

Mexico's First Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan: An Assessment

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On January 11, 2021, the Mexican government presented its first National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS).¹ The NAP is part of Mexico's feminist foreign policy, launched in January 2020, and it is a joint effort of the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs, the Secretariat of Defense (which encompasses the Army and the Air Force), the Secretariat of the Navy, the Secretariat of Security and Citizen Protection and the National Institute for Women (INMUJERES). An interagency group is responsible for coordination, monitoring and evaluation of the NAP, which is subject to an overall review in 2024.

In this policy brief, we analyze Mexico's NAP and make three arguments. First, NAPs are not only relevant for a country's foreign policy and international engagements but are also significant for a country's domestic security. Unfortunately, Mexico's NAP is almost exclusively outward focused and does little to address Mexico's own security challenges and their impact on women, LGBTQ and nonbinary persons. Second, we argue that the NAP's outward-facing objectives are limited to a Western format that overlooks local contexts. Third, the most effective NAPs are those that have active civil society engagement. We therefore advocate for a formal, institutionalized and expanded role for Mexican civil society organizations. We conclude with recommendations for the Mexican government and civil society organizations and sketch what a more innovative and inclusive NAP could look like.

The NAP's first three sections introduce the WPS agenda and Mexico's interests within it. A fourth is devoted to the four pillars of prevention, participation, protection and relief and recovery. The NAP concludes with a section on coordination and monitoring and one on financing. A detailed implementation plan in an annex describes 10 strategic objectives, 16 lines of action and 23 indicators.²

The NAP links to the broader national and international public policy frameworks "aimed at guaranteeing gender equality and accelerating women's empowerment in all areas." For example, at the national level it mentions the country's Spotlight Initiative for the Elimination of Violence against Women and the National Program for Equality between Women and Men (2018–2024). At the international level, it mentions the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action and the recommendations from the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, in particular the one referring to women's participation in security tasks.³

"[F]or Mexico, gender equality and the human rights of women and girls are essential conditions," the NAP states, "not only for the achievement of international peace and security, but also for sustainable development and peace." It also says UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, which launched the WPS agenda, is not restricted to conflict or post-conflict situations but is also relevant in times of peace.⁴

At first glance, Mexico's NAP seems to take an expansive view of the WPS agenda, covering domestic and international issues. However, when it comes to the operational part of the NAP, the main focus is on Mexico's international efforts—particularly its participation in UN peacekeeping operations (PKO). For Mexico, the expansion of the presence of women in peace operations is one of the main objectives of the WPS agenda.

We believe the NAP missed a great opportunity to address the security challenges facing Mexico.⁵ Its high rate of homicide affects women, men, LGBTQ and nonbinary people differently and undermines gender equity and equal access to justice.⁶ As a public policy tool to address gender inequalities and security, the NAP ought to leverage both domestic and foreign policies to address the root causes of violence and its intersections with gender. Given the context of citizen insecurity in Latin America in general, these root causes are particularly relevant.⁷ Moreover, the NAP seems to contradict itself, suggesting that Mexico is “at peace” while emphasizing its support for Mexico's “women peacebuilders” working within its borders.

Thematic Areas and Objectives

The core operational part of the NAP is composed of four pillars: prevention, participation, protection and relief and recovery. The bulk of the objectives and lines of action fall under the first two pillars.

Prevention

The NAP's primary prevention objectives are to “promote gender mainstreaming among institutions responsible for peacekeeping and security” and “raise awareness among military and police personnel” about the role of women in conflict prevention and peace processes. The specific lines of action and indicators to achieve these objectives rely heavily on training and awareness campaigns.

Yet the effectiveness of these training efforts is uncertain. A 2020 report by civil society organizations in Mexico found that neither the Army, Navy nor the National Guard were able to evaluate the content or impact of their human rights training.⁸ The authors of the report called for reassessing training as the sole strategy to guarantee and protect human rights. They argued that training is not a substitute for establishing clear, written policies and limits on the use of force. Training on gender perspectives for all Federal Public Administration personnel has been part of the equality plans coordinated by INMUJERES for several years, but this training appears to have yielded little, as judged by the increasing gender-based violence and femicides.⁹

The proposal for creation of a specialized police body to prevent, investigate and prosecute gender-based violence within municipal police departments is in this regard more promising. For example, in Chihuahua, the capital city of a northern state of the same name, the police's specialized gender unit has had some success when it comes to investigating and prosecuting specific crimes that target women and girls. The unit has also had some success dealing with the problems of impunity and corruption in local law enforcement agencies.¹⁰ The one obstacle to the creation of specialized bodies is that the federal government has limited power to impose such changes on local police forces. For this to become a reality, the federal government would need to launch a major political strategy of cooperation with each of the 32 states. No such strategy is mentioned in the NAP.

Participation

The NAP's main goal is “to promote the substantive participation of women as real and effective actors to prevent conflict at all levels.” It goes on to say that it will deploy more female personnel to UN peacekeeping operations.

Two things limit the proposed action. First, Mexico's participation in peacekeeping is modest.¹¹ Increasing the number of women without significantly augmenting the overall personnel contribution will have minimal impact. In addition, the action does not commit to increasing women's participation in national security forces. The implementation plan includes only two indicators to measure the number of Mexican women involved in security operations: the number of Mexican women nominated and those deployed to UN peacekeeping operations missions. There is no mention of recruitment, hiring or promotion of women or LGBTQ people in the National Guard or the military.

Other participation indicators are vague and difficult to assess. For example, “number of networks of women peacebuilders formed,” “exchanges of experiences” and “number of uniformed women who participated in specialized language courses” can be quantitatively measured but are hard to assess in qualitative terms. Comprehensive indicators for the Mexican context could have included, for example, the extent to which violations of women's and girls' human rights are reported, referred and investigated by human rights bodies and the extent to which measures to protect women's and girls' human rights are included in national security policy frameworks. Making women's and girls' human rights violations visible is crucial to eradicating barriers to participation.

Civil society is mentioned only once. Under the participation pillar, the Mexican government commits itself to hold multilateral forums and meetings attended by women officials, experts or civil society representatives. However, there is no mechanism to ensure civil society's consultation or substantive participation and monitoring.

In sum, the NAP focuses on enhancing women's visibility in some spaces from which they have been traditionally excluded without altering the underlying power structures that sustain that discrimination. Women's participation ought to be understood as a means for achieving gender equality and eliminating gender-based violence, not as an end in itself. It is not enough to "just add women and stir."¹² It is about transforming power structures to be more inclusive and attractive for women and LGBTQ people.¹³ That is, it requires organizational reforms that allow groups that have traditionally been discriminated against to hold positions of power and make policy decisions.

Protection

The protection objectives focus on protection of women and girls in peace operations and promotion of the UN's zero-tolerance policy on sexual exploitation and abuse by PKO staff. The indicators used to measure the implementation of these goals rely almost exclusively on training: "number of staff trained"; "academic programs of police institutions that incorporate issues related to the Women, Peace and Security Agenda"; "number of female instructors" and "number of trainings imparted."

The objectives and actions stand out for their narrow focus and lack of ambition. This is disappointing for two reasons. First, many experts and stakeholders have developed the WPS agenda over more than 20 years. They have proposed many ways to protect women in conflict and post-conflict situations and guarantee and protect women's economic, social and physical safety: for example, an inclusive design process and an established coordination system for implementation with civil society. None of these proposals are included in Mexico's NAP. Without such inclusion, the NAP becomes an intragovernmental process that promises little meaningful change outside bureaucracy.¹⁴

Second, Mexico's feminist foreign policy promises to advance the human rights of women and girls across several issues, and the government placed particular emphasis on these commitments during the Generation Equality Forum in March 2021.¹⁵ Thus, limiting government efforts to implementing training (whose impact is difficult to evaluate) and promoting a zero-tolerance policy on sexual exploitation and abuse (without monitoring mechanisms) come across as the bare minimum.

Authorities cannot protect potential victims of gender-based violence if they are not able to accurately and timely diagnose and measure the drivers of this violence. At a minimum, Mexico should prioritize enhancing and improving data-gathering mechanisms concerning gender-based violence and homicides. For example, to identify one of the characteristics of a femicide in mortality data, records in Mexico specifically seek information about the nature of the relationship between the victim and perpetrator of a homicide. However, the information is left blank 95 and 97.5 percent of the time for women and men, respectively.¹⁶ Mexico also should have committed to complying with the Bogota Protocol on gathering quality data on homicides in Latin America and the Caribbean.¹⁷

Relief and Recovery

The relief and recovery objective is "to support gender mainstreaming in aid and humanitarian assistance efforts, as well as in post-conflict peacebuilding." Implementation of this goal is to be measured by the number of initiatives promoted by Mexico at the United Nations and other multilateral forums. The types of initiatives are unspecified. More appropriate indicators would assess the financial, legal and psychological services provided to survivors of gender-based violence and the families of victims of femicide.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Financing

Effective implementation of NAPs rests on robust monitoring and evaluation and sufficient financing. In terms of monitoring and evaluation, Mexico's NAP creates an interagency group comprising the Foreign Affairs Ministry, the Navy, the Army, the Citizen Security and Protection Ministry and the Ministry for Women's Affairs. Although international civil society organizations championed UNSCR 1325 and were part of the Working Group on WPS, Mexico's interministry group excludes them. Civil society's involvement is necessary for accountability and supervision of the government's performance, so this is a serious cause for concern. In El Salvador, the Executive Council within the UNSCR 1325 Implementation Committee includes nongovernmental organizations and academic institutions.¹⁸ This policy is considered a best practice in the region, and Mexico should replicate it.

For the financing portion of the NAP, Mexican authorities did not commit to any concrete figures for its implementation. Instead, the document suggests that each coordinating institution carry out the tasks described using their own human capital and budgets. Given the severe federal budget cuts to policies related to gender issues during the current administration, this is also cause for concern.¹⁹ In this instance, the Mexican government should look to Canada's budgeting commitments, which include specific budgeting targets over a five-year period.²⁰

Opportunities for Progress

The NAP's external focus means there are many missed opportunities for enhancing gender equality in security at home. Many observers have criticized Western NAPs for an overwhelmingly outward focus that insists on "rescuing" women in the Global South while ignoring major issues in their own countries.²¹ Mexico's NAP seems to replicate these NAPs.

Many NAPs in Latin America copy and paste the Western format and thus miss an opportunity to use the NAP within their local contexts.²² The substantive focus of the WPS agenda has shifted over the years from traditional approaches to conflict to other challenges, such as climate change, migration and violent extremism. The Mexican NAP explicitly recognizes that the agenda is not restricted to conflict or post-conflict situations, yet the proposed actions focus solely on conflict and post-conflict situations. They do not address transnational security challenges such as immigration, violent extremism and ethnic minorities rights.

Immigration

Mexico has been dealing with a transnational immigration crisis for many years. Migrants, half of whom are women,²³ are increasingly traveling to the United States, through Mexico, to seek refuge from harrowing gender-based violence.²⁴ The perilous journey is particularly dangerous for women, who are most likely to fall prey to sexual violence and human trafficking.²⁵ Migrant women in Mexico frequently see their wages and travel documentation retained by security authorities such as the National Guard, which adds to their precarious situation.²⁶ The recent murder of Victoria Salazar at the hands of the Tulum police is just one example of the disproportionate state and police violence inflicted on immigrant women.²⁷ In terms of public health, UN Women statistics also show that 60 percent of preventable pregnancy-related deaths occur in humanitarian settings and are caused by internal displacement and migration.²⁸

Mexico's NAP could have sought to increase relief measures for migrant women and establish cooperation mechanisms for the investigation and international prosecution of human trafficking and sexual exploitation, as well as strengthen existing mechanisms. One example of such mechanisms is the memorandum between the Mexican and Guatemalan authorities pertaining to the protection of women and children victims of human trafficking via the Mexico-Guatemala border, signed in 2004.²⁹

On a similar note, the WPS agenda in Mexico could have promoted further cooperation with Central American countries to address the underlying causes of forced displacement in the region—gang violence and gender-based violence.³⁰ This would be particularly appropriate given that Guatemala and El Salvador have themselves adopted NAPs. Regional cooperation in this realm could incentivize other countries to get on board with the WPS agenda.³¹

Far-Right Extremism and Disinformation

Far-right extremism is closely linked to sexist, homophobic, white supremacist and militaristic notions that undermine democratic values, human rights and gender equality and hinder peacebuilding.³² For example, in Colombia, the 2016 Peace Accords faced a substantial setback when Colombia rejected the deal in a national plebiscite after a conservative campaign against "gender ideology"—a term conservatives used to undermine LGBTQ and women's rights.³³ These campaigns and narratives have become particularly salient in Latin America, and Mexico is no exception. At the start of the pandemic, some religious groups blamed the surge of COVID-19 on feminism and queer people, and they have also actively halted the efforts of the reproductive rights movement in local legislation.³⁴

Disinformation is also closely linked to far-right groups and conspiracy theories that are hostile toward women, particularly women in leadership positions and women of color.³⁵ While Mexico's diplomatic efforts (i.e., co-hosting the Generation Equality Forum) are certainly relevant to counteracting far-right agendas internationally, the threat is also brewing domestically. Mexico's NAP could have addressed far-right extremism and disinformation head on by promoting and protecting local journalists covering WPS-related issues.

Indigenous and Afro-Mexican Rights

The Foreign Affairs Ministry has repeatedly stated its intention of leading a feminist foreign policy anchored in an intersectional lens.³⁶ According to Kimberle Crenshaw, who first coined the term, intersectionality denotes the combination of multiple forms of discrimination, such as racism, homophobia, ableism and sexism to analyze and understand the specific experiences of black, transgender or Indigenous women, for example.³⁷ However, Mexico's NAP makes no reference whatsoever to intersectionality. The document also lacks public policy proposals that recognize and address the overlap of forms of discrimination and state violence against Indigenous and Afro-Mexican women. Neither does it acknowledge the legacy of Afro-Mexican and Indigenous women as peacebuilders in Mexico. The NAP could have seized the opportunity to condemn and urge the cessation of low-intensity warfare against the Zapatistas while referencing and remembering the Acteal massacre of 1997, where the principal victims were women and children.³⁸

Recommendations

Our analysis of Mexico's NAP leads us to make the following recommendations:

1. *Include the active participation of civil society organizations.* The coordination, implementation and evaluation mechanisms of the NAP should include civil society organizations as observers and agents responsible for demanding accountability and measuring and monitoring the NAP's impact. Three feminist civil society organizations with in-depth knowledge of the impacts of militarism, international relations and gender-based violence in Mexico are Data Civica, Intersecta and Justicia Transicional MX; they should be invited to join coordination, implementation and evaluation bodies.³⁹
2. *Move beyond training.* To implement the WPS agenda, the Mexican government ought to go beyond simply training. Clear, well-defined rules, limits and sanctions must be established to govern the use of force by security forces. Moreover, the substantive participation of women should involve reforms to make national defense and security bodies more inclusive and attractive for women and LGBTQ people.
3. *Budget realistic, sufficient expenditures for implementation.* For the WPS agenda's goals to become a reality in Mexico, financial planning and budgeting are a prerequisite. As with any public policy agenda, resources are required to carry out actionable items, measure their impact and, if successful, expand them.

4. *Adopt policies that address WPS-related issues in the domestic and regional spheres.* Mexico should seize the opportunity to propose new, innovative WPS-related policies that address the violence spreading within its borders and in the region. We have suggested addressing the immigration crisis, the spread of disinformation and threats on journalism and incorporating an intersectional perspective that aligns with its stated feminist foreign policy. Other issues may include LGBTQ rights, disarmament and illicit arms flows across the US-Mexico border.

Overall, Mexico's first NAP is a positive step and answers the call by Mexican civil society to work on issues related to the women, peace and security agenda. The NAP provides a formal framework to hold the government accountable. And yet, we underscore the inconsistencies between the government's positions in the international arena and the ones it presents to its citizens.⁴⁰ We hope that the publication of Mexico's NAP will start a conversation not only with the government but also with practitioners and researchers around the world. To advance the WPS agenda, it is critically important to share experiences and best practices, particularly among Mexico's neighbors, the United States included.

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