Arms Control Needs the Modernizing Lens That Gender Offers

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By Heather Hurlburt

At a moment when the field of arms control and security faces existential challenges, it may seem foolish to insist that one of the sector’s problems is a failure to incorporate thinking about gender. After all, achievements over a half-century in institution building and norm creation, even the most basic norms against the use of nuclear weapons, are under attack.

Yet in an important sense, the community is confronting its 21st century opposition with a 1950s mindset. The politics of the last year showed people in the United States—whether recent graduates or new members of Congress voting on budget funds and authorizations for use of military force—to be broadly unaware of core principles such as deterrence and basic facts about U.S. arsenals and the shape of global threats. At the same time, they are hearing about security through ever-more intimate and personal lenses. Identity-linked advocacy networks, from Concerned Women for America to the Movement for Black Lives to veterans and religious organizations, are increasingly shaping the way Americans receive news and understand the world.

As research carried out last year showed, national security professionals are likely to believe the best response to differences in policymaking is to remove it rather than embrace it. That impulse was once the state of the art—“I don't see race” or “men and women are converging”—but is no longer. A
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community that fails to catch up on diversity, as reflected in who participates and what perspectives are considered, will fail to compete for talented personnel, as well as for relevance, in a diverse world.

Elsewhere in the security field, gender has moved beyond the personnel department. Scholars have documented how differing experiences of gender affect policy outcomes, most notably how closely linked the treatment of women is to the prevalence of violence within and between societies. In response, institutions from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to NATO and the United Nations have begun to practice analysis and policymaking that explicitly take gender difference into account.

The field faces two related but distinct challenges: diversifying the people who work in it and the perspectives it recognizes. The arms control and security policy sector is still overwhelmingly white and upper-middle class, and disproportionately male, especially in its highest echelons. Despite the reams of evidence and successful practices to emulate from other fields, the sector is only at the very beginning of remaking itself so that it can successfully compete for talent and connect with the majority of Americans, much less the rest of the world.

Despite rich generations of feminist scholarship, the arms control sector lags well behind others in bringing a gender lens, that is, the ability to consider how policies affect the genders differently, to its work.

Finally Get Serious About Diversity

First, there is a tendency to complacency about gender representation in the arms control and security sector. After all, goes the reasoning, Rex Tillerson is just the second white male U.S. secretary of state in 20 years, and a list of illustrious female practitioners tends to follow. Yet, those high-profile achievers mask a more disappointing overall picture. As women's representation has progressed then seemed to plateau, across the general economy, the private sector has led in developing and implementing practices that seek to remedy gender imbalances. On this, government has lagged, and the national security sector with it. Female representation in national security policymaking has progressed only slowly, despite taking a dramatic jump at upper levels during the Obama administration.

It would be wrong, however, to regard this trend as irreversible or well institutionalized. The Center for a New American Security (CNAS) documented the precipitous falloff in women’s representation that continues to occur at the upper levels of civilian and military government service. Although in recent years half of entering U.S. Foreign Service officers have been female, only 30 percent of senior staff are; at the Pentagon, just 20 percent of senior jobs are held by women. The Trump administration’s attempts to freeze or roll back civilian hiring at the Department of State and elsewhere in government were accompanied by lopsided ratios among its political appointees. Moreover, discussion among top administration officials and allies about returning to a ban on women in combat roles and the promotion by Vice President Mike Pence and others of cultural norms that prohibit women meeting alone with men seem likely to further depress women’s equal participation now, as well as limit younger women’s chances to advance for years to come. Further, due to hiring freezes, shifts to contractors, and priority given to hiring older veterans, the proportion of the federal workforce under age 30 has fallen to 7 percent from a high of 25 percent 40 years ago. Gender balance among interns and students in their twenties is thus almost irrelevant to the current workings of U.S. government. Senior leadership in this and future administrations will need to take explicit measures to repair the damage and promote diversity at all levels.

At present, that means focusing on the inclusion of women outside government. From academia to think tanks, from students to journal authorship to board membership, the outlook is still disappointing.

Considering academia matters because it is the main pipeline through which young professionals enter the field and it is where they gain their expectations about what it means to work in security policy. Although women have made up more than half of undergraduate students for almost 40 years, they are underrepresented in the postgraduate and specialized programs that lead to security
sector careers. CNAS found that a number of the most prestigious graduate programs in international relations are less than half female. Women who enter the security field by joining the military continue to face disproportionate obstacles; as one example, entering classes at the service academies have surpassed 20 percent women only very recently.

Although cross-field studies have not been done, a casual look at rosters and tables of contents confirms that gender disparities among students increase among tenure-track faculty and skyrocket for publication in elite journals. Recent years have seen graduate students organize at Georgetown University to demand a response to the prevalence of all-male reading lists and at Columbia University and Tufts University's Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy to press for more consideration of gender issues in the curriculum. Faculty members say that many such efforts, while impressively prepared and resourced by a given cohort of students, are allowed by administrations to lapse when that cohort graduates. There are some examples of schools making explicit commitments, such as Fletcher School Dean James Stavridis’ target of a 40 percent female tenure-track faculty, but choosing not to publicize them.

Gender representation in the nongovernmental security sector has received considerably less attention, but what is known is discouraging. In 2016, a survey carried out by the University of Texas LBJ School of Public Policy found elite foreign policy think-tank scholars in the United States to be 75 percent male. Globally, a 2014 survey of a network of 43 think tanks found staff to be 42 percent female, but leadership only 14 percent. Ploughshares Fund, in the process of developing a yet-to-launch “Women’s Initiative,” did its own informal survey of the nuclear nonprofit sector and found that although women were strongly represented at entry levels, senior jobs and, above all, boards remain seriously imbalanced.

Staffing is just one piece of the representation puzzle; visibility is another. Female experts are badly underrepresented in media coverage of security issues as sources in print media and guests on TV and radio. A study found that, of 6,000 guests on national news segments covering foreign policy and national security in 2016, only 24 percent were women.

Debates have raged within institutions and among community members about the prevalence of all-male-speaker panels, or “manels,” which continue to be an issue in the arms control field. Surprisingly few U.S. institutions, programs, or funders have taken what is known as the “no manels” pledge. The possibilities for improvement are large. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace’s International Nuclear Policy Conference, for example, went from 10 percent female panelists...
in 2011 to 30 percent in 2015 and 49 percent in 2017, according to James Acton, one of the organizers. Anecdotally, however, senior women and men who have been outspoken on the topic confirm that resistance is intense.

‘Gender Lens’

Diversity theory indicates that broadening the perspectives of those who make policy produces better outcomes. The other side of that coin is the concept of a “gender lens,” that is, the idea that policy analysis that considers the different experiences of different genders can produce such better policy outcomes. The concept has gained traction in academic circles and in peacekeeping and conflict resolution training in the UN and NATO and some other regional security bodies, but it is little known in U.S. policymaking and not applied at all in the arms control space.

Socially constructed norms and patterns ensure that people of different genders have different experiences. This commonplace observation has important consequences for security policy. For example, violent extremist groups exploit gender norms to recruit women, deploy women in contexts and societies where women are not expected to be agents of violence, and heighten feelings of victimization and vulnerability among their targets. Similarly, counterterrorism analysts have documented important patterns and moments where women’s roles in traditional, as well as Western, societies can be key in detecting or preventing radicalization. Slowly, policymakers are starting to take notice.

In conflict resolution and peacekeeping, analysis has documented that the inclusion of women makes peace agreements more durable, while failing to take differently gendered needs into account in postconflict stabilization can contribute to the re-emergence of violent groups. UN Women has found that peace processes that include women are 20 percent more likely to last at least two years and 35 percent more likely to last 15 years. Yet, new research found that women have made up just 8 percent of peace negotiators over the past 27 years.

The UN Women, Peace and Security framework, constructed through seven UN Security Council resolutions, now provides guidelines for training on and planning and evaluation of peacekeeping and conflict resolution work. NATO and other regional organizations have followed suit, as have military and civilian planners from a number of key U.S. allies. Just this fall, U.S. President Donald Trump signed
into law the bipartisan Women, Peace and Security Act of 2017, which directs but does not require U.S. security policymakers to incorporate these best practices into U.S. government work. Congress did not appropriate any new resources for this task, however, and positions focusing on gender stand empty at the National Security Council, State Department, and USAID.

Moreover, hard data indicates how gendered dynamics contribute to conflict. Measures of violence against women have emerged as some of the best predictors for outbreaks of violence within and between states.\(^{16}\) Scholars are doing important new work on a variety of indicators, not all associated with women. Societies in which young men are less able to attain the symbols of successful adult masculinity, such as marriage, employment, and community status, may be more vulnerable to violence.\(^{17}\)

Students and practitioners of arms control and security disciplines need to catch up to the research on causes of conflict. Although the indicators connecting gender violence to risk of broader societal conflict are robust, surveys by New America have found that work to be almost unknown among national security elites.\(^{18}\) Professionals in and out of government owe it to themselves to become familiar with the findings.

Although “gender” is often associated with feminist or other politically progressive worldviews, the observation that violence against women and societal violence are closely linked also dovetails comfortably with ideologically conservative frameworks that see protecting the vulnerable and traditional family structures as a key goal of security policy. The observations themselves are ideologically neutral.

**Recommendations**

The following are seven recommendations for action. Not every actor in the field—government agencies, think tanks, advocacy groups, international actors, and scholars—can take up every recommendation. All can do at least one, becoming more effective policymakers as a result.

**Make the gender lens a standard tool of analysis.** As Fletcher School scholar Meg Guliford wrote recently, security “is contextual. There exists no blanket definition to encapsulate how all human beings experience security.” This observation is the foundation of gender analysis, the practice of considering how policies or events affect different genders differently. Gender analysis yields important insights in counterterrorism and countering violent extremism thought, whether predicting the movements of extremist groups from the flows of female recruits or learning about ISIS’ internal cohesion from its practice of systemic rape against women and men. Yet, it is not broadly known, used, or taught in the international security field.

**Widen the research lens.** The time is ripe for an imaginative research agenda where such dynamics might be at play in the use and control of weapons. For example, little is known about how such dynamics might play out in the demand for, use of, and success or failure in controlling small arms, but that is more than what is known about what measures of societal insecurity are most likely to drive governments to acquire more disruptive weapons systems or become more aggressive in their use. Does the insecurity of women and other vulnerable populations have a bearing on nations’ or groups’ willingness to lay down arms or forbear particular capabilities or systems?
New insights are likely waiting for researchers who widen the lens to perceive women as negotiators and combatants and men as victims of sexual violence, as well as perpetrators. The literature on women’s participation in peace negotiations and their implementation would likely be enriched and challenged by consideration of women in arms control negotiations, from the Iran nuclear deal to the negotiations leading to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

**Quantify the problem.** Every source interviewed for this article cited the scarcity of comprehensive studies and strong data to document the challenge of gender inclusion in security policymaking, let alone test the outcomes of different responses. Organizational leadership at universities, think tanks, journals, and conferences often cites the lack of data as a barrier to galvanizing response. Unlike many of the other identified problems, this one is easily solved by the application of resources and research skill.

**Address hiring and talent management issues.** Several excellent sets of recommendations...
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exist for institutions to access. CNAS highlights the need to frame policies in terms of effectiveness and build data sets to document it, get out of a zero-sum framework by setting family-friendly policies for employees of all genders, and rethink mentorship. Public and private national security institutions have much to learn from the very public struggles of the cybersecurity field, where extreme gender imbalances and problematic working conditions for women have spilled into the media.

New America proposed five steps for workplaces that are extremely relevant to arms control and security: remove gendered code words from job descriptions and learn what they are, institute policies that allow female and male employees to combine job and caregiving responsibilities and make sure the policies are visibly used by senior staff, hire women at senior levels to help attract and retain junior and mid-level personnel, set targets around office diversity and measure leaders against them, and build talent pipelines through internships and fellowships.

The “#metoo” surge of women speaking out about workplace sexual harassment and assault in the wake of disclosures about movie producer Harvey Weinstein has shone a spotlight on the painful conditions that remain all too frequent in the security policy environment. Employers and managers must have proactive policies and model leadership for male and female employees.

#Nomanels. Institutions and program directors can institute policies to prevent all-male panels and direct event planners to any of several resources to help expand their awareness of diverse sources of expertise. Funders can bar their funds going to all-male programming. Individual scholars and leaders can ask organizers about event diversity and decline to participate when they are not. Some existing projects include Manpanels.org, Gender Avenger, and the UN Global Compact Panel Pledge, a global effort to end all-male panels. George Washington University’s Elliott School of International Affairs has become the most high-profile institution to enact such a policy under its dean, Reuben Brigety. Owen Barder, vice president of the Center for Global Development, has attracted more than 1,300 signatories for a pledge stating, “At a public conference I won’t serve on a panel of two people or more unless there is at least one woman on the panel, not including the chair.”

Improve media visibility. Institutions and leaders who say they want more women in the field must back this up by making sure female scholars and professionals are equally featured in syllabuses and promoted as institutional representatives in media, publication, and speaking opportunities. Individuals and institutions can facilitate this with explicit policies and commitments to offer media opportunities, speaking engagements, and co-authorship to younger colleagues and through willingness to vouch for those colleagues in the informal networks through which most such invitations move.

Adapt the Rooney Rule. Corporations from Amazon to Xerox to Uber have adopted a standard from the National Football League (NFL) known as the “Rooney Rule,” requiring that at least one minority candidate be interviewed for all senior positions, as they focus on gender and ethnic diversity. It is credited for spotlighting a larger pool of talented candidates who were previously overlooked, but has had uneven results across the NFL.

The practice brings with it an inherent limitation, which psychologists call “moral licensing,” by which requiring the inclusion of underrepresented groups on a short list can make it less likely that they are selected. The Rooney Rule or indeed the other recommendations mentioned here are most valuable when they are accompanied by staff and management training and practices that identify and challenge such biases at every level. After all, avoiding bias is supposed to be the foundation of good policymaking.

ENDNOTES


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7. Kidder et al., “From College to Cabinet.”


12. Heather Hurlburt and Jacqueline O’Neill, “We Need to Think Harder About Terrorism and Gender. ISIS Already Is.” Vox, June 1, 2017.


19. Kidder et al., “From College to Cabinet.”


21. For a primer on policy responses and gripping testimony of the obstacles women in the field still face, see Susan B. Glasser, “Sexism on America’s Frontlines,” Politico, November 6, 2017,


Heather Hurlburt is director of the New Models of Policy Change project at New America’s Political Reform program.

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