



Women in Diplomacy: Targets and Quotas

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May 2026

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LSE IDEAS Women in Diplomacy Project

Women are still underrepresented in diplomacy, foreign policy and public policy, particularly in senior positions. The LSE IDEAS [Women in Diplomacy](#) project was set up to help address this issue, understand what obstacles remain and how they can be overcome. The project aims to share knowledge and tools about how to create better access to and accelerate women's representation in international organisations. It also examines how to more effectively integrate a gender-lens into government action and policy-making.

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 barriers – 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.

Although quotas and targets have been widely adopted and studied in national politics (e.g., electoral and parliamentary quotas), their use in diplomacy has received far less attention. This policy brief addresses that gap by assessing the use and effectiveness of targets and quotas in tackling women's underrepresentation in diplomacy. It draws on both available, though limited, academic and policy literature on targets and quotas, as well as the lessons learned and best practices gathered through dialogues carried over the course of 2025 with women diplomats, experts and practitioners.

Gender targets or quotas intend to ensure that women constitute at least a critical minority – 30% or 40% – of political elites (International IDEA, no date) and are designed to 'reverse' discrimination and promote equal opportunities for women and men (Dahlerup *et al.*, 2014, p. 16). They establish minimum (and sometimes maximum) level of the representation of women and/or men in political institutions and decision-making bodies. They can be legally mandated, constitutionally guaranteed, or voluntarily adopted. In diplomacy, this can mean setting targets for women's inclusion in recruitment, advancement to senior roles (e.g., ambassadors, permanent

representatives, negotiators), and delegations or conferences. The main difference between quotas and targets is that quotas are legally binding and targets are not. Both can work well when accompanied by actions that ensure that they are met.

Research demonstrates that gender quotas/targets have potential to lead to 'positive, systemic disruption' (Aldrich and Daniel, 2025). They can:

- Accelerate systematic change through 'tangible, measurable and time-bound goals' (Uličná, 2023).
- Improve overall quality of outcomes by attracting more qualified workforce (Aldrich and Daniel, 2025).
- Enhance democratic legitimacy, as gender equality 'confers legitimacy to political decisions' even when elected through quotas (Clayton, O'Brien and Piscopo, 2025, p. 8).
- Create 'positive spillover effects' – women become role models to young women, bring attention to, among others, women's rights and public health, improve minority representation and international reputation (Aldrich and Daniel, 2025).

However, quotas also raise concerns about tokenism. This creates a 'double burden' (Uličná, 2023) as women have to justify their presence in certain positions and disprove stereotypes (Anderson, 2011). Resistance and backlash against women further lead to adverse effects, and sometimes, violence; quotas can unintentionally substitute for deeper political reforms or create new inequalities among women, and so quotas or targets are not 'automatically beneficial for all women' (Aldrich and Daniel, 2025).

At the same time, based on conversations we held as part of the 2025 dialogues, in general, quotas/targets were seen as effective because they create a clear baseline and a concrete target to work towards – something that can anchor and catalyse further action. Without defining what level of representation is expected or even establishing the extent of underrepresentation within a foreign ministry, it is difficult to diagnose the problem, track progress, or hold institutions accountable. Therefore, quotas or targets can be a useful tool to progress towards parity but requires tailored and thoughtful design and implementation paired with enforcement mechanisms.

Without this, there is a risk of creating 'artificial' quotas or targets, on paper, rather than meaningful measures that drive real change. 'Real' quotas or targets are backed by clear enforcement mechanisms, monitoring and evaluation (M&E), consequences for non-compliance, and institutionalisation (Aldrich and Daniel, 2025). Institutionalisation should embed quotas / targets within organisational structures, ensuring they are not dependent on individual leaders and vulnerable to reversal. By contrast, 'artificial' quotas / targets exist mainly on paper, focus on low-status or ceremonial roles, lack accountability, and leave structural barriers intact. The objective of quotas/targets is not only to achieve descriptive, but substantive, representation of women across all diplomatic ranks. At their best, quotas/targets can drive multi-dimensional change. They can improve women's representation, enhance individual career opportunities, influence organisational culture, and shape policy outcomes.

ESTABLISHING QUOTAS/TARGETS

Understanding the level of women's representation in a foreign ministry, the specific challenges that limit their entry or retention, and the accountability mechanisms that are or are not in place is essential for determining when quotas/targets are needed and how they can be effectively adapted to the local context. Many foreign ministries are not aware of the significant underrepresentation of women across their ranks because they do not systematically collect disaggregated data, including by gender or ethnicity, for example.¹

The impact of quotas/targets also depends on the scale and placement. While smaller targets (20-30%) may benefit individual careers, and individual leaders can play a role by advancing gender-sensitive measures, they are less likely to shift norms.² Thresholds of 30-40% combined with placement mandates are more likely to produce measurable change by ensuring that women occupy key diplomatic posts and addressing critical gaps within foreign ministries (International IDEA, no date).

Research shows better success of quotas/targets when they are introduced and implemented as part of a broader gender equality strategy – such as a Feminist Foreign Policy, or a Women, Peace and Security Action Plan (Meier and Lombardo, 2013). At the same time, there is also evidence to show that countries with embedded gender equality strategies can still fail to meet their quota targets, or their effectiveness is limited (Green, Kozielska and Smith, 2023), mainly because the implementation alongside the strategies lacks depth of understanding of the internal barriers that prevent women from progressing. That is why it is important to pair quotas/targets with supporting measures – such as training, mentorship, networking, flexible work and childcare – that help tackle key barriers that have been identified within foreign ministries.

CASE STUDIES

The format in which quotas or targets are instituted will differ by organisation, its objectives, and ways of achieving those objectives.

In 2015, the **Australian** Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) set out the goal of achieving '40-40-20' gender balance in senior leadership positions by 2020: 40% women, 40% men and 20% for all genders, with progress towards the targets to be monitored annually (Australia. DFAT, 2015). The targets were met, and in 2020, the goal of 40-40-20 gender balance extended to division level and posts, to be met by 2025 (Australia. DFAT, 2020). In 2024, the strategy of setting targets was extended to other underrepresented groups in the foreign service (Australia. DFAT, 2024). The DFAT strategies include a number of measures that contributed to success, including the strong commitment of leaders and open conversations about the targets, as well as the celebration of those women who were the first to hold particular ambassadorships.³ Australia's experience is notable for its consistent whole-of-government commitment to gender equality, which is credited as central to the strong outcomes achieved.

1 Author's workshops with women diplomats, held in 2025.

2 Ibid.

3 Elise Stephenson points out that despite the remarkable progress, women leaders in foreign affairs still face barriers including sexism and covert discrimination (Stephenson, 2024, pp. 12-15).

Chile became the first South American country to adopt a Feminist Foreign Policy in 2023 (Government of Chile, 2023). The policy set objectives to increase women's representation in major ambassadorial missions and achieve parity among honorary consuls. A Gender Affairs Division was created to implement the policy and oversee progress, alongside supporting measures including maternity and paternity leave, positive gender-based scoring in selection, gender equality training and coaching, and a workplace violence protocol. Within two years, the number of women in embassies and missions rose from 14 to 27, and women were appointed to high-profile missions for the first time, though women ambassadors still represented only 26% of all ambassadors (Chile. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024).

Kenya's 2010 Constitution introduced a requirement through Article 27: no more than two-thirds of members of elective or appointive bodies can be of the same gender, obliging the state to take legislative and other measures, including affirmative action, to implement this principle. The Foreign Service Act of 2021 translated this commitment into the diplomatic sphere, requiring that nominations for ambassadors and diplomatic or consular representatives reflect the gender, regional, and other diversities of the people of Kenya. By 2024, there were 32.7% women ambassadors (Towns and Niklasson, 2025).

Mexico became the first Global South country to adopt a Feminist Foreign Policy in 2020. Mexico's Foreign Ministry ran a study which had found declining representation of women and limited access to higher ranks, prompting affirmative action by decree to achieve gender parity in the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs – this included a formalised 2:1 women-to-men quota for entrance exams (Mexico. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). Supporting measures included training on substantive equality, anonymised foreign service exams, and workplace gender equality education. By 2024, new entrants numbered 66 women and 33 men.⁴

Sweden first coined and adopted a Feminist Foreign Policy in 2014. The policy set gender balance targets focused on decision-making roles, with regular evaluations, consistent guidance to agencies and embassies, and the creation of a dedicated Gender Equality Ambassadorial position to oversee implementation. By 2021, women represented 47% of Swedish ambassadors; the policy also had measurable foreign policy effects: as a UN Security Council member in 2017–2018, Sweden ensured women were present at the table, promoted gender parity in peace talks, and pushed to link gender-based violence to sanctions (Sweden. Ministry for Foreign Affairs (2017). However, the policy and its associated targets were abandoned following a change of government in 2022.

Other notable examples include Canada, France and Switzerland. **Canada** committed to having 50-50 representation in its foreign service, and in 2018 reached parity in appointment of heads of mission, and by 2023, women were 49% of all heads of mission (Government of Canada, 2024). **France** passed the Sauvedet Law in 2012, which provides for a system of gender quotes in the public service, with fines for not meeting them. The law has led to a growing rate of women across all managerial positions including in the foreign ministry (Dell'Apa, 2021). **Switzerland's** first female foreign minister in 2004/05 insisted on more balance, with an aim for parity at all levels, and by 2024 31.5% of senior management were women.⁵

4 Author's workshops with women diplomats, held in 2025.

5 Ibid.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FOREIGN MINISTRIES

The argument for improving women's representation in diplomacy is not only about fairness but also strengthening institutions and policy outcomes in an era of complex international challenges. Gender quotas or targets, while not a cure-all, can be powerful catalysts for multi-dimensional change within foreign ministries and the broader foreign policy world. The following policy recommendations focus on measures that contribute to stronger design and sustainable implementation of gender quotas/targets::

- **Collect and use gender-disaggregated data to guide quota / target design**, and to set quotas/targets that are evidence-based and context-specific.
- **Pair quotas/targets with robust monitoring and evaluation systems** to continue strengthening what works and to rigorously address weaknesses.
- **Pair quotas/targets with tailored enforcement mechanisms** to ensure that key barriers are addressed.
- **Integrate quotas into broader gender equality strategies.** Implementation of quotas/targets should be linked to broader agenda for career progression, cultural change, and policy progress. Integrating quotas/targets as part of broader strategy will help in three key aspects:
 - To establish reinforcing supporting measures aimed at recruitment pipelines, career progression, work-life balance support (including care burdens), and culture change.
 - To prevent backlash and resistance by framing quotas/targets as collective goals laid out by the strategy.
 - To present a long-term view of change while giving quotas/targets legitimacy, resources, and leadership support.

Ultimately, effective quota/targets setting requires action at every level:

- **Representation** – foreign ministries must set evidence-based targets across all diplomatic ranks.
- **Individual career** – foreign ministries must address biased recruitment processes, limited access to senior assignments, and work-life balance.⁶
- **Organisational** – foreign ministries must commit to consistent gender equality measures that help shift discriminatory norms to a more inclusive culture.
- **Policy outcomes** – quotas/targets can catalyse systemic change, but this requires foreign ministries' genuine commitment to gender equality, grounded in an understanding of its importance and institutional dynamics. This will not only lead to greater diversity, but also greater institutionalisation over time, durability and effectiveness of gender equality measures, and ultimately stronger policy outcomes. ■

⁶ Workshops with women diplomats, held in 2025; see also Aldrich and Daniel (2025).

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