Editors’ Note: Get In Formation

Elmira Bayrasli & Lauren Bohn

Last year, a prominent female foreign policy expert came to us in tears. “What do I have to do to be acknowledged?” she asked in exasperation. She felt that a male colleague had been recommended over her to speak on an important panel. During meetings, her bosses seemed to credit her male colleagues with ideas that she had brought up. Editors, she said, rarely replied to her pitches. She felt insecure and unheard. Maybe, she said, she wasn’t as smart as she thought.

“If I were a man, I wouldn’t be overwhelmed with such paralyzing self-doubt,” she said. “This wouldn’t even be a problem.”

Certainly the U.S. election won’t lift the unsettling feeling that a woman’s competence is valued less than a man’s confidence. How else could an extremely smart, articulate, and experienced woman lose the U.S. presidency to a reality TV star who boasts about sexually assaulting women? While some respectfully disagree with her economic and foreign policies, the bulk of attacks against Hillary Rodham Clinton have always been gendered: She’s “shrill”; she should smile more; and she lacks “stamina.” At the same time, Trump’s well-documented misogyny, sexual abuse, racism, and ineptitude weren’t enough to keep him from the White House.

As long as men dominate institutions and nodes of power, we will continue to turn to men as authorities. We will continue to seek male approval, male opinions, and male guidance. Worse, we will continue to accept men’s flaws and dismiss their ignorance and transgressions.

It’s true: Women have made waves in the highest of offices around the world this year. As one male foreign policy expert tweeted at us, as if to counter the existence of gender imparity, President Barack Obama’s top three national security advisers are women. Rome and Tokyo voted in women as mayors. Myanmar and Estonia welcomed female heads of state. Tsai Ing-wen became Taiwan’s first female president. Theresa May took charge at 10 Downing. While each has helped shatter glass ceilings, the perception that women are leaders and experts with value and wisdom to impart must constantly be defended and justified.

Men continue to dominate policy matters, boardroom decisions, fellowships, professorships, and opinion pages. Women are usually represented, but often their presence is a box to be checked.

Boxes, in any form, suit a bygone era—a past in which most problems did not immediately pour over borders or go viral. It was a time when problems could be packaged in morning newspapers and tackled over cigars in oak-paneled rooms. Today’s hyper-connected world has yielded challenges that can no longer be contained to a particular time or place. From pandemics to warfare, current affairs move in real time and at tremendous speed. But while urgency and reach have upended foreign policy, they have yet to upend our approach to it.

In today’s world, solutions no longer lie in the hands of heads of state or foreign ministers. And they can no longer be constructed in the minds of only half the population.

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This issue, penned entirely by female foreign policy experts and journalists, imagines a world where women are accepted—a world where we wouldn’t need to interrupt to be heard at the table. In reconstructing a media landscape where the majority of foreign policy experts quoted, bylined, and miked are not men, we quickly gain deeper insight into a complex world, one historically narrated by only one segment of society.

How far off is this reimagined world? According to data: far. In the United States, women author about a quarter of the op-eds published. On the front page of The New York Times this summer, World Policy Journal found that men were quoted nearly three times more often than women. For the last two years, we’ve conducted studies on foreign policy analysis in conjunction with Media Matters for America. The results are a 1950s redux: Women made up roughly a fifth of foreign policy guests on major American news programs in 2014 and 2015.

Three years ago, we—two female foreign policy practitioners—were tired of complaining. We were tired of figuring out whether we needed to lean in, lean out, or stand on our heads. We felt stuck in a conversational cul-de-sac where solutions were never discussed. Our frustration birthed Foreign Policy Interrupted, an initiative to amplify female voices in international affairs. We run a visibility platform and fellowship program that offers female foreign policy experts media training and editorial mentorship at major publications. To date, we’ve incubated 12 fellows from thousands of applications—brilliant women around the world who rarely have the opportunity to take the mike.

Dissecting inequality is challenging, but one thing is clear: The gender disparity isn’t a supply problem. Instead, there’s a demand deficit. A quick look at our weekly newsletter, which aggregates dozens of pieces written by women, or any university faculty or think-tank staff directory confirms that there are binders full of female foreign policy experts.

Women typically face two main barriers to visibility. The first is institutional. Deeply entrenched societal sexism and bias, unconscious or otherwise, deem male voices as authoritative. In turn, women’s voices are rendered unauthoritative—second-guessed and untrustworthy. This sexism is compounded by a 140-character-driven news cycle in which producers and editors don’t have the bandwidth to identify, much less cultivate, new voices. Many have told us that they are often forced to fall back on whom they know—and that’s usually a long list of white men, sprinkled with a few Washington, D.C.-based women. “I’m called on to opine on everything from Syria to Siberia,” quips FPI’s founding board member Anne-Marie Slaughter, president and CEO of the New America Foundation. “It’s as though they don’t know of any other women.”

But there’s a second, far more insidious barrier that prevents women from claiming and sharing their expertise. If the first barrier is institutional, the second one is internal. Confidence matters just as much as competence, and studies show that women hold themselves to a higher threshold of certainty before they offer an opinion. Men overestimate their abilities and performance, but women underestimate both. We receive almost daily emails from women who express anxiety over marketing their own expertise, despite pages of qualifications and years of experience. They’re not just asking for guidance. They’re asking for something far more elusive and existential: permission to call themselves experts.

This oft-discussed confidence gap isn’t cleaved by biological coding. Over centuries of disrespect and abuse, women’s insecurity and hesitance to assert themselves have evolved into coping and defense mechanisms. The sidelines have become shelters.

As columnist Jessica Valenti writes, women’s lack of confidence is a reflection of just how little society and the media conversation value them. When The Guardian examined 1.4 million comments...
that have been blocked by moderators since 1999, they found that eight of the 10 writers receiving the most blocked comments were women. Topping the list was Valentini herself.

To truly close the gap, we must create spaces that value women’s voices. Men—who make up most of the leadership on editorial and executive boards (including of this publication)—must not only be allies, but accomplices. Quite simply, we cannot manifest gender parity without a wide-sweeping “He for She” campaign. For instance, Foreign Policy magazine CEO and Editor David Rothkopf, an FPI board member, has not only pledged to publish more women, but he refuses to participate on all-male panels. He shouldn’t be an exception. Certainly not at a time when “the leader of the free world” waxes poetic on the value of a “[having] a young and beautiful piece of ass.”

Trump’s success in weaponizing a collective fear of the other confirms that the interrupting can’t end with women. Our conversation must be recalibrated well beyond the gender divide. Why are so few expert non-Western voices called upon to opine on the “developing world”? Why are foreign policy analysts who analyze Somalia or the Islamic State usually white? Expanding these discussions is not just for diversity’s sake. When you incubate diverse voices, you incubate diverse ideas and diverse approaches to foreign policy challenges.

This all-women’s issue is a testament to that. When we don’t see women and hear their opinions, we marginalize them. We feed the unconscious bias that men are policymakers and women are not. This Interrupted issue challenges and changes that perception by showcasing the voices of female experts and leaders.

From cover artist Molly Crabapple who has brilliantly illustrated the U.S.’s flawed foreign policy in Guantanamo, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates to our Kenya-based fellow Nanjala Nyabola who analyzes gender representation in African legislatures to Megan Garcia on algorithmic bias and Ellie Geranmuyeh on Tehran’s split opinion on Moscow, the following pages offer a more dynamic look at the world through a diverse set of eyes and ears.

The media—a volatile battleground for parity—doesn’t reflect the societies it aims to represent. Right now, some voices are valued over others, and vestiges of patriarchy and bigotry determine not only whose voices matter, but whose lives matter.

Raising awareness about media representation is not enough to change it. As we move into a new year, we’re still faced with civil war in Syria; a refugee crisis; growing extremism, fascism, and authoritarianism; climate change; and myriad other problems. Knowledge of our dangerously broken discourse is a necessary but insufficient step to address these challenges. We must also meaningfully change who we call upon as experts. This Interrupted issue is a preview of the possibilities.