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Culture, structure and leadership impacts on gender inclusion in the security sector

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Abstract

Depending on your perspective, the primary challenge to gender inclusion is either culture, structure or leadership. The good news is that they are all outcomes, not causes. Indeed, they are constantly evolving as governments and organizations attempt to align them with their interests. The Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS) in Hawaii is a strategic and forward-leaning Department of Defense institution that provides executive education to security professionals from all over the Asia Pacific region. APCSS has systematically pursued culture change by embedding gender inclusion mechanisms that model the change and actions that modify institutional structures. Real culture change is occurring by driving an approach that embraces gender inclusion rather than simply requiring it to comply with existing culture.

Key words

Inclusion, gender, culture, leadership, security

Governments and organizations do not leave culture up to chance and intentionally pressure it to align with their interests. The United Nations resolutions that promote the inclusion of women and the female perspective into peace operations, military affairs and the security sector in general are a great example (UN Peacekeeping 2016). Another is when the US responded promptly with a national plan on women, peace, and security, which made the issue a central focus that complemented other inclusion efforts in a coordinated manner among all relevant departments and agencies who are now accountable for implementation (USG 2011).

In January 2013, then-Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta lifted the ban on women in combat roles following their exemplary performance in Iraq and Afghanistan (Egnell 2016). Almost three years later, in December 2015, Defense Secretary Ash Carter announced that all 220,000 US military combat positions that were traditionally limited to men were now open to women who could meet the standards (Bradner 2015). Around the world, at least 15 other developed nations allow women in combat roles (Fantz 2015).

The Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS) in Hawaii operates under the direction of the US Department of Defense and supports US Pacific Command to provide a focal point for mid to senior level security professionals, national officials, decision makers and policy makers from over forty countries. These fellows gather to exchange ideas, explore pressing issues and achieve a greater understanding of the challenges that shape the security environment of

region. In 2014, APCSS created the following mission statement to align its gender inclusion engagement efforts in the region. “In support of the National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS), APCSS will foster an inclusive security sector through engagement and executive education, producing lasting experiences and outcomes for security practitioners in the Asia-Pacific region.”

Informal conversations with hundreds of mid to senior grade military and civilian security professionals throughout the Asia-Pacific region have resulted in an enhanced appreciation of WPS issues. For instance, depending on profession, the number of organizations with no gender inclusion issues ranged from a fifth to a third. This is likely to be reflective of a difference in the involvement of women in different security sectors due to the impact of these sectors on women. For instance, the United Nations has recognized the strong association between gender equity and community resilience to crises, and the effect of this relationship on the achievement of Millennium Development Goals (UNDP 2010).

When considering challenges to gender inclusion, the general impression gained is that almost a half attribute obstacles to cultural constraints, a fifth attribute them to organizational and hierarchical structures and a tenth attribute them to leadership psychology. More senior security professionals attribute more importance to structural obstacles, which is likely due to their roles in creating, implementing and disbanding structural impediments. Mid to senior grade professionals with a stronger focus on national and transnational security coordination were more likely to consider leadership an issue than those working in more service-oriented roles. In these grades, there was a common misperception that women lacked the ability to work effectively in leadership positions. These impressions, observations or experiences were most likely due to a combination of cultural belief and structures that limited inclusion.

In accordance with the model proposed by Schein (2004), the leadership at APCSS has systematically pursued culture change by embedding mechanisms that model the change and actions that modify institutional structures. Some of these include agenda setting and monitoring, resource and reward allocation, and human resource choices. It has reinforced these by making organizational changes in the areas of operation, systems, procedures, physical space allocation, philosophical statements, rites, rituals and lore. These latter mechanisms were quicker and easier to achieve than the former, but real culture change is occurring by ensuring that the embedding mechanisms are in place.

Contrary to conventional approaches, which view culture as a cause and thus a fix to corporate and societal ills, these shifts in APCSS and US military culture were outcomes of structural reform. A guided evolution in security sector culture occurred following persistent social pressure, compliance with international standards, and the development of national and organizational imperatives. In other words, relatively simple structural enablers brought about a change in national and organizational culture to address socially complex issues. As the orchestrators of large successful corporate transformations have said, “... culture isn’t something you ‘fix’ ... cultural change is what you get after you’ve put new processes or structures in place to tackle tough business challenges” (Lorsch and McTague 2016).

Some people view those who advocate for cultural change as meddlers who need to stop interfering with other people's cultures (Mukhopadhyay 1995). However, this betrays ignorance of the fact that culture continually evolves as a product of compliance and resistance. In each country, community or institution, there are many cultures and unwritten cultural norms. Some enable productive behaviors while others constrain harmful behaviors. We usually comply with our cultural norms because they make good sense, but occasionally we resist when we want things to be better or when we learn how things could be better from external societies.

Some of us, from peace activists to terrorists, even make resistance a life-long cause with the goal of bringing about a better society. Our compliance with societal and organizational norms reinforces them, while our resistance challenges them (Jolly 2002). In the process, we are influenced and shaped as we interact with local, national and international information. Likewise, we influence and shape cultural norms at all levels throughout our lives as we actively change our own cultural environments towards what we think is better. The definition of 'better' however, is in the eyes of the beholder and so there is a continual struggle to pull culture here and there, which does not always result in ideal outcomes for all sectors of society.

Most leaders, both the coerced apathetic and the legitimately interested, focus their gender inclusion efforts on getting women to adapt to existing male-dominated organizational cultures (Lorsch and McTague 2016). The key obstacle to change is the culture created by the group in power. Disinterested leaders don't think gender balance is a priority in their organizations, which means that the driving forces are insufficient to create change and the inclusion efforts are skin-deep (LeanIn 2015). Smart people go where the grass is greener, and so organizations of this type and indeed entire countries with this philosophy hemorrhage the best of their female talent.

Changing the culture of organizations and societies to fit women is a more strategic and discerning approach to gender inclusion (Wittenberg-Cox 2015, Lorsch and McTague 2016). The intentional repositioning of culture through public structures, policies and processes to actively remove structural and institutional impediments is an obvious winner between these two approaches. This is nothing new. Governments have always intentionally reconstructed the cultural concepts of society to create societal change, and so the real question is, "Why aren't they mandating an across-the-board restructure to drive a change in culture that embraces gender inclusion rather than simply requiring that gender be inserted into existing culture?"

Will governments and organizations spend another decade or two ignoring half of the global talent pool and/or trying to get women to adapt to male-dominated institutional cultures or will they accept the existing evidence (Frink et al 2003, Smith et al 2005, Wooley et al 2010, Campbell et al 2013, Duhigg 2016), which shows that that it is smart and strategic to change institutional culture and adapt to a vast untapped pool of existing and undeveloped human resources? As usual, proactive organizations and sectors must lead the charge.

The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Daniel K. Inouye Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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