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**Pop Rocks and Persistence: Finding the Women in U.S. Foreign Policy and National Security**

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Pop Rocks and Persistence:
Finding the Women in U.S. Foreign Policy and National Security

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One hundred years after the ratification of the 19th amendment, women in the United States continue to face societal and institutionalized biases that can undermine the success of women everywhere. This is especially true when it comes to leadership in the U.S. government. And while the number of women serving in state and federal legislatures has increased, the number of women leaders in the foreign policy and national security establishment continues to be lacking. As I progressed in my International Relations degree, it became apparent that I was most frequently learning about men, from men, and then I asked: where are the women in U.S. foreign policy and national security (FP/NS)? Over the last three months, I have interviewed fifteen women from various FP/NS backgrounds and degrees of experience to understand their time in the field and how their identities as women impacted their work. The decades-old networks of aging, white men who have held, and continue to hold, the majority of positions across the foreign policy establishment and have created a culture where women must work harder than the men around them in order to advance. In addition, almost all reported casual sexism and discrimination in the workplace. But, small steps have brought greater numbers of women into the field. While support from career service members and both male and female mentors have helped increase the numbers of women in FP/NS, the fraternal cultures of the institutions women serve has prevented the diversity the establishment needs so the decision-makers are more informed and better represent the country they serve.

Method

In order to better understand why the field of FP/NS in the United States seemed to be lagging behind when it came to gender parity in leadership, I interviewed fifteen women from across various agencies and institutions. In these interviews, I asked a set of questions, focusing on their background, careers, and personal thoughts and experiences as women in these areas. I
also asked for their thoughts on the future of women in foreign policy and advice for young women entering the field. From these questions, I identified several themes throughout all interviews and the stories and results will be explained below. The women were selected in no particular order, many I was put in contact with through the others I had spoken with. Their names have been replaced with pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity.

**Diverse Voices Matter**

When the decision makers and agency staff are entirely or almost all male, and in the U.S. old, white men, it is not representative of the population they work to serve and protect. This is often the case all around the world where governments are making policy choices. One of the most shining examples of this is in peace negotiations. One study that examined “eighty-two peace agreements in forty-two armed conflicts between 1989 and 2011 concluded that peace agreements with women are associated with ‘durable peace’” and that agreements “signed by women show a higher number of provisions aimed at political reform and implementation.”\(^1\) Yet, women are still being left behind when negotiations are conferred. Many women also believe that they bring their own unique skills to diplomacy and foreign policy. One woman, Lone Decker Wisborg, Denmark’s Ambassador to the U.S., interviewed in Susan Sloan’s book *A Seat at the Table*, while she was “hesitant to discuss differences between male and female mentalities. . . ‘men are focused on winning and women are focused on getting things done.’”\(^2\) Former Hungarian Ambassador to the U.S. Reka Szermerkenyi stated that “women have a more natural talent for approaching conflict compared to men, but ‘a combination of men and women is hugely important, because in many cases, what is missing is an ability to smooth things

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\(^1\) Sloan Susan. *A Seat at the Table: Women, Diplomacy, and Lessons for the World* (New Degree Press, 2020), 63

\(^2\) Ibid., 276
together.” Including people of diverse backgrounds means including diverse perspectives on issues and widening the window of possibility for progress in any given field.

**Experiences: Then**

Prior to 2000, the experiences of women in the field of FP/NS paint a picture for women’s place since the early 1970s. One woman, Laura, a former Ambassador and Deputy Chief of Mission has worked in the field for over thirty years and her career highlights the changes over time. When she started, women could not get the language training they needed and were essentially excluded from posts in the Middle East and most of Asia. She says that what women were told repeatedly was “we couldn’t we couldn’t we couldn’t.” One of her early bosses who she referred to as the “jerk of all jerks” was unhappy that he had been assigned a woman. When she arrived at the post, he escorted her to her new office which turned out to include a fridge, coffee pot, and hot plate. He had literally put her in the kitchen. He then proceeded to exclude her from all meetings and assigned her no work. Luckily, the other men in the office took her with them and she sought out work on her own. Eventually the Ambassador heard her story after she requested a transfer and the ‘jerk’ was asked to retire. Later on in her career, in a new post, Laura was wearing a Diane von Furstenberg wrap dress (she made a note of telling me this detail). A senior official stopped to chat with her and then, as an apparent joke, pulled on the tie of her dress to undo it. Laura told herself to just let it go but informed her boss as well. He asked her if she wanted him to say anything but she said she would think about a response. Then, the offender was in her section and she had some Pop Rocks. She asked if he had ever had them and when he said no, she offered some. She explained that you were supposed to eat the entire pack at once and soon pop rocks were fizzing out of his nose. While this was

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4 Zoom Interview with the Author, 17 June 2020
certainly an unconventional response, it was one way this woman found to handle an offensive, and ridiculous act from her work colleague. Another story she related to me was not specifically about her but about former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. At a panel Laura had assisted in making between Albright and former Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, he mansplained to her the entire time despite the fact that she was more senior and had held a cabinet position.

Another woman I spoke with, Katherine, has a background in national security and a different experience than Laura. She was raised by female professors and after undergrad, worked for a national security scholar which sparked her interest in defense policy. After graduate school, she worked under a top military advisor for six years. During that time, like most of the people I interviewed, she was just about the only woman. But, she was also the only civilian staff. This meant she also wasn’t competition for the military officers posted there looking for promotions or advancement. She says that “what we were doing mattered too much” to have her gender impact the work. Rather than very specific incidents of sexism or discrimination, she described how individuals could be discriminatory. One man assumed she was a secretary at a meeting where she was an official representative, something multiple women said had happened. With this, she stated there was “general creepy, predatory behavior.” The ‘general’ behavior in comparison to something like the pop rocks incident, indicates the broader, cultural problems that breed in male-dominated institutions. But, Katherine says the institution itself was looking out for her more broadly and says that she “joined at the crest of diversifying the field.” She had help from her male colleagues that mitigated the impacts of discriminatory individuals. With this she believes her “experience is markedly different because for [her] being a woman has been a marginal advantage” due to the various mentors and programs she was able

5 Phone Interview with the Author, 28 June 2020
to have due, either in part or in whole, to her gender. And as she became others’ boss, she knew people weren’t going to make it about her gender. She says her former positions, especially under the top military advisor, taught her how to unflinchingly deal with incidents of bias and to be tough. Aside from her own career, she knows most of her young female friends have had a different experience.

One more woman I interviewed began her career pre-2000. Juliet says that “things she had to contend with are no longer acceptable today.” Throughout her education in FP/NS there were hardly any female role models or professors. Her field of expertise, Russia/USSR, was largely men, but the USSR had a larger contingent of women. The nuclear weapons and arms control sectors were predominantly male, filled with “generations of men who think that any hard power or military or armed services/weapons are always male.” Because of this, Juliet thinks that “many people felt that women would feel uncomfortable negotiating with force rather than diplomacy.”

Experiences: Now

More recently, many of the women I spoke with have seen a lot of growth and increased diversity, but many also face similar discrimination as the women before them. While there have been more women at the head of US foreign policy, Madeleine Albright, Condoleezza Rice, and Hillary Clinton, there has been a less visible but no less important increase in the lower ranks. Jane has worked in several subsect of government, most notably serving in the Marine Corps. When she joined the military, there were no female mentors in the marines, and largely male senior officers. With this there were institutionalized biases, namely that women were barred from combat until 2015, which prevented advancement for many female service members. In

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6 Phone Interview with the Author, 28 June 2020
7 Zoom Interview with the Author, 25 June 2020
response to this, women found loopholes including Lioness and Female Engagement Teams (FETs) which allowed them to go into combat zones for a maximum of 44 days. She also described, like other military members I spoke with, the sexual harassment issues throughout the armed forces, and inappropriate actions of senior officers. When she was given a rare opportunity to head into a combat zone, the men stationed there assumed she was going to be male, and a senior officer “said no straight out” to her being assigned because she was a woman (he was eventually promoted). She says that the military is an equalizer because everyone comes in at the same level, but that this equality is quickly lost because members who achieve high-ranks like Generals have to be lifelong soldiers and these self-select for men. These ranks require greater demands on a soldier’s life that make it difficult to be home with families. Women who achieve these positions often don’t have children, are married to other officers with similar ranks, or are in a relationship where there was more shared responsibility. When Jane transitioned to work as a civilian in the Pentagon, her “male coworkers assumed I didn’t know anything about the military.” Working in this environment became “emotionally exhausting” and that they hyper-masculine culture has made her regret “not sticking up for women all the time.”

Claire also served in the armed forces for the US Army. She has been involved in ROTC and the military since high school, and has dealt with sexism and harassment since the beginning. During her initial training, she had a superior officer sexually harass her, and to avoid it she tried to complete part of her training early to get away from him and says she did “the right thing by not reporting.” She also described the sometimes blatant micro-aggressions, especially in her current position at a different agency where there is a sense of people asking “why does this black girl have this job?” There are also male subordinates who regularly contradict female

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8 Zoom Interview with the Author, 29 June 2020
9 Zoom Interview with the Author, 10 July 2020
superiors, “and would even do this to women above her, even when he would be dead wrong, like completely wrong.” This occurred once during a joint-department meeting with senior military officer. A woman tried to tell a Colonel that her office needed something different from his plan and he “essentially told her to ‘stay in her lane.’” When the man called on another male officer, who had the same thought as the woman, the Colonel took the point. “Basically, what she said wasn’t valid until a white man said it.” These are things that are problems, but Claire points out that there isn’t really a way to report them. When a new man came into the office, he noticed these situations occurring. And Claire described how he noticed that in the hallway, women would bond “even if they didn’t know each other” but would give each other a look because “there are some straight up assholes” and there’s an unwritten rule of friendship between the women. Like Jane, she was thankful for her time in the service, but “was sick of it” towards the end. When she worked with FETs, her boss whom she was briefing asked “what about home the life?” Claire responded “well I’m single. . . and I don’t have a husband” and that this officer basically sounded like an Afghan man. When she was leaving he “knew he had put his foot in it” and requested she not tell anyone about the conversation.10

Another Army officer described similar situations from a decade earlier in the late 90s and early 2000s. She said when she was in the lower ranks, she had to always be “on the lookout” for sexual predators. Though this was less necessary when she was older, she would still occasionally find herself in potentially harmful situations with male colleagues.11 Prior to her active duty, she attended West Point several classes after the first women were admitted. A friend who was in the first class had to deal with far more blatant aggression and threats to her physical safety than she did. Morgan said this demonstrated how having women there before you

10 Zoom Interview with the Author, 10 July 2020
11 Zoom Interview with the Author, 8 July 2020
make a difference. In her chosen specialty, there were institutional biases linked to women’s exclusion from combat. Certain modes of transport were not open to women for certification, purely because they had a weapon attached to them. But, “women are expected to be there now.” Like Katherine, Morgan described occasional individual bias, but that both of her General bosses were on the lookout for increased diversity. And while senior personnel were well aware of the issue, they were more inclined to see why “certain races were drawn towards certain sections that had less room for advancement, which made it feel like the race issue overshadowed the gender one” when both were of great concern. While working for one senior office, she said the officials “had a chip on their shoulder about gender questions.” In meetings, she described how as a woman “[she] sat back and listened,” in order to have her voice heard she “had to be more active than [her] male colleagues” because she was never going to be called on or asked a question.\footnote{Zoom Interview with the Author, 8 July 2020} Morgan’s story illustrates both the lack of progress and the gains women have made over the last twenty years.

Elle also worked in the defense sector, but was not a member of the military. After receiving a fellowship early on, she chose to start work in an especially male-dominated part of the DOD. She did this despite being worried because she was female and because she was significantly younger than the majority of the military staff. Being younger in this position “had a bigger impact” on her job than being a woman. But, that is not to “say there wasn’t additional discrimination.”\footnote{Phone Interview with the Author, 10 August 2020} She described how because she was blonde and didn’t wear the unofficial black or navy suit most women wore, she stood out even more. But, when she spoke her colleagues understood what she was speaking about and this deterred greater bias against her. There was also “low-grade sexual harassment and plenty of inappropriate comments” and men...
hitting on her at work. She picked her battles, like Laura, because if she “got upset all the time, it would wear [her] down.” Around this time, Elle was also working with international networks, and said she faced more gender concerns when abroad. Once, while travelling in Eastern Europe, she and a young black army officer were together and drew a lot of stares, which was somewhat off-putting. One of the days, after a military site tour, her coworker said he was scared they were going to try and grab her hair and “drag [her] out behind the building.”¹⁴ Another time when travelling the Middle East, her blonde hair garnered a lot of attention and a large crowd of young men surrounded her and took pictures. These stories show the heightened significance of physical safety for women in the field, in situations that are unlikely to happen to men. Later in her career, after transitioning back to public service, she noticed many of her friends with her during her initial fellowship had left government service. She suspects this was due to an issue I had not considered at the outset of the project: the struggle to balance work and life as a woman. Several mothers I spoke with discussed how difficult it was to start and raise a family with the demands and constraints of their demanding careers. Elle explained that “maternity leave” (she requested air quotes be used here) is practically non-existent. When she was pregnant with her twins, she saved enough sick and vacation time to take care of her newborns. This is the way most women get enough time off to stay home after having kids. Meaning while working in a very demanding position and pregnant with twins, she was unable to take time off. When her twins were born several weeks early, she needed more time off than anticipated and described being in a panic in her hospital room. Both over her babies’ welfare and over her job security while on the phone with Human Resources. The unwillingness of this field to create more

¹⁴ Phone Interview with the Author, 10 August 2020
flexible approaches for maternity and paternity leave places unnecessary restraints on women’s careers.

Kathleen, like Katherine, Laura, and Elle, described impediments in her career as: double standards, being confused as a secretary or administrative worker, and having blatantly rude, sexual comments directed at her. She also noted the struggle to balance work and life, and said this is an issue across the board, not just in her field, and that there needs to be more flexible work environments.

Leslie, like Morgan and Katherine, has worked in the field since the 1990s, but has yet to work directly for a female boss. The fact that networks were majority male meant if you couldn’t engage with them you wouldn’t advance. She said she developed habits to make herself more comfortable in that environment. One graduate school professor told her to read the sports section every day so she would have something to discuss with her male colleagues at work. She also described having to verbally “elbow her way in” by interrupting, physically taking up space, and being more aggressive and assertive. So much so that when she received a new job as a political appointee, her boss “had to gently counsel” her to not interrupt people so much which Leslie found “ironic.” She said one department in her office at the time as having a much more blatantly hostile culture due to its military components. More people had a chip on their shoulder (an oft-used phrase by most of the women I interviewed) about women working there. One anecdote was about how a group of women working there were called the “click clack girls” because of the sound their heels made on the marble floor. Even in officer that have generally been better about diversity, men would make lewd comments at work which could be construed as being done to intentionally make the women uncomfortable and what Leslie said was a

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15 Phone Interview with the Author, 15 July 2020
“general bro-iness” in the workplace. For example, in meetings when a woman spoke, like the situation Claire described, it would often go ignored until a man repeated it later and was acknowledged.

Bridget’s career was on a different timeline than the other women because she already had her children when she got both her undergrad and law degrees. So, by the time she began her public service, her children were much older. In her jobs, she has worked with a lot of women leaders, and although her current sector is not equal, “it’s not horrifying.” She thinks this may be true of the whole department, she said one office she wouldn’t name has “a lady problem with no women in management.” Her limited engagement with another agency who sends delegations to her office has resulted in a running joke that they “forgot to bring their women.”

Her focus on foreign assistance and aid has caused her to run up against the ‘old boys club’ issues less than other subsects but has seen it with other people.

Nancy has largely worked in academia, but served some time in government in Congress and the White House. When I asked if she felt there was discrimination because she was a woman, she responded “yes, certainly.” She says it is easy to discriminate and that it is a more subtle, structural form of bias, which women like Katherine and Morgan who described it as more individually, did not see. Especially in her field, which has been one of the most typically masculine topics for the last seventy years. For women who “don’t want to engage in the cultural repartee it can be a struggle.” Her subfield is steeped in language and actions surrounding power and domination with the additional testosterone of “lots of military in the mix.” Nancy thinks that the way policy is made and viewed in her field prioritizes the concept of “a single person making a decision, which is a masculine notion.”

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16 Phone Interview with the Author, 29 July 2020
17 Phone Interview with the Author, 16 July 2020

https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/thecommons/vol1/iss2/1
better over the last thirty years she says there “has been no change at all.”\textsuperscript{18} In a government posting she volunteered to do everything in the office, and when people saw she could do the work they \textit{then} began to rely on her. When it became known that she had a controversial policy opinion in her area of expertise, younger men would engage with her, but older men would dismiss her outright. She had to convince them to have a conversation with her. Sometimes they responded by loudly throwing jargon in her face but she could do the same thing back. When she stood her ground, they would speak with her, but would also start to hit on her. Almost as if when they failed to overpower her intellectually, they felt a need to sexualize her instead. More broadly, the administration she worked in would try to hide this behavior. She recalled one man she worked with who groped women, and when senior women would discuss him they would say how “creepy he was” but not do anything about it. When incidents did get reported, higher-ups would try to sweep it under the rug. Nancy’s experience highlights the lack of cultural progress within the field and how far there is to go.

Julia is earlier in her career than many of the women. After working an unpaid internship for a government think tank, she worked for a defense sector as an Executive Assistant for a director. He was a retired marine and she described him as a “dysfunctional and toxic manager” and that military personnel were also difficult to work with.\textsuperscript{19} This office was most toxic in part due to active gender discrimination. There was a maximum of three women on the roster but she was typically the only woman and the youngest. The military make-up had the same ‘good old boys’ culture and her manger made demeaning remarks to her. She filed official complaints that went unaddressed and when she eventually left this department, he had six ongoing investigations and has now been demoted but holds the same amount of power. But, other parts

\textsuperscript{18} Phone Interview with the Author, 16 July 2020
\textsuperscript{19} Phone Interview with the Author, 2 July 2020
of the institution were better, the rules vary. Her new sector is really good about diversity and inclusion. And, like other women working in defense, she attributes bad experiences to individuals and not the military.

The last few women I spoke with have begun working in the field in the last six years. Their newer experiences combine the issues of both age and gender that other women described above. While working at a defense-centered post, which was full of “military bros” and she was “a tiny Asian girl,” Hadley had a boss who wouldn’t close the door to his office “because they didn’t want people getting inappropriate ideas.” When a college tour came to speak with her office, an undergraduate boy responded to her point saying “we’re really here to hear from the senior people” after her supervisor had directed the question to Hadley. Another undergraduate boy, this time interviewing with her for an internship, interrupted her and said “I don’t think you have the policy expertise to be judging me.” A male intern would similarly disrespect her authority and check with others on every task she assigned to him to see if he actually had to do it. At her current job, she is often demoted in emails to and from senior staff. Once in a meeting with several women from the Executive Branch, a senior woman asked the room how many kids they all had and when Hadley replied that she was 23, the women said “oh you better get on it or your eggs will dry up!” Each of these incidents were derived from some form of gender and age bias that is not seen nearly as often with men early in their careers in FP/NS.

Sylvia, who works in the same office as Hadley had very similar experiences. At an event she helped organize, a male senior official came and spoke to her and her female coworkers about how he has “a fiery wife just like them.” While in school studying business, she and her female classmates were instructed in what they should wear for work and how to present

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20 Zoom Interview with the Author, 25 June 2020
themselves within a “very narrow box of femininity.” Later at an unpaid internship, four out of the six interns were women but the men were given every substantive task while the administrative tasks were “evenly” given to the female interns. Another co-worker Maddie experienced much of the same things, notably at meetings, men are able to drag on and women tend to speak much more concisely. She believes this is because they don’t want to speak too much or be cutoff, and the men are generally the people who interrupt. This is similar to Morgan’s striving to be included in meetings and Leslie’s ability to elbow into conversations. But, both of those women are several decades ahead of Maddie in their career.

The experiences of women throughout the last thirty years demonstrates what has and has not changed over the generations. While some women described individual bias and casual discrimination or harassment that persists either for all women or for younger women specifically, the bias remains an issue in the field. And while other women described a broader, institutional bias, either form indicates that being a woman in US foreign policy and national security comes with its own forms of discrimination and impediments.

**Mentorship**

For most of the women I interviewed, there weren’t a lot of women present in their early education and careers to be female mentors. This is especially true of women in graduate school before the 1990s. The lack of women mentors exacerbated the old boys’ networks by leaving women with only male mentors to help and teach them. Leslie described how “network effects explain a lot of disparity” making it “imperative of men to expand their networks outside of other men.”

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21 Zoom Interview with the Author, 25 June 2020
22 Phone Interview with the Author, 15 July 2020
years, she has been able “to not ignore female voices.” Katherine described how the 1980s had few “prominent women” in foreign policy and national security. But, a self-described outlier, she was raised by female professors and became interested in the subject after working for a female national security scholar after college. Her story, and others today, show how when women are in leadership it opens opportunities for other women, “it provides a cascade effect.” This is true outside of the US as well. Laura told me a story from her time serving abroad, where she went to the ministry complaining about the amount of press coverage she received compared to other US officials. In response, a foreign official said “you don’t get it, do you? We don’t have women role models in high positions in our country.” Laura heard this as “tag you’re it.” While she served her time there, the country ended up appointing several women to high-level positions.

But, in the face of a male-dominated mentor pool, almost everyone interviewed cited the importance of male mentors and allies in supporting their work and career advancement. Maddie, who is very early in her career stated that progress cannot be achieved alone “we need white male allies to help. . .it’s not enough to just say there’s inequality.” In order to get where women are today and where they’re going, it is imperative of men to join the cause. When “men join the chorus of voices advocating the importance of women’s issues,” other men are more likely to pay attentions and take these issues seriously. Throughout all the stories above, for all the men who were discriminatory and toxic, there were stories of men who worked to support and advance these women’s’ work. Laura said that “for every jerk I had to deal with, there were five guys who were on our side” and that when she was placed in a controversial post for a

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23 Phone Interview with the Author, 15 July 2020
24 Zoom Interview with Author, 17 June 2020
25 Zoom Interview with the Author, 25 June 2020
26 Hudson Valerie and Patricia Leidl. The Hillary Doctrine: Sex and American Foreign Policy (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 281
woman at the time, her male superiors wanted her to succeed.” Her time working in the kitchen as a result of one man’s petty anger, was mitigated by the rest of the men in the office who made sure to bring her with them to meetings so she could learn and work. And, the head of the mission hearing her story led to the aforementioned “jerk” being sent back to Washington where he was forced to retire. For the women who served in the military, most described how their male bosses were “on the lookout for increased diversity” both for gender and race. One of Jane’s commanding officers appreciated her research and candor, and was very helpful in supporting her advancement. On the civilian side, Katherine’s career was helped early on when Colin Powell brought her on as staff which ensured she was treated with respect. She also felt the institution was looking out for her more broadly, especially with help from her male colleagues. Due to the assistance and support from male peers and mentors, women have been able to gradually expand their networks and reach new heights in their careers.

While male allies were very significant throughout the interviews, the increase in networking between women has also played an important role. This became more notable under Secretaries of State Albright and Clinton. When Albright first got to the state department, she began intentionally creating networks of women to pass down and expand the opportunities and connections that were so prominent in the male-sphere. Prior to her nomination, she described the male-bonding practices as ties forged

As early as prep school or college, or later in entry-level positions in law firms or on Capitol Hill. As careers progress, these networks broaden. Friendships are cultivated over drinks, cigars, steaks, Redskins games and rounds of golf. . . Problems are solved and deals arranged through quiet telephone calls and conversations, with outsiders none the wiser. Washington women also

27 Zoom Interview with Author, 17 June 2020
28 Zoom Interview with the Author, 8 July 2020
have networks, but until recently these networks were primarily social or philanthropic. Men focused on power. Women focused on everything but power.

After her appointment, Albright noted that “diplomatic leadership was so long the domain of men that Henry Kissinger told an audience in 1997 that he wanted to welcome her to the ‘fraternity’ of secretaries of state’ she responded, “Henry I hate to tell you, but it’s not a fraternity anymore.”

After Albright’s tenure, then came Condoleezza Rice, and Hillary Clinton after. With three women now having held the position, including a woman of color. Secretary Clinton brought women and girls security, long a relatively minor aspect of US foreign policy, to the forefront of US national security. This shift was a monumental achievement for the rights of women and girls all over the world, and placed a reinvigorated emphasis on women’s empowerment on the domestic front, especially in the institutions creating and producing foreign policy and security. Her appointment had many effects on the gender disparity in the field, one way to see this is “to count how many female ambassadors to the United States were appointed while Clinton was secretary of state. One count puts the number at 25, a historic first.” A woman at the top, especially a lifelong women’s advocate like Hillary Clinton made it “easier for president to pick a woman ambassador for Washington.”

Within the U.S., “more than half of new recruits for the US Foreign Service and 20 percent of the chiefs of mission [were] women.” With both male allies helping pave the way and women at the highest levels of power, women are able to achieve their full potential and become prominent voices in the field.

30 Hudson Valerie and Patricia Leidl. The Hillary Doctrine: Sex and American Foreign Policy, 57
31 ibid.
Complacency

With the help of powerful women and male mentors, women have come further in the last thirty years. But there continue to be barriers to greater progress. One of these is the complacency of institutions and their leaders surrounding the issue of gender parity and women’s empowerment in the realm of FP/NS. This is most clearly seen through the experiences of women like Katherine or Laura, who had extremely successful careers despite beginning in a stage where women were scarcer than they are today. While they are both success stories on the surface, when we look at the experiences of younger women like Jane, Julia, or Sylvia, we see how some things have not come very far. In the case of Nancy, her specialty has not gotten any better since before she started her career. Katherine described her origin story as happening at the peak of “diversifying the field.” It seems that when some milestones are achieved, like the first female Secretary of State and several more after her, the perception is that the problem is being solved. That women are being included and heard in decision-making and are prominent voices included throughout the establishment.

Yet, Leslie had to learn to “verbally elbow” her way into conversation and Morgan has to go out of her way and her personality to ensure her voice is heard. In the 1990s, when Albright was appointed both US Ambassador to the UN and Secretary of State, there was an influx of research on the importance of women in decision-making. But, little changes were made by both the U.S. and countries around the world when it came to including women in high-level negotiations. Nancy said that “older people are more complacent and need younger people to remind them.” Even under Secretary Clinton’s leadership, women faced similar discrimination and bias across departments due to their gender. Melanne Verveer, whom Clinton appointed as the

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32 Phone Interview with the Author, 28 June 2020
33 Phone Interview with the Author, 16 July 2020
first Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women’s Issues, described being in a meeting with “a young male desk officer for the DCR [Democratic Republic of the Congo] . . .who asked ‘I don’t understand what women have to do with any of this?’ Verveer was shocked at the disconnect between the Senate’s objective of protecting women and this State Department officer’s narrow mindset.”

At all levels of power in the field, women are hit with the reality that things are not as good as you expected.

Sylvia described how “she was sold a promise as a child that everything was better” for women. While attending an all-girls high school, she never considered that her gender was an impediment to what she might achieve. Leslie says there is a “rude clash with reality for women who were raised right” and that we need to raise girls “with boundless optimism” bridged to reality. Claire’s office “think they’re more progressive than they are” and she thinks it’s ironic that they “have these issues but then try to teach other countries.” This comes from a notion that because things have gotten slightly better and women have now held more powerful positions, things have become better for women in general. The stories of the women I interviewed show otherwise. When the issue of women’s empowerment and equality is not consistently considered and prioritized, progress fades and things don’t change.

Institutions and Culture

The biggest factor contributing to why women are consistently absent from high-levels of US foreign policy and national security is the simple fact that the institutions they serve have been male-dominated since their creation. Decades, even centuries, of patriarchal institutions combined with the culture that produces, have embedded sexism and bias into the field. One of the traditional

34 Sloan, Susan. *A Seat at the Table: Women, Diplomacy, and Lessons for the World*, 211
35 Zoom Interview with the Author, 25 June 2020
36 Phone Interview with the Author, 15 July 2020
37 Zoom Interview with the Author, 10 July 2020
arguments for why women are not often in these positions is called the ‘beautiful souls’ notion which depicts women as ethereal angels “floating above the field of battle” averse to the use of force. Bashevkin’s analysis of all three female Secretaries of State and former USUN Ambassador Jeanne Kirkpatrick shows how untrue this notion is. All four women advocated for force in their careers, including Albright’s push to use force in the Kosovo conflict and Rice’s argument for the Iraq war. The historical record has pushed women to the sidelines for years and “for centuries been tempted to generalize about roughly half of humanity and to draw conclusions that, while often tidy and sometimes comforting, hold limited values.” The prominent IR scholar Francis Fukuyama worries that “increasing female political participation will probably make the United States and other democracies less inclined to use power around the world as freely as they have in the past” and believes that in order to maintain greater stability Western states “should embrace muscular and masculine foreign policies, rather than risk-averse, feminine approaches.” But, the terms of all the women above did not advocate for a weaker US presence on the world stage. Rice’s assertive “approach to world affairs—known as the Bush doctrine—diverges clearly from a ‘beautiful souls’ view of women as pacific creatures who avoid conflict at all costs.” Gina Haspel, the first woman to become Director of the CIA, was hit with an onslaught of scrutiny during her confirmation for her actions during the War on Terror. All of these examples demonstrate the blatant masculinity of the field.

When several women describe the environment of sexual harassment and discrimination almost as an aside, it’s clear that the places they work allow this behavior to permeate and that it

38 Bashevkin Sylvia, *Women as Foreign Policy Leaders: National Security and Gender Politics in Superpower America*, 97
40 Ibid., 42
41 Ibid., 135
is a natural part of working in foreign policy or national security. Even when people like Claire report this behavior, it goes acknowledged but lacking action. In Claire’s case, she still holds that not reporting the sexual harassment she faced in basic training for the Army was the right thing to do. Leslie described how deep issues of unconscious bias and barriers to equity and diversity are an additional problem, and that this contributes to the government agencies retention issues, especially for women of color. Laura specifically stated that “our problem is culture’ and that while some sectors like the Foreign Service are ahead of it, it’s still not where it should be. Juliet explained how it’s the “same crowd of people across administrations” cycling in and out based on whichever party wins. During our conversation, Elle said she had briefed a very senior Defense official a few days prior and could tell he was surprised when the person conducting the briefing was her. Without a greater push from all sides to increase the presence and power of women in the field, the patriarchal institutions that determine foreign policy and national security will continue to be steeped in these environments of sexism and discrimination.

**Progress and Visibility**

In spite of all the places where this field has failed to empower women, progress has nevertheless been made. While some of it is more obvious, like the appointments of female cabinet secretaries and an increasing number of FS officers, less visible progress has been made too. More broadly, many of the women I spoke with did not hold the highest positions in their agencies, but they are committed, resilient women who care passionately about their work. This summer, the Army Special Forces just had their first woman graduate. Since 2015, women have been allowed to serve in combat zones and there has been an increasing emphasis throughout the armed services on sexual assault and bystander intervention. The Obama Administration was responsible for 43%
of political appointees at the Pentagon, the highest in history and today, President Trump’s National Security Council has gender parity. Katherine said that no one is claiming “there aren’t any qualified women” which was a frequently cited reason for women being absent from departments. Jane said this was a “silly” thing to claim and her current work is assembling a way to ensure the executive has a host of qualified women to choose from. The lack of visibility given to women who are and have long been working in the field, was what led me to this project in the first place.

We know from these women’s experiences that there is a cascade effect when someone like you goes first. With women in charge, there is an increase in opportunity and visibility for women throughout the department. Leslie, who worked in Clinton’s State Department, described how Clinton would often be the “smartest person in the room but was a great listener and asked more questions of all levels of staff.” Another story pointed to how women’s leadership impacted the work/life balance of those at State. A single-mom who had just returned from serving abroad was on a hard deadline to finish a report before the Secretary left for a trip in a few days. The work she had to do was with classified material and could only be done in the State Department building. So, she and her son camped out to finish the work in time. When Clinton found out, she got the boy out of school and went down to the mom’s cubicle to personally thank both of them for their work and commitment. Clinton also set an earlier deadline for papers to be submitted for her briefing, knowing how many people had to stay at work if she was there, and that many of those people needed to get home and take care of their families. Empowering women at all levels of

43 Phone Interview with the Author, 28 June 2020
44 Zoom Interview with the Author, 29 June 2020
45 Phone Interview with the Author, 15 July 2020
foreign policy and national security will make the field thrive and with an increased diversity of voices, there is greater opportunity for progress and advancement in US leadership.

**Conclusion**

While women have now been vital contributors to the FP/NS field for decades, their absence points to broader gender issues throughout the institutions they serve. Since the 1990s, women have gradually increased their presence throughout policy institutions. But, the experiences of women then and now continue to be tainted by long-held biases. This was evident with almost every woman I spoke with. Many described casual sexual harassment and risk of assault, especially when they were younger like Laura and Elle. Almost all have been and continue to be underestimated and overshadowed by male colleagues and superiors. But, many also spoke about the help and support of male allies throughout their careers. And as more women have come up in the field, more women have acted as mentors for those just starting. The institutions of the field and the cultures they perpetuate continue to hinder women’s advancement. This is exacerbated by the complacency that has surrounded women’s empowerment in the workplace; while achievements, like gender parity of the NSC, or multiple female Secretaries of States, should be celebrated, it’s important to keep pressing the issue in order to keep moving forward.
Works Cited

Anonymous Interviews: Laura, Katherine, Juliet, Jane, Claire, Morgan, Hadley, Sylvia, Maddie, Julia, Elle, Kathleen, Leslie, Bridget, Nancy. Between 17 June 2020-10 August 2020 on Zoom and Phone.

