

**Testimony to the U.S. Senate
Committee on Foreign Relations**

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June 13, 2019

Chairman Rubio and Ranking Member Cardin, thank you for the opportunity to be here and discuss the critical importance of involving women in the advancement of peace and security.

Today, I'm representing the Independent Women's Forum, a nonprofit dedicated to developing and advancing policies that enhance people's freedom, choices, and opportunities.

I draw heavily from my past experience as the Director of the International Women's Issues Office at the U.S. State Department during the George W. Bush Administration and my work with survivors of sexual assault, domestic violence and rape.

The Women, Peace and Security Act of 2017 ensures that the United States will be a global leader in promoting the participation of women in conflict prevention, management, and post-conflict relief efforts.

I enthusiastically commend the U.S Congress and President Trump for making this the law of our land.

This important legislation recognizes that including women in conflict prevention and resolution will promote more inclusive and democratic societies. The addition of women to these discussions is critical to country and regional stability. It is within the national interest of the United States to ensure the participation of women and a true demonstration of our global leadership.

The participation of women in peace processes has contributed to increased success in reaching agreements and the subsequent longevity of those agreements.

According to studies conducted by the United Nations, when women have a substantive role in peace negotiations the likelihood the agreement will last beyond fifteen years increases by as much as 35 percent.

However, it is not always easy to insert women into the peacemaking process. Between 1990 and 2017, according to the United Nations Executive Director of UN Women, women constituted only two per cent of mediators, eight per cent of negotiators, and five per cent of witnesses and signatories in major peace processes.

Only three out of 11 agreements signed in 2017 contained provisions on gender equality. Of 1,500 agreements signed between 2000 and 2016, only 25 raise the role of women's engagement in the implementation phase.

These statistics underscore the point that the Women, Peace, and Security Act is desperately needed. We need to examine the barriers and challenges that keep women from participating fully in their societies and work to eradicate them.

Women around the globe are disproportionately affected by violent conflict. Women and girls face violence as they flee armed conflict and as they strive to survive in a new place.

Rape is used as a weapon of war and other forms of sexual violence occur before, during and after conflict. According to the United Nations, there are eight different forms of conflict-related sexual violence: rape, sexual slavery, prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, enforced sterilization, forced marriage, and other forms of sexual violence of comparable gravity.

Another human rights abuse that women and girls face is female genital mutilation (FGM). This is any procedure involving the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs. FGM is often performed on **girls between the ages of 4 and 14** to ensure their virginity until marriage.

The World Health Organization reports that FGM has no health benefits and can cause serious and often lifelong physical and psychological health problems. It is estimated that 200 million women worldwide have undergone this procedure.

American women should note that while this is most predominant in Africa, the Middle East and East Asia, it is estimated that over 500,000 young women and girls are at risk of FGM in the United States.

We need to be concerned about this rising threat and work to raise awareness this practice will not be tolerated in the United States.

<https://iwf.org/FGM-in-VAWA>

Gender-based violence exists in epidemic proportions around the world, whether it occurs in the form of domestic violence, the trafficking of human beings, or in the context of war and conflict, such violence and coercion has devastating effects on women's personal health, the families, communities and emerging societies.

A continued emphasis on fighting these atrocities needs to continue if we want to make sure women are included in peace and security discussions.

There are many reasons why the involvement of women can change the outcome. These reasons have to do with how women are viewed and how they naturally interact with others. Women tend to be more collaborative in their approach to problem solving.

Collaboration demands working with others and would naturally include those of different cultural, religious and other groups.

In most societies around the world, women and men still play very different roles in their families and communities. Often, women are not as directly associated with the power structures and are viewed as more transparent and honest. They can be viewed as more impartial than their male counterparts and therefore, more trusted.

When women show courage and stand up for their rights, it can make a huge public impact. An example of this bravery is the story of the “Abuelas” of Sepur Zarco.

Guatemala endured a decades long civil war while indigenous women were systematically raped and enslaved by the military in the small community of Sepur Zarco. From 2011-2016, fifteen women survivors fought for justice in the highest court of Guatemala.

The case resulted in the conviction of two former military officers of crimes against humanity and granted reparation measures to the women survivors and their community.

Another example of the successful involvement of women in the peace process is the Colombian Peace Agreement. In 2016, the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) came to a peace agreement after fifty years of armed civil conflict.

The peace agreement set an international example for women’s involvement in peace building. When negotiations began in 2012, only one of the twenty negotiators was female. Civil society took note, organized a summit about women and peace and a few years later about 20%-30% of the negotiators were female.

The involvement of women in the Colombian story made a large impact in many different ways. The women helped broaden the agenda, negotiated local cease-fires, increased accountability and helped build public support.

In 2008, I had the honor of flying with Captain Erika Pedraza Murillo, who was the only female Blackhawk helicopter pilot with Colombia's anti-narcotics police. Her strength and courage reflect the traits of so many Colombian women.

We have an ongoing peace process effort in Afghanistan today. Since the Taliban government fell, millions of women have voted in local and national elections.

In 2002, the United States Afghan Women's Council was created as a Presidential Initiative under President George W. Bush. This effort was a joint U.S.-Afghan effort to promote public-private partnerships and mobilize resources to ensure that women can gain the skills and stability they had been deprived of by the Taliban.

An example of the progress made by Afghan women with the support of the United States is the Afghan Fulbright Program. This educational program offers grants to qualified Afghan graduate students to study at the graduate level in the United States.

In 2002, there were no women qualified to apply, due to years of being denied access to education. Today, half the applicants are women and the Afghan Fulbright Program is one of the largest in the world. Coincidentally, the current Afghan Ambassador to the United States, Roya Rahmani is a Fulbright alumnus.

The Council continues to thrive today.

Since 2010, women have played a role seeking to end the conflict. They have been appointed to the High Peace Council, negotiated with Taliban fighters and continued to demand women are included in the ongoing peace negotiations.

The United States has strong influence with Afghanistan and needs to use that leverage to ensure that women are involved in peace negotiations in Afghanistan. Our actions in support of Afghan women will show the strength of our commitment to the world.

As we view today's global challenges and consider the robust involvement of women, we should continue to promote a few effective strategies. We need to seek the input from women about their societies before conflict occurs. We have to support women's leadership in their communities and when conflict occurs, give them equal access to aid.

We recognize women and girls are at a disproportionate risk of violence during conflict and must protect them and seek justice for acts committed against them. We can work to bolster the number of women in law enforcement and the military. We can provide support to female negotiators, mediators, and peace builders.

We can support women's peace-building organizations and encourage a robust civil society. We can recognize the value brought by faith-based organizations, non-governmental organizations and businesses, as we work to identify effective ways to empower women.

The United States has a unique role in our world. We must continue to lead efforts on behalf of voiceless and vulnerable women, especially those in conflict situations working desperately for peace.

We know women are essential to the development of open and prosperous societies. When we invest in women, we are promoting peace and stability. When we attack poverty, fight violence, combat injustice and work for the empowerment of women, we are changing the very nature of society.

It is in America's best interest to always remember the importance of women, as we work to implement the United States Strategy for Women, Peace and Security.

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