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Integrating masculinities into the WPS agenda for better peacebuilding

Traditional masculinities must be recognised as key factors contributing to violence and conflict. The gender analysis in the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda should be expanded to incorporate a nuanced understanding of masculinity. There are opportunities to include masculinities into the political debate, such as including masculinity in the UN's Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda, positioning youth as agents of change to disrupt cycles of violent masculinity and promoting positive role models.

The integration of masculinities within the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda is a critical yet underexplored aspect of peacebuilding. This is symbolically highlighted in the few references to men and boys in the ten resolutions adopted by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in the context of the WPS agenda. Critics argue that, while the fact that men and boys can be victims of sexual violence is not mentioned enough in UNSC resolutions, there is also a lack of recognition of masculinity as a conveyor of violence. Hence, integrating masculinities into the WPS means examining how certain forms of masculinities relate to violence and can be harmful to peacebuilding processes. As for the US's 2023 WPS Strategy and National Action Plan, the only three mentions of men and boys promote their potential positive contributions to peace and security. The next US administration has the opportunity to either engage in tackling harmful masculinities or reinforce militarised masculinity. Therefore, the general elections are crucial for addressing masculinities in a world experiencing a rise in violence.

Times of war and conflict are usually accompanied by a resurgence of traditional masculinity, which generally leads to the militarisation of masculinities and poses significant challenges to peacebuilding efforts. For instance, Ukraine enforced a conscription law and banned adult men from leaving the country. The United States, which has been called “a leading exporter of white supremacist terrorism” (Hoffman and Ware 2023), is also witnessing a resurgence of traditional masculinity within far-right ideologies, evident through the Capitol attack led mostly by male figures. The militarisation of masculinities and its intertwining of domestic and international space also plays out in the domain of foreign policy. In Afghanistan, for example, gender norms and expectations have been profoundly shaped by decades of war and foreign intervention, leading to the reinforcement of rigid gender norms (Myrtilinen 2018). Ultimately, the US's military power, alongside its role as a permanent member of the UNSC, underscores the necessity of reevaluating the US approach to masculinities with a feminist approach.

Demilitarising masculinities is all the more critical given that Democrats and Republicans are divided at their core on gender-related issues, such as reproductive rights. Although they might not explicitly address masculinity, each party's political orientation towards women's rights reflects their stance on masculinity. This policy brief adopts a radical feminist perspective and outlines plausible scenarios for how the next US administration could approach masculinities in formulating its (foreign) policies and how this would impact peacebuilding efforts. It then makes recommendations accordingly. The next US administration's approach to these issues may either uphold or challenge established gender norms. On one side, there the potential for the US to follow

the UK's WPS National Action Plan steps, which explicitly recognises masculinity as contributing to insecurity, thus offering a positive direction for peacebuilding. Conversely, neglecting to acknowledge masculinity's link to violence, alongside the absence of frameworks that embrace intersectional identities—like LGBTQ+ men and men from the Global South—poses serious risks for global peace and security.

Plausible scenarios: Masculinities after the 2024 election on the WPS agenda

Both candidates have released a WPS national action plan during their terms. The 2019 action plan was published under Trump's presidency, and the 2023 version came under Biden's presidency while Harris was vice president. To make the scenarios more evidence-based, I will briefly summarise the two WPS national action plans, assuming that the next president's policy toward masculinities will resemble the ones they have already implemented.

Scenario 1: Trump wins the 2024 election

If Donald Trump wins the 2024 US presidential election, the policy of minimal engagement with masculinities within the WPS agenda seen during his first administration will continue. The 2019 WPS Strategy published during his presidency emphasises women's leadership in peacebuilding but only briefly mentions men and boys, focusing primarily on their positive contributions without addressing harmful masculinity norms. This lack of attention paid to masculinities reflects a broader disinterest in gender-sensitive policies under Trump's leadership.

Hence, a likely scenario for a second Trump administration is that it will prioritise military strength and traditional security approaches and exclude progressive gender policies. Trump's penchant for misogyny and homophobia, hypermasculinity ideals—strength, dominance and control—will be further entrenched in policy, reflecting the Trump administration's focus on hard power. Therefore, programs tackling the role of masculinities in perpetuating violence will continue to be overlooked, which will undermine comprehensive peacebuilding efforts that seek to transform harmful masculinities.

Additionally, Trump's nationalistic and isolationist tendencies will lead to a diminished role for the US in promoting global gender equality, including within the WPS framework. His administration will certainly also disregard intersectional gender concerns, such as the roles of LGBTQ+ men and men from marginalised racial groups in peacebuilding efforts.

Recommendation

Under a Trump administration, US policymakers may need to work discreetly, perhaps focusing on internal working documents that are not publicly accessible and are less likely to attract attention from the administration. Keeping discussions on masculinities low-key while waiting for a more favourable political climate could help preserve the issue for future administrations that are more open to engaging with gender dynamics. Civil society organisations should focus on maintaining resilience in the face of expected funding cuts.

Given the expected reduction in US federal support, finding creative ways to engage with existing frameworks will be necessary. One possible approach is to address masculinity through alternative agendas, such as the UN's Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda. As Kern's policy brief (Kern

2024) argues, combining the WPS and YPS agendas can offer more holistic solutions. Building on this idea, addressing traditional masculinities as drivers of violence within the YPS agenda could be strategic. It can include promoting alternative forms of masculinity, particularly among young people, and positioning them as agents of change to break the cycle of violent masculine socialisation. It can also be part of Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programmes. Furthermore, addressing masculinities in the YPS context can help to counter the stigma that portrays young non-white men as inherently dangerous.

Scenario 2: Harris wins the 2024 election

If Kamala Harris wins the 2024 US presidential election, the WPS agenda will build on the progressive, intersectional approach seen under the Biden-Harris administration. Although the 2023 WPS Strategy does not address masculinity as contributing to insecurity, it emphasises engaging men and boys to address harmful social norms, and this approach will be expanded under a Harris administration.

Thus, a scenario for a Harris administration is that it will prioritise a transformative approach to gender relations in conflict and peacebuilding, addressing the complex roles of masculinities in both perpetuating and resolving violence. Programs aimed at transforming harmful masculinities will be strengthened, particularly focusing on the intersection of militarised masculinities and their impacts on both domestic violence and international conflict, as this was already one objective of the 2023 WPS National Action Plan. Harris's administration will probably push for policies that engage men as partners in peace and gender equality, focusing on the desecuritization of masculinities as part of broader peacebuilding efforts.

Furthermore, Harris will support more inclusive policies that consider the roles of LGBTQ+ men and men from marginalised racial backgrounds in peace processes. Drawing from previous work, such as LGBTQ+ sensitivity training for police officers and prosecutors from African countries, her administration could advocate for US foreign policies that incorporate how specific visions of masculinities can contribute to violence and fuel conflict. However, even though Harris worked as a prosecutor of sexual violence, she has never adopted a radical feminist stance, nor has the majority of the Democratic Party that will comprise her administration. Hence, Harris's national action plan will not go as far as the UK's by explicitly presenting masculinity as a conveyor of violence that can undermine peacebuilding.

Recommendation

While a Harris administration may be more open to addressing issues of masculinity, it remains part of the broader patriarchal system in the US. The challenge is then to seize the opportunity provided by a Democratic administration's progressive stance on gender issues to achieve concrete progress on masculinity-related policies, even though tackling harmful masculinities is somewhat controversial within the Democrat party.

Civil society and policymakers should aim to advocate for a "Masculinity and Peace" agenda. Although such an agenda may seem unrealistic in the immediate term, initiating these discussions could yield long-term results, even if they do not materialise under a Harris presidency. Another inconceivable yet impactful possibility would be pushing for a UN resolution that addresses

masculinity within peacebuilding efforts. It would require significant coordination among international policymakers and, while challenging, could provide a lasting platform for action on masculinities.

More realistically, policymakers should expand the gender analysis in the WPS to include a comprehensive gender-relational framework that explicitly includes masculinities. This approach would highlight how militarised masculinity drives violence and marginalises both men and women in conflict zones. This framework incorporates insights from the study on Somalia, showing how unachievable masculine ideals contribute to instability (El-Bushra and Gardner 2016). It can also acknowledge and address how societal expectations of men contribute to both conflict and peace.

In addition, Harris's involvement in efforts to prevent conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), as highlighted in Meyer's policy brief (Meyer 2024), could be a practical entry point. Since harmful masculinities are often at the root of violence, including CRSV, addressing masculinities could become a vital element of the next "US strategy to prevent and respond to gender-based violence globally". It could involve promoting caring masculinities within peacebuilding, hence fostering more compassionate forms of male leadership in conflict resolution.

Conclusion

Incorporating masculinities into the WPS agenda and expanding inclusive peacebuilding programs are essential for addressing the root causes of violence and fostering sustainable peace. Policymakers can build more inclusive and effective peace efforts by broadening the gender-relational framework to account for masculinities and engaging all men, including those from marginalised communities, as active agents of change. Without these critical changes, global peace initiatives will continue to overlook the powerful role gender dynamics play in both perpetuating and resolving conflict.

Note: The respective author is responsible for the content of the article. The contributions do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Bundeskanzler-Helmut-Schmidt-Stiftung and the Europa-Kolleg Hamburg.

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