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Despite this, women are showing exemplary strength as they combat Covid-19 within their communities. Women peacebuilders and peacekeepers are educating local communities about containing and preventing the spread of Covid-19 and are providing lifesaving services to men, women, and children.

Covid-19 further demonstrates and highlights women’s effective leadership in times of crisis. The United States should elevate women’s voices in Covid-19 response and recovery efforts and ensure their meaningful participation in peace processes and politics post-pandemic.

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THE ISSUE

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INTRODUCTION

In October 2000, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted Resolution 1325, which established the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda. The resolution acknowledges how women and girls are disproportionately impacted by conflict and war and recognizes the critical role that women can and already do play in preventing, managing, and resolving conflict. It calls on all UN member states to increase women’s meaningful participation in peacebuilding and peacekeeping efforts.

This year marks the twentieth anniversary of Resolution 1325 and the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action on gender equality and women’s rights. Twenty-five years later, the message that then-first lady Hillary Clinton delivered in Beijing resonates now more than ever before: “Human rights are women’s rights and women’s rights are human rights, once and for all.”

Over the last few decades, considerable progress has been made toward achieving gender equality and women’s rights around the world. Today, women hold 25 percent of seats in national parliaments, which is more than double the share that they had in 1995. Maternal mortality has declined by 38 percent between 2000 and 2017. The number of girls not attending primary school has decreased from 65 million to 32 million, and 85 percent of secondary-aged girls are enrolled in school. Although progress has been
made, no country has fully achieved gender equality, and women and girls continue to suffer from discrimination and violence in every part of the world today. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that one in three women and girls (35 percent) experiences physical and/or sexual violence at least once in their lifetime.

Women are often perceived as mothers, nurturers, trustworthy, and less violent by the various parties and stakeholders involved in a conflict. Some women use this to their advantage and “capitalize on the commonly held images of women as peacemakers” in order to enter the political and public space. However, some scholars argue that this limits women’s agency and perpetuates gender roles and stereotypes of female vulnerability. There is a growing consensus among scholars that women’s meaningful participation in peace processes increases the durability and quality of peace in the aftermath of a conflict or war. A study examining 82 peace agreements in 42 conflicts between 1989 and 2011 found that agreements with female signatories are more likely to bring lasting peace. The same study also found that peace agreements signed by women are more likely to include provisions aimed at sociopolitical reform. These provisions, in turn, have a greater likelihood of being implemented. Some provisions explicitly call for the adoption of electoral gender quotas, which has been linked to increasing women’s representation in national legislatures. Women’s meaningful participation in peace processes has also been linked to reducing the risk of civil war relapse in post-conflict countries.

Despite their contributions to preventing conflict and promoting global security, women continue to be excluded and marginalized from peacebuilding and peacekeeping efforts. Between 1992 and 2018, women made up only 3 percent of mediators, 4 percent of signatories, and 13 percent of negotiators in all major peace processes throughout the world. Since 1990, there have been no women signatories in the majority of peace agreements worldwide. In 2018, out of six UN-led or co-led peace processes, women were included in only 14 out of 19 delegations. A number of cultural and structural barriers—such as discriminatory laws, institutional obstacles, and social stereotypes—keep women from participating. Even when women are included in peace processes, their presence is rarely acknowledged, and their roles are of a more symbolic rather than substantive nature. Often, they are only able to participate indirectly by being granted observer status or working through civil society actors or UN agencies. Additionally, women are also routinely underrepresented in peacekeeping missions. Of the 98,000 peacekeepers that are currently deployed in 13 missions, women comprise only 6 percent.

The Covid-19 pandemic threatens to derail progress toward gender equality and women’s rights even further. Women and girls are facing the brunt of the pandemic. This is especially true for the 264 million women and girls who live in conflict and fragile settings, where preexisting gender inequalities and patriarchal social norms are being exacerbated, and women are being further sidelined from all areas of decisionmaking. In such contexts, women have limited decisionmaking power because they are often on the periphery of peace and political solutions.

Despite these challenges, women continue to actively agitate for participation in efforts to combat and recover from Covid-19. As has been the case when they participate meaningfully in peacebuilding, women have proven to be effective leaders during global pandemics. As a global leader, the United States should elevate the voices of women in Covid-19 response and recovery efforts and ensure their meaningful participation in peace processes and politics post-pandemic.

THE SHADOW PANDEMIC OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

The shadow pandemic of gender-based violence (GBV) must be addressed alongside the elevation of women peacebuilders. One cannot and should not be done without the other. Acts of GBV increase during times of crisis, such as conflict and war, disease outbreaks, and natural disasters. This is largely due to preexisting gender inequalities and social norms, coupled with increased stress, restricted movement, and social isolation measures. During the Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone, there was a spike in cases of intimate partner violence (IPV), or domestic violence, and a 65 percent increase in early pregnancies in adolescent girls. A similar pattern is already emerging as a result of Covid-19.

In April 2020, UN Secretary-General António Guterres noted that there has been a “horrifying global surge in domestic violence” as a direct result of stay-at-home orders. A number of high- and middle-income countries, including Australia, China, France, Germany, South Africa, and the United States, have all had increases in reports of IPV, as women and girls have been confined at home with their abusers. It is important to keep in mind that GBV should have been considered a global pandemic long before the Covid-19 outbreak. According to UN Women, globally, 243 million women and girls were subjected to acts of gender-based violence (GBV) in the last year alone.
Women and girls in conflict and fragile settings, in particular, have endured high levels of GBV long before Covid-19 started. One of the most common forms of GBV that they face is sexual violence. Armed militants and soldiers often employ sexual violence as a weapon of war to target vulnerable groups, incite displacement, inflict suffering, and sever community cohesion, as had been the case for Rohingya women in Myanmar. These same women are now facing higher rates of child marriage and IPV during displacement. The main threat that women and girls now face is IPV. A recent study by Refugees International on South Sudan, a country with historically high levels of sexual violence in conflict, found that “the biggest risk for women is within the household.”
number of women suffering from sexual violence is likely far higher.

The Covid-19 pandemic is exacerbating the situation for Rohingya women and girls. In May 2020, the world’s largest refugee camp mostly populated by Rohingya people in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh, saw its first case of Covid-19. As of June 2020, two deaths have been reported in the camp, which many believe will be “a ticking time bomb” without significant intervention. The Rohingya people’s understanding of izzat, or “honor,” has specific gender-related implications for women’s agency, freedom, mobility, and rights. A recent study by the Inter-Sector Coordination Group (ISCG) Gender Hub, in collaboration with UN Women, CARE, and Oxfam, found that certain activities by women and girls are being perceived as “dishonorable.” For example, when women attempt to access healthcare facilities or GBV services, some view this as breaking the practice of purdah, which is the seclusion of women from public spaces. Some men, women, and community leaders are blaming women’s behavior as being the cause of Covid-19 in refugee camps, despite no evidence to enforce this claim. Because of this, women and girls are experiencing increased behavior policing, GBV, and mobility restrictions.

Women are also being excluded from decisionmaking systems in their communities. The refugee camps are run by camps-in-charge (CICs), all of whom are men. Men are also the primary decisionmakers over household-related issues and issues that directly affect women and girls. In over half of Rohingya households, men decide when and where women should give birth. Numerous institutional and structural factors constrain women’s leadership and participation in camps, as well as their households. Some of these barriers include “lack of family support and resistance from husbands, burden of household and caregiving work, lack of education, and low self-confidence.” Religious and sociocultural beliefs and values intensify the resistance to women’s leadership and participation. Men and religious leaders often view women’s leadership as tarnishing the family’s izzat and a threat to maintaining the practice of purdah.

Survivors of GBV often experience mental health problems, such as alcohol and substance abuse, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, and increased risk of suicide. They also experience physical health problems, such as HIV/AIDS, infertility, and traumatic genital inflammatory disease. When women and girls experience violence, entire families, communities, and economies suffer as well. In the United States alone, women lose eight million days of paid work each year due to IPV. The annual cost of IPV around the world is estimated at $4.4 trillion, which amounts to 5.2 percent of the global GDP. More generally, the global monetary cost of violence against women and girls had previously been estimated at $1.5 trillion. This figure is expected to grow as Covid-19 increases GBV worldwide.

When there are increased levels of GBV, communities in conflict and fragile settings are more likely to experience instability. For example, increased IPV was observed in Ethiopia prior to its war with Eritrea in the late 1990s. Valerie Hudson, a scholar in international security, has argued that “the very best predictor of a state’s peacefulness is not its level of wealth, its level of democracy, or its ethno-religious identity; the best predictor of a state’s peacefulness is how well its women are treated.” The increase in levels of GBV due to Covid-19 will likely aggravate existing conflicts and pave the way for new ones.

When incidents of GBV such as IPV increase in conflict and fragile settings, services for survivors are often not available or are poorly funded. From 2016 to 2018, only 0.12 percent of all humanitarian funding was allocated to GBV-related programs as requested in country humanitarian response plans (HRP). For example, in the Central African Republic (CAR) where rape is often used as a weapon of war, the 2016 HRP requested $28.5 million for GBV programming. Of that, just under $1.1 million was received. Following the kidnapping of the 276 Chibok schoolgirls by Boko Haram—made famous by the #BringBackOurGirls campaign—Nigeria’s 2016 HRP requested only $6 million for GBV programming, 2.4 percent of the total request. Of that, only $726,507 was received. HRPs are requesting comparatively few resources for GBV and receiving even less. Due to Covid-19, funding is expected to be further limited and restricted. The international community should close this gap while providing additional resources for Covid-19-related increases in GBV.

In addition to GBV, Covid-19 has brought several other challenges for women and girls. It has compounded economic impacts for women, especially for those working in the informal economy. An estimated 89 percent of
students, including 743 million girls, are currently out of school, and drop-out rates are expected to increase amongst adolescent girls. Recent data has found that women make up 70 percent of healthcare workers on the frontlines of the Covid-19 response, which shows the risks that predominantly female healthcare workers face.

**WOMEN: THE KEY TO COVID-19 RESPONSE AND RECOVERY**

Despite increases in GBV, many women are playing active roles in helping their communities combat and recover from Covid-19. Female leaders—including Angela Merkel, Jacinda Arden, and Sanna Marin—have been praised for their effective leadership in responding to Covid-19, despite being only 11 female heads of state and 12 women who serve as heads of government. Against all odds and determined to be part of the solution, women who are being hit the hardest by the pandemic—those in conflict and fragile settings—are showing the greatest resilience in fighting Covid-19 within their communities.

Even though Rohingya women are being kept out of decisionmaking circles in refugee camps, they are raising awareness of Covid-19 and mobilizing their communities. Due to the closure of women-friendly spaces, as well as the restrictive nature of social norms, women and girls have less access to information. To address this, female volunteers have been providing crucial information to other women through door-to-door sessions, reaching 2,863 community members within a single week. Women are also involved in mask production and have been advocating for the presence of female police officers in refugee camps. Many women have received support and even praise from their family and community members for their effective leadership in responding to Covid-19, yet they remain largely absent from decisionmaking roles.

Rohingya women are not alone in their fight for meaningful participation in efforts to combat and recover from Covid-19. In Kashmir, women have created a domestic violence hotline and offer online classes to survivors of GBV that focus on healing and self-expression. Women in the Maldives are providing psychosocial support to other women and girls over the phone. In Sri Lanka, women’s rights organizations have launched an initiative to prevent domestic violence by threatening to call the police if men hit their wives. Syrian women are providing self-defense classes to other women and girls in refugee camps in Jordan. In Uganda, women peace mediators are simultaneously combatting Covid-19 while resolving community disputes.

Women’s networks and women’s rights organizations have also been focusing their attention on the most vulnerable. Women have long devised and executed innovative approaches to resolve conflicts and to facilitate peace and reconciliation. Now, they are creating vehicles for women’s leadership and participation in Covid-19 response and recovery efforts. Ninety-one women’s networks and women’s rights organizations from Iraq, Libya, Palestine, Syria, and Yemen issued a joint statement calling for a ceasefire due to Covid-19. In Libya, members of the Libyan Women’s Network for Peacebuilding have been spreading awareness of Covid-19 through social media and via national and local radio stations. The network has teamed up with a legal aid network to provide masks and gloves to inmates in prisons and detention centers and has called for the release of prisoners, especially those who are elderly or ill. They are also working with local NGOs to distribute food and information to vulnerable migrant and refugee communities on preventative measures. At the same time, Libyan women are looking for ways to establish an equal, inclusive, and sustainably peaceful post-conflict and post-pandemic society. They meet weekly on WhatsApp and Zoom to find ways to enter male-dominated decisionmaking and negotiation spaces.

**Women have long devised and executed innovative approaches to resolve conflicts and to facilitate peace and reconciliation.**

Women peacebuilders are also working with content development and social marketing organizations to highlight the work that women are doing in Covid-19 response and recovery efforts. For example, in Jordan, an organization known as World of Letters created images saluting women who are combatting the virus as army pilots, doctors, medical technicians, nurses, and scientists. These images have been part of a social media campaign that seeks to showcase Jordanian women’s contributions in responding to Covid-19. By portraying women in these powerful ways, these organizations are sending a message that women are not only essential during a global pandemic, but they will continue to be once the pandemic has subsided.
It is important to support organizations like World of Letters that are working to elevate the voices, stories, and needs of women peacebuilders who are on the frontlines of Covid-19. The Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security (GIWPS) recently launched a new initiative, Stories from the Frontlines: Women Peacebuilders in the Pandemic, which seeks to raise awareness about the challenges that women are facing on the ground and the opportunities for systemic change presented by the crisis. During this time, it is just as important to support grassroots organizations that are working to build the next generation of women peacebuilders, such as the Andi Leadership Institute for Young Women and Women LEAD Nepal.

Women peacekeepers also have an important role to play. Despite the evidence that women’s participation in
peacekeeping missions improves mission effectiveness and promotes peace and security, they are severely underrepresented in operations. The rate of female participation in peacekeeping has grown slowly from 1 percent in 1993 to a mere 4 percent of military peacekeepers in 2017, far short of the UN target of 15 percent. The UN has set a target of contributing 16 percent of female staff officers and military experts in peacekeeping operations and warned if countries fail to meet the target, positions will be reallocated to countries that are able to deploy more women in peacekeeping missions. It makes sense for the UN to do so, especially since women peacekeepers are also playing a major role in responding to Covid-19.

Women peacekeepers are preventing the spread of the virus by educating local communities through radios, implementing health and sanitation policies, providing handwashing stations and soaps to local communities, and supporting logistics for communities to implement their Covid-19 response plans. They are key to Covid-19 response and recovery efforts because they have greater access to communities than their male counterparts, and it is easier for them to build the trust of women and girls. For example, it is oftentimes easier for women to interview and support female survivors of GBV and acquire critical information that would otherwise be difficult to obtain.

Most importantly, women serve as powerful mentors and role models for young women and girls in conflict and fragile settings.

**CREATING A FOUNDATION FOR WOMEN’S LEADERSHIP POST-PANDEMIC**

Women who are engaging in Covid-19 response and recovery efforts, whether as healthcare workers, organizational leaders, volunteers, or peacekeepers, must continue to lead and meaningfully participate in peace processes and politics post-pandemic. Time and time again, women have proven that they can effectively lead in times of crisis, and Covid-19 is no exception.

In 2000, Ethiopia was one of the six countries that contributed to more than 50 percent of all maternal deaths around the world. An army of female community healthcare workers played a crucial role in drastically reducing maternal mortality. Now, women are leveraging the credibility and trust they built in the 2000s to combat Covid-19. Temesgen Ayehu, the director of Primary Health Care for the Ministry of Health of Ethiopia, claims that “the trust [these women] have built through the years will help us reach communities as early as possible.” Over 40,000 women have already been “improving hygiene, monitoring new cases, and dispelling myths about Covid-19,” which has infected over 5,000 people in Ethiopia alone. Some of the women responding to the pandemic are recent graduates in their twenties, while others are mothers with prior experience in educating communities and families about reproductive health.

Should conflict rear its head in the Horn of Africa as it has in the past, these women should be on the shortlist for leadership positions when peacebuilding efforts begin. In 2015, a large influx of Burundian asylum seekers entered Tanzania and sought refuge at the Nyarugusu refugee camp. The chairperson of the camp, Angelique Abiola, was faced with the seemingly insurmountable task of integrating 70,000 Burundian refugees into a camp that already sheltered 60,000 Congolese refugees. Due to her effective leadership, the integration happened with relatively few negative repercussions. As a result, Abiola is often compared to renowned female African leaders, such as former presidents Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Joyce Banda, even having been conferred the unofficial title of “camp president.” “Many people could not believe a woman could lead,” Abiola has said. “But I proved them wrong.” Abiola continues to actively campaign for women to take up leadership positions in the camp.

There is no greater example of women’s effective leadership in times of crisis than that of Liberian women who are often rightly credited with ending 14 years of civil upheaval and war. Although there were no female mediators or negotiators involved in the formal peace process, female leaders participated in observer roles as civil society delegates. They were instrumental in “demanding formal talks, holding belligerents accountable to negotiation timetables, mobilizing national support for the process, and facilitating the disarmament of former combatants.” The Women in Peacebuilding Network brought together women from Liberian refugee camps and across the region for anti-war protests. Collectively, these efforts led to the eventual signing of the 2003 Accra Peace Agreement.

The reputation that Liberian women earned as a result of their effective leadership has only gotten stronger over the years. WIPNET became known as a powerful, widely respected group for what they accomplished in the early 2000s. Its members played an essential role in electing Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as president on her promise to make gender equality and women’s rights central to her
administration’s agenda. Women managed market stalls so that their female owners could register to vote and watched children while mothers voted on the day of the election. Close to 80 percent of women flooded the polls during Liberia’s first post-conflict presidential election. In 2005, Sirleaf made history when she was elected as the first female president in all of Africa. She became known as “Africa’s Iron Lady” and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011 for her “non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women’s rights to full participation in peace-building work.”

Eleven years after peace came to Liberia and nine years after Sirleaf came to power, the country and entire region fell victim to the most widespread outbreak of the Ebola virus in history, which ultimately claimed more than 4,800 lives and infected nearly 11,000 people. Women, many of whom were members of WIPNET, were front and center in combatting the Ebola outbreak. They joined forces to fight the “invisible rebel” by implementing community-based techniques that they honed during the war. Let Girls Lead, a network of local organizations, educated communities about preventing Ebola and distributed free sanitary kits. Another organization, Traditional Women United for Peace, produced a series of guidelines for rural communities to follow, which included quarantine and social isolation measures. Many lessons can be learned from Liberia’s peace process and response to Ebola, namely the importance of women’s leadership of pandemic response and recovery efforts in conflict and fragile settings.

As was the case in Liberia, women’s meaningful participation in peace processes often helps women discover their political voice in conflict and fragile settings. However, women in these contexts face just as much discrimination and marginalization in the political arena as they do in peace processes. This is despite the fact that the majority of voters believe that women candidates are better at “thinking about what needs to happen before, during, and after a crisis.” Even though women have proven that they can handle a crisis, they still face discrimination and a higher bar than men do to demonstrate their qualifications. One of the ways in which this can be addressed is by ensuring that women are elevated in Covid-19 response and recovery efforts in conflict-affected contexts.

As talks between the United States and the Taliban raise hopes for peace in Afghanistan amidst a global pandemic, Afghan women’s inclusion and input are critical to combatting Covid-19 and establishing lasting and sustainable peace. According to Fauzia Kofi, the first woman to lead a political party in Afghanistan, women’s inclusion in the upcoming peace talks and in politics is crucial. “We need the political presence of women in power,” she says, “so we can get inside the structures to make our presence meaningful.”

One of the main obstacles that Afghan women have faced in the past is the disagreement among major stakeholders about their value and what they bring to the table. In the two decades that the Taliban have ruled Afghanistan, some leaders have voiced support of limited rights to girls’ education and women’s employment in certain sectors. However, it is far from certain that the Taliban has any intention of including Afghan women in future peace talks. For years, Afghan women have been viewed as not being vital participants to peace processes. Their inclusion in Covid-19 response and recovery efforts could move the needle on societal attitudes that have historically held women back.

The lockdown that is currently imposed by the Afghan government has greatly limited the reach of NGOs and women’s rights organizations at a time when their assistance is most needed. Nevertheless, women peacebuilders are working diligently to combat Covid-19. The Afghan Women’s Education Center (AWEC) has been distributing food and school supplies to families in Kabul and Nangarhar, and the Afghan Women’s Network recently launched a fundraising campaign to provide food and hygiene supplies to IDPs.

This is not the first time that Afghan women have stepped up. Over the years, women peacebuilders have played an essential role in “providing legal, social, economic, educational, health, and psychological services to millions of Afghan men and women.” However, since 2005, Afghan women have only had an active role in peace processes twice. The lack of inclusion of women almost certainly accounts for the failure to create lasting and sustainable peace in Afghanistan. It is critical that the United States and its allies push for Afghan women’s inclusion in Covid-19 response and recovery efforts. Doing so could result in women’s meaningful participation in the upcoming peace talks and politics thereafter.
Even though women have proven that they can handle a crisis, they still face discrimination and a higher bar than men do to demonstrate their qualifications.

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR U.S. LEADERSHIP
Over the past few years, the United States has demonstrated an increased interest in the WPS agenda and advancing the rights of women and girls in conflict and fragile settings. The WPS Act was passed in 2017, making the United States the first country in the world with a law codifying the WPS agenda. The bipartisan act affirms the core principles of Resolution 1325 and calls for the United States to be a global leader in promoting women's meaningful participation in preventing, managing, and resolving conflict. The law even requires training for government officials on how to further the WPS agenda.

The United States has made meaningful strides in furthering the WPS agenda since the passing of the WPS Act. The Trump administration developed a WPS Strategy in 2019, which explicitly mentions the engagement, inclusion, and mobilization of men and boys in support of women's meaningful participation in peace processes. The strategy also recognizes the importance of sex-disaggregated data, which helps analysts and policymakers examine and understand differences in the experiences of men and women. A recent study found that Covid-19 cases among women in conflict and fragile settings may be severely underreported, highlighting the need for better and greater sex-disaggregated data.

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In March 2020, the WPS Congressional Caucus was launched, with Representative Lois Frankel (D-FL) and Representative Mike Waltz (R-FL) serving as co-chairs. The new caucus seeks to “ensure that the WPS goals stated in the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and in the Women, Peace, and Security Act (P.L. 115-68) are considered national security and foreign priorities for the U.S. in our bilateral and multilateral relations, discussions, and agreements.”

In compliance with the WPS Act, the Department of State (DOS), Department of Defense (DOD), Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) recently released their plans for implementing the WPS Strategy. However, they have fallen short of including “specific and measurable goals, benchmarks, performance metrics, timetables, and monitoring and evaluation plans,” which are necessary to the strategy’s implementation.

U.S. LEADERSHIP ABROAD MUST START AT HOME
Despite the progress that the United States has made in promoting the WPS agenda, sexual violence remains pervasive in the U.S. military. The DOD’s annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military estimated that 20,500 service members, 13,000 of whom were women, were raped or sexually assaulted in 2018, a 38 percent increase from 2016. The report also found that 59 percent of women were assaulted by someone with a higher rank than them.

The recent death of Army Specialist Vanessa Guillén, who was brutally murdered and allegedly sexually harassed by a fellow soldier at Fort Hood, has sparked the #IAMVanessaGuillen movement whereby service members and veterans share their own experiences with sexual assault or harassment. As mentioned in DOD’s Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan for WPS, the United States must lead by example and work to eradicate sexual violence in the armed services. The United States should also provide female service members with safe work environments, more leadership roles, and increased participation in decisionmaking processes.

In late 2020, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) will be hosting Beijing +25, a high-level meeting to accelerate the realization of gender equality and women’s rights. In addition to the meeting, this year’s milestones on Resolution 1325 and the Beijing Declaration are the perfect opportunity for the United States to assert its leadership on the WPS agenda and to elevate the voices of women in Covid-19 response and recovery efforts, especially in conflict and fragile settings.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Though Covid-19 threatens progress toward gender equality and women’s rights (e.g., by exacerbating GBV challenges), there are a number of steps that the United States can take—some in cooperation with allies and within the multilateral system—to ensure that women in conflict and fragile settings are equipped with the tools they need to deliver effective Covid-19 responses. In addition to having an equal voice in Covid-19 response and recovery efforts, the United States and its allies must ensure that women continue to lead and meaningfully participate in peace processes and politics once the pandemic has subsided.

To assert its global leadership on the WPS agenda, the United States should consider the following.

On elevating women in policy and in practice during Covid-19:

• Engage women and women’s rights organizations in all areas of decisionmaking during and after Covid-19 and provide them with the longer-term funding that they will need to adapt their work to the new realities of a global pandemic and to develop the next generation of women peacebuilders.

• Ensure women are meaningfully involved in Covid-19 response and recovery efforts in fragile states, especially where the United States is engaged in active military operations.

• Increase women’s leadership in domestic Covid-19 response and recovery efforts, especially on the White House Coronavirus Task Force, which currently boasts only two female members (out of 27).

• Adopt a gender lens to all domestic and international Covid-19 response programming to ensure that efforts consider and adjust for the gendered impacts of the pandemic.

• Fund, integrate, and otherwise support efforts to elevate women’s voices in the Covid-19 response, as is being done by GIWPS and World of Letters.

• Require all Covid-19 data to be disaggregated by sex at all levels and in all places, then anonymize these data and release them publicly.

• Leverage the twentieth anniversary of Resolution 1325 and the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action to connect the importance of women’s leadership in the Covid-19 response to the importance of including (many of the same) women in future peacebuilding efforts.

On strategic realignment around WPS:

• Create an interagency body with the primary purpose of coordinating a whole-of-government approach to WPS; this could either take the form of a policy coordination committee (PCC), a similar White House-led effort (e.g., the Atrocities Prevention Board under the Obama administration or the Atrocity Early Warning Task Force under the Trump administration), or an inspector general tasked with ensuring adherence to WPS strategies and/or the evaluation of policies through a gender lens.

• Elevate the U.S. Department of State's Office of Global Women's Issues to be led by an assistant secretary of state (A/S) under the undersecretary of state for civilian security, democracy, and human rights, with multiple deputy assistant secretaries of state reporting to the A/S who will be responsible for high-level participation in the aforementioned interagency coordinating body.

• Address and ultimately eradicate sexual violence in the U.S. armed forces.

• Promote female military and police officers into peacekeeping operations and leadership roles.

• Reinstate the White House Council on Women and Girls, ensuring that its mandate includes issues relevant to the WPS agenda.

• Create a WPS Index similar to the Trump administration’s Women’s Global Development and Prosperity (W-GDP) Initiative Index that was launched in February 2019.

On leveraging partnerships with allies and within the multilateral system:

• Explore opportunities for coordination, collaboration, and/or co-programming with key stakeholders with existing robust programs in place to counter GBV and increase women’s meaningful participation in peace processes, including Canada, Denmark, Norway, the United Kingdom, the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

• Identify priority countries (e.g., Bangladesh, Ethiopia, and others) to which foreign assistance countering GBV and supporting the WPS agenda can be targeted in collaboration with like-minded allies (e.g., Canada, Denmark, Germany, and Japan) and via U.S. contributions to the multilateral system.
On financing:

- Increase funding for GBV programming through its own bilateral foreign assistance and humanitarian aid mechanisms, additionally striving to fully fund HRPs, which can be much lower than the actual amount needed.

- Provide additional “above and beyond” funding to address the increases in GBV due to Covid-19.

- Fund the WPS agenda through sustained contributions to the appropriate parts of the multilateral system (e.g., UN Women, to which the U.S. funding places it barely in the top 10 of government donors), addressing what a 2015 study called a “consistent, striking disparity between policy commitments to gender equality and women’s empowerment, and the financial allocations to achieve them.”

- Leverage the new WPS Congressional Caucus to call attention to these funding gaps.

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