Women and Diplomacy

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“It used to be that the only way a woman could truly make her foreign policy views felt was by marrying a diplomat and then pouring tea on an offending ambassador’s lap.” I will always remember Madeleine Albright saying this in an address to the Women’s Foreign Policy Group (WFPG) in Washington shortly after President Bill Clinton’s reelection when she was conducting an undeclared campaign to be named Secretary of State. She went on to say:

Today women are engaged in every facet of global affairs, from policymaking to deal-making, from arms control to trade, from the courtroom of the War Crimes Tribunal to the far-flung operations of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Even in the United Nations Security Council, there is, thanks to President Clinton, one skirt to balance the fourteen suits. I like to think that is just about even odds.

How Well are Women Doing in the Diplomatic World Today?

In record numbers, women in the United States (US) are entering the rarified field of diplomacy, assuming leadership roles, and breaking with centuries of tradition. However, as recently as the 1970s, women made up only 4.8 percent of US Foreign Service Officers. The United States has had 184 women ambassadors since President Harry Truman appointed the first female ambassador in 1949. In 1989, when I was appointed Ambassador to the Kingdom of Nepal, women were seven percent of US ambassadors. Today, there are 30 women representing the US out of about 167 ambassadors, or some 18 percent.

Looking worldwide, today there are eight women ambassadors serving as their country’s Permanent Representatives at the United Nations (UN) in New York. These numbers are lower than in 2002, when there were 11. Seen against the background of 189 United Nations member countries, it means a little more than three percent of UN ambassadors are women.

Breaking Diplomatic Tradition

Historically, diplomacy has been the preserve of men. Women were not admitted to diplomatic and consular services in any appreciable numbers until 1933, when 13 countries, including Nicaragua and Turkey, had women diplomats. Until the mid-20th century, the most extensive contribution made by women to diplomacy was as the wives of diplomatic and consular officers. In this capacity, they supported their husbands by

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1 Nancy E. McGlen and Meredith Reid Sarkees, The Status of Women in Foreign Policy, (Foreign Policy Association: Headline Series, No. 307), p. 41.
running diplomatic households, presiding as hostesses, making their own range of contacts to complement the official work of the Embassy and in many instances, distinguishing themselves by local, voluntary, and community work.

In the US State Department, there have been very few women or minority diplomats. The transition to a merit-based Foreign Service examination in 1924 theoretically opened up the Foreign Service, but many women and minority candidates were weeded out during the oral exams. The US Foreign Service did not gain a critical mass of women officers until the 1990s—26 percent in 1993 and 33 percent in 2003.

Until the 1970s, women diplomats had to choose between marriage and career. Can you believe that the State Department expected women to give up their jobs if they married and did not remove this unfair requirement until 1974?

To this day, women are generally posted to lesser posts; blacks are nearly universally posted to traditionally “black posts,” such as Liberia or Haiti; Hispanics are posted to the Spanish-speaking world; and Asians were not visible in the field until 1989, when I became the first Asian American to achieve ambassadorial rank.

The American diplomatic service is relatively young—only 80 years old. Nevertheless, it took 25 years to have the first female US ambassador, when Eugenie Anderson went to Denmark in 1949 under the Truman administration. It took 65 years for America to have its first Asian American ambassador. And it took 72 years for women to attain the highest diplomatic position when Madeleine Albright became the first woman Secretary of State.

Barriers and Challenges

While the numbers of women in diplomacy are growing, significant barriers and challenges remain. There has been very little research on women in diplomacy, but a 1995 study by Nancy E. McGlen and Meredith Reid Sarkees found that various factors excluded women and continue to exclude women from the foreign policy arena. Can you guess what the factors are?

♦ Traditional gender stereotypes;
♦ Cultural norms;
♦ Overt discriminatory practices of foreign policy institutions.

Women have been marginalized in the arena of foreign policy-making because traditional western and eastern philosophers from Aristotle to Confucius taught that the state, like the household, should be governed by men. The very conceptualization of the state was based on the subordination of women’s labor within the family to allow men to concentrate on increasing wealth.
Particularly in affairs of the state, the traits most associated with being a man have been those most valued in the conduct of international politics. Toughness, courage, power, strength, and even the use of force are seen as qualities more appropriate and relevant to the successful management of the state.

Added to these barriers posed by gender and cultural stereotyping, the study found past and current examples of both direct and indirect discrimination against women by the National Security Council, Congress, the Department of State and the Department of Defense.2

A US Court of Appeals ruling on a class action suit brought against the State Department in 1976 (Palmer v. Baker), found the Department to have violated Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and to have engaged in gender discrimination in a wide range of activities, including the Foreign Service exam, assignments, evaluations and awards. In a subsequent case, the Voice of America and its parent organization, the United States Information Agency, were likewise found to have been guilty of sex discrimination and ordered also to compensate the victims.3

Although more women are entering Foreign Service fields, the study pointed out that the increase is concentrated in lower positions. Women remain largely under-represented in the top administrative and policy decision-making positions. The authors of the study concluded, “Women must keep pressing for inclusion.” Women, they urged, “…cannot wait for men to open the door and invite them into the foreign policy process.”4

Women’s Foreign Policy Group Study

In 1998, the WFPG, of which I am a co-founder, undertook a study of 589 women, including in-depth interviews with 43 women, to learn more about the personal, professional and environmental factors that have shaped women’s careers in the diplomatic service. I participated in the study and remember being asked five basic questions:

♦ What was your career strategy?
♦ What were the factors that facilitated or hindered your advancement?
♦ Are there lessons that you can offer from your experiences?
♦ What do women bring to the field of diplomacy?
♦ What distinguishes women’s experiences in international affairs from other fields?

2 Nancy E. McGlen and Meredith Reid Sarkees, The Status of Women in Foreign Policy, (Foreign Policy Association: Headline Series, No. 307), pp.14-34.
3 Ibid, pp. 21-22.
In its report, *Leading by Example: US Women Leaders in International Affairs*, the WFPG found:5

♦ A large proportion of the women studied were first, second or third generation Americans who were stimulated early on by study or work abroad.

♦ Job satisfaction outranked job security, material benefits or career status as motivational factors in their careers.

♦ A majority shared similar generational experiences and educational qualifications. Most had early exposure to other cultures, had studied abroad and obtained advanced college degrees.

♦ Affirmative action and special training programs did not often figure in their career progression.

♦ Most cited mentoring as important for advancement even though they did not have the benefit of mentors.

♦ Almost all said that serendipity, in the form of seized opportunities, had been more important to their career advancement than structured planning.

♦ Balancing family life with frequent overseas travel, long office hours and the need to attend conferences exacted a toll.

♦ To succeed the women had constantly to exceed performance expectations, make their male colleagues feel comfortable, and schedule marriage, family time, and even childbirth around their careers.

The study went on to offer more concrete strategies for women achieving leadership positions in diplomacy.6 Women are encouraged to:

♦ Earn an advanced degree, obtain internships and seek out mentors for guidance;

♦ Gain international experience and language skills early on;

♦ Develop or identify a specialty or expertise that women care about;

♦ Work hard, taking on high profile assignments, learning to take risks, developing transferable skills and being flexible; and,

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6 Ibid, p. 17.
♦ Recognize and manage the tensions between private life and professional obligations.

How I Became Ambassador

As so many of the women interviewed by the WFPG study, I became an ambassador by serendipity. I happened to be in the right place at the right time.

Although I had spent my entire professional career at that point in government service, I was not a Foreign Service officer. US law required nine years citizenship before anyone could join the Foreign Service at the time when I graduated from college. I did not get my American citizenship until after graduation. When you are 20 years old, you think 30 is very old; so, the Foreign Service seemed impractical and out of reach.

I never dreamed, then, that I would become an ambassador one day, as ambassadorships are the ultimate diplomatic job, the yardstick for measuring accomplishment in the diplomatic service. And I saw no one who remotely looked like me in the Foreign Service, let alone in positions as ambassadors.

The closest I could get to diplomacy was to join the Peace Corps; so, I did.

After the Peace Corps, I wanted to pursue an international career. Several of my male volunteer colleagues had gotten good assignments overseas, and I wanted, like them, to return to work in Asia. The only Peace Corps jobs open to me, despite a newly minted Harvard Master’s degree, were in Washington, DC. Peace Corps management told me repeatedly that Asian cultures would not accept a woman, particularly a young woman, in any position of responsibility.

After three years with the Peace Corps in Washington, I realized that the only way for me to go overseas was to take a personal sabbatical with my new husband. Therefore, I took a year off to explore the Middle East and Europe.

Returning to Washington, I sought a job with the US Congress. In every interview the first question asked was, “How fast can you type?” At the time, a job related to international affairs was simply out of the question for someone who looked like me. I was lucky enough to get a substantive job; to have escaped the usual positions relegated to females whatever their qualifications—as receptionists, secretaries, or legislative correspondents.

I still remember how one senator told me that I could not qualify for a committee position because I did not speak Spanish. When I told him that, indeed, I did speak Spanish, he blustered that I was not from his state—end of interview.

Like so many of my compatriots studied by McGlen and Sarkees and the WFPG, I realized very quickly that I would have to work harder, smarter and constantly exceed performance expectations to be able to even gain a foothold in diplomacy. And so, I did.
Twenty years later, a different problem surfaced. Finally, I was offered an ambassadorship. However, my husband was not enthusiastic. Faced with having to balance marriage with a coveted career move, I opted for marriage. Women in diplomacy are often faced with such dilemmas. International careers often become “either/or” propositions, forcing women to choose between family and work.

But four years later, I got another chance. This time, my husband gave his blessings, as he has been a life-long supporter. He also realized that it was time—1989—for America to have its first Asian American ambassador, even if he had to “give up” his wife for three to four years.

Do Women in Diplomacy Make a Difference?

Becoming ambassador, I felt a double burden. I had to succeed, to break the persistent stereotypes that women and Asians are not equipped to handle foreign affairs. I also did not want to become another excuse for denying women and Asians future ambassadorial appointments.

I found that success did not turn on making a difference as a woman ambassador, but on establishing credibility with my Nepali interlocuters, the Embassy staff, my State Department handlers, and the foreign policy community. To be taken seriously, women ambassadors have to establish their credibility. In my case, credibility turned on how well I managed the totality of the bilateral relationship—from revolution to trade to aid—as well as how well I ran the Embassy. Only after establishing my credentials, could I turn to integrating women’s needs and rights into the Embassy’s agenda.

I brought my experience in foreign aid and economic development to bear in overseeing US assistance to Nepal, integrating issues of concern to women into our bilateral relations. At the Agency for International Development (AID), it was widely known that investments in women yield big development gains. A recent Council on Foreign Relations Center for Universal Education report, What Works in Girls’ Education: Evidence and Policies from the Developing World, confirmed that:

♦ When women earn a little money, they are far more likely than men to reinvest it in their children’s health care, education and nutrition—ending poverty one family at a time and eventually leading to the overall economic growth of a country;

♦ Few programs are as important as sending girls to school. Educated women are more productive, have fewer children, enjoy lower infant and child mortality rates, and are more likely to send their children and keep them in school; and,

♦ Nothing, arguably, is as important today in the political economy of development as adequate recognition of political, economic, and social participation and leadership of women.7

I championed such programs as ambassador and supported nongovernmental organizations in Nepal, particularly those working with women and children. Long before I became ambassador, I had realized that US foreign aid and policies generally ignored women’s economic contributions and needs. When I was working for Senator Charles H. Percy (R-IL) in 1973, I served as “midwife” to the Percy Amendment, which requires US aid programs to include women. As an Assistant Administrator at AID years later, I cajoled and pushed the agency and aid professionals to implement the Percy Amendment. Obviously, I did not do enough, as twenty years after Congress directed AID to integrate women into development programs, a 1993 Government Accounting Office independent evaluation concluded that the foreign aid agency “has only recently begun to consider the role of women in its third-world development strategies.”

When I was Assistant Administrator for Asia and the Near East at AID, I travelled to the Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan. I was the first US aid official to meet with the women in the camps because all other visiting officials had been men and were not allowed to see or talk to the women.

With me the women poured out their suffering and loss of hope. They told me that they were not allowed to pick up their rations unless accompanied by a male, that their illnesses could not be treated because the doctors were all male, that there were not even sanitary facilities for them and they could not relieve themselves until dark because of propriety.

I told the camp commanders—all male—that the girls should be educated like the boys, that the women and girls ought to have clinics and sanitary facilities, and that provisions should be made for women who had no male relatives to be able to pick up their rations. I believe I drove home the point that the treatment of women and girls in the Afghan refugee camps was very important to the US and AID and, thereby, helped somewhat to improve the lives of these Afghan women and girls.

Women in Power Promoting Women’s Rights

Speaking directly to the topic of this morning’s panel, Women in Power Promoting Women’s Rights, I cannot say that I was ever at the center of US diplomacy, as it has been noted that women and minorities, particularly of my generation, were rarely given essential foreign policy assignments. Nevertheless, I believe I have been able to make a little difference in bringing women’s needs and rights into the periphery of US diplomacy.

Even Madeleine Albright, as Secretary of State, could not make women’s needs and rights central to US diplomacy, or carry out a feminist international relations agenda. After all, she is best known for pushing the US into Kosovo, a conflict now commonly referred to as “Madeleine’s War.”

Nevertheless, women’s groups credit Albright for championing women’s issues like no other Secretary of State, making women a foreign policy priority and indicating her support for women’s human rights and the advancement of women in diplomacy. They
also point to Albright using the media to expressly bring women’s values to the table in areas of foreign policy that affect the lives of women and their communities. For example, in a world affairs program, Common Ground, she said, “Today around the world appalling abuses are being committed against women. These include domestic violence, dowry murders, mutilation, and the forcing of young girls into prostitution. Some say all this is cultural and there’s nothing we can do about it. I say it’s criminal and we each have a responsibility to stop it.”

Unlike National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, who is seen more as an example of a woman making foreign policy like a man, women empathize with Albright, who exhibits the vulnerabilities of a woman, as she was abandoned by her husband for a younger woman. In her biography, Madam Secretary, she questions whether a married woman with full domestic responsibilities could ever be the player she was on the world stage. In a September 18, 2003, Guardian article, Albright is quoted as saying, “I would have given up my career to save my marriage.” Even Madeleine Albright could not have both—her dream job and a happy personal life.

Conclusion

When women can have both, that’s when women will have finally made it in diplomacy. Unfortunately, we still have a long way to go.

My experience has taught me that diplomacy is still very much a man’s world. Mainstreaming a gender perspective into foreign policy may make a difference on the margin, but masculine policies related to security and national defense, particularly at this time when terrorism is at the heart of US foreign policy, will continue to dominate and be the issues that matter.

Women, however, can take heart in the fact that more and more women are becoming involved in international relations and increasingly taking positions that matter. Gender stereotypes and assumptions are increasingly less deeply embedded in international relations and foreign policy theory. And unfailingly, issues that particularly impact women and are of importance to women are also gaining prominence.

Let me conclude by congratulating the Center for Women Policy Studies in conceiving the Foreign Policy Institute for State Legislators and bringing us all together. I look forward to the day when there will be enough graduates from this Institute to truly make a difference in US foreign policy for girls and women around the world.*

* Editor’s Note: This text is based on a speech delivered by Ambassador Bloch to the Foreign Policy Institute of Women Legislators, Center for Women Policy Studies, on July 15, 2004.