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. 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. Similarly, post-conflict peacebuilding has been more successful in societies where women are empowered. 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).
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. 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. 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. For example, between 1992 and 2011, women made up just 2 percent of mediators and 9 percent of negotiators in 30 official peace talks. Accordingly, only 7 percent of agreements signed between 1990 and 2010 referenced gender equality or women’s rights.

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.” 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. 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. Only 11 countries (out of 195) are led by female heads of state. 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).

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.
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. 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. When 35 percent of a nation’s legislature is female, the risk of relapse into conflict is near zero (box 3).

Countries with more women in government also enjoy better standards of living across multiple sectors of society, leading to increased peace and stability. 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. 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.

When women are elected in sufficient numbers, they tend to introduce norms essential for good governance and progressive democracies. A World Bank study of more than 100 countries showed that higher percentages of women in parliament correlated to decreased corruption in government. 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. 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).

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.

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.
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).

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. 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. 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. 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.

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.”

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. 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. Not only do women struggle to raise funds to run a campaign, they often receive little or no financial assistance from their political parties. 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.
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.

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.

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.
• 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.

About the Authors

Tanya Henderson, Founder and Director, Mina’s List, a program of Peace is Loud. Tanya is an international human rights and gender lawyer whose work has focused on women’s rights and empowerment; the role of women in conflict resolution and peace-building; and women’s political participation through U.S. policy, international multi-lateral agencies and civil society, and coalition building among global women political leaders. She was a Policy Director for Women's Action for New Directions (WAND), the US National Director for the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), a legal consultant for the Ministry of Social Affairs in Lebanon on issues of gender based violence and women's political participation, and part of a research team in Ethiopia working with Harvard Medical School to research and draft policy on gender inequality, economic development, and health. Her work has been published in academic journals as well as various print and social media outlets. She holds a B.S. from the University of Massachusetts Boston, a J.D. from Suffolk University Law School, and pursued an LL.M. in international law from The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. She has also earned several certificates in mediation and conflict negotiation.

Amanda Domingues, Program Officer, NDI. Amanda Domingues is a Program Officer at National Democratic Institute. While at NDI she has worked both on the Gender, Women and Democracy (GWD) team and the Southern and East Africa team. In her role on the GWD team she served as the lead on work pertaining to Peace, Security, and Democratic Resilience and violence against women in political parties. In her current position on the Southern and East Africa team she works to support NDI’s electoral programs in the region, focusing on gender inclusive elections. Prior to joining NDI, Ms. Domingues attended graduate school at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), where she focused on inclusive peace processes and constitutional reform. While at UCLA, Ms. Domingues was an African Studies Department Fellow and also worked as a Graduate Student Researcher for the Center for the Study of Women.

Ursala Knudsen-Latta, Research and Policy Officer, Saferworld. Ursala Knudsen-Latta is a Research and Policy Officer based in Washington DC. Prior to joining Saferworld, Ursala worked at Alliance for Peacebuilding (AfP) and Women in International Security. Ursala works on Saferworld US’ advocacy team and focuses on issues of violent extremism, gender and conflict, and SDG16. Ursala studied Religions and Theology at the University of Manchester, where her research focused on religion and conflict in South Asia. She worked with the Anchorage Interfaith Council, and the North American Interfaith Network before graduating with a Masters International Peace and Conflict Resolution from American University.
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