The primary goal of the GEPA project from its outset in 2011 has been to bring attention to public administration globally as an essential sphere of policymaking, where gender equality in positions of leadership is understated and understudied. In response to the need to better understand the current status of women in public administration, the UNDP initiated the first phase of the GEPA project, the results of which led to the 2014 UNDP Global Report on Gender Equality in Public Administration that included 13 country case studies. The GSPIA working group teamed up with the UNDP cluster for the second phase of the GEPA project and expanded the search for better sex-segregated data in public administrations to include both Organisation for Economic Co-Operation Development (OECD) member and non-OECD countries.

The working group has followed a rather unconventional process, from its reach to other schools and departments for interested graduate students, to its very close collaboration with the UNDP cluster, which provided unrestricted access to raw and processed data they collected from their member states. It also provided students with hard skills in raw data manipulation and visualization, along with professional mentorship within the UN system. J. Clay Rogers (Mid ’16), a returned Peace Corps volunteer, noted that the commitment from and the partnership with the UNDP cluster has been most valuable for his learning. “It was a great experience to work alongside the UNDP cluster and get their perspectives on the research as we were doing it,” he said. “The team communicated to us how our research was feeding into and shaping new policy documents in real time in the country offices. Their support and appreciation made our efforts more meaningful.”

The initial work during the fall semester focused on the quality and availability of sex-segregated data and tracking systems in the civil service in economically developing countries where UNDP focuses its work. Students self-selected into regional groupings, took on countries of interest and searched for publicly available data on women’s participation and leadership in civil service. By the end of the first semester, more than 650 hours of coding produced a pretty dim picture for non-OECD countries. Most of the countries researched had little or no publicly available data.
For countries that reported having accessible data, retrieving it proved exhausting. And when data was available, it usually wasn’t of high quality. The group’s initially gloomy picture of how few countries are adeptly keeping track of gender-disaggregated data also allowed a few countries to shine. MID student **A.J. Stephens** and **Neal Walker (MID ’16)**, who worked on Dominican Republic, reported that the Dominican Republic provided a “jackpot” of data. **Shivani Rampersad (MID ’16)** and MID student **Donghe Li**, who worked on Sri Lanka, noted the impressive level of detail on sex-segregated data that was being recorded. “It has been really interesting to see how policies are enacted or implemented across countries,” said PhD candidate **Chelsea Pallatino (MPH ’13, BS/BPhil ’11)**, a member of the working group. “I think we often make a general assumption that the ’developed’ countries have it all figured out, but we’ve seen a lot of interesting cases where policies work better in some of these non-OECD countries.”

The close working relationship the group established with the two core members of the UNDP Governance and Peacebuilding Cluster — Pelle Lutken (policy specialist) and Ciara Lee (international consultant) — made the work a true partnership. In addition to being available via Skype for bimonthly meetings of the working group to give comments and answer questions, Lutken and Lee visited the Ford Institute on Dec. 9, 2015, for a one-day workshop. The workshop, the first of the deliverables, was planned as an opportunity for working group researchers to meet and network with the UNDP cluster, present their preliminary findings, receive feedback and strategize for the next phase of the project. Data visualizations, along with the regional best practices presented, were well-received by the UNDP cluster and were consequently circulated to the UNDP regional offices for comments and feedback.

In the spirit of aligning the GEPA work with the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the U.N. in September 2015 toward the 2030 agenda, the working group spent the spring semester delving into OECD countries to see how their tracking systems and sex-segregated data on civil service compared. The spring semester produced a clearer pattern, which the researchers titled “the Goldilocks Standard.” The research demonstrated that most countries — 95% of non-OECD countries and 71% of OECD countries — collect “too little” sex-segregated data; 1% of non-OECD and 9% of OECD and countries collect “too much” data; and only 3% of non-OECD and 20% of OECD countries collect the “just right” amount of data.
The working group presented these findings at a meeting at the UN Headquarters in New York on May 3, 2016. The presentation was cohosted by the Embassy of Dominican Republic, and was followed by a panel discussion chaired by Sarah Poole, deputy director of the UNDP Bureau for Policy and Programme Support, and included representatives from U.N. Women, the Wilson Center, the Clinton Foundation and the Council on Foreign Relations. The working group was applauded for bringing timely, accessible and relevant research to a diverse set of efforts already seeking gender equality.

The composition of the multidisciplinary working group, which was intended to bring creative approaches to the problem analysis, was an experiment which Pallatino, a PhD student in the Graduate School of Public Health, affirms has paid off. “It’s been an interesting experience just because the student researchers bring so many different things to the table,” she said. “We have people from political science, from sociology and from GSPIA who have a whole range of interests in policy. The working group created an engaging dialogue where we learned from each other.”

J. CLAY ROGERS (MID ’16) added that participating in this working group was “a fantastic opportunity to become more of a researcher than just a student. Learning to conduct research with raw data and presenting analysis that can be accessed and consumed easily for policymaking purposes are skills that I hope to utilize in the future.”

The working group’s partnership with the UNDP cluster has shaped and increased expectations on both sides. The UNDP cluster continues to incorporate the working group’s outputs into institutional deliverables that support gender equality. The presentations in Pittsburgh and New York have opened up further professional venues for researchers. Three of the working group members are waiting for final approvals on their UNDP/GEPA internships over the summer that will place them in UNDP regional hubs in Bangkok, Istanbul and Amman. Two other researchers will have UNDP internship opportunities to work first in Pittsburgh and then at the UNDP headquarters in New York as they continue to analyze the collected data, highlight the remaining gaps and help UNDP identify research priorities for the next academic year. This year’s group has most certainly helped draw a comprehensive picture of what needs to be done. When the group reconvenes with new researchers in the fall, it will take on new questions.