

Maíra Topall, PSIA - Human Rights and Humanitarian Action by obtaining the Advanced Certification in Gender Studies



After receiving a Bachelor's degree in Law from the Pontifical Catholic University of Minas Gerais, in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, and a Master's degree in European Studies from the Sorbonne Nouvelle, in Paris, France, Maíra Topall is now graduating from the Sciences Po School of International Affairs. She completes her studies in Human Rights and Humanitarian Action by obtaining the Advanced Certification in Gender Studies. She tells us about her academic career in this field.

What first sparked your interest in gender studies?

I went to Law school back in Brazil and my first internship was related to domestic violence against women, at the [Criminal Court of Justice](#). After this first experience, I became really interested in this subject, and at the same time I came to realise the existence of a series of issues related to Brazil's domestic violence law. The problem is not the Brazilian law itself — as the United Nations recognised it as one of the world's best legislations regarding violence against women — but rather the public policies (or the lack of it) behind the law.

In that sense, I decided to deepen my analysis and to write my Bachelor's thesis on this subject. To get a better view and understanding of the system, I worked in all the public organisations related to the area of protection of women present in the city while I was studying. These experiences not only allowed me to write my Bachelor's thesis, but also made me realise I wanted to specialise in gender studies, reason why I moved to Paris to pursue a Master's degree at the Sorbonne Nouvelle.

You defended a Master's Thesis on Women and Migration there. Can you give us more information?

Yes, I completed my first Master's degree in European Studies at the Sorbonne Nouvelle and wrote a thesis on women and migration. My idea was to continue to study violence against women, but from another perspective: instead of focusing on domestic violence against women in a specific country, I wanted to check the relation between domestic violence in their country of origin and women migrating to Europe. I must admit it was an ambitious plan to think I could cover all Europe! In the end, I focused more on women coming to France. It was intriguing to see that women represented 33% of asylum seekers in France in 2016 and that a great number of them were exposed to gender violence in their home countries, and on their way to Europe. Despite this, French authorities often refused to recognise gender-based violence against women as a form of persecution that allows one to seek asylum.

You are now graduating from the Sciences Po School of International Affairs. Can you give us more information about your experience?

I pursued a Master's degree in Human Rights and Humanitarian Action at Sciences Po and I can say it was one of the best experiences in my life so far! The past two years allowed me to grow academically, personally and professionally all while discovering new talents and passions in myself. The programme itself was enriching and I learned so much from everyone I met, from the Sciences Po faculty to my fellow classmates. I came with some ideas about gender studies and having the opportunity to choose courses from a flexible curriculum enabled me to do research on gender-related topics in the different subjects offered, including some I would not otherwise have considered.

During your third semester, you did an internship at the Unesco division for Gender Equality. What were your missions and what are your takeaways?

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation ([UNESCO](#)) Division for Gender Equality ensures the overall coordination of UNESCO policies, strategies and actions in support of gender equality and women's empowerment, meaning they do not have specific projects. Because of that, I had different missions depending on what was going on. The most interesting mission I was given was the development of the 2019 Orange the World Campaign, a campaign advocating against femicide. Working on an awareness raising action on this widespread, persistent and devastating human rights violation was a sad reminder of the extent of violence against women and girls, but also an occasion to put into practice what I had learned in class about developing a successful campaign.

How will the advanced certification in Gender Studies impact your future career?

The Advanced Certification in Gender Studies granted by Sciences Po's Gender Studies Programme is a recognition of my academic career in this field. When I first started this journey back in Brazil, I had some ideas of what I wanted to do in the future. I knew for sure I wanted to work in the gender equality field, but I also had many doubts about the route I should take in order to achieve this aim. Through some courses I took, I met some incredible women and professionals, such as Drs. Réjane Sénac and Saskia Ravesloot. They taught and inspired me a lot!

Of course, I still have some doubts. But I feel more confident as a young professional and an intersectional feminist passionate about women's rights. I am currently looking for a position advocating for gender equality, women's economic and social empowerment seeking to create lasting systemic change in the world.

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