

# Women in Foreign Affairs

## A New Methodology for Impact Assessment

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# Imprint

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# Preface

Women in diplomatic services are underrepresented in many states of the world, including Germany where female leaders in the foreign service are still a minority. What is more, hardly any institution of international politics has managed to achieve gender parity or an equitable representation of minorities. At the same time, feminist foreign policy and the Women, Peace and Security agenda have been identified as promising strategies of conflict resolution and alternative approaches to crisis intervention. The reasons for focusing more systematically on women in peace-building processes and conflict situations are, to briefly summarize, their key role in society and the need to find more comprehensive, equitable and sustainable ways to address root causes of conflicts.

Yet, the credibility of such proposals can be undermined when states that push for a feminist foreign policy, which among other things envision measures for less unequal societies, are not able to demonstrate their own commitment to gender equality. The role of women in foreign affairs can thus be seen as an important success factor of states' international policies, particularly of democratic states such as Germany or other EU members, which claim moral leadership and aim to influence the global agenda.

In her discussion paper, Dr Tonka Kostadinova, who can draw on her experience as a diplomat in the Bulgarian foreign service, proposes a research agenda to study what impact women in foreign affairs can have on the state's actual foreign policy. Her project engages with the institutions that are committed realizing globally agreed goals such as the 2000 UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on including women in peacemaking processes. In explicating a methodology to study how ministries of foreign affairs establish more gender equal processes, Tonka's work can be seen as a highly relevant and timely contribution to rethinking international politics.

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**Abstract:** *In this discussion paper, I introduce a new methodological approach in the form of a framework for assessing women's empowerment in foreign affairs. This framework aims to provide new theoretical and methodological pathways for evaluating the impact of women's increased presence in foreign policy institutions on the content and implementation of foreign policy. The proposed methodology treats foreign policy as a holistic process and examines women's roles and agency at all three stages of the policy cycle: foreign policy making, foreign policy content, and foreign policy outcomes. Such an approach is essential for informing policies that bring about institutional change, advancing gender equality both within MFAs and in foreign affairs, and ultimately improving the overall effectiveness of foreign policy.*

# 1. Introduction

In recent decades, women have made substantial progress in the traditionally male-dominated fields of foreign policy (FP) and diplomacy, getting better representation and increased visibility as foreign policy agents. This shift has impacted global diplomacy, and women's rights and empowerment have been increasingly prioritized on the international agenda. Yet, despite women's enhanced presence in foreign affairs, current academic and policy research faces a large lacuna in theoretical and empirical understandings of women's empowerment in the field. Studies on the roles and lived experiences of women in foreign policy institutions remain limited even in countries that have prioritized women's issues in their foreign affairs. Moreover, despite growing emphasis on gender equality in foreign policy agendas, practical implementation remains elusive in everyday diplomatic practices and policy-making processes. This interplay of opportunities and limitations underscores the necessity for a thorough examination of women's actual empowerment in the domains of foreign policy and diplomacy, one that includes whether and how women's increased presence in the Foreign Office impacts the content and outcomes of foreign policy. Exploring this topic can offer a deeper insight into the institutional barriers that prevent women from effectively serving as diplomats and foreign policy agents, limiting their capacity to actively shape policy formulation and decision-making processes.

This discussion paper introduces an innovative framework for evaluating and understanding the multifaceted nature of women's political empowerment within the realm of foreign policy and diplomacy. The framework is based on analyzing the gendered aspects of the interplay between agency (women's participation and representation, power, leadership) and structure (enabling and disabling conditions for the advance of pro-gender norms in foreign policy such as state identity and national role conception). It aims to facilitate future studies that examine women's agency and empowerment in foreign policy institutions across the globe, enabling a comparative perspective between different national and socio-political contexts.

The impact assessment model is focused exclusively on Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs) as central foreign policy institutions and a particularly relevant context for exploring women's empowerment at all three stages of the policy process: everyday diplomatic activities and policy-making, formulating policy strategies and agendas, and foreign policy implementation. It provides a new method to help us gain deeper insight into the workings of MFAs and to better understand how day-to-day diplomatic practice constitutes and perpetuates diplomacy and foreign policy as gendered institutions (Towns, Kreft & Niklasson 2018: 201). The scope of this paper excludes parliamentary foreign policy committees and the executive branch of foreign policy due to their political nature and frequent personnel changes, which makes assessing the long-term impact of women's participation and leadership in these contexts challenging. However, the model is transferable to other institutional contexts with permanent diplomatic personnel, e.g. international organizations, diplomatic missions and diplomatic corps.

## 2. Key questions

At the intersection between feminist IR, foreign policy analysis and diplomacy studies, the paper addresses timely and important questions that have received scarce attention so far:

- Has the arrival of a more diverse set of actors impacted the practice of foreign policy and diplomacy, and which are the gendered hierarchies that remain resistant to change?
- Does women's increased participation in foreign services influence foreign policy preferences and outcomes, and if so, in what ways?
- What factors intersect with the share of women in MFAs to explain the adoption or the lack of women-oriented or feminist foreign policies? (Towns, Kreft and Niklasson, 2018: 201).

The paper addresses these questions by approaching women's empowerment in foreign policy institutions holistically, considering all three levels of the policy cycle—foreign policy making, policy content and policy implementation. In doing so, it provides new theoretical and methodological avenues for assessing the impact of women's enhanced presence in the MFAs upon foreign policy strategies and outcomes.

## 3. Contributions to debates

The paper makes several significant contributions to existing debates in the fields of feminist international relations (IR), foreign policy analysis (FPA), and diplomacy studies. Over the last three decades, feminist approaches to IR have taken multiple directions and have evolved into a dynamic and diverse field of scholarship, which has been applied to a broad range of issues and areas such as peace building, security, and international negotiation (Enloe 1989; Paffenholz 2018; Peterson 1992; Prugl & Tickner 2018; Sylvester 1994; Tickner 1992; Towns 2010). Nevertheless, scholarly engagement with women's agency and specific roles in contemporary foreign policy institutions and everyday diplomatic practices remains limited. Existing feminist IR research focuses either on historical accounts of the process of opening the diplomatic service to women, or on descriptive analyses tracing the number of women diplomats and ambassadors in contemporary diplomacy (Kostadinova 2022). Studies on the substantive impact of women's presence in MFAs on diplomatic practices and negotiation outcomes remain on the margins of the field.

FPA hasn't consistently explored women's agency in contemporary foreign affairs either. Despite the increasing number of women in foreign policy institutions globally there is still a significant lack of robust models for assessing how their participation impacts the content of foreign policy. FPA studies focus primarily on the core elements and topics covered in the newly developed feminist foreign policies, with less consideration given to the processes of their introduction or their implementation (Thomson 2022). Questions regarding the influence of women in foreign policy decision-making processes or the effects of women's enhanced agency on foreign policy outcomes have remained largely

unaddressed (for an important exception see Smith 2020). The paper fills in this gap by providing a novel methodological framework aimed at studying women's roles throughout the policy development and implementation phases.

Such an approach seamlessly integrates feminist international relations with foreign policy analysis and diplomacy studies, providing a comprehensive framework for examining women's empowerment in foreign affairs. Despite their obvious codependency, only a few scholars so far have pursued the task of combining these strands of research (Aggestam & True 2020: 4). By incorporating women's agency at all three levels of the policy process, our impact assessment model provides a significant methodological innovation that enriches and integrates these fields. It contributes to one of the core debates in IR and FPA concerning agency and structure. Existing research focuses on the dualism between agency and structure emphasizing either the role played by individual actors, or the structural contexts that enable or constrain leadership and change. By contrast, our impact assessment model draws on the perception of human agents and structures as being fundamentally interrelated and mutually constituted (Aggestam & True 2020: 9). It thus offers better understanding of the gendered dynamics of the relationship between agency and structure in the field.

Furthermore, this paper paves the way for interdisciplinary studies on women in foreign affairs, extending beyond international relations and foreign policy analysis. By concentrating on diplomats and MFA officials, it seeks to foster a more anthropological perspective on foreign policy-making processes. The impact assessment model leverages ethnographic methods, including interviews and participant observation, to uncover novel insights into foreign policy through the lens of everyday practices, working routines, and the daily environment within diplomatic institutions. This approach is crucial given the often closed and secretive nature of diplomatic work. Scholars in IR and FPA have emphasized the need for more ethnographic studies in these fields. However, they also acknowledge the significant challenges these approaches face, particularly in gaining access to diplomats and Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs). As a result, our understanding of the standard operational procedures and daily routines in foreign policy and diplomacy remains quite limited. Even those who work as political insiders acknowledge that both fields significantly differ from the widespread stereotypes that shape policy reports, popular culture and the opinions of social scientists who lack personal exposure to diplomatic practices and diplomatic work (Neumann 2012, 3-8).

One potential solution to this methodological impasse is to place diplomats at the forefront of research on foreign policy-making and implementation. In foreign ministries, diplomats navigate the everyday routines of policy-making, prepare the positions of high-level political figures (such as the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Prime Minister, the President, and the Chairpersons of the National Assembly), and serve as safeguards for political decision-makers, even at the highest levels of government. Despite their essential role for conducting and maintaining foreign affairs, diplomats have remained outside the scope of scholarly attention in the fields of international relations, foreign policy analysis, and even diplomacy studies.

Drawing from the author's own diplomatic experience, this paper underscores the crucial role of diplomats as key foreign policy agents, responsible for shaping and

implementing diplomacy and foreign affairs. It thus aligns with scholarly calls for a broader understanding of diplomacy—one that acknowledges the importance of individuals and groups, not just sovereign states, as essential components for diplomacy to thrive (Wiesman 2011).

## 4. Concepts and methodology

Departing from the points of intersection between feminist IR, FPA and diplomacy studies, the paper adopts Valerie Hudson's actor-specific theory based on the assumption that the interaction between nations is grounded in human decision makers acting singly or in groups (Hudson 2005). Hudson approaches the individual as the basis for all foreign policy analysis because “without a human being acting, no policy (either domestic or foreign) would be imaginable” (Heinrich 2008: 110). She emphasizes the importance of human agency, arguing that states are abstractions and thus have no agency (Hudson 2013).

Accordingly, our model is based on the understanding of foreign policy as an actor-oriented practice rather than simply a structured response or adaptation to external factors (Aggestam & Towns 2020: 9). I posit that the actions, choices, and decisions of diplomats and MFA officials are pivotal in shaping a country's foreign affairs. Similarly, I anticipate that increased participation and agency of women within MFAs has the potential to influence policy strategies and outcomes. Therefore, the suggested model aims to measure the extent to which women diplomats may impact the policy development and implementation phases.

The concept of women's empowerment lies at the core of the proposed impact assessment model. Empowerment is understood here as a process of dismantling the power differential between men and women, centered around women's agency and self-determination (Mosedale 2005). It denotes a process of transformation from a position of no or limited agency to one of greater agentic opportunity and effectiveness (Alexander 2018: 5-6). The impact assessment model is based on the understanding that women's political empowerment is multifaceted and encompasses various dimensions beyond mere representation or participation such as:

- *Access to decision-making*: This dimension considers the ability and opportunity of women to actively influence policy formulation and decision-making processes.
- *Agency and autonomy*: Women's empowerment involves enhanced agency to make choices on policy matters, while autonomy allows women to navigate their personal and professional paths independently.
- *Intersectionality*: Studying women's status in diplomacy implies recognizing that empowerment intersects with diverse aspects of identity (gender, race, ethnicity, class).
- *Social and cultural norms*: By analyzing the wider socio-political and institutional context, our model reflects on the societal norms and stereotypes that impact women's effectiveness as diplomats and foreign policy agents, and identifies barriers related to gender bias and expectations.



## 5. Analysis

For the purposes of this discussion paper, I advance a methodological framework on women's empowerment in FP for empirical analyses. I elaborate on the key elements of the framework that allow us to trace women's involvement at every stage of the foreign policy cycle, considering both quantitative and qualitative aspects.

### ***Foreign policy-making: quantitative and qualitative analysis***

The proposed model commences by developing robust indicators to quantify women's empowerment within foreign policy institutions. Through an examination of gender-related metrics, including the count of women diplomats, female ambassadors, and their allocation across various policy domains and types of assignments, we can acquire critical insights into the position and status of women within the field. These measurement metrics not only provide a baseline understanding but also facilitate the assessment of progress and the tracking of changes in women's empowerment patterns over time.

Our framework suggests the following indicators for evaluating the level of women's empowerment within foreign policy institutions:

- *Number of women diplomats*: by quantifying the representation of women in diplomatic roles and by analyzing the proportion of women diplomats relative to their male counterparts, the model assesses the overall gender balance in foreign policy institutions.
- *Female ambassadors*: analyzing the ratio of female ambassadors to male ambassadors within the selected Ministry of Foreign Affairs over the last thirty years provides valuable insights into patterns of progress in women's leadership positions and decision-making roles.
- *Distribution across policy areas*: studying women's participation in specific policy areas (e.g., security, trade, human rights) sheds light onto their place and status in diplomacy. Assessing the category of "power" implies exploring whether women are evenly distributed across different domains or if certain areas remain male-dominated.
- *Types of postings*: investigating the types of postings held by women – whether they serve in high-profile embassies, multilateral organizations, or challenging regions – allows us to better understand their career trajectories in diplomacy.

While the impact assessment model places significant emphasis on women's representation and active participation as primary indicators of gender equality in foreign policy institutions, it undertakes the complex task of examining the intricate relationship between women's mere presence and their substantive agency in foreign affairs. This task involves examining the collected quantitative data through a qualitative lens, focusing on key concepts like representation, leadership, and power (see table 1).

Furthermore, the impact assessment model foresees conducting interviews with diplomats and MFA officials. Interviewing male and female diplomats provides valuable insights into their lived experiences and agency in everyday policymaking. Moreover, it is a relevant methodological tool to explore potential differences or similarities in the thematic priorities upon which men and women diplomats focus, such as development aid,

humanitarianism, or security and military expenditures. Specifically, the assessment model suggests examining whether women tend to prioritize different policy areas that emphasize human rights, gender equality and social justice, and whether these priorities might lead to shifts in policy agendas, resource allocation, and diplomatic strategies. We can then delve into whether and how these differences influence the content and overall effectiveness of foreign policy.

### ***Foreign policy content***

The impact of women's increased representation in MFAs on policy strategies and agendas is examined by exploring the gendered dynamics of the relationship between agency and structure. The analysis of the interdependent factors shaping women's influence on policy content can be approached from two perspectives. First, we can examine the institutional factors that facilitate or hinder women's agency and capacity to make decisions, influence processes, and take actions. Supportive policies, such as gender quotas, mentorship programs, and family-friendly work environments, play a crucial role in creating an environment where women can effectively contribute to foreign policy. It is widely recognized that institutions that prioritize gender equality and foster the expression of women's political perspectives are more likely to develop and implement policies that support the advancement of pro-gender norms in international relations. Inclusive policy making processes that involve diverse perspectives are more likely to result in gender-sensitive foreign policy agendas. Conversely, foreign policy institutions with lower levels of women's substantive representation are less likely to prioritize gender-related issues. Institutional barriers such as gender bias, lack of representation in leadership positions, and inadequate support systems can hinder the advancement of women-friendly policy strategies.

Second, the analysis of the interplay between agency and structure entails considering a state's specific foreign policy orientation, strategic approach, and thoughtful evaluation of issues related to state identity and national role conception. The foreign policy orientation of a state provides the overall framework to explain the rise, continuity, change, or resistance to pro-gender equality norms (Aggestam & True 2020). Gender-blind foreign policy manifests itself in contesting international agreements and resolutions that promote women's rights. For example, many countries have refused to ratify the Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women (Armenia, Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Lithuania), or have withdrawn from it (Turkey). Other states have been reluctant to adopt National Action Plans and to allocate resources for the implementation of the United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security (2000). Looking into how a state has addressed the global dissemination of pro-gender norms (support or resistance) can reveal broader trends and patterns related to women's empowerment and ability to effectively articulate and mainstream gender equality perspectives in foreign affairs.

### ***Foreign policy implementation***

As noted above, the agency of actors informs their behavioral patterns in everyday policy making, and hence has the potential to impact the content and outcomes of foreign policy. The choices of these actors - whether influenced by personal beliefs, organizational culture, or external pressures - shape policy priorities, strategies, and actions. For instance,

an emphasis on human rights or economic interests may lead to different policy stances. Consequently, the outcomes of foreign policy (e.g., treaties, alliances, aid allocation, trade agreements) are also influenced by the collective agency of these actors.

Our impact assessment model thus seeks to detect those outcomes of foreign policy that are related to advancing gender equality and women's rights. It suggests examining foreign policy implementation across several key areas as follows:

- Resource allocation involves analyzing the balance between humanitarian/development assistance and military/defense expenditures.
- Aid provision relates to assessing how (and how much) foreign aid is allocated to gender-specific programmes, such as initiatives supporting women's education, healthcare, and economic empowerment.
- Women's participation in peace processes indicates whether foreign policy institutions are committed to actively involving women in peace negotiations, conflict resolutions, and post-conflict reconstruction efforts. It is widely known that the inclusion of women is more likely to contribute to advancing women's rights in conflict and post-conflict processes.
- Efforts to prevent and combat gender-based violence allows the evaluation of policies and actions aimed at addressing gender-based violence, including legal frameworks, support services, and awareness campaigns.

By considering these factors, we can gain deeper understanding into whether women's increased agency in MFAs leads to any shifts in policy agendas, resource allocation, and diplomatic strategies, and how these shifts manifest in specific policy outcomes.

## 6. Findings

The model is based on an integrated and coherent scheme that allows us to better understand the impact of women's enhanced presence in MFA upon foreign policy content and outcomes. The scheme establishes a meaningful and valuable interconnection among the different stages of the policy process by considering the interdependencies between the following factors:

**Table 1: Scheme for the development of an experimental model for assessing the impact of women's presence in FP on foreign policy content and implementation**

<b>Foreign policy-making (everyday practices)</b>	<b>Foreign policy content</b>	<b>Foreign policy outcomes/ implementation</b>
Representation, participation (number of female diplomats and FP officials)	State identity; national role conception; constructions of masculinity and femininity in foreign affairs	Aid to contribute to gender equality programs; promoting women's rights in international development assistance
Power (the position of men and women within MFA; distribution of men and women across the different policy areas)	Foreign policy orientation and key discourses legitimizing foreign policy.	Humanitarian vs. military and defense expenditures
Leadership (women in high rank diplomatic positions; number of female ambassadors, to which countries etc.)	Responsivity to the global diffusion of pro-gender norms (UNSCR 1325); ratification of international treaties	Promoting women's participation in peace processes; advancing women's rights in conflict and post-conflict processes
Power (the position of women within MFA; distribution of women across the different policy areas)	Pro-gender norms formulated into specific FP strategies.	Efforts to prevent and combat gender-based violence in international affairs.

## 7. Conclusion

The paper underscores the pivotal role of human agency in shaping foreign policy, emphasizing that actors are not mere recipients of rules but active participants in policy formation. By adopting an actor-oriented approach, the study highlights the potential impact of increased female representation in Ministries of Foreign Affairs on foreign policy and international relations. The methodological tool for a more nuanced understanding of women's agency presented here has the potential to offer novel understandings of the contributions of women diplomats and their influence on long-term foreign policy goals. At the same time, the research pays close attention to the institutional context that influences women's agency, reflecting on the structural conditions that either facilitate or hinder leadership and change. In doing so, the paper provides valuable insights into the gendered aspects of the relationship between agency and structure in foreign affairs. This approach can help to identify the challenges women face in foreign policy institutions, while simultaneously highlighting the opportunities for advancing gender equality, such as through targeted policies and initiatives that support women's participation and leadership.

The paper thus provides valuable pathways for future studies to explore the evolving participation, influence, and agency of women in foreign affairs. By offering a framework to examine women's roles throughout the policy development and implementation phases, it sheds light on the challenges and opportunities for promoting gender equality within this critical domain. The development of rigorous models to assess the impact of women's presence in foreign policy institutions remains crucial for informing policies, advancing gender equality, and enhancing the overall effectiveness of foreign policy.

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