

On December 19, 2011, President Barack Obama issued an Executive Order entitled “Instituting a National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (NAP)” and a 26 page plan. This is a milestone in the history of U.S. multilateral engagement. But will it make a positive difference in the lives of women around the world and, more particularly, in the lives of women living in the U.S.?

Last fall, with the full cooperation and participation of the U.S. Department of State, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom convened civil society consultations in five cities to discover the security priorities of women in the U.S. The report on the data collected is clear: peace abroad begins at home. Priorities identified in the civil society consultation report on Women, Peace and Security are:

- U.S. ratification of the U.N. Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, to establish a basis for women’s rights in the U.S. consistent with international standards.
- Financial support and federal leadership in re-building the infrastructure of local and state Commissions on the Status of Women to train and promote the involvement of women at all levels of decision-making about resource allocation and international affairs.
- Peace and Human Rights education in all public elementary and secondary schools, to begin to build a culture committed to the non-violent resolution of conflict at home and abroad
- Ending impunity for perpetrators of violence against women, in all communities and institutions, including the U.S. armed forces and including private military contractors employed by U.S. missions abroad
- Holding the military accountable for repairing environmental degradation resulting from its operations and facilities within the U.S. and abroad, and for accurately informing civilians living in affected areas of the pollutants released into the environment by military activities.

The U.S. NAP on Women, Peace and Security, which at this point is a mere outline waiting to be filled out with the specific commitments of several federal agencies falls far short of addressing the security threats identified by U.S. women and fails to include their most pressing recommendations for building sustainable just peace and preventing future war.

At the same time, the U.S. NAP represents a milestone in multilateral engagement and something more substantive than a mere gesture of goodwill on the part of those who created it. It requires measurable commitments from federal agencies beyond the Departments of Defense and State and USAID and includes agencies with domestic as well as international mandates such as the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. This indicates at least a possibility that the NAP, *when* fully fleshed out with the departmental action plans requested for May 2012, *could* correspond to a human security framework and *could* include domestic policy applications.

To its credit, the U.S. NAP envisions a strong role for civil society in monitoring and evaluation. At the same time, it is clear that future iterations of the NAP need to be developed with greater involvement of congress, so that the political objectives of U.S. women, as filtered through their elected representatives, can have greater influence on outcomes and implementation. Only through vigorous and assertive action by civil society and elected officials will this milestone, the U.S. National Action Plan, change the security landscape for women globally and in the U.S.

Random addendum of diminishing power of women in the U.S., to which we might add documentation of recent attacks on women's bodily integrity and reproductive freedom.

Within the U.S., the women's rights glass has always been half full—or half empty if you prefer. But as the situation of women's rights around the world continues to evolve, the domestic situation has become increasingly paradoxical, and frankly depressing.

- *According to data maintained by the Interparliamentary Union, in April 2002 13% of the U.S. congress was female and the U.S. ranked 52nd in the world in terms of women's representation. Today, with 17% of the seats in our national legislature held by women, the U.S. ranks 78th.*
- *Today, the United States ranks 41st among a ranking of 184 countries on maternal deaths during pregnancy and childbirth, below all other industrialized nations and a number of developing countries. Globally, maternal mortality is declining an estimated 1.9% annually, yet in the United States it is going up. Estimated maternal mortality ratios have trebled in the past 25 years, from 6.6 deaths per 100,000 live births in 1987 to 20.2 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2011.*
- *Paid maternity leave is a benefit granted to some women by employers in the U.S. not a guaranteed right, as it is in at least 178 other countries, and, in the U.S., only about one half of all employers are compelled to grant even unpaid parental leave to women or men. In 2011, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that fifty-one percent of working women who had their first child between 2006 and 2008 received paid leave, compared with 42 percent between 1996 and 2000. That is the highest rate since the census started tracking leave data in 1981. However, the trend split sharply on education lines: 66 percent of women with bachelor's degrees or higher received paid leave, compared to only 18 percent of high-school dropouts.*
- *A survey conducted by the Institute for Women's Policy Research in 2010, found that during the previous year 26 million women reported having difficulty paying for food and 32 million experienced problems with paying their rent or mortgage, compared with 15 million and 25 million men, respectively.*