Review - Is International Affairs Too 'Hard' For Women?

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'Is international affairs too 'hard' for women?'.
By: Melissa Conley Tyler, Emily Blizzard and Bridget Crane
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The recent article "Is International Affairs Too 'Hard' for Women by Melissa Conley Tyler, Emily Blizzard and Bridget Crane asks why women are missing in Australian international affairs – taking as a starting point a comment on a blog that the imbalance has less to do with sexism and discrimination, than with international relations being too 'hard' for women and because it is most often women who interrupt their careers to take on the care of children.

The article provides some background data on the under-representation of women at senior levels in Australian Federal Government agencies and in academia, and on the boards of bodies such as the Lowy Institute and the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, as well as not-for-profit boards. The important point of course is that, while it is easy to demonstrate this under-representation, there is little agreement on its cause. Is it a matter of women having different priorities and choices or is it related to obstacles that women face? The classic agency-structure divide as source of explanation is suggested by this question, bringing to mind strategies to correct the imbalance that address either individuals or institutions. This dichotomy is not explicitly dealt with in the paper, but it is at the heart of what is seen to be the problem and therefore, the range of possible solutions.

It begins with the authors outlining the commonly suggested reasons for why women are under-represented in senior international affairs roles: They are less interested in 'hard' issues; and they prefer more intimate modes of communication, instead of having public profiles. These the authors dispense with by pointing out that at early career stages in international affairs, the numbers of women equal men or even surpass them. The pipeline of younger women coming through the ranks somehow narrows, so that many women disappear before they reach senior levels. They go on to propose four alternative explanations for why women are under-represented at senior levels in Australian international affairs: Direct discrimination (historical but with ongoing effects produced by a lack of female role models at senior levels), indirect discrimination (because the workplace is masculine, and networking occurs between those who are alike – who are mostly men at senior levels), family commitments (women interrupt their careers due to an absence of equal parental leave, a lack of affordable childcare, and inflexible working hours), and socially constructed gender norms (international affairs is masculine so women are seen to be either not 'tough enough' or if they are tough, as acting inappropriately).

The article then describes the careers of three women who have progressed to senior positions in international affairs in Australia. In telling the stories of how these women succeeded, they outline a number of strategies used by them to overcome the barriers they each faced. These stories are telling in terms of some of the challenges and attitudes they met with along the way, as well as in regard to the approaches they used. Professor Emeritus Helen Hughes used three (individual) strategies – to always say what she thought, to seek out progressive environments to work in, and to have an important career mentor. Her Excellency Penny Wensley sought changes to the work environment through both individual action and lobbying for change. She also attributed her success to hard work and determination, strategic career choices, and a real enthusiasm for her work and her career. Professor Hilary Charlesworth followed

a more activist path, speaking out publicly on how gender and a gendered perspective make work in the field of international law challenging for women. She also noted the importance of finding a mentor who could provide support and encouragement.

These three interesting stories of the careers of very impressive and highly successful women illustrate the individual strategies they used, such as finding supportive mentors, and the more structural approaches taken to overcome the barriers that inhibit women's careers, such as lobbying for change and publicly exposing the issue. It seems that both of these may be needed to drive change in fields that are so masculinely gendered and tied up with ideas of strength and aggression. This puts women, and indeed men who favour more soft and consultative approaches (and President Obama has faced such criticism of his approach to international affairs) in a difficult situation since they are cast as too weak. For women, this is also a no-win situation, because if they behave 'like men' they are often seen to be inappropriately strong against the culturally implied expectations that they will not be tough 'like men'.

Panaceas for this situation are often those directed at individuals working on themselves to try and fit the accepted mould. Many of the self-help books directed at women wanting to build careers exhort them to behave in the same way as men in order to progress. This sits unnaturally on many women, rendering their behaviour as inappropriate simply because they are women and this is 'out of character'. Even if this was a successful strategy in correcting the gender imbalance in Australia's international affairs, it is unlikely to make workplaces less culturally masculine, more open to helpful organizational changes such as better childcare, or more accepting of women and men who are not comfortable with this type. The final outcome might instead be a rise in the overall decibel level as women compete with men in displays of strength and stories of their own successes. Instead, might it not be better to attempt to change the culture of international affairs workplaces so that strength and aggression were less valorised? This is not straightforward, since it is a reflection of broader cultural frameworks, but it is surely one worth attempting. Without institutional change that addresses the embedded cultural values of international affairs organizations at the senior levels in Australia (and many other organizations), progress will continue to be slow and reliant on individual strengths and individual strategies such as finding supportive role models at the top levels who are willing to act as mentors.

By definition, not everyone can hold senior appointments (as some have to occupy the lower positions of a hierarchy). In addition, not everyone wants to. The lack of women at senior levels is a problem if the reasons for this are those discussed here – sexism, discrimination (both direct and indirect), lack of facilities and structures for equal parenting responsibilities, and gender norms that render women 'out of place' in international affairs. This brings us back to the difficult issue of whether the leaky pipeline really reflects what women want (agency), or what they are able to achieve against a particular set of cultural, political and social constraints (structure). If it could somehow be proven that women do not choose to try for senior positions because of their own internal preferences, the lack of representation at senior levels would not be a problem. But given that societal and organizational constraints have a significant impact on these choices, and that it is quite impossible to determine whether the answer lies in one direction or the other, institutional strategies to address why so few women still make it to the top of international affairs in Australia are likely to be a major part of the solution.

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