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Do women matter to international security? Trump just changed the U.S. government's answer to that question.

[The Washington Post](#)



Congolese women and their children, who fled from rebel group attacks, work in a field farmed with the help of the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations in Tshikapa in the Kasai Region, Congo, in July. (AFP/Getty Images)

Does the status of women elsewhere in the world matter to U.S. national security? On Dec. 19, President Trump released his answer in the latest [National Security Strategy \(NSS\)](#), one of his first opportunities to outline what an “America First” foreign policy will look like.

While there are several notable changes from those released by previous administrations, one of the most striking is the sharp turn away from recent policies — backed by a significant amount of research — that treat the well-being of women around the globe as critical to peace and prosperity.

A short history of the U.S. government's position on women, peace and security

President Ronald Reagan released the first NSS in 1987, mentioning women only in passing as members of the U.S. military. But in 1994, [President Bill Clinton's NSS](#) began referring to women's status as critical to global stability, for the first time. The Clinton administration took the [position](#) that advancing American interests and ideals depends on integrating women's and girls' concerns into the foreign policy agenda. This point of view was both a product and a driver of the times. Hillary Clinton's proclamation at the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women that "[women's rights are human rights](#)" helped bring gender into the mainstream security and foreign policy discussion — but it wasn't the first time that the administration had advanced that notion. Bill Clinton's first NSS emphasized family planning, reproductive health care, maternal and child health, education and improvements in the status of women, arguing that giving women control over their bodies and future would result in more stable countries and contribute to global security. And it declared that multilateral conferences and institutions were critical in reaching these goals.

President George W. Bush dropped the focus on women's issues as part of national security. In 2006, [Bush's NSS](#) stated simply, "No nation can be free if half its population is oppressed and denied fundamental rights. We affirm the inherent dignity and worth of women, and support vigorously their full participation in all aspects of society." While the president kept the Office of Women's Issues and then-first lady Laura Bush launched a women's rights campaign in Afghanistan after the U.S. invasion, the effort to incorporate women into the national security architecture stalled.

President Barack Obama revived attention to women's status as a national security issue, drawing from a by-then growing body of [evidence](#) linking the security of women to the security of states. The [2010 NSS](#) stated, "Experience shows that countries are more peaceful and prosperous when women are accorded full and equal rights and opportunity. ... Furthermore, women and girls often disproportionately bear the burden of crises and conflict."

This wording echoes findings from feminist academics who have found that "[gender gaps](#)" in the [rights of women](#), their economic participation and the violence enacted upon them result in [worse health outcomes](#) and stalled [economic growth](#). Further, they find that the higher the level

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of [violence against women](#), the worse a nation-state's relations with its neighboring countries and the [less peacefully](#) it will behave internationally. Nations with bigger gender gaps are more likely to be involved in inter- and intra-state conflict, and to use violence first in a conflict. How a nation treats women, in other words, indicates how it will treat its neighbors.

Obama's 2010 NSS announced plans to cooperate "with regional and international organizations to prevent violence against women and girls, especially in conflict zones," to support "women's equal access to justice and their participation in the political process," to promote infant and maternal health, advance girls' access to "education, employment and micro-finance" and strengthen law enforcement's responses to crimes against women.

As follow-up, the administration released a [National Action Plan](#) on Women, Peace and Security. As part of that plan, the administration oversaw the development of [gender adviser](#) positions to a number of State Department bureaus and created such women's rights programs as "[Let Girls Learn](#)," a USAID program that supports girls' primary and secondary [education](#) around the world to broaden access to and improve the quality and safety of schooling.

Trump rejects the link between women's rights and national security

[Trump's NSS](#) changes direction once again. It does include the assertion that since "societies that empower women to participate fully in civic and economic life are more prosperous and peaceful," the United States "will support efforts to advance women's equality, protect the rights of women and girls, and promote women and youth empowerment programs." But that's as far as it goes, offering no statement that women's rights are critical to national and international security.

Perhaps it's no surprise, then, that the Trump administration is already [gutting](#) programming for women and girls around the globe. It has reinstituted the "[global gag rule](#)," which requires that any international NGO that receives U.S. family planning funding may not offer or discuss abortion as an option. It defunds the UNFPA, which provides reproductive and related health services to women and girls around the world. It has been threatening to cut such programs as [Let Girls](#)

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[Learn](#) and the Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues. Further, Obama's [National Action Plan](#) on Women, Peace and Security had begun to open all U.S. military positions to women; bring more women into peace-building efforts around the globe; and offer services to those who had suffered or were at risk of suffering gender-based violence around the world. Without [executive commitment](#), those efforts could erode quickly.