



# Women in Diplomacy: Mentorship

Karen E. Smith

April 2026

## THE AUTHOR



**KAREN E. SMITH** is Professor of International Relations at LSE and Director of the Women in Diplomacy project at LSE IDEAS . Her main research interests lie in the fields of foreign policy analysis and the study of international organisations. She has recently published on feminist foreign policy, the role of women in diplomacy and foreign policy-making, the European Union’s diplomacy at the United Nations, and the role of groups in UN multilateralism.

She has also written on the formulation and implementation of common EU foreign policies, including the EU’s pursuit of ‘ethical’ foreign policy goals such as promoting human rights and democracy, and policy-making within European states regarding genocide. She has a strong interest in the role that emotions can play in EU foreign policy-making. She is currently investigating the role of women in foreign policy-making and has used Foreign Policy Analysis to try to explain feminist foreign policies.

In March 2026, the LSE IDEAS Women in Diplomacy project published a research report on *Strengthening the Representation of Women in Diplomacy: Lessons from the Field* (Smith and Kozielska, 2026). The report analyses the findings from research and dialogues that we conducted in 2025 with women diplomats across several global cities: Abu Dhabi, Brussels, Geneva, London, Mexico City, New York and Ottawa. It situates the challenges to women's representation in diplomacy within their broader institutional and socio-political contexts, identifying practical, actionable, and transferable solutions to the underrepresentation of women in senior diplomatic roles. Through our dialogues, we identified a range of structural, institutional, and cultural barrier, co-creating a practical toolkit, based on proven practices, that address them. Alongside the report, we are producing four additional briefing papers, on mentorship, targets and quotas, handling the media, and work-life balance. While these topics are addressed in the report to some extent, they warrant deeper examination given their prominence in our research, allowing us to provide more evidence and best practices.

In all the dialogues we held with women diplomats, the importance of mentorship was stressed. In our podcast series, women diplomats repeatedly pointed to the significant role that mentors have played in their own career development and offered advice to diplomats about seeking out mentors.

Mentors are considered to be invaluable at all stages of a diplomatic career. Mentors can be senior diplomats but diplomats in middle-ranking positions can also offer invaluable mentorship, too. Indeed, it may be better to have a mentor who is just a step or two above their mentees, as they have more recent experience of career progression at that level. Mentors can help diplomats to navigate the promotion process, support them in difficult situations by sharing experiences and lessons learned, understand the norms and unspoken expectations of diplomatic service, provide advice on balancing work and family life, and motivate and empower mentees to identify ways to reaching their goals. Participants also noted that having a mentor even at senior levels can be useful. Mentors can also help senior diplomats with managerial responsibilities, such as running an embassy.

However, mentorship is often informal, rather than institutionalised or formalised within a foreign ministry. While mentorship, in any format, is beneficial and advantageous, we learned of four principal concerns with respect to informal mentorship:

1. Access to mentoring can be uneven, with the onus placed on diplomats (particularly junior diplomats) to reach out to prospective mentors.
2. While mentors can be of any gender, those with women diplomats as mentees need to take into account the particular barriers that women face in diplomacy.
3. Individual senior women diplomats may feel they cannot manage all the requests for mentoring that they receive, if more junior women diplomats prefer to seek out senior women as mentors.
4. The work of mentors may not be adequately acknowledged within the ministry, and mentoring may not be viewed as a responsibility to be shared by all or a contribution that matters for career advancement.

This policy brief thus focuses on the good practices that were shared during our research and puts forward recommendations for foreign ministries interested in setting up effective mentoring schemes.

## What is mentoring?

Broadly speaking, mentoring involves providing support, guidance and advice oriented around career development. It goes beyond the specific formal requirements for promotion and advancement. Mentoring can be informal: diplomats taking the initiative to seek out the regular advice of a colleague. Junior colleagues should be encouraged to seek out mentors; more senior colleagues should be encouraged to act as mentors. Mentoring schemes can also be formal, set up by the foreign ministry. The advantage of the latter is that all employees can benefit, the expectations of the relationship are transparent and therefore understood by both mentors and mentees, and credit for acting as a mentor can be acknowledged (or expected). In practice, both types of mentoring can co-exist.

To borrow an example from our own institution: the LSE has formal mentoring schemes for academic and professional staff. One of the guides to mentoring states: “Mentoring is a professional relationship that involves the practice of an individual sharing their knowledge, skills and experience with one or more individuals, assisting them to progress in their careers” (London School of Economics and Political Science, no date).<sup>1</sup> There is guidance on the respective roles of mentors and mentees, and on how to manage the practicalities and expectations of the mentoring relationship. Acting as a mentor is an integral part of the responsibilities of more senior academic staff.

---

<sup>1</sup> At the LSE there is also a mentoring scheme for all academic staff below the level of associate professor, as well as for professional services staff.

## Examples of mentoring schemes

Through our dialogues with women diplomats, we learned of several examples of mentoring schemes. These exist within foreign ministries but can also be multinational.

Examples of multinational schemes that were shared in dialogues include a group of African women ambassadors to the United Nations in Geneva, who worked to bring young African women to Geneva to train and support them in pursuing a career in international organisations or multilateral diplomacy.

Within foreign ministries, there are numerous schemes, both formal and informal. Several have specific aims. For example:

- The Swiss Foreign Ministry's club for women diplomats has a scheme to coach women who are ready to apply for ambassadorships.
- The European Union's External Action Service has a formal structure for mentoring to help convince women to apply for posts as heads of mission and to prepare them for interviews.
- In the United Arab Emirates, a Council of Retired Ambassadors mentors junior diplomats for a one-year term,
- A report into Canada's foreign service recommended that all new entrants into Global Affairs Canada should have formalised access to a mentor; each department should establish mentorship and job shadowing opportunities for all employees to access throughout their careers (Canadian Senate, 2023).

We also learned of an innovative scheme in Mexico City, which provides mentoring to women at the very start of the 'diplomatic career pipeline', as potential entrants into diplomatic service. The Mexican Foreign Service Association (ASEM: *Asociación Mexicana del Servicio Exterior*), founded in 1955, consists of active and retired diplomats and aims to strengthen Mexico's foreign service and preserve its prestige and reputation. In 2024, ASEM launched an initiative – beginning with a blog – to reflect on the conditions for the development of women's representation in Mexican diplomacy.<sup>2</sup> Ambassador David Nájera, President of ASEM, and Lorena Maldonado, former President of the Association of International Relations Alumni of the Universidad Iberoamericana, then agreed to take the initiative further and set up the project *Mujeres Diplomáticas Mexicanas ASEM*. An important strand of this project consists of a mentoring scheme for women in the final stages of studying for a degree in International Relations.

In its initial year, the scheme brought together five mentors, all senior women diplomats, and thirteen mentees selected from over twenty applicants. The mentors met monthly with their mentees for a year, provided advice, shared their experiences, and addressed questions and concerns about diplomatic careers. Mentees also benefitted from regular seminars, workshops and panel discussions on issues such as professional development, Mexican foreign policy, and gender and diplomacy. The objectives of the programme are to encourage the mentees to apply

---

2 Blog available at: <https://mujeresdiplomaticasmexicanas.blogspot.com/>

for the diplomatic service and to help prepare them for the entrance exam. The initial year of the programme was a success, with almost half of the mentees applying to sit for the entrance exam for the foreign service. The programme is now (2025-26) in its second year. Almost 200 candidates applied for the programme in 2025, with 20 selected.<sup>3</sup>

Mujeres Diplomáticas Mexicanas ASEM is an example of an initiative that can help to broaden and diversify the applicant pool for diplomatic services, preparing women for a diplomatic career.

## Recommendations for foreign ministries

- **Set up formal mentoring schemes within ministries.** This ensures equality of access to mentorship across the ministry and at all levels of seniority, establishing the principal that all share the same responsibility for mentorship.
- **Utilise networks of women diplomats as mentors.** This is particularly important if there is resistance to formalising mentoring, but consideration needs to be given to additional workload of mentorship and ensuring mentoring is acknowledged as a contribution. Retired diplomats could be approached to participate in network initiatives, which could reduce the workloads of serving diplomats.
- **Champion mentorship.** Institutional buy-in really matters in developing and sustaining mentorship schemes. When leadership actively promotes mentoring and communicates its value, mentorship schemes will be more credible, better resourced, and more effective; mentors will also be more encouraged to do a good job.
- **Provide guidance to both mentors and mentees.** This clarifies expectations regarding both roles and ensures that mentors are aware of the particular barriers and other issues that may affect women diplomats and those from other under-represented groups. Within foreign ministries, ensure the availability of space (both physical and temporal) for mentors and mentees to meet.
- **Centralise information and resources for mentors to share with mentees.** This includes training, networking events, and other career development opportunities. Mentors can play an important role in sharing relevant information, contacts, and resources that may be hard for mentees to access, or difficult to navigate, on their own. They can also help mentees prepare for key opportunities and guide them towards the right support and resources.

<sup>3</sup> Information on the mentoring scheme can be found here: <https://sites.google.com/view/mujeresdiplomticasmexicanas/home>. A document on the scheme was also provided to us: Lorena Maldonado and Ambassador David Nájera, 'Mentoring Scheme Mujeres Diplomáticas Mexicanas 2024-2025' (Mexico City, 15 September 2025).

- **Ensure recognition and acknowledgement of the contributions that mentors make.** Establish the expectation that mentoring is a responsibility undertaken by all.
- **Take the relative seniority levels of mentors and mentees into consideration.** It may be more effective to ensure that mentors and mentees are relatively close in terms of career advancement, so that mentors have more recent experience of the challenges and opportunities that mentees face.
- **Set up a mentoring scheme for students or recent graduates.** This can be designed to widen the pool of applicants for diplomatic service and to reach out to potential applicants from under-represented groups, including women.
- **Design mentoring to help address specific shortcomings and support targeted aims.** This depends on where the gaps in representation and progression lie, such as encouraging and supporting women applying for the post of head of mission. ■

## REFERENCES

- Canadian Senate (2023) *More than a Vocation: Canada's need for a 21<sup>st</sup> century foreign service*. Report of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade. Available at: <https://sencanada.ca/en> (Accessed: 13 March 2026).
- London School of Economics and Political Science (no date) *Guide to Mentoring for Members of Staff*. Available at: <https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/divisions/Human-Resources/Organisational-learning/PSS-Career-Development/Mentoring> (Accessed: 13 March 2026).
- Smith, K. E. and Kozielska, M. (2026) *Strengthening the Representation of Women in Diplomacy: Lessons from the Field*. LSE IDEAS, London School of Economics and Political Science. Available at: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/publications/research-reports/strengthening-the-representation-of-women-in-diplomacy-lessons-from-the-field> (Accessed: 13 March 2026).



THE LONDON SCHOOL  
OF ECONOMICS AND  
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

# A Unique Programme in Strategy Designed for Decision Makers

**LSE IDEAS**, a centre for the study of international affairs, brings together academics and policy-makers to think strategically about world events.

This one-year **EXECUTIVE MASTERS PROGRAMME** is at the heart of that endeavour. While studying in a world-leading university you will be able to learn from top LSE academics and senior policy practitioners.

The programme will sharpen your ability to challenge conventional thinking, explore new techniques for addressing risk and threats, and coach you in devising effective strategies to address them.

Residential and non-residential options allow students to learn while holding demanding positions in the public, private and non-governmental sectors.

*Right from the first week I was able to apply the lessons I had learnt to our operational and policy work and to coach my teams to look at issues differently.*

–**Dame Karen Pierce DCMG**  
UK Special Envoy to the  
Western Balkans, Former  
UK Ambassador to the  
United States

## CONTACT US

[ideas.strategy@lse.ac.uk](mailto:ideas.strategy@lse.ac.uk)

+44 (0)20 7955 6526  
[lse.ac.uk/ideas/exec](http://lse.ac.uk/ideas/exec)



**LSE IDEAS** is the LSE's foreign policy think tank. Through sustained engagement with policymakers and opinion-formers, IDEAS provides a forum that informs policy debate and connects academic research with the practice of diplomacy and strategy.

The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not represent those of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) or LSE IDEAS. This publication is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s) and LSE IDEAS should be credited, with the date of the publication. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the material therein, the author(s) and/or LSE IDEAS will not be liable for any loss or damages incurred through the use of this publication..

## **LSE IDEAS**

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

+44 (0)20 7107 5619  
[ideas@lse.ac.uk](mailto:ideas@lse.ac.uk)  
[lse.ac.uk/ideas](http://lse.ac.uk/ideas)

