Because of their distinctive access and influence, women are crucial antiterrorism messengers in schools, religious institutions, social environments, and local government.⁴ Countries are more prosperous and stable as the gender gap closes, with stability improving as more women participate politically and as women become more empowered at the

household level.⁵ On the other hand, allowing gender inequality and violence against women to persist increases the risk of instability and conflict.⁶

Despite ample evidence demonstrating the importance of women’s involvement, they are often excluded from peace and security efforts. A Council on Foreign Relations report tracking women's participation in peace processes found that between 1992 and 2017, women comprised less than 5 percent of mediators and less than 10 percent of negotiators around the world.⁷ Women are routinely underrepresented in peacekeeping operations, even though their participation has been shown to improve mission effectiveness and advance stability: in 2017, only 4 percent of UN military peacekeepers and 10 percent of UN police personnel were women.⁸ And while local women’s groups lead grassroots efforts to prevent and resolve conflicts, they received just 0.4 percent of the aid to fragile states from major donor countries in 2012–2013.⁹ U.S. policymakers rarely enlist women’s participation in efforts to combat radicalization—an omission that forfeits their potential contributions as mitigators against extremism.

Although women are underrepresented in today’s peace processes, women continue to make valuable contributions to addressing violence and securing peace at the grassroots level in their countries.¹⁰ Women organize across cultural and sectarian divides and broaden the agenda, raising issues in negotiations that help societies reconcile and recover, like political and legal reforms, social and economic recovery priorities, and transitional justice concerns. They stage mass action, employing visible and high-profile tactics to pressure parties to begin or recommit to peace negotiations, as well as to sign accords. Drawing on their different social roles and responsibilities, they access critical information that can inform negotiating positions and areas of agreement.

In Colombia, for example, women improved the security situation in local communities by mediating local cease-fires, convincing guerrillas to lift roadblocks preventing the passage of people, food, and medicine, and negotiating the release of hostages. Representing 33 percent of the negotiators in the final rounds of talks, women ensured the agreement addressed some of the primary grievances of affected communities, including land restitution and the right to justice and reparations for victims.¹¹

In Syria, women facilitated humanitarian access in areas aid convoys had difficulty reaching, secured the release of detainees, and have done the work local governments should do, from staffing field hospitals and schools to distributing food and medicine to forming an all-female police brigade that has access to areas that their male counterparts do not and providing families with critical services. Yet they remained underrepresented throughout the UN-led peace process starting in 2012—in the 2017 talks, women comprised 15 percent of negotiators.¹²

In Afghanistan, women negotiated directly with insurgent leaders to support the reintegration of demobilized Taliban fighters into local communities, mobilized local support for the peace process, including by encouraging local insurgents to participate in talks, and worked in schools to counter extremist narratives. They also broaden the agenda, as Wazhma Frogh, a member of the Afghan Women’s Network, recounted: “when women engage in the process, we talk about the needs of the communities, about justice, about schools, about health, about education. It becomes about communities and issues, not just about men deciding which power positions to hold.”¹³ Yet in twenty-three rounds of Afghan talks between 2005 and 2014, on only two occasions were Afghan women at the table.¹⁴

Women overcome social and economic inequalities to assume leading roles in nonviolent campaigns, from Chile to Liberia to the Palestinian territories. Nonviolent movements—driving social, political, and economic change—are nearly twice as successful as violent ones at achieving their objectives.¹⁵ In the recent mass protests in Sudan that ousted Omar al-Bashir, women accounted for up to 70 percent of the protestors, and one woman—Alaa Salah—became a symbol of the Sudanese revolution when an image of her leading protestors in a chant went viral on social media.

Women are also on the front lines when it comes to preventing and countering violent extremism in their communities. Women are well positioned to recognize early signs of radicalization because attacks on their rights and physical autonomy are often the first indication of a rise in fundamentalism.¹⁶ Female security officials gather critical intelligence about potential terrorism threats, while the prominent role that many women play in their families and communities renders them especially effective in diminishing the ability of extremist groups to recruit and mobilize.¹⁷ Women-led civil society groups are particularly critical partners in mitigating violence, though counterterrorism efforts too often fail to enlist them.

As women seek to contribute to peace in their countries, they face systematic harassment and violence. The peacemakers and human rights activists promoting security are themselves under growing attack. Twice as many acts of political violence targeting women have been reported during the first quarter of 2019 than in the first quarter of 2018. And many of these acts take place in conflict-affected countries: the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Syria, Sudan, and Yemen all rank in the top ten countries for levels of violence targeting women.¹⁸ Take the example of women protesting on Sudan's streets in the last few months: the regime, before it was overthrown, ordered soldiers on the ground to systematically beat and rape women—a strategy continued by military officials now in charge, with paramilitaries using sexual violence as a deliberate tactic to terrorize civilians.

Sexual violence and human trafficking are not simply gross violations of human rights—they are also security challenges. Wartime rape fuels displacement, weakens governance, and destabilizes communities.¹⁹ Conflict, weak rule of law, and large-scale displacement also expose civilians—including women and girls—to increased risk of trafficking, including forced labor, child soldiering, sex trafficking, and forced marriages. From Iraq to Myanmar to Venezuela, refugee women and girls are at heightened risk of sexual exploitation and trafficking.²⁰ Yet current security-sector efforts to address sexual violence and human trafficking in conflict are inadequate, plagued by insufficient training for security officials, limited accountability through national and international judicial systems, and resource gaps. For example, while one in five women who have fled from their homes go on to experience sexual violence, only 0.1 percent of humanitarian funding addresses violence against women and girls.²¹

Conflict further limits women's and girls' access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, which contributes to cycles of exploitation and poverty; in humanitarian contexts, for example, adolescent girls are two-and-a-half times more likely to be out of school than their male peers. Nine of the top ten countries with the highest rates of child marriage are affected by conflict; crisis situations can exacerbate income inequality and poverty rates, leading families to become more desperate to stay financially afloat.²² Yemen's conflict, for example, prompted an increase in the number of child marriages: in 2017, more than two-thirds of girls were married before their eighteenth birthday, compared to half before the conflict escalated.²³

U.S. government policy and programs pay little attention to the role of women, despite their contributions to peace and security. The Women, Peace, and Security Act envisions the United States as a global leader in promoting the meaningful participation of women in conflict prevention, management, and resolution, and postconflict relief and recovery efforts. The Trump administration's new strategy is a positive step, but there remain many missed opportunities where women could have improved the effectiveness of U.S. operations and advanced global security. I've outlined here a few suggestions based on the gaps I observed while helping to draft the U.S. government's first-ever policy on women, peace, and security issues, and then overseeing its implementation from the National Security Council staff.

To strengthen its peace and security efforts, the U.S. government should pursue the following steps:

In any peace or transition process in which it is involved—from bilateral talks in Afghanistan and Yemen to Syria’s constitutional committee and beyond—the U.S. government should advocate that women represent at least 30 percent of negotiating bodies and mediating teams, a threshold that research suggests affords a critical mass to enable women’s influence. To strengthen its own teams and to lead by example, the U.S. government should likewise ensure that its delegations have at least 30 percent women.

The U.S. government should allocate more resources to support women’s contributions in efforts to prevent and resolve conflicts and to counter terrorism. Women’s groups are rarely considered relevant security partners, and their work remains chronically underfunded. Investment by the United States in this area has been limited to small grants or stand-alone programs, an omission that overlooks the benefits of women’s participation and the contributions of half the population. Now is the time to scale successful women-led initiatives and incorporate them into core peace and security programs and budgets.

Agencies are now developing the Congressionally-mandated implementation plans, which can translate the lofty goals put forth in the administration’s new strategy into diplomatic, development, and defense efforts abroad. In doing so, they should improve broader security initiatives by ensuring they draw on women’s contributions. For example, as the U.S. government pushes peacekeeping operations to be more effective and less costly, it should help countries to address the barriers that limit the pipeline and deployment of female peacekeepers. To strengthen security forces around the world, the U.S. government should increase security training opportunities for female officials. Courses like the International Military Education and Training program or the Antiterrorism Assistance program should double within three years the total number of women receiving training.

To combat the sources of terrorist support, the director of national intelligence should produce a National Intelligence Estimate and form an operational task force on the relationship between women, violent extremism, and terrorism, including an analysis of women’s roles as recruiters, sympathizers, perpetrators, and combatants. The intelligence community should require data collection of indicators related to women’s equality and autonomy as potential early warning signs of growing fundamentalist influence. And given the rise in women’s participation in extremist groups, the United States can no longer afford to ignore the ways in which women can strengthen counterterrorism efforts.

To discourage the use of sexual violence in conflict by militaries, police, and armed groups, the U.S. government should—for example, through its Group of Seven (G7) presidency next year—encourage partner countries to condition bilateral assistance and weapon transfers to foreign militaries on the security units’ human rights record, including with respect to sexual violence. Such a commitment would be modeled on the U.S. Leahy Law (1997) and Section 502B of the Foreign Assistance Act, which prohibits the use of funds for units of foreign security forces that have committed gross violations of human rights. In parallel, the Departments of State and the Treasury should use sanctions to apply a travel ban and asset freeze on human traffickers.

To respond effectively to modern security threats and address the failure of traditional peacemaking methods, the U.S. government should ensure that the rising generation of American diplomats and security professionals recognizes that women’s participation in security efforts around the world advances U.S. stability and should nominate or appoint the necessary leadership to guide the government’s policy and programs, including an Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women’s Issues and a full-time senior-ranking coordinating position at the Department of Defense.

The success of the Women, Peace, and Security Act and of the administration’s new strategy can only be measured through action. Congress and this Committee can work to hold the administration accountable for ensuring that its efforts to advance national security invest in an important but overlooked strategy: the

inclusion of women. It's the right thing to do—and holds the potential to significantly improve stability around the world.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for this opportunity to testify.

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