Seize the Gender Inclusion Era to Enhance Homeland Defense and Security

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Abstract

This article examines experiences implementing a Women, Peace, and Security strategy in diverse cultural contexts, focusing on underutilized tools for promoting gender equity. It explores opportunities for Mexican and Latin American women in regional defense and security. Emphasizing cultural awareness, it advocates for culturally sensitive leadership to strengthen international alliances prioritizing homeland defense. It also underscores leveraging gender differences for organizational effectiveness. Despite advancements, global gender discrimination persists, highlighting the need for continued progress. Upholding human rights and inclusion values enhances homeland defense efficacy. Leadership, gender inclusion research, and financial resources are crucial for successful homeland security strategies.

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The 2023 Department of Defense Women, Peace, and Security Strategy underscored the indispensable role of gender inclusion in homeland defense, positioning it as a vital tool for force management. However, true inclusivity extends beyond gender to encompass the broader spectrum of human dynamics, forming the bedrock for fostering cultural understanding and ensuring a robust foundation for security measures. Delving into the intricacies of culture and human behavior in foreign contexts is both intellectually stimulating and ambitious. A comprehensive, 360-degree perspective is imperative for effective homeland defense and security strategies, yet such a viewpoint remains elusive if it overlooks half of the population.

Gender disparities hold pivotal significance for leaders, planners, and decision makers, as they shape individuals' values, preferences, and personality traits, thereby influencing organizational dynamics and outcomes. According to social roles theory, these differences stem from societal attributions placed upon women and men,

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dictating various aspects of human interaction, including labor division. The attributions of groups carry statistical weight, shaping perceptions and affecting outcomes.

Throughout history, women have often been relegated to roles perceived as delicate or unsuitable for certain tasks. Societal expectations for women vary across countries and intersect with factors such as age, gender, and race. The entrenched power of these roles poses formidable challenges to their disruption. Despite evidence demonstrating women’s proficiency in areas such as discipline, motivation, and marksmanship—even outperforming men—cultural norms and perceptions still hinder their acceptance into roles traditionally associated with male identity, such as combat positions. The barriers to women’s integration into society are predominantly rooted in cultural norms and perceptions rather than grounded in empirical reality.

Society’s assignment of gender roles reflects cultural norms and significantly shapes individuals’ daily behaviors and responses to crises and violence. The models of individual and group cultural identity permeate societal structures, influencing business interactions and organizational ethos. As individuals transition from childhood to adulthood, their perceptions of gender roles become deeply ingrained in their personalities, serving as both conscious and unconscious reference points for decision-making processes.

Moreover, the sense of security fostered by cultural familiarity becomes paramount during times of crisis, as individuals find solace in familiar environments. This familiarity aids in navigating situations of insecurity, providing a semblance of stability.

Within the US military, women have highlighted the arduous task of overcoming stereotypes regarding their physical capabilities and grappling with gender-related mental health challenges as the most formidable hurdles in their careers. Stereotypes portraying women as mentally inferior to men persist, hindering their acceptance into nontraditional roles. These culturally perceived physical disparities between genders not only impede women’s integration but also deter leaders from recognizing the benefits of fostering gender diversity within their teams, which could enrich organizational dynamics and mirror broader societal inclusivity. Ad-

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5 Lisa Worthy, Trisha Lavigne, and Fernando Romero, Culture and Psychology: How People Shape and are Shaped by Culture (Phoenix: Maricopa County Community College District, 2020), https://open.maricopa.edu/.
dressing cultural bias emerges as a formidable challenge, requiring individual commitment and concerted effort.

Oftentimes, I have observed the underrepresentation of women in my capacity as a security cooperation professional. When reviewing images from security cooperation events worldwide, including those from my tenure at the Security Cooperation Office in Mexico, I often find myself amidst a predominantly male cohort. While this realization underscores my privilege, it is also a testament to “how broadly invisible are women faces”—not only within fields like security cooperation, traditionally male-dominated professions, or contexts of organized crime but also in social gatherings.\(^7\) Many other women have echoed similar sentiments of privilege, particularly when labeled as pioneers in their respective roles. This phenomenon underscores a stark reality: as long as society continues to designate “first women,” progress in gender inclusion efforts remains insufficient.

The influential role of women in shaping children’s education is indisputable. As mothers, women actively contribute to molding children’s worldviews while also playing key roles in household economies and stability. However, women also hold significant potential as contributors to defense and security efforts. Researcher Marie O’Reilly’s findings in 2015 underscored women’s overwhelmingly positive impact on violence prevention, societal strengthening, and peace facilitation.\(^8\) O’Reilly observed that women possess inherent qualities conducive to negotiation and violence prevention, serving as natural mediators who promote dialogue and trust. Their involvement in legislative and political spheres further bolsters efforts to prevent international conflicts, thus offering substantial advantages when designing programs, processes, and strategies for homeland defense and security.

Gender roles serve as pivotal factors in defining power dynamics within authoritarian regimes. Within the United States’ homeland defense and security communities, there exists a staunch advocacy for power equilibrium. Incorporating a gendered perspective into US defense and security frameworks will prove instrumental in evaluating national security threats, devising strategic competition initiatives, and countering the sway of authoritarian regimes on the global stage. Despite the profound intersectionality of gender and authoritarianism, leveraging gender as a competitive advantage against adversaries remains underutilized.\(^9\)

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Security cooperation stands as a potent instrument through which the United States cultivates enduring partnerships with foreign nations, thereby advancing defense and security objectives worldwide. Given the noble endeavor of security cooperation, it becomes imperative to recognize the paramount importance of fostering diverse participation within its leadership ranks. Inclusivity not only ensures representation, ownership, and empowerment but also serves as a true reflection of the broader community.

Moreover, embracing diverse participation and accessibility can elevate the prominence and efficacy of security cooperation initiatives, provided leaders acknowledge the contributions of all stakeholders and confront challenges with a comprehensive perspective rather than a narrow focus. With women constituting a majority of the global population, their increasing involvement as active participants in terrorist groups, criminal networks, and armed factions cannot be overlooked. Deborah Bonello’s work in *Narcas: The Secret Rise of Women in Latin America’s Cartels* offers compelling narratives illustrating the evolving roles of women in criminal enterprises. Gender disparities and roles, alongside other forms of diversity, must be meticulously documented to effectively inform leadership decisions. A steadfast commitment to fostering individual participation and opportunities within groups, promoting inclusivity across all team members, and nurturing a culture of healthy relationships stands as an essential leadership imperative.

Leadership skills serve as potent instruments, imbuing leaders with a social responsibility to wield these tools to foster inclusion and positively influence those around them.\(^\text{10}\) Within Latino culture, where relationships are rooted in trust, the imperative for inclusive leadership becomes even more pronounced.\(^\text{11}\) Leaders bear an implicit duty to cultivate an environment conducive to individuals realizing their full potential and fostering growth. The impact of leadership extends far beyond mere directives, as leaders serve as role models whose influence permeates throughout the organization.

Active engagement in leadership is pivotal to advancing societal inclusion. Culture operates subtly, necessitating ongoing observation and guidance from leaders to redirect cultural biases and champion inclusivity. In social spheres, gender neutrality is a myth, yet leaders often fail to capitalize on opportunities to cultivate a diverse workforce and underscore the gender dimensions within all facets of security cooperation.\(^\text{12}\) It is incumbent upon leaders to commit to analyzing issues...

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through a gendered lens and integrating these insights into strategic initiatives, thereby enhancing the efficacy and acceptance of homeland defense and security strategies.

Increasingly, global conflicts and security challenges bear the face of women. Gender considerations are particularly salient in discussions surrounding the root causes and repercussions of voluntary or forced migration, where women and children are disproportionately affected by insecurity and physical risks, often falling victim to physical, sexual, and gender-based violence. While statistics reveal more men succumb to violent conflicts, women disproportionately endure sexual abuse.\(^\text{13}\)

Moreover, as cartels wield significant influence on social development, it becomes imperative to approach the issue through a gendered lens, evaluating the surge in crime and violence as women assume various roles, including producers, suppliers, traffickers, recruiters, couriers, consumers, and supporters of drug lords and gangs across South and North America, notably in Mexico. However, homeland defense and security professionals have been slow to adapt to these evolving trends, failing to view them through the perspective of women. This dearth of women’s insights hampers the ability of leaders, planners, and decision-makers to formulate informed strategies. Furthermore, the underrepresentation of women in security and defense spheres undermines efforts to realistically observe and address matters, hindering progress in safeguarding essential resources such as health, education, and finances through effective social policies.

Gender-disaggregated data on immigrants between 2019 and 2020 revealed a higher proportion of male immigrants compared to female immigrants in Latin America and the Caribbean. Globally, out of a total of 280.6 million immigrants, 51.9 percent were men, while the remainder were women. However, women constituted 51 percent of the global refugee population.\(^\text{14}\) Failure of homeland defense and security professionals to consider gender as a crucial variable can impede their ability to discern the nuances of different initiatives and effectively address associated challenges.

An illustrative case lies in the fight against drug trafficking, where emphasizing a gendered approach holds potential benefits. The international framework of drug control, largely premised on prohibition, inadvertently fuels illicit drug markets and empowers drug trafficking organizations. These organizations often mirror and perpetuate hegemonic gender systems, treating women and children as dispos-


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able commodities. This perpetuates sexist structures, fostering the exploitation of women's labor by male counterparts, reinforcing patriarchal relations within illicit labor markets, and perpetuating cycles of patriarchal violence and cultural norms.15

The realm of drug trafficking is fraught with various forms of organized crime, including human trafficking, arms smuggling, money laundering, and migrant smuggling, alongside pervasive violence, corruption, gender-based violence, and income disparities. This intricate network of criminal activities ensnares both victims and perpetrators, leaving them vulnerable to legal prosecution, financial exploitation, sexual abuse, and forced labor. Such realities pose significant threats to defense and security, undercutting efforts towards gender equality and female empowerment.

Another illustrative case lies within the realm of humanitarian response. Humanitarian crises precipitate extreme vulnerability and economic strain, pushing individuals outside of established healthcare systems and depriving them of fundamental necessities such as shelter, sustenance, and clothing. Amid such crises, women often find themselves grappling with the burdens of securing housing, food, and care for their families, rendering them susceptible to sexual violence, recruitment by drug cartels, human trafficking, and other forms of exploitation. A nuanced understanding of the gender dynamics at play in such circumstances is imperative for effectively addressing the associated challenges. Enhancing the representation of women in significant leadership capacities, such as within emergency management groups, first responder teams, and medical and healthcare organizations, empowers them to develop and implement inclusive solutions tailored to the needs of diverse communities.

Gender inequality and power dynamics present multifaceted challenges for leaders, necessitating the identification and cultivation of individuals capable of embracing and operationalizing inclusive and diverse visions within organizations marked by racial, cultural, and gender diversity. Additionally, leaders must discern how educational interventions can shape organizational culture, individual behavior, and the interplay between various components of organizational systems to enhance or sustain performance at requisite levels.16

Mentorship programs play a pivotal role in nurturing and guiding junior leaders through various stages of professional development. Meaningful mentorship experiences facilitated by the security cooperation program in Mexico yielded positive outcomes, as evidenced by a successful medical evacuation exercise con-

ducted between Mexico and the United States. In this instance, Mexico appointed a female leader to spearhead the air evacuation, thereby underscoring the significance of female medical professionals within the Mexican Armed Forces and promoting best practices. Moreover, during a women in defense panel in Mexico, military women had the opportunity to discuss the pivotal role of early education in fostering leadership skills and were affirmed by senior colleagues regarding the importance of empowering junior leaders—both women and men—through targeted value-building approaches.

Individuals are driven when they experience fairness, receive recognition and opportunities for growth, and are inspired to make meaningful contributions. It is worth noting that within organizations where the mission is traditionally associated with masculinity, such as the military, women’s performance may suffer due to the pervasive perception that many roles are tailored primarily for men. Correspondingly, it is crucial to acknowledge that the WPS agenda, from the perspective of homeland defense, transcends gender lines and concerns everyone, as it fundamentally revolves around maximizing human potential and motivation.

Organizations that prioritize diversity and equity in their environments are better equipped to excel in the global environment. Women within the security and defense sectors consistently shatter barriers, exhibit exceptional preparedness to seize opportunities, and repeatedly achieve success. Young women embarking on their careers are poised not only to meet but to surpass established standards, showcasing unparalleled dedication and performance. By placing greater emphasis on the inclusion of women and acknowledging their invaluable contributions, the potential to witness tangible advancements in democracy and the nation’s security and defense remains within reach.

**Recommendations and Conclusion**

Diversity and inclusion exert significant influence on organizational culture. Given the dearth of research on methodologies for integrating these facets into homeland defense and security, it becomes imperative to develop solutions that bridge this gap, empowering security cooperation professionals to effectively navigate the intricate dynamics of human differences. Adopting a stance of apparent neutrality regarding factors such as race, gender, and religious affiliation, and fostering a culture where gender distinctions are minimized in organizational...
culture and decision-making, fails to address the complexities of modern defense challenges. Instead, it is essential to shed outdated social paradigms and acknowledge gender differences with the explicit aim of harnessing the benefits of effectively managing individual divergences as organizational assets rather than liabilities.¹⁹

Navigating the intricate balance between individual interests and organizational imperatives within rapidly evolving environments poses significant challenges for leaders and security professionals. To facilitate conditions where individuals feel accepted and respected while fulfilling mission objectives, leaders can implement policies and structures conducive to fostering inclusivity.²⁰ WPS national action plans (NAP) emerge as pivotal tools for shaping such policies and structures. While more than 90 percent of nations in the Western Hemisphere have initiatives addressing WPS, not all countries have NAPs for integrating gender perspectives into the security and defense sectors. Such plans are indispensable for supporting, formalizing, and guiding objectives in this critical domain.

Effective homeland defense organizations prioritize the advancement of knowledge and the seamless integration of their workforce. Such integration serves as a linchpin for robust knowledge management and operational excellence, as individuals enrich organizational systems with their diverse perspectives and leverage their intersectional characteristics—including gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and disability—to optimize processes and achieve desired outcomes.

Despite the compelling evidence supporting the importance of mentorship programs, there remains a notable dearth of initiatives extended to international partners that facilitate cross-gender mentorship, enabling both women and men to glean insights from each other’s strengths. Additionally, it is incumbent upon successful women within these organizations to embrace their leadership roles and leverage their experiences and soft skills to mentor and empower other women to advance professionally.

Furthermore, the lack of comprehensive gender data on women’s participation across various domains, as well as a clear understanding of their involvement in illicit activities, poses a significant challenge. Rigorous data collection and research on gender issues within security and defense are indispensable for fostering critical reflection on existing practices and identifying viable solutions to evolving challenges.

Urgent action is warranted to achieve equal gender representation within homeland defense and security realms. This entails promoting inclusive measures, allocating financial resources to invest in comprehensive inclusion programs, and supporting initiatives aimed at collecting gender-disaggregated data for research purposes. Such efforts will contribute to cultivating a clearer understanding of homeland defense threats and opportunities, thereby guiding strategic advancements in this critical domain.

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