

IR is (Still) a Man's World

Written by Alex Stark

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ALEX STARK, JUL 9 2013

It is a truth universally acknowledged that women are underrepresented in the International Relations field. Anne-Marie Slaughter's recent article in *The Atlantic*, "Why Women Can't Have it All," brought wider attention to a flurry of blog posts and academic research highlighting the lack of women working at all levels in the field, and speculating as to why. Writing in *Foreign Policy*, Micah Zenko argued that there is an astonishing lack of women working at high levels in Washington, DC policy circles in the US. Analyzing a gender breakdown of 10 prominent foreign policy-oriented think tanks, he pointed out that women constitute just 29% of all leadership staff and 21% of policy-related positions. This disparity exists in the halls of academia and foreign policymaking too: according to Zenko in 2006, 23% of all international relations professors were women, while 16% of the US Pentagon's and 22% of the State Department's senior leadership positions were filled by women. Washington, Zenko concluded, is a "city of men."

Things are no different in academia, where women are underrepresented in tenure-track positions, and under-cited and under-published in academic journals. A 2013 study by Hancock, Baum, and Breuning found that in comparing women and men, "there are significant differences in publication rates, as well as differences in research focus (traditional subjects vs. newer subfields) and methodologies (quantitative vs. qualitative)." Similarly, a forthcoming study by Maliniak, Powers, and Walter discovered that in comparing peer-reviewed publications over the past several decades, "women are systematically cited less than men after controlling for a large number of variables."

Much of this is of course due to structural dynamics as well as more overt forms of discrimination. Lisa Curtis argues that while there were few women who served in national security and foreign policy positions even twenty years ago, the increasing number of women role models, such as Madeleine Albright, Hillary Clinton, and Anne-Marie Slaughter, as well as women mentors on all steps of the ladder, is "creating [new] opportunities for women in leadership positions." Similarly, Diana Wueger points out that "we should be asking whether women at the start of their careers are being offered assignments, experiences, and opportunities that lead to later success. Intentionally or not, women tend to be given more administrative or support work rather than policy or research work; path dependence takes over from there."

Indeed, while women seem to be making (at least symbolic) strides at the top of the leadership ladder, it often seems that a new generation of women are setting aside barriers in the lower ranks and will soon rise to join these women at the top. According to the National Science Foundation, "women have outnumbered men in undergraduate education" since 1982, and since the late 1990's, women have earned about 57% of all bachelor's degrees in the US. Yet according to the survey by Hancock, Baum, and Breuning, only 49% of students currently studying IR are women. There might not be a young cohort of women IR scholars, eagerly waiting to strive for the top echelons of the field. So what accounts for women's comparative lack of interest in IR?

All of the (admittedly long overdue) handwringing about why women are so underrepresented has focused largely on two figures: Slaughter, and Cheryl Sandberg and her new book *Lean In*. Pundits have played up a sort of "debate" between Slaughter and Sandberg, but in reality their perspectives are remarkably similar: both emphasize the structural barriers and socially learned behaviors that hold women back. In highly competitive workplaces, where 60-hour workweeks are the norm, they argue that women are disadvantaged, especially when it comes to

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maintaining a work-family balance. Slaughter worries about the behavioral problems her son has developed while she is living in Washington, DC and commuting home to Princeton each weekend where her family still lives, while Sandburg emphasizes her practice of leaving the office each day by 5:30 so that she can spend time with her young children.

The framing of this so-called debate has led me to wonder if IR has a problem, not in attracting women to the academic study and profession, but in warning them away. Much of the speculation and advice about women in IR, as well as in the wider workplace, points to work-life balance as an essential issue. Women are told that they “can’t have it all,” in Slaughter’s words, that according to Jolynn Shoemaker, “inflexible schedules, unrelenting travel, and constant pressure to be in the office are common features” of the IR-related job field. In academia too, women are told that they are more likely to be burnt out, to give up their own career for their spouse’s, to struggle with balancing having kids and a tenure-track academic position. Even Dan Drezner has blogged that

most people are between 27-32 years of age when they complete their Ph.D.. This also happens to be the peak demographic of the whole getting married/having children phase of life. And, women tend to marry men a few years older than them. The professional difference between 50 and 53 is negligible, but those few years can make a HUGE difference in one’s late twenties/early thirties. It means that, on average and regardless of career choice, the man in the relationship is more firmly embedded down his career path.

For newly-minted women Ph.D.s, this can impose profound constraints on career choices. Their best job offer might be inconvenient for their spouse’s career, and so they pass on it. I saw this very dynamic play out multiple times with female colleagues when I was in graduate school. There are a lot of good reasons to subordinate one’s first job choice to family considerations, but it has a negative impact on one’s long-term career trajectory.

Oddly, such commentary rarely touches on men’s roles as parents and whether parenthood will create conflicts for their careers. Men are never told that they will have to make a decision between spending time with their children and time at work, that they may have to give up career opportunities for their spouses, or that they should feel guilty and conflicted about a “difficult” career that includes a lot of travel and long hours at the expense of spending time with their families.

Combine this constant drumbeat of impending failure with a look at Foreign Policy’s website. Hover over the blogs tab, and you’ll see that of its illustrious bloggers- Tom Ricks, Stephen Walt, Marc Lynch, and yes, Dan Drezner- exactly zero women are advertised as regular bloggers. Is it any wonder, given a constant narrative of the professional failure they will inevitably experience in this field, or the guilt that they should have about a modern work-family life balance, that when women look up and don’t see anyone who looks like them, they are more likely to look to other professions and academic pursuits?

Of course, e-IR is also culpable. We’ve tried to increase women’s presence on e-IR, including a website takeover back in October on UNSCR 1325 and a more recent interview with Cynthia Enloe. Yet according to our recent survey, about 68% of e-IR’s readers are men and just 32% are women. (Similarly, Foreign Affairs reports that 84.2% of subscribers are men, while 21.3% are women.) Of our team of volunteer editors, 22 out of 64, or just 34%, are women. Much of our articles content is written by men as well: of the most recent 100 articles published, 32 were written by women (and 2 more by teams of men and women). Furthermore, of those 32, 10 (that is, about 31% of all of the articles written by women) were focused on feminist theory or gender. Of course women can and should be writing about gender, but this breakdown also reflects worries that women are being siloed into “softer” parts of the field. It seems to me that it is not an inherent lack of interest in traditional “bombs and bullets,” but rather that encouragement to focus on topics like gender, human rights, and development plays a role.

On the other hand, 3 of the articles written by men were about gender, development, or human rights. With the UN Security Council increasingly taking up issues like Women, Peace, and Security; climate change; and intervention in humanitarian crises, perhaps these crucial but until now marginalized issues will become more mainstream, bringing more prestige to the proportionally more women academics and practitioners who work on them?

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At any rate, surely we can do better.

So we want to hear from you: how do we bring more women's voices into e-IR, as well as into the IR field as a whole? What do you think?

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