LSE Ideas

Strengthening the Representation of Women in Diplomacy: Lessons from the Field

Karen E. Smith and Marta Kozielska

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Women in Diplomacy

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Karen E. Smith and Marta Kozielska

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.

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 strategic vision. Marta is a policy analyst and advisor specialising in the design, delivery, and evaluation of evidence-based policies and programmes, across the UK and EU. Her work focuses on social and financial inclusion, gender equality, fundamental rights, and international governance, having worked across academia, think tanks, public sector consulting, and government. Formerly, Marta led policy research and evaluation projects for the EU, focusing on strengthening citizen engagement and inclusion in democratic processes and improving EU decision-making and funding mechanisms.

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Executive Summary

In June 2024, the LSE IDEAS Women in Diplomacy team published a report on Strengthening the Representation of Women in Diplomacy: Challenges and representation and voices in diplomacy and foreign policy. In 2025, we carried out further research and held dialogues with women diplomats across several global cities to deepen our analysis and develop more detailed recommendations, which are reflected in this second report.

This report situates the challenges to women's representation in diplomacy within their broader institutional and socio-political contexts and identifies practical, actionable, and transferable solutions. Through our dialogues, we identified a range of structural, institutional, and cultural barriers and co-created a practical toolkit, based on proven practices, that address them. The solutions encompass critical priority areas for action across diplomatic institutions, including data collection, fairer recruitment and career progression, expanded professional development, and improved work-life balance.

Between April and July 2026, four additional briefing papers will be published to provide more detailed, more detailed evidence of good practices with respect to targets and quotas, mentorship, work-life balance and handling the media.

Strengthening women's representation in diplomacy matters because it goes beyond questions of workplace equity and individual opportunity to fundamental issues of human rights, representation, policy effectiveness, and credibility. A diplomatic service represents a country and therefore should be representative of that country. Women contribute distinct leadership styles, broaden policy priorities, strengthen negotiation processes, and give access to populations that are inaccessible to male counterparts. Diversity in diplomacy can deliver more durable agreements and better foreign policy outcomes. This report provides leaders, networks, and individual managers with ideas for organisational and policy changes that can strengthen women's representation in diplomacy and foreign policy in a way that benefits everyone.

Introduction

The LSE IDEAS Women in Diplomacy (WiD) project was launched in 2022 with the mission to improve women's representation and leadership in diplomacy, foreign policy, and policy-making by identifying barriers and enablers to women's advancement in national foreign ministries, diplomatic services and international organisations.

Since its inception, the project has established a strong foundation rooted in research, dialogue, and collaboration. The WiD team has actively engaged with practitioners, led discussions online (through the LSE IDEAS Women in Diplomacy podcast series) and offline (through dialogues and roundtables), and held public events.[1] We have built meaningful partnerships with networks of women diplomats, national foreign ministries, and international organisations, and positioned the project as a bridge between academia and practice. In June 2024, the WiD team published an inaugural report on *Strengthening the Representation of Women in Diplomacy: Challenges and Policy Solutions* (Smith and Kozielska, 2024).

The report captured and articulated trends and patterns that were emerging through podcast interviews with senior women diplomats, a review of existing literature, and expert feedback. It examined women's underrepresentation in diplomacy, explored key barriers women face, and presented recommendations for diplomatic services and international organisations, covering areas such as gender-equality plans, data collection, recruitment and career development. The report was widely read, received positive feedback, and was reportedly used as a tool to make a case for change within some embassies and foreign ministries.

While comprehensive, we recognised that our first report did not capture the full range of barriers or potential solutions, nor did it reflect the diverse experiences and voices across different contexts, regions, identities, and levels of seniority. Therefore, we used it as a basis for further research and dialogues which we carried out in 2025, with funding from the LSE's Engagement and Partnerships Fund. This second report therefore builds on the first edition of the report and reflects the work we have done in 2025.

This report will be complemented by four additional briefing papers which will provide further analysis on selected topics: 1) *targets and quotas*, 2) *mentorship*, 3) w*ork-life balance*, and 4) *handling the media*. They will be published between April and July 2026. While these topics are addressed in this report to some extent, they warrant deeper examination given their prominence in our research. Separate shorter papers on these subjects will allow us to provide more evidence and best practices that complement this report's broader overview.

1 For the Spotify podcast series, see: https://open.spotify.com show/5oLXGWOUEXsRjSesqkhsQy.

How we gathered lessons from the field

Over the course of 2025, we convened a series of dialogues and consultations with diplomats, experts, and practitioners across selected regions. We used contacts that we had developed between 2022 and 2024 with networks of women diplomats, individual women diplomats, foreign ministries and international organisations. We conducted in-person dialogues in seven cities: Abu Dhabi, Brussels, Geneva, London, Mexico City, New York and Ottawa. We chose to hold dialogues in Brussels, Geneva and New York because these cities have large diplomatic communities due to the presence of the European Union (Brussels) and the United Nations (Geneva and New York). We held dialogues and events in our home city, London, and convened dialogues in Abu Dhabi, Mexico City and Ottawa where we had already established contacts with networks of women diplomats. Canada, Mexico and the United Arab Emirates have taken steps to strengthen women's representation in diplomacy so we also felt there were important lessons that could be learned in dialogues there. In almost all the seven cities, we engaged with diplomats from that country's foreign ministry, and with diplomats posted to that country from abroad. Almost all the participants in our dialogues were women. Some officials and diplomats from international organisations also participated. Participants in our dialogues included ambassadors and permanent representatives, deputy ambassadors, mid-level diplomats, and junior diplomats. We engaged with approximately 200 diplomats, experts and practitioners (including academics, officials, NGO and civil society leaders, policy advisors, students), including approximately 140 diplomats from over 50 countries from six continents. Our dialogues were held under the Chatham House rule, so we do not attribute quotes or information to specific individuals. We are enormously grateful to the people, institutions and networks that hosted us and to all the diplomats who took the time to participate in the project (see Appendix).

In our dialogues, we discussed the findings of our 2024 report and examined barriers and potential solutions in greater depth to better understand underlying challenges experienced by diplomats internationally and across intersecting identities.[2] This approach enabled us to situate the challenges within their broader institutional and socio-political contexts and identify practical, actionable, and transferable solutions. Together with the participants in our dialogues, we co-created a toolkit that can be used to push for meaningful changes within foreign ministries and diplomatic services that will boost the representation of women in diplomacy.

2 All the dialogues were conducted in English, which may have excluded non-English speakers, although English is widely spoken in international diplomacy. We also gathered key documents, though many foreign ministries lack accessible records, which still restricts coverage and depth of research that can be conducted into women's representation in diplomacy.

With the support of co-hosts, we also held public events in several of the cities we visited, where we presented our project and engaged in public discussions on barriers and solutions with students and practitioners. Throughout 2025, we also continued our public conversations with senior women diplomats as part of the LSE IDEAS Women in Diplomacy podcast series.

Therefore, this second report is based on those dialogues, consultations and events, 23 podcasts with women diplomats, a review of existing literature, a review of official reports and resources shared by select foreign ministries and organisations, and expert feedback.[3] In the report, we have focused principally on national diplomatic services, rather than international organisations – though the findings in this report. are not irrelevant to these institutions. Future research could tackle barriers and solutions to women's representation in international organisations, and other projects do focus on that issue.[4]

Firstly, this report summarises the state of women's representation in diplomacy since 2024 and makes the case for strengthening diversity in diplomacy. Secondly, it explores the key barriers women face in diplomatic services and foreign policy. Thirdly, it identifies practical strategies to overcome them. Beyond routine recommendations, the report presents a set of lessons learned, good practices, and actionable solutions – a toolkit – that can be adopted by individual leaders, networks, and foreign ministries.

The report's final remarks reflect on the overall situation, our responsibility to improve it, and how to take action. While there is no single solution, given the significant influence of both internal institutional structures and the broader socio-political context, it highlights what matters most and identifies non-negotiables that are key for meaningful progress. The main objective of the report is to provide concrete, practical guidance for policymakers and organisations seeking to advance gender equality and strengthen diversity in diplomacy and foreign policy.

3 A more detailed summary of our engagements that fed into the report is included in the Appendix.

4 See, for example, the work of GWL Voices: https://www.gwlvoices.org/.

Why it is important to increase women's representation and diversity in diplomacy

Though data on women's representation in diplomacy is still scarce, there is increasingly more data on the number of women in senior positions such as ambassadorships.[5] The latest 'Women in Diplomacy' index from the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy (AGDA) tells us that in 2025 women held only 22.5% of ambassadorial positions (Chehab, 2025). This is a modest 1.5 percentage point increase from just under 21% in 2024.[6]

Further, regional disparities in representation persist: 29% of ambassadors from the Americas and Europe are women, while that percentage in Asia declined to 13% in 2025 (from 14% the year before) and MENA lags at 11% (Chehab, 2025). Progress in multilateral spaces has also stagnated: a recent GWL Voices report on women in multilateralism found that in 2025, 23% of Permanent Representatives to UN were women, a percentage that has been roughly the same for four years (GWL Voices, 2026, p. 21). This is before we further consider an intersectional breakdown for which data are not available.

In general, women are considerably less likely to be posted to high-profile, prestigious postings in which a role of ambassador matters the most to the country's international position, diplomatic relations, and interests. The AGDA WiD index mentions a pattern of 'strong diplomatic reciprocity' among Nordic countries, which are both top senders and recipients of women diplomats, potentially reflecting that these destinations are perceived as 'family-friendly and safe' (Chehab, 2025, p. 7). Women ambassadors are disproportionately assigned to smaller states and traditionally 'safe' postings rather than the most economically and militarily strategic positions, indicating gendered patterns that persist not only in who becomes an ambassador, but also in where they are sent.

There has been some progress and intention for change. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) has been ratified by 189 states and includes the commitment 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' (article 8). A roadmap for achieving that commitment was issued

5 Thanks to projects such as: The GenDip Dataset on Gender and Diplomatic Representation by University of Gothenburg (Sweden); The 'Women in Diplomacy Index' by Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy (UAE); The Women in Multilateralism Report by GWL Voices.

6 The modest increase in percentage of women ambassadors was also reported by the GenDip database on women in bilateral diplomacy: the percentage rose from 20.9 in 2021 to 23.4 in 2024 (Towns and Niklasson, 2025).

in 2024 (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 2024.[7] Some foreign ministries lead their government's gender equality agendas, including on feminist foreign policy (FFP) and Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agendas, framing women's inclusion as 'smart investment' (Bigio and Vogelstein, 2020, p.20. Despite this advocacy for gender mainstreaming, institutional measures lag behind external rhetoric, and there is a serious gap between commitments and reality (Green, Kozielska and Smith, 2023. Countries with FFPs average 31.3% women ambassadors, while those with WPS National Action Plans (NAP reach only 23.65% -figures that fall far short of the WPS agenda's core participation pillar as it marked its 25th anniversary in 2025 (Chehab, 2025).

Women continue to be significantly underrepresented in diplomatic roles, especially in senior positions. Although we heard through our dialogues that entry into the diplomatic services is increasingly gender-balanced in numerous countries, there is a 'bunching' of women in mid-level career postings. They have not yet broken through the 'glass ceiling' and this, combined with other obstacles women face, can lead to women leaving the diplomatic profession. 'Bunching' not only limits women's opportunities but also reduces the effectiveness of diplomacy itself.

The implications of this extend beyond questions of workplace equity and individual opportunity to fundamental issues of human rights, representation, policy effectiveness, and credibility. A diplomatic service represents a country and therefore must be representative of the country, as several of the participants in our dialogues asserted. A more diverse foreign ministry will also 'reflect better … the global environment in which we operate', according to the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2015, p. 5).

A growing body of research shows how gender equality strengthens institutional and diplomatic outcomes (see Box 1 on the next page).

The next section of this report provides details of the barriers and challenges that women can face in seeking to pursue a career in diplomacy. What is striking is that many of these obstacles are seemingly universal, with only some variation across countries in terms of the extent and severity of the obstacles and the progress that has been made in dismantling them.

7 For more on the normative frameworks in particular, see UN Women (2026) forthcoming.

Box 1. How gender equality strengthens institutional and diplomatic outcomes

For example…

- Women contribute distinct leadership styles, broaden policy priorities, and give access to populations that are inaccessible to male counterparts (United Nations Development Programme, 2023).
- Women's involvement in peace agreement increases their long-term durability by 35%, and gender equality correlates with reduced conflict propensity within and between states (Council on Foreign Relations, no date; Hudson *et al.*, 2012). For example, the inclusion of women in peace processes in Northern Ireland, Liberia, and Colombia led to including provisions that address broader societal needs beyond military concerns, including education, healthcare, and economic recovery (O'Reilly, Ó Súilleabháin and Paffenholz, 2015).
- Sweden's feminist foreign policy prioritised and integrated gender analysis into arms trade, conflict prevention, and development aid, and, as a result, led to more comprehensive risk assessments (Sweden. Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2018).
- Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy proved that women's involvement in climate decision-making leads to more effective adaptation and mitigation strategies, and, more generally, points to key areas of relevance making a case for gender equality: empowerment of women and girls, human dignity, growth, environmental health, inclusive governance and peace (Government of Canada, no date).
- Gender diversity in economic policy teams correlates with better macroeconomic outcomes and more comprehensive policy analysis (Lagarde and Ostry, 2018).
- Diversity in diplomacy can deliver more durable agreements and better foreign policy outcomes. To quote the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade again:

  "Best practice tells us organisations succeed when they harness the diversity of their staff – embracing new models of leadership, contestability and flexible work practices. Benefits arise because diverse leaders can challenge prevailing approaches by injecting new identities, priorities and foreign policy perspectives (Australia. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2020, p. 4)."

These benefits can be seen and tracked across other areas of life and work as well, from country-level politicians and parliamentarians to other sectors, such as business and entrepreneurship. Finally, better integration and inclusion of women into life and work, at all levels, can add $12 trillion to global GDP in a single decade, cut worldwide extreme poverty by 12%, and ensure that money earned is invested back into children and family, improving nutrition, health, and education for the next generation (United Nations Population Fund, 2025; Elder, 2013).

Barriers and challenges to women's representation in diplomacy

Our 2024 report noted several barriers to women's representation within diplomacy, including the three 'glasses': *glass ceilings*, which prevent women from acceding to leadership positions; *glass walls*, which can confine women to working on particular 'soft' portfolios such as development or women's issues (Haack, 2022, p. 121); and *glass cliffs*, which enable women to access leadership positions but only when or because funding for diplomacy is decreasing or there is an institutional crisis, so failure is more likely (Stephenson, 2022). Further, gendered perceptions of women's ability can limit their influence, harassment can still be a danger, and the challenges of work-life balance can discourage women from entering the diplomatic profession or lead them to leave it.

Our dialogues with women diplomats throughout 2025 revealed that these barriers are very real across contexts and seniorities, and they identified the specific ways in which they challenge their work as diplomats. They also highlighted how other barriers – socio-cultural, institutional, political, economic – impede the recruitment andretention of women diplomats, and especially those from underrepresented groups.

Patriarchal and chauvinistic social and cultural norms can act as barriers to women's entry into and progression within diplomacy (leading to the problem of 'bunching' of women below senior levels). Cultural norms may mean that male spouses are reluctant to follow their partners when they are posted abroad, especially if they cannot work (for example, because of visa issues or a lack of opportunities). Societal expectations that women will be the primary care-givers (for children, for elderly parents) remain strong in most countries. This can create a work-life balance problem for women in particular, and may lead women diplomats to leave the profession, often mid-career, especially if they have children (Fellegi, Koci and Benesova, 2023).

> "One ambassador was told: 'Why did you send me a pregnant woman if she won't be here in a couple of months?'"
>
> – Ambassador Valeria Csukasi, Women in Diplomacy (WiD) podcast, series 2, episode 8

Many of the participants in our dialogues emphasised that work-life balance is an ongoing, perennial challenge, which adds to the stress of the job, can lead to high rates of divorce or singledom among women diplomats, and causes 'leakage' from the pipeline of women's procession through a diplomatic career. Indeed, many participants noted that the pipeline leaks particularly at the mid-ranking stages of a career: the work-life balance can be easier to manage (comparatively) when diplomats are younger and can move around the world more easily; if diplomats then start a family, the challenges mount and some may then decide to leave the profession.

> "I have found that sometimes the glass ceiling is not glass, but … concrete."
>
> – Participant in dialogue

Their experiences have been backed up in several studies documenting the effects of such norms in limiting women's representation in diplomacy across a variety of different national contexts: by Aran and Brummer (2024, p. 371) for Israel; by Al Hassanieh (2023) for Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia; by Park (2023) for Lithuania; and by Rumelili and Suleymanoglu-Kurum (2018, pp. 99-101) for Türkiye. One Bulgarian diplomat recounts that she was 'warned that diplomatic service was not suitable for women who plan to start a family and raise a child' (Kostadinova, 2022, p. 423). As one study of women in diplomacy serving in Greece, Italy and Spain noted, 'archaic norms around women's place in society in general and within foreign policy in particular, stemming from stereotypes and historical cultural norms, have prohibited them from gaining a stronger foothold within foreign policymaking and diplomacy' (Baez, 2025, p. 5).

Other social norms are at play too, including gendered assumptions about ambassadors: there can still be expectations that the ambassador is a man, with many women ambassadors reporting that they can be mistaken for an assistant or the ambassador's partner – for example, see Ailish Campbell WiD podcast series 2, episode 7. Scholarly work has also found that women diplomats can encounter misogyny when trying to make male counterparts hear and accept their opinions, and male diplomats would comment on women's attire or capabilities (Park and Jaskaite-Confortola, 2025, p. 152). Tolerance of all-male

panels or all-male delegations to international negotiations can also send signals that women diplomats' views and voices are not particularly valued.

Patriarchal and patronising attitudes within foreign ministries can limit women's advancement in diplomacy, and participants in our dialogues shared some examples. There may be stated or unstated assumptions that women are unsuited to work in hardship posts, either because there are fears for their safety or because there are concerns that women would be too 'emotional' to handle the challenges. Yet service in hardship posts is usually necessary to progress to better postings and progress in a diplomatic career.

Promotion prospects can also be diminished because of the operation of male-dominated networks, and low expectations of women:

> "Males tend to recommend other males because they are friends, they go to play football together, they stay late hours together, avoiding coming back home."
>
> – Valeria Csukasi, WiD podcast series 2, episode. 8.

> "Women, especially women of colour, are underestimated."
>
> – Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, WiD podcast series 1, episode 1.

An extreme – but far too common – manifestation of patriarchy is sexual harassment. Our dialogues revealed accounts of physical harassment, and high levels of concern about online harassment. Within ministries there may be few, if any, clear procedures for handling complaints of sexual harassment, close to none for handling online harassment, and few consequences for engaging in harassment. There were concerns that young women working as local hires in embassies can be especially vulnerable, as well as concerns about harassment that can take place in international

> "I went on to have children and went into the career wilderness…It took me almost a generation to reclaim my career."
>
> – Ambassador Melissa Hitchman, WiD podcast, series 2, episode 1.

negotiating spaces, where the UN or other international organisation is powerless to take action against harassers if member states do not act.[8]

> “There is a ‘double penalty on women’: if they are at work, they are supposed to be home with the family, if they are at home with the family, they’re supposed to be at work, and no one is ever satisfied.”
>
> – Ann Linde, former Swedish foreign minister, WiD podcast, series 2, episode 3.

Diplomats, especially ambassadors, are very visible representatives of their countries or international organisations, and that visibility means they are vulnerable to online harassment. Several participants in our dialogues raised concerns about the spread of a new and horrific form of harassment, using AI to generate and then distribute degrading, abusive and sexually explicit images of a person, often women but also children. Some junior diplomats stated that this growing threat inhibits them from establishing any online presence, which in turn undermines their visibility and networking capability important at this stage of their career.

The example of harassment illustrates how institutional practices can be inimical to women’s advancement in diplomacy. In addition, informal norms around working hours, such as expectations of long hours in the office (‘no one can leave before the boss’) and/or being on call 24 hours affect all employees but have a particularly hard toll on women with caring responsibilities. In our dialogues, several deputy ambassadors or permanent representatives – in other words, mid-career diplomats – reported that the expectations that they will always be available were pervasive, as they are the last port of call before the ambassador or permanent representative needs to be brought in.

These workplace norms can impede the effectiveness of family policies: as a study of Japan’s foreign ministry illustrated, even generous formal policies designed to try to improve work-life balance will fail to do so if informal norms of ‘presenteeism and total availability’ remain unchallenged (Flowers, 2025). In the Danish foreign ministry, ‘As an employee, you need to work long hours at your desk in the ministry to be visible to management, who values hard work and long hours, including working on evenings’ (Hogenhaug, 2025, p. 171). But these norms can also have knock-on effects even for diplomats who are single, as several of the participants in our dialogues noted.

8 For one example of such harassment that attracted press attention, see Mooney and Hodgson (2023).

They may feel, or be, obliged to work overtime or take on additional responsibilities to help others who need to take time for family responsibilities. Although widespread, there were exceptions in some duty stations (e.g. where organisational and national cultures valued work–life balance, such as discouraging weekend work), as well as in teams led by senior leaders who were committed to setting a good example.

In addition, there are expectations surrounding the appearance of a diplomat that place a heavier burden on women than men. The stress of being judged on your appearance was mentioned by several participants in our dialogues. As Ann Towns argues, diplomatic appearance standards are largely gender binary, with male uniformity and female variation; more time and effort are demanded from female than male ambassadors; and diplomatic appearance standards demand women conform to upper class conventions and western physical appearance norms and avoid being perceived as 'sexy'. Women have to ensure they look professional, including having to care about hair, nails and makeup. As a result, women ambassadors 'spend roughly twice the amount of time on clothes and their appearance as their male colleagues… [and feel] stressed, insecure and uncomfortable about meeting diplomatic appearance standards' (Towns, 2025, p. 256).

Internal ministry procedures can also have unintended gendered impacts. For example, to be promoted in the Mexican foreign service, diplomats must pass exams, and those exams are held in Mexico City. Ambassador Jennifer Feller (WiD podcast, series 2, episode 4) noted that when she was a young mother with two small children, she had to 'travel for these promotion exams together with another colleague that just had a baby. And in the plane, there were also three men, three colleagues'. She added: "We were travelling with our babies, and they were travelling by themselves. They studied the whole flight. We didn't have a chance to study."

> "There's still discrimination against pregnancy and this concept that while you are pregnant, you are of no use for the service and that somebody has to do your job."
>
> – Valeria Csukasi, WiD podcast, series 2, episode 8.

> If a woman reaches a post of more responsibility, then you become a threat and suddenly you are branded with labels that are not applicable as well to men, like you are pushy, you are selfish, and you become so much more scrutinised on your daily life, how you dress, how you talk.
>
> – Ambassador Jennifer Feller, WiD podcast, series 2, episode 4.

Foreign ministries may also be blind to the specific stress that women diplomats can experience, as well as to health issues affecting women, such as endometriosis, reproductive health, and the menopause. Often there is a lack of targeted support to enable women to better cope with such health challenges which can influence their work considerably.

Challenging the social norms and institutional practices that may inhibit the representation of women in diplomacy requires strong political leadership – both within the ministry and outside it. Yet the rise to power of explicitly anti-gender equality parties and politicians combined with a backlash against so-called 'woke' policies such as equality, diversity and inclusion policies has instead created a context in which progress not only has slowed but can be reversed. As one participant warned, the rise of such politicians has emboldened colleagues who were always uncomfortable with efforts to enhance diversity, equality and inclusion. Another noted that 'global toxic masculinity is trickling down'.

Economic conditions can also act as a barrier to women's careers in diplomacy, and especially women from underrepresented groups. Diplomacy has long been, and remains, a career largely open to elites. Access to diplomatic careers tends to be open only to those with sufficient resources, those who live in or near the capital city, have a network of contacts, and/or have been educated at prestigious universities. As a result, diplomatic services do not fully reflect the diversity of the societies they represent, and recruitment pathways can reinforce broader societal and regional divides.

Preparing for diplomatic service exams, acquiring foreign language expertise, learning the language of diplomacy and international relations – all of these require time, economic resources, and the support of family and professional networks. As a result, entry into the profession is limited to a relatively narrow stratum of society.

Economic constraints – above all, budgetary pressures – affect working practices and norms within foreign ministries and embassies. Understaffing can increase workloads and therefore exacerbate work-life balance challenges. Frozen pay can demoralise diplomats, and economic constraints can also reduce opportunities for promotion: with opportunities for better-paying jobs in the private sector, ministries with such economic constraints risk losing mid-career diplomats in particular. Ministries with few resources may be unable (as well as unwilling) to provide the kinds of support that help to minimise work-life balance challenges, such as day care.

Most countries cannot afford large diplomatic networks, but even their limited number of embassies can be quite small. Ambassador Yvette Stevens (Women in Diplomacy podcast series 2, episode 5) put forward the case that Sierra Leone should have a delegation to the United Nations in Geneva (as well as New York), and when she then served as the first ambassador, she notes that 'I was the mission', helped only by one locally-hired assistant. She 'had to work very hard', averaging only about five hours of sleep a day. Such constraints affect both men and women, of course, but the expectations surrounding women's caring responsibilities can exacerbate their impact on women.

Despite all the above barriers facing women in diplomacy, the participants in our various dialogues still extolled the positive aspects of a diplomatic career ('it's a great job!'). The more experienced diplomats noted that they had witnessed enormous change for the better during their career. They shared examples of good practices that had contributed to this change. Participants in our dialogues value the opportunity to serve and represent their country, to contribute to solving international problems, to learn about other cultures and political systems. Attracting such committed public servants and ensuring that they remain in service should be a high priority for foreign ministries. The next section presents a toolkit for measures that they can use to pursue that priority.

> "Families are not 'personal effects': they can't just be moved to another country."
>
> – Participant in a dialogue.

Solutions: A toolkit

Our 2024 report made seven recommendations to foreign ministries and international organisations focused on understanding the problem within the organisation, and thinking more systematically about how to improve gender equality through internal, formal and informal measures, and externally-focused commitments:

1. Create and implement a plan to enhance gender equality and diversity within the organisation.
2. Collect gender-specific/gender-disaggregated data to set an evidence-based gender equality strategy.
3. Align both internal and external gender equality efforts.
4. Make sure that recruitment processes are fair and inclusive.
5. Consider and implement formal and informal career development support.
6. Rethink building design: make facilities inclusive and accessible,
7. Make social inclusion and gender equality non-negotiable and make its benefits known to everyone in the organisation.

Our dialogues with women diplomats in 2025 revealed that these recommendations are both important and relevant. Though they may seem simple and straightforward, our discussions have only re-confirmed that in many organisations, they are not commonplace. At the same time, we also learned that often a single measure without a broader gender equality commitment may be more effective than a comprehensive multi-step plan that exists without sufficient enforcement.

There are a wealth of good practices and a genuine intention for change in many governments and foreign ministries, evidenced by both literature and practice. Rather than cataloguing every recommendation, we prioritise the most cited and demonstrably effective solutions – those capable of working across contexts when adapted, tailored, and pursued with sustained commitment. The section below offers a suite of practical solutions, best practices, and lessons learned across identified key action areas: data collection, recruitment and accessibility, career progression, professional development, and work-life balance.

We will also publish four separate briefing papers with more detailed examples of good practices with respect to *quotas and targets*, *mentorship*, *work-life balance* and *handling the media*. These four topics were of particular importance by our interlocutors and thus merit a distinct and deeper focus.

The solutions and best practices outlined below can improve the representation, influence, and leadership of diplomats from diverse backgrounds, not just women. While targeted at women in diplomacy, these solutions can and should benefit all diplomats, especially diplomats who are parents (both mothers and fathers) and those from under-represented backgrounds – such as ethnicity, socio-economic status, region, education, religion, etc. This includes men from less privileged backgrounds. More equitable, transparent, and merit-based processes can improve both diversity as well as organisational and policy effectiveness. When done well, these measures demonstrate that equity, inclusion and effectiveness are mutually reinforcing rather than competing priorities.

Box 2. Benefits of introducing targets or quotas

Both quotas and targets have been used to try to remedy the continued underrepresentation of women in diplomacy, reflecting a belief that without taking such action to favour women's entry into the profession or advancement within the organisation, progress will be far too slow. They help form a 'baseline' and act as an incentive to work towards.

Targets and quotas operate under different rules, and their suitability depends on organisational objectives, culture, leadership, and communication practices. When well designed and clearly communicated across the organisation, they can set a useful baseline, create incentive for change and introduction of other complementary measures, boost morale by signalling commitment to fairness and opportunity, while also helping to address concerns or backlash by emphasising merit, transparency, and benefits for the institution as a whole – relevant and important to both men and women.

While quotas are legally binding, targets are generally not, but both can work well when accompanied by actions to ensure that they are met. In both cases, these measures should be seen as helping foreign ministries to widen the scope of the recruitment efforts and bolster the progression prospects of women and other underrepresented groups in the profession. To the extent that targets or quotas help to increase women in diplomatic service, an internal 'tipping point' or 'critical mass' may be reached in which the internal culture starts to shift.[9]

Several states have committed to targets to try to improve the gender balance within the foreign service, including Australia, Canada and Switzerland. In other countries, such as France and Kenya, quotas have been used – generally with respect to parliament or civil service more broadly, but with effects that are considered to extend to the foreign ministry. Another similar measure that can be used to increase women's representation in diplomacy relatively quickly is for governments to appoint ambassadors from outside the diplomatic service. In some states (such as the US), political appointees are common, which has distinct implications, both positive and negative, for equality of treatment and career progression.

All these measures, however, can be met with opposition. In particular, they can prompt accusations or insinuations that women achieved their positions only because of the quotas, targets or political appointments. This is why measures must be accompanied by leadership commitment and ministry-wide conversations, as well as demonstrations of merit, including that those who have been promoted are qualified. As one participant in our dialogue argued, essentially what these measures do is simply help mitigate the previous preference for men (in 'Global North' countries: white men) and often men who went to the same elite schools. Another participant suggested labelling quotas or targets as 'balancing measures'.

However, neither targets nor quotas should be instituted and can feasibly exist without data that supports and substantiates the choice of specific realistic quota or target as well as enforcement and complementary measures that help ensure that the target/quota is instituted, done so fairly and transparently, and accompanied by other supportive measures that allow women to step into the profession or higher roles. Otherwise, they are built to fail, either putting women into positions in which they cannot succeed in due to other institutional barriers or failing to advance women altogether. Many of these accompanying measures are outlined below.

A separate briefing paper will examine targets and quotas in greater depth, drawing on examples and lessons learned from several different foreign ministries.

9 In our podcasts (series 2, episodes 6 and 7), both Ambassador Kara Owens and Ambassador Ailish Campbell reflected on the importance of a critical mass within foreign ministries leading to a change in institutional culture.

Identifying the problem

"What gets measured gets done."
– Ambassador Melissa Hitchman
(WiD podcast series 2, episode 1)

There was not one interview, discussion, or dialogue that would dispute the importance and value of intentional and high-quality data collection. We found that often foreign ministries are not aware of the significant underrepresentation of women across their ranks because they do not systematically collect disaggregated data (by gender, ethnicity, etc.). This is visible through the lack of data at organisational, national, regional, and international levels.

Collecting and analysing gender-specific and gender-disaggregated data helps organisations identify gaps and understand the challenges they face. Although it can bring (sometimes unwanted) accountability, having a clear picture of the workforce composition at all levels allows organisations to identify key patterns, such as points where women are disproportionately represented or where they 'taper off' – leaving the diplomatic service, or stagnating and unable to progress into senior roles. It further helps to target recruitment and career outreach effectively and set up targets or quotas (see Box 2), ensuring that the organisation re lects the diversity and composition of the country it represents.

Collecting data internally is a critical first step toward building a more representative organisation as well as embedding gender-responsive and gender-mainstreaming practices (see Table 1). While many foreign ministries champion these goals externally through FFPs and WPS agendas, and gender-mainstreaming frameworks, applying the same standards internally reinforces credibility and impact. Progress on both levels is mutually reinforcing and ultimately strengthens each approach. For example, some ministries already have well-developed gender analysis tools, such as Canada's Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) in Global Affairs Canada (GAC).9 Mainstreaming such a tool into human resources policies would help address systemic barriers and promote a more diverse workforce.

Without consistent data collection, patterns remain invisible, progress cannot be measured, and barriers go unaddressed. Consistency in data collection enables trend analysis, robust monitoring and evaluation, and evidence-based target-setting.

Table 1: Recommended Data Collection Framework
This framework presents the minimum data that should be collected. It can be expanded based on the organisational structure, ambitions, and intended impact.

CATEGORY	KEY INDICATORS	DATA SOURCE(S)	FREQUENCY
Recruitment	■ Applications by gender, minority status (for example, ethnicity, sexual orientation), region, sector, education background and years of relevant experience.[10] ■ Hires by gender, minority status, region, sector, education background and years of relevant experience. ■ Starting salary by gender, minority status, region, sector, education. ■ Demographic data: age, minority status, socio-economic background.	Applications HR recruitment database	Annual (or per cycle)
Career progression	■ Promotions by gender (with justifications/ reasons for promotion). ■ Postings by gender: general split + 'prestigious' posts (e.g., key strategic capital postings) + 'hardship' locations (usually indicating remoteness, more difficult living conditions, lower security). ■ Premature returns from postings by gender (with reasons). ■ Portfolio/sector assignments by gender. ■ Salary progression tracking by gender.	Posting data-base HR personnel records	Annual (or per cycle)
Professional development	■ Participation in mentorship programs by gender (mentors and mentees). ■ Participation in leadership/training programs by gender. ■ Access to development opportunities by gender and minority status.	Training records (sign up + realised) Mentorship database (if exists)	Quarterly or annual
Culture	■ Participation in international negotiations, by gender and minority status. ■ Participation in conference/seminar panels, both within ministry and externally, by gender and minority status.	Meeting minutes	Quarterly or annual

10 Not all applicants may want to reveal their minority status and so that data may always be incomplete. Foreign ministries must also ensure data privacy.

A suite of solutions

Recruitment & accessibility

While the first step to improving recruitment is ensuring that already existing recruitment processes are fair and inclusive (including gender-balanced interview panels, blind recruitment processes, and transparent selection criteria), that is not enough. Recruitment needs to be thought of from a long-term perspective and with a strategic view, asking questions such as:

1. Where does the organisation want to be in five, ten or 15 years?

2. What talent does it need?

3. What is the makeup of the workforce, and does it represent key social groups in the country?

Diplomacy is a sector where, just like in politics, the entire country should be represented. Yet a diplomatic career can still be inaccessible to many from minority backgrounds and those who live outside of the capital city.

That is why it is key to ensure that relevant opportunities are visible to a broad and diverse pool of candidates. This requires more comprehensive outreach and engagement efforts that go beyond elite universities and capital cities, instead reaching individuals across the country, including in both urban and rural areas. Further, engaging institutions outside traditional hubs and investing in information and career-awareness campaigns can help address information gaps and widen participation.

At the same time, greater attention needs to be paid to accessibility. Financial and structural barriers, such as upfront costs (e.g. for travelling to the capital city) or unpaid internships, continue to limit who can participate. For example, ministries can rethink the right timing and location of entrance exams, and understand the support candidates need to participate, while designing that support in a way that remains cost-effective. Addressing these barriers, alongside improving access to professional opportunities (including access to paid internships, conferences, fora and relevant networks) and skills development is essential. Making training and mentoring available at university level can also play an important role in supporting early engagement and strengthening long-term participation pathways.

Thinking through these recruitment strategies will help ministries expand the pool of candidates, and identify, train, and support prospective diplomats better. Engaging more broadly with prospective candidates across the country can also help ministries identify how to make opportunities more equitable and accessible in practical terms.

Career progression

Many foreign ministries differ profoundly in terms of how they are structured, how they hire, and how they promote and post diplomats to missions. While these differences will have an impact on what resources the ministries have, the support ministries are able to give to its employees, the 'posting' system in place, and the opportunities there are for career progression, there is a set of clear best practices we put together based on our research and discussions. Some of these recommendations may be more feasible for some than others, but, in most cases, these are simple, straightforward, and adaptable solutions that can make a big difference to enabling career progression within ministries:

1. **Strengthen transparency and predictability in career pathways and postings.** Implementing predictable and transparent processes for promotions and postings is key. It will help ensure that staff/diplomats understand opportunities and expectations and are able to plan their career and personal life accordingly. This includes:

    - Regular and predictable rotation and posting schedules to help diplomats plan their careers and personal lives (including planning children or aligning with school schedules).

    - Clear promotion timelines and criteria so diplomats understand when, how, and what career progression opportunities arise.

    - Transparent and equitable criteria for advancement that avoid disadvantaging women, for example:

        - Recognising that women may be less likely to access or be posted to hardship or prestigious posts (as that decision is often outside of their remit).

        - Valuing independent skill development (e.g., language or IT training) without penalising those with limited outside-work time due to caregiving.

- Implementing policies that support work-life balance, including flexible arrangements and childcare support, to ensure that family responsibilities do not limit women's ability to meet those criteria and that mid-career drop-offs are mitigated (see Table 2).

- Financial and logistical support for promotion processes to ensure they are accessible, navigable, and cost-neutral. For example, this could include enabling staff posted abroad to take tests and interviews online rather than incurring travel expenses to return to the capital.

These measures may seem obvious, but in some foreign ministries they are not guaranteed, and the internal environment in some ministries has been described as resembling the 'Hunger Games', with a culture of competition, rather than collegial support.

2. **Strengthen support and opportunities for women to reduce competition and enhance collaboration.** While women in the field often support one another through networks and informal mentorship, this support can shift into competition at senior levels, or when women feel they must outperform each other and men. In our conversation, Ambassador Valeria Csukasi (podcast series 2, episode 8) noted: 'At the beginning...we tend to have a lot of mentors...But once you become available to become a chief of mission...that support becomes more a competition.'

To address this, ministries should provide targeted training to build leadership skills and confidence, facilitate structured networks and formalised coaching and mentorship programmes that encourage collaboration rather than rivalry, across all seniority levels, ensure promotions and key postings are guided by objective and transparent criteria, and foster a supportive organisational culture that values inclusion and recognition at all levels for both women and men. We go into more details of some of these recommendations below.

Professional development

Participants in our dialogues pointed to the importance of professional development measures that could prepare women for both junior and senior positions, help root out biases and prejudices against women's advancement in diplomacy, provide support for women diplomats and other diplomats from underrepresented groups, Professional development measures can also encourage women diplomats to

undertake hardship postings, and support them while they are there, thus helping them to build the experience that is necessary for advancement. Such measures include training, mentorship programmes, and networks.

Training

Diplomatic academies and diplomatic courses should include topics on gender in international relations and foreign policy to ensure that diplomats are aware of the international normative and legal frameworks on gender equality, research on women's involvement in diplomacy and international organisations, and the gendered aspects of issue areas such as trade or security. Besides this, however, two types of training were repeatedly mentioned in several of our dialogues: gender bias training, and leadership, negotiation and management training. That's why training on how to avoid gender biases should be compulsory for members of recruitment and promotion panels, while training for mid-career diplomats should specifically prepare them to take on leadership and management roles in different socio-cultural contexts (for example, how to manage an embassy).

Mentorship

The importance of mentors and mentoring repeatedly appears in almost all the episodes of our podcast series and was stressed in all our dialogues. Diplomats value the advice and support they can get from mentors at all stages of their careers. Mentorship can be formal and informal, and both can work well, depending on the institutional context, level of commitment and chosen format.

For example, the Mujeres Diplomáticas Mexicanas ASEM (organised under the auspices of the Mexican Foreign Service Association) in Mexico City runs a formal, year-long mentoring scheme matching prospective women diplomats with senior women diplomats. It combines monthly mentoring sessions, reinforcement activities (e.g. reading assignments, workshops, expert-led panels, professional practice-based assignments), and networking events.

According to many of the participants in our dialogues, much mentoring is in fact informal, with individuals seeking out the advice of other diplomats. However, informal mentoring schemes may operate with insufficient clarity about the purpose of mentorship or the expectations of both mentors and mentees. It can further put additional burdens on women diplomats, particularly senior women diplomats, so thought should be given as to how that contribution is recognised and supported.

Formalising mentorship could also help ensure that everyone can benefit from mentoring. The format of mentoring could either be relaxed or more structured but should focus on issues that are the most pressing and relevant to the life of a diplomat, from best practice sharing to personal support to confidence building.

Some diplomats also noted that beyond mentoring, it is important for junior diplomats to have a sponsor or cheerleader, someone who touts their achievements in meetings even when they are not present. The Women's Network within Global Affairs Canada has set up the initiative 'Be Her Champion' to achieve this.

A separate briefing paper will examine mentorship in greater depth and will include additional examples of best practices related to mentoring.

Networks

Networking is intrinsic to diplomacy, with cultivating relationships one of the key skills and tasks undertaken by diplomats. Participants in our dialogues noted that male-dominated networks are very prevalent, with practices that can exclude women, such as after-work drinks or sports activities such as golf or football. Women diplomats have created their own networks as well, which function not just as opportunities to exchange information but also (or mostly) as mutual support networks and informal lobbies pressing for changes in institutional norms, rules and culture.

There are essentially two types of networks of women diplomats: those functioning within foreign ministries, and those created among diplomats posted in capital cities and cities hosting international organisations.

Women's networks within foreign ministries

Multiple examples of these networks abound; indeed, two of our dialogues were hosted by women's networks within foreign ministries, the network within Global Affairs Canada (GAC) in Ottawa, and Mujeres Diplomaticas Mexicanas ASEM in Mexico City.[11] The activities of such 'internal' networks vary. They function as support networks, and they can provide coaching and mentoring. The *Women's Association* within the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office has created toolkits to prepare diplomats for promotion, and supported colleagues with coaching and mentoring, while in France, the network of female French diplomats – *Femmes et Diplomatie* – mentors junior colleagues (Dell'Apa, 2021).

These internal networks can also advance the interests of women diplomats within the ministry. For example, the group of women diplomats within the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *DIP Swiss Women Diplomats*, actively promotes equal opportunities for all diplomats, insists on diversity in delegations and missions, and promotes the reconciliation of work and private life.[12] The women's network within GAC submitted evidence to the Canadian Senate's 2024 report on the Canadian foreign service, with recommendations for strengthening gender equality within the service (Women's Network Global Affairs Canada, 2023).

The formal status of such networks varies, with some functioning as recognised entities within the ministry. The UK's Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office, for example, has numerous such networks of employees, which feed into decision-making and are consulted by a staff advisory board and human resources department. One observer recommends that informal networks and women-led organisations within MFAs be given formal policymaking and advisory roles (Baez, 2025). Others have argued that formal women's diplomatic networks can promote the institutional change that can bring more women into diplomacy (Jezierska and Towns, 2025). Foreign ministries could consider formalising networks and their consultative roles, in agreement with the networks themselves.

Regardless of the formal standing of such networks, however, consideration needs to be given to how to recognise the work that the leaders or convenors of networks put into running networks. Will their work to foster diversity and equality be taken into account in career development reviews and promotion processes? Further, consideration should also be given to whether or not foreign ministries should provide financial support to internal networks, and when such networks can meet on foreign ministry premises – for example, after-hour meetings can conflict with caring responsibilities.

11 For more on the network in the GAC, see https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/stories-histoires/2024/womens-network-reseau-femmes.aspx?lang=eng.

12 See their LinkedIn page: https://www.linkedin.com/company/dip-swiss-women-diplomats/posts/?feedView=all.

Women's networks at post/on missions

The second type of network is composed of women diplomats based in a capital city or the site of an international organisation. These are informal networks that often operate at a particular level of seniority: women ambassadors or deputy ambassadors, for example. There is a 'Band of Sisters' in Geneva, and a network of EU and EU member states (WEDIN EU) in Brussels.[13] Such networks will convene lunches and events, often acting both as support networks but most importantly as sources of information including about navigating the realms of the specific posting as well as career development. Networks of women diplomats in host cities help to 'create awareness, to make comparisons, to learn from other diplomats what they have done in their career [and] for the people that are younger, to know what mistakes should not be repeated'.[14] Multinational networks of women diplomats must still manage the political and economic issues that divide states, but they are seen as alliances or networks that can empower women diplomats and even herald a new way of enacting diplomacy, based on collaboration and trust-building.[15] This is why such networks are widely regarded as effective and important tools that should be replicated across postings and contexts, and sustained beyond the tenure of the founding diplomat.

Work-life balance

Although work life balance is not solely a cultural issue, as organisational norms often mirror wider societal pressures and expectations placed on women in this context, it is best addressed by first examining and changing organisational culture. However, admittedly there is not one cure-all. Over the course of our research, we have come across many, various solutions - from simple measures to creative innovations (as outlined in Table 2):

13 On WEDIN EU see European Union External Action Service (2023). In October 2025, the Western Balkans Six Women in Diplomacy network was created to advance the participation of women in diplomacy; see United Kingdom, Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office (2025).

14 Ximena Fuentes, WiD podcast, series 2, episode 2.

15 As argued in Yassine (2025), PhD thesis.

Table 2. Work-Life Balance and Cultural Barriers in Diplomacy: Best Practices and Solutions

Family, Family Planning & Care (on posting and at home)		
Issue and Type	**Solutions & Best Practices**	**Explanation / Examples**
Pregnancy & Parental leave (Formal)	■ **Clear maternity/adoption/parental leave policies**. Written, accessible policies outlining entitlements, application procedures, and return-to-work arrangements. This should include: • a clear definition of time-period covered by full salary, by half, statutory and options for extension. • a clear procedure for how maternity or adoption leave procedure applies in the capital vs on posting (ensuring that it does not disadvantage women to have children while on posting). ■ **Nursing leave provisions**. Additional leave or reduced hours for breastfeeding mother's post-return.	While the application of these best practices may vary depending on the resources available to an organisation or government, they can be implemented effectively within the means of any institution by adjusting the scale, format, and scope of implementation.
Childcare & Care responsibilities (Formal)	■ **Government-funded childcare**. Government and/or ministry/organisation covers or subsidises nursery and childcare costs for employees. ■ **On-site childcare facilities in the capital and abroad**. Larger embassies establish childcare centres within or near embassy premises. Smaller embassies establish contracts with childcare providers in the city. ■ **Education allowances.** Where possible, financial support for children's schooling, whether domestic or international. If resources are limited, offer guidance to posted diplomats through a briefing detailing recommended schools, costs, locations, and other practical information. ■ **Ensure that single parents can be accompanied by a support person on postings abroad.** This could be another family member or a nanny.	The 2024 **Estonian** Foreign Service Act allows a single parent to take a support person with them abroad.[16]

16 For details, see: https://www.riigikogu.ee/en/sitting-reviews/the-riigikogu-approved-an-amendment-of-the-foreign-service-act.

Working arrangements (on posting and at home)		
Issue and Type	**Solutions & Best Practices**	**Explanation / Examples**
Family planning & ensuring continuity for children / family members (Formal)	■ **Regular posting cycles**. Establish predictable rotation schedules (e.g., 3 - 4-year postings) so families can plan pregnancies/parenthood, children's education, spouses' job. ■ **School-year aligned timing**. Schedule posting transfers to coincide with academic year breaks (summer/winter depending on where the posting is) rather than mid-academic year. ■ **Family posting prioritisation**. Give possibility to 'opt-in' to family-friendly postings for diplomats with school-age children or planning children; allow diplomats with families to be posted to neighbouring countries so they can commute home on weekends.	**Denmark** has a commuting programme for diplomats posted in Europe and the east coast of the US, allowing for regular travel back to families in Copenhagen (Hohenhaug, 2025, p. 177). **Germany** has a similar programme.
Create an 'off-ramp' and 'on-ramp' from diplomatic service (Formal)	■ **Enable secondments to other ministries (off-ramp)**.Diplomats could spend several years in another ministry in the capital to reduce work-life balance challenges when their children are in school. ■ **Facilitate return of secondees to diplomatic service at appropriate level (on-ramp).** Ensure that diplomats can re-enter diplomatic service without losing seniority and progression momentum.	A **Canadian** Senate report recommended that 'senior management at Global Affairs Canada should emphasise that horizontal movement by employees in and out of the department is valued and recognised with regard to career progression, including promotions and postings abroad' (Canada. Senate of Canada, 2023).
Long hours & Presenteeism (Formal + Informal)	*Formal measures* ■ **Defined working hours:** Establish and enforce standard office hours rather than open-ended expectations. ■ **Overtime compensation:** Pay or time-off-in-lieu for hours worked beyond standard schedule. *Informal measures* ■ **Leadership & norm-setting.** Senior officials/ Ambassadors visibly leave work at reasonable hours, take annual leave, and don't respond to non-urgent emails outside working hours. Senior leaders explicitly communicate that long hours ≠ commitment and create a culture (and scheduling) that allows to put this into practice.	These measures require both formal policy changes and informal cultural shift. Even with formal working hours policies, if ambassadors work 12-hour days and expect staff availability at all hours, formal rules become meaningless. Success depends on leadership actively demonstrating and enforcing boundaries.

continuation of **Working arrangements** (on posting and at home)

Issue and Type	Solutions & Best Practices	Explanation / Examples
Flexible working (Formal)	■ **Remote work policies.** Allow working from home or other locations, using the already established post-COVID technological infrastructure (VPNs, secure communications). ■ **Dedicated leave categories.** Create specific leave types for: health, family care, personal matters (separate from annual leave), allowing employees to attend medical appointments, school events, or urgent family matters without using annual leave. ■ **Flexible hours.** Allow adjusted schedules for nursing mothers, parents with childcare responsibilities (e.g., 10am-4pm core hours).	The **UAE** Ministry of Foreign Affairs created dedicated leave categories including sick leave days, children's days, family days; introduced personal hours, nursing hours, and parent hours per month (allowing employees to attend medical appointments and school events without using annual leave), in line with UAE federal government guidelines on human resources. These formal policies must be reinforced through informal culture. If employees fear career repercussions for using them, uptake will remain low. Conversely, if employees take additional leave without a clear purpose, it can undermine the policy's effectiveness.
Working arrangements and support on posting		
Dual career couples (Formal)	■ **Job-sharing arrangements**. Allow two diplomats (usually spouses) to share a single diplomatic position, splitting responsibilities and salary, allowing both to remain employed while posted abroad. This can be done in many ways: e.g., week/month/year on/off – one covering mornings, another covering afternoons, etc. ■ **Trailing spouse employment support**. Provide assistance finding employment for partners who accompany diplomats abroad and are not diplomats or cannot work at the ministry / embassy. This can be simply giving access and having an agreement with relevant recruiters; having a list of companies that are open to hiring foreign employees across key sectors ■ **Income compensation allowances**. Where possible, provide financial support (even if just during the time they are actively searching for work) to offset trailing spouse's lost income when unable to work abroad. If the spouse is unable to work at all (e.g., due to childcare and other commitments with no flexibility), some sort of financial support is necessary, and can be reflected in the diplomats' salary ■ **Bilateral agreements**. Form more and better government-to-government agreements focused on creating an enabling environment for its diplomats and families – e.g., allowing spouses of posted diplomats to work in host country, overcoming work permit restrictions.	**Switzerland** currently has almost 60 couples successfully sharing diplomatic positions. Some couples split positions by time (AM/PM shifts), others by portfolio. This has enabled more women to reach senior positions by making postings compatible with dual careers. **Germany** implements job-sharing with alternating pattern – i.e., one spouse works actively for two years while other takes leave/reduced role, then swap for next two years. **The UK** and **Sweden** also allow staff posted abroad to job-share with spouses (Women's Network Global Affairs Canada, 2023, p. 5). **Finland** and **Estonia** provide allowances to trailing spouses to partially offset income lost from career interruption during posting abroad. There is however also an implementation gap. Many countries have bilateral agreements on paper but prove much harder to implement in practice due to bureaucratic obstacles.

continuation of **Working arrangements and support on posting**

Issue and Type	Solutions & Best Practices	Explanation /Examples
Posting support (Formal)	■ **Pre-posting orientation.** Provide comprehensive briefings on host country before departure (housing, schools, healthcare, culture, etc.). These are 'easy wins', as such booklets can be prepared for each posting country and given to diplomats posted there, with minor updates required every so often. ■ **School selection assistance.** Provide curated lists of international/local schools, guidance on curricula, application support, and subsidises costs (if possible). ■ **Family integration support.** Provide resources and networks to help entire family (not just diplomat) adjust to new country. ■ **Housing support.** Administrative (at the very least), and financial (if possible) assistance or ministry-provided accommodation suitable for families.	The **Kenyan** foreign ministry provides direct financial support for children's education and housing when diplomats are posted abroad. **Cuba** actively helps integrate diplomatic partners into embassy work by creating positions such as cultural attachés, allowing both partners to remain professionally active.
Exclusionary practices (on posting and at home)		
'Old Boys Club' culture & networking (Formal + Informal)	*Formal measures* ■ **Gender focal points.** Appoint designated officials within ministries responsible for genuinely monitoring, responding to, and advancing gender equality. ■ **Ambassadors for gender equality.** Senior diplomats to become champions and advocates for organisational culture change. This only works if it is done on volunteer basis and the senior diplomats are understanding of and committed to the cause. ■ **Women's professional networks.** Ministry-supported networks providing mentorship, information-sharing, resources for advocating against harmful culture and practices within the organisation. *Informal measures* ■ **Shift meeting times.** Restructure meeting schedules and formats to be more inclusive – e.g., hold luncheons instead of evening drinks (which is when parents tend to attend to care responsibilities) and create networking opportunities compatible with care responsibilities (breakfast meetings, afternoon events). Create alternative networking opportunities beyond traditional male-dominated venues (golf clubs, late-night bars). ■ **Inclusive venue selection.** Choose accessible locations for those with time constraints.	While exclusionary practices extend beyond work–life balance, they are included here because they directly shape the daily experiences of women diplomats. Such structural barriers can make it harder for women to perform their roles and manifest in various ways, including exclusion from spaces where they should rightfully participate, often due to differing responsibilities and expectations placed on women versus men. Both formal measures, which can institutionalise change and alter these dynamics and rules, and informal measures, which influence culture and everyday practice, play a crucial role in addressing these challenges.

continuation of **Exclusionary practices** (on posting and at home)

Issue and Type	Solutions & Best Practices	Explanation /Examples
Harassment (incl. online) (Formal)	■ **Zero-tolerance policies**. Written policies clearly stating harassment is unacceptable with specific consequences (suspension, termination). This must include very clear step-by-step enforcement action, as well as details on who and how will enforce this. ■ **Confidential reporting mechanisms**. Safe, protected channels for reporting harassment (anonymous hotlines, trusted officers, external ombudspersons). The key is to ensure there is follow up. ■ **Clear accountability procedures**. Transparent and always enforceable investigation and disciplinary processes. ■ **Safe spaces**. Create protection from harassment both in physical conference/work settings (e.g. thinking through building design, agenda set up) and online diplomatic forums (block out hate-speech). ■ **Implement clear policies regarding social media**. Consider who is responsible for social media of ministry/embassy (so that individual diplomats do not have responsibility for this) and ensure that diplomats subjected to online misogynistic harassment are supported. Though getting the *formal* guidelines, procedures and resources right is key, these need to be complemented by *informal* culture shifts embedding no-tolerance attitude to everyday interactions.	Harassment intersects with other barriers beyond work-life balance, but it is included in this section because harassment experienced as part of diplomatic duties can profoundly affect women's personal and professional lives – i.e., affecting life both inside and outside of the workplace. Many ministries have harassment policies but weak enforcement, creating perception that reporting is career-damaging rather than protected. Canada publishes 'disclosure on wrongdoing' reports publicly showing what happens when harassment occurs. It demonstrates accountability and deters future incidents.
Reproductive & women's health	■ **Comprehensive reproductive health support**. Medical coverage and leave for fertility treatments, pregnancy complications, reproductive health issues. ■ **Miscarriage support**. Specific leave and counselling provisions (currently women are often forced to use sick leave). ■ **Menopause / Endometriosis (and other reproductive health) support.** Recognition as health issue requiring potential accommodations (flexible schedules, medical leave depending on severity of symptoms). Recognition and accommodation for chronic condition affecting many women.	Reproductive and women's health issues remain largely unaddressed in diplomacy, foreign ministries, and many other sectors. Women navigate pregnancy complications, miscarriages, menopause, and chronic conditions like endometriosis not only without formal support, but without the possibility to take time off when facing those challenges (due to inflexibilities in the workplace, stigma, being seen as 'weaker'). These health realities disproportionately affect women's careers when unsupported, and it leads diplomats to hide health issues, delay seeking treatment, or leave service entirely.

Conclusions

We are facing a two-fold challenge today. First, an interconnected global crisis – climate, health, economic, geopolitical – that demands the most effective policy tools at our disposal, and strong, diverse, and representative voices at global negotiating tables. Without them, we risk addressing crises in isolation while deepening others or missing the narrow windows we have to address them altogether.

Second, we are navigating a time of adversity and regressive rhetoric on gender. Practitioners report defensive responses ranging from 'why do we need more women?' to resistance to the term 'feminist'. Beyond the resurfacing of toxic masculinity and 'macho' culture in diplomatic spaces, we observe growing opposition to gender equality globally. This shows that even where there is significant progress, there is no room for complacency. Progress remains fragile and vulnerable to backlash and regression without continued vigilance and reinforcement of these commitments. Addressing this backlash requires reframing narratives, gathering data and evidence pointing to the benefits of gender equality for everyone, shifting from 'supporting women' to demonstrating organisational excellence, improved performance, and stronger foreign policy outcomes. It also requires further stressing that many measures that 'support women' will also support all diplomats (including men) who are parents, single or married, and/or from under-represented backgrounds – thus helping to ensure that foreign ministries can benefit from the experiences and expertise of a more diverse diplomatic corps.

If there is one take-away from our year-long research it is that we have witnessed ample goodwill, interest, and commitment from countries, ministries, and individual leaders to strive towards gender equality in diplomacy and foreign policy. While some efforts have proven more effective than others, each attempt offers valuable lessons, allowing us to better understand what works, what doesn't and why. This report sought to capture these insights. We hope it serves, first, as a practical toolkit and source of knowledge and inspiration, showcasing a range of ready-to-use solutions that can be adapted and tailored to different contexts, and demonstrating that there is no single pathway but many ways to foster and achieve gender equality within organisations and across national and international settings. Second, it serves as a case study demonstrating how sustained commitment and transformative leadership can catalyse change within the organisation but also at national and international levels.

Leadership is pivotal. Senior figures can be the 'firsts' who visibly demonstrate strong leadership (and redefine what strong leadership means, what sort of leadership is needed today, and show the value of many different leadership styles), challenge assumptions about what is possible, and establish practices that respond to the real needs of their workforce – serving as the role models that everyone needs. Beyond this, they can drive cultural change. When they do, it is key that they operationalise commitments, because if they don't our reliance on individual champions risks instability. Systematised approaches help ensure that progress endures beyond individual tenures, embedding gender equality measures that work into institutional culture and sustaining the shift over time. While senior leaders are the most visible drivers of change, meaningful progress is not confined to the top. Change can, and should, also be driven at lower levels. Individual managers have the remit and agency to set inclusive practices that shape team culture, influence departmental norms, and contribute to organisational change.

Ultimately, sustainable progress depends on transforming 'small wins' and strong individual leadership into systematised commitments through organisational (and national) objectives, concrete, tailored institutional measures, and consistent communication. This not only requires the dedication of those already committed but also the active engagement of more men as allies and champions of change, recognising that gender equality is a shared responsibility that benefits everyone equally.

A note on the future direction of the project

Through research, collaboration, and dialogue, we continue to seek opportunities to drive impact through the WiD Project. We foster collaborations with a long-term vision to:

- **Share knowledge, recommendations, and practical tools and research-based strategies** with women's networks, foreign ministries, and international organisations to accelerate representation and amplify women's voices in international diplomacy and foreign policy.

- **Build a global network** of women, allies, practitioners, and experts to drive transformative, structural change. Convene experts, scholars, and practitioners to foster collaboration, share insights, and develop actionable solutions.

- **Shape debate and practice on diversity and women's inclusion in policy-making** by bridging rigorous academic research with practice.

If you are interested in partnering with us, please contact us at: ideas.widproject@lse.ac.uk

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Appendix

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Henriette Mueller, Assistant Professor of Gender, Governance and Society, New York University Abu Dhabi

Ouided Bouchamaoui, Nobel Laureate (2015), Professor of Practice in Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution, New York University Abu Dhabi

Nouf Al Hamly, Advanced Sciences and Technology Advisor, UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs

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H.E. Deputy Ambassador Katharina Reischer, Deputy Head of Mission of Austria to the United Kingdom

The Permanent Representation of Croatia to the European Union, Brussels

H.E. Ambassador Irena Andrassy, Permanent Representative of Croatia to the European Union

UN Women, New York

Isatou Badjie, UN Women

Carla Kay Kraft, UN Women

Diana Lutta, UN Women

University of Ottawa, Canada

Ambassador Lilly Nichols, University of Ottawa, Canada

Professor Rebecca Tiessen, University of Ottawa, Canada

Women Heads of Diplomatic Mission Canada

H.E. Ambassador Sabah Al Rafie, Ambassador of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan to Canada

H.E. Ambassador Josefina Martínez Gramuglia, Ambassador of Argentina to Canada, Ottawa

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Erin Koenig, Chair

Anna Forth, Vice-Chair

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Women's Network, Global Affairs Canada

Fatma Magued Diop, Global Affairs Canada

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List of attendees / engagements

We are very grateful to all of the participants in the dialogues we held. The participants listed below agreed to be included with the titles (or lack thereof) as presented below. Not all participants wished to be listed.

Brussels, May 2025

Dialogue co-hosted with the Permanent Representation of Croatia to the EU

H.E. Ambassador Irena Andrassy, Permanent Representation of Croatia to the EU

H.E. Ambassador Mikaela Kumlin Granit, Permanent Representation of Sweden to the EU

H.E. Ambassador Iulia Matei, Permanent Representation of Romania to the EU

H.E. Ambassador Daniela Morari, Mission of the Republic of Moldova to the EU

H.E. Ambassador Christina Rafti, Permanent Representation of Cyprus to the EU

H.E. Ambassador Kyllike Sillaste-Elling, Permanent Representation of Estonia to the EU

H.E. Ambassador Rita Adam, Swiss Mission to the EU

H.E. Ambassador Haifa Al Jedea, Mission of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the EU

H.E. Ambassador Ailish Campbell, Mission of Canada to the EU

H.E. Ambassador Amal Jadou-Shakka, Mission of Palestine to the EU

Ms Thérèse Blanchet, Secretary-General of the Council

Ms Maryem Van Den Heuvel, Director-General, Council of the EU

Ms Paola Pampaloni, Deputy Managing Director, EEAS

Ms Maja Kocijančič, Head of Unit, European Commission

Ms Silvana Koch-Mehrin, President and Founder of Women Political Leaders

Ms Joanna Maycock, consultant, expert on women's leadership

Geneva, May 2025

Dialogue co-hosted with the International Gender Champions

Ruben Brouwer, Human Rights Officer, OHCHR

H.E. Anna Ifkovits-Horner, Ambassador and Deputy Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of Switzerland

Amena Martins Yassine, PhD Candidate, Brazilian Diplomat, Graduate Institute

Michelle Gyles-McDonnough, UN ASG, Executive Director, UNITAR

H.E. Maira Macdonal Álvarez, Ambassador and Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of Bolivia

H.E. Kadra Ahmed Hassan, Ambassador and Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of Djibouti

H.E. Davaasuren Gerelmaa, Ambassador and Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of Mongolia

Shahd Matar, Deputy Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of UAE

H.E. Emily Roper, Ambassador andDeputy Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of Australia

Jana Urh-Lesjak, Deputy Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of Slovenia

H.E. Clara Cabrera Brasero, Ambassador and Deputy Permanent Representative , Permanent Mission of Spain

Iris van der Veken, SG and Executive Director, Watch and Jewellery Initiative 2030

Rita French, Executive Fellow, GCSP

H.E. Ann-Kathryne Lassegue, Ambassador and Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of Haïti

Céline Fabre, Counsellor, Permanent Mission of Haïti

Line-Rose Georges, First Secretary, Permanent Mission of Haïti

Solange Dufourcq, First Secretary, Permanent Mission of Chile

Céline Marie Georgi, Human Rights Officer, OHCHR

Mona M'Bikay, Executive Director, UPR Info

Dialogue co-hosted with the Health Diplomacy Alliance

H.E. Ms Yvette Stevens

H.E. Ms. Bulou Keleni Tikomaisuva-Servatu, Ambassador - Deputy Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of Fiji

Dr. Nikica Darabos

Diana Vaca Mcghie

Isatu Veronica Abu

Nadia Scoloff

Nine other ambassadors and deputy permanent representatives, as well as senior diplomats and policy advisers

London, June 2025

Dialogue co-hosted with the Austrian embassy

Elisabeth Bowes PSM, Deputy High Commissioner of Australia to the United Kingdom

Dame Deborah Bronnert, Director General Europe, UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office

Waltraud Dennhardt-Herzog, Director, Cultural Forum, Austria

Ioanna Kriebardi, Deputy Head of Mission of Greece to the United Kingdom

Kati Laus, Deputy Head of Mission of Estonia to the United Kingdom

Dineo Mathlako, Deputy Head of Mission of South Africa to the United Kingdom

Hiruni Rajapakse, Minister Counsellor, Embassy of Sri Lanka to the United Kingdom

Katharina Rauscher, Deputy Head of Mission of Austria to the United Kingdom

Rhenita Rodriguez, Deputy Head of Mission and Deputy Consul General of Philippines to the United Kingdom

Nicola-Anne Singh, Deputy Head of Mission of Singapore to the United Kingdom

Mexico City, June 2025

Dialogue co-hosted with the Instituto Matías Romero

Contreras Téllez, Elda María, Direction General for Consular Proteccion and Strategic Planning

Gandoy Vázquez, Wilma Laura, Direction General of Regional Mechanisms and Organizations

García Hidalgo, Guadalupe Ximena, Office of the Secretary of Foreign Affairs

Gómez García Graciela, Director General for liaison with civil society, at the Undersecretariat of Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights

Jiménez Alegría, Natalia, Office of the Secretary of Foreign Affairs

López Fabián Montserrat Fernanda, Office of the Coordinator for the Feminist Foreign Policy

Lucano Gómez, Paula Elizabeth, Direction General for South America

Magaña Martínez, Bárbara Gabriela, Undersecretariat of Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights

Morales Dionicio Jeanette, Direction General of Regional Mechanisms and Organizations

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Dialogue co-hosted with Mujeres Diplomáticas Mexicanas ASEM

Mujeres Diplomáticas Mexicanas ASEM mentees:

Noaomi Martínez Ramón

Ximena Carriola Serrano

Monstserrath Ocadiz Marquez

Frida Soto García

Vania González Meléndez

Paula Calderón Salas

Victoria Rosas Rivas

New York, September 2025

Dialogue co-hosted with UN Women and Kaschak Institute for Social Justice for Women and Girls at Binghamton University

Ms. Fatou Njie Hydara, DPR, The Gambia

Ms. Heba Mostafa, Minister Plenipotentiary, DPR, Egypt

Mrs. Ulziibayar Vangansuren, DPR, Mongolia

Mrs. Paula Narvaez Ojeda, PR, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, Chile

Three other deputy permanent representatives

Ottawa, September 2025

Dialogue co-hosted with Women Heads of Diplomatic Mission Canada

Morocco:
H.E. Souriya Otmani Ambassador & Dean of the Diplomatic Corps

Argentina:
H.E. Maria Josefina Martínez Gramuglia Ambassador & Chair of the WDHMO

Jamaica:
H.E. Marsha Monique Coore Lobban High Commissioner

Slovak Republic:
H.E. Viera Grigová Ambassador

Jordan:
H.E. Ambassador Sabah Al Rafie Ambassador

Greece:
H.E. Ekaterini Dimakis Ambassador

Kenya:
H.E. Caroline Kamende Daudi High Commissioner

Malaysia:
H.E. Dato' Dr. Shazelina Zainul Abidin High Commissioner

Panama:
Mrs. Thais Collado Chargé d'affaires, a.i

New Zealand:
Ms. Jocelyn Woodley Acting High Commissioner

Dialogue co-hosted with Global Affairs Canada

Sheri Burke, Manager, SPL

Anne-Frédérique Naud, Senior Policy Analyst, ISL

Émi Fugère-Shimazu, Policy Analyst, TCW

Camila Sanchez,
Senior Policy Analyst, TDS

Mira Olah, Senior
Advisor, RGD (soon GFC)

Lashaunda Yates,
Development Officer, WEK

Julia Sekkel, Economist, REI

Cristina Popovici, A/Director, REI

Candice White, Foreign Service Officer

Raphaelle Lapierre, Deputy Director, TDE

And other participants including staff working across policy, operations and delivery.

Abu Dhabi, November 2025

Dialogue co-hosted with Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy

Seven Emirati diplomats, Abu Dhabi

Dialogue 2 co-hosted with Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy

Sajeda Shawa, Head of Mission in the UAE of UN OCHA

Katherine Lester, Head of the United Nations Resident Coordinator Office in UAE

European female ambassador to the UAE

List of podcast interviewees (series 1 and 2)

We are extremely grateful to the following women who took the time to record interviews with us for the Women in Diplomacy podcast series:

Series 1:

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, 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, former Ambassador of Georgia to Germany

Ximena Fuentes, Chile's Ambassador to the UK

Lynessa Griffith, PhD student, City University St George's University of London and former Grenadian diplomat

Melissa Hitchman, former Australian Ambassador to the Holy See

Ann Linde, former Swedish Foreign Minister

Kara Owens, British Ambassador to Ireland

Yvette Stevens, former Ambassador of Sierra Leone to the UN in Geneva

Series 2:

Marisol Argueta de Barillas, senior director for Latin America for the World Economic Forum and former Foreign Minister of El Salvador

Agnieszka Bartol, Permanent Representative of Poland to the EU

Ailish Campbell, Canada's Ambassador to the EU

Valeria Csukasi, Undersecretary in Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Uruguay

Jennifer Feller, Ambassador and Director-General, Mexico's Foreign Service

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LSE IDEAS
Floor 9, Pankhurst House
1 Clement's Inn, London
WC2A 2AZ

+44 (0)20 7107 5619
ideas@lse.ac.uk
lse.ac.uk/ideas