

POLICY PAPER

WOMEN IN THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS: NORMATIVE FRAMEWORKS, STRUCTURAL BARRIERS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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 FOR ALL
WOMEN
AND GIRLS

Background

This policy paper is produced under UN Women’s global initiative on Gender-Responsive Foreign Policies which is implemented in four regions (Arab States, Europe and Central Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, West and Central Africa).The initiative supports the integration of gender equality in foreign policies and is operationalized across three pillars:

- i) A strengthened evidence base for gender-responsive foreign policies;
- ii) An enabling environment for equal representation of women in diplomacy; and
- iii) Gender mainstreaming in all domains of foreign policy

The paper contributes to increased research on gender responsive foreign policies with a focus on representation and participation of women in the diplomatic corps, the normative frameworks that influence their roles and the structural barriers they confront on the path to parity. It identifies promising practices for gender mainstreaming in foreign policy and provides recommendations to various actors in the ecosystem of diplomacy, including policymakers across government, especially within ministries of foreign affairs.

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Introduction

Globally, it is still primarily men who hold positions of power. Across most countries, the numbers are stark in the realms of leadership and participation in domestic and international politics. Heads of States, Heads of Governments, legislators and cabinet ministers play a critical role in shaping a country's domestic and foreign policy. Yet, only 25 countries are led by a woman; women account for only 22.9 per cent of cabinet ministers worldwide; and they hold only 18 per cent of foreign affairs portfolios.¹ Women account for only 27.2 per cent² of legislators at the national level and 35.6 per cent at the local level.³ Moreover, the *2025 Women in Diplomacy Index*⁴ shows that globally, women make up only 22.5 per cent of ambassadors.

As the main instrument of foreign policy and a field of practice,⁵ diplomacy is the everyday work of managing relations between States. The work is “typically carried out by a country's representatives or members of multilateral organizations”⁶ who work within organizations and formal structures through which diplomacy is carried out. This ‘machinery’ is what States, and multilateral bodies use to manage external relations, negotiate agreements, represent interests abroad and handle international crises. Without equal representation and participation of women at all levels of decision-making, including in diplomacy, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved.⁷

Predominantly, early scholarship on the history of women in diplomacy leaves women's involvement in the diplomatic activities of societies in majority parts of the world excluded from dominant knowledge.⁸ This is gradually changing over the last decade, with contemporary research on women leaders from the Global South and their role in diplomacy. Further, early scholarship on women's participation in the diplomatic corps largely involved unofficial roles such as spouses of serving diplomats, facilitators in social and transnational networks,⁹ and economic managers of embassies – reflecting more informal participation of women in diplomacy.

But despite their limited representation in the diplomatic corps, and limited visibility in research, women have made significant diplomatic contributions as leaders in global politics. Austria's Bertha von Suttner's contributions to the Universal Peace Congress and peace movements inspired the foundation of the European Union¹⁰. Brazil's Bertha Lutz and Minerva Bernardino from the Dominican Republic, in solidarity with networks of women leaders from Latin America, played an instrumental role in ensuring that the UN Charter explicitly affirmed the equal rights of women and men¹¹ and that it made several references to non-discrimination on the basis of sex; among other examples.

Despite these notable contributions, it was not until the twentieth century that women's formal participation in diplomacy, via conditional admittance into the diplomatic corps, was realized.¹² And in many countries, these bans remained for married women¹³ until the 1970s. Since then, women's formal participation in the diplomatic corps has increased, albeit slowly.

While diplomacy broadly encompasses many actors and activities, the scope of this policy paper is narrowed to the diplomatic corps. The paper uses a mixed-methods approach to ensure a robust evidence base, using secondary quantitative analysis and qualitative inquiry to assess: key normative frameworks that underpin women's participation in the diplomatic corps and structural barriers, including discriminatory policies and practices. It uses these as levers of analysis to understand the issues that affect the participation of women in the diplomatic corps and their equal advancement to the

highest levels of diplomatic representation. A synthesis of available literature was used to present the findings and policy recommendations. As complementary sources of data, UN Women:

- i) Conducted a 25-year analysis (2000–2025) of all States Parties Reports on the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW Convention) with a focus on Article 8, which obliges States Parties “ [to] take all appropriate measures to ensure to women, on equal terms with men and without any discrimination, the opportunity to represent their governments at the international level and to participate in the work of international organizations”¹⁴; and
- ii) Conducted anonymized key informant interviews (KIIs) and a focus group discussion (FGD) with 21 serving members of the diplomatic corps at the senior-most and mid-management levels from a cross-regional group of Member States.

BOX 1. KEY DEFINITIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF THIS PAPER

- **‘Normative frameworks’** refers to a set of principles, norms and rules that guides the behaviour of States and other actors, promoting shared values and expectations on issues like human rights, conflict resolution and international law.
- **‘Structural barriers’** refers to systemic, often informal or path-dependent factors, including culture, norms, gatekeeping networks, performance evaluation biases, mobility expectations, caregiving penalties and harassment. It also includes seemingly neutral rules that have a disparate impact. All these may be embedded in law, regulation, policy or institutional practice that directly or indirectly produce unequal opportunities, access, resources or outcomes for women, particularly those who experience intersecting forms of marginalisation across the diplomatic career lifecycle (recruitment, training, postings, promotion, leadership). Cumulatively, these factors suppress women’s advancement even where formal parity commitments exist.

Women's representation and participation in the diplomatic corps

In 2025, the *Women in Diplomacy Index* found that women held 22.5 per cent of all ambassador and permanent representative positions globally. Only three countries had a proportion of 50 per cent of women ambassadors.¹⁵ The Index and other existing data sets capture numerical representation, often for the highest level of representation in diplomacy. Data analysed by UN Women on the implementation of Article 8 of the CEDAW Convention found that while reporting of women's representation in the foreign service is presented in some State Party reports (23.8 per cent), this is often done without granular disaggregation and, where this information exists, it is presented in an uneven manner across States Parties' reports.

Between 2000–2025, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW Committee) requested further information under Article 8, related to either the proportions of women diplomats or efforts made to increase women's participation and representation in diplomacy from nearly half of all States Parties (86, or 45.5 per cent). This request is often done through a List of Issues and questions (LOIs), and List of Issues and questions Prior to Reporting (LOIPRs). Notably, by the Committee not raising LOIs and LOIPRs on Article 8 for a specific State Party, this does not imply that the State Party is fully compliant with the article. The LOIs and LOIPRs however, allow the Committee to identify priorities in their review signalling the level of interest in tracking implementation of Article 8.

Further, data for comparative analysis of how cultural norms, political incentives and institutional rules interact to exclude or enable women in the diplomatic corps are sparse. Cumulatively, these data fragmentations pose a challenge to capture the broader ecosystem within which the diplomatic corps and its practices exist through a gender lens and in a systematic way.¹⁶

Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs) do not often collect, use or disseminate data that show how structural inequalities related to race, ethnicity, religion, disability, class or sexuality shape the career trajectories of women in the diplomatic corps.¹⁷ As a result, those facing multiple and overlapping forms of marginalization remain largely invisible in recruitment, posting and promotion decisions. Without intersectional analysis, policies risk benefiting only a small subset of people and reproducing existing hierarchies.

Generally, States Parties' reporting on Article 8 denotes a steep drop-off of women between entry, mid-career and senior leadership ranks in the diplomatic corps, suggesting that change must be tracked and resourced along the entire career ladder.

Diplomatic practice is built around a masculine "logic of appropriateness" in which certain behaviours – such as toughness, emotional restraint, and availability for constant mobility are differently valued and rewarded,¹⁸ while skills associated with care, collaboration and relationship-building are systematically devalued.¹⁹ As such, revising policy and institutional procedures alone is insufficient if the underlying criteria for merit and professionalism continue to reflect gendered and racialized ideals of the "ideal diplomat."²⁰

The advent of feminist foreign policies and other gender-responsive approaches to foreign policy represent an important normative shift in the governance of the diplomatic apparatus; in how some States conduct

diplomacy and how representation in foreign policy is perceived. While diplomacy still reflects and reproduces patriarchal power relations, these feminist and gender responsive approaches have provided frameworks of accountability for gender equality commitments in global politics. This is particularly significant for diplomacy where gender issues have been historically overlooked, including in relation to enablers and barriers to women's full participation and equal representation across all cadres of the diplomatic corps.

Key normative frameworks

Limitations of women's participation in the diplomatic corps largely stem from social norms, institutional, legal and policy practice rather than direct prohibitions in the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, the main instrument of diplomatic practice. However, the Convention does not consistently reflect a gender-inclusive approach to diplomatic work, given the masculinization of the provisions of its text. For example, "head of mission" and "diplomatic agent" are consistently referred to using masculine pronouns (he, him, his) and when referring to families of diplomats, it is implied that a male diplomat is to be accompanied by his spouse. This treats the existing international law on diplomatic relations under the Convention, including the provisions that prioritize men's participation in the diplomatic corps or confine women to certain roles, as if fixed,²¹ reflecting a period where the "ideal-type" diplomat was male. Nonetheless, the evolution of diplomatic practice has continued to embrace the integration of international normative frameworks for gender equality over the years.

Adopted on 18 December 1979, the CEDAW Convention is an international legal instrument that obliges States Parties to eliminate discrimination against women and girls and promotes women's and girls' equal rights. Often described as the international bill of rights for women, States Parties commit themselves to undertake a series of measures to end discrimination against women in all forms, ensuring women's equal access to, and equal opportunities in all spheres of life.

Article 8 of the Convention offers the strongest basis for women's participation and equal representation in diplomacy by obligating States to "take all appropriate measures to ensure to women, on equal terms with men and without any discrimination, the opportunity to represent their governments at the international level and to participate in the work of international organizations".²² These may include temporary special measures, such as quotas, to correct historical and structural barriers faced by women in public and political spheres.²³

The CEDAW Committee's²⁴ General Recommendation 23 emphasized that achieving broad representation in public life requires women's "full equality in the exercise of political and economic power"²⁵ and their equal involvement "in decision-making at all levels, including internationally".²⁶ This interpretation moves beyond formal equality towards substantive equality, recommending that criteria for foreign service entry and global postings address gender bias and indirect discrimination.²⁷

This has been further reinforced by the CEDAW Committee's General Recommendation 40 on the equal and inclusive representation of women in decision-making systems,²⁸ which clarifies the scope of duties arising under Article 8. It expressly stresses the importance of including women from diverse backgrounds, considering factors like age, ethnicity, disability and socioeconomic status – an intersectional approach. Crucially, it sets out concrete measures to ensure women's equal representation and influence in diplomatic roles and multilateral institutions.

By identifying women's unequal access to power and decision-making; and accountable institutions as critical areas of concern, the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action reframes diplomatic spaces as sites where gender justice must be realized, not as gender-neutral arenas that women simply enter. Its emphasis on gender balance in political representation, dismantling structural discrimination and transforming institutions provides another basis for examining the practices of States' apparatus for the diplomatic corps. In this sense, the Beijing Declaration provides a strong anchor for women's equal and meaningful participation in the diplomatic corps in line with an agreed global framework, even where specific legal obligations remain uneven across countries.

Similarly, the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, which was launched through UN Security Council resolution 1325 in 2000, provides an important basis for advancing women's inclusion in the diplomatic corps, especially in peace and security decision-making. In requiring women's "full, equal and meaningful participation" in peace negotiations, mediation and post-conflict governance, WPS offers concrete entry points for initiating changes in how countries recruit, promote and deploy members of the diplomatic corps to represent their governments in peace and security issues.

In 2025, the UN's Human Rights Council adopted, by consensus, Resolution 58/15 (HRC 58/15) on "Women, diplomacy and human rights,"²⁹ which strengthens and operationalizes the normative framework established by Article 8 of CEDAW. The resolution acknowledges "persistent and systemic barriers that hinder the full, equal, meaningful and safe participation and leadership of women in decision-making, particularly their underrepresentation in diplomacy, including in international human rights forums."³⁰ Significantly, it links women's diplomatic participation to human rights, recognizing women's critical role in "fostering inclusive, sustainable and effective multilateral decision-making processes."³¹

The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) is an instrumental normative space for developing global norms that continue to set the standards for gender equality and women's empowerment, including on women's participation and leadership in public life. It monitors and reviews progress on the Beijing Platform for Action and Sustainable Development Goal targets. In 2025, an interactive dialogue at CSW 69 focused on women in diplomacy in the context of advancing women's political participation, accountability and gender-responsive institutions.³² The present policy paper focuses on pertinent issues aligned with the priority theme of CSW 70, highlighting structural barriers that continue to sustain women's underrepresentation in diplomacy. While existing Agreed Conclusions and CSW political declarations do not provide specific provisions for women in the diplomatic corps, CSW's consensus standards and recommendations of its outcome documents can help to catalyse national legislation, policies and institutional reforms by Member States to eliminate structural barriers that continue to limit parity in the diplomatic corps.

BOX 2. MOMENTUM THROUGH LEGISLATIVE REFORM IS OBSERVABLE IN SOME REGIONS.

- The Americas demonstrate how legislative action can embed parity commitments with institutional force. Ecuador became the first country in the region to adopt a constitutional parity norm in 2009, catalysing regional approaches to gender equality in governance, including diplomacy. Mexico's 2019 "Parity Everywhere" Constitutional Reform mandated gender balance across all three branches of government, explicitly including diplomatic representation. Chile,

Colombia and Mexico have adopted feminist foreign policies that integrate gender equality and women's rights as central components of international engagement, with direct implications for diplomatic recruitment and promotion.

- The General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS) has issued mandates requiring parity in the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, embedding gender balance as a regional governance standard. However, this is unevenly implemented across countries.

Synthesis and findings on normative frameworks



Implementation gaps remain in the effective implementation of Article 8 of CEDAW.

The CEDAW Convention is a binding treaty with near universal ratification by 189 States Parties and with no reservations to Article 8. Yet, implementation gaps remain. CEDAW States Parties reports still identify underlying social norms and structural barriers such as disproportionate care responsibilities and lack of educational opportunities for women, as compared to men. Where progress is observed, it is slow and uneven.



Gender quota commitments without operational guidelines for the diplomatic apparatus are evident, with a few exceptions.

Nearly half of examined countries (93 out of 193) are committed to gender parity in their public institutions through gender quotas.³³ In some cases, these commitments identify MFAs as targets, but generally they are related to gender equality in public life without specific operational guidelines for diplomacy.³⁴ In Austria, commitment to parity includes the adoption of legal frameworks asserting gender equality in diplomatic recruitment and advancement. In its 2017 CEDAW country report, Austria reported that the 2011 amendment to the Federal Service Code raised the quota for women in public service. The quota was raised from 40 to 45 per cent in 2010 and to 50 per cent in 2012, contributing to increases in women's representation within the diplomatic corps, albeit unevenly at the highest levels. Between 2011 and 2016, there was an approximate 20 per cent increase in the number of women holding leadership roles within the diplomatic service of Austria.³⁵



Gender-responsive foreign policies as institutional accelerators. In countries that have embedded gender equality as an explicit foreign policy objective, spillover effects into the implementation of Article 8 are observable. In Slovenia, a 2009 review of equal opportunities within the diplomatic service led to substantive reforms.³⁶ Since then, targeted measures have favoured qualified women in competitive scenarios, reflecting sustained governmental commitment to gender parity.

For example, its 2014 CEDAW country report shows that in 2012, Slovenia's MFA put in place a policy on diversity and numerical targets set for each year, to be monitored closely in accordance with the "comply or explain" principle. In 2020, a study in Slovenia, conducted in cooperation with Iceland's MFA showed a 7 percentage point increase (51 per cent to 58 per cent) of women in the foreign service between 2000 and 2020. However, women still formed a minority of applicants for Ambassador-level posts.³⁷

BOX 3. QUOTE FROM KII-02

“In the last promotion exams, [MFA] applied the first-time affirmative action. So, there were more spots for women than men, and [this] responded to those gaps that we have in numbers. [My country] adopted a feminist foreign policy and I think that was a factor [for change] because according to that, you’re supposed to promote gender equality to the outside, but also you have to take action [on] the inside to be coherent.”

– Anonymous interviewee. Key informant interview, October 2025.

Where gender equality is articulated as a foreign policy objective and supported by leadership, institutional mechanisms – including revised recruitment criteria, transparent promotion pathways, targeted career-development programmes and accountability systems for outcomes tend to follow, albeit slowly and unevenly.

Structural barriers

According to research undertaken for the World Bank, nearly half of women around the world still face discriminatory legal barriers.³⁸ And while overtly discriminatory laws barring women from diplomatic service have largely been eliminated, broader systems of discrimination produce systematically unequal outcomes. These practices operate beneath the surface of formal equality, rendering barriers invisible yet potentially effective in limiting women’s equal advancement to the highest levels of diplomacy.

Even under conditions of formal equality and non-discriminatory policies, institutions reproduce inequality through informal rules, unstated expectations and masculinized norms that define ‘ideal’ diplomats and leaders. These barriers are often embedded in organizational cultures, career architectures and everyday practices. Addressing structural barriers requires not just rule changes but transformation of social norms and institutional logics.

Synthesis and findings on structural barriers



Gendered stratification persists across all cadres of the diplomatic corps.³⁹ Across countries, women constitute larger proportions of attachés, third secretaries and administrative staff, but diminish markedly at senior or middle levels – ambassadors, ministers, counsellors, first secretaries⁴⁰ (see Table 1 for illustration of different diplomatic ranks). The discrepancy between formal equality and realities of exclusion across ranks defines the glass ceiling – intangible barriers with tangible consequences.

BOX 4. CORE DIPLOMATIC RANKS

Across countries, women constitute larger proportions of attachés, third secretaries and administrative staff, but diminish markedly at senior or middle levels.



Note: This is illustrative of substantive ranks which determine protocol placements. In some cases, diplomatic officers have a functional title which describe their area of expertise or specific duties assigned to them. For example, legal attaché, labour attaché, military attaché etc. The use of "Attaché" in this context is a functional description and is not necessarily related to the lowest diplomatic rank of Attaché. A Counsellor or a First Secretary by substantive rank may have the functions of a legal attaché. Members of the diplomatic corps of different ranks also serve at capital level in various roles in between postings abroad.



Barriers to equitable career progression continue to linger. About 31 per cent of countries examined (60 out of 194) provide the option of submitting applications online via a specified portal or government affiliated websites – a positive development for transparency – and a majority advertise for positions in public forums, like official government websites. This entry-level access, however, does not address mid-career and senior-level attrition.

In Mexico, to address a persistent structural imbalance ratio of 66 per cent men to 34 per cent women in the foreign service, a policy announced in 2024 commits to admit two qualified women for every one male candidate who passes the diplomatic entry examination – a reversed ratio of 66.7 per cent women to 33.3 per cent men.⁴¹ In the same year, the Foreign Service promotion exam for career personnel in the Diplomatic-Consular and Technical-Administrative branches was introduced with more positions reserved for women to achieve majority or equal promotions for women in the two branches⁴² whose proportion typically reduces as the career ladder advances.

This pipeline leakage, evident in most countries globally, indicates that inclusive entry systems are necessary, but on their own insufficient, to guarantee substantive equality

across the full spectrum of the diplomatic pipeline. Career progression mechanisms, including promotion criteria, posting assignments, access to career-critical experiences, mentorship and networks require equal scrutiny and reform.



Strategic portfolios for women in the diplomatic corps are withheld. Women diplomats are often concentrated in portfolios such as development, health, human rights and humanitarian policy, while remaining underrepresented in areas like defence, sanctions and economic strategy. Portfolio segregation reflects and reinforces stereotypes about women’s competencies and appropriate roles, systematically excluding them from career-accelerating experiences that later determine eligibility for senior leadership.⁴³

Where women do achieve ambassadorial rank, they are significantly less likely to serve in countries that are deemed strategic due to their geopolitical positioning.⁴⁴



Leadership for women in the diplomatic corps sometimes occurs at precarious periods. In some cases, women gain access to senior roles disproportionately during resource constraints or crises – positions with diminished substantive power where failure risks are high and resources scarce.⁴⁵ As diplomatic budgets are “dwarfed by defence budgets,”⁴⁶ women may inherit leadership with limited leverage and face disproportionate criticism if unable to reverse decline.



Family-friendly policies have an impact on women’s participation in the diplomatic corps. Many countries have implemented family-friendly policies in principle, yet these remain poorly calibrated to the realities of diplomatic life. Analysis of the Japanese diplomatic service reveals that while formal family policies exist, workplace norms of presenteeism and total availability impede the effectiveness of these measures.⁴⁷

Career advancement is tied to constant mobility, frequent rotations between headquarters and posts, and long and irregular working hours. These expectations collide with caregiving responsibilities and make partnered or parenting arrangements harder to sustain. This is a structural feature that systematically disadvantages women who devote 2.5 times as many hours per day to unpaid domestic and care work compared to men.⁴⁸

BOX 5. QUOTE FROM KII-01

“One diplomat recounted spending half her salary on childcare costs that far exceeded ministry allowances – a penalty her male peers did not face in comparable measure. She noted the stark choice: “I couldn’t have children very early on because I was trying to climb the ranks [...] I achieved many of my professional goals by the time I became a mother – at 42. [...] I don’t believe the system is yet ready for us to have everything at the same time – to be a full-fledged mother and to be a full-fledged senior leader.”

– Anonymous interviewee. Key informant interview, October 2025.



Mentorship scarcity and limited access to networks persist. Advancement in a diplomatic career depends not only on formal qualifications but on access to formal and informal networks, insider knowledge and active mentorship. Women diplomats face documented disadvantages: even when occupying comparable roles and communicating at similar rates, their voices “travel less far” – one study shows women diplomats’ social media posts receive far fewer amplifications, muting their agenda-setting power and professional recognition.⁴⁹ While there is mentorship in some cases, the KIIs and FGD used for this paper noted the importance of mentorship for career progression, which was acknowledged as scarce for women in the diplomatic corps.



Training of the diplomatic corps often does not challenge structural barriers. UN Women’s mapping of trends of the diplomatic corps shows that generally all countries offer some standard diplomatic training, including on the country’s foreign policy objectives, diplomatic protocol courses, language instruction, etc. However, only a minority integrate training focused on gender perspectives in various aspects of foreign policy. Many of those that include gender perspectives have made specific gender-responsive foreign policy commitments, particularly around the WPS agenda. For the most part, however, across countries and regions, training often does not address the institution itself – it does not challenge structural biases, prepare managers to recognize and correct disparate impact, or equip diplomats with strategies to navigate masculinized institutional cultures.⁵⁰

In France, internal training on gender equality has been prioritized in alignment with its Feminist Foreign Policy.⁵¹ In Ukraine, UN Women has supported training to develop Ukraine’s ambitions for a gender-responsive diplomatic corps.⁵² Similarly, as part of the United Arab Emirates (UAE)’s Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak Women, Peace and Security Initiative – supported by UN Women – the most recent cohort in 2025 integrated women-centred foreign policy principles into its broader WPS training. This marks a shift from focusing solely on individual skills-development to preparing women to actively shape national and international policy agendas.



Data gaps undermine accountability of commitments and comparative analysis.

The majority (62 per cent, or 116 States Parties reports to CEDAW) did not provide comparable data on the proportion of women in the diplomatic corps and the disaggregation that would enable comparative analysis.⁵³ For example, in some reports, only the number of women in the MFA was provided without the total number of MFA staff to establish the proportion of women vis-à-vis men. Most of the reports on implementation of Article 8 did not disaggregate the data on the diplomatic corps to indicate time-in-grade by gender, promotion success rates, or the distribution of women across mission types (bilateral vs. multilateral), locations (headquarters vs. overseas, hardship tiers) and specializations (political, economic, security, legal, public diplomacy). Without this granular data, structural bottlenecks remain invisible, limiting evidence-based institutional reporting and assessment of progress over time.

BOX 6. COUNTRY EXAMPLES

Australia centres on concrete, institution-wide initiatives that hardwire gender equality into diplomatic practice. A whole-of-foreign-policy gender strategy (adopted in 2016) mainstreams gender across five priority areas, including preventing sexual and gender-based violence, advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender-responsive peace and security, gender-equitable climate and humanitarian action, inclusive trade and support for locally led women's leadership. A dedicated Ambassador for Gender Equality leads international advocacy, public diplomacy and outreach, enabling high-level accountability and visibility. Internally, within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), the Women in Leadership Strategy (launched in 2015) operationalizes progression and retention through measures such as gender balance on departmental committees, systematic attention to women's visibility as speakers and experts, and a workplace culture that recognizes and celebrates women's contributions. In 2020, DFAT reviewed the implementation of the strategy and found that as of 2019 October, 61 per cent of all DFAT employees were women. Yet, men still outnumbered women with a 2 to 1 ratio in the most senior roles in DFAT. In 2025, 43 per cent of Australian Ambassadors were women, according to the Women in Diplomacy Index.

In 2024, **Honduras** signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM) of the Organization of American States (OAS), establishing a collaboration framework to identify and address existing inequality gaps in Honduran foreign policy. Its main objective is to increase and strengthen women's participation and integrate the equality and rights approach into the Honduran public administration and foreign service. Following the signing of the MoU, the CIM/OAS and the Government of Honduras will carry out a comprehensive diagnosis and an action plan to address existing inequalities. According to the Women in Diplomacy Index, the proportion of Honduran women ambassadors grew by 12 percentage points – rising from 25 per cent in 2024 to 37 per cent in 2025.

In **Liberia**, following a political commitment to advance a gender-responsive foreign policy in 2023, a comprehensive gender assessment of the MFA was conducted in 2024 with the support of UN Women. Recommendations arising from assessment findings identify targeted

measures to support women's participation and equal representation in the diplomatic corps, including: potential application of quotas in the diplomatic corps; provision of gender-responsive training; strengthened collaboration with the legislature; and MFA coordination with other ministries, departments and agencies to accelerate implementation of Liberia's gender responsive foreign policy commitments.

Spain has turned the reform gaze inwards and towards equality within its diplomatic service. Since the adoption of its Feminist Foreign Policy, Spain has committed to collecting gender-disaggregated data and intensified promotion of the diplomatic service to university students, while standardizing gender equality training in the MFA. Spain's Foreign Action Strategy (2025–2028) recognizes advancement of work-life balance, equality and diversity as a fundamental pillar of the Spanish Foreign Service; and commits to take targeted action to ensure balanced representation of women and men at all levels and categories. It is also worth noting Spain's commitment to qualitative representation in leadership by appointing women as Ambassadors and Heads of Missions in geopolitically strategic locations.

The **UAE** illustrates how a strategic, whole-of-government approach can advance women in diplomacy. In its 2020 CEDAW report, the UAE notes that high-level mandates task the Prime Minister's Office in coordination with the General Women's Union with increasing women ambassadors, peace envoys and representation in international organizations, supported by a federal Gender Balance Council that targets representation gaps in decision-making. The systematic appointment of women to ambassadorial roles, underpinned by the National Strategy for Empowerment of Women, normalizes women's leadership in the diplomatic corps. As of June 2024, women constituted 30 per cent of the diplomatic corps in the UAE. Dedicated research on women in diplomacy, regular reporting to CEDAW and the use of indices to track progress are some of the enablers of accountability mechanisms across the diplomatic corps.

In **Ukraine**, the *Strategy for Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men in the Diplomatic Service* adopted policies on combating harassment; improving infrastructure (including a children's room at the MFA); promoting women's leadership through a Women's Diplomatic Club; and increased opportunities for mentorship. Moreover, legislative reform and awareness campaigns are being used to integrate gender equality into all levels of diplomacy and leveraging wartime shifts to challenge norms for greater inclusion. In 2024, findings were released from the second gender audit of Ukraine's MFA, conducted with the support of UN Women. Results showed that since 2019, the proportion of women in senior positions in the foreign service grew by 6 per cent, reaching 30 per cent. Notably, the number of women serving as ambassadors and heads of missions had risen by 8 per cent since 2019, reaching 22 per cent.

Viet Nam, in its 2023 CEDAW country report, demonstrated strong political commitment and cited legal reforms, targeted career support and capacity-building via ambitious quotas, targeted training and promoting a network for women in foreign affairs (such as the ASEAN Community Women's Circle of Ha Noi), to foster cooperation and support. The target is to have 75 per cent women in key leadership positions in government. These measures have notably increased the number of women Heads of Viet Nam's representative missions abroad (doubling from 8.1 to 16 per cent between 2015 and 2019).

Conclusion

International instruments and national frameworks recognize the right to equal representation in diplomacy as a legal and human rights obligation. Despite this, the path to parity remains arduous. The steep drop-off of women between entry, mid-career and senior leadership ranks in the diplomatic corps indicates a pervasive pipeline leakage that is not addressed by transparent entry processes alone. Gains towards parity stall when commitments lack enforcement mechanisms or operate in isolation from leadership accountability structures.

The path forward lies in translating formal commitments, including to Article 8 of CEDAW, into a gender-responsive architecture of diplomacy. This requires sustained institutional transformation, including through dismantling the underlying attitudes, practices and incentive structures that privilege particular gendered, racialised, and classed models of diplomatic professionalism, limiting women's equal representation in the diplomatic corps. Measures such as target-setting, collection, dissemination and use of gender disaggregated data, redesigning merit systems to remove bias, and culture change initiatives are necessary. Leadership-driven accountability and whole-of-government collaboration is equally crucial: senior officials, including gender champions, must actively model commitments, allocate resources, and provide necessary checks for accountability and measurable progress.

Recommendations

- 1. Strengthen implementation of Article 8 of CEDAW:** To accelerate progress towards effective implementation of Article 8, States Parties should continue to take targeted measures to ensure that women have equal opportunities to represent their governments abroad and participate in the affairs of international organizations devoid of any discrimination and other structural barriers. Existing General Recommendations, including GR40 and upcoming ones provide options for specific actions that States Parties can take to attain parity in political life at the international level, including in the diplomatic corps.
- 2. Strengthen reporting guidelines for Article 8.** The CEDAW Committee has an important role in enabling this, including by recommending a list of targeted questions as part of the reporting guidelines for States Parties. Reporting guidelines may request the inclusion of specific, data-driven sections in the States Parties reports with gendered disaggregation in a standardized format to enhance data interoperability, detailing the challenges and progress on effective implementation of Article 8, including actions taken in line with General Recommendation 40 and other general recommendations.
- 3. Conduct participatory gender audits, assessments and analyses of MFAs** to provide an evidence base that captures the specific, lived experiences of staff to identify discriminatory practices, other structural barriers and drive accountability towards practical recommendations arising from the assessments. This approach ensures targeted, data-backed interventions by MFAs as they advance implementation of Article 8.

- 4. Establish robust systems for collecting, analysing and disseminating disaggregated data** on the diplomatic corps, encompassing recruitment, retention, promotion, attrition and workplace experiences by gender, rank and posting. MFAs may work in partnership with national statistical offices for appropriate methodologies and frequency of data collection and dissemination, embracing the use of new and emerging technologies.
- 5. Conduct research on women in diplomacy, including in the Global South, where data are sparse.** Document women's contributions to international politics over time, including through research collaboration between MFAs, diplomatic training institutions, other academic institutions and civil society.
- 6. Develop guidelines to operationalize gender parity commitments in the diplomatic corps.** Progress towards parity commitments in political life at the domestic and international levels must be mutually reinforcing. Where parity commitments exist in national frameworks, including through quotas, develop clear guidelines for how these apply at each stage of recruitment, appointment and promotion across all cadres of the diplomatic corps.
- 7. Establish and implement comprehensive family-friendly policies for the diplomatic corps,** including flexible work arrangements, paid parental leave with job protection and no performance penalty, systematic return-to-work support to prevent post-leave attrition, and support for childcare. Fair practice would also ensure that childcare and schooling allowances are calibrated to real local costs for diplomats posted overseas. Where national care frameworks exist, develop guidelines for their application to the diplomatic corps.
- 8. Review and strengthen diplomatic training curricula through a gender lens,** including by embedding: normative frameworks and standards for gender equality (including obligations and General Recommendations under Article 8 of CEDAW); awareness of discriminatory social norms, legal, policy, institutional and other structural barriers to equal participation in the diplomatic corps calibrated to national contexts; and practical strategies for addressing barriers faced by women in the diplomatic corps.
- 9. Establish and nurture formal or informal professional networks for women in the diplomatic corps** to facilitate strategic dialogues, regular networking, skills workshops, peer support forums and intergenerational mentorship by current or former cohorts of the diplomatic corps who have incentives to actively champion mentees for assignments, promotions and inspire gender-responsive strategies in global governance.
- 10. Strengthen an enabling environment for women's participation and equal representation in the diplomatic corps,** including through: legal, policy and institutional measures; fostering coordination mechanisms across government ministries, departments and agencies, including between MFAs and national gender machineries to advance gender mainstreaming in foreign policy apparatus and diplomacy; and closer partnership between MFAs and parliamentary committees on foreign affairs to enhance requisite legislation, budget allocations and accountability mechanisms for existing commitments.

Endnotes

- 1 IPU and UN Women, 2025.
- 2 IPU, 2025.
- 3 UN Women, 2025.
- 4 Chehab, 2025.
- 5 Enloe, 1990; McGlen and Sarkees, 1993; Neumann, 2008; Towns and Niklasson, 2023.
- 6 UNDP, 2025.
- 7 United Nations, 1995.
- 8 Aggestam and Towns, 2019.
- 9 Do Paço, 2021.
- 10 Federal Ministry European and International Affairs (Austria), 2014.
- 11 UN Women, 2019a.
- 12 Ansorg, Haastrup and Wright, 2021.
- 13 FCO Historians, 2018.
- 14 United Nations, 1979.
- 15 Chehab, 2025.
- 16 Hutchings and Suri, 2017.
- 17 Towns and Niklasson, 2017 reinforce this point. For exceptions to this rule see for example Del Rio, 2016; and GAO, 1989.
- 18 Donovan, 2025 p. 239.
- 19 Mackay and Krook, 2015, p. 6; Towns, 2020; see also Stanfield, 2024.
- 20 Aggestam and Towns, 2018, p. 11
- 21 Malone, 1997.
- 22 United Nations 1979, CEDAW Article 8.
- 23 Kran, 2021.
- 24 The CEDAW Committee is the body of independent experts that monitors implementation of the CEDAW Convention. It provides interpretations that clarify the Convention's provisions, explain State obligations and provide guidance on specific thematic issues through general recommendations.
- 25 CEDAW Committee, 1997.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 CEDAW Committee, 2024.

- 29** HRC, 2025.
- 30** Ibid.
- 31** Ibid.
- 32** UN ECOSOC (United Nations Economic and Social Council), 2025.
- 33** United Nations, 2025.
- 34** UN Women, 2025a.
- 35** Ibid.
- 36** Jazbec et al., 2010.
- 37** Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Slovenia), 2020.
- 38** World Bank, 2024.
- 39** McCarthy, 2014; Towns and Niklasson, 2025; Lecler and Goltrant, 2025.
- 40** UN Women, 2025a; Chehab, 2024.
- 41** Government of Mexico, 2024a.
- 42** Government of Mexico, 2024b.
- 43** Smith and Kozielska, 2024.
- 44** Ibid.
- 45** Ibid.
- 46** Ibid.
- 47** Flowers, 2025.
- 48** UN Women, 2025b.
- 49** Donovan, 2025; see also Smith and Kozielska, 2024; Rahman, 2011.
- 50** Bode, 2020; Turunen, 2022.
- 51** Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2022.
- 52** UN Women Ukraine, 2025.
- 53** UN Women, 2025a.

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UN Women exists to advance women’s rights, gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. As the lead United Nations entity on gender equality, we shift laws, institutions, social norms and services to close the gender gap and build an equal world for all women and girls. We keep the rights of women and girls at the centre of global progress – always, everywhere. Because gender equality is not just what we do. It is who we are.

