

From the Classroom to the Capitol

A Missing Link Between National Security and Gender?

Gender remains, at best, an “add women and stir” afterthought in U.S. national security policy. While academics have built a significant research literature on the ways gender influences security outcomes, gender theory has yet to make it into the standard curriculum—and thus, into the consciousness of new generations of national security professionals. To better understand the knowledge gap between academics and students and between students and field professionals, we conducted informal surveys of professors in the summer of 2017, and students in the fall.

Our survey found that many professors don't see teaching gender perspectives as a priority, others don't know how, and some think they're irrelevant to their topic. For students, many are interested and would be receptive to gender discussions in the classroom, but few are learning about gender theory in formal classroom settings.

We developed five main findings about today's national security and IR students and tomorrow's policy leaders:

- 1. Students are bringing baseline ideas about gender and violence to the classroom.** Surprisingly, the majority of students surveyed were familiar with the term “gender-based violence”—almost as many as knew the more general term “victimization.” “Mainstreaming” and “WPS” (referring to the “women, peace, and security” field) were the least familiar terms.
- 2. Those ideas appear to be coming from popular culture and mass media rather than the academy.** The overwhelming majority of students found information about the gender/security overlap through independent reading, both online and offline, and not in class or work. And independent interest in subject matter was the second-most salient factor students said would drive them to look at new material

in a course. It's clearly not the case that one or a few seminal pieces of literature are what introduce students to the field—and whatever materials they are encountering do not seem to be memorable. It's also unclear what kinds of online resources students are turning to for the gender perspective—or how accurate and reliable they may be.

- 3. The canon matters.** The most popular factor compelling students to look at material was whether it was mandatory or would be on the test. Students are keenly watching to see what content is valued by the profession and are taking their cues. There is just no substitute for integrating content into the canon. Based on this result, it seems that including content in a class is still a good way to introduce topics like gender theory to future practitioners who may not have the personal motivation or interest to do their own research.
- 4. Both female and male students want to learn more.** The vast majority are very interested in learning more about linkages between gender equality and security and want to see more resources devoted to that subject in their courses. Students split evenly on whether they preferred to see the topic integrated across coursework or presented in standalone classes.
- 5. This is new territory.** As with professors, almost no one has ever been asked about the subject before.

The classroom represents one of the last places to introduce soon-to-be-practitioners to a range of ideas that extend and challenge their constructs of how security can be attained and safeguarded. There is no substitute for introducing new concepts and frameworks while students' foundational understanding of international relations and national security theory is still in development.

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