

*Special Section*

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# Foreword

## Women Scholars and Practitioners in Intelligence, Security and International Relations: Personal Reflections

Daniela Bacheş-Torres<sup>i</sup>

The purpose of this special issue is to collate a selection of seven diverse contributions from female scholars and practitioners in security, intelligence and international affairs that are illustrating the experience of many women who chose to build a career by breaking into a male-dominated environment. Certainly, these experiences do not pretend to cover the whole picture, there being many other valuable stories from woman experts that await to be shared. Conversely, these perspectives might not be representative of some other women that work in these fields. However, our aim is to voice out a facet of security and intelligence that has remained marginal in the academic environment and community of practice: the status of women and their added value to their professional communities.

Literature<sup>1</sup> usually illustrates the success of some iconic female figures as an inspiration for present and future generations of women who want to embark in similar career paths and break the gaps. Yet, most of these success stories are written in the past tense and focus on the happy endings and glamorous achievements of these skillful women (spies, intelligence analysts, scholars and leaders). The details of their struggle, hardships and challenges they had

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to face often remain behind closed doors, classified by work rules or society taboos. Contrarily, present day accounts of women's professional status in these fields follow the general debate on equal gender representation and its adjacent implication, which is a fair thing to do. Whether it is the academia, the Intelligence Community (IC), the tech industry, the Government or any other field of the Private Sector, female experts should be given equal opportunities and treatment, based on the assessment of their skills, expertise and knowledge, as their male colleagues are. However, this is not a given.

As a young scholar, and a junior member of the IC for two years, I had a glance at the intelligence world beyond books and articles. My experience, in terms of numerical gender representation, was one in favor of women's cause. Both during high school and college, I belonged to groups dominated (on paper at least) by girls. As I became immersed in the work market, I realized that, although women were still more numerous, the situation was not applying to the management positions, where men were in clear control. As an Assistant Researcher with the Intelligence Academy of the Romanian Intelligence Service (SRI), I worked in a department where the ratio men-women was 2:3 when I got there, and 4:7 when I left. The ratio men-women among SRI employees was a rather balanced one. However, things change when it comes to middle- and higher management positions, where men were clearly dominating numerically. Since 2015, I have attended various conferences in intelligence, and I have witnessed the same under-representation of women; I vividly remember that in one of those international events gathering over 80 people, only 5 were women. Interestingly, it is worth noting that most of the women that use to attend these academic events work or used to work in the IC; most of them are former practitioners that decided to embrace an academic career, maybe most of them aware that "women still can't have it all,"<sup>2</sup> as Anne Marie Slaughter pointed out in a 2012 article for *The Atlantic*.

But having it all in a woman's case is not a matter of succeeding to be in many places at the same time – at work, at home, at the gym, on the field, in the classroom. Let's be honest: a man cannot have it all either, but his success is much easily taken for granted and less scrutinized. However, a female professional and a male professional will not be looked at with the same pair of eyes: there are different requirements, double standards and, sometimes, opposed expectations from men and women. I have never been a supporter of positive discrimination solely based on the status of belonging to a minority or an under-represented group. In the absence of additional selection criteria such as merit, professionalism, fair competition, positive discrimination ends being a false positive. And let me point out that while women are those who suffer most from double standards, men are also treated unfairly when it comes to professional areas considered to be a woman's field (such as elementary education, nursing, social work).

Traditionally, the research and practice of security and intelligence is a man's job; yet, exceptional figures that we like to quote and consider role-models include various women. Honestly speaking, both men and women like to see and work with powerful, smart and successful women – whether they are professors, researchers, managers, analysts or spies. However, a woman who assumes such a challenge and success, must also be aware that she steps on a mine field. Usually, a woman at the beginning of her career who shows career aspirations is looked at with sympathy and benefits from her senior colleagues' – both women and men - support. Things change the moment one shows a certain professional independence and ability to speak truth to power. That is the moment a woman's role, work, and achievements start being challenged based on additional criteria to the professional ones: clothes, make-up, attitude, network, personal life. During my staying with SRI, I experienced and observed what it means for a woman who dedicates herself fully to her job to be the subject of gossip; I saw how a woman's professional achievements are downgraded because of her sacrificing her family; I also listened to people assessing a woman's skills and clothes as the sides of the same coin. At the same time, I heard people talking about young male colleagues who were spending between 10 and 12 hours at work, saying: "this young man knows what he wants! He works hard, he will get far!" Not a word about his personal life. I also met senior male practitioners who had barely seen their children growing up and spent more hours at work than at home; they were viewed as examples of loyalty to the country, dedication to the goals of the organization, and career role models. Not spending enough time with their families was seen as an exemplary sacrifice, something they had to be admired for. All but a failure in achieving a personal life – career balance, as it was considered in the case of their senior female colleagues".

But whether we are men or women, we want to be surrounded by successful women. Their path to achieving that success, however, is much harder for women than from men. Bureaucracy, traditional beliefs, stereotypes, myths, they're all the Procrustean Bed that we need to carry with us and make sure to fit at each moment. Talking about women in intelligence and security as a new way of enriching the research agenda is not just a simple gender perspective of equal representation and fair inclusion. It is even more than providing professional respect to our peers and recognizing their professionalism and value. This *Section* is the result of the Editors' strong belief that women's contributions are an asset beyond the human resource need; it is the social and cultural capital of knowledge, confidence, and creativity that women can provide for a far-reaching look at the world and, therefore, a better understanding of global threats and transformations, as well as opportunities and development.

The *Section* opens with *Nirmala Rao's* reflection on the women's present-day representation in International Affairs, both as scholars and practitioners.

Nirmala's extensive experience in academic management on two continents – Europe and Asia – allows her to provide an insight overview of female leadership and representation in a world where gender differences continue to persist and influence women's careers. This contribution serves as a framework for the next papers, increasing awareness on the gender biases that women continue to fight every day in throughout the professional arena. In addition, the presentation of the Asian University for Women that she provides us with is an example of empowerment and leadership among women that many leaders and decision-makers from different communities could use as an inspiration to address under-representation of women as well as other minorities.

*Jennifer Mathers* provides a historical account of women's participation in security and intelligence operations during times of crisis and confirms at the same time the fascination that the larger public has for stories of female bravery. But while showing how women were an invaluable asset to the Resistance during the Second World War, Jennifer also makes a strong case of post-war underestimation of women's role. At the same time, those women who managed to have their merits recognized were not as successful in escaping ironical stereotypes. Moreover, as Jennifer emphasizes, 'by performing extremely well in a "man's" role, these women achieved the dubious status of honorary man'. None of these situations are something unknown to present-day society where self-confident, successful women pass as "bossy" and are awarded with "the dubious status of honorary man."

*Elsine van Os's* genuine story of her professional journey is most likely representative of many women (and most likely men) who built their expertise across sectors and by taking different challenges in the "unknown" world(s) of intelligence. Elsine offers us a strong lesson of courage and resilience not only in traditionally male-dominated areas, but also in emerging fields where a woman's presence can be the expression of a risk, but also of a rewarding opportunity. Moreover, her paper provides insights on the challenges of the intelligence work, not only with regards to the specific tasks, but also the adaptation to cultural and geographical contexts that can take us out of our comfort zone. Although Elsine's contribution warns us that every intelligence career is different, she also provides the common denominator for being successful in the world of intelligence, whether it is the Government or the Private Sector: "Intelligence is not crystal ball gazing. Getting it right means your intelligence process and methodology is solid."

*Nicole K. Drumhiller and Kate Brannum's* contribution unveils the alterity of women's presence and work in the academic environment. Building upon existing research and their own experience, the two professors address the gender biases that female scholars often have to overcome. The stereotype of the "female-friendly" approach is a dominant feature of the way women's academic performance is being shaped and perceived by their community. An important suggestion that Nicole and Kate offer to mitigate this gender gap is

the vertical and horizontal change of culture and practices within organizations and communities of practice through integration of women at all levels, support for women's networking, mentorship and collectively addressing stereotypes and disparities. Ending on an engaging note, the two of them note that "the emphasis of those providing education and training in the fields of intelligence and security should be on changing the norms rather training women to adjust to them."

*Spencer Beall's* research is a comprehensive analysis of the economic consequences that failing to include more women in the cybersecurity field and enable their access to technology professions comprise. What can be more ironical than a field pioneered by women that risks to draw back and slow down its development because of the women's under-representation?! As emphasized by Spencer, female professionals were replaced in computer science "when personal computers became a lucrative prospect, marketed almost exclusively to men and boys." This is not an isolated case, as women across industries and domains are most of the time required to adapt their role to a status-quo that is male-tailored a priori. However, not everything is lost, but the change requires holistic measures that range from fighting stereotypes and biases, to corporate practices and national policies.

*Claire Prestwood* warns us from the first lines of her paper that we cannot skip "discussing gender in intelligence because whether or not you want it to, your gender may define you regardless of your education and professional background." Being a woman has its drawbacks, but also its advantages, and what Claire advises us to do is to turn the former into our allies by capitalizing on what may appear, at first sight, the weakness of being a woman. At the same time, she also makes a strong point of women learning to stand their ground and defend their personal and professional integrity from their male peers. Claire's informal, and somewhat witty, style sprinkled with short stories and comments is an effective way of encouraging women to pay it forward and create their own way of pushing things forward.

*Amy-Jo Griffin's* paper is a bold, fearless and straight-forward reflection that makes us aware of the stereotypes we are both victims and perpetrators of. It also shows us that the world of intelligence, whether is in the classroom or on the field, in the government or private sector, is still dominated by its own traditions and perceptions that are many times averse to evolution and alterity. Being a woman in a male-dominated professional community is a challenge; being a woman different from the mainstream type is a risk. Amy-Jo's contribution is also a compelling example of the power of women's leadership, and how a women's success and nerve to do things differently can change not just the status quo, but also the life of other women through a domino effect.

These seven papers are connected through one question that is rhetorically asked by Elsie van Os, but comes about after reading each contribution: "Do

I remain my female self or do I try to become one of the boys?” In theory, the answer may be self-obvious; in practice, giving an answer is more than a matter of principle or equity. All choices come with an opportunity cost, and it is up to each of us to decide how far we are ready to go. But one thing is certain: “The beginning is always today.” (Mary Shelley)

## Endnotes:

- 01\_ See: Amy J. Martin, “America’s Evolution of Women and Their Roles in the Intelligence Community,” in *Journal of Strategic Security*, vol. 8:3, 2015; Elizabeth P. McIntosh, *Sisterhood of Spies: The Women of the OSS*, Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1998; Tammy M. Proctor, *Female Intelligence: Women and Espionage in the First World War*, New York: New York University Press, 2003.
- 02\_ Anne-Marie Slaughter, “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All,” *The Atlantic*, July-August 2012 Issue, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/07/why-women-still-cant-have-it-all/309020/>.