



Building a Bigger Tent: *Women and Irregular Conflict*

Dennis Walters, PhD
Acting Director

Kathryn Newton, PhD
Chief of Curriculum Design and Development



In December 2022 this Center introduced ourselves with an essay that outlined our intent to create a [big tent](#) by “entering into partnerships and resource agreements with academic institutions.” Your Irregular Warfare Center (IW Center) is pleased to report that last month about two dozen civilian universities joined us in Washington, DC, to discuss the comprehensive research, education, and outreach plan we promised. More importantly, the Center is on track to accomplish the three main tasks directed by Congress in the FY23 National Defense Authorization Act. *But wait, there’s more!*

The [2022 National Security Strategy](#) makes it clear that our nation has an imperative to invest in and empower women as we seek to address the root causes of fragility, conflict, and crisis. Given that the most [likely forms of future conflict](#) will be irregular in character, that is, short of conventional war, and the appropriate prevention and mitigation measures fall squarely into the [human domain](#), the IW Center needs to support education and research efforts to achieve that imperative. Accordingly, the Center’s security studies and educational support efforts will ensure they fully address the different roles women can and will play as leaders, politicians, influencers, mediators, technical experts, and educators in the irregular conflict [warfare] space. In addition, we are creating a diverse team that will focus on the social, behavioral, informational, and cultural elements of irregular conflict [from women’s perspectives](#).

It is well known that women play a crucial role in conflict prevention, management, and resolution. In 2017, Congress passed the “[Women, Peace, and Security Act](#),” 22 USC 2151, stating that the U.S. should be a global leader in promoting the meaningful participation of women in all aspects of conflict prevention, resolution, and recovery. Two years later, the White House published the [United States Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security](#). Noteworthy in that strategy document was the President’s acknowledgment that women have a special place as “agents of peace via political, economic, and social empowerment.” This human-centric aspect is why, as a significant next step in the evolution of the Center’s big tent, we are expanding our educational, research, and outreach programs to intentionally address opportunities for empowering women and exploring how the larger half of the population can help prevent and mitigate the most prevalent and most likely future conflicts.

Preventing and mitigating irregular conflicts is not a primary function for the DoD. Rather, the necessary whole-of-government/whole-of-society approach is led [by the State Department](#) with the U.S. Agency for





International Development (USAID) and DoD in a supporting role. The State Department's *Joint Strategic Plan 2022-2026* says that they will,

... lead an integrated U.S. government response to address conflict and fragility which will aim to elevate prevention, address the political drivers of fragility, and support locally driven solutions to instability, guided by the ... *Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017*, and the *U.S. Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security*... U.S. efforts will lead with diplomatic engagement, supported by building the core capacities of key partners and stakeholders to prevent, mitigate, and respond to conflict and insecurity, including via support for peace building and reconciliation, countering violent extremism, and atrocity prevention; effective civil-military cooperation; and ***ensuring the unique protection needs, meaningful participation, and leadership of women*** (emphasis added)

This is where the IW Center can play an important role as the “coordinating body and central repository for irregular conflict [warfare] resources, including educational activities and programs, and lessons learned,” as well as “developing curriculum and conducting training and education of military and civilian participants of the U.S. and other countries.” Our team is actively building relationships and partnerships across the different U.S. government agencies most concerned with the complex challenges of irregular conflict. One of the desired outcomes from this month's [University Days](#) is a plan to expand and enhance irregular warfare education, and specifically how the Center and civilian universities together might appropriately address the lines of effort outlined in the *US Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security*.

At the same time, the IW Center has the fortuitous opportunity to address the complexities of women's roles in irregular conflict as a logical follow-on to workshop with the professional military education (PME) institutions. Now that irregular warfare education has been designated as a [Special Area of Emphasis](#) for joint PME, the Center has the ability, and a responsibility, to ensure that women's perspectives are intentionally addressed in the lesson guides and supporting educational packages we, as the designated proponent for irregular warfare education, are charged with providing to the PME institutions.

[Dr. Heather Gregg](#) offered a series of recommendations to address the DoD's shortcomings in irregular warfare education. “First and foremost,” she said, is that PME needed to address means of “influencing relevant populations” and learning how to “employ soft power that influences and persuades in the strategic environment.” She went on to recommend that PME place “a much greater emphasis on the other [non-military] instruments of statecraft and a whole-of-government approach,” as well as the “fundamentals of relationship-building and maintenance.” While Dr. Gregg did not specifically tie her observations and recommendations to the approach women take and the perspectives they bring to conflict prevention and mediation, we know that influence, persuasion, and relationship-building tend to be among females' “superpowers.” It is our belief that the IW Center has an obligation to incorporate women's skills, passions, and expertise into the educational and research projects and products we sponsor.

There is a lot to do before the IW Center fully meets Congress's specified tasks, but we are on the path; designing comprehensive and relevant curriculum, and working closely with the civilian and military colleges and universities that will help the Center design, develop, and deliver the necessary educational programs and focused research. Building a “bigger tent” and ensuring that the educational and research products we deliver intentionally address the challenges and opportunities faced by women in the irregular conflict space reinforces the wisdom of placing the Center in close proximity to the departments, agencies, and institutions leading and supporting efforts to prevent, resolve, and recover from the different, usually non-military, forms of irregular conflict. ♀

