

A GUIDE TO TALKING WOMEN, PEACE, AND SECURITY INSIDE THE U.S. SECURITY ESTABLISHMENT

Summary

We began with a big question: *How much do national security policymakers consider the ways policies and programs impact men and women differently?*

After a series of in-depth interviews, focus groups and surveys, we discovered an answer: not very much. But for many, it wasn't for lack of interest. Policy wonks told us that the promise of gender-inclusive policymaking intrigued them, but that they lacked the tools and knowledge to make the case to others within the broader national security community. Here, we offer an introduction to the knowledge and those essential tools for those internal supporters—the foreign policy expert, journalist, commentator, academic, or security professional who understands both the potential usefulness of the women, peace, and security (WPS) lens and the challenges of introducing a new construct into the slow-to-change and highly-gendered U.S. national security establishment.

This guide is informed by decades of research from the women, peace, and security community, and by New America's recent investigation of questions such as:

- What do policymakers assume when they hear the word 'gender'?
- Why is it important to go beyond simply bringing women to the decision making table?
- Where do writers and journalists fall short when they discuss women and security?
- How can we make the language of WPS more familiar in national security contexts?

We hope this guide will bridge knowledge gaps, encourage conversations, and spark further questions.

What You Will Find In This Guide

A team of analysts at New America brought experience in journalism, security policy, media analysis, and messaging to take an extensive look at how the U.S. national security community and elite influencers understand the WPS agenda and perceive its core intellectual constructs. Our research included polling, in-depth interviews, and media analysis.

This toolkit marshals that research to help us better understand which messages cut through the noise, which slide through the cracks, and why.

1. LOST IN TRANSLATION

In *Lost in Translation*, we share nine hidden assumptions that often shape and misshape security policy. A few examples:

- Many experts believed that the word “gender” is synonymous with “women,” and that gender-blindness when formulating policy is a virtue.
- They felt that bringing a woman or two into a policy conversation was enough to make sure they had checked the “women’s issues” box.

2. DISSECTING THE STORY

In *Dissecting the Story*, we analyze how common policymaker assumptions and frames can appear in the media and map the most common ways that women are represented in a peace and security context.

- For three months in fall 2016, we catalogued search results for terms such as “Iraq + women” or “Afghanistan + women + peace” in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal* to discover patterns in reporting on gender and conflict in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and South Sudan.
- Women were under-represented as political actors in our sampling of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, with media outlets intermittently representing women as politicians, social activists, protestors, or members of women’s advocacy groups. Only 5 percent of articles in our sampling of the *Washington Post*, for example, featured women as activists, union leaders, protesters, politicians, or members of women’s advocacy groups, and none of the articles in this sampling featured women as peacekeepers.
- Across all publications in our sampling, South Sudanese women were represented almost exclusively in terms of sexual violence.

3. CHANGING THE CONVERSATION

In *Changing the Conversation*, we suggest a series of best practices for dialogue with and within the U.S. national security establishment.

- Our policymaker interviews suggested that terminology such as “Women, Peace and Security,” “Inclusive security,” and “Gender mainstreaming” was little-known and often misunderstood. Don’t rely on this shorthand. Rather, communicate exactly what you want in a particular context, such as: “analyzing how policies affect people of different genders differently.”
- “Participation/empowerment.” The idea of empowerment—although it is standard-issue in the development policy world—is less well understood among security analysts or the general public. Participation and empowerment themselves are not first-tier goals for security agencies and thus will be less compelling even when understood—unless connected to stability and security outcomes that are the job of security interlocutors.

4. CONCLUSION OF CURIOSITY

Finally, in *Conclusion of Curiosity*, we identify questions that require more research and dialogue both inside and outside the community.

LOST IN TRANSLATION

Mapping Policymaker Assumptions and Knowledge Gaps

Our research uncovered assumptions that many policymakers hold around common WPS approaches, ideas, definitions, words, and phrases. If we want our messages to sink in, we'll need to better acknowledge the worldviews, frames, and assumptions that these policymakers hold which guide their thinking.

- 1 Gender = Women.** Although “gender” refers to the challenges that all genders face based on norms and biased systems and laws that may constrain their choices or limit their opportunities, policymakers have a tendency to reflexively think that when we say “gender” we’re talking only about women.
- 2 “Women, peace, and security — say what?”** The overwhelming majority of U.S. policymakers and elites are not familiar with WPS; when they encounter the phrase for the first time, they found it a “confusing triad.” Women and men alike heard echoes of sexism or offensive essentialism, because they perceived it labeling women as the more virtuous and peaceful gender.
- 3 “Add women and stir” is a recipe for success.** If you include a woman at the decisionmaking table, women’s perspectives are covered. Box checked, game over. Unfortunately, not only is this not always true, the theory of critical mass holds that underrepresented groups may be less likely to bring up their perspectives when they are the “token” member of a decisionmaking body. Relatedly, many respondents conflated two separate ideas: gender representation across decisionmaking bodies with gendered impacts of policies.
- 4 The “gender person” has no power.** When national security discussions did include someone who represented gender issues, policymakers reported perceiving the representatives as powerless—or in the room only as a PR gesture—and thus easily ignored.
- 5 Gender is really only relevant to a handful of subjects.** Policymakers saw the relevance of gender-differentiated impacts to explicitly gendered policy concerns such as sex trafficking, sexual violence, and sex slavery in ISIS. They perceived a connection between gender equality and stability but couldn’t point to any supporting data or research. Strong majorities felt that gender was not relevant to subjects like economics and trade or missile defense.

6 Gender-blindness is a virtue. The idea that considering gender is akin to introducing prejudice or bias persists strongly among national security professionals, particularly men. Many insisted that they see the person, not the gender, and that a focus on gender would displace this meritocratic model—or equate to “social engineering” in other societies.

7 Women are just another special interest group. By extension, if we consider policies through a “gender lens,” we risk encouraging resentment from other communities, exacerbating tensions in an inclusivity battlefield. “It becomes a heated debate when you start talking about parsing which communities are worse off, or most negatively impacted by policy,” a respondent with background in both security and human rights told us. “Subsets of a population can end up having outsized influence on policy, and when we don’t have the resources to help everyone, which is basically always, it’s a shitty job to decide who gets the food, the shelter, the protection.”

8 “This stuff is important, but it’s not my job.” Many people in the field thought that looking for data to substantiate why considering gender could affect policy outcomes or incorporating it into existing frameworks was more the domain of people who worked in USAID. They had a vague understanding that such data existed, but weren’t sure where to begin looking for such research and metrics.

9 This too shall pass. Most of the problems related to representation of women across the security apparatus endure because of generational and demographic issues that will eventually shift—in other words, we’ll eventually see fewer older white men in power, and an infusion of people from currently underrepresented groups. Many policymakers emphasized the role of people over systems in changing this reality, downplaying structural barriers that could attract or repel people into security roles over the next few decades.

DISSECTING THE STORY

How are Women in Conflict, Peace, and Security Contexts Portrayed in Media?

U.S. national security policymakers and influencers get their information on the world from a very specific set of sources. When New America commissioned POLITICO Focus to conduct research based on interviews with national security and foreign policymakers, we found that many policymakers consumed media by syncing Google alerts with their primary policy issue or geographic region of focus. Further, many rely on department news briefings, which are often distributed in the morning and based on the collection of headlines and op-eds from major national outlets by press shops and subject matter experts. These briefings were said to drive up to 10 percent of a department's daily objectives. Given that reporting on women and gender-related issues is often limited to only a portion of a news article and rarely featured in headlines, **these topics may be frequently filtered out of briefings and ignored among policymakers.** The results of these media consumption habits are significant gaps and distortions in a policymaker's understanding of particular issues.

Consumers of leading media outlets are not exposed to women leaders in conflict and peacebuilding; their roles are quite literally written out of the story.

For three months in fall 2016, we catalogued search results for terms such as “Iraq + women” or “Afghanistan + women + peace” in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal* to discover patterns in reporting on gender and conflict in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and South Sudan. The results go a long way toward explaining—and reinforcing—the policymaker assumptions described above. Consumers of these leading media outlets are not exposed to women who are formal or informal leaders in conflict and peacebuilding; their roles are quite literally written out of the story. They are exposed to women as victims, usually twinned with children in contexts that may overemphasize women's vulnerability and certainly underemphasize women's agency. And often—as has been noted in other media surveys—they are underexposed to women's voices as journalists and as citizens.



**THE ERASURE OF
WOMEN'S VOICES**



**WOMEN'S ABSENCE
IN PEACE CONTEXTS**



**“WOMEN AND
CHILDREN”**

THE ERASURE OF WOMEN'S VOICES

Across all publications in our sampling, South Sudanese women are represented almost exclusively in terms of sexual violence, with prolonged discussion of the mass rape of female populations in South Sudanese towns and villages in the wake of a brutal civil war. Even in this context, women rarely speak in any of these articles about their experiences or the sexual violence they have endured: **journalists, politicians, and UN personnel speak for them instead.**



WOMEN'S ABSENCE IN PEACE CONTEXTS

Women were occasionally represented as political actors in our sampling of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, with media outlets intermittently representing women as politicians, social activists, protestors, or members of women's advocacy groups. Only 5 percent of articles in our sampling of the *Washington Post*, for example, featured women as activists, union leaders, protesters, politicians, or members of women's advocacy groups, and none of the articles in this sampling featured women as peacekeepers. When they are featured in these roles, their representation often fails to move beyond name-dropping.

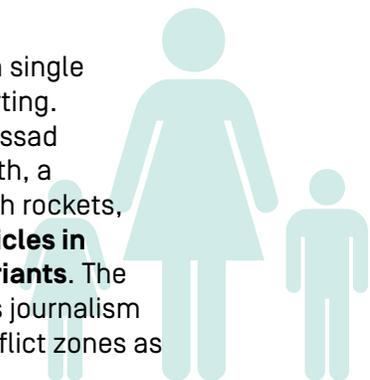
For example, over the three months in our sample only once did the *Wall Street Journal* feature a woman in a peacemaking role. Malalai Shinwari, a peace advisor to the Afghan president, was mentioned as one of the few women present at an Afghan peace conference.¹ However, the article did not quote her or provide any more specific insight into her role within the peace talks.

Furthermore, our sampling of the *New York Times* featured only four instances of women in peacemaking roles. Ironically, one of those four representations, within an article concerning Syrian peace talks, was Mouna Ghanem, a Syrian politician and coordinator for the Syrian Women Forum for Peace, critiquing women's "shallow" and "insignificant" participation in peace negotiations.²



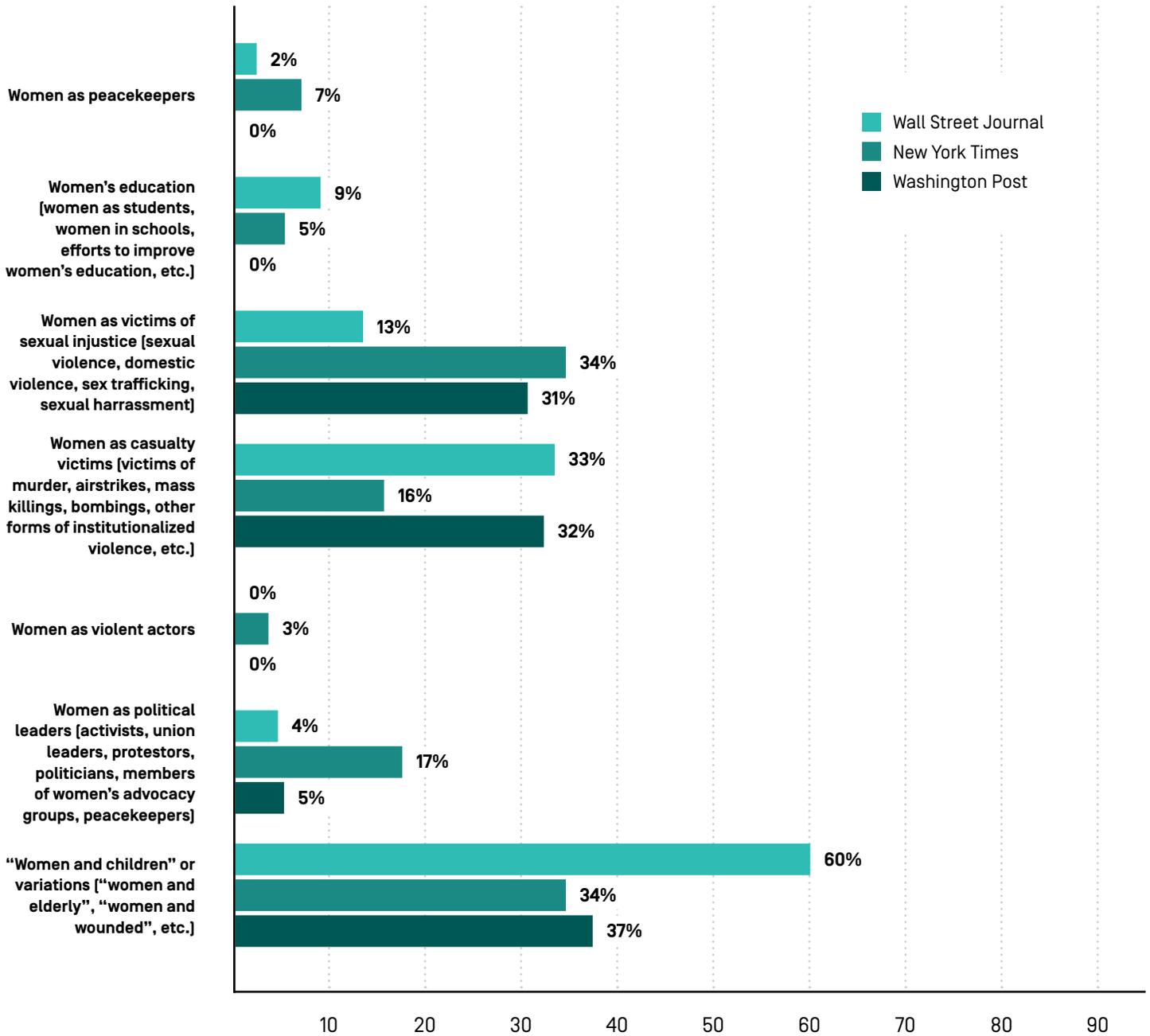
"WOMEN AND CHILDREN"

Women's presence in the journalism we sampled was often limited to a single sentence that paired them with children during casualty or injury reporting. For example: a *Wall Street Journal* article concerning the bombing of Assad strongholds in Syria included the following sentence: "Earlier this month, a maternity ward in the regime-held side of Aleppo city was attacked with rockets, killing several women and children." **More than 60 percent of WSJ articles in our sampling featured the phrase "women and children" and its variants.** The ubiquity of this pairing of women and children, though standard across journalism and conflict reporting, reveals a popular construction of women in conflict zones as infantile, vulnerable, perpetual victims.



¹ Jessica Donati and Margherita Stancati, "Taliban Details Conditions for Afghan Peace Talks," *Wall Street Journal*, January 24, 2016.
² Somini Singupta, "An Odd Diplomatic Dance as U.N. Prepares for Syria Peace Talks," *New York Times*, January 26, 2016.

Gender and National Security Media Analysis



CHANGING THE CONVERSATION

Language, Concepts, and Choices that Could Broaden the Constituency that Understands WPS

The Women, Peace, and Security agenda has evolved for over two decades thanks to the efforts and conscious choices of women and men around the world. For many advocates and practitioners, this community has great value, and its vocabulary and core concepts are central to its goals. As the assumptions we uncovered in our research illustrates, the core concepts and vocabulary of WPS are not known to the U.S. national security community, or summon up problematic frames and images for U.S. decision makers and influencers—across generational and ideological divides.

A core frame that advocates may wish to use instead of or in addition to the classic WPS language is a classic of policymaking and social science:

Use a data-based frame. Security policymakers showed themselves to be heavily invested in the idea that security decision-making is a meritocratic space, driven by outcomes. As the social science data on the value of analysis and policymaking that consider gender effects grows stronger, framing the challenge as one of implementing cutting-edge findings, rather than implementing a UN agenda, is likely to be more palatable to some audiences, avoid triggering biases carried over from U.S. domestic politics, and help establish new habits of thought in younger policymakers.

What kinds of inputs would make your workplace focus more on inclusivity?



Source: Center for a New American Security

42%

Data showing effects on hard policy outcomes [49 of 117]

30%

Data showing it improves workplace environment [35 of 117]

21%

Mandates from leadership [24 of 117]

4%

Formal legal mandates [5 of 117]

3%

None of the above [4 of 117]

Below we identify some of the specific reactions we heard to the vocabulary of WPS, to assist users in making conscious choices about whether they are attempting to teach and spread the WPS framework, or whether they are attempting to achieve policy shifts that may not engage or even acknowledge their connection to the WPS framework. In the years ahead there will be plenty of need for both types of effort.



“WPS” “INCLUSIVE SECURITY,” AND “GENDER MAINSTREAMING”



UNSC 1325



WOMEN’S ROLE IN CONFLICT, PEACEMAKING, OR CVE



DIVERSITY THEORY VS. EMPOWERMENT THEORY



GENDER BIAS AS LANDMINE



“Women, Peace, and Security,” “Inclusive security,” and “Gender mainstreaming.”

Don’t rely on this shorthand when communicating with the broader national security community. Develop a few short phrases that communicate exactly what you want in a particular context, for example, “analyzing how policies affect people of different genders differently,” “full-society participation in peacebuilding,” or “reaching different sectors of the civilian population.” When you *do* want to use the terms, use the explanatory phrases as well.



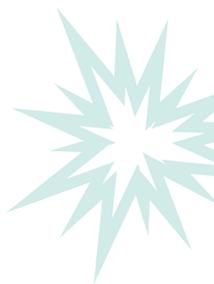
“UNSC 1325.” UN Security Council resolutions don’t carry any special authority in most U.S. national security circles and will surely invite hostility in some. If your context is one where policymakers will be looking for legitimacy or support in an international context, explaining how couching a policy in 1325 may help is a good idea; if the challenge is legitimacy in a domestic policymaking context, an effectiveness frame is likely better. Another alternative is to pair mention of the UN with NATO’s work on gender, as many military policymakers and observers perceive NATO as a more U.S.-friendly bureaucracy.



“Women’s role in conflict, peacemaking, or CVE.” This framing evoked essentialist feminist theory in career national security wonks. It risks alienating both those who see policymaking as difference-blind and those, women in particular, who see their own rise and status in the security establishment as at odds with a view of women as inherently peaceful, or as nurturers and influencers rather than actors. Avoid it when possible. Simple substitutions include “women’s experience” or “roles for women” or “women’s inclusion” in place of “women’s role.”



“Diversity theory” vs “empowerment theory.” The idea of equal rights and equal access for men and women has deep resonance within the national security establishment and the broader American public. The diversity theory developed in the private sector—that teams with a diversity of experience are more resilient and produce better outcomes—has broad understanding as well. Framing WPS goals and policies in these two contexts will be helpful to security policy audiences. The idea of empowerment—although it is standard-issue in the development policy world—is less well understood among security analysts or the general public. Participation and empowerment themselves are not first-tier goals for security agencies and thus will be less compelling even when understood, unless connected to stability and security outcomes that are the job of security interlocutors.



“Gender bias” as landmine. Our interviews with decision makers uncovered no one who thought discrimination against women was okay; many with more traditional views nonetheless saw themselves as keen supporters of equality, and a striking number had a personal story about themselves as fortunate sons of strong mothers. Ensuring that the WPS agenda is not viewed as a response to or reparation for sexism, or “social engineering” in affected societies, or as a criticism of practitioners, but as social science that improves how policymakers take existing societal dynamics into account will help avoid policymakers’ perceiving that they are being accused of sexism.

FIVE GENDER DATAPOINTS EVERY NATIONAL SECURITY PROFESSIONAL SHOULD KNOW

[And Be Ready to Share]

- 1 Women's physical security is one of the best predictors of conflict and societal violence.** The higher the levels of violence against women—and the larger the gap between the welfare of men and women—the more likely a society is to find itself in civil or international conflict.¹
- 2 Peace processes in which women participate, as mediators, negotiators, and interest groups, have significantly better prospects than processes from which women are absent.** Statistical analysis finds agreements which women helped negotiate are 35 percent more likely to endure 15 years or more. Processes where women's groups are engaged are overwhelmingly more likely to reach agreements, and then to be implemented.²
- 3 Gender and gender roles play a key part in moderating—or exacerbating—extremism.** Interviews across the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia identify women as both the first to show the effects of extremism in a community and often the first to push back against it.³ Studies suggest that empowerment is a key motivation for women who join terrorist groups, and that female terrorists are disproportionately likely to come from environments where women's participation in public life is barred or discouraged.⁴ Emerging research suggest that young men's inability to pay bride prices and attain marriage is a similarly strong trigger.⁵
- 4 Multiple studies show a direct relationship between women's decision-making power on issues of peace and conflict, and the likelihood of societal violence.**⁶ Higher women's representation in parliaments is correlated with lower incidence of conflict; one study found just a 5 percent increase in legislative representation diminished conflict fivefold. Women's representation in legislative bodies also correlates with lower levels of governmental human rights abuses.
- 5 Private sector experience, from corporate boards to management teams to business school theory, parallels observations on value of diverse teams and gendered perspectives for durable outcomes.**⁷ Multiple studies show that diverse teams encourage more multi-disciplinary and innovative thinking, and “more careful information processing.”⁸

1 Valerie Hudson, *Sex and World Peace* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2012].

2 O'Reilly, Marie, *Why Women? Inclusive Security and Peaceful Societies* [Washington, DC: Inclusive Security, 2015].

3 Bennoune, Karima, *Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here* [New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013].

4 Bloom, Mia, *Bombshell: The Many Faces of Women Terrorists* [New York: Viking Press, 2011].

5 Valerie Hudson and Dara Kay Cohen, “Women's Rights are a National Security Issue,” *New York Times*, December 26, 2016.

6 O'Reilly, Marie, *Why Women? Inclusive Security and Peaceful Societies*. [Washington, DC: Inclusive Security, 2015]

7 David Rock and Heidi Grant, “Why Diverse Teams are Smarter,” *Harvard Business Review*, November 4, 2016, <https://hbr.org/2016/11/why-diverse-teams-are-smarter>.

8 Chhun, Bunkhuon, “Better Decisions Through Diversity,” *Kellogg Insight*, October 1, 2010, https://insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu/article/better_decisions_through_diversity.

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Conclusion of Curiosity: Questions for Further Analysis and Research

For as many questions as it answered, our research also uncovered new ones that we invite the community to take up and explore. Much of our research was conducted before the 2016 Election. Today, we face a dramatically different national security policy environment with new players, ever-higher stakes, and the need to sustain conversations about gender and security around policymaking tables and on front pages. Below, please find a few of these queries.

What can the community learn about how academic research and constructs make their way into the policy bloodstream? What lessons are available from examples such as democratic peace theory?

How are we harvesting the lessons of WPS in the Obama Administration across various agencies?

How can we enhance security establishment members' interest in empowerment or full participation as goals of security policy?

Are the WPS agenda and the research behind it being picked up and learned by next generations, in academic and training settings?

How will the media environment change under the new U.S. administration, and what do these changes mean for the way that advocates, journalists, and editors should pitch, report and edit stories that discuss gender and security?

Given the reality that policymaker media consumption habits can lead to significant gaps and distortions, how should advocates refocus their own media and messaging efforts to help identify and rectify those gaps?