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Letter from the Editor

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Letter from the Editor

Ashley Humphrey, CNSP

Associate Editor and Editorial Liaison for the Special Issue for Women in Nuclear Security



It is vital for women to share their experiences with others; it shrinks the distances among us, creating stronger bonds. It builds camaraderie and community. It is also vital for women to document and share their journey so others can see tangible progress and use it as a tool in their own right. So, here is my story, my confession, about being editorial liaison for the *IJNS Special Issue on Women in Nuclear Security*.

In spring 2019, after attending just two meetings with the IJNS editorial team, Dr. Russel Hirst asked me to spearhead a special issue on women in nuclear security. I accepted even though I had no experience in publication; I had just changed my major from biology to English, with a concentration in technical communication. I knew that being in charge of such a publication would strongly boost my somewhat late-blooming career in the security sector. It was a great opportunity.

Fast forward to fall 2019: I was laid off from my job, and then graduated college a month later. The following year brought a new job, as well as selling a home, and buying a new one. In addition, as we have all been experiencing, there were the anxieties and uncertainties of living through a pandemic. If ever there was a propitious year to start something—2020 was not it.

As I built relationships with mentors and colleagues in the nuclear security network, I began to feel a sense of community with people living in the wide world, outside my small state of Tennessee. I saw women blazing paths in countries where women had never blazed before, and although I was a novice, I wanted to be part of that; the passion for progression was infectious. Interactions with women well-established in their professions, as well as with those still considering their options, showed me how important self-confidence and persistence are to success. When women lack confidence in themselves and in their purpose, it might be due to restrictive cultural customs, ingrained traditions in a profession, or simply lack of knowledge about how to step into a role—largely due to a lack of mentorship. Knowing there are women who walked your path before evokes courage and poise, causing a ripple effect for more change and progress. The process of change can be slow and require personal growth that is often uncomfortable. The fact is, no one said any of this would be easy or comfortable, but it is necessary.

I reached a point in this project where I needed to reassess my own self-confidence and make some adjustments to successfully spearhead a special journal issue on Women in Nuclear Security. Although I characteristically keep to timelines and drive forward relentlessly to complete things, this project has been different. Yes, I have stuck with the project, but I had to slog through the swamp of “imposter syndrome,” a sneaking sense that I did not deserve to oversee something so important as this publication. I am not easily swayed by opinions, I enjoy critique, and I thrive on trying new things—but this project was my first with a global audience watching. I am not sure exactly what I was scared of, maybe rejection as much as being “found out”—and I did not realize how much it was slowing me down until near the end of

the process. Progress takes time, and if my delays affected any of you involved in this project, I sincerely apologize.

Every woman in the nuclear security profession owes it to the women who will come after us to let them see the highs and lows we have gone through, not just our success at the end. The often-wearisome process is what people forget to talk about—everyone, not just women. Perhaps we do not always share our lows because it can be perceived as weakness, but it takes more strength to stand up when you have been knocked down than it does to simply keep standing. Success is wonderful, but it does not reveal the grit needed to drudge through low points. Women, especially, cannot appear to be weak in such distinguished and important positions where they are addressing global security issues. But the fact is, we are stronger together. In our weaknesses, we find opportunity for growth and betterment. This process is how we identify areas that need more consideration so we break old patterns—or glass ceilings, for the next generation.

As I reflect upon my own lessons and my role in this publication, I see parallels to the situations, affected so strongly by the implicated gender roles and inequalities that professional women face every day. To complete this project I had to constantly remind myself that I can provide excellent work, on a global platform—in a field where roughly only 30% of the cohort can relate to me. Certainly, there are life obstacles, professional challenges, communication barriers, and problems to solve, but my job is to work beyond the barriers—so to lead my project to success. Self-reflection is a powerful tool, but only if you are real with yourself. If I am to self-identify as a leader, then I must follow through as a leader.

There is no manual on how women should conduct themselves in this field, nor is there a policy defining how we handle personal and professional growth; we are among the first to be in the positions we hold, so we must design the role with care, grace—and grit.

I encourage you to look at gender equality as a global issue—as a necessary element for human continuation. We cannot solve the more complex issues humanity faces with only half of the brainpower. We also cannot judge one woman's experience halfway around the globe if we were not there to see it for ourselves; each experience is different. In many cases, our support was from a man—so we say to men who have ushered women into their leadership roles: Thank you! Our purpose is to lead; doing so requires empathy and compassion— words not typically used to describe those in the nuclear security sector.

As you read this very special issue of the *International Journal of Nuclear Security*, note that the call for submissions was required to be about how nations are bolstering gender equality or about nuclear security, where the first author is a woman. Some articles are historically informative, some are told from a personal perspective, or from experience in the field. Each article in some way offers its own contribution about women in nuclear security, and in many cases, is not characteristic of traditional academic journals.

I hope this unorthodox approach encourages young women everywhere. In a field where mentorship is essential, and yet scarce, I wanted this issue to serve as a beacon of leadership and strength—to show that those of us who work here, now, are preparing the next generation to step into their roles with confidence and gusto. To show women questioning their ability, that they belong here, they are capable and deserving—and the work is worth it.

Thank you, my friends, and colleagues for your patience and support for this project and for your dedication to keeping our world safe from nuclear aggression and accident. It is a vital calling, a high calling—one to which women and men must respond with all their might.

“If your actions create a legacy that inspires others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, then, you are an excellent leader.” – Dolly Parton