

THE WIDER WORLD

Women Play Critical Roles in Peace and in Conflict

By Diane Chido
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For millennia women have played essential roles in both peace and conflict.

As *objects* of conflict, women have been the cause as far back as the war ensuing from the kidnapping of Helen of Troy. It is widely speculated that Viking raiders in the 10th century were motivated by booty, of course, but also acquisition of land and women, as they were beginning to run short of both for continued expansion and reproduction.

As *subjects* of conflict, in the United States, just a few centuries ago, Dolly Madison famously entreated her president husband James as he helped craft the United States Constitution, “Remember the ladies ... If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.”

For the next century, the ladies refused to bind themselves to such laws. Suffragettes nearly took down the presidency of Woodrow Wilson by picketing the White House in all weather and maintaining prison hunger strikes despite violent force-feeding. Wilson would have preferred to continue ignoring the ladies as all previous American history had done, but the press ensured this would not be the case. In the end, the Suffragettes’ agitating won the day thus inciting and winning the same conflict.

As Dr. Andrew Roth has written about how the South won the Civil War in several ways, it was Confederate women who constructed and maintained the “Lost Cause of the Confederacy,” unwilling to have had their husbands and sons die ignobly in defeat as they watched their slavery-supported lives of comfort and beauty crumble away in the face of Reconstruction. Vestiges of these efforts can be seen today in our Memorial Day observances, which began in the South, and in southern states’ efforts to control what is taught in history textbooks.

Today in conflicts across rural Africa, men join insurgencies and kidnap women because the local bride price is too high for them to pay. Think of the 2014 kidnapping of 276 girls from a Nigerian Christian school by Islamic extremist group Boko Haram, which shocked the world as they impregnated many and even turned some of them into suicide killers. Rape is not an unfortunate outcome of war; it is often a central tactic. Like kidnapping children and forcing them to become soldiers, rape is used to divide communities in the near term and reduce their ability to reproduce and create new enemies in the long term. Women have traditionally been trafficked at a far higher rate than men around the world as sex and domestic work slaves.

When it comes to promoting democracy and human rights, we must remember the efforts of women in our own history like Florence Nightingale and Clara Barton, who mobilized women to ensure wounded soldiers would have adequate medical care for their times. Harriet Tubman and other lesser-known Underground Railroad conductors rescued people from enslavement and served with the US Army as cooks, nurses, couriers, spies. Some even took on combat roles when their husbands fell in battle, like Mary Hayes and Margaret Corbin, who are today remembered collectively as “Molly Pitchers.”

Women are also often the most visible symbol of problems in a fragile society. The contemporary example of Iran is still to play out, but massive street protests were sparked in 2009 after a video of a woman killed by police in post-election violence was broadcast around the world. Again in 2022, huge and lasting protests were sparked when Mahsa Amini was killed in police custody after being arrested for improperly wearing a headscarf. In this case, the woman herself, became the symbol of the movement. These protests were marked by mass participation by all genders and the phenomenon of thousands of women publicly cutting their own hair in grief and protest.

The latest news in this saga is the alleged poisoning of hundreds of young girls in 50 schools across the country. While it is still unclear whether this is some kind of retribution for the protests or a sign of something else, Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei has called for the death penalty for the perpetrators. It is also causing serious consternation among Iranians who value the safety of their children over nearly all else. As troubling as things may seem for Iranian

women, at least they are permitted to study and work, unlike in Afghanistan, where girls are no longer allowed to go to school and are subject to daily persecutions and violence.

At the same time, women have historically played critical roles in waging peace across continents. Without including women in any peace process, conflict is generally doomed to flare up again. This fact was recognized by the US Congress in 2017 when both the House and Senate passed unanimously on a voice vote the “Women, Peace, and Security Act,” which expressed:

(T)he sense of Congress that: (1) the United States should be a global leader in promoting the participation of women in conflict prevention, management, and resolution and post-conflict relief and recovery efforts; (2) the political participation and leadership of women in fragile environments, particularly during democratic transitions, is critical to sustaining democratic institutions; and (3) the participation of women in conflict prevention and conflict resolution helps promote more inclusive and democratic societies and is critical to country and regional stability.

This legislation does not only make these statements; it holds the US government accountable for enacting policies that support these sentiments. The Department of Defense (DOD), for instance, developed a 2019 U.S. Women, Peace, and Security Strategy, which requires it to write doctrine for all service members in all branches to follow to ensure the integration of women into peace processes and post-conflict stabilization efforts.

The WPS Strategy’s 2022 progress report^[1] did not make many mainstream headlines, but it significantly changed the way we view and manage conflict:

DOD spent \$5.5 million to establish policies and programs to advance implementation of WPS, hire and train qualified personnel, and integrate WPS into relevant training curriculum^[a] and professional military education for the Armed Forces. The Department also allocated \$3 million from its International Security Cooperation Programs to conduct security cooperation programs that incorporate gender analysis and advance women’s participation in defense institutions and national security forces.

While \$8.5 million is a drop in the bucket in DOD’s \$409 *billion* budget, it still represents its commitment to this ongoing effort to integrate considerations of women into all of its processes and operations. American servicewomen and anthropologists were key actors in ensuring effective cultural understanding in recent conflicts, as they were the only ones able to speak and work with local

women. Women have also played a significant role for decades monitoring elections in tightly gendered societies.

Recent research from the Brookings Institution and US Institute for Peace, among many others, proves that the security of a nation is directly tied to the security and status of its women. Across cultures and history, it is commonly women, religious leaders, and elders who exert the most influence in measures that reduce violence and enhance governance. The 2016 peace agreement that ended the 50-year civil war in Colombia has been praised widely for its inclusion of women as negotiators, designers, implementors, and beneficiaries of the peace process. Incorporating this gendered perspective is a critical factor in building the institutions needed for lasting peace.

Before the US government officially recognized the role of women in peace and security, the 2000 UN Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security recognized that “war impacts women differently, and reaffirmed the need to increase women’s role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution.” The UN has since adopted an additional seven resolutions on women, peace, and security.

UN Women is an agency resulting from these resolutions dedicated to achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. It does this by providing training in peacebuilding and development for women leaders and by monitoring achievement by each country of gender-related aspects of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the roadmap followed by all UN agencies.

While all of this is progress, the Pentagon’s 2022 Annual Report on Sexual Assault and Prevention (SAPR) in the military disclosed that nearly 36,000 servicemembers reported experiencing unwanted sexual contact, including 16,000 or 8.4 percent of women and 15,000 or 1.5 percent of men across the US armed services.^[iii] The report emphasizes that this is the number reported, not necessarily the number that occurred, which could be significantly higher. Just collecting and publishing these data is a big step forward, but they clearly indicate that in all areas of peace and security much more work is to be done protecting and including women in critical institutions and processes.

Since 9/11, over 300,000 women have served in the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2013, all combat-related roles were opened to women in all branches of the US military with more than 100 graduating from special forces training. Women are also leading the charge across the US defense establishment to implement WPS and to train women to do so in partner nations. These achievements, as well as the SAPR caveats remind us that we must continue to work diligently to make sure we all “remember the ladies.”

[i] U.S. Women, Peace, and Security Strategy 2022 progress report available [here](#)
[ii] Pentagon's 2022 Annual Report on Sexual Assault and Prevention available [here](#)

End Notes

"DoD Announces Women, Peace, and Security 2022 Report," US Department of Defense, July 19, 2022, available [here](#), accessed on April 26, 2023

Fact Sheet: Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2021 Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military, September 1, 2022, available [here](#), accessed April 26, 2023

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