**Carolin Wefer, “Of Course the Fräulein is an Expert: Female Leadership and Expertise in Transatlantic Think Tanks,” *American Council on Germany*, (2019)[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**INTRODUCTION**

In the early 1960s, Dr. Helga Haftendorn, leading female expert on security policy, sat at the table with an exclusive study group, only to be asked by its chairman: “What is the Fräulein doing there?”[[2]](#footnote-2) Once it had been established that Dr. Haftendorn was indeed an expert she was accepted to remain at the table – but only after initial confusion about a female presence among exclusively male ranks. Female representation in international relations continues to be a hot topic, including female representation in transatlantic think tanks[[3]](#footnote-3) in Germany and the United States. Women are often sought after, in the sense of hard to find, and the historical and structural undercurrents of the field have made it difficult for women to rise to the very top in transatlantic relations. A natural assumption is missing that values and assumes the intellectual and leadership contributions of women just as we currently value and assume the contributions of men. Transatlantic think tanks are in a unique position as analytical institutions and path givers to drive change both within and outside their institutions to advance female leadership.

**FEMALE REPRESENTATION**

Women remain underrepresented in leadership positions in the transatlantic think tank space, a phenomenon that is inherent in the structure of international relations and in society’s biased views of leaders.

The rise of globalization, increasing interconnectedness, and a reconsideration of values has shifted the debate on female representation from a moral obligation to an inevitable reality. Yet, strong gender stereotyping of leaders remains, and our assumptions of leading figures continue to be biased. Female leaders in all professional fields are ‘damned if they do, doomed if they don’t.’ They find it difficult to be considered both competent and likeable. Their assertiveness is perceived negatively or inappropriate, while they are overlooked if they do not assert themselves at all. Women continue to be paid less than men on all professional levels and again, are viewed negatively if they negotiate otherwise. Moreover, if a leading woman has children, she is considered unable to commit fully to the job – while if she does not have children, she is expected to be absent for maternity leave soon and therefore unreliable. In all global regions, women are more likely than men to fall off the management ladder before reaching highest-level positions. Moreover, women continue to be excluded from networks in male-dominated work environments, receive less institutional support, and suffer from open and indirect discrimination (Zhao & Foo, 2016).

In the immediate aftermath of World War II, predominantly white Western men created the international order transatlantic think tanks operate in today and determined the structure and language used in that arena. The field of international relations has been male-, mostly male elite-dominated. A surge of feminist critiques starting in the 1990s (Enloe, [1990](https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-368" \l "acrefore-9780190228637-e-368-bibItem-0018); Tickner, [2001](https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-368" \l "acrefore-9780190228637-e-368-bibItem-0066); Ackerly et al., [2006](https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-368" \l "acrefore-9780190228637-e-368-bibItem-0001); Peterson & Runyan, [2010](https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-368" \l "acrefore-9780190228637-e-368-bibItem-0049); Kaufman & Williams, [2017](https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-368" \l "acrefore-9780190228637-e-368-bibItem-0037)) began to question the theoretical foundations against which international policy-makers operated. They find the values and assumptions of the international system to be created by and targeted towards men. Female leaders are perceived as weak, particularly in dealing with realpolitik issues of security, defense, and economics. Success is measured in terms of values perceived by society as masculine such as power, autonomy, and self-reliance, reflecting those characteristics usually ascribed to whom we perceive as successful and capable leaders. Even if a woman makes it to the highest levels of power, she is still within the prevailing male-oriented system. Oftentimes, these women have created a new persona for themselves by adopting behaviors socially viewed as ‘male’ to combat ‘weak’ stereotyping (Koch & Fulton, 2011). A tough, assertive, and/or violent approach is heralded as the ideal behavior in the international sphere. In the name of defending one’s country or the national interest, international relations has become a masculinized sphere in which, as we have seen with the example of Dr. Haftendorn, women’s voices seem inauthentic or out of place.

To take a quantitative look, here is how the above plays out in transatlantic relations think tanks: Since the 1990s, an increasing number of women has entered foreign policy decision-making. The early stages of the debate focus on the characterization of women as leaders. Female leaders are perceived as weak against parameters such as assertiveness and toughness. Even women who have experience in the ‘tough’ policy areas are considered too weak and emotional to handle national security life-and-death scenarios (Tickner, 1992). Women face a cohort of established male leaders to whom it is irreconcilable with their own masculinity to be defeated and/or overruled by a woman (Kawakami et al., 2000). In cases where women make it to the top, they generate resistance or aggression not found with their male peers; or at minimum a raised eyebrow and the inquiry whether the woman was sure she was in the right place among her male colleagues.

The think tank and academic spheres, however, continue to be dominated by male boards, male directors, male panels, and male citations. This is particularly astounding as the underlying structures for entering the think tank environment have begun to change. Women surpass men as university graduates in 97 of 145 major and emerging countries (Zhao & Foo, 2016:1). Most students enrolled in graduate social science programs have been female (60%; de Jonge Oudraat & Kamali-Nafar, 2018:1). The International Studies Association has 43% of female members, with women outnumbering men in 8 of 29 topics and female graduate student members outnumbering their male counterparts (ISANET, 2019). As research-producing institutions, think tanks can play an active role in defining the debate and address these challenges in the policies and papers they produce.

Women in International Security (WIIS) has analyzed what this means for thinks tanks on one side of the Atlantic, in Washington, DC and has compiled enlightening data. De Jonge Oudraat and Kamali-Nafar (2018) find:

* only 27 percent of expert staff are women
* only 3 out of 22 think tanks (14 percent) have achieved gender parity within their expert staff
* only 22 percent of think tank governing boards are women; no think tank has achieved gender parity
* only one think tank has integrated gender in its programs.

Female perspectives are neglected in foreign and security policy analyses. In part, this can be attributed to the debate on the relevance of female perspectives highlighted above. Policymakers in the WIIS survey, for example, consider female perspectives relevant to issues such as sexual violence and human trafficking. They consider these perspectives less relevant in the security and defense space and consequently push women’s publishing and their public appearance into separate, excluded domains.

Women remain underrepresented as commentators, panelists, and in citations. They make up, for example, only 12% of the one hundred most frequently cited political scientists (The Political Science 400). Additionally, women accounted for just 24 percent of foreign affairs and national security experts invited to speak on major political talk shows (de Jonge Oudraat & Kamali-Nafar, 2018:1). This trend will only change once women are equally assumed and valued as experts and leaders and experience the same amount of representation as men.

**TRANSATLANTIC THINK TANKS IN PRACTICE**

To showcase the above in the workplace, the author interviewed a representative number of women in transatlantic think tanks in the United States and Germany. All of them are in senior research and/or executive positions in their organizations and have many years of professional experience to look back on. All women were asked the same set of ten questions (Addendum). All women were informed beforehand of the anonymity of the questionnaire. The questions themselves highlight the most prominent arguments of the representation debate for the think tank community as well as the interviewees’ individual experiences and expertise.

Using a standardized set of questions produced a coherent, profound overview of the field. It allowed to detect parallels across organizations, ranks, and career paths but also highlighted disagreements and novel points of view as not every woman’s lived experience in the field is the same. One obstacle to this research was finding a representative number of women in relevant positions in transatlantic think tanks. Another obstacle was, complex questions were difficult to grasp at times in a spoken interview and under time constraints. Many interviewees expected the standard narrative of “how is it like being a woman and why is that a problem.” This paper steers towards highlighting structure, and leadership in the field rather than just an individual’s gender.

**Men as structural architects**

The interviewees reflected upon how much the transatlantic space we operate in today is male-structured and whether perceptions of transatlantic relations vary for men and women.

Each woman describes transatlantic relations as rooted in a male dominated, post-World War II order and in military and security discourse. They identify realism as the dominant school of thought. They add that the field continues to be defined by a historical notion and a world order constructed by men. One interviewee argues, “the top echelons of thinking and leading are men so how do we expect the lexicon to be different.”

The topics which have traditionally been central to transatlantic dialogue - and the topics viewed as most ‘serious’ and thus benefiting from the most resources and prestige - have traditionally been coded as ‘male,’ for example security, trade, and finance. Issues such as equity and inclusion that may more directly speak to a broader audience are viewed as ‘softer’ and ‘less important.’ Most of the dominant topics have been categorized as ‘gender-neutral’ issues, when in fact the language we use is deeply male-dominated and sexist.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The interviewees discuss the historical pursuit of an “enlightened self-interest post-World War II” and the idea of “war as an influencer” which largely shaped the experience of policymakers since 1945. This continues to influence these policymakers’ views on transatlantic relations and, more importantly, whom they deem an appropriate expert to invite among their ranks. Consequently, “Cold War masculine patterns” continue to shape the space. The security-heavy undercurrents of transatlantic relations are filled with exclusive acronym vocabulary: If you do not know it, you do not belong and as military terminology is male-dominated, there remains a male advantage to this space.

One woman notes, “institutions are built and maintained almost only by men and we have not imagined what it would be like with only women around the table.” While she cautions to romanticize women as peacemakers, she criticizes our readiness to maneuver a world solely dreamed up by men as we are unable to imagine this world having been created solely by women. This falls again under the assumption paradigm.

All interviewed women argue, their education provided them with certain patters of thinking which their male colleagues, by virtue of the same education, equally follow. If men and women go through the same system, their views will be similar. They note, it is rather the difference in lived experience for men and women that generates different views mostly on work environment and structures. All interviewees agree institutional leadership is defined by male characteristics and more men occupy higher positions within their organizations, especially on management boards. Consensus exists on problematic selection bias at higher positions, and therefore extension and prolongation of male leadership. The sense remains, there is “only one seat at the table for a woman.”

One argument all interviewees refute is that of women being more peaceful. They rather note, on a larger scale, women focus more on alliances, collaboration, teamwork, listening, and solutions. One woman offers the definition of “builders versus asserters.” All interviewees agree some of the most beneficial contributions come from women as builders, an approach not yet automatically invited to the executive office or the board of management

**Roadblocks and slowdowns**

Interviewees reflected on roadblocks they had experienced. They started by stating the gender balance in their programs of study and first jobs to reflect on whether the lack of female representation is not due to structure but simply because not enough women have studied international relations yet. All women refute this as too simplistic. Most of them stress their academic programs had already been gender-balanced but beginning with their first jobs, gender disparities fostered. One notes the critical lack of an in-between generation. She says, “you need to see a realistically achievable path: If you see three top women and no one below, you will not know how to reach their level through the ranks. It is not a virgin birth.”

All women see pay equity as the most pressing issue, in some cases receiving only half of a male colleague’s remuneration. Another leading issue is parenthood. For the U.S. interviewees, this centers on their lack of appropriately regulated maternity leave. Both U.S. and German interviewees note women are overall punished for having children as they remain the primary caretakers. While not all are comfortable with the word ‘roadblock,’ they still define it as a significant slowdown. They mention the issue of not being granted professional opportunities under the ‘assumption paradigm:’ “We did not offer you this as we *assumed* you would not have time because of your children.” Their husbands do not face this assumption.

The third most pressing issue was described as “acceptance and opportunity,” a structural problem within think tanks. A lack of institutional support remains to grow in a position, with both a reluctance to promote and give external facing opportunities. Many mention “personability to the director” influencing a woman’s advancement. As women are not automatically assumed to have capabilities and valuable expertise, many of them feel forced to ensure supervisors and directors like them. As one interviewee describes, “you are less trusted in. Older men doubt your fundamental right to be there.” Another interviewee agrees stating, “women first must gain the men’s trust, that they believe she is one of them.”

All women mention the issue of raising female representation questions throughout their careers before they reached senior levels. They argue until you are in a position of power, it is a struggle to speak up about injustices or to negotiate in favor of oneself.

**Female-male and junior-senior cooperation**

As a final reflection on the field, interviewees were asked about individual contribution and/or dissuasion of female leadership in transatlantic think tanks.

As discussed earlier, in a male dominated system, women cannot bring about change by themselves. Unconscious bias and lack of awareness are two of the predominant motivators for men’s behavior towards female colleagues and so female-male cooperation is necessary for change. One interviewee says, “if as many averagely qualified women were currently given senior positions as averagely qualified men, then we would be truly equal.” While this sentence sounds cynical, it captures what women strive for in their cooperation with men: They do not want selection bias but qualified people. Interviewees agree, while there are many men actively disadvantaging women, there are even more men who are simply not aware of the issue. Interviewees advise to be open about the discussion, and rather than attacking men, to offer solutions to doing better and to stress opposition against overcorrection.[[5]](#footnote-5) Most interviewees also mention they do not wish to achieve arbitrary parity of 50% at the expense of expertise. They, however, argue “you need to make extra effort to hire/find women.” They do exist; finding them is about “how much we feel it matters.”

For female-male cooperation to be fruitful, interviewees suggest explaining female representation to men as a strategic issue and instrumentally important. One woman assesses, “parity makes you more effective across sectors, so we approach it as an evidence-based model.” She continues, “we connect female representation to effective security and foreign policy and convey to men that for achieving the best policy, the incorporation of women gives your organization a strategic edge.” Another interviewee notes, “the incorporation of women’s voices diversifies perspectives more widely and leads to better thinking, decision-making, and discussions.” All interviewees argue the conversation needs to be about “the best people speaking.” Men must achieve an active realization; the best people are not solely their peers and diversifying the conversation and leadership is advantageous to their organization.[[6]](#footnote-6)

For junior-senior cooperation, interviewees stressed the importance of women paving the way for each other. All interviewees agree a senior woman needs to be a good colleague to other women. One argues, “as a leader you set the tone for what is acceptable or not.” Another interviewee states, “be a role model, so the gender question will not matter anymore at one point.” Senior women are accountable in leadership positions and have a unique opportunity to promote women who come after them. Another one encourages, “seniors, reach out your hand, do not stop halfway up the ladder but reflect what kind of leader you want to be for next-generation women and men.” As specific individual measures to be taken, all interviewees mentioned: support; showcase; sponsorship; peer-to-peer mentoring; and seniors looking out for writing, speaking, and participation opportunities for juniors.

Interviewees highly criticized senior women not adopting this mindset. Psychological undercurrents remain about threat perception on both the professional level but also the realm of sheer womanhood; fears of ageism and replaceability; envy of junior women potentially treading an easier path. As a woman, being a minority in leading positions makes women acutely aware of their gender. They portray a tendency to always also define themselves through their womanhood instead of just their professional position. One interviewee sums this situation up nicely for junior women: “Maintain a sense of humor and do not take it personally. Some women just really want that special place in hell for themselves and it always has to do with their own insecurities rather than your talent.”

However, interviewees stress those are only smaller, ad hoc steps to be taken. It requires change on a larger, structural level meaning institutional change. Individuals, particularly those with institutional power, can help by mentoring women, thinking carefully about their own biases and hiring decisions, committing not to participate in all-male panels, and speaking out against sexist language and practices. Organizations can implement solid policies that address some of the imbalances we are seeing. This means paid parental leave that both fathers and mothers are encouraged to take, and the possibility of flexible work arrangements. It also means systematically reviewing diversity within the institution and reaching out to disadvantaged/underrepresented groups when filling fellowships or internships. It also includes diversity on hiring committees for senior posts, functioning sexual harassment and bullying policies, and regularly surveying employees about their experiences. Lastly, organizations must be transparent about salaries within the institution to address the gender pay gap. Those are all shorter- and longer-term processes transatlantic think tanks can encourage and initiate by being in a position of power. They thereby help to diversify and advance the field and their individual organization.

**SOLUTIONS**

The incorporation of female leaders in transatlantic think tanks is beneficial for the field at large. Think tanks represent a more profound pool of expertise this way and can achieve a natural assumption of women as experts and leaders, an automatism that values and assumes the intellectual and leadership contributions of women as beneficial to an organization’s work.

While increasingly more women study and graduate in the field of international relations, the percentage of women at higher management in transatlantic think tanks remains low and women tendentially fall of the career ladder sooner than their male peers. For the future of transatlantic relations, we need to overcome bias structures and assume and value women as leaders and experts. However, with the sector’s foundations being male dominated, women must first carve a space for themselves before they can rise to top levels. In interviews conducted with leading female representatives from the field, we have seen this cannot be achieved alone. It requires both female-male and junior-senior cooperation within transatlantic relations to make women more visible and conversations more diverse. An automatism remains that readily accepts the expertise and leadership of men which has yet to be applied to women.

Solutions to moving forward in the space and creating long-lasting positive trends include but are not limited to:

* Making conscious efforts to identify, assume, and value female experts.
* Recognizing business benefits, the strategic edge, and progression that women leaders add to transatlantic think tanks.
* Setting up coaching and mentoring programs and women networks within organizations and training existing managers.
* Not stopping at increasing the number of women as an instrumental goal but focusing on removing structural power imbalances, gender stereotyping, and biases.
* Creating opportunities for broader professional exposure, raising the profile of female leaders in the organization, motivating women, and facilitating their development.
* Recognizing and countering processes and narratives that affect women disproportionately over men (mentor- and sponsorship, women networks, maternity leave, pay).

Having leading women in transatlantic relations think tanks yields positive results. Women tend to have a history of having worked in a less hierarchical, more participatory, and more collaborative way than male colleagues. Most studies that incorporate women leaders only zoom in only on a single, outstanding female figure such as Angela Merkel as Germany’s Chancellor. However, even in areas with very visible leading women, most other women are still excluded from higher positions of power. Increasing the number of women as an initial step serves instrumental goals but does not help to address greater structural power imbalances. Women are still constantly under observation to perform better and make less mistakes than men. They face a list of things that could affect them negatively that are not a concern for men in their careers: being assertive in negotiations; having children or being of perceived child-bearing age; attracting negative attention when they are assertive, and attracting no attention when they are not. As much as we need to empower women, women themselves cannot go it alone in a field dominated by men and male views. As the barriers they face are in large determined by male bias, it takes recalibration on the side of men as well for women’s success and representation to be tangible and long-term.

Same applies to senior women who have already risen to leading positions. Women are not by default supportive of other women. Senior women have a special responsibility to help their junior female peers advance and maneuver professional obstacles. Bullying your female supervisee out of irrational fears of replaceability; creating fake narratives about their alleged poor performance; stooping to personal jabs over professional feedback; those are all poor strategies that harm all female peers. So is accusing a junior female colleague of arranging a ‘private meeting’ with a higher-ranking man – when said private meeting was, in fact, a brief coffee-break chat. Unfortunately, these examples are not just hypotheticals.

To further female leadership and visibility in think tanks, both the incorporation of women into foreign policy as well as the structural dimensions within think tanks must change. As mentioned, the goal must be to make the existence of women leaders an automatism that values their leadership and expertise without second-guessing or extra effort. Female political participation is an accelerator of progress. Female leadership gives organizations an edge for the future. It drives organizational performance and offers more flexibility in responding to future challenges. By assuming the inclusion of women in higher positions as no longer extraordinary, we, in a next step, juxtapose the image of thought leaders as only men.

Women are not the better-makers, better-thinkers just by virtue of their gender. It is a cliché trap that is counter-productive to pursue. Women would only define themselves back into the niche out of which they try to escape. They do not necessarily view the substantive aspects of international relations differently from men. Tokenism is hence not what they strive for. Receiving speaking invitations or job offers solely based on their womanhood is not the way forward and is frankly insulting their intellectual capabilities.

To further female leadership and visibility in think tanks, both the incorporation of women into foreign policy as well as the structural dimensions within think tanks must change. As mentioned, the goal must be to make the existence of women leaders an automatism that values their leadership and expertise without second-guessing or extra effort. Female political participation is an accelerator of progress. Female leadership gives organizations an edge for the future. It drives organizational performance and offers more flexibility in responding to future challenges. By assuming the inclusion of women in higher positions as no longer extraordinary, we, in a next step, juxtapose the image of thought leaders as older distinguished white men, as our thinking about female leaders is determined by visible leaders, panel leaders, and speakers.

**CONCLUSION**

The transatlantic relations think tank community as thought leaders and shapers provides a unique platform for raising awareness on female representation. Increasing diversity and female representation in leadership positions and on boards of management is crucial. Women remain underrepresented in higher- and executive level positions, most notably on boards, in transatlantic think tanks in the U.S. and Germany. While the foundations are changing with gender balance in International Relations programs and more women graduating university than men, this has yet to translate from the bottom to top-level positions.

Think tanks act as analytical institutions and path givers in times when the government is in crisis. They are the hinge between academia, civil society, and the government and consequently political shapers. Think tanks therefore are in a unique position to represent the world we live in, including diverse societies and female leadership.

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**Interview questions**

1. What was the gender balance in your program of study? What was the gender balance when you started working in the field?
2. In what way(s) are conceptions of transatlantic cooperation different for women than for men? How do these differences manifest in female thought-leadership?
3. What roadblocks did you face as you progressed in your field? Which of these were related to your gender?
4. As men have been the dominant architects of the transatlantic space, the language and systems constituting it are biased by dint of their creators. To what extent is the transatlantic think tank space structurally male?
5. How do you work with/ speak to men about issues of gender parity in the Think-Tank world?
6. In what ways can women act as advocates for women as they progress through the ranks within these institutions?
7. What specific steps should be taken in order to make the upper levels of Foreign Policy think tanks more accessible to women?
8. How will female perspectives in upper level positions alter the orientations of Transatlantic Think Tanks?
9. What advice do you have for other women who are seeking out careers in this area?
10. Do you see Think Tanks changing demographically and what do you think the future will look like?

1. This research has generously been made possible by the American Council on Germany’s McCloy Fellowship on Global Issues. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Fräulein” is the German word for “Miss,” formerly used to address a young, unmarried woman. The anecdote was shared in Constanze Stelzenmüller’s “Was sucht den das Fräulein da?,” Die ZEIT (2005) and was the inspiration for this title. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Definition: Think tanks are research and analysis-oriented organizations in the fields of international relations and public policies whose aim is to influence different players who intervene in decision-making processes (Elcano Royal Institute, 2019). For this paper, ‘transatlantic’ describes U.S.-European, more specifically U.S.-German issues. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. An example comes from Carol Cohn in her still timely essay on sexism in the language of defense intellectuals (1987). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This is a pattern in the answers and shows how women adopt a more cooperative, alliance-focused mindset. While men continue to not put second thought into promoting men at the expense of women, when it is a woman’s turn to join the debate, she favors the collaboratively over the belligerent approach. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. As a footnote to female-male cooperation, all women discussed men blaming their lack of supporting women on the #MeToo movement. Around 40% of senior male staff currently claim to be scared to have drinks with junior female colleagues. All interviewees refute this claim, stating those men were of the same cohort who did not support women even before #MeToo. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)