

Strengthening the Representation of Women in Diplomacy: Challenges and Policy Solutions

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LSE IDEAS is the LSE's foreign policy think tank.

Through sustained engagement with policymakers and opinion-formers, IDEAS provides a forum that informs policy debate and connects academic research with the practice of diplomacy and strategy.

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Executive Summary

Women's representation in international diplomacy is alarmingly low. Though it varies across countries and regions, women's underrepresentation in international diplomacy is pervasive. Despite a few women holding senior leadership positions in prominent institutions such as the World Trade Organization, European Commission, International Monetary Fund, and European Central Bank, women's representation within international organisations is unequal and only twenty percent of ambassadors worldwide are women. At the same time, research increasingly shows that diversity enhances decision-making capabilities, better addresses the needs of a diverse population, and embodies a commitment to the democratic principles of inclusion and tolerance.

The LSE IDEAS Women in Diplomacy project was launched in 2022, and it leverages research, collaboration, and dialogue to address the misrepresentation and underrepresentation of women in this field. To better understand the barriers and enablers that affect women's progress within international diplomacy, the project team has thus far carried out twelve interviews with women who have held high-ranking diplomatic positions or have participated in international diplomatic processes. The interviewees have extensive experience within several sectors, including international trade, international security, international health, development, climate change, cultural diplomacy, and international criminal law. This report summarises key insights from the interviews, a review of the literature on women in diplomacy, and expert feedback.

Women face many challenges when it comes to progressing and rising to the top within international diplomacy. This report makes recommendations to try to overcome these challenges, highlighting the significance of changes that need to occur at all levels: individual (centred on empowerment), community (focused on norms, behaviours, culture), and organisational (policy-driven structural change). The key recommendations for diplomatic services and international organisations are: create and implement tailored gender-equality plans which address issues regarding equal pay, parental leave and sexual harassment; collect and analyse gender-specific data to develop an evidence-based Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) strategy; align internal and external gender-equality policies, including in collaboration with stakeholders; ensure fair and inclusive recruitment processes, especially for senior and leadership positions, while fostering mentorship; implement formal and informal career development support, including for 'trailing partners'; rethink building design and accessibility, including accessible bathrooms and child-care facilities; and finally, establish social inclusion and gender equality as non-negotiable, making the benefits known to everyone within the organisation.

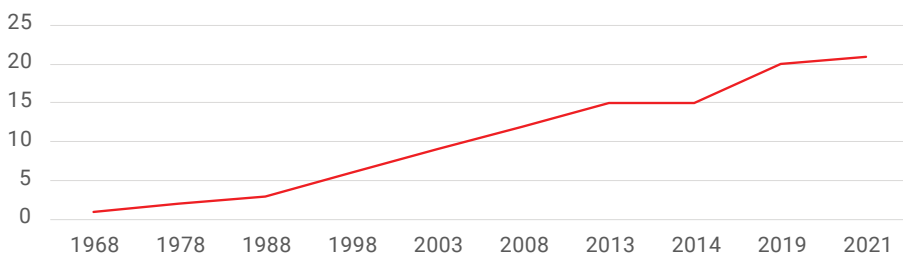
The Women in Diplomacy project will use this initial report and its recommendations as the basis for further dialogue and discussion with women's networks and international organisations around insights, barriers and solutions.

Introduction

Women's underrepresentation in international diplomacy is shocking: only 20.54% of ambassadorships were held by women in 2023.¹ The percentage of women ambassadors has risen by only five percent over the past decade, as Figure 1 illustrates. Further, although the percentage of women diplomats from countries in some regions (such as the Nordic region) is approaching half (42% in 2019), elsewhere the percentage is low: 11% from the Middle East and 13% from Asia.² In the public imagination, the figure of the 'diplomat' has long overlapped with that of 'man', and the current underrepresentation of women in the field of diplomacy continues to reinforce such stereotypes.³

Women ambassadors have tended to be posted to countries that are more gender equal and have been less likely to serve in countries with 'more economic clout' or affected by conflict.⁴ Of the eighteen peace agreements signed in 2022, 'only one was signed or witnessed by a representative of a women's group or organisation'.⁵ In addition, representation within international and regional organisations, where multilateral diplomacy is often centred, is unequal. Although some international and regional organisations are currently led by women, including the European Commission, the European Central Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization, elsewhere representation is patchy at senior levels. There has never been a woman secretary-general of the UN or NATO, for example, and only four women have been elected to serve as President of the UN General Assembly.⁶

Figure 1. Percentage of all women ambassadors sent by all countries



Source for Figure 1: Birgitta Niklasson and Ann E. Towns, 'Introducing the GenDip dataset on gender and diplomatic representation', 2023, Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg; <https://lines.gendip.gu.se/>

Further, data on intersectionality is still scarce, though we know that in many countries in the 'Global North', such as the United States, the representation of Black women in the diplomatic service has lagged behind both the representation of white women and Black men.⁷ Intersectionality is an important perspective for not only understanding the individual experiences of women diplomats, but also for analysing the structural and systemic inequalities that shape diplomatic institutions and practices.

Representation matters. A growing number of studies has highlighted the benefits of diversity for decision-making (in private enterprises, states, international organisations). Diverse participants bring diverse perspectives to the table, which helps to produce policy outcomes that address the needs of a wider and diverse population.⁸ For example, involving women in peace processes leads to 'more robust democracies and longer-lasting peace'.⁹ Further, diversity in and of itself demonstrates a commitment to democratic values such as inclusion and tolerance.¹⁰ Yet we have seen a growing backlash against women's rights and the resilience of 'strongman leadership', an aggressive hyper-masculine leadership style that endangers international cooperation and a stable world order.¹¹

The LSE IDEAS Women in Diplomacy project was launched in 2022 to address the issue of misrepresentation and underrepresentation of women in the field, by understanding the obstacles to representation and how they can be overcome. LSE IDEAS is the LSE's foreign policy think tank which connects academia with policymakers and decision-makers, providing a forum that informs policy debate on diplomacy and strategy. LSE IDEAS hosts interdisciplinary research projects, produces working papers and reports, holds public and off-the-record events, and runs the Executive MSc in International

Strategy and Diplomacy. The project hopes to accelerate women's representation in international and regional organisations and national diplomatic services, by sharing knowledge and tools, and supporting structural change. In so doing, it also acknowledges the even higher barriers facing women from ethnic minority, non-elite and other minority backgrounds.

This report summarises the findings from twelve interviews with women who have held high-ranking diplomatic positions or have participated in international diplomatic processes, a review of the relevant literature, and feedback from academic and practitioner networks.

We spoke with women who have worked in various multilateral contexts across the world, such as peace negotiations, human rights, development, and trade. Our interviewees represented diverse backgrounds, regions, and career paths, which allowed us to capture the intersectional dimensions of gender and diplomacy. We also sought to build on the existing academic work on women's leadership and diplomacy, and to ensure the relevance and validity of our report in line with practitioner experience. We gathered feedback from academics at conferences and seminars, as well as from our burgeoning network of academics and practitioners interested in the project.

This is the first edition of this report, and we recognise that it will not be representative of everyone's experiences in the field. That is why we treat it as a basis for our future discussions and seek to expand and refine it for future editions.

The first section describes the project and its methodology in more depth. The second section summarises the literature regarding the factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of

women in diplomacy, and ways those factors might be mitigated. The third section then summarises lessons we learned from our interviews with senior women diplomats about how they have navigated these challenges. The final section presents a series of recommendations for foreign ministries and international organisations that could help redress the gender imbalance in diplomacy. The report concludes with a note on the future direction of the project.

The Women in Diplomacy project

Diplomacy involves the development and maintenance of relationships, often between states but also on behalf of international organisations such as the United Nations and includes the activity of negotiating bilateral and multilateral agreements. Diplomats may rise through the ranks of their national diplomatic services, but they must also navigate relationships and diplomatic processes that can involve participants from multiple other states and organisations. Diplomats carry out their work in an international context but are rooted in the national context in which they were trained and, for most diplomats, on whose behalf they act. These different contexts pose different demands on diplomats and are characterised by different institutional norms and ways of working. Women diplomats may thus face certain obstacles and opportunities in their national diplomatic services, and other obstacles and opportunities when interacting in a multilateral context. Diplomats representing states and international organisations are also not the only actors involved in the negotiating of international agreements, as civil society and private sector actors may engage in the crafting of agreements, as on climate change, global health, or development.

The Women in Diplomacy project seeks to unpack those varying demands and challenges. Studies of women's involvement and leadership within national foreign policy-making and implementation have increased over the past couple of decades, though they are still often focused on western countries.¹² These studies have provided us with a better understanding of obstacles women face in foreign policy and the gendered nature of the institutional and social contexts in which they operate. There have also been more studies of women's leadership generally, in the political, corporate, civil society and academic worlds.¹³ There are, however, fewer studies of women's leadership in international organisations and

Representation matters. Diversity enhances decision-making, better addresses the needs of a wider population, and embodies a commitment to inclusion and tolerance.

negotiations and this project aims to help fill that gap.¹⁴ It seems likely that the barriers and enablers to women's leadership in these contexts are similar to those encountered in a national context, but the complex multinational environment may also pose different kinds of challenges and opportunities.

To explore those challenges and opportunities, we reached out to several women with considerable experience of leadership in diplomacy. All of the interviews were recorded and published as podcasts, available on the [project website](#) and Spotify. By publishing podcasts, we have ensured that our discussions with women leaders are accessible to the wider public and so can contribute to the broad debate about strengthening women's representation. We have thus far interviewed the following twelve leaders:

- Catherine Ashton, the former EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy
- Fatou Bensouda, The Gambia's High Commissioner to the UK and the former Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court
- Patricia Espinosa, CEO and Founding Partner of onepoint5, the former Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, and the former Mexican Foreign Minister
- Jane Hartley, the US Ambassador to the UK and former US Ambassador to France
- Mitsuko Hayashi, Ambassador, Disarmament, Non-Proliferation and Science Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan
- Nicole Mannion, the EU's Deputy Ambassador to the UK
- Alaa Murabit, head of the Gates Foundation's health advocacy and communications programme, and an advocate for the UN's Sustainable Development Goals
- Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the Director-General of the World Trade Organization
- Karen Pierce, the UK's Ambassador to the United States and former Ambassador to the United Nations
- Sandra Pralong, a member of the cabinet of the President of Romania and a former UN diplomat
- Nadia Theodore, Canada's Ambassador to the World Trade Organization, UN Conference on Trade and Development, the International Trade Centre and the World Intellectual Property Organization
- Gabriela von Habsburg, the former Ambassador of Georgia to Germany

We thus interviewed women who lead international organisations, or who act on behalf of an international organisation or a state, or who have been involved in the crafting of international agreements. They come from several different countries, in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and North America. They have experience in numerous different sectors, including international trade, international security, international health, development, climate change, cultural diplomacy, and international criminal law, as well as the broad expertise required of diplomats in general. We sought to interview women from various regions and sectors to ensure that we captured a diverse range of perspectives and experiences.

All the interviews were conducted by members of the project team: Rosa Balfour, Pamela Blackmon, Ingvild Bode, Kamy Choudhary, Marta Kozielska, Mary Martin, Henriette Müller, and Karen E. Smith. Our project team brings together leading experts in women's leadership, women in diplomacy, global governance, and foreign policy. The pairing of experts in the field with women leaders enabled informed, meaningful interviews. We thus combined academic and practitioner knowledge so that we could produce reliable, practical and transferable lessons learnt, recommendations and solutions. Biographies of the interviewees and the team are in the Appendix. We asked our interviewees open-ended questions about the challenges and barriers that they may have faced during their careers, and on the difference that women might make in leadership positions. We developed our questions as a team and based them on a review of the relevant research into women's careers and leadership in the field of international affairs. We asked all our interviewees a core set of questions:

1. What biases or structural barriers did you have to challenge or break in order to take on the various leadership positions you have held?
2. What experiences or people (enablers, mentors, sponsors) have helped you in your career?
3. Do you think you do things differently to your predecessors? And if so, to what extent do you think this has to do with gender? Do women really lead differently?
4. Do you think your gender has influenced the goals and priorities you pursue in your leadership position?
5. And do you think your gender has had an impact on the success you've had in pursuing those goals?
6. How could we improve the gender balance in international diplomacy? What could researchers, practitioners and leaders do to help break still-existing discriminatory structures in foreign policy?

We tailored further questions to reflect our interviewees' particular backgrounds and career trajectories, for example, by asking about their experiences in leadership at the national level and in multilateral settings or in the private and public sectors.

Women face a number of challenges and barriers when trying to break through glass ceilings and take on leadership positions in diplomacy.

Lessons from the academic literature: barriers to women's representation in diplomacy and possible solutions

There is a growing body of literature on the questions we asked our interviewees, which is summarised briefly here, to provide context for the questions we asked and the lessons we learned from the interviews.

Challenges and barriers: glass ceilings, glass walls, glass cliffs, and more

Women face several challenges and barriers in terms of pursuing a diplomatic career within national diplomatic services and international organisations and trying to break **glass ceilings** by taking on leadership positions such as foreign minister or the head of an international organisation.

At the national level, for example, women's participation in politics can be impeded by political parties, and a lack of role models may also discourage women from running for office.¹⁵ This phenomenon matters because foreign ministers are usually appointed from within the national political system, for example, from among parliamentarians. If women are not in the leadership pipeline, then increasing women's representation at the national level is virtually impossible, and as leaders within international organisations are often sourced from national governments, a lack of 'supply' of suitable women for posts becomes problematic as well.

Within national diplomatic services, glass ceilings are also evident. Bans on women entering diplomatic service were mostly lifted between the 1920s and the 1950s, but were usually replaced by a ban on married women diplomats, which began to be lifted in ministries across the world only from the 1970s.¹⁶ Although the numbers of women entering the diplomatic profession have risen sharply since then, the legacy of exclusion persists in continuing patterns of underrepresentation and gendered stratification within ministries of foreign affairs. Women in national diplomatic services can also still face outright discrimination and suffer from bias against them, as a 2015 survey of Irish diplomats found.¹⁷ The problem is considerably worse for women whose identities intersect with other underrepresented minorities.¹⁸

Glass walls are evident in the predominance of women working on specific ‘soft’ portfolios, such as development or women’s issues. The percentage of women working in professional and higher categories in UN agencies is greater than half in agencies such as UN Women or UNICEF, but less than thirty in UN agencies such as the World Meteorological Organization or the International Atomic Energy Agency.¹⁹ Breaking through such glass walls has been a slow and uneven process. Similar glass walls exist in terms of ambassadorial appointments: men are more likely to occupy high-status ambassadorships than women, and in the US Foreign Service women are more likely to be placed in countries where living standards are lower compared to the countries where men are placed.²⁰

Then there are the obstacles posed by resource constraints. Diplomacy is usually undervalued by governments in the sense that funding for foreign ministries tends to be dwarfed by the budgets for defence and even development. This may create a ‘**glass cliff**’ for women as they gain increased access to leadership positions in diplomatic services: they gain representation but less substantive power, and could be judged adversely if they are unable to increase government funding for diplomacy.²¹ Further, leaders of international organisations face constraints posed by decision-making rules which may make it difficult to push through change; powerful member states may seek to control the agenda and resourcing of the organisation; and the culture of the bureaucracy may be resistant to change.²² Women’s access to leadership positions is frequently available primarily during times of crisis, when they can be set up for failure—another ‘glass cliff’ situation.²³

Women face additional challenges, including **unequal hierarchies and gendered power relations** within institutions.²⁴ When women serve abroad, they can also face sexism in host countries.²⁵ Perceptions can limit women’s ability to exercise influence, with men seen as leaders more than women.²⁶ Women may struggle to be seen or heard at all. A recent study on the treatment of women diplomats on social media finds that there is a pronounced discrepancy in online visibility between men and women diplomats: retweets on Twitter/X of women’s tweets are 66.4% fewer than those of men.²⁷

Furthermore, the **challenges of work-life balance** can negatively affect the career advancement of women diplomats. These challenges are more significant in the diplomatic field because diplomats must be mobile, rotating between postings and the ministry in the home capital. Further, long hours, including evenings, are often expected, making it difficult to balance childcare and the job. This has resulted ‘in the phenomenon of ever-increasing numbers of unaccompanied female diplomats on missions, who either prefer to remain single, get divorced or become separated from their families during their service abroad’.²⁸ Such a prospect can also discourage women from entering diplomatic service in the first place.

Harassment can still be a danger, both in the context of international negotiations and within diplomatic services. Women diplomats at UN climate talks in 2023, for example, reported being harassed and intimidated, prompting two dozen countries to complain to the UN.²⁹ The announcement of Mexico’s feminist foreign policy in 2020 included the goal of a foreign ministry ‘free of violence that is safe for all’.³⁰

Solutions? Opportunities, pathways and support

How can women navigate these barriers and challenges? A burgeoning literature suggests a variety of actions that could be taken by governments and institutions. To attract, support, and retain women's careers in diplomacy, the following steps could help:

- Gathering data on women and underrepresented minorities.³¹
- Ensuring that recruitment processes are fair and that biases against women are rooted out; for example, by making sure that selection panels themselves are diverse.³²
- Enabling mentorship and coaching to support women at all stages of their careers.³³
- Participating in women's networks can offer support for careers (and mentoring possibilities), though diplomats must also build wider networks.³⁴
- An institutional culture that supports and recognises women's leadership.³⁵
- Reducing the challenges of postings abroad, such as providing opportunities for trailing spouses and children.³⁶
- Possibly instituting quotas or targets for the percentage of women and men hired and promoted.³⁷

Further, there is also literature that offers advice to women, such as learning how to deal with (or ignore) comments about their appearance and other perceptions of their speaking or leadership style, working with life partners to ensure an acceptable life-work balance, and working to build self-confidence.³⁸

Are women diplomats and leaders able to make changes, to shift agendas and institute new policies, despite the obstacles posed by bureaucratic inertia, gendered institutions and so on? There is evidence that there are opportunities to institute change. Under Christine Lagarde's leadership of the International Monetary Fund, for example, more papers were researched and published on economic growth and gender.³⁹ Lagarde also stressed the importance of stronger diversity and inclusion policies, and the benefits that result from having sufficient numbers of women in the highest leadership positions.⁴⁰ A study on women's leadership of international organisations argues that it is plausible that women promote more socially-oriented policies, aimed to improve the well-being of disadvantaged groups, than men do.⁴¹

What we learned from our interviews

To what extent have the barriers, pathways and opportunities outlined above affected the career paths and choices of the senior women diplomats whom we interviewed? What are their views on the ways forward to improve women's representation in diplomacy?

Our interviewees stressed the **importance of women's representation and leadership**, as well as the **need for greater diversity** more generally in international diplomatic and policy-making processes, from trade and development to climate change and security. Patricia Espinosa argued that women's involvement in decision-making is critical to keep international policy-making—regarding climate change but also more generally—relevant and attuned to the needs of the entire population, including the half that is women. As Alaa Murabit noted, women should be part of political processes as key constituents who are impacted by the challenges at stake, in areas such as conflict, development, healthcare. For example, most conversations about active conflict and peacebuilding prioritise those holding the guns. That is automatically a gendered lens, and rarely incorporates those impacted by conflict such as women and children—and Catherine Ashton noted how difficult but crucial it was to include women in conflict resolution processes.

Nadia Theodore argued that trade policy needs to work for the largest possible group of people, which means that women's representation in decision-making is critical. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala pointed to the society-wide benefits that could come from enabling women's role in trade—including as owners of small and medium enterprises. For Fatou Bensouda, prosecuting the crimes of gender-based and sexual violence in war and conflict requires women's equal representation in international jurisprudence. Global challenges simply cannot be tackled by excluding women and other underrepresented groups from decision-making processes; hence it is imperative to ensure those processes are inclusive. Also, it is women who are more likely to make social inclusion a priority, a goal, or a point on the agenda.

How to ensure such diversity is the challenge. The issue of **quotas** or targets was not specifically addressed by most of our interviewees, although Gabriela von Habsburg came out strongly in favour of quotas as necessary to redress the severe underrepresentation of women in diplomacy.

Global challenges simply cannot be tackled by excluding women and other under-represented groups from decision-making processes; hence it is imperative to ensure those processes are inclusive.

Many of our interviewees noted that when they were starting out, there were few **role models** for women in senior positions. They broke the glass ceilings and glass walls themselves. Indeed, several of our interviewees were ‘firsts’: the first woman and African Director-General of the World Trade Organization; the first woman and African Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court; the first woman EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy; the first woman British Ambassador to the United Nations, and to the United States; and so on. There are clearly more role models for women now, but still plenty of ‘firsts’ to come. Karen Pierce noted that while it may be easier to see that you can do it if you have ‘someone who looks and talks like you in the system’, always adopting that mantra would mean that nobody would ever break a glass ceiling. ‘Someone has to be first, it might as well be you.’ Yet for several interviewees, role models are still important in encouraging younger women to enter the diplomatic profession, as Jane Hartley pointed out that it shows what is possible.

Our interviewees also commented on some of the **differences between working primarily in a domestic context and an international one, as well as those between bilateral and multilateral diplomatic settings**. In an international context—such as multilateral negotiations or an international organisation—it can take time to build trust, as Nadia Theodore noted, which may be easier at the domestic level because there is simply more common ground at that level. Yet domestic politics can be challenging and distracting. Furthermore, as Sandra Pralong argued, some domestic contexts can be particularly restrictive for women, where biases and prejudices persist; the international context can be more accommodating because certain expectations regarding gender equality operate.

Nicole Mannion noted that the context of an international organisation can open broader perspectives, with more resources available (certainly within the EU) compared to the constraints that can be imposed by working for small states. Yet this is not to underestimate the gendered challenges at the international level, which can include the effects of unconscious but structural biases, leading to oversights such as not designing buildings or key events to accommodate various childcare needs—pointed out by Patricia Espinosa. The very public and prominent nature of some institutions, such as the UN Security Council, and negotiations—such as on climate change—means leaders must also accept the challenges and opportunities of being in the global public glare.

Alaa Murabit added that in the **private sector** there may be more opportunities available for women, specifically pointing to the greater opportunities for Muslim women as well as access to political office for women in general. These greater opportunities in the private sector vary, however, as Jane Hartley noted that gender representation at the top levels of private businesses in the US had decreased in the past few years.

The **importance of mentorship** was highlighted by several of our interviewees. Women should seek out mentors—whether women or men—at various stages of their career. Mentors can provide advice and support, including (as Nicole Mannion noted) advice on next steps and the skills needed to progress to higher posts. Even in the most senior posts, mentorship still matters: Hillary Clinton was of great help to Catherine Ashton. For Patricia Espinosa, women in more senior positions should also be willing to mentor others.

Supportive networks can be beneficial. Catherine Ashton noted the benefits of building and engaging in supportive networks. Within the European External Action Service and across the EU, as Nicole Mannion pointed out, there are now networks for women diplomats, which exchange best practices for facilitating women's careers in diplomacy.⁴²

Our interviewees offered **advice on how to handle gendered diplomatic contexts** and the higher levels of scrutiny that come with leadership positions, based on their own experiences: know your stuff, so that you can confidently demonstrate your expertise. Jane Hartley argued that if you are well prepared, you will have more confidence to express your views and be willing to speak up. Nadia Theodore noted that you can therefore show that 'you really do know what you're talking about'. This can confound expectations, as Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala pointed out that women, and especially women of colour, are often underestimated. She advised speaking first, in seminars and other meetings, so that you are sure to be heard. Gabriela von Habsburg noted the importance of 'getting out there' and showing confidence. Patricia Espinosa encouraged women not to be put off by judgments about their capabilities, and focus on building up skills, learning from colleagues and other established women in the field, agreeing to take on more challenges, and accepting feedback to grow and improve. Nadia Theodore underlined the importance of owning and leveraging one's identity to your advantage. She explained how her identity as a Black woman and first generation Canadian contributes to the way she leads and to the way she sees policy problems.

Mitsuko Hayashi noted that it is necessary to focus on performing well in your job, not letting your status as one of the only women (or the only woman) in the room interfere with that. Karen Pierce recommended that charm, conciliation, and a sense of humour 'help you to retain control...you

need to be the lofty one and people will respect you for that'. Catherine Ashton noted that women's appearance does attract attention so be aware that what you wear matters. Men's appearance rarely attracts as much attention. Some women have tried to manage this double standard creatively: former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright famously used that attention to send signals about her views and preferences via the brooches she wore on her clothing.⁴³

They also offered advice on how women can make a difference in terms of strengthening women's representation. Not only do you need to be very good (or the best) at what you do, you should take chances and risks to get yourself into jobs or areas where women are underrepresented. You should look out for younger or less confident women colleagues and offer help. As a parent, you should educate your own daughters and sons to take a positive approach; in societies where family connections matter, this can be crucial. Finally, you should celebrate and publicise advances, progress, and achievements.

The **significance of leadership** came up frequently in our interviews, in several ways. Leadership can be transformative in helping to enact change, and women may lead in a more collaborative and communicative fashion, as Jane Hartley argued. Sandra Pralong emphasised the importance of communication, as well as the politics of compassion and care, in trying to effect change. For Karen Pierce, building and motivating a team are essential elements of leadership. Nicole Mannion argued that senior leadership (whether men or women) matters in terms of ensuring that there is a continuing focus on gender equality and diversity within an organisation. Mitsuko Hayashi noted that when the Japanese government decided to focus on promoting the Women, Peace and Security agenda, change ensued, with more women joining the foreign service. Nadia Theodore

concluded, pointing out that trade policy leaders need to understand that to have trade policy work for the largest group of people, it is necessary to have wide representation from diverse societal groups.

Although our interviewees were divided on the question of whether women do things differently in diplomacy, **they have put issues of gender equality and diversity onto the agenda in new ways.** Women in leadership have a real opportunity to make a difference to these problems and to have a helpful legacy by shaping significantly their institutions and their practices. For example, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala rejuvenated the World Trade Organization's work on trade and gender, bringing in a new gender policy framework for the organisation, including reformed recruitment practices that produced quick results. Fatou Bensouda instituted ground-breaking change at the International Criminal Court, ensuring that sexual and gender-based violence would be systematically included in the Office of the Prosecutor's investigations and prosecutions. She also noted that, because she was able to talk directly with Islamic women victims unaccompanied by 'male protectors', the amount of usable evidence that was collected to prosecute offenders dramatically increased. Catherine Ashton specifically sought to meet with women's groups during her travels and could therefore gather their views on how conflict settlements in crisis zones could be constructed and implemented. She was also directly engaged in recruitment interviews, both to show women candidates that there was a senior woman in post and to set the expectation that women should be rising through the European External Action Service. Ensuring equality in recruitment practices and strengthening the support given to women as they advance their careers were emphasised by many of our interviewees. These are examples of meaningful and substantive change and illustrate the possibilities that can become available as diplomacy and international organisations become more diverse.

Policy recommendations for diplomatic services and international organisations

Institutions such as diplomatic services and international organisations should implement changes and reforms that aim to redress the imbalances currently evident in diplomacy worldwide. These policy recommendations should not come as a surprise, as they have been repeatedly suggested in the literature (see the references in our endnotes). Yet, little change and not enough timely progress are still evident.

Our interviewees confirmed the importance of making concerted efforts to change institutional cultures and practices that could foster greater representation of women and other underrepresented minorities in diplomacy. Several foreign ministries and international organisations have begun to adopt such reforms, with some countries—Chile, Germany, Mexico, and Spain—pledging to pursue a feminist foreign policy; these countries have included commitments to tackle the gender disparities within diplomacy and are already implementing reforms such as those listed below.⁴⁴

Overall, our interviewees highlighted the significance of changes that need to occur at all levels: individual (centred on empowerment), community (focused on norms, behaviours, culture), and organisational (policy-driven structural change).

(1) Create and implement a plan to enhance gender equality and diversity within the organisation

The senior leadership of the organisation (foreign ministry, international or regional organisation) must ensure that there is a continuing focus on gender equality and diversity, and that it is integrated into the organisation's strategy and workplan. An organisation can no longer afford not to have a social inclusion or gender inclusion agenda. However, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Each organisation can design, tailor, and implement its own strategy, based on its specific priorities and needs.

The introduction of equality, diversity, and inclusion policies (EDI) can entail:

- Equal pay policy.
- Parental leave.
- Flexible working patterns.
- Introduction of targets or quotas.
- A zero-tolerance approach for sexual harassment.
- Gender sensitivity and awareness training and capacity-building.
- Gender-responsive budgeting across all departments and units.
- Gender-responsive programming.

The above-mentioned measures are just examples of how gendered institutional practices, cultures, and behaviours can be challenged. It is important to remember that these measures and practices must extend to all employees of an organisation.

(2) Collect gender-specific/ gender-disaggregated data to set an evidence-based gender equality strategy

To further support the establishment of a tailored, practical, and effective EDI strategy or EDI focused policies, collecting data on gender (and other identity characteristics) with respect to recruitment and hiring processes, salaries, career progression is key.

Collecting and analysing gender-specific/
gender-disaggregated data will help organisations to:

- Set an evidence-based strategy on gender equality/gender balance.
- Better identify barriers that may contribute to lack of diversity or that may hinder women or other minorities.
- Meaningfully monitor progress.
- Set informed targets.
- Promote accountability.

Analysis of the data should identify patterns, differences, and disparities. Further disaggregation by other variables such as age, race, socio-economic status, and location is also recommended to understand intersectional impacts.

(3) Align both internal and external gender equality efforts

Organisations should not only promote and implement gender inclusion measures within their own structures and cultures, but also in their external interactions and outputs, such as policies, partnerships, and communications. A commitment to gender equality needs to be reflected internally through a built-in system and relevant processes as well as externally through the activity of the organisation. This includes among others:

- Ensuring equitable treatment and collaboration with partners, all stakeholders, and clients.
- Incorporating gender equality considerations into contracts, partnerships, and agreements.
- Promoting women's representation, participation and enabling women's voices to be heard.
- Mainstreaming gender considerations across the institutions and the policies, procedures, and decision-making processes, ensuring they meet the needs of all employees, preventing biases that could disadvantage any group.
- Introducing or enhancing research on gender and specific policy challenges or issue areas.⁴⁵
- Establishing mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the impact of gender equality measures externally, using gender-sensitive indicators and feedback loops to continually improve practices.

(4) Make sure that recruitment processes are fair and inclusive with a diverse pool of candidates

To ensure fair recruitment, women need to be in the selection pool of candidates in the first place, but this is not enough on its own. Women are less likely to be in the relevant pool of candidates for more senior positions: while they may be disinclined to apply due to workplace inflexibilities or lack of role models, they may also be subtly or unsubtly discouraged from doing so because of gendered perceptions about the leadership role.⁴⁶ Furthermore, equality among overall staff is more likely to occur when there is a history in the institution of appointing women to leadership positions: when women are part of the selection pool, they are likely to be selected—for political appointments, for example.⁴⁷ Therefore, recruitment for top leadership positions and key political appointments must be thought of many stages before the final recruitment process.

Additionally, addressing the underrepresentation of women in diplomacy requires taking an intersectional approach that recognises the diversity of women's experiences and needs in recruitment, and that challenges the underlying structures and systems that perpetuate inequality and exclusion—such as addressing discrimination in organisational culture (see recommendation 1).

Some possible ways to develop this recommendation are:

- To promote a more diverse and inclusive pool of candidates for leadership positions, recruitment strategies should be designed with a long-term perspective and a proactive approach. This means identifying and cultivating potential talents from underrepresented groups, such as women, ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities, and providing them with opportunities to gain relevant skills, experience, and exposure. Recruitment should also be transparent and fair, with clear criteria and processes that avoid bias and discrimination.
- Recruitment for senior roles and key appointments should not only focus on the current vacancies, but also on the future needs and vision of the organisation. This requires planning ahead and building a pipeline of qualified and diverse candidates who can take on leadership positions in the future. Recruitment should also involve outreach and engagement with potential applicants from different backgrounds, sectors, and regions, and encourage them to consider a career in diplomacy. Additionally, recruitment should be aligned with the organisational culture and values and communicate the benefits and challenges of working in a diplomatic service.
- Foster a culture of mentorship and sponsorship within the organisation. Mentorship involves providing guidance, feedback, and support to less experienced employees, while sponsorship involves advocating for their career advancement and visibility. Both formal and informal mentorship and sponsorship programmes can help women to overcome barriers, access opportunities, and develop their potential (see more information on this in the recommendation below).

For today's diplomacy to be effective, it must be created, negotiated, implemented by groups which reflect and represent the make-up of the modern society.

(5) Consider and implement both formal and informal career development support

Formal and informal support was seen equally as important. Besides formal gender equality measures, procedures and policies, the following suggestions were made on informal support within organisations:

- Set up mentoring schemes to ensure that employees have a mentor at all stages of their career progression.
- Encourage the creation of networks, which can exchange best practices, provide informal mentoring, and address specific issues affecting the progression of women and other underrepresented minorities in the institution.
- Provide leadership training that values qualities that are not only associated with 'men' but also 'women', including collaborative and empathetic leadership.
- Provide confidence-building training.
- Provide media training, to enhance the visibility of women diplomats.
- Introduce policies to support employees with 'trailing partners', children and caring responsibilities when they are posted abroad. These can include agreements with host countries to enable trailing partners to work and enabling posting to neighbouring countries.⁴⁸

(6) Rethink building design: make facilities inclusive and accessible

Though perhaps a less obvious measure, facilities must be inclusive in day-to-day engagements, including events such as conferences and meetings. Buildings must be designed to fit the needs of a more diverse workforce. This can include but is not limited to:

- Provision of accessible bathrooms, including space for breastfeeding or other related activities.
- Provision of sufficient child-care facilities.
- Consideration of lighting and spatial arrangements with regards to safety, both in the formal workplace as well as during on-site and off-site events (conferences, delegations, and gatherings).
- Ensuring that events such as conferences and negotiations, and the facilities in which they take place, are gender-sensitive.

(7) Make social inclusion and gender equality non-negotiable and make its benefits known to everyone within the organisation

Including women and minorities in diplomacy, foreign policy, and decision-making processes in general does not only benefit women: it benefits everyone. For today's diplomacy to be effective, it must be created, negotiated, implemented by groups which reflect and represent the makeup of the modern society. For example, for peace negotiations to be effective and sustainable, women must be at the table, as they are also affected by conflict.⁴⁹ It is important that everyone is aware of and acknowledges the collective benefits of inclusion of women and minorities in diplomatic processes:

- Bringing diverse perspectives and experiences which shed light on issues that may have been otherwise ignored in discussions (boosting creativity, innovation).
- Aiding mutual understanding, leveraging dialogue, mediation, reconciliation, and trust-building.
- Enhancing social dynamics.
- Fostering inclusive culture.
- Strengthening the process of shaping public policy.

A note on the future direction of the project:

We acknowledge that this report does not capture the full diversity of perspectives in this field. That's why we treat it as a first edition. We intend to use it as a basis for further dialogue and discussion with women's networks and international organisations, across countries and regions, with a view of building it out in subsequent editions.

We plan to use it as a basis for discussions with:

- women's networks internationally to discuss insights, barriers and solutions. We will use the viewpoints and experiences of others to enhance the recommendations made and come up with innovative ideas on how to overcome barriers faced by women in diplomacy.
- international organisations. We want to understand what the appetite is for internal reflection and improvement of social/gender inclusion measures.

Through those discussions, we also plan to:

- learn more about some of the more prominent themes and sub-themes that we will seek to carry out further research and commentary on: mentoring, networking, representation, leadership styles, and so on.
- further contextualise the situation of women in diplomacy and compare it to the situation in other fields such as, politics, business, and the third sector.
- better understand and imagine the future of diplomacy and the role women play in it. ■

Appendix

Biographies of our interviewees

Catherine Ashton, the former EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Baroness Ashton served as Leader of the UK House of Lords, and then as EU Trade Commissioner, before assuming the role of the EU's first High Commissioner for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and Vice President of the European Commission, between 2009 and 2014. She has recently published a book, *And Then What? Inside Stories of 21st-Century Diplomacy*, about her time as EU High Representative.

Fatou Bensouda is The Gambia's High Commissioner to the UK. From 2012 to 2021 Dr Bensouda was the Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC)—the first woman and the first African to serve in that capacity. She had previously served as the Deputy Prosecutor of the ICC, as Senior Legal Advisor in the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, and multiple roles in The Gambia including Attorney General and Minister for Justice.

Patricia Espinosa is Founding Partner and CEO of onepoint5, an ESG consulting firm specialized in climate change. Prior to founding onepoint5, Ambassador Espinosa served as the Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (2016-2022), Secretary of Foreign Affairs of Mexico (2006-2012) and Mexico's Ambassador to the Federal Republic of Germany (2013-2016), and to Austria, Slovakia and Slovenia (2002-2006). In 2012, she was appointed Ambassador Emeritus of Mexico, the highest recognition the Mexican Government awards its diplomats. She has also been decorated by the governments of Germany, Argentina, Austria, Chile, Colombia, Denmark, El Salvador, Guatemala, Netherlands, Paraguay, and Peru.

Jane Hartley is the Ambassador of the United States to the UK. She is only the second woman to serve in that position. Previously she was the US Ambassador to France from 2014 to 2017. She also had a distinguished career in the private sector and has served on a number of boards of trustees, including as Chair of the Board of Trustees of Sesame Workshop.

Mitsuko Hayashi is Ambassador in the Disarmament, Non-Proliferation and Science Department at Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Her career has predominantly focused on defence and security policy making. She has worked on Japan's defence relationships with several countries, including China, India, Australia and the UK.

Nicole Mannion is the Deputy Head of the European Union's Delegation to the UK. She has been in that post since 2020, and before that, served as the Director for Brexit and EU Affairs at the Embassy of Ireland in London, as Ireland's European Correspondent, and the Deputy Director for Human Rights in the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs.

Alaa Murabit leads the Gates Foundation's health advocacy and communications programme. She is a medical doctor, women's rights advocate, and an advocate for the Sustainable Development Goals appointed by the United Nations Secretary-General. She founded Voice of Libyan Women in 2011, when she was 21, and recorded a widely-viewed TED Talk on 'What My Religion Really Says About Women'.

(continued next page)

Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala is the Director-General of the World Trade Organisation. The first woman and first African to hold the position. She is an economist and international development expert with over 40 years of experience. Dr Okonjo-Iweala was Chair of the Board of Gavi, The Vaccine Alliance, African Risk Capacity and Co-Chair of The Global Commission on the Economy and Climate. She is Co-Chair of the Global Commission on the Economics of Water, a Distinguished Visiting Fellow at the Brookings Institution and a Harvard Kennedy School Global Public Leader. She served as Nigeria's first female and longest serving Finance Minister (7 years) and was also the first female Foreign Minister.

Karen Pierce is the first woman British ambassador to the United States, and before that was the first woman British Permanent Representative to the UN in New York (2018-2020). Dame Pierce has also served as British Permanent Representative to the UN in Geneva (2012-2015), and as Ambassador to Afghanistan (2015-2016). She has worked extensively on security issues in the Balkans and Afghanistan.

Sandra Pralong, a state adviser in Romania's Department for the Relations with Romanians Abroad, and a member of the Cabinet of the President of Romania. She served as the Director of Promotion of Newsweek in New York and led the UN Development Programme's communications efforts in the Central and East European region. Dr Pralong also served as a gender and civil society adviser at the UN Fund for Population.

Nadia Theodore is the Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Canada to the World Trade Organization and other International Organizations in Geneva. With over two decades of experience, she blends traditional expertise with innovative strategies to bridge cultural divides and strengthen partnerships. Her impact is notable in the realm of economic diplomacy, where she has been instrumental in negotiating influential trade agreements and pioneering new pathways for commercial exchange. She also leverages digital platforms to facilitate dialogue and champions gender equality and youth engagement.

Gabriela von Habsburg served as Georgia's ambassador to Germany from 2009 to 2013. She is also an artist, creating abstract sculptures, and has been a professor of art. She was born in Luxembourg, grew up in Germany and then became a citizen of Georgia.

The LSE IDEAS Women in Diplomacy Team

Pamela Blackmon is Professor of Political Science at Pennsylvania State University, Altoona. Her research areas include international political economy with a focus on the international financial and trade institutions. Current research projects include examining the increase of female leadership in the European Central Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization and, thus, implications for gendered policy frameworks.

Rosa Balfour is director of Carnegie Europe. Her fields of expertise include European politics, institutions, and foreign and security policy. Balfour is also a member of the steering committee of Women in International Security Brussels (WIIS-Brussels). Prior to joining Carnegie Europe, Balfour was a senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, the director of the Europe in the World program at the European Policy Centre in Brussels and a researcher in Rome and London.

Ingvild Bode is Associate Professor of International Relations at the University of Southern Denmark. She is also the Principal Investigator of an ERC research project on autonomous weapons systems and international norms (AUTONORMS). She is furthermore Associate Editor of *Global Society: Journal of Interdisciplinary International Relations*. Ingvild's research agenda covers the area of peace and security, with a theoretical focus combining practice theories and constructivist International Relations.

Kamya Choudhary is an India Policy Fellow working on climate policy with a particular focus on renewable energy, climate finance and transition to zero emissions. She's currently supporting the [India-UK Track II Dialogue on Climate Change and Energy](#). Prior to joining Grantham Research Institute, she was an interdisciplinary social scientist conducting qualitative research on renewable energy solutions for farming in India. She holds an MSc and PhD in International Development from the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. She pursued her bachelor's degree in political science from Lady Shri Ram College, Delhi University.

Marta Kozielska is the co-founder and manager of the Women in Diplomacy Project at LSE IDEAS, where she oversees the project's activities and vision. She is a Public Policy Consultant with a focus on social inclusion and policy communications, and has previously worked across think tanks, consultancy and non-governmental organisations, where she developed her expertise in international strategy, public policy, advocacy and strategic communications. Marta previously studied at the LSE and University of California, Berkeley.

Mary Martin is director of the UN Business and Human Security Initiative at LSE IDEAS. Her research focuses on the role of the private sector in conflict and peacebuilding and private security in the international system. She was co-ordinator of the Human Security Study Group 2006-2010, reporting to the High Representative of the European Union. She holds a PhD in International Relations from the University of Cambridge.

Henriette Müller is Assistant Professor of Gender, Governance and Society at New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD). Focusing on gender and women's leadership, her research encompasses the comparative study of political leadership both at the national and international level, as well as across different political systems and sociocultural contexts. She is the author of *Political Leadership and the European Commission Presidency* (Oxford University Press, 2020) and co-editor of *Women and Leadership in the European Union* (Oxford University Press, 2022, together with Ingeborg Tömmel).

Karen E. Smith is the co-founder and director of the LSE Women in Diplomacy project. She is a Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her main area of research is the 'international relations of the European Union', and she has examined the EU's pursuit of 'ethical' foreign policy goals such as promoting human rights and democracy, and EU-UN relations. She is now working on projects on women in foreign policy-making and diplomacy, and on the role of that emotions play in EU foreign policy-making.

Endnotes

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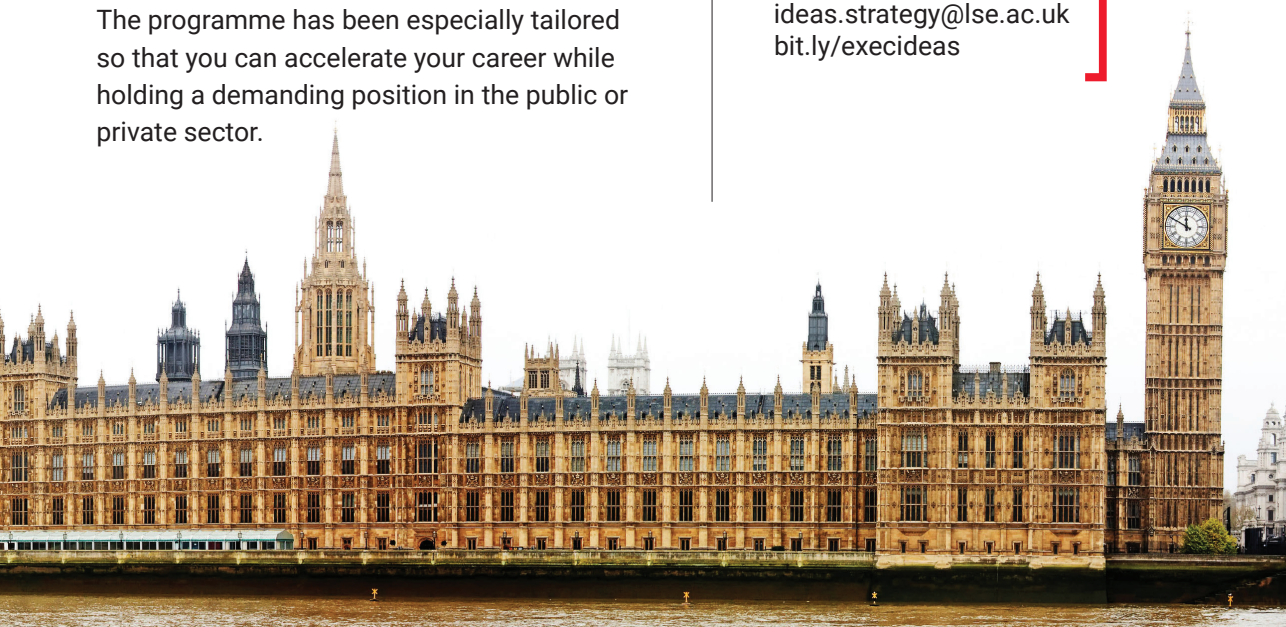
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Strengthening the Representation of Women in Diplomacy: Challenges and Policy Solutions

LSE IDEAS Project Report June 2024

Karen E. Smith and Marta Kozielska, editors

Contributors: Rosa Balfour, Pamela Blackmon, Ingvild Bode,
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