



The Boston Consortium on Gender, Security and Human Rights

---

# Bringing Gender Perspectives to the Security Debate

**Sarah Sewall**

**March 3, 2003**

**Carr Center for Human Rights Policy  
Kennedy School of Government  
Harvard University**

**Sarah Sewall** is the program director at the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy. She served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Assistance from 1993-1996. She had previously served for six years as Senior Foreign Policy Advisor to Senate Majority Leader George J. Mitchell. Ms. Sewall has taught foreign policy at Stanford University, been a Visiting Scholar at the Harvard Program on Negotiation as a Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow, and worked as a defense analyst at a variety of research organizations.

*Sarah Sewall began by giving her background in bringing together individuals from the human rights and the security worlds. She comes originally from the defense analysis world, then Capital Hill (working for Senator George Mitchell), then the Pentagon, and then Harvard. She has been responsible for putting together six conferences, each building on the other, bringing to the table humanitarian and military leaders. Sewall has the personal trust of many individuals in both communities. She is well regarded in*

*the military, and has training in human rights. The purpose of the conference series was to create a way for the two sides to talk to each other.*

Why aren't women more effective in bringing their perspectives to the security debate? Most women are fighting with their hands tied. They can't "talk the talk." As children they don't play with soldiers; as adults they don't play strategy. "Originally," says Sewall, "I didn't want to talk the nuts and bolts of howitzer fire power, because it struck me as beside the point. But I found that when you are not expert at the exercise with which you take issue, you are not listened to. You must engage those who "own" the issue.

Most people who approach the military with the perspective that there 'ought not to be war,' remove the 'yes' option from the table. They are invincible, have preconceptions, can't be argued with. If you ask the question, 'Under what conditions would war be acceptable?' and the answer is 'none,' you have to go the alternate power route. However, peace activists are often also "anti-power-structure" and "anti-authority." They have a discomfort with power *qua* force (war) and power *qua* structure (authority).

There are problems of language, syntax, and discourse. To the humanitarians, the language of the military seems technical, antiseptic, interest-based, narrowly 'rational.' To the military, the language of the humanitarians seems moralistic and 'unrealistic.' There are not many mechanisms or venues in which these two groups are forced to come together.

Not having command of operational issues is most important when one wants to affect the discourse and the outcomes at the level of policy-making. It is not so important at the media/public opinion level. At the policy-making level, men in the security field are able to obtain respect even if they don't have personal experience in the military.

There is little presence of women in the security field. There are 600,000 international law experts who are women, but only a handful of women who have worked in security, especially the nuts and bolts of security. This paucity derives from both self-selection and external forces. Many Under-Secretaries for Global Affairs are women. The higher policy levels are filled by men, staffed by women (the "20-somethings"). The higher policy levels are 24/7 jobs, hard for people with family obligations. The few women in the field must do their supportive networking outside, because there is no critical mass inside.

Women in the human rights, humanitarian, and peace fields tend to talk only with one another, and to others who hold similar positions. They are ghettoized.

In the security field there is a premium on the backstage meeting. There is no stage for "morality." This setup inhibits anyone who tries to raise outside issues, but it particularly inhibits women from raising these issues.

The linking of women with “emotion” also hurts. This is a meta-problem. It is easy to dismiss whatever analysis goes with emotion.

Prescriptions:

- 1) Young women should become as expert in war as they can, or “borrow” that expertise.
- 2) Women must get away from the power/authority phobia, the aversion to power, that permeates the peace community.

### **Discussion**

**Q:** How is it possible to get the two groups together?

**SS:**

- Focus on *how* to go to war, not *whether* or not to go to war.
- Encourage people to see from the other’s perspective: e.g., the military feels it is being micromanaged by their political superiors; how can you help them? In general, the military must come and stay, while human rights workers would come but not stay.
- Structure the interaction like a tutorial, allowing the military to present. Often humanitarian groups see any potential interchange as a chance for them to yell at the military. They have no military expertise, so they open themselves to the charge that they haven’t “earned” the right to criticize.
- Find an issue that is important from a purely military perspective. For example, “How do you balance force protection, accomplishing the mission, and avoiding collateral damage?” This question uses military language, accepts the legitimacy of the first two objectives, but subtly focuses on the last one. Ask “how” questions; this makes it technical, puts it on the table. (E.g., “How do you make the tradeoffs?”)
- Start with those who are most interested in real dialogue and build out. Begin with Human Rights Watch and move toward Global Witness. Start with retired four-star generals and move toward those in active service: This, “Steer me to the sleepers” approach is a labor intensive process. It is an art, not a science and must be done incrementally. Seek out key influential figures in each community who have credibility in those communities.
- Weight the numbers toward the military, because they need the numbers for comfort.
- Pose questions that the participants will consider interesting in and of themselves, questions that are germane and relevant, and that they will want to discuss with others afterwards.
- Rehearse and coach some of the major players on either side, and get them to model behaviors for the others. This requires reframing questions. At the first sessions, the Carr Center moderated, but after some time the participants began to moderate.

- 9) Start with small meetings. Keep in mind that as the meeting gets bigger, the humanitarians want to be “holier than thou.” Small meetings are good for sincerity, but big meetings have a greater effect.

**Audience Comment:** Unfortunately, it seems that generalizability of your process requires someone like you whose experience in both camps allows her or him to frame the questions, and, more importantly, to figure out “who carries what torches” -- in other words, who to bring to the table and who to avoid. Also, it helps to be someone who has the relationships which mean that members of the military would come as a personal favor.

**Q:** What about women currently in the military or the security field?

**SS:** Increase incentives for them to advance. WIIS (Women in International Security) is a terrific organization. It promotes the advancement of younger women, but its real strength has been in its cocoon and platform function for those new to the field.

**Q:** Which individuals in the security field is it easiest to involve in dialogue?

**SS:**

- Invite retired military personnel. Academic “war nerds” don’t have a “human rights aesthetic.” Retired military officers want to engage the larger picture.
- Go to peacekeeping operations. People there retire at Major, and then look around and join CARE or Save the Children.
- Find academics who are willing to become experts in the waging of war, like Tom Schelling in the study of nuclear weapons in the 1960s.
- Recognize that there is no institutional incentive for either side to come to the table. For the humanitarian groups, it is “sleeping with the enemy.” The fear is that it leads to “diluting” their message.