

DISSECTING THE STORY

How are Women in Conflict, Peace, and Security Contexts Portrayed in Media?

U.S. national security policymakers and influencers get their information on the world from a very specific set of sources. When New America commissioned POLITICO Focus to conduct research based on interviews with national security and foreign policymakers, we found that many policymakers consumed media by syncing Google alerts with their primary policy issue or geographic region of focus. Further, many rely on department news briefings, which are often distributed in the morning and based on the collection of headlines and op-eds from major national outlets by press shops and subject matter experts. These briefings were said to drive up to 10 percent of a department's daily objectives. Given that reporting on women and gender-related issues is often limited to only a portion of a news article and rarely featured in headlines, **these topics may be frequently filtered out of briefings and ignored among policymakers.** The results of these media consumption habits are significant gaps and distortions in a policymaker's understanding of particular issues.

Consumers of leading media outlets are not exposed to women leaders in conflict and peacebuilding; their roles are quite literally written out of the story.

For three months in fall 2016, we catalogued search results for terms such as “Iraq + women” or “Afghanistan + women + peace” in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal* to discover patterns in reporting on gender and conflict in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and South Sudan. The results go a long way toward explaining—and reinforcing—the policymaker assumptions described above. Consumers of these leading media outlets are not exposed to women who are formal or informal leaders in conflict and peacebuilding; their roles are quite literally written out of the story. They are exposed to women as victims, usually twinned with children in contexts that may overemphasize women's vulnerability and certainly underemphasize women's agency. And often—as has been noted in other media surveys—they are underexposed to women's voices as journalists and as citizens.



**THE ERASURE OF
WOMEN'S VOICES**



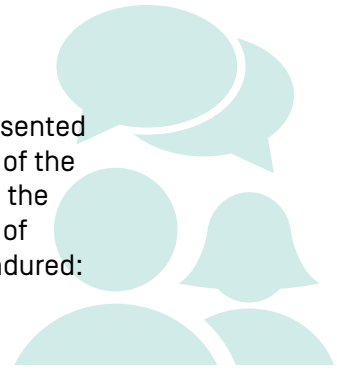
**WOMEN'S ABSENCE
IN PEACE CONTEXTS**



**“WOMEN AND
CHILDREN”**

THE ERASURE OF WOMEN'S VOICES

Across all publications in our sampling, South Sudanese women are represented almost exclusively in terms of sexual violence, with prolonged discussion of the mass rape of female populations in South Sudanese towns and villages in the wake of a brutal civil war. Even in this context, women rarely speak in any of these articles about their experiences or the sexual violence they have endured: **journalists, politicians, and UN personnel speak for them instead.**



WOMEN'S ABSENCE IN PEACE CONTEXTS

Women were occasionally represented as political actors in our sampling of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, with media outlets intermittently representing women as politicians, social activists, protestors, or members of women's advocacy groups. Only 5 percent of articles in our sampling of the *Washington Post*, for example, featured women as activists, union leaders, protesters, politicians, or members of women's advocacy groups, and none of the articles in this sampling featured women as peacekeepers. When they are featured in these roles, their representation often fails to move beyond name-dropping.

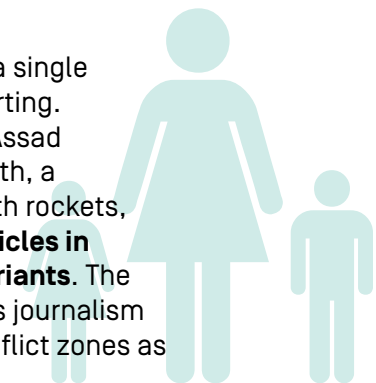
For example, over the three months in our sample only once did the *Wall Street Journal* feature a woman in a peacemaking role. Malalai Shinwari, a peace advisor to the Afghan president, was mentioned as one of the few women present at an Afghan peace conference.¹ However, the article did not quote her or provide any more specific insight into her role within the peace talks.

Furthermore, our sampling of the *New York Times* featured only four instances of women in peacemaking roles. Ironically, one of those four representations, within an article concerning Syrian peace talks, was Mouna Ghanem, a Syrian politician and coordinator for the Syrian Women Forum for Peace, critiquing women's "shallow" and "insignificant" participation in peace negotiations.²



"WOMEN AND CHILDREN"

Women's presence in the journalism we sampled was often limited to a single sentence that paired them with children during casualty or injury reporting. For example: a *Wall Street Journal* article concerning the bombing of Assad strongholds in Syria included the following sentence: "Earlier this month, a maternity ward in the regime-held side of Aleppo city was attacked with rockets, killing several women and children." **More than 60 percent of WSJ articles in our sampling featured the phrase "women and children" and its variants.** The ubiquity of this pairing of women and children, though standard across journalism and conflict reporting, reveals a popular construction of women in conflict zones as infantile, vulnerable, or perpetual victims.



¹ Jessica Donati and Margherita Stancati, "Taliban Details Conditions for Afghan Peace Talks," *Wall Street Journal*, January 24, 2016.

² Somini Singupta, "An Odd Diplomatic Dance as U.N. Prepares for Syria Peace Talks," *New York Times*, January 26, 2016.

Gender and National Security Media Analysis

