



POLICY BRIEF | SPRING 2020

# SECURITY FOR ALL

## APPLYING THE WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY LENS TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC RESPONSE IN THE US

by Kelly Case, Sahana Dharmapuri, Hans Hogrefe, Miki Jacevic, Jolynn Shoemaker, Moira Whelan  
Edited by Erin Cooper

### I. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic does not respect borders or power. Armies, weapons, and fortifications will not destroy it. COVID-19 is a national security threat of a different kind. It has killed tens of thousands of Americans so far and has resulted in the complete shutdown of the American economy in just a few months. The United States and countries around the world need to reexamine what it takes for people to be safe.

Policymakers can look to the Women, Peace and Security agenda (WPS) for guidance and urgently needed solutions. Policymakers have primarily focused on the Women, Peace and Security agenda exclusively in the foreign policy arena. It has important application for domestic policy as well, especially for achieving policy goals that link to security and prosperity for American families and communities.

*It is time for the US government to look to lessons from women's organizations within and outside of our country to implement policies and practices that will lead to more efficient preparedness, response, and recovery efforts, and build more resilient communities. This brief offers a set of WPS-grounded analyses and recommendations to the US Congress to support a more effective pandemic response and recovery for all American people.*

The Women, Peace and Security framework focuses on human security for all and promotes responses to crises that take into account differing experiences and needs among the population. A crisis of such magnitude requires skills and contributions from all members of society.

Past crises and conflicts have different impacts on women, men, girls and boys, which require policy responses that integrate an understanding of these varying experiences. The promotion of active, meaningful roles for women in all aspects and levels of their communities advances inclusivity, democracy, and long-term stability within societies. It makes security policies, programs, and outcomes more effective. These policy goals, enshrined in the Women, Peace and Security Act (Public Law 115-68) and UN Security Council Resolution 1325, are critical to global peace and prosperity.<sup>1</sup>

#### THE NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE COUNCIL IDENTIFIED INFECTIOUS DISEASE AS A SECURITY THREAT IN 2000

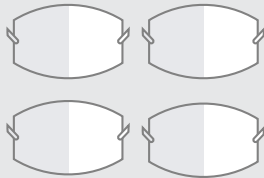
"The National Intelligence Council argues that the infectious disease threat will complicate U.S. and global security over the next twenty years. These diseases will endanger U.S. citizens at home and abroad, threaten U.S. armed forces deployed overseas, and exacerbate social and political instability in key countries and regions in which the United States has significant interests."<sup>2</sup>

## A GENDER PERSPECTIVE ON THE COVID RESPONSE WHO ARE THE ESSENTIAL WORKERS?



In the US, women are

**77%**  
**OF HEALTHCARE  
WORKERS & 78% OF  
SOCIAL WORK  
PROFESSIONALS.**<sup>4</sup>



Women represent

**52%**  
**OF ALL ESSENTIAL  
WORKERS** in the US.<sup>5</sup>

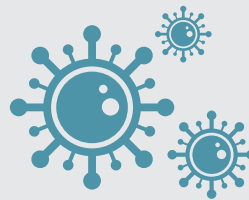


Women are

**9/10** nurses and nursing assistants, most respiratory therapists, a majority of pharmacists, and an overwhelming majority of pharmacy aides and technicians are women. These workers have the most face-to-face contact with COVID patients.<sup>6</sup>

**1/3** **JOBS HELD  
BY WOMEN**

in the US are designated by the CARES Act as essential during the Coronavirus crisis. Nonwhite women are more likely to be doing essential jobs than any other sector of society.<sup>7</sup>



Women account for

**73%**  
of the US healthcare workers who have been infected since the outbreak began.<sup>8</sup>

## II. PUBLIC HEALTH IS A NATIONAL SECURITY ISSUE: WHAT CONGRESS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY AND THE US RESPONSE TO COVID-19

More than 7 times as many Americans have died from COVID-19 compared to 9-11, in just the last few months.<sup>9</sup> Pushing national public healthcare systems across the world to the brink of collapse, the COVID-19 outbreak has forced doctors and nurses to make triage decisions in civilian hospitals that have formerly only been seen in military field hospitals during active combat operations. The US Department of Defense has a trillion-dollar budget to protect American lives—but to date, nearly 80,000 Americans have died from the COVID-19 threat, with thousands more deaths projected.

While policymakers can rely on the US national security framework to address protecting the country from external threats from other state actors, they cannot look to the current national security approach for adequate policy responses to this pandemic and other non-state actors. The US national security framework has not adequately considered key determinants of peace and stability for the entire population—including healthcare, livelihoods, education, and social welfare—as prime security concerns. These issues are often referred to as being the purview of “soft security” or “human security,”<sup>10</sup> and are considered “women’s issues.” This view underscores the idea that human security is less important compared to hard security concerns. But, as the death toll from COVID-19 continues to climb, it demonstrates that both hard and soft security solutions are required in the design and implementation of any national security framework.

The failure to initiate a rapid response that encompasses a broad security paradigm is raising important questions about archaic concepts of national security that pervade policymaking. Driven by a traditional national security paradigm more akin to the Cold War, spending has largely focused on tanks, ships, fighter planes, and ammunition—none of which can protect even a

single individual infected with COVID-19. Yet, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies' *Military Balance* report released in early 2020, countries around the world have increased their defense spending for the year ahead. The US Congressional Budget Office projects that the US defense budget request will increase from \$718 billion in FY 2020 to \$776 billion by 2034.<sup>11</sup> While traditional defense spending on military tools is robust within national security plans, soft security tools are neglected and underfunded.

Compare this increase in defense spending to the critical shortages in the federal emergency medical supply cache that Americans are facing. America's Strategic National Stockpile that houses the supply has an annual budget that is less than one recent signed missile contract with Lockheed Martin.<sup>12</sup> And, although the Cold War paradigm has shifted in the past several decades, what has not shifted— even in the years since 9/11—is the continuing reliance on the same tools and the underlying philosophy about what creates security.

## LESSONS LEARNED FROM HUMANITARIAN AND HEALTH CRISES MAKING PREPAREDNESS, CRISIS RESPONSE, AND RECOVERY MORE EFFECTIVE

At the core of the Women, Peace and Security agenda is the recognition that women leaders and civil society organizations on the ground have insights and approaches to share that are effective and inclusive of community needs and priorities. Unfortunately, these voices are rarely heard and are usually excluded from peace and security policy decisions. When these perspectives are included, the policy outcomes are more successful for the entire population and long-term stability and prosperity. Tapping into this knowledge and utilizing the tenets of Women, Peace and Security—participation in decision-making and gender analysis of the problems at hand—can lead to more comprehensive and multidimensional policy responses to COVID-19.

### RECOVERY FROM HURRICANE KATRINA

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, women, particularly in low-income groups and women of color, were disproportionately affected.<sup>14</sup> They were also instrumental in rebuilding their communities and bringing national attention to issues that impacted marginalized communities. For example, Sharon Hanshaw helped found [Coastal Women for Change](#), which organized around issues of fair housing and affordable childcare.<sup>15</sup> The group also pushed for greater representation in local leadership because they experienced, firsthand, the importance of having representation when critical decisions were being made about their communities.

### RESPONDING TO EBOLA IN LIBERIA AND SIERRA LEONE

During the Ebola crisis, Liberian women did not have access to medications or proper medical equipment. As the late [Precious Dennis](#), who worked to combat the Ebola crisis in Liberia, referred to the disease not just a “health issue, but a peace issue.” Ebola attacked our peace.” During the Ebola crisis in West and Central Africa in 2014, the US Department of State supported women’s local leadership to respond to the outbreak. One group leveraged its convening authority to host public outreach with healthcare providers and local populations on Ebola response. According to the report *Implementation of the U.S. National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security*, the effort ultimately yielded recommendations that were adopted by the Government of Sierra Leone as standard operating procedures.<sup>16</sup> Recommendations were centered on the unique contributions of community response, including: increasing women’s participation in burial management, empowering local community members to trace contacts and provide psychosocial services, and elevating community leaders to bridge communication gaps between districts and the national government.

### III. RECOMMENDATIONS

The US Congress should broaden the lens of the traditional security paradigm with a complementary human security approach which includes women's voices and a gender perspective. Congress can take specific actions to support this, including:

- 1. ENSURE THAT THE REQUIREMENTS AND SPIRIT OF THE WOMEN, PEACE, AND SECURITY ACT OF 2017 ARE REFLECTED IN COVID-19 LEGISLATIVE ACTIONS,** as this law stipulates that international crisis response must include a gender perspective and women in decision-making positions.
- 2. REQUIRE OF RELEVANT FEDERAL AGENCIES THAT AFTER-ACTION REPORTING ON COVID-19-RELATED RESPONSES INCLUDE THE COLLECTION OF SEX-DISAGGREGATED DATA AND A GENDER ANALYSIS.** The pandemic has impacted every strata of society, and an effective response must be based on robust data collection and information-gathering that reflects the experiences and needs of all sectors of society.
- 3. GUARANTEE A BROAD RANGE OF FEMALE EXPERTS ARE AT THE TABLE WHEN DECISIONS ARE BEING MADE ABOUT FUNDING AND POLICY.** It is critical to understand women's perspectives on and experiences with COVID-19. This also could include technical support for US government actors (including the Department of Defense, State Department, USAID, and Department of Homeland Security), providing expert guidance, providing questions for testimony and hearings, and establishing a feedback loop at the local, state, and national levels.
- 4. INSIST ON BUDGET AND LEGISLATIVE APPROACHES THAT ENSHRINE A HUMAN-SECURITY APPROACH TO SAFEGUARDING AMERICAN LIVES.** A gender-sensitive budget will provide a more comprehensive, inclusive approach to both COVID-19 and other peace and security issues. A gender analysis takes into account gender differences, economic disparities, access to health services, and other issues. Any special commissions and specialized oversight should be diverse and inclusive. Make use of virtual testimonies, videoconferencing, and other digital tools to ensure participation of women and a gender-sensitive approach.

- 5. PROVIDE FUNDS TO SUPPORT LOCAL WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS IMPLEMENTING RELIEF AND RECOVERY EFFORTS AND BUILDING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE, BOTH IN THE US AND INTERNATIONALLY.** Provide additional relief for women, including but not limited to affordable childcare, targeted business loans, and expanded paid parental leave and sick leave, particularly for low-wage workers. Failing to address these issues will lead to an uneven recovery and the overall response for the US economy will be slower and more costly.<sup>13</sup>

*Human Security shifts the lens from traditional state-centered, often militarized, perspectives on security to instead focus on how people experience insecurity and security in multiple ways. It is a broader framework that encompasses issues such as healthcare, education, economic security, human rights, access to resources, and clean environment which can directly impact personal, community, and state security.*

## IV. INTEGRATING A GENDER PERSPECTIVE INTO AFTER-ACTION REPORTING ON RELIEF AND RECOVERY PROGRAMS

As COVID-19 unfolds, steps are already being taken to preserve data and documents for after-action assessments to determine what went wrong and find systemic opportunities to make changes for the future. After-action assessments are a standard process, and due to the nationwide impact of COVID-19, this means that hundreds of after-action reports will be completed. Routinely, after-action reports completed following a crisis take into consideration at-risk communities. Focus on the elderly has led to changes to the way nursing homes and home health workers prepare in hurricane preparedness and response processes, for instance.

It is critical to include a gender perspective in determining how these assessments will be focused. COVID-19's impact is not limited to the death toll or other basic data. Rather, a gender perspective in after-action assessments offers the opportunity to take into consideration the impact of the crisis on caregivers in hospitals and nursing homes, as well as grocery workers (the majority of whom are women), who

have been disproportionately exposed to the illness. Even mundane considerations such as access to hygiene products in limited supply chain environments should be assessed to see if these considerations were given adequate attention.

When states and localities move forward in their after-action reports, the Department of Homeland Security should make available to stakeholders a strategy for ensuring a gender perspective in the after-action process as well as training and briefings on how this can create stronger data and recommendations that can save lives moving forward.

After-action reports do not often capture in their assessments the dynamic of how survivors navigated a crisis. In the case of COVID-19, sex-disaggregated surveys and polling may yield important preparedness data. Using a gender perspective to examine the different experiences of men and women, and boys and girls, in the crisis will yield more nuanced information and help create more effective responses. For example, asking if it was male or female heads of household who led the supply of households? Did women bear a disproportionate amount of the burden in "unpaid work" as the crisis unfolded? Were early-stage reports by caregivers and health workers regarding Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) supplies given adequate attention by supervisors?

The following are a few more examples of how incorporating gender perspectives can improve response and recovery efforts.

### HOW TO IMPROVE RESPONSE AND RECOVERY EFFORTS USE A GENDER PERSPECTIVE IN AFTER-ACTION REPORTING

- Examine whether the recovery efforts have the capacity and tools to implement gender responsiveness.
- Ensure that women are included in leadership positions during and after a disaster at the local, state, and national levels.
- Invest in building and strengthening the leadership of women in effective crisis response at the local, state, and national levels and encourage nontraditional leadership roles that challenge stereotypes.
- Address domestic violence. Ensure survivors can access essential support by designating shelters as essential services and support for hotlines.
- Consider the needs of frontline fighters (female doctors, health workers, etc.).
- Pay attention to the gender differences in affected populations as women and men are differently impacted by COVID-19. Preexisting health disparities have widened the gaps in casualties between men and women, and between minority groups and dominant white populations.
- Promote women's participation in stakeholder discussions on policies and programs at all levels to help ensure impacted communities receive the support they need.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 “US Leadership on Women and Foreign Policy: Recommendations for the 116th Congress,” Our Secure Future policy brief, February 18, 2019, <https://oursecurefuture.org/publications/women-foreign-policy-recommendations-for-congress>.
- 2 David F. Gordon, Donald L. Noah, and George Fidas, “National Intelligence Estimate: The Global Infectious Disease Threat and Its Implications for the United States,” National Intelligence Council, January 2000, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/national-intelligence-estimate-the-global-infectious-disease-threat-and-its-implications>.
- 3 “Gender Equity in the Health Workforce: Analysis of 104 Countries,” World Health Organization, March 2019, <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/311314/WHO-HIS-HWF-Gender-WP1-2019.1-eng.pdf?ua=1>.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Campbell Robertson and Robert Gebeloff, “How Millions of Women Became the Most Essential Workers in America,” The New York Times, April 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/18/us/coronavirus-women-essential-workers.html?referringSource=articleShare>.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 “Characteristics of Health Care Personnel with COVID-19—United States, February 12–April 9, 2020,” US Center for Disease Control, April 17, 2020, [https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6915e6.htm?s\\_cid=mm6915e6\\_x](https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6915e6.htm?s_cid=mm6915e6_x).
- 9 Samantha Power, “How the COVID-19 Era Will Change National Security Forever,” Time Magazine, April 14, 2020, <https://time.com/5820625/national-security-coronavirus-samantha-power/>.
- 10 WHAT IS HUMAN SECURITY?  
UN General Assembly Resolution 66/290 states that “human security is an approach to assist Member States in identifying and addressing widespread and cross-cutting challenges to the survival, livelihood and dignity of their people.” It calls for “people-centred, comprehensive, context-specific and prevention-oriented responses that strengthen the protection and empowerment of all people.” A human security framework offers an opportunity to analyze what security actually means for people and how to adequately address and respond to the immediate crisis at hand and prepare for threats to peace and stability in the future.
- 11 Congressional Budget Office, “Long-Term Implications of the 2020 Future Years Defense Program,” August 9, 2019, <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/55500>.
- 12 Andy Blum, “Why the US Buys Too Many Missiles and Not Enough Masks,” New Republic, April 21, 2020, <https://newrepublic.com/article/157369/us-buys-many-missiles-not-enough-masks>.
- 13 Joanna Sullivan, “Maryland Lawsuit Claims Minority, Women-owned Businesses Missed Out on PPP,” Baltimore Business Journal, April 17, 2020, <https://www.bizjournals.com/baltimore/news/2020/04/17/maryland-lawsuit-claims-minority-women-owned.html>.
- 14 “Women, Disasters, and Hurricane Katrina,” Institute for Women’s Policy Research, August 2010, <https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/wpallimport/files/iwpr-export/publications/D492.pdf>.
- 15 Sara K. Gould and Cynthia Schmae, “Katrina’s Gender Focus Offers Lesson for Recovery,” WeNews, August 29, 2007, <https://womensenews.org/2007/08/katrin-as-gender-focus-offers-lesson-recovery/>.
- 16 “Implementation of the U.S. National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security FY 2014,” US Department of State, May 2015, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/244162.pdf>.

## ONE EARTH FUTURE

[oneearthfuture.org](http://oneearthfuture.org)     

ONE EARTH FUTURE fosters sustainable peace by partnering with innovative world leaders, global development agencies and communities to see complex problems at the root of armed conflict in new ways and solve them together through orchestrated collaboration.

## OUR SECURE FUTURE

[oursecurefuture.org](http://oursecurefuture.org) 

Our Secure Future: Women Make the Difference (OSF) is a department of the Colorado-based One Earth Future Foundation. OSF works to strengthen the Women, Peace and Security movement to enable effective policy decision-making for a more peaceful world.

---

## CONTACT US

 303.533.1715  [oursecurefuture@oneearthfuture.org](mailto:oursecurefuture@oneearthfuture.org)

---



OUR **SECURE** FUTURE

*Women Make the Difference*

*a department of One Earth Future*

one earth  
FUTURE