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Advancing Gender Equality at Home and Abroad by Leveraging Women, Peace, and Security

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Introduction and summary

President Joe Biden marked International Women’s Day this year by issuing an executive order (EO) establishing a White House Gender Policy Council.¹ Building on the groundwork laid by the Clinton and Obama administrations, the council is charged with ensuring that the U.S. government advances gender equity and equality at home and abroad.² Unlike earlier efforts, however, this EO requires every cabinet secretary to participate in the council, which itself reports directly to the president. This formulation provides the council with far more weight than its predecessors and is designed to ensure that the responsibility for advancing gender equality is woven throughout the Biden administration’s domestic and foreign policies and mainstreamed across the government.

See also: “Fact Sheet: Recommendations for Advancing Gender Equality at Home and Abroad” by Carolyn Kenney

The EO requires the White House Gender Policy Council to produce a governmentwide strategy within 200 days laying out how the United States will advance gender equity and equality at home and abroad. Specifically, the strategy must include recommendations on “policies, programs, and initiatives that should be proposed, passed, or implemented” to do so.³ The Biden administration’s prioritization of developing an overarching strategy to address gender equity and equality in its domestic and foreign policy is critical to U.S. credibility and success domestically and with foreign partners. It is also long overdue.

Fortunately, at least on the international side, this effort will not need to start entirely from scratch. The U.S. government’s implementation of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Act of 2017⁴ through its national strategy⁵ and department-specific implementation plans⁶ offers an existing framework by which to organize foreign policy efforts on gender equity and equality, as well as expand them to make greater gains and better align with domestic policy efforts.

To this end, in its governmentwide strategy to advance gender equity and equality in U.S. domestic and foreign policy, the council should ensure that the government's existing WPS implementation architecture is expanded and better institutionalized throughout the federal government's national security and foreign policy processes and workforce, and that it is better aligned with U.S. domestic policy. In order to achieve this, the council's strategy should focus on the following:

- Reorient WPS implementation to include how the United States advances women's empowerment and gender equality at home as well as with other nations.
- Invest more resources in WPS personnel, programs, and trainings that institutionalize gender equality and women's empowerment in the national security architecture beyond any one administration.
- Better integrate gender into foreign policy strategies and national security discourse.
- Ensure gender analyses inform decision-making in national security and foreign policy.

Evidence and experience clearly demonstrate that gender-inclusive policies and decision-making lead to better security outcomes at the local, national, and international levels, and that gender inequality is linked to greater instability, violence, and corruption. Yet advancing gender equality often remains disconnected from national security policy- and decision-making processes. The work of the White House Gender Policy Council can hopefully rectify this.

This report includes specific recommendations, related to each of the focus areas noted above, that the council should consider for inclusion in its final strategy in order to better institutionalize gender equity and equality in the U.S. government's work.

As the transition from the Obama administration to the Trump administration made abundantly clear, it is far too easy for an administration to walk back critical gains on issues ranging from climate change to gender equality. The work of the White House Gender Policy Council provides a great opportunity to institutionalize policies across the U.S. government in ways that are difficult for an incoming administration to reverse, which can ensure lasting advancements for gender equity and equality at home and abroad.

Background on WPS

In 2000, the U.N. Security Council adopted the landmark resolution on Women, Peace, and Security—U.N. Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325—which formally acknowledged for the first time the disproportionate impact of conflict and crisis on women and girls as well as the critical roles women play in preventing and resolving conflict.⁷ In recognition of the impact women’s meaningful participation has in achieving sustainable security and the particular harm women and girls face in conflict and crisis, the resolution called for increasing women’s participation in decision-making roles surrounding peace and security, ensuring the protection of women and girls from gender-based violence, and incorporating gender perspectives and analysis in peace and security efforts.

UNSCR 1325 represented the culmination of decades of efforts—led by women’s civil society organizations and U.N. member states such as Namibia and Bangladesh—to elevate gender equality on the global stage. It also builds on an ever-growing body of evidence demonstrating women’s powerful contributions to sustainable peace and security and the links between gender inequality and instability, violence, and corruption. For example, studies have shown that when women meaningfully participate in peace processes, the resulting agreements are far more likely to be successfully implemented and achieve lasting peace.⁸ Research has also shown that nations that subordinate women—and thus have a high degree of gender inequality—are more than two times as likely to become a fragile state and more than 3 1/2 times as likely to have governing structures that are more autocratic and corrupt, among other things.⁹ Such studies clearly demonstrate the link between gender equality and a nation’s security. However, advancing gender equality often remains disconnected from national security policy- and decision-making processes.

Over the past 20 years, there have been nine more Security Council resolutions on Women, Peace, and Security, known collectively as the WPS agenda, which address issues such as conflict-related sexual violence, women’s participation in peace processes and decision-making, and the need to conduct gender analyses to

inform decisions. At its core, the WPS agenda aims to reverse gender inequalities globally and ensure that decision-makers understand and account for the gendered implications of the policies, actions, and investments they make—both because it is the right thing to do and because doing so is essential for achieving lasting global security.

In the United States, the passage of the WPS Act of 2017 enshrined the WPS agenda in U.S. law and marked a major bipartisan win brought about by dedicated and persistent advocacy from U.S. civil society organizations. The WPS Act requires the U.S. government to develop a governmentwide strategy on WPS every four years and tasks specific departments and agencies—the U.S. Departments of Defense (DOD), Homeland Security (DHS), and State and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)—with implementing WPS and developing their own department- or agency-specific implementation plans every four years.¹⁰ Additionally, the act requires that implementing departments and agencies provide WPS-specific training to U.S. personnel, track metrics on their implementation progress, and report to Congress on this progress.¹¹

WPS implementation by the United States continues to garner widespread bipartisan support—there is even a WPS Congressional Caucus. Launched in March 2020 by Rep. Lois Frankel (D-FL) and Rep. Michael Waltz (R-FL), the caucus was created to ensure the U.S. government continues to implement the WPS principles spelled out in UNSCR 1325 and the WPS Act.¹² Given the strong bipartisan support for WPS implementation and the fact that the WPS Act requires the U.S. government to update its WPS strategy and associated implementation plans every four years, the Biden administration has a robust starting point on which to build and expand its foreign policy efforts to advance gender equity and equality at home and abroad.

Recommendations

In its governmentwide strategy to advance gender equity and equality in U.S. domestic and foreign policy, the White House Gender Policy Council should ensure that the government's existing WPS implementation architecture is expanded and better institutionalized throughout the federal government's national security and foreign policy processes and workforce and that it is better aligned with U.S. domestic policy. In particular, the council should make clear to federal departments and agencies what their roles are in advancing gender equity and equality and lay out clear guidance for how they should fulfill these roles. Without doing so, the council runs the risk of some departments and agencies treating gender equity and equality as a box-checking exercise and doing the bare minimum. In order to achieve this, the council's strategy should include the following recommendations.

Reorient U.S. WPS implementation

Since the adoption of UNSCR 1325, many donor nations such as the United States have approached their WPS efforts largely as a foreign policy or international development exercise, focusing almost exclusively on external engagements and programs in partner nations. This approach ignores the many inequities and injustices facing women domestically in donor nations and assumes such challenges exist only in other countries, which is unequivocally not the case. A recent report by the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, "The Best and Worst States to Be a Woman: Introducing the U.S. Women, Peace, and Security Index 2020," drove this point home, revealing vast disparities in women's well-being, rights, and opportunities across the United States and among racial groups.¹³ Comparative studies exist across countries on women's well-being and empowerment that demonstrate this point as well.¹⁴

The U.S. government will be more credible—and more effective—in its efforts to promote gender equity and equality abroad when it both acknowledges its own deficiencies at home and works collaboratively to ameliorate them. Therefore, WPS implementing departments and agencies must understand the status of men, women, and gender minorities in the United States and look inward at their own policies and practices with respect to inclusivity. As such, there should be greater focus and transparency on where the United States broadly and WPS implementing agencies and departments specifically have succeeded and failed with respect to women’s empowerment and gender and racial equality. As a first step, agency and department progress reports to Congress on WPS implementation should include internal metrics used to measure issues such as women’s meaningful participation in decision-making; recruitment and retention; reasons for attrition; gender and racial wage gaps; and prevalence of sexual harassment and assault. Additionally, these reports should continue to be produced annually and made public so that lawmakers, civil society, and partner nations can track how implementing agencies are progressing on their own commitments to gender inclusivity.

The Gender Policy Council should also recommend legislation that expands the WPS Act and enshrines the policies laid out in the following EOs and memoranda:

- EO 13583 on Establishing a Coordinated Government-Wide Initiative to Promote Diversity and Inclusion in the Federal Workforce, August 18, 2011¹⁵
- Presidential Memorandum on Promoting Diversity and Inclusion in the National Security Workforce, October 5, 2016¹⁶
- EO 13988 on Preventing and Combating Discrimination on the Basis of Gender Identity or Sexual Orientation, January 20, 2021¹⁷
- EO 13985 on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government, January 20, 2021¹⁸
- National Security Memorandum on Revitalizing America’s Foreign Policy and National Security Workforce, Institutions, and Partnerships, February 4, 2021¹⁹
- EO 14035 on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in the Federal Workforce, June 25, 2021²⁰

Sen. Bob Menendez (D-NJ) has already introduced legislation in this same vein, titled the Federal Jobs Act,²¹ which could be updated to reflect the latest EOs, memoranda, and guidance documents released by the Biden administration and reintroduced in the U.S. Senate for passage, thereby ensuring that such policies and initiatives do not fall to the wayside when administrations change.

The United States still has much work to do domestically to ensure women and gender minorities across all racial and ethnic groups are empowered and provided equal opportunities. This includes addressing the gender and racial wage gap and wealth gap; providing supportive work-family policies such as paid family and medical leave and paid sick leave; guaranteeing workers good-paying, high-quality jobs; ensuring access to high-quality, affordable child care; guaranteeing access to affordable health care; reducing gender-based violence; and expanding access to reproductive health services and coverage for maternal health care. By modeling and employing the gender-inclusive principles the United States advocates abroad in its domestic policies and in its foreign policy workforce, and by exchanging best practices and lessons learned with partners, the United States is better situated to make even greater gains for gender equity and equality across the board.

Invest in and institutionalize WPS activities and programs

One major and persistent challenge to WPS implementation around the world is that even when countries commit to WPS policies and develop national action plans to implement WPS, these policies and plans largely go unfunded. Without financing to carry them out, mandates such as WPS can never achieve their full potential and often get pushed aside in favor of other policy priorities. This can have far-reaching effects on a government's ability to institutionalize WPS from the top down, including by inhibiting the ability to build programming; hire long-term personnel; and provide clear and effective training on WPS and the importance of integrating a gender perspective into policies, plans, and activities. It is clear the Biden administration understands this challenge since it included in its EO establishing the Gender Policy Council a directive to the director of the Office of Management and Budget to "identify opportunities to promote gender equity and equality in the budget that the President submits to the Congress."²²

In addition to including funding for gender equity and equality in the president's budget, the council should also recommend that WPS implementing departments and agencies include WPS in their own budget submissions to Congress. By

including WPS-specific budget requests, departments and agencies are better equipped to build out dedicated, long-term programming, training, and staffing structures that are institutionalized and capable of lasting beyond any one administration or budget cycle. And by directing this inclusion, the council would make clear that investments in WPS are an administration priority that senior leaders must execute.

For example, to date, Congress has provided WPS-specific funding only to DOD (\$4 million in fiscal year 2019, \$7 million in FY 2020, and \$8.5 million in FY 2021), which DOD had not included in its annual budget requests. This additional congressional funding has been critical to DOD's WPS implementation progress—allowing it to build out WPS programming, training, and a more robust network of gender advisers at all the combatant commands, military services, the joint staff, and the Office of the Secretary of Defense. However, because DOD has not included WPS in its budget requests to Congress (a bureaucratic challenge that requires dedicated senior leader support and prioritization), it is nearly impossible to plan ahead and institutionalize WPS programs and personnel into the DOD bureaucracy. This in turn creates an enormous amount of uncertainty around WPS staffing and programming each year, particularly when there are continuing resolutions that delay resource allocation for items not included in department budgets, and thus hinders continued and expanded WPS implementation and institutionalization.

As it will likely take time for WPS implementing departments and agencies to integrate WPS into their budget requests, the Gender Policy Council should also recommend that Congress provide WPS-specific funding in the interim to all four implementing departments and agencies. The WPS-specific funding provided to DOD the past three fiscal years, though relatively small, has allowed its WPS programming to expand exponentially. By continuing to provide funding to DOD and by providing similar funding to DHS, the State Department, and USAID, Congress could ensure that the U.S. government makes even greater strides in its efforts to advance gender equity and equality abroad under the WPS mandate. Furthermore, additional funding could also ensure that departments and agencies expand and improve their workforce's understanding of WPS and its relevance to all aspects of foreign policy by making greater investments in training and education. Such investments will accelerate much-needed cultural shifts in the foreign policy realm to recognize and account for the role of gender in national security.

Integrate gender into foreign policy strategies and discourse

Previous administrations—including the Trump administration—have generally included at least some reference to promoting gender equality and/or women’s empowerment in their national security strategies. However, these references—and any sort of gender analysis of the national security landscape—do not tend to trickle down to other important national strategies such as the National Defense Strategy or the National Counterintelligence Strategy. This is likely due to a lack of understanding of the gendered dimensions of national security and their importance—all the way from the senior leadership level to the action officer level—as well as an insistence on keeping gender siloed outside the policymaking process. Such omissions of rhetoric and analysis in critical strategic documents set the tone from the top down that gender equity, equality, and analysis are not actually important to achieving U.S. national security and foreign policy goals, which makes them easy to ignore when it comes to taking actions to realize these goals. Additionally, such omissions stifle robust discourse and understanding at the most senior levels of how gender affects and is affected by national security and foreign policy, leaving it siloed and often ignored.

To address this issue, the Gender Policy Council should recommend that council representatives from departments and agencies designate subject matter experts to help draft, review, and clear the national security strategies for which they are responsible to ensure that gender is mainstreamed throughout these critical policies and to help educate those responsible for implementing these policies in the process. Additionally, for those strategies owned and led by the White House, the council co-chairs should also recommend the designation of experts to help draft and review those strategies on which co-chairs would ultimately provide clearance.

Mainstreaming gender throughout the government’s national security and foreign policy strategies is an important step in ensuring that senior leaders and the foreign policy workforce writ large take this issue seriously and prioritize it when working toward U.S. objectives. However, more is needed to guarantee that there is sufficient understanding among senior leaders in particular—and the federal workforce more broadly—of gender in the national security landscape and the role it should play in shaping policies, actions, and investments. To further this understanding, the council should recommend that gender experts be included and/or consulted in National Security Council meetings beyond those focused solely on WPS, that senior leaders—and not just women senior leaders—be briefed on the gendered implications of any matters on which they are testifying

to Congress, and that those individuals designated to represent cabinet members in council meetings provide, at a minimum, two briefings annually to the cabinet members about the council's and their specific department's or agency's efforts to advance gender equity and equality.

Providing these kinds of senior leader engagement opportunities is vital to ensure buy-in and a baseline understanding at the highest levels for the advancement of gender equity and equality in U.S. foreign policy. This would have huge impacts on both personnel buy-in and understanding lower down the chain, as well as on the kinds of dialogue senior leaders can have with their counterparts in partner nations to advance gender equality. These engagements can also greatly empower WPS implementing offices and experts to actually affect the personnel, policies, and actions that will help them achieve gender equity and equality outcomes within their departments and agencies and abroad when working with partner nations.

Ensure gender analyses inform decision-making

It is also critical that decision-makers and their staff be well informed of the gendered implications of any national security decisions they recommend or make. This requires that there be robust use of gender analysis in the policy- and decision-making processes around national security. A gender analysis examines and interprets information about gender relations in specific social, cultural, economic, and political settings to better understand roles, access, security, and power dynamics in a particular environment.²³ Critical to a robust gender analysis is ensuring it accounts for the intersection of other important identities that could influence gender relations, such as race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, age, and disability, among others.

To ensure that such analyses reach the highest levels of decision-making, the Gender Policy Council should recommend that all decision memos and action memos going to the president and cabinet secretaries include a gender analysis. Ideally, such analyses would be included in these kinds of memos going to other senior officials as well. However, for these analyses to be properly conducted and consistently conveyed to those influencing or recommending decisions, the U.S. government needs to take several initial steps, particularly related to intelligence and data collection and training.

As with the challenges related to financing, the Biden administration clearly recognizes that there is a gap in the government's data collection and analysis of the gendered dimensions of national security. In the EO establishing the White House Gender Policy Council, the administration tasked the director of national intelligence with designating a national intelligence officer for gender equality “who shall coordinate intelligence support for the Council’s work on issues implicating national security.”²⁴ The EO also tasked the council with proposing “improvement[s] in the collection of data related to gender and gender identity.”²⁵ As a starting point, the council should recommend that the national intelligence officer for gender equality ensure that the intelligence community, at a minimum, collects sex-disaggregated data and prioritizes gender considerations in its information collection as part of the intelligence cycle. Without this kind of data collection at the outset, it is not possible for analysts to evaluate the gendered dimensions of a given environment or situation and therefore understand the complete security picture and offer fully informed recommendations for the way ahead.

Additionally, in order for analysts to evaluate this information and for those consuming it to fully understand and communicate the implications of it, they must also have a basic understanding of how to conduct a gender analysis and make or recommend gender-informed decisions. As such, the council should also recommend that national security personnel—particularly those serving as intelligence analysts and action officers across the national security workforce—receive training on how to conduct a gender analysis and communicate its findings.

While it will take time to integrate gender analysis and training more robustly into the national security and foreign policy decision-making process, doing so will have profound effects on both global and U.S. security.

Conclusion

The Biden administration's elevation of the Gender Policy Council and its prioritization of mainstreaming gender in the federal government's work represents a major step forward for the advancement of gender equity and equality at home and abroad. While there is certainly much work to be done to set the U.S. government on a path toward fully realizing the vision laid out in the EO establishing the council, not all of it must start from scratch. Leveraging the government's existing WPS mandate and architecture and making some necessary changes to better institutionalize it and realize its stated goals provides the council with a path forward in its foreign policy to achieve even greater gains in gender equity and equality around the world. It is well past time for the national security and foreign policy establishment to fully recognize, understand, and account for the gendered implications of U.S. and global security, and hopefully the work of the Gender Policy Council can ensure this happens.

About the author

Carolyn Kenney is a senior policy analyst for National Security and International Policy at the Center for American Progress. Most recently, Kenney served as the deputy director for women, peace, and security (WPS) in the International Humanitarian Policy Directorate in the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy at the U.S. Department of Defense, where she earned the Office of the Secretary of Defense Medal for Exceptional Public Service. In this role, Kenney was lead author and coordinator of the department's first WPS implementation plan. She also helped oversee the WPS program at the strategic level, which included developing departmentwide policies on WPS, coordinating with the interagency, organizing regular outreach to stakeholders inside and outside government, and helping oversee the program's \$8.5 million budget. Prior to joining CAP, Kenney worked at the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, International Crisis Group, and Human Rights Watch. Kenney received her master's degree in international human rights from the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver and her bachelor's degree in international affairs from the University of Colorado Boulder.

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