

POLICY CHANGE TAKES FLIGHT

**The Department of the
Air Force Women's
Initiatives Team**

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How does policy change occur within an institution? This article presents a framework to examine agents of policy change as key mechanisms for understanding institutional transformation. A case study evaluation of the Department of the Air Force Women's Initiatives Team—an all-volunteer effort that has generated policy changes addressing military uniform standards, aircraft design, reproductive healthcare access, and parental leave—explores how gender policy change in the Department of the Air Force has unfolded over the past decade. By utilizing ethnographic and policy research, this article traces the individual and group dynamics shaping the team's activities as well as the collective action challenges facing such changes within the department, with implications for institutions in general.

How do institutions change over time?¹ This question lies at the heart of political and sociological study, with these disciplines often focusing on economic trade-offs and historical analysis to solve this puzzle. Yet as policy change efforts within and across institutions become more prevalent, the traditional economic and historical lenses are limited in their ability to engage complex individual and group dynamics that lie at the heart of institutional longevity and change.

Addressing this knowledge gap, this article presents a new framework to analyze institutional change. This framework assesses the interaction between groups interested in policy change, those unwilling or unable to support change, and the levels of interest and power that shape not only motivations but also abilities to overcome collective action

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1. The author is grateful to the members of the Department of the Air Force (DAF) Women's Initiatives Team (WIT) for sharing their data on efforts and outcomes in support of this article and for their continued leadership of gender policy change across the Department. The author appreciates feedback received on an early draft of this piece from Gender & Politics panel reviewers at the April 2024 Midwest Political Science Association Conference. Thank you as well to the thoughtful peer reviewers and editors of this journal for improving this article through your comments and suggestions. The views, opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations contained herein are the author's alone and not those of the RAND Corporation or its research sponsors, clients, or grantors.

problems. The theoretical foundation for this new framework derives from feminist analyses of institutions and power, which point to the critical importance of understanding individual-level dynamics in order to comprehend the complexity of institutions and institutional change.² Applying this framework to a case study of the Department of the Air Force's (DAF) Women's Initiatives Team (WIT) reveals that individual and group-level dynamics within institutions provide insights into the nature of agent-driven incremental change that ultimately transforms institutions from within.

Theoretical Foundations

The disciplines of political science and sociology maintain well-established foci on institutions, or "the rules of the game in a society . . . the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction."³ Institutions consist of the set of rules and norms guiding behavior among individual actors, or agents, within the system. From a constructivist viewpoint, people create institutions. They are not stagnant, permanent fixtures; instead institutions are produced by people, for people.⁴ A feminist analytical approach, which pays attention to hierarchies of power, approaches institutions as ultimately constructed systems that shape agents' access to power, empowering some populations while disempowering others.⁵

At the same time, as populations enter and leave institutions, they indelibly change the nature of those institutions by reshaping power distributed within and beyond them. Understanding these networks of power internal to institutions themselves sheds light on the function and efficacy of those institutions. Additionally, understanding how institutions change reveals how these networks of power shift and transform over time. Ultimately, "institutional change shapes the way societies evolve through time and hence is the key to understanding historical change."⁶

One way to understand institutional change is through path-dependent analysis.⁷ According to one sociologist, "the identification of path dependence . . . involves both tracing a given outcome back to a particular set of historical events, and showing how

2. See J. Ann Tickner, *Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); and Carol Cohn, "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 12, no. 4 (1987).

3. Douglass C. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*, Political Economy of Institutions and Decisions (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 3; and James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen, eds., *Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency, and Power* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

4. Alexander Wendt, "Constructing International Politics," *International Security* 20, no. 1 (1995).

5. J. Ann Tickner, "Feminism Meets International Relations: Some Methodological Issues," *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations* 41 (2006).

6. North, *Institutions*, 3.

7. Jacob Torfing, "Rethinking Path Dependence in Public Policy Research," *Critical Policy Studies* 3, no. 1 (2009).

these events are themselves contingent occurrences that cannot be explained on the basis of prior historical conditions.”⁸ As a qualitative methodological approach, path-dependent analysis reveals the timing and sequence behind certain events that, linked together, produce particular outcomes. Sequences may be self-reinforcing or reactive, and these path-dependent sequences produce inertia: “Once processes are set into motion and begin tracking a particular outcome, these processes tend to stay in motion and continue to track this outcome.”⁹

Considering institutions, conceptualized here to be constructed systems that shape agent access to power, inertia becomes a mechanism for self-preservation. An institution set into motion will reproduce the structures, rules, and norms that keep the institution strong. Agents within the institution who benefit from these rules and norms—that is, those who maintain and grow their power within the system—become less inclined to change the institution that rewards their participation. As time passes it becomes more difficult to disrupt these established processes, and institutional change grows difficult.

Critical junctures offer a window into how institutional change occurs and represent “the adoption of a particular institutional arrangement from among two or more alternatives.”¹⁰ Critical junctures often reflect shocks to an institutional system, marking a scenario in which an institution must progress down one road while rejecting alternative options. These critical junctures, such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, can often appear obvious when viewed through the lens of historical analysis.¹¹

Yet not all critical junctures are as striking as black smoke against a clear blue sky. Sometimes, critical junctures leading to institutional change reflect the painstaking work of agents, slowly reshaping the power structures within an institution so steadfastly that alternative arrangements are no longer viable. In order to understand the quotidian mechanisms through which institutions change over time, research must consider the foundation of institutions themselves—the agents within the system.

Toward a Model of Agency within Institutions

When considering agents acting within institutions, where institutions are systems of constraints that coordinate behavior and agency while regulating power, a rational actor framework offers certain theoretical contributions.¹² Within this framework, individuals navigate a system of incentives and disincentives to maximize their own

8. James Mahoney, “Path Dependence in Historical Sociology,” *Theory and Society* 29, no. 4 (2000): 507–8.

9. Mahoney, 511.

10. Mahoney, 513.

11. Sidney Tarrow, “‘The World Changed Today!’ Can We Recognize Critical Junctures When We See Them?,” *Qualitative and Multi-Method Research* 15, no. 1 (2017): 9–11.

12. North, *Institutions*.

benefit.¹³ This behavior becomes complicated when individuals join together in groups but may possess conflicting interests. This leads to the logic of collective action and free-rider problems: if people work together to achieve a common good, then others who did not pay the cost for the good might still benefit from the outcome, thus disincentivizing a group to pursue achieving the common good at all.¹⁴

Of course, the rational actor framework and associated collective action logic are not without critique.¹⁵ One feminist analysis has argued that adopting a rational actor framework imbues all agents with an economic scale of priorities reflecting patriarchal Western values.¹⁶ Further, this approach may ignore other bodies of knowledge while conflating economic self-interest with rationality and thus, to a logical conclusion, humanity.¹⁷ Moreover, reducing agents to rational actors ignores the visceral lived experiences of individuals and groups engaged in institutional change. The identity politics, contentious group dynamics, negotiations and trade-offs, shared victories and losses, and often-literal blood, sweat, and tears shaping policy change efforts remain invisible when ignored by traditional rational actor models.¹⁸

Still, the rational actor framework and associated collective action logic are central to disciplines of political science and sociology—so how can they evolve to produce new modes of understanding institutional change? This article posits that the rational actor and collective action frameworks may enable the productive study of change within institutions only when augmented with path-dependent analyses that evaluate individual and group dynamics among agents within the institution.

In this approach, rational actor dynamics do not solely reflect decisions between incentives and disincentives. Rather, factors influencing decision-making within institutions also include historical context, individual and group identity, and networks of power. Without understanding these dynamics, any evaluation of agents overcoming the collective action problem to initiate institutional change remains incomplete.

13. Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965).

14. Elinor Ostrom, "Collective Action and the Evolution of Social Norms," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 14, no. 3 (2000).

15. Paula England, "A Feminist Critique of Rational-Choice Theories: Implications for Sociology," *American Sociologist* 20, no. 1 (1989).

16. Val Plumwood, "The Politics of Reason: Towards a Feminist Logic," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 71, no. 4 (1993).

17. Joyce Green, ed. *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism*, 2nd ed. (Black Point, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 2020).

18. See Raymond Caldwell, *Agency and Change: Rethinking Change Agency in Organizations* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2006); and Jean Hartley, John Benington, and Peter Binns, "Researching the Roles of Internal-Change Agents in the Management of Organizational Change," *British Journal of Management* 8, no. 1 (1997).

Conceptualizing Agents of Institutional Change

To understand the full scope of how institutional change occurs, the mechanisms through which individuals and groups navigate and change the norms and rules, or policies, of their institution merit scrutiny. At the heart of these negotiations lies power: Who has it, who seeks it, and who wields it? Moreover, who desires to change policy—and thus the distribution of power—and whose interests lie in maintaining the status quo? The new framework presented below integrates feminist paradigms to understand power with an evaluation of institutions and organizational change.¹⁹

Figure 1 details a new framework to categorize the nexus of power and interest across an institution’s population. In this model, an institution represents a discrete unit with its own internal policies. These policies structure the norms and rules constraining behavior and shaping incentives in the system. Agents are members of the institution, and the institution endures over time without experiencing severe shocks generating critical junctures. Given these scoping conditions, the model categorizes the agents who prove capable of changing the institution’s policies and, thus, the institution itself. This model does not aim to reflect every agent within an institution but rather to categorize the individuals and groups involved in policy change dynamics.

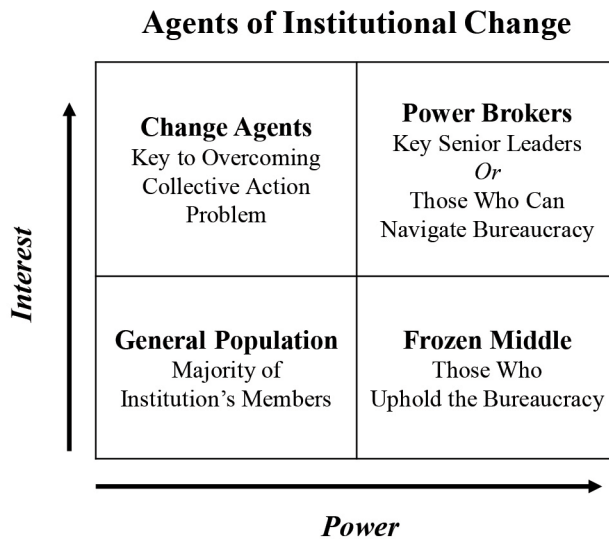


Figure 1. A framework for agents of institutional change

The model operates along the axes of power and interest, where power represents an agent’s power in the institution and interest represents the agent’s interest in

19. See Joan Acker, “Gender and Organizations,” *Handbook of the Sociology of Gender* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer Science + Business Media, 2006); and Marta B. Calás et al., “From the ‘Woman’s Point Of View’: Feminist Approaches to Organization Studies,” *Studying Organization: Theory and Method* 212 (1999): 251.

changing policy in the institution. The general population consists of the majority of the institution's members: they have low to moderate power and minimal interest in changing policy. Change agents are those who have low to moderate power but possess a high level of interest in changing policy. Additionally, this model simplifies concepts for instructional design and therefore does not capture the myriad motivations and dynamics involved in situations of institutional change.

As more people gain interest in policy change and subsequently transition from general population to change agents, the change agents become more likely to overcome collective action challenges in their efforts to change policy since more individuals are invested in change outcomes, thus reducing the free-rider problem.

Power brokers facilitate policy change—they possess high levels of power in the institution and a high level of interest in changing policy. These agents may be key senior leaders who possess positional power, or they may include agents who understand the institution keenly and can therefore navigate the constraints of the system. In either case, power brokers partner with change agents to foster policy change.

Finally, the frozen middle represents those with high levels of power in the institution but low levels of interest in changing policy. In some cases, the frozen middle has low interest in institutional change since they are overtasked and under-resourced, compelled to stay within their roles through time and task constraints. They have no interest in policy change because they have no time available to consider alternatives. In other cases, the frozen middle wants to uphold the bureaucracy and its associated administrative constraints for ideological reasons: they gained power through the institution's existing structures, and therefore they oppose changes to the system that benefited them.

In either case, the frozen middle slows down or even thwarts attempts by change agents to transform institutional policy. Power brokers, particularly key senior leaders, may overrule the frozen middle in some cases, but often the frozen middle is so deeply entrenched in the institution's power structures that they can withstand power broker efforts.

Considering this model and its internal mechanisms, how do these dynamics play out in a real-world example? To illustrate the model, this article presents a short case study of the US Air Force Women's Initiatives Team. This evaluation is based upon the author's experience working with and observing the WIT for over six years. Such ethnographic assessment, although shaped by the subjectivity of participant observation, still proves valuable when conceptualizing and illuminating the internal mechanisms of an opaque institution such as the US military.²⁰

Case Study: US Air Force Women's Initiatives Team

The US Air Force Women's Initiatives Team provides a unique example of a coordinated effort to change policy in an institution, led by members of the institution itself.

20. Richard Handler, *Critics against Culture: Anthropological Observers of Mass Society* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005).

The WIT is one subset of a broader barrier analysis working group structure operating across the Department of Defense. The Department of the Air Force chartered its barrier analysis working group in 2008, in accordance with Management Directive 715 issued by the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in 2003. According to this directive, the purpose of barrier analysis is “an investigation of anomalies, or triggers, found in an agency’s employment-related policies, procedures, practices, and conditions.” The investigation aims “to identify the root cause(s) of those anomalies” and develop “plans for eliminating the barriers.”²¹

The Women’s Initiatives Team was established in 2008, and as of 2021, the DAF has formally established seven teams within the structure of the barrier analysis working group:²²

- Black/African American Employment Strategy Team
- Disability Action Team
- Hispanic Empowerment and Advancement Team
- Indigenous Nations Equality Team
- LGBTQ Initiative Team
- Pacific Islander/Asian American Community Team
- Women’s Initiatives Team

As a team within the working group structure, the WIT’s mission is to identify barriers to women’s service in the DAF and Defense Department that influence and impact women’s propensity to serve and advocate to eliminate those barriers through policy change. The WIT is run by volunteers and maintains six lines of effort, as of 2024:

- Childcare Programs, Policies, and Entitlements
- Pregnancy Discrimination and Maternal Bias
- Female-Specialized Healthcare
- Outreach and Recognition
- DAF Development
- One Size Does Not Fit All (Anthropometrics)

The WIT is perhaps the most widely recognized barrier analysis working group within the Department of the Air Force. This is in large part due to a 2021 WIT-led

21. “Instructions to Federal Agencies for EEO MD-715,” US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, accessed March 13, 2024, <https://www.eeoc.gov/>.

22. Secretary of the Air Force Public Affairs (SecAF PA), “Department of the Air Force Creates Two New Barrier Analysis Working Groups for LGBTQ, Indigenous Nation Members,” US Air Force (USAF), April 26, 2021, <https://www.af.mil/>.

policy change to update hair standards for women in the Air Force and Space Force.²³ The visibility of this change, which enabled DAF women to wear their hair in pony-tails or braids in addition to the traditional bun, marked a tangible outcome of policy change efforts that often remain hidden within bureaucratic structures.²⁴ A comprehensive list of WIT policy change efforts is included below:

Table 1. DAF WIT policy change accomplishments²⁵

<p>2024</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update to Medical Standards Directory implementing refined stature standards for career enlisted aviators, based upon anthropometric study utilizing representative measurements • Update to DAF Instruction (DAFI) 63-101 <i>Anthropometric Design Specifications</i> directing that such specifications must accommodate body sizes of at least the central 95 percent of the US recruiting population, including all races and genders • Authorization of women’s wear of mess dress slacks in DAFI 36-2903, <i>Dress and Personal Appearance of DAF Personnel</i> • Authorization of commercial cold weather outerwear for pregnant Airmen and Guardians • Joint travel regulation authorization for five-year pilot program of travel reimbursement for childcare support from a family or friend during a military move • Protection of parental leave while enrolled in professional military education (PME) • Implementation of flexible spending accounts for service members <p style="text-align: center;">2023</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reimbursement of meal fees as part of childcare fee assistance • US Special Operations Command policy update to authorize Bluetooth-enabled breast pumps into sensitive compartmented information facilities (SCIFs) • Publication of “Flying While Pregnant” survey • Childcare resources included in First Term Enlisted Course • Production of “Childcare Heroes Videos” to promote DoD childcare staff hiring • Publication of Reserve and Guard guides on parental leave policy expansion • Updates to DAFI 36-2908, <i>Family Care Plan</i>, to clarify policies and requirements • Child Development Center no hat/no salute guidance added to DAFI 36-2903 • Updated guidance on pregnancy/postpregnancy exemptions for body composition assessment • Authorized convalescent leave for the nonbirth parent following perinatal loss in DAFI 36-3003, <i>Military Leave Program</i>
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23. Clayton Filipowicz, “Women’s Initiative Team: Taking Initiative, Breaking Barriers,” *Airman*, June 7, 2021, <https://www.airmanmagazine.af.mil/>.

24. Kelly Atkinson and Alea Nadeem, “Warrior Braids and the Air Force Women’s Initiative Team – The Invisible Labor behind Diversity, Inclusion, and Institutional Change,” *Wild Blue Yonder*, May 17, 2021, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

25. DAF Women’s Initiatives Team record of policy change efforts, current as of April 2024.

Table 1 (continued)

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Advocacy and coordination on DoD and service guidance for parental leave parity
2022
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Approval of Air Education and Training Command simulator credit to mitigate temporary medical disqualification (i.e., in cases of pregnancy)• Shaped guidance for Secretary of Defense memo “Ensuring Access to Reproductive Health Care” and DAF guidance on implementing nonchargeable leave for reproductive health care• Updated AFI 48-145, <i>Occupational and Environmental Health</i>, military codes, and profile forms to protect pregnancy privacy• Partnership with Military Family Building Coalition to expand reproductive clinical advocacy and fertility management services to service women at no cost to member• Designed and wrote pre-/postpregnancy experience survey, released by Air Force Survey Office (AFSO)• Updated policy to allow pregnant service members to attend medical readiness training• Update to AF Manual (MAN) 36-2032, <i>Military Recruiting and Accessions</i>, to remove restrictions on pregnant women applying to Officer Training School• Identified supply deficiency for maternity uniforms and coordinated uniform redistribution worldwide with Army and Air Force Exchange Service• Update to DAFI 36-3003 to allow permissive temporary duty (TDY) for fertility treatment travel• Changed Joint travel regulation allowing breastmilk transport cost reimbursement while TDY• Supported DAF clarification of policy allowing pregnant aviators to return to flying status• Initiated redesign and funding of new maternity flight suits• Updated Space Force officer classification guide to expand candidate talent pool degree requirements to bolster more diverse representation• Air Force Special Operations Command policy update to authorize Bluetooth-enabled breast pumps into SCIFs
2021
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Updated AFMAN 41-210, <i>Tricare Operations and Patient Administration</i>, to standardize convalescent leave for pregnancy loss• Supported DAF guidance memo clarifying pregnancy termination access• Updated DAFI 36-2110, <i>Total Force Assignments</i>, to clarify postpartum TDY deferment policy• Updated women’s hair standards to improve medical, operational, and inclusivity impacts• Supported DAF guidance on commander accountability for climate assessments• Transitioned previous guidance memos for lactation requirements to standalone DAFI 36-3013, <i>Lactation Rooms and Breast Milk Storage for Nursing Mothers</i>
2020
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Held inaugural Women’s Air and Space Power Symposium 2020

Table 1 (continued)

- DAF policy updated to direct that anthropometric design specifications must accommodate body sizes of at least the central 95 percent of the US recruiting population, including all races and genders
- Air Force awarded contract to begin production of female body armor
- Sponsored redesign of maternity service dress by Squadron Officer School students
- Updated Military Equal Opportunity Program DoD Instruction 1350.02 to include pregnancy
- Supported Air Force removal of minimum height requirement for aviation applications
- Initiated Air Force allowance of fitness assessment exemptions for miscarriages
- Partnered with AFWERX to distribute free fertility kits to service women
- Led Air Force removal of administrative policies preventing pregnant and postpartum women from attending PME
- Established Air Force policy mandating nursing mother access to refrigerator in work center
- Changed policy to allow women option to wear pants with mess dress uniform
- Modified existing flight suit uniforms for pregnant women
- Built and launched Kinderspot app to centralize and streamline childcare spot subletting

2019

- Coordinated with base uniform stores for maternity uniforms to be available in person
- Established Air Force-wide creation of civilian voluntary leave bank program in AFI 36-815, *Leave*
- Held inaugural WIT strategic offsite
- Partnered with AFSSO to launch first survey on maternity uniform redesign
- Secured authorization for remotely piloted aircrew, missile operations duty crews, and specified fully qualified pilots to perform duties while pregnant, without medical waiver
- Led female fit program event to develop two-piece female flight suit, improve current women's one-piece coverall, and advance aviator bladder relief system for Air Force and Navy
- Initiated guidance memo 2019-36-02 to require organizations to have dedicated lactation rooms
- Facilitated pregnant Airmen to become eligible to log gate months while pregnant

2018

- Partnered with Department of Veterans Affairs to create Women's Health Transition course
- Updated AFI 36-2903 to authorize wear of breastfeeding undershirt in uniform

2017

- Established Air Force national capital region pilot program for civilian voluntary leave bank

Table 1 (continued)

2016
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supported Air Force implementation of new DoD-wide policy providing female active-duty Airmen up to 12 continuous weeks of fully paid maternity leave • Mandated use of diverse hiring panels for all GS 14/15 positions • Modified policies relating to civilian developmental education • Initiated new policy requiring Air Force Personnel Center commander approval when proposing to separate dual military spouses for assignments • Revised policy allowing pregnant Airmen the option of applying to separate from military service commitment, now extending timeline from pregnancy to first year postpartum • Initiated option for officers to decline in-residence intermediate or senior development education without seven-day separation or retirement requirements

Theoretical Application: The WIT and Agents of Institutional Change

Considering the purpose and policy change accomplishments of the Women's Initiatives Team, the framework for categorizing agents of institutional change illuminates the mechanisms of WIT policy change efforts. Referencing figure 1 above, the population under consideration includes members of the Air Force and Space Force, including military and civilian personnel. Within the DAF, power most simply derives from rank: the higher the rank, the more organizational and positional power the member possesses within the institution. Interest refers to a member's interest in WIT policy change efforts, broadly defined as gender policy change.

Within this system, the majority of WIT members fall in the category of change agents. These are typically individuals who have moderate levels of rank-based military power coupled with a high interest in gender policy change. But the existence of these change agents cannot be taken as a given; rather, path-dependent analysis reveals the foundation for why this population might exist in the first place.

The Women's Armed Services Integration Act of 1948 institutionalized women's World War II military contributions by allowing them to serve as "regular members of the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps."²⁶ Of course, participation does not equate to power within an institution. Despite the Integration Act becoming law in 1948, women were not admitted to the US Air Force Academy, the nation's largest producer of commissioned officers, until 1976, with the first women graduating in 1980.²⁷

This timeline is critical when considering how power operates in the military system, defined elsewhere as a "greedy" societal institution subject to change and depen-

26. C. Todd Lopez, "In 75 Years Since Women's Armed Services Integration Act, Female Service Members Have Excelled," US Department of Defense (DoD), June 12, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/>.

27. Terri Moon Cronk, "Women in the Military Academies: 40 Years Later," DoD, October 2, 2020, <https://www.defense.gov/>.

dent on internal and external factors.²⁸ For example, legal command authority in the US military resides in the hands of commissioned officers. This is not to say that enlisted personnel lack power, but rather that legal authority and chain-of-command power operate through officer personnel structures. The military officer promotion system is structured so that it takes approximately twenty-five years before an individual is eligible for the rank of general officer.²⁹

Even within the category of general officer, an individual must serve additional years before reaching the highest rank and with it the highest level of institutional power. In all, it takes roughly 30 years to produce a four-star general. This means that the first female graduates of the Air Force Academy were not eligible for the highest rank in the service until around 2010. Indeed, the first female four-star general in Air Force history is General Janet Wolfenbarger, who graduated in the first class of female cadets from the Air Force Academy in 1980 and reached the rank of four-star general in 2012.³⁰

When considering how institutions change, the “firsts” may serve as symbols of change but may often remain focused on moving through and succeeding in the system rather than changing its rules.³¹ Overcoming the collective action problem facing policy change therefore requires a larger population of change agents. Research indicates that companies consisting of over 30 percent women financially outperform those with lower levels of women participants, while gender quotas for women’s political participation at a minimum mandated threshold of 30 percent correlate with significant effect outcomes.³² With women making up only 21.4 percent of Air Force and Space Force members as of 2022, the population of institutional members with potential interest in gender policy change falls below the 30 percent threshold.³³ How, then, has the Women’s Initiatives Team achieved its policy change successes?

The individual and group dynamics central to WIT policy change efforts benefit from contingent elements of time and visibility. Made visible through path-dependent analysis, these contingent elements change levels of group membership among the general population, change agents, power brokers, and the frozen middle as categorized in the framework presented above.

28. Mady Wechsler Segal, “The Military and the Family as Greedy Institutions,” *Armed Forces & Society* 13, no. 1 (1986).

29. “Promotion Timing, Zones, and Opportunity,” RAND Project Air Force, accessed March 20, 2024, <https://www.rand.org/>.

30. “First Air Force Female Four-Star General Confirmed,” USAF, March 28, 2012, <https://www.af.mil/>.

31. Frida Linehagen, “Conforming One’s Conduct to Unwritten Rules: Experiences of Female Military Personnel in a Male-Dominated Organization,” *Res Militaris* 8, no. 1 (2018).

32. Sundiatu Dixon-Fyle et al., *Diversity Matters Even More: The Case for Holistic Impact* (New York: McKinsey & Company, December 5, 2023), <https://internationalwim.org/>; and Jennifer Rosen, “Gender Quotas for Women in National Politics: A Comparative Analysis across Development Thresholds,” *Social Science Research* 66 (2017).

33. Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy, *2022 Demographics: Profile of the Military Community* (Washington, DC: DoD, 2022), <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/>.

From the time perspective: throughout the 75 years since women were integrated into the military, more women joined the general population as modeled in figure 1 above. As female leaders secured officer commissions and enlisted leadership roles and subsequently progressed higher in rank, they began filling power broker roles. Most importantly, key power brokers emerged who lacked senior leader positional authority but understood how to navigate the bureaucracy, thus making the invisible work of policy change visible.³⁴

From the visibility perspective: as power brokers made WIT gender policy change more visible, members of the general population realized that institutions could change, as evidenced by the aforementioned hair policy change. With this realization, they moved into the change-agent category. As this category grows larger, it becomes easier to overcome the collective action problem—both because more members of the change-agent population (in this case, women in the military) exist and because others gain interest in gender policy change for nonutilitarian reasons, such as caring more about diversity, equity, and inclusion.³⁵

The Continued Problem of the Frozen Middle

Although progress has been made, change agents and power brokers—key senior leaders—face risk when engaging the frozen middle. In the context of the Air Force and Space Force, the frozen middle represents a mix of those ideologically opposed to policy change and those whose low interest levels result from their overtasked and underresourced work constraints. In either case, WIT members often expend political capital in their pursuit of gender policy change.³⁶ This renders deleterious effects on some change agents' careers, given the up-or-out nature of promotions that impact career advancement in the military.

Continued visibility on the operational impact of gender policy change efforts, whether influencing retention, recruitment, operational effectiveness, or other areas, offers opportunities to reduce the strength of the frozen middle's resistance by increasing their interest in gender policy change. Events like the annual Women's Air and Space Power Symposium, which features ongoing efforts of the WIT and other barrier analysis working groups, showcase the power of visibility in the work of policy change.³⁷

Conclusion: Applications to Broader Cases

Overall, examining the individual and group dynamics shaping the gender policy change efforts of the DAF Women's Initiatives Team offers novel insights into an un-

34. Atkinson and Nadeem, "Warrior Braids,"

35. "Gen Z Demands Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace," World Economic Forum, accessed March 20, 2024, <https://www.weforum.org/>.

36. Atkinson and Nadeem, "Warrior Braids."

37. SecAF PA, "DAF Hosts 3rd Virtual Women's Air and Space Power Symposium," USAF, February 27, 2023, <https://www.af.mil/>.

derstudied aspect of institutional change—the people involved in the effort. Employing a case study of the WIT shows how a framework for agents of institutional change augments the traditional rational actor framework with historical context and analysis of contingent events. Incorporating the critical role of power adds important context to this area of study.

Future research should explore empirical outcomes of WIT policy change efforts and more details on the group dynamics of the team as a change-agent organization. For example, the internal identity dynamics within the WIT merit exploration, as its members may have different experiences regarding their ability to effect change and their recognition for these change efforts, both internal to the Women's Initiatives Team and from an external audience. This information would prove insightful to ongoing efforts to effect policy change, both in terms of diversity, equity, and inclusion and more broadly.

Moreover, highlighting the different groups that operate along axes of power and interest reveals mechanisms to advance inclusive policy change efforts: when groups understand the motivations behind the frozen middle's resistance to institutional change, they can leverage new approaches to engage this population.

As economic globalization, rapidly evolving technology, and the erosion of international norms continue to transform the global world order, the role of institutions in this evolution proves worthy of particular attention. Understanding the factors that shape agent behavior and how agents themselves transform institutions is critical to understanding, explaining, and predicting political and sociological events in the years ahead. Individuals' motivations and their ability to access power are essential elements to the study of institutional change. Without addressing these areas of study, we will never know the complete picture behind why policy change efforts take flight. Æ

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