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Inside the SHAFR Ad Hoc Committee on Women

by Kelly Shannon, Ph.D. Candidate, Temple University

As a graduate student, I find myself in the unusual position of serving on a committee for a professional organization, the Ad Hoc Committee on Women of the Society of Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR). I wound up on that committee largely because I was in the right place at the right time, and it has been an incredible learning experience for me to have had the privilege to serve in such a position at this early stage in my career.

It all began at the SHAFR annual meeting in June 2007. I went to the women's breakfast to hear Anna Nelson of American University speak, and I ended up sitting with Petra Goedde and Frank Costigliola because I knew both of them. Petra is on my committee, and Frank was my M.A. adviser at the University of Connecticut. Eventually, the conversation at the table turned to a discussion of the fact that SHAFR has only had one female president in its four decades of existence. This, of course, led to a discussion of why that might be so, and Frank suggested that we form a committee to investigate the status of women in SHAFR. Later that summer, SHAFR President Richard Immerman authorized the formation of such a committee, and the Ad Hoc Committee on Women was born. Petra and Frank, of course, became the committee co-chairs, and Anna Nelson, Andrew Rotter from Colgate, and Barbara Keys of the University of Melbourne signed on, as well. I was invited to join the committee as a representative of the views of newer female members of SHAFR and because I was a participant in the initial discussion that led to the committee's formation.

As the only graduate student member of the committee, I was excited to take on this task but unsure what my role would be, since I had never been more than just a SHAFR member or conference presenter before. Luckily, the committee had an important task ahead of us, and there was plenty of work to go around. My fellow committee members are also very gracious and did a lot to teach me about what sort of tasks are expected from committee members. And so, last fall, we set about compiling data on the status of women in SHAFR.

My fellow committee members and I were energized, and within a few months, with the help of the staff at SHAFR and *Diplomatic History*, we compiled an impressive amount of data on women's participation in the organization. We studied the gender breakdown of SHAFR membership, women's representation in governance and committees, and women's contributions to *Diplomatic History* and H-Diplo. Our larger goal was to explain why women's numbers in the field of diplomatic and international history remain so low. In addition to compiling data on SHAFR and its publications, we sent out a survey to SHAFR members about their personal experiences, which we published in the SHAFR newsletter and posted on the website. We hoped to compile enough data to present our initial findings at the 2008 SHAFR annual meeting, held at Ohio State that June. We also brainstormed, in person but more often via frequent e-mail

exchanges (thank goodness for technology!), about how to interpret the data and find solutions to the problems we were beginning to identify, and we coordinated some of our efforts with the Committee on Minority Historians, since many of our concerns overlapped with theirs.

Based on our initial assessments of the data and survey, we held a roundtable at that annual meeting on “Is SHAFR Sexist?” As one of the roundtable participants, it was my job to present the survey findings and to talk about why I chose to become a member of SHAFR as a female graduate student. The roundtable – and committee – concluded that the individual men in SHAFR are not sexist and are, in fact, extremely welcoming to their female colleagues. The overwhelmingly positive response of the roundtable audience and of individual SHAFR members in private conversations later on confirmed that belief. However, we identified some areas of concern that indicated that there nonetheless may be a structural gender bias in favor of men in the organization.

Our data, which was rendered understandable for the rest of us history folks by the committee’s invaluable resident math whiz, Ara Keys, indicated that, while women’s representation at all levels of SHAFR has increased since the organization’s inception, women are still underrepresented in important areas within the organization and within the field of foreign relations in general. For example, when SHAFR was founded in 1967, it had seventy-nine members, only one of whom was a woman. By 2007, SHAFR had many hundred members, and 19 percent of members were women. However, women receive 40 percent of all Ph.D.s in the field of history and comprise about 30 percent of practicing historians. Thus far fewer women choose to participate in SHAFR than are represented in the field of history in general. In contrast, women made up 32 percent of the members of the American Political Science Association and the International Studies Association, which are organizations that have a focus similar to SHAFR’s. The committee identified several women historians who work on topics that would fall under the umbrella of diplomatic and international history but who have not become SHAFR members. Based on our informal contacts with these women and on our other research, we have concluded that SHAFR may have an image problem: that it is seen as having a narrow focus on diplomatic history that marginalizes non-traditional approaches. As SHAFR members, we know that organization is, in fact, more than open to scholarship that incorporates non-traditional approaches, such as gender and culture analysis, but we believe that SHAFR has had a difficult time conveying its broader definition of the field of diplomatic history to non-members. To remedy this problem, we suggested, among other things, that *Diplomatic History* change its name to something more inclusive, and that SHAFR itself consider a name change.

Another problem we identified was the fact that, while women participate in numbers at or greater than the proportion to their membership in SHAFR in self-selected activities, like presenting papers at the annual meeting or publishing articles in *Diplomatic History*, they are vastly underrepresented when their participation must be invited by others, such as reviewing books in *Diplomatic History* and serving as panel chairs/commenters. In addition, women were underrepresented as authors of books or as reviewers for the roundtable reviews of “key works” published by H-Diplo since 2000. We suspect that the under-representation of women in these positions of authority is due to two factors. First, SHAFR members and the editors of *Diplomatic History* and H-Diplo may perceive women as commanding less authority than men in the field, and this subconscious bias this leads them to solicit men to review books and chair/comment on panels more often than women. Second, women write about non-traditional subfields of diplomatic history (such as culture, gender, race, and non-governmental international relations) more than traditional subfields (like policy, security, intelligence, and economics), while men disproportionately write about traditional topics, so that we have identified a

correlation between women's publications in *Diplomatic History* and on H-Diplo and the number of publications focusing on traditional topics. Again, we conclude that if SHAFR and *Diplomatic History* define themselves more broadly, they will attract more female members/authors and more members in general, since the fields of international and transnational history have exploded in size recently.

Now that we had presented SHAFR members with the information we collected, the committee then set about compiling a report on our research and a list of recommendations to remedy the problems we have identified. The report details the findings that I have outlined above, as well as many more. In it, we recommend, first, that SHAFR make the ad hoc committee a standing one and that it continue to collect data on women in SHAFR, especially regarding women's participation in committees and governance. We also recommended that SHAFR take steps to help junior faculty and new members network at the annual conferences, so as to make the organization more welcoming for them. This includes taking steps to attract new members by sending information about SHAFR to other related organizations, changing the name of *Diplomatic History*, and providing travel assistance for first-time conference presenters. We also hope to broaden SHAFR's focus in many areas, so that it is perceived by non-members to be more welcoming of non-traditional approaches to diplomatic and international history and of historians from overseas, as well as scholarship by historians not working on the 20th century.

The full report will be published in the January issue of *Passport*, the SHAFR newsletter, but already we have engaged in some lively debates with our SHAFR colleagues about our recommendations and have received many good ideas from them. Our recommendation to change the name of the journal and possibly even the organization has been particularly thought-provoking, and I expect that there will be a formal discussion about the name change proposal at the upcoming SHAFR meeting this June. The publication of our report will be the next step in the ongoing discussion about gender in SHAFR, which we hope will lead to more productive action by the Ad Hoc Committee on Women in the future.

What I have learned from all of this is that jumping into involvement with professional organizations, especially for graduate students, can be a bit mystifying at first, but doing committee work to help improve SHAFR has been deeply satisfying. While serving on committees may not be practical or even possible for most graduate students, all of them should think about becoming involved actively with the professional organizations they love once they receive their degrees, and if they have the opportunity to participate as grad students, they should take the plunge. Serving on this committee has been an invaluable learning experience for me, and it has been a way for me to contribute in a substantive way to an organization in which I plan to belong my entire career. In addition to learning more about my capabilities and about the inner workings of professional organizations, I have also learned that SHAFR members are constantly engaged in improving the organization and the field of diplomatic and international history as a whole and that they seem to be dealing with the subtle gender issues that the Ad Hoc Committee on Women has identified with gusto because they really care about making SHAFR truly representative of all members of the historical community, whether they are women, minorities, or historians who take a non-traditional approach to U.S. foreign relations history. This has confirmed that I made the right choice when I decided to join the field of U.S. foreign relations history and to become a member of SHAFR.

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