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WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY IN BRAZIL

PROGRESS AT A CROSSROADS

AUTHOR

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INTRODUCTION

When General Laura Richardson assumed her position as commander of United States Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) in 2021, one of her priorities was to conduct key leader engagements (KLEs) with partners in Latin America and the Caribbean. These engagements included high-level Women, Peace, and Security (WPS)-specific activities with senior leaders. Her team's efforts to discuss WPS on her first KLE in Brazil were met with resistance from Brazil's Ministry of Defense. While some U.S. officials stationed there reasoned that the military lacked sufficient time to adequately prepare for the engagement, Brazil's response suggested an apprehension within the military ranks to fully engage in WPS other than in themes related to peacekeeping. Eventually, a modest roundtable took place; mostly mid-level officers attended. Brazil's posture sent a clear message that its military was not invested in WPS at the strategic level.

Like many other countries, including the United States, Brazil has taken two steps forward and one step back when it comes to furthering gender equality in support of national security. While rhetorical support comes easily, including the passage of the 2017 U.S. Women, Peace and Security Act, implementation has been slow and cumbersome. As of 2024, for example, U.S. efforts to educate those in the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), one of four U.S. organizations specifically charged with implementing the act, remain nascent despite clear evidence linking gender equality and national security. As of April 2025, U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth announced on social media that he was canceling the Women, Peace, and Security program. Official reiteration of that intent is expected to follow. Globally, the gap between rhetorical support for supporting gender equality and funding efforts to do so remains significant.¹

Decades of empirical research demonstrate the linkage between gender equality and national security. For example, researchers Mary Caprioli and Mark Boyer began looking at the linkage between gender, violence, and international crisis in 2001.² They found that the severity of violence in crisis decreases as domestic gender equality increases. In 2005, Caprioli continued that research, looking at the role of gender inequality in predicting internal conflict, controlling for other possible influences on domestic conflict, including "transitional polities, polity type, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita, GDP per capita growth rate, prior domestic conflict, peace years, and the existence of and number of at-risk minorities."³

Caprioli found that states characterized by gender inequality are more likely to experience intrastate conflict. Political scientist Valerie Hudson and a team of multidisciplinary researchers found that states ranking high on gender inequality metrics were more than twice as likely to be fragile states, more than three times as likely to have a more autocratic, less effective, and more corrupt government, and more than one and a half times as likely to be violent and unstable than countries with strong gender equality.⁴ These numbers make the link between gender equality and good governance associated with national security difficult to deny. Hence, we must take solid steps forward when it comes to the meaningful inclusion of women in defense and security and society at large.

Recently, Brazil began drafting its second National Action Plan for implementing the Women, Peace, and Security framework to address issues associated with gender equality and work toward good governance, which would ultimately contribute to peacemaking at the individual, communal, national, and international levels. Whether the upcoming National Action Plan will be any more successful than the first remains to be seen, especially in the face of significant structural and cultural barriers. This analysis indicates Brazil's modest but gradual progress regarding WPS despite recurrent setbacks over the past years, as evidenced by ongoing issues in three areas: (1) women's participation in the military, (2) women's participation in peacekeeping, and (3) women's agency.

BRAZIL'S TWO NATIONAL ACTION PLANS

In March 2017, the Brazilian government launched its first National Action Plan (NAP) on WPS to cover the years 2017-2019, aligning with international gender-equality norms and arguably seeking to positively project its global image and gain legitimacy and influence.⁵ That NAP passed with only limited awareness or support from the Brazilian government beyond middle management.⁶ Not surprisingly, the plan was unable to find much traction, though it was renewed to cover 2019-2023.

The original NAP was the result of almost two years of work led by Brazil's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, created in a group with representatives from the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Justice and Public Security, and the Secretariat of Policies for Women, United Nations (UN) Women, and civil society. This plan had the UN WPS framework as a foundation outlining four pillars:

1. Increased *participation* of women in security-related affairs, broadly defined;
2. *Protection* of women's rights and from gender-based violence;
3. *Prevention* of conflict; and
4. Assuring that women's rights are represented in *relief and recovery* efforts after conflicts or crises.

The first Brazilian NAP tailored the WPS pillars into four thematic pillars: *participation, prevention and protection, consolidation of peace and humanitarian cooperation, and deepening awareness and engagement.*⁷ The last pillar can be thought of as a prerequisite for the others, as institutions cannot implement what their leaders and operators do not have knowledge of or understand. The United States underwent its own struggles with the implementation of its Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017.⁸ The Brazilian NAP outlined broad and ambitious comprehensive objectives, but these goals proved difficult for practical implementation given the lack of support at high levels. It also called for monitoring mechanisms and annual reports but failed to lay time-specific targets and budget allocations.

The NAP aimed primarily to increase the participation of servicewomen in UN peacekeeping operations.⁹ This emphasis on contributing troops to missions abroad, such as in Haiti, was intended to spotlight Brazil's commitment to peacekeeping efforts. The plan also addressed gender equality in the armed forces, including issues of representation and policy implementation, but these aspects gained even less traction than the peacekeeping objective. Overall, the NAP had 16 strategic objectives with 77 linked activities, 30 of which were to be led or co-led by the Ministry of Defense. The implementation of the NAP to advance the WPS agenda depended on the effective coordination and collaboration of several stakeholders, with the armed forces bearing substantial responsibilities. Nevertheless, the actual implementation was largely moot due to a lack of awareness, prioritization, and funding.

In 2023, Brazil took more pragmatic steps to advance its WPS agenda, considering that the first NAP expired in March of that year. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with the support of UN Women, held a workshop to draft a second NAP, focusing on gender integration and intersectional perspectives to address issues such as climate change, justice, migration, and prevention of violence against human rights advocates.¹⁰ Finally, an extensive NAP report from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs proposed two groundbreaking bills: one to make the next NAP a federal law and the other to create a National Monitoring System, both ensuring that the implementation actually moved forward.¹¹

While the NAP report included women's accounts in the military, it also left several questions from the Ministry of Defense marked as "not answered yet." This lack of transparency suggests resistance to fully addressing gender inclusion within the armed forces, a failure to prioritize women's inclusion, or, at best, insufficient coordination among the ministries. Bureaucratic slow-rolling is a time-honored way to stall poorly supported programs and initiatives.

This inadequate contribution of the Ministry of Defense to the NAP report should not come as a surprise. Entrenched gender bias and stereotyping within Brazilian society are reflected in the low participation of women in defense. Women account for 52%¹² of the Brazilian population, yet they comprise less than 10%¹³ of servicemembers in the armed forces as of 2022. The lack of representation, particularly at the highest echelons, indicates that Brazil continues to struggle with the integration of women into the military. The subsequent cultural issues of inclusion that follow and still test the United States and other militaries in too many instances are often even more challenging.

In October 2023 at the annual UN Security Council Open Debate on Women, Peace, and Security, Brazil announced the initial drafting phase (Stage I)¹⁴ of its second NAP:

The Second National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security: Stage I ..., covers not only foreign policy actions, but also a broad range of issues of major importance for Brazilian society, such as public security, social protection, political participation, and minority rights. In that sense, it goes even beyond the scope of the WPS Security Council resolutions.

Given the priority of the federal government to the empowerment of all women, the Second National Action Plan adopts an intersectional approach, and will encompass the specific needs of Black and Indigenous women, as well as women refugees and migrants, among other vulnerable groups. We will continue to work with civil society, parliament, think tanks and academia to design specific actions and monitoring mechanisms for the implementation of this very ambitious second plan of action.

The even more ambitious nature of the second NAP warrants a closer look at progress to date.

WOMEN IN THE MILITARY

Women's inclusion in the Brazilian military goes back to World War II when 73 nurses voluntarily joined the Brazilian Expeditionary Force.¹⁵ The Brazilian military's contributions during the war are a point of pride, as they fought to achieve the Allied victory in Italy. Therefore, the participation of women during this period has profound historical significance.

In 1980, the Brazilian Navy established the Auxiliary Corps, marking the official entry point for women into the Brazilian Armed Forces. Subsequently, the Brazilian Air Force and the Brazilian Army created similar corps or integrated women into existing structures under certain conditions and limitations.¹⁶

Over the years, opportunities for women to serve slowly increased. As of 2022, the Brazilian Armed Forces were composed of 358,000 personnel, including 35,109 women in various ranks and positions. Servicewomen accounted for 9.78 percent of the total force across the Brazilian Navy, Brazilian Army, and Brazilian Air force. The Brazilian Air Force had the highest proportion of servicewomen among all branches, with women making up 20.5 percent of the force. The breakdown of servicewomen by rank in 2022 included three general officers, 1,756 senior officers, 1,720 intermediate officers, 11,690 junior officers, 1,378 students in training, 16,840 senior noncommissioned officers and sergeants, and 1,715 corporals and privates.¹⁷ Only recently have legal changes enabled women to more equitably enter officer training and attain military education at service academies, placing more women into the leadership pipeline.¹⁸

The Brazilian military culture, however, has resisted integrating women across all defense functions, most recently with the Brazilian Army's restrictive position toward women in combat. As recently as 2024, the Brazilian Army defended its decision to exclude women from positions such as cavalry, infantry, artillery, and engineering, citing physiological differences and the physical demands of these military functions. There is, however, an ongoing debate within security communities in Brazil on this perspective, with critics arguing that this position is discriminatory and unconstitutional.¹⁹

Nevertheless, the appointment of the first women general officers in select military fields reflects a gradual recognition of women's leadership potential and incremental organizational shifts toward gender equality. In 2012, Rear Admiral Dalva Maria Carvalho Mendes, a physician, became the first woman general officer in Brazil's Armed Forces.²⁰ In 2018, Luciana Mascarenhas da Costa Marroni became a general officer in the Brazilian Air force.²¹ In 2021, for the first time in the 210-year history of the Army Military Academy, *Agulhas Negras*, 23 women cadets graduated from a class of 391 students.²² In 2023, Navy Physician Maria Cecília Barbosa was promoted to rear admiral.²³ Also in 2023, the Ministry of Defense promoted the first woman to a three-star general officer, physician Carla Lyrio Martins, from the Brazilian Air Force.²⁴

Advances have also taken place in the strategic and operational context. As recent as 2024, SOUTHCOM's Richardson was invited to join a roundtable discussion at Boeing Brazil with military officials and Brazilian industry leaders to discuss how to empower women in aerospace and defense roles.²⁵ In the same year, the Brazilian Armed Forces continued to advance gender integration by welcoming women to the army's Aircraft Pilots and Aircraft Maintenance Management courses for the first time and increasing women's participation in the Brazilian Navy, as evidenced by the inaugural class of women in the Marine Soldier Course.²⁶ In July 2024, the first group of women marines graduated from the Brazil Marine Corps, leading the way for future servicewomen.²⁷ Furthermore, the Brazilian Navy appointed Lieutenant Commander Taryn Machado Senez as the gender focal point at the InterAmerican Defense Board, where she led WPS efforts focusing on the region, bringing together thousands of participants during in-person and virtual seminars to share knowledge on topics ranging from leadership to garrison operations.²⁸ These initiatives align with the global WPS framework and demonstrate progress in implementing the WPS framework within the Brazilian military.

Despite progress, Brazil's NAP still has a long way to go. The military continues to face challenges that include a low percentage of servicewomen overall, the exclusion of women from certain operational fields, and a stark gender disparity in leadership, with only three women general officers compared to 389 men as of 2022 (less than 1 percent).²⁹ Brazil's stated commitment to recruiting, retaining, and promoting women's talent requires stronger prioritization from the Ministry of Defense.

WOMEN IN PEACEKEEPING

Brazil's focus on peacekeeping missions opened space for a small but growing number of servicewomen to contribute on a global scale. Between 1992 and 2019, at least 338 Brazilian women (261 military, 25 police, 52 civilians) served in 25 UN peacekeeping missions. These numbers represented only 0.7% of the total 48,163 Brazilian peacekeepers. In late 2019, however, the number of servicewomen peacekeepers increased to 3.77 percent (10 out of 265) of Brazilian uniformed personnel.³⁰ In recent years, the Brazilian military has increased its focus on women's participation in peacekeeping with positive results.³¹ In 2022, for the first time, the Brazilian Armed Forces surpassed the UN's "Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy" target, assigning more than 20 percent servicewomen participation in peacekeeping missions and aiming for 25 percent by 2028.³²

Brazilian servicewomen serving as peacekeepers consistently demonstrate their potential, performing exceptionally well and therefore earning global recognition and respect from the international WPS community. Trailblazers such as Lieutenant Colonel Luanda dos Santos Bastos—the first woman officer from the Brazilian Air Force to serve in peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance missions UNAMID (Darfur, 2017) and MONUSCO (Democratic Republic of Congo, 2021)—and Brazilian Navy Captains Márcia Andrade Braga and Carla Monteiro de Castro Araújo—recipients of the UN Military Gender Advocate of the Year Award for their work in MINUSCA (Central African Republic, 2019 and 2020, respectively)—have served as role models and played an essential role in connecting and building trust with the local communities they serve.³³ Another servicewoman whose contributions have gained international recognition is Army Lieutenant Colonel Ivana Mara Ferreira Costa.³⁴ She served as a gender focal point, Women's Committee president, and peacekeeper in Haiti. Additionally, she participated in Operation *Acolhida* (Welcome) at the Brazil-Venezuela border and currently serves as a military advisor for the Brazilian mission supporting the UN response to sexual exploitation and abuse.

Despite their remarkable performance, servicewomen still face numerous barriers while serving as peacekeepers.³⁵ These challenges include poor communication of opportunities, data and personnel tracking problems, restrictive societal expectations, lack of women in higher ranks, and insufficient pre-deployment training. Brazil must address these sociopolitical and integration issues to implement its new NAP responsibly.

WOMEN'S AGENCY AND PARTICIPATION IN DEFENSE

Women's agency consists of their capacity to choose and act autonomously without fear. Brazilian servicewomen's agency and participation are often tested, not only because of issues in military culture but also due to pervasive issues such as long-standing social norms and gender-based violence.

Servicewomen in Brazil are often self-motivated, self-taught, hard workers who rise through the ranks due to their determination, not because of institutional support mechanisms. They navigate the demands of military duty with talent and leadership, even though they are often faced with overt gender bias and discrimination.

It is not surprising that Brazilian servicewomen report experiencing hostility, intimidation, and weak self-reporting mechanisms for sexual harassment and violence. Gender-based violence is a critical problem in Brazilian society generally; a woman becomes a victim of assault every five seconds.³⁶ Brazil has one of the highest rates of femicide in the world, with 3.5 cases per 100,000 women. Besides having a permissive culture that frequently objectifies women, between 1980 and 2019, the official number of reported femicides was almost 30 percent less than the actual occurrences due to inadequate reporting protocols and the misclassification of deaths.³⁷

To a certain degree, Brazil acknowledges the gravity of its long-standing gender-based violence problem. In 1994, Brazil hosted and ratified the Convention of Belém do Pará, which classifies gender-based violence as a human rights violation.³⁸ The government has also passed laws to address violence against women, such as the Maria da Penha Law (2006)³⁹, the Law of Femicide (2015)⁴⁰, and Law 14.188 (2021)^{41,42}. Nevertheless, the prevalence of gender-based violence continues to impact the safety of women in Brazilian society, hindering women's meaningful inclusion in defense and security.⁴³ Largely performative acknowledgment, however, is easier and more prevalent than genuine attention to the underlying cultural proclivities that perpetuate gender-based violence.

Finally, the country's data for gender parity reflects the need for more effective measures at the national level. The WPS Index examines demographics (women's education, employment, financial inclusion, political representation, etc.) and ranks countries based on their initiative to integrate the WPS agenda. The WPS Index for 2023-2024 positions Brazil at 115 out of 177 countries.⁴⁴ Brazil's relatively low country rank emphasizes the importance of integrating the WPS agenda across all dimensions of women's inclusion, from the judiciary to politics to defense.

WHY NAP IMPLEMENTATION MUST BE TAKEN MORE SERIOUSLY

The high turnover associated with Brazil's political inconsistencies has disrupted the momentum necessary to effectively implement the first Brazilian NAP.⁴⁵ Brazil, like the United States and several other countries in Latin America and Europe, has recently witnessed significant political polarization in its electorate and, consequently, its elected governments. Frequent changes in political administrations and drastic partisan differences have led to shifts in priorities and personnel, undermining institutional memory and the commitment to the WPS agenda. This instability results in a fluctuating focus on advancing gender equality as other national interests take precedence, leading to a diminished focus on the NAP's objectives. Nevertheless, there is motivation for the U.S. Department of Defense to move forward with initiatives regardless of partisan politics.

The meaningful inclusion of women within the military ranks will support the Brazilian military in fulfilling its national defense priorities and strategic goals. A distinct characteristic of Brazilian military culture is the preference for peace over conflict. Its 2020 National Defense Strategy clearly states: “Brazil prioritizes peace and advocates for dialogue and negotiations to resolve disputes between states.”⁴⁶ A growing body of WPS research indicates that when women are meaningfully included in societies—and organizations—stability, prosperity, and peace increase. Therefore, prioritizing the inclusion of women in the military makes great sense in Brazil as it is a strategically sound approach to supporting peace.

Militaries around the world are struggling with some variation of the “5 Rs,” recruiting, retention, readiness, resources, and risk to force/risk to mission. Similarly, Brazil faces these challenges. Eliminating large portions of the population, neglecting to support them once in place, and having to retrain troops to replace those lost to attrition are all factors of the 5-R issues. Brazil has an opportunity to move forward, but that will require more commitment than it has previously demonstrated.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING WPS IMPLEMENTATION

A holistic approach is necessary to successfully implement the WPS agenda within Brazil’s Armed Forces and ensure women’s full participation in defense, including in the areas of WPS awareness, policy implementation, training and education, talent management, resource allocation, international partnerships, WPS networks, and the institutionalization of plans.

The development of a WPS implementation plan at the Ministry of Defense level and its integration across all military services is needed for the successful operationalization of these principles. Without this guiding structure, the new NAP will remain largely aspirational internally and, again, a showpiece for external image and credibility purposes. Goals for recruitment, retention, and promotion of servicewomen need to be defined, and mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation must be put in place.

Implementation of the NAP also requires awareness and understanding of WPS principles as a prerequisite. In this regard, Brazil would do well to learn from the mistakes of the United States, where considerable misunderstanding of WPS objectives remains prevalent⁴⁷, thereby hindering implementation. A strategic communication plan targeting both military personnel and the general public is necessary to properly shape the WPS defense and security narrative, highlighting the contributions of Brazilian servicewomen.

A necessary first step in WPS implementation is awareness. Security practitioners can’t implement what they don’t know. Additionally, opportunities for international schools, training, and education programs should be provided to enhance servicewomen’s skill sets. WPS training programs for all military personnel, including senior leadership, should be implemented, while equitable provision of training and education opportunities to all servicemembers must be ensured.

With regard to opportunities for women, developmental plans for servicewomen’s career advancement need to be prioritized. Opportunities for more women to serve abroad in peacekeeping missions, as exchange subject matter experts and liaison officers, should be offered, as well as increased participation of women in combined military exercises. In doing so, Brazil would demonstrate its determination to integrate women into the military.

Of course, these initiatives will require funding. There is an adage that budgets reveal priorities. The international community will know Brazil is serious about NAP implementation when there is an allocation of resources and a dedicated budget for WPS initiatives within the Brazilian Armed Forces.

Brazil is not the first or only country to struggle with WPS implementation. There are lessons to be learned from other countries. Strengthening international partnerships and WPS networks to exchange best practices related to WPS practical implementation is crucial.

Finally, successful WPS implementation will generally benefit from an intersectional perspective. To this end, expanded participation of civil society in Brazilian governmental efforts will increase the potential for success. The Ministry of Defense should institutionalize implementation plans through interministerial working groups, an implementation timeline, monitoring mechanisms, and a defined budget.

CONCLUSION

With its upcoming WPS NAP, Brazil is well-positioned to address pressing societal and security-related issues within its borders and beyond. Success, however, will require moving beyond rhetorical support for WPS principles. The incremental progress that Brazil has made regarding women's participation in the military as peacekeepers and women's agency is good, but further action will be needed if Brazil intends to fulfill the goals it has set for itself in the new NAP. The need for moving beyond rhetoric is clear.

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