

## ARGUMENT

# Tear Down the Foreign-Policy Glass Ceiling!

Democratic presidential candidates—and a new group of wonks—are committed to fixing rampant gender inequalities in the national security workplace.

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BY ROSA BROOKS | JUNE 25, 2019, 5:08 PM

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I was a single mother with two young children when I took a job at the U.S. Defense Department in 2009, and my family and friends didn't think much of this career move. How, they demanded, would I manage the long hours? The high-stress environment? When I remained undeterred, one friend commented resignedly, "Well, at least it's probably a good place to meet men."

She wasn't wrong about that. In 2009, the Pentagon *was* a good place to meet men—if by "meet men" you mean "sit through endless meetings in which there will be nine or 10 men for every woman." Every woman who has worked in a senior position at the Pentagon is familiar with the experience: You walk into a room, and all the men look surprised when you take your place at the main table instead of heading for the outer ring of chairs. After all, most of the women on the Pentagon staff are *assistants* to the senior officials, not senior officials in their own right.

When I worked at the Pentagon, my boss was Michèle Flournoy, the undersecretary of defense for policy. Flournoy, who is often spoken of as the likely nominee for defense secretary in the next Democratic administration, brought an unprecedented number of senior women on to her team. This generated plenty of raised eyebrows around the building; a male friend of mine reported hearing a four-star Marine general dismiss Flournoy's staff as nothing but "pretty girls in skirts."

It would be nice to imagine that things have changed for the better in the decade since then, but if anything, they've gotten worse. Today's Pentagon is still very much a man's world. As of April, women made up only **18 percent** of military officers overall, and the numbers **dwindle** when you look at the highest ranks: 20 percent of new lieutenants are

female, but women make up just 12 percent of colonels and less than 10 percent of generals and admirals. On the civilian side, things aren't much better: Women occupy only about a **quarter** of Senior Executive Service and supervisory positions, and only 16 percent of the "**senior defense officials**" listed on the Defense Department's June 2019 webpage are female.

This glaring gender disparity doesn't exist in all the federal departments and agencies. Women constitute 56 percent of senior executives in the Department of Health and Human Services, 49 percent of senior executives at the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and 43 percent of senior executives at the Education, Labor and the Treasury departments. But only 39 percent of senior executives at the State Department are female, and in the **intelligence community**, women make up just 30 percent of employees at senior pay levels. For women of color, the disparities are even more glaring.

During President Barack Obama's administration, the number of female political appointees in national security agencies edged up; since Donald Trump was elected, those numbers have plummeted. At the Defense Department, for instance, five of 14 assistant defense secretary positions were held by women in 2012. Today, there are no female assistant defense secretaries.

This needs to change. The United States owes women an equal shot at leadership positions in the national security community, but it's not just about basic fairness—it's also about ensuring the strongest possible national security institutions. The research is clear: Put a lot of people who look pretty much alike around those decision-making tables, and you'll get a lot of decisions that look pretty much alike. Diversify your leadership teams, and you'll get smarter, better, more creative decisions. This is true for all forms of diversity: Diversity of gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, cultural and economic background all make teams stronger, but the research on gender diversity is particularly striking. Companies with more women in management posts are **organizationally stronger and do better financially** than their less diverse counterparts, for instance, and gender diversity reduces **dangerous overconfidence** and reckless risk-taking.

We live in a dangerous world. The chance of conflict between major powers such as the United States, Russia, and China is rising; countries such as North Korea and Iran continue to pose nuclear threats; terrorism remains endemic; and we are struggling to prepare for new challenges posed by climate change, global migration, and a dozen other

wicked problems that should keep us up at night. Having national security institutions that don't reflect America's diversity is a luxury the country can't afford.

There's some good news on the horizon, though: **The Leadership Council for Women in National Security** (LCWINS), a nonpartisan new organization that I helped co-found, is dedicated to redressing these gender inequities. LCWINS began over drinks: A few years ago, a dozen women who had served together at the Pentagon started getting together for the occasional lunch or happy hour, and the talk often turned to shared frustrations, such as the all-male think tank panels, the men who can't seem to hear anything women say in meetings, the jobs highly accomplished women didn't get because they were told (by men) that they lacked "gravitas" or "executive presence," and, sometimes, much worse—the sexual harassment and assault that remain part of the workplace experience of far too many women.

One day, someone suggested that we start a more formal organization to promote women's national security leadership, and LCWINS was born. The organization now has nearly 75 amazing women and men on its steering committee and honorary committee, including the first female **secretary of state**, the U.S. Navy's **first female African American four-star admiral**, the first female **deputy director of the CIA**, and scores of other proven leaders.

The organization's first initiative is the #5050in2020 Pledge for Gender Parity in National Security Appointments. We approached all the 2020 presidential candidates, from both parties, and asked them to pledge that if elected, they would seek gender parity in their senior national security appointments. So far, fifteen of the candidates have taken **the pledge**: Michael Bennet, Joe Biden, Cory Booker, Pete Buttigieg, Julián Castro, Kirsten Gillibrand, Kamala Harris, John Hickenlooper, Seth Moulton, Amy Klobuchar, Beto O'Rourke, Tim Ryan, Bernie Sanders, Eric Swalwell, and Elizabeth Warren. These men and women have pledged that if elected, their presidential personnel office will seek to ensure gender parity in national security leadership appointments by establishing diverse hiring pools, setting hiring standards that take diversity into account, and not discriminating against applicants who have taken employment breaks or downshifts due to family obligations.

If one of our pledgers is elected in November 2020, LCWINS will be there to help make sure this campaign pledge translates into real action. We'll work with the winning candidate's transition team and presidential personnel office to make sure they use best

practices in recruitment, hiring, and retention. There's no shortage of qualified women to fill senior national security positions—the problem has been a lack of committed leadership willing to make gender diversity a priority.

Coming from so many of the nation's most prominent political leaders, the #5050in2020 pledge marks a striking symbolic shift. The presidential candidates who have signed the pledge are demonstrating that they're ready to move beyond rhetoric and window dressing and make a commitment to concrete steps to change America's national security institutions. And while all our initial pledgers are Democrats, we hope that will change: LCWINS is a nonpartisan organization, and a commitment to women's leadership is a goal that should transcend party affiliation.

Back in the 1950s and '60s, young women heading off to college were often coyly asked if they planned to get their “Mrs.” degree. College, it was assumed, was where the boys were. That's not true anymore: Today, **more than half** of America's college students are female. Now, the challenge is to make sure the many talented young women who enter the national security workforce know they'll be valued colleagues at every level, all the way up to the very top.

And someday, I hope, I'll hear people tell those young women that the Pentagon is a great place to meet men—and women, too.

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