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The Limitations of the 2019 US Women, Peace and Security Strategy

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The United States Strategy on Women, Peace and Security (the *Strategy*) was released in June 2019 to replace the 2016 US National Action Plan (NAP) and is the mandated outcome of the 2017 Women, Peace and Security Act. The *Strategy* details four “Lines of Effort” outlining the US response to the adverse and disproportionate effects of armed conflict on women and girls, focused specifically on advocating for women’s participation, protection, and involvement. As a response, different governmental agencies are required to develop implementation plans within 120 days of the *Strategy*’s release. Below, we examine the strengths and limitations of the *Strategy* in relation to the overall Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda.

Positive Aspects

The *Strategy* includes some positive aspects that are well worth drawing attention to. First, the *Strategy* can be used as a starting point on the road to increased gendered national and international efforts. Second, the *Strategy* explicitly mentions the engagement, mobilization and inclusion of men and boys in support of meaningful participation of women’s equality in society. This type of allied inclusion is critical and it is encouraging to see it included. Unfortunately, the *Strategy* only mentions men and boys’ vital participation briefly, and does not address the fact that gender equality, while critical to national security, is often viewed as a woman-only issue, not a gendered issue.

Finally, the *Strategy* recognizes the importance of the use of sex-disaggregated data. Sex-disaggregated data is important to successful analysis, decision-making, and measuring success as it enables analysts and key policy makers to examine and understand differences in men and women's experiences. For example, Sweden's Feminist Foreign Policy Handbook (https://www.government.se/4a4752/contentassets/fc115607a4ad4bca913cd8d11c2339dc/handbook_swedens-feminist-foreign-policy.pdf) makes a point of including sex-disaggregated data in their foreign policy in order to fully address national and international security. While sex-disaggregated data is only mentioned briefly, the recognition of this is a step in the right direction.

While there were positive statements in the *Strategy*, there were also a number of questionable assumptions and statements in the *Strategy*. For us, four stand out.

Lack of engagement with the global WPS agenda

Since the adoption of UNSCR 1325 in 2000, there have been nine WPS United Nations Security Council Resolutions. The *Strategy* lacks any engagement with these resolutions. The reference to 1325, and the WPS agenda at large is in a vague and general context. Without this engagement with the global WPS agenda, the *Strategy* does not fully address and engage with many issues WPS is centered around. An effective strategy is one that acknowledges the global efforts on WPS--the U.S. *Strategy* does not engage with those efforts.

Lack of Engagement with the Notion of Gender

The *Strategy* very clearly defines itself as a *Women, Peace and Security* document, not a *Gender, Peace and Security* document. That distinction is an important one. Instead of taking a gendered perspective to complex international political issues, this *Strategy* leans heavily on stereotypical notions of gender and operates under the incorrect assumption that only women have a gender. Throughout the document, it repeatedly reinforces the (false) belief that women are inherently victims and inherently lacking in agency. The *Strategy* subsequently argues that "women cannot fully participate in the prevention or resolution of conflict or participate in recovery efforts if they themselves are victims of violence or intimidation" (p.9). This statement is made worse by the frequent assertion that women's only role in conflict is that of victimhood. If women are only victims in conflict, then, by the *Strategy's* own analysis, women cannot participate in recovery efforts. Put simply, the *Strategy* is only about women; it is only about women as victims; and it is only about women with no agency.

Opt-Outs

This *Strategy* is predominantly focused on US national interests. Most of the language throughout the *Strategy* promotes an outward focus and excuses US inaction through 'selective' engagement decisions or language that permits withdrawal or inaction. For example, the *Strategy* measures success by 2023 as showing an increase in women's meaningful participation, as having a measurable impact on "one or all" of the objectives or phases of conflict/crisis prevention. By this vague measurement, the United States government could consider the *Strategy* successful in 2023 in almost any situation. The United States could simply support an obscure "partner government" in adopting a generalized "policy, plan, or capacity" to support female peacemakers at some time in the future (p. 15). By utilizing vague language, the Administration and the US Government are able to opt-out of any potential commitments or requirements.

Patronizing Tone

The *Strategy* has a patronizing tone immediately. The overuse of the phrase “empower women” implies a lack of knowledge of the complex roles women are already playing in the conflict context. The document also calls for “[d]eveloping women’s technical and professional competencies” (p.13), the implication being that women lack the necessary competencies to participate. Not only is this assumption incorrect, it further dismisses the valuable work women are already doing. In so doing, the *Strategy* relegates women to the role of acted upon, not of actor. With repeated calls to train women, to empower women, and to incentivize women to participate, the *Strategy* infantilizes women, narrows the purview of the WPS Agenda, and blatantly ignores the work women already do on the ground.

Conclusion

We look forward to seeing this Administration engage with Civil Society and using the vast number of sources written by scholars, experts and other individuals that are well-versed on the WPS agenda. Additionally, we are encouraged by the mention of sex-disaggregated data and its potential to be used as a core component of any implementation plans based on this *Strategy* that come from departments and agencies. That said, the *Strategy* backtracks and dilutes many key points of the 2016 National Action Plan. For example, the current four Lines of Effort in this *Strategy* were derived from the five high-level objectives laid out in the NAP.

The WIIS team is conducting a more thorough content analysis of the *Strategy*. We welcome comments at info@wiisglobal.org

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