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Why does diplomacy have a women issue?

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Professor Karen E Smith,
Professor of International
Relations, Department of
International Relations, LSE

Just 20 per cent of ambassadorships worldwide are held by women. Research from **Karen E Smith** explores the under-representation of women in diplomacy, why so few women rise to senior positions in the area, and how these barriers can be overcome.

In the public imagination, the image of a diplomat is often that of a man. The fact that only a fifth of the world's ambassadors are women, a fraction that has barely risen in the last ten years, certainly does nothing to dispel these stereotypes.

"Representation matters. We need voices around the table who can speak on behalf of the issues that affect the wider population and that includes women," says Professor Karen E Smith, Department of International Relations at LSE. She recently published a report on the **LSE IDEAS Women in Diplomacy project** investigating how women's representation can be strengthened in diplomacy.

The project team interviewed 12 women who have held high-ranking diplomatic positions or have participated in international diplomatic processes to better understand their experiences and the barriers they have faced. The report summarises those interviews and makes recommendations to address obstacles to women's career advancement in the field of diplomacy.



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Family and diplomatic life

“Diplomacy is an unusual career, and the demands of the job are high. You might need to physically relocate every three to five years which creates all sorts of challenges, especially for women, who are still considered to be primary caregivers,” explains Professor Smith.

At a recent LSE careers event featuring a Q&A with women diplomats, Professor Smith recalls how one of the last questions came from a student who asked if it was possible to combine family life with a diplomatic career.

“There was a murmur around the room. Like, this was the question the audience really wanted the answer to. There’s certainly a fear about whether the demands of a diplomatic career are amenable to having a family.”

In addition to concerns around family life, being in the public eye and the sexism and harassment that can come from inside and outside of foreign ministries can be challenging for female diplomats.

Stereotypes, sexism and the glass ceiling

Professor Smith argues that old, gendered ideas surrounding the role of ambassadors and how they should behave are pervasive and damaging.

“Old perceptions of what it means to be an ambassador linger. The old buddy network, the ambassadors’ parties where the wives are in a separate room: that image remains.”

These perceptions can limit women’s ability to exercise influence, with men more often seen as leaders than women. Women may also struggle to be seen or heard at all. A recent study cited in the report on the treatment of women diplomats on social media found there is a discrepancy in online visibility between male and female diplomats with retweets on Twitter/X of women’s tweets 66.4 per cent fewer than those of men.

Further research shows that when women do become ambassadors, they are less likely to serve in countries with “more economic clout” or those affected by conflict.

These “glass walls” are evident in the predominance of women working on “soft” portfolios, such as development or women’s issues. The percentage of women working in professional and higher categories in UN agencies, such as UN Women or UNICEF, is greater than 50 per cent, but less than 30 per cent in UN agencies such as the World Meteorological Organization or the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The report highlights that although some international and regional organisations are currently led by women, including the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization, elsewhere representation is patchy at senior levels. For example, there has never been a woman UN or NATO Secretary-General and only four women have been elected to serve as President of the UN General Assembly. Of the 18 peace agreements signed in 2022, only one was signed or witnessed by a representative of a women’s group or organisation.



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Ensuring greater diversity in diplomacy

So, what can be done to help overcome these barriers?

In the report, the authors outline a variety of actions to support women's careers in diplomacy. These include the imperative that institutions such as foreign ministries commit wholeheartedly to the goal of equality, diversity and inclusion; ensuring recruitment processes are fair; providing mentorship and coaching to ensure women are supported at all stages of their careers; and introducing policies to reduce the challenges of being posted abroad, such as providing opportunities for trailing partners.

All 12 of the senior diplomats interviewed for the project stressed the importance of women's representation and leadership. Numerous studies have also highlighted the benefits of diversity for decision-making. Diverse participants and leaders bring a variety of perspectives to the table, which helps to produce policy outcomes that address the needs of a wider and diverse population.

Many of the interviewees noted that when they were starting out, there were few female role models in senior positions. They broke glass ceilings and glass walls themselves. Indeed, several of the interviewees were "firsts": the first female and African Director-General of the World Trade Organization; the first female EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy; and so on.

Karen Pierce – the UK's Ambassador to the United States and former Ambassador to the United Nations – noted that while it may be easier if you have "someone who looks and talks like you in the system", always adopting that mantra would never see anyone break a glass ceiling. "Someone has to be first; it might as well be you."

The interviewees provided advice on how to handle the higher levels of scrutiny that come with leadership positions. Both Jane Hartley, the US Ambassador to the UK, and Nadia Theodore, Canada's Ambassador to the World Trade Organization, argued that if you are well prepared, you will have more confidence to express your views and be willing to speak up. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Director-General of the World Trade Organization, pointed out that women, particularly women of colour, are often underestimated. She advised speaking first in meetings to ensure being heard.

Going forwards, Professor Smith plans to undertake further interviews with women diplomats around the world, as well as with foreign ministries and international organisations to really drill down into the report's recommendations to explore what more can be done to increase women's representation in diplomacy. ■

Read the [Women in Diplomacy project report and listen to interviews with women who have held high ranking diplomatic positions.](#)

Professor Karen E Smith was speaking to Charlotte Kelloway, Media Relations Manager at LSE.

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