

WOMEN WAGING PEACE

The Fate of the Women, Peace, and Security Act in 2018

By Alexandra Schmitt

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While the Trump administration has been the subject of many headlines about its war *on* women, few have discussed Trump's major contribution related to war *and* women. Last October, President Trump signed the Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017 into law. Yet the impact of this potentially monumental legislation remains murky in 2018. Rather than allowing it to fade into the background of White House drama, both the Trump administration and activists alike must recognize that the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda represents an opportunity to make real progress in improving the prospects for women and peace around the world. With conflict on the rise in many regions, and with civilians bearing the brunt of modern wars, the timing has never been more important.

THE WPS AGENDA

Historically, women have been sidelined during conflict. At best, they are tasked with keeping the peace in their community and families, and at worst, they are victims to be seen or mourned, not heard. But research has shown that involving women in conflict

resolution and peace negotiations makes resulting agreements much more successful in the long run—they are 64 percent less likely to fail and 35 percent more likely to last at least 15 years.¹ Studies have also demonstrated that countries with more gender equality are associated with lower rates of conflict between and within states. One study found that women's participation in negotiations was strongly correlated with parties' reaching agreement and with positive implementation outcomes.²

Based on this research, the WPS agenda focuses on the important role women can play in conflict management, resolution, and peacebuilding if given the opportunity to do so. In sum, it aims to increase the role of women in all areas of peace and security, as well as to increase their safety and security in conflict. Based on this compelling research, the United Nations Security Council formalized the WPS agenda in 2000 in Resolution 1325, a landmark declaration that recognized the important role women play in conflict.³ Since UN Security Council Resolution 1325, many subsequent resolutions have clarified and expanded the role of WPS in mitigating conflict. The agenda has four pillars that

encompass the broad roles women can play before, during, and after conflict: participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery.

Despite this wealth of evidence and enactment of the resolution, women are still often neglected or left out entirely in peace deals. A study cited by the UN found that women were only referenced in 27 percent of agreements signed from 2000 to 2015.⁴ Another study found that even while WPS was gaining steam, women composed just 11 percent of all negotiators in peace processes between 1992 and 2011.⁵ Recent developments in the US and the international community demonstrate that there is still a long way to go until WPS can play a formative role in global international security policy.

US NATIONAL ACTION PLAN

One successful path toward implementation of WPS has been to codify the agenda at the national level in countries around the world. Since 2005, when the UN Security Council⁶ urged states not to fall behind on real implementation of Resolution 1325, 72 countries, representing a wide geographic and socioeconomic range, have implemented National Action Plans (NAPs).⁷ NAPs outline specific protocols and policies that states promise to adapt to institutionalize WPS in their security strategies.

The US NAP was announced by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2010 and published in 2011. The United States was a relative latecomer to the NAP game, but the plan specifically laid out details for implementation and integration into US national security. The US NAP called for five objectives: integrating and institutionalizing WPS among US diplomatic, development, and defense sectors; increasing women's participation in peace processes and decision-making in conflict; protecting women and children from violence and improving accountability mechanisms

for violators; promoting women's involvement in conflict prevention efforts; and providing access to relief and recovery resources for women and girls in conflict-affected disasters.⁸ More practically, it provided specific policy guidance to US agencies on how to incorporate the WPS agenda into US strategy in the field. In 2016, an updated plan called for a renewed focus on monitoring and evaluation and a new emphasis on the role of women and girls in preventing and responding to violent extremism.⁹

THE WOMEN, PEACE, AND SECURITY ACT OF 2017

While laudable, policy agendas like the US NAP still are not enough without adequate funding and relevant agencies leading the charge on implementation. The Obama administration made some steps toward incorporating WPS into US policy, but there appeared to be a lack of tangible evidence of policy changes. Advocates and experts outside of the administration called for more designated funding and a specific training scheme to ensure implementation was a success.¹⁰ So, it was exciting that Congress passed the Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017 and called for a more formal WPS integration plan.

The WPS Act was not an overnight success. Resolutions were introduced in the US House of Representatives as far back as 2003 calling for implementation of UNSCR 1325.¹¹ The real predecessor of the WPS Act was first introduced in 2012 by then-Senator Barbara Boxer. Subsequent updates were introduced again in 2014 and in 2015. A version of the WPS Act was reintroduced in May 2017 by Senator Jeanne Shaheen, a Democrat from New Hampshire, and Representative Kristi Noem, a Republican from South Dakota. It was passed in September and signed into law in October 2017.

The WPS Act calls for a government-wide strategy on implementation of WPS. It outlines

training requirements for Department of State and Department of Defense officials on the participation of women in conflict prevention and peacebuilding, emphasizing collaboration across US agencies.¹² It imposes two reporting requirements on the executive branch, a one-year progress report to congressional committees and a written briefing on the WPS implementation and monitoring and evaluation efforts.¹³

Despite championing a very conservative agenda, President Trump signed the WPS Act into law and agreed to all of these provisions. This decision could be interpreted as an important signal of the strength of support for WPS across both sides of the aisle. Its passage is a major testament to the persistence of civil society members who pushed for years to make the legislation a reality with bipartisan support. But the fact that it took 14 years to finally pass in Congress is another example of how women's issues get pushed aside on the national agenda, even when they enjoy bipartisan support, and how easily this law could lead to nowhere.

Given this frame, one is left wondering how Trump administration officials will square the letter of the law with administration policy thus far. In fact, it is reasonable to question whether it will even be implemented, or if Trump's policy makers intend to put the agenda to rest on a dusty shelf. In 2016, many advocates feared that the Trump transition team's request for a list of all women's programs meant that he was prepared to cut many of them.¹⁴ As of February 2018, Trump's Department of State has yet to appoint a Global Ambassador for Women's Issues (and was reportedly considering someone who seemed extremely unlikely to advance policies in line with the progressive stance of the WPS Act).¹⁵ Furthermore, Trump's budget proposal for fiscal year 2017 zeroed out funds for the women's issues office at the State Department (it had a \$8.25 million budget in

2016), and his administration has paid little attention to existing gender programs.¹⁶

IN OTHER WORDS, THERE IS A GLARING DISPARITY BETWEEN TRUMP'S SIGNING OF THE WPS ACT AND HIS ADMINISTRATION'S ACTIONS THROUGHOUT HIS FIRST YEAR IN OFFICE.

In other words, there is a glaring disparity between Trump's signing of the WPS Act and his administration's actions throughout his first year in office. Among other provisions, the WPS Act called for the United States to be a "global leader in promoting the meaningful participation of women in conflict prevention, management, and resolution, and post-conflict relief and recovery efforts" and reaffirmed the importance of international collaboration to achieve these aims.¹⁷ Yet, Trump's "America First" strategy has done little to lead the United States on women's rights or WPS, and he has squarely rejected cooperation in the international arena (the long list of examples includes exiting the Paris climate agreement, threatening to pull out of the UN Human Rights Council and reduce UN funds, and whittling down the United States' diplomatic corps). The law also calls for increased training for US Foreign Service officers and other personnel, yet the Trump administration put forward one of the smallest State Department budgets in recent memory, with no mention of trainings for any personnel on any issues.¹⁸ In short, Trump's record on gender issues and diplomatic solutions is questionable, and it is unclear whether, even though he signed the Act, he is at all serious about making it a reality.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The read from Washington appears to be one of mixed signals—hope that there is room for progress, but realistic expectations for how

far the WPS agenda can go in this administration. Below are a few recommendations to actors inside and outside of government on where the United States should go from here to achieve the true aims of the WPS Act. There needs to be strong civil society pressure on this administration, reinforced by advocates within the government, and backed up by a commitment in the form of funding and follow-up if real implementation of the Act stands a chance.

I. Keep the Fight for WPS in the Public Eye

Activists around the world and in the United States have fought for decades to make the WPS agenda a reality. Their efforts were rewarded last year with passage of the WPS Act, but the fight for effective implementation continues. One thing advocates should not do is lose hope in a Trump administration and assume that WPS is over or irrelevant.

Civil society can play an important role in keeping the pressure on the Trump administration. In drafting the 2011 NAP and its update in 2016, the Obama administration held several meetings and conducted outreach to NGOs and academic experts immersed in the details of WPS.¹⁹ Part of the challenge for civil society members who are trying to engage with the Trump administration today is the glaring rosters of empty positions. There are simply not a lot of people in this administration working on these issues, and those who do are wearing several other hats. Women seem to be falling to the bottom of agenda lists. And when meetings do happen to discuss the WPS Act and its implementation, it is unclear that there is any follow-up from these meetings from administration officials, despite signaling their openness to work together.

Civil society must not be discouraged by these hurdles. Advocates need to remain energized and engaged in dealing with this

administration. They should continue to press the Trump administration for continuous consultation and meetings with officials, and follow up relentlessly to ensure that positive steps towards implementation occur. NGOs should raise awareness and publicity about any hearings convened by Congress on WPS. They should keep public pressure up—through op-eds, social media, and public information campaigns—to ensure WPS remains on the political agenda. In combination with Congress, internal advocates, and outside pressure, this strategy might give the WPS agenda a chance in the Trump administration.

2. Build Momentum within US Agencies

The WPS Act leaves room for the Trump administration to develop its own strategy on Women, Peace, and Security, to be outlined in a plan delivered to Congress one year from the Act's passage in October 2018. It is a good sign that the Obama-era NAP and executive orders on WPS remain in place as US policy today. These pieces, which received bipartisan support in Congress, can serve as guidance for any Trump policy. A future version of the NAP—or whatever form the strategy mandated by the WPS Act takes—should emphasize the importance of mainstreaming women into national security planning and policies throughout the State and Defense Departments, not just in human rights silos.

Officials within the US government and serving in Trump's administration can help build momentum for WPS. Advocates who understand the value and importance of WPS can frame this as an opportunity for a legacy-defining issue, with broad bipartisan support, for which the Trump presidency can claim some credit. One way advocates can do this is by creating an interagency training program to solidify and integrate WPS throughout the US security community. A survey conducted by the New America Foundation found

a stunning majority of US security officials were unfamiliar with even basic elements of the WPS agenda.²⁰ The WPS Act specifically calls for State Department Foreign Service officers and Defense Department officials to receive training on WPS.²¹ If leaders within Trump's security staff step up and advocate internally for this training, it can help ensure the US WPS agenda becomes a reality.

3. Protect and Consolidate the Gains Already Made with Funding

Congress' power of the purse can play an important role in bolstering American support for women who are stepping up to negotiating tables around the world. There is strong language in the 2017 Act on monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, which gives Congress a mandate to ensure implementation remains on track.²² Congressional representatives—especially strong voices on women's issues—should exercise oversight responsibilities to ensure that executive branch offices are including WPS in program implementation and adequately training staffers on the intricacies of WPS.

Unfortunately, any follow-up on WPS implementation appears largely missing from the congressional agenda today. Professor Joan Johnson-Freese of the US Naval War College noted that the WPS Act of 2017 “was an easy bill to pass to show rhetorical support ... and then let it go unfunded or unattended with little personal loss to any member.”²³ Lyric Thompson, Director of Policy and Advocacy at the International Center for Research on Women, noted that “Governments—including our own—very rarely put their money where their mouths are with regard to gender equity.”²⁴ Congressional officials should remember that funding for gender-focused programs has proven to be a solid return on US foreign investment and is supported by substantive quantitative research. Representatives in the House and Senate should actively support

WPS through increased appropriations and more dedicated funding.²⁵

Another important caveat, pointed out Professor Johnson-Freese, is that for women to have a meaningful voice in any peace process, “they must have equal access to education, health care, food, employment choices, reproductive rights, etc., which the Act does not address.”²⁶ The reality is that a successful WPS approach requires robust support for gender equality *across* the social spectrum. Recent cuts to US development aid, and specifically programs promoting women's equality, do not bode well for this prospect.²⁷ Congressional officials can again step up here and protect appropriations dedicated to women and girls, and ensure that Trump's State Department and United States Agency for International Development are adequately funding these mechanisms around the world.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the onus may lie with women (to no one's surprise) and men who care about these issues to put pressure on our government to uphold its commitment to WPS. As 2018 elections ramp up, activists and students can ensure that WPS implementation is on the agenda for policymakers running for office. Now that the initial burst of activity on blogs and congressional news releases has passed, it is up to us to make sure WPS continues to remain on the radar for officials.

NOTES

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