

Women, peace and security: Trump can make feminist history by signing this bill

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Women are vital to keeping the world stable and prosperous. This law would make sure they participate in U.S. policy-making at home and abroad.

As North Korea ratchets up its threats, conflicts rage from Syria to Yemen and terrorists launch attacks on innocent civilians, Congress just quietly passed historic legislation calling for more women to be involved in peace and security efforts.

That could not come soon enough.

Under the bipartisan Women, Peace and Security Act, by law it would be a core priority for U.S. diplomatic, development and military personnel to include women in preventing and resolving conflicts.

This bill has been over five years in the making and is perhaps needed now more than ever. Between 1992 and 2011, only 9% of negotiators at official peace talks were women. Women still make up less than 5% of police and military forces in many places around the globe, and at the local level are rarely consulted in security initiatives.

These dismal figures have not improved significantly in recent decades, even though the way we build and maintain peace is clearly not working. In the last nearly two decades

alone, 90% of conflicts occurred in countries that had already experienced a previous conflict. Terrorism continues to pose a serious threat to global stability as does food scarcity, weak governance, climate change and beyond.

It's time for a change.

Congress passing this bipartisan bill was a strong first step, and President Trump should immediately sign it into law. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Secretary of Defense James Mattis Mark Green, administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), must hold leaders at all levels in their departments accountable for its implementation.

A new law like this would signal to women around the globe that their voices are being heard by Congress even in rocky political times. While the proof will be in how it's carried out, the bill not only mandates that women's participation be a priority for relevant federal agencies, it requires personnel for these agencies to consult with women on the ground in regions affected by conflict and to receive proper training to do so. Importantly, this bill also strengthens the ability of Congress to oversee this work.

The U.S. has had a national strategy on women's participation in peace and security processes since former president Obama instituted one by executive order in 2011 and it was updated in 2016. This bill would ensure a strategy remains the law of the land in the Trump administration and its successors.

Critics might note that the U.S. is dealing with numerous foreign policy challenges and security threats and argue that focusing on women's participation would be a "soft" distraction from these priorities. However, research shows us time and again that gender diverse groups are more likely to effectively prevent and resolve conflicts in the long-term.

Afghanistan is a strong example where the U.S. should learn from its mistakes. Back in 2001, U.S. and allied NATO forces put billions of dollars into stabilizing the country and assisting in reconstruction. But with little strategy at first for consulting with Afghan women and including them in decision-making, the rollout was an almost entirely all male affair.

Women were often left in homes while all-male circles of soldiers and tribal elders discussed their fate. Existing norms and stereotypes prevailed, and the men were hindered in their ability to gain access to a range of views in communities where terrorist groups and insurgents had embedded.

Women had a deep understanding of community needs and their participation in emerging government and security institutions is critical for long-term stability. But their contribution was initially left untapped. Over the years, NATO saw firsthand the importance of including women and has since documented numerous examples where engaging with Afghan women led to better results.

Similarly, the International Peace Institute found peace accords are 35% more likely to last at least 15 years if women participate in their creation. This is because women often bring up issues related to the underlying causes of conflict and structural barriers that contribute to violence.

The evidence is so obvious, it's no wonder Republican and Democratic leaders in the Senate and House worked tirelessly to pass this bill.

However, staff at the working level in our government cannot make progress on these issues without support from senior leadership. Congress would be wise to press political appointees during confirmation hearings on how they will implement the mandates in this bill. A formal inter-agency coordinating structure is also critical. It is inefficient for each of these agencies to be working to promote women's leadership without meeting regularly to discuss their efforts.

Finally, Congress must see to it that resources are committed. In the budget submitted to Congress in May, the Trump Administration requested to cut by more than half the miniscule amount of foreign aid requested the previous year for women, peace, and security efforts. Congress must correct course and ensure any funding bills moving forward explicitly protect resources for these important initiatives.

Women's engagement at all levels of peace and security efforts is essential. Failing to invest in this agenda endangers our national security and hurts our efforts to advance our foreign policy priorities.