

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

March 31, 2022

Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20520

Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III  
U.S. Department of Defense  
1000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20301

cc: Jennifer Klein, Executive Director  
White House Gender Policy Council

Dear Secretary Blinken and Secretary Austin:

As we celebrate Women's History Month, we recognize the remarkable accomplishments of women around the world and reflect on the progress yet to be made. As Members of Congress committed to securing a seat at the table for women and girls, on March 8, 2021, we introduced a resolution expressing the importance of taking a feminist approach to U.S. foreign policy. We ask that the Department of State, in coordination with the Department of Defense, take steps to apply a feminist approach to foreign policy and defense decision-making processes to empower women and girls around the world.

Although women and girls comprise approximately half of the world's population, they continue to face considerable disparities relative to men and boys in their access to rights, resources, and agency. Globally, women enjoy only three-quarters of the legal rights afforded to men, and 178 countries have legal barriers in place preventing women's full economic participation.<sup>1</sup> Women hold only 26.1 percent of parliamentary seats and only 16 countries have female heads of government.<sup>2</sup> In 2020, women made up only 5 percent of total military forces deployed to peacekeeping missions, despite evidence showing that women have a heightened ability to decrease violent outcomes and that a higher proportion of female peacekeepers is

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<sup>1</sup> <https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/wbl>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2022-03/women-in-parliament-in-2021>

associated with fewer allegations of sexual abuse and exploitation. And although the inclusion of women in peace processes makes the resulting agreement 35 percent more likely to last 15 years or longer, women made up only 13 percent of negotiators for major peace agreements between 1992 and 2019.<sup>3</sup>

We applaud the Biden-Harris administration's prioritization of sexual and reproductive health and rights in U.S. foreign policy by revoking the Mexico City Policy and recommitting funding to the U.N. Population Fund (UNFPA). We hope this change in policy will aid the hundreds of thousands of women in low- and middle-income countries who have an unmet need for family planning services and supplies. We also commend the Biden-Harris administration's commitment to advancing gender equity through the executive order to establish the Gender Policy Council, the request to double the funding for global gender equity programs to \$2.6 billion in the President's Budget for Fiscal Year 2023, and standing up the Global Partnership for Action on Gender-Based Online Harassment and Abuse. The United States has an opportunity to build on that progress through adoption of a feminist foreign policy, and to lead the way in securing women's greater political, economic, and social participation around the world, and ensure that all people in all their identities are fully included in a foreign policy that prioritizes peace, people, and planet.

As you know, foreign policy reflects how a government defines and prioritizes peace and security, structures international trade, provides humanitarian aid and development assistance, and engages with other nations and non-state actors. Adoption of a feminist foreign policy would require the U.S. government to identify and challenge power structures and inequalities based on intersecting systems of discrimination, while engaging in meaningful analysis of how U.S. assistance, trade policy, diplomacy, military capabilities, and intelligence can best be leveraged to advance the rights of women and girls. We also recognize the need for an intersectional feminist foreign policy that prioritizes gender equity, racial and environmental justice, and human rights, and peace throughout the foreign policy and national security spheres.

Countries around the world, from Sweden to Mexico, have found concrete ways to implement a feminist foreign policy. For example, Canada has focused on shifting 95% of its foreign assistance budget to promote gender equity and the rights of women and girls abroad. Sweden used its feminist foreign policy to address unfair trade practices in which women's clothing had tariffs up to six times higher than similar items for men, and has used its leverage to include more women in high-level negotiations when it held the presidency of the United Nations Security Council. Mexico has included training on a feminist foreign policy in curriculum for ambassadors and diplomats and has pledged to reach gender parity within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by 2024. While the mechanisms for implementing a feminist foreign policy may vary, they all seek to put women at the forefront of foreign policy decisions, rather than as an afterthought.

In the United States, a whole-of-government approach is necessary to achieve the goals of a feminist foreign policy, including a commitment to diversity and gender parity in federal government hiring and promotion, adoption of zero-tolerance policies toward gender-based

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/>

violence and workplace harassment, access to reproductive health care, incorporation of gender analyses as a part of foreign policy and defense decision making, accountability and transparency in planning and implementation, and allocation of adequate resources to these goals.

The ongoing invasion of Ukraine further highlights the immediate need for a feminist U.S. foreign policy. Women and children are disproportionately impacted by war, which magnifies existing inequalities and increases the risk of sexual violence.<sup>4</sup> Of the 3.5 million refugees who have fled Ukraine, over two thirds are women and children. Women arriving at the border face increased risk of sexual exploitation and assault, exacerbating an already alarming increase in sexual violence caused by the Russian-backed conflict in the Donbas region. In 2019 alone, one in three Ukrainian women reported experiencing physical or sexual violence, and the current conflict has increased that risk exponentially.<sup>5</sup>

The breakdown of social and health care services has also disproportionately impacted Ukrainian women, some of whom have been forced to give birth in bomb shelters or under bombardment from Russian forces, as we saw in the horrific attack on the maternity hospital in Mariupol. This problem will only get worse: UNFPA estimates that 80,000 Ukrainian women will give birth in the next 3 months, and many will do so without access lifesaving and critical care.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, Ukrainian women are aiding in the defense of Ukraine. Over 22 percent of Ukraine's military is female, one of the highest percentages in the world—and higher than the percentage of women in our own armed services.<sup>7</sup> Since 2016, Ukrainian women have served in combat roles and have been instrumental in countering Russian aggression in response to the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Despite having a greater fighting force and more advanced weapons systems, Russia has so far failed to gain air superiority or capture the capital city of Kyiv in its invasion of Ukraine – something that U.S. intelligence assessments initially predicted would happen within several days. Ukraine's effective response is due in part to its inclusion of and integration of women within its armed services and territorial defense units.

When achieved, women's participation and gender equity promote peace and security, further economic prosperity, and decrease the likelihood of violence.<sup>8</sup> In the United States alone, GDP could increase by an estimated 12 to 19 percent with improved participation of women in the economy.<sup>9</sup> Reports have also found that women's equal economic participation could add \$28 trillion to annual global GDP within 10 years.<sup>10</sup> It is past time for the United States to join Sweden, Canada, France, Luxembourg, Mexico, Spain, and Germany by adopting a feminist foreign policy. We look forward to working with you to realize this important goal.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.un.org/press/en/2003/sc7908.doc.htm>

<sup>5</sup> [https://eeca.unfpa.org/en/publications/well-being-and-safety-women?\\_ga=2.8081201.220554671.1646062129-58387694.1642436549](https://eeca.unfpa.org/en/publications/well-being-and-safety-women?_ga=2.8081201.220554671.1646062129-58387694.1642436549)

<sup>6</sup> <https://unfoundation.org/blog/post/protecting-the-health-rights-and-dignity-of-girls-women-in-ukraine/>

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.mil.gov/ua/content/files/whitebook/WB\\_2019\\_2020\\_eng.pdf](https://www.mil.gov/ua/content/files/whitebook/WB_2019_2020_eng.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2019/03/closing-the-gender-gap-dabla.htm>

<sup>9</sup> 2015 McKinsey Global Institute study projected by 2025. <https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-global-economy/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/employment-and-growth/how-advancing-womens-equality-can-add-12-trillion-to-global-growth>

Sincerely,



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Jackie Speier  
Co-Chair  
Democratic Women's Caucus



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Barbara Lee  
Co-Chair  
Pro-Choice Caucus



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Lois Frankel  
Co-Chair  
Democratic Women's Caucus



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Brenda L. Lawrence  
Co-Chair  
Democratic Women's Caucus



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Veronica Escobar  
Vice Chair  
Democratic Women's Caucus



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Sylvia R. Garcia  
Vice Chair  
Democratic Women's Caucus