

Studying the intersection of gender diversity and political violence



New GPS associate professor Jakana Thomas brings the effects of women’s roles in political conflicts to the forefront

Today, it is more important than ever to gain a better understanding of the many facets that influence and shape political violence. [Jakana Thomas](#), a new faculty member of the UC San Diego School of Global Policy and Strategy (GPS), has made it her charge to explore how gender diversity at the group and societal levels impacts the behavior of violent political organizations - like terrorist, rebel and militia groups.

“In short, I am interested in how women’s political participation influences conflict processes and efforts at conflict resolution,” said Thomas, who recently moved from the Department of Political Science at Michigan State University.

Thomas said GPS seems to be a place where one can do impactful work that appeals simultaneously to the policy world and academics.

“I love that I will work with such a wide range of scholars on important, timely global issues. Faculty here do such clever work and are at the same time interesting and kind,” said Thomas

Her research contributes to academic and policy work on the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, adding to the breadth of policy topics to which faculty members at GPS contribute scholarly research. She is currently working on two book projects: one focused on how female rebels influence peace processes in civil wars, and another examines women’s participation in communal violence and local peace-building efforts.

With the first project, Thomas said that for the last couple of decades, policymakers have placed enormous focus and delegated significant resources to increasing women’s participation in peace-building efforts.

“The prevailing arguments suggest that when women are welcomed to the peace table, resulting agreements are more durable and inclusive. These efforts and ideas, however, are concentrated on only a narrow subset of women in society,” Thomas said.

She added that traditionally, WPS policies have focused on ensuring peaceful women from civil society groups are included in negotiations and mediation efforts but have overlooked the impact of women within armed groups. This new project examines how women within violent groups shape peace processes, paying particular attention to how rebel women encourage the integration of peace terms that benefit women and understanding which terms they try to advocate for.

The second book project, in conjunction with Hilary Matfess at the University of Denver’s Korbel School, is supported by the Folke Bernadotte Research Institute.

“Here we try to understand, in the context of communal strife, when and why some local women encourage violence, while others push for peace and others do neither,” Thomas said.

Thomas said that international relations “is often portrayed as a man’s game,” and “women do so much heavy lifting that typically goes unacknowledged.”

Understanding where women are and what motivates their participation can offer

researchers better insight into the types of conflict outcomes that should be expected and the tools needed to address complex societal issues, she explained.

“Essentially, it is difficult to make a cake successfully when major ingredients are omitted,” Thomas said. “It turns out that women are a major ingredient in the making of both peace and conflict, so we need to consider what women are doing and contributing in order to understand what motivates conflict and what makes peace stick.”

Thomas, who is slated to teach the Gender and Conflict and Political Violence course, said she hopes to convey to her students that the world is diverse and that diversity is important for politics.

“I hope students walk away understanding that political actors, even terrorists and rebels, are attempting to make rational, strategic decisions,” she said.

When not focusing on her research, Thomas channels her efforts into creative endeavors, like drawing, painting and soft pastels.

“I am an artist,” she said. “I enjoy creating.”

And the thing Thomas is most looking forward to about her new life in San Diego?

“The unrelenting sunshine,” she said.