



Madam Ambassador: A Statistical Comparison of Female Ambassadors Across the U.S., German, and EU Foreign Services

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Abstract

Since the end of the Cold War, the transatlantic relationship has championed enlightenment principles and progressive values around the world, including gender equality. However, U.S.-European relations have become increasingly threatened, with the advancement of fundamental values like diversity and equality stunted at the hands of divisive actors. It is therefore an urgent time for those in power to restore these forces both domestically and internationally. Women play a valuable role in such an endeavour, especially in the external representation of the U.S. and Europe abroad.

This paper examines how and why women's representation at the ambassadorial level has changed from 1990 to 2018 across the U.S., German, and EU foreign services. Numerous challenges have limited women's entry and participation in the diplomatic profession, including explicit policies such as their eligibility to take the entrance exam, as well as implicit attitudes that women should not and could not execute foreign policy. With increasingly inclusive attitudes, as well as known examples debunking myths that question women's effectiveness, results on women's participation should and must be materializing.

A unique dataset constructed especially for this study enables a comparative examination of the evolution of women's leadership over the last twenty-eight years, investigating in particular: 1) the numbers of female ambassadors over time, 2) the 'types' of posts they are sent to, and 3) recruitment pipelines and training. The data shows that the 50% needed to mirror society are still not a reality: the U.S. foreign service peaks at 40% in 2017, the EU at 22% in 2014, and Germany only at 14.5% in 2018. Examining 'types' of posts shows that females disproportionately serve in small African nations, multilateral organizations, or former-Soviet states. Female U.S. ambassadors tend to come from the career track, as opposed to being politically appointed, while female EU ambassadors predominantly come from founding EU Member States, with backgrounds in the European Commission.

The underlying causes driving these trends are also considered, including policy, organizational, cultural, and historical factors. Though impossible to explain definitively, policy changes are suggested to have been most influential, dominating and even determining the extent to which women had the opportunities to succeed. Interviews with seasoned diplomats helped illuminate and contextualize these factors, in particular revealing that no policy, historical, or cultural event has held as much sway over a woman's career as her own decisions.

Finally, this research provides concrete evidence to hold foreign ministries accountable to the Gender Action Plans they have published and claimed to have implemented. It reviews whether the Plans adequately reflect areas for improvement, assesses the strength of the indicators chosen to measure progress, and judges proposed solutions. A variety of policy recommendations are subsequently made, with the aim to converge approaches across the three foreign services.



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Looking towards the future, this work provides a small, yet important building block in rooting the concept of gender equality firmly within the success strategy of each diplomatic corps. A future generation of foreign policy leaders depends on it.