

COUNCIL *on* FOREIGN RELATIONS



The first all-female unit of UN peacekeepers stands at attention as it arrives at Roberts International Airport outside Liberia's capital, Monrovia, on January 30, 2007. (Reuters/Christopher Herwig)

INSIGHTS FROM A CFR SYMPOSIUM

Women's Contributions to Peace and Security Processes

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*In December 2016, the Council on Foreign Relations' Women and Foreign Policy program and Center for Preventive Action co-convoked a symposium on the role of women in conflict prevention and resolution. The on-the-record event was streamed live and can be found on CFR's YouTube channel. The symposium was made possible through the support of the Compton Foundation. The views described here are those of symposium participants only and are not CFR or Compton Foundation positions. **The Council on Foreign Relations takes no institutional positions on policy issues and has no affiliation with the U.S. government.** In addition, the suggested policy prescriptions are the views of individual participants and do not necessarily represent a consensus of the attending members.*

Symposium Takeaways

- Empirical evidence proves the benefits of including women in conflict prevention and resolution and in efforts to counter terrorism and violent extremism.
- Many high-ranking diplomats and military leaders recognize that no society has successfully transitioned out of conflict unless women were a part of the mainstream of that society.
- Women’s participation in peace and security processes is still plagued by obstacles, including a lack of funding, cultural and safety barriers, and a dearth of leadership through example by the countries that most vocally preach the merits of inclusion.
- To improve security outcomes, societies around the world should invest in the contributions that women make to preventing and resolving conflicts. Major actors, including the United States and international organizations, should lead by example with more diverse delegations to peace and security processes.

INTRODUCTION

[Research shows](#) that including women in conflict prevention and resolution, as well as in efforts to reduce radicalization and violent extremism, generally leads to more secure peace. U.S. leaders—from diplomats to military commanders—have seen the efficacy of including women in peace and security processes and do not want to see those lessons discarded or overlooked. At a December 2016 [symposium](#), entitled “Women’s Participation in Conflict Prevention and Resolution,” CFR hosted three panel discussions in Washington, DC, with government officials, civil society experts, and military and private sector leaders, who addressed how women improve security outcomes in conflict-prone areas.

IMPROVING SECURITY OUTCOMES: FROM ADDRESSING FRAGILE STATES TO COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

“No society has ever successfully transitioned from being a conflict-ridden society to a developing society or better unless women were a part of the mainstream of that society,” retired General John Allen, former commander of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan and former special presidential envoy to the global coalition to counter the self-proclaimed Islamic State, also known as ISIS, recalled telling former Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

Getting women more involved in conflict prevention is neither a Band-Aid nor a zero-sum game, other experts said. It is “about the inclusion of women to the benefit of men and women and society,” reflected retired Admiral Daniel Leaf, former director of the Asia-Pacific Security Studies Program and former deputy commander of U.S. Pacific Command.

Peace talks that include women at the table, studies have found, are more likely to succeed and last longer than those that exclude women. Research also shows that enlisting the help of women makes it easier to counter radicalization before it takes root. In the last fifteen years, some sixty countries—developed and developing alike—as well as international organizations such as the United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the African Union, and the Group of Seven (G7) nations, have all made commitments to boost women’s participation in conflict resolution.

By empowering women, we can make them a force to reduce the reality of radicalization.

Yet despite years of good intentions and international commitments, the broader inclusion of women in conflict resolution is still plagued by obstacles, including a lack of funding, cultural and safety barriers, and a dearth of examples by the countries that most vocally preach the merits of inclusion.

Possible solutions, panelists said, could involve countries such as the United States setting a clear example of inclusive peace processes—for example, by including more women in delegations, military units, police forces, and the like, as well as investing more in civil society. As Allen reflected, it is critical to “empower civil society, give them a voice, and provide them funding and support, and sometimes physically provide them security . . . [because] solving the problems by military means is never going to do it. We’re going to be fighting forever.”

HOW WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION ADVANCES SECURITY INTERESTS

More than fifteen years ago, UN Security Council Resolution 1325 sought to make women a more integral part of conflict prevention and resolution around the world. But, over time, that became just a box to check, rather than a way to seriously make women partners in conflict resolution, some panelists noted.

However, the growth of the Islamic State, and the group’s reliance on women, has galvanized global attention on the bigger role that women can play in conflict situations. “About two years ago people were like, wait a second—apparently women are useful in conflict, because ISIS is using them,” said Alaa Murabit of the advocacy group Voice of Libyan Women. The rise of the Islamic State prompted conversation among governments, nongovernmental organizations, and think tanks about how to make women a bigger part of the peace process, she said, making them think about “how we can leverage it ourselves.”

“It should not have taken ISIS using women as recruitment tools for us to say, wait, women have agency in conflict,” Murabit said. “Women are already on the front lines of countering all forms of violence in their communities, whether that be through negotiating ceasefires with proscribed groups [or] working with victims,” reflected Jayne Huckerby, director of the International Human Rights Clinic at Duke University School of Law. She suggested the more important question is “how we can be supportive of those particular efforts” and draw on them in broader diplomatic and security work.

The Case for Women’s Participation in Security

- When women participate in peace processes as witnesses, signatories, mediators, and/or negotiators, the resulting agreement is [35 percent more likely to last at least fifteen years](#).
- The participation of civil society groups, including women’s organizations, makes a peace agreement [64 percent less likely to fail](#).
- Higher levels of gender equality are associated with a [lower propensity](#) for [conflict](#), both between and within states.
- Female security sector officials frequently have access to populations and venues that are closed to men, which allows them to [gather intelligence about potential security risks](#).

“Women can play a particularly important role in reducing radicalization in society, which in turn can improve security,” said Allen. “Empowering [women], we can make them a force to reduce the reality of radicalization,” he said, calling it an “investment [that] pays off in virtually every occasion where I’ve had

the opportunity to see it.” Allen noted that in Afghanistan, increasing women’s participation was a conscious part of his mission, because making women part of mainstream society reduced the Taliban’s capacity to attack. He advised future administrations to marshal women’s leadership to make a difference at the “ground level,” in order to “defeat the circumstances that can change a young man or woman’s views, to radicalize them, and make them ultimately susceptible to extremist recruitment.”

COUNTERING SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN CONFLICT

Sexual violence is a defining feature of many conflicts, including those in the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, and South Sudan. “I think this is one of the most disturbing aspects of what’s going on in conflicts,” said Princeton Lyman, former U.S. special envoy to Sudan and South Sudan, adding that “to address violence and to prevent sexual violence requires empowering local women. Where women are organized and nonviolent in major ways, they have an impact.”

“This is not a Third World issue. This is not a modern world issue. This is a war issue,” said Zainab Salbi, founder of Women for Women International. What is needed, she argued, is to address the psychological, political, and military structures that allow sexual violence to happen—and may even encourage it.

While commonplace in many conflicts, rape is not inevitable, said Chris Jenks, director of the Criminal Justice Clinic and a law professor at Southern Methodist University. He cited [research](#) showing that, far from being a constant scourge, the prevalence of rape in war varies widely, depending on a host of factors. But one decisive variable determining whether rape occurs in a conflict is the attitude of military commanders, who can encourage, tolerate, or prohibit the use of rape as a weapon of war.

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That makes it possible to minimize rape during conflicts, rather than just seeking to punish it after the fact, Jenks said. Ways to prevent sexual violence include increasing the emphasis on discipline in military training, holding military commanders accountable, and publicly shaming perpetrators, thereby stigmatizing rape much the same way that the use of chemical weapons is today.

ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES LIMITING WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION

A number of obstacles limits women’s ability to participate in peace and security processes. Panelists proposed solutions to alleviate these barriers and advance the role of women in security, thereby strengthening U.S. conflict prevention and resolution efforts.

Setting an Example

Actions speak louder than words. Empirical evidence abounds proving the importance of including women in conflict prevention and resolution and counter-radicalization, panelists agreed. What is needed now, suggested Leaf, is not to keep proving why women ought to be included but showing it. In many cases, the failure by Western governments or international organizations to include women in their delegations,

military command, or police forces—not to mention in their own politics—can undermine the message that women’s inclusion is important, panelists stressed in every session.

Murabit recalled one meeting in Libya where an official from a predominantly male UN mission questioned the lack of women on the Libyan side of the table. “Well, where are yours?” she countered.

There are precedents. While commanding international forces in Afghanistan, Allen cast about for a female general officer to show Afghans he had a “credible” woman leader. A top-notch, quickly promoted Croatian colonel fit the bill, and proved “spectacular” on the job, setting an “incredible example for the Afghans of what a woman general officer [in NATO] looks like and can accomplish.” NATO did something similar with Afghan women police cadets, partnering them with female trainers from the Royal Jordanian police. “It’s the demonstration of the value of inclusion that compels men to appreciate it and to implement it,” Allen said. Someone in the next administration, Leaf said, should scan every room to “look at the demographics and say ‘Who are we missing?’” Murabit suggested that “leading by example is probably step number one.”

Gaps in Women’s Participation

- Between 1992 and 2011, women were fewer than [4 percent](#) of signatories to peace agreements and 9 percent of negotiators.
- Only [3 percent](#) of UN military peacekeepers and 10 percent of UN police personnel were women in 2015.
- Local women’s groups received [0.4 percent](#) of the aid to fragile states from major donor countries in 2012–2013, despite the role that they play in conflict prevention and resolution.

One obstacle to the United States setting that example is the continued prevalence of gender-based violence across U.S. society, including in the U.S. military. That violence needs to be reckoned with so that the United States can better influence leaders in conflict-prone places, Lyman said. “The more honest we are about it, the more we are able to talk about this as an international norm to deal with and encourage others to deal with it as well,” he said. He recommended that the U.S. government “pursue both at the same time”—that is, address the issue domestically while supporting other countries to similarly respond to it.

Overcoming Physical and Cultural Barriers

Local women, Murabit argues, “physically put their lives on the line” by taking part in conflict resolution. Those promoting the inclusion of women should do more to protect them when they speak out, participants said. Murabit noted that in Libya, bringing more women into the conversation meant “address[ing their] security first and foremost.” Lyman called for UN peacekeepers to “protect people who want to stand up,” which they have conspicuously failed to do in South Sudan.

Cultural barriers can also keep women from taking their place at the table and can make it hard to deal with sexual violence. Donor countries and international organizations, some panelists noted, often harmfully dismiss a lack of local women’s participation by blaming so-called cultural differences. Involving women will, in some cases, require jettisoning cultural barriers that excuse the sidelining of women, panelists said. International missions seeking trade or investment deals, Murabit noted, steamrolled over cultural roadblocks. “But when it came to women’s inclusion, [culture] seemed to be the huge barrier,” she said. And, panelists reflected, despite plenty of empirical evidence showing that women’s inclusion leads to

better outcomes, there is still built-in resistance to change in organizations, schools, militaries, and government bureaucracies, both in the developed world and in conflict-prone regions.

The stigma associated with sexual violence in many societies makes it difficult even to speak about the issue, and therefore much harder to find solutions. Salbi contrasted the ashamed silence of raped German women after World War II with the vocal stance Germany takes today on women's rights around the world. To encourage open dialogue on the issue, "we just need to support local voices—until it evolves from within so they can own the [solutions]," Salbi advised.

Leveraging Funds

Finally, money talks, as numerous panelists noted. U.S. government financing could be used as a lever. Leaf suggested making financial assistance conditional on recipient countries boosting women's inclusion in peacemaking and peacekeeping. "I'll engage, but here's the norm I expect," he said. Still, shortfalls in funding make it harder to systematically promote women's participation. Even when money is available, it often goes first to larger, better-known organizations, panelists said, which may have a strong track record, but which in many cases operate far from the grassroots level of women's participation.

At other times, money is available but is not readily used to fund women's involvement in security processes. Making it easier for proponents of women's involvement in deradicalization efforts to access funding earmarked for other purposes would pay off with greater security. Allen advocated making Defense Department money available for State Department–run programs, such as those that help women fight radicalization. "It isn't a military solution. It is the solution that fits the need," he said.

Women are already on the front lines of countering all forms of violence in their communities.

Ironically, regulations meant to cut down on terrorist financing are actually making it harder for women's groups, including ones that work against radicalization, to get money. Huckerby noted that restrictive rules on electronic funds transfer to locales linked to terrorism end up curtailing many groups' ability to operate. Streamlining their ability to access funding without falling afoul of anti-terror laws would help close the gap, she said. "There has to be a very honest conversation around how we address that."

Given limits on what the government can do, there is a need for a greater effort from society at large, especially private-sector financial assistance, said Adnan Kifayat, a former advisor to the Department of Homeland Security on violent extremism and head of Global Security Ventures with the Gen Next Foundation. Countering violent extremism is not "just a government fight or a government challenge," he said, noting that hatred, intolerance, and exclusion "are not necessarily things that government is going to be able to resolve or fix." Instead, he said, foundations, corporations, and philanthropists need to invest more.

Society needs to "stand up . . . all the elements of national power," Kifayat advised. That includes investing in the contributions that women make to preventing conflict and extremism around the world. Because, in the twenty-first century, unleashing the potential of 50 percent of the world's population is not just the right thing to do—it is a strategic imperative to advance national security.