

CHALLENGES FACING WOMEN IN OVERSEAS DIPLOMATIC POSITIONS

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Numerous careers have traditionally been reserved for men. For example, the first women doctors in the US began graduating from medical schools only in the late nineteenth century.¹ Likewise, the American public elected the first woman governor in 1924.² It has not always been easy for women to enter different professional realms. The infamous glass ceiling phenomenon has curtailed women with regard to their *hiring, promotion* and *retention*. The glass ceiling has impacted the hiring and promotion of women in many different professions including those in the public sector and those serving diplomatic missions.

American women did not enter the diplomatic arena and join the ranks of ambassadors until 1934 when Ruth Bryan Owen was posted to Denmark.³ Gibson⁴ reviews two arguments posited against having women serve as career diplomats. The first was that women could not serve in places considered unsafe and that men would end up with too many hardship assignments. The second argument was that most male diplomats came with a female spouse and the woman provided US government representation services without charge and without receiving a salary. In other words, the US government had the services of two individuals and had to pay for only one. UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld also expressed arguments against women's serving in diplomatic positions, stating that issues more important than gender needed to be taken into account when personnel decisions were made.⁵ After the 1959 Cultural Revolution in Cuba, a perfect opportunity arose to assign women to the Cuban diplomatic corps; however, those in decision-making roles placed men in these positions.⁶

When looking at the glass ceiling phenomenon in diplomacy, women have also had difficulty being promoted beyond the junior and mid levels. As a result, in 1976 Alison Palmer, a mid-level career officer, sued the US Department of State. The Department was not expedient in resolving the matter and did not settle the case until 1990. In *Palmer versus Baker*, the plaintiffs claimed widespread discrimination against women. Not only was it argued that women were under-represented in general, a hiring problem, it was also asserted that women were clustered at the junior and mid-levels.⁷ The court ruled that part of the violation of discrimination laws was the fact that women were not given the opportunities or experiences necessary in order to be promoted.⁸

Research Question

The purpose of this paper is to identify challenges that women face when working overseas in diplomatic positions, a professional environment that historically has been male dominated and that can be characterised in some ways as an “old boy’s” network. The paper intends to identify some of the significant issues from the perspective of women who are serving or have served their countries’ foreign missions. As this is a new area of research, the author chose to use qualitative methods, which are suitable when research generates theory rather than verifies it.⁹ These methods are appropriate when the researcher does not have a clear-cut hypothesis regarding the research question or questions.

Sample

In qualitative research the sample size is often much smaller than when quantitative methods are utilised. In this study, the sample consisted of eleven women, ten of whom were serving in overseas missions for their governments. One of the eleven worked for a number of years before opting to stay home and take care of her children. Ten of the eleven women who participated in this study were living and/or serving in Minsk, Belarus, the residence of the author at the time of the study. The remaining participant in the study was serving in Mexico City. An attempt was made to obtain a representative sample in terms of age, marital status, position and length of time working overseas, although a very limited number of women work in diplomatic missions in Minsk. The participants ranged in age from 24 to 60 and came from Estonia, Germany, Lithuania, South Africa and the United States. Seven of the eleven women were serving or had served in US missions abroad. Although Potter¹⁰ points out the need for a representative sample, in this case compelling reasons demanded the inclusion of more individuals from the US in the sample. First, as a result of the Palmer vs. Baker decision focus has been placed on the needs of US women diplomats. Secondly, at the time of this study, more English-speaking diplomats from the US resided in Minsk than from any other country.

The women interviewed had served from one and a half years to over thirty years and had worked all over the world from Africa to Russia and from Laos to Canada. Six of the women were raising or had raised children. Two of the women worked for their governments’ diplomatic corps while raising children on their own as single parents. The remaining five were single without children. The women held or had held a variety of positions ranging from clerical secretary all the way up to counsel general or deputy chief of mission.

While clerical secretaries or administrative assistants are not foreign service officers, they were included in this study because they serve their countries by working in diplomatic missions abroad. Administrative assistants face many of the same challenges as other women serving abroad and historically were the first women posted abroad to work in diplomatic missions. Although the title “secretary” in some countries has changed to something more politically correct, the women interviewed for this study labelled themselves as secretaries.

Methodology

The author conducted semi-structured interviews with all of the participants. (See the interview guide in Appendix 1.) Participants were asked to comment on why they chose to work for their governments in a foreign service capacity as well as on what challenges they faced. Participants were also asked if they would advise a young person, particularly a young woman, to join the foreign service or the ministry of foreign affairs.

Interviews with each participant took place in a location of the interviewee’s choosing and lasted between thirty minutes and several hours. One interview took place in the embassy cafeteria, one in the interviewee’s home and the rest in the interviewees’ offices. All of the interviews, with one exception, were conducted face to face; the one exception took place by telephone. Notes were taken during the interviews. The interviews were not tape-recorded due to security regulations at US embassies. All of the notes were analysed to determine major categories and themes related to the topic. Since this was a qualitative study looking at challenges that women face, the range of responses were included in the final paper.

Findings

Two main categories of challenge emerged from the data: (1) the actual work that the foreign service/ministry of foreign affairs employee performs; and (2) the family life of the interviewee. With respect to work and the job, many aspects arose, some of which depended upon the woman’s job functions as well as upon personal experience. With respect to family, the interviewees addressed many facets. Some women gave opinions regarding situations that were not their personal experiences; for instance, several single women commented on the benefits given to working mothers.

Since the women in the study represent vastly different backgrounds and experiences, not all of the issues mentioned affected every woman interviewed.

The findings reported are the most significant from the standpoint of work and family. Because the sample size was small, all issues that appeared to have relevance to other women in similar situations are reported.

Work

Most of the women interviewed went into detail about their specific place or role within the overall structure of their ministry of foreign affairs or the Department of State. It was evident they had a very good understanding of their work culture and their place in the hierarchy of their ministry of foreign affairs or the Department of State. They were very patient with me while they explained the “work culture” of their government agencies. One woman put it very succinctly: “You need to know the work.” She was referring to both the job expectations carefully set up and dictated by her government and the culture of the workplace. She went on to say that the work was the same worldwide because her focus was within the embassy. Three women who gave extensive details regarding their “systems” or “work culture” had joined their diplomatic corps through different, non-traditional channels. They were able to utilise both *emic* (insider) and *etic* (outsider) perspectives, an approach considered by many to be more sophisticated than just one or the other.

Two participants in the study did not elaborate regarding the organisational structure of their ministries of foreign affairs. This could be because their ministries have only been in existence for the past dozen years since their countries have re-established independence. It could also have been the case because their countries as well as their missions abroad are much smaller than those of other participants in this study.

Within the context of learning the culture of the US Department of State, many cited the mentor programme as a vehicle that helped some participants learn both cultural assumptions and expectations. The mentor programme, a direct result of the Palmer case, is a formalised system of helping junior staff and officers learn the culture of the organisation. Noon¹¹ points out that women, especially in male dominated professions, do not have the same routes for learning how to do a specific job. The mentor programme was set up as an avenue for staff and officers to learn about the culture of the US Department of State as well as about the expectations required for advancement. It is a simple but effective way of helping new employees. Interviewees cautioned, however, that the mentor programme is only as good as those who are selected to serve as mentors.

It should also be noted that the “work culture” for a couple of the women interviewed had changed since they joined their respective governments’ diplo-

matic corps. Two of the administrative secretaries interviewed commented that the role of secretary is not necessarily the best position for someone entering a ministry of foreign affairs or the foreign service. They pointed out that the career is changing in large part because of technological advances. No longer is the secretary responsible for taking dictation and typing original documents. In ever increasing numbers, drafting officers have their own computers and produce their own finished reports.

Many of the interviewees mentioned chauvinistic men in the workplace. Chauvinistic treatment from men was considered par for the course and it was not confined only to the diplomatic community but, rather, was part of life in general. Several mentioned that they had received similar treatment from men in other work situations. They considered this male behaviour a nuisance but not an insurmountable problem. It should be pointed out, however, that three women said that bad male bosses were not nearly as difficult to work for as bad female bosses. The women in this study had the maturity to realise that one can receive unprofessional treatment from individuals in all walks of life.

Although interviewees were generally aware that bothersome or irritating behaviour could come from anyone, they also commented that expectations were higher for women than for men. Within the context of the work environment, eight of the eleven women commented that they were required to work much harder than the men around them and that was true regardless of their position, be it senior level or secretarial. Only two women expressed serious concerns that they did not get as far ahead, or as quickly, in their careers as they would have if they had not been female. Just as regarding the unprofessional behaviour mentioned above, women spoke of this phenomenon as a very straightforward fact that was not considered unusual. This finding is consistent with reports from women serving as ambassadors in Washington DC. Women envoys representing their countries in Washington noted the need to work twice as hard as their male counterparts.¹²

When asked about the challenges that they faced in their jobs, for the most part interviewees did not address issues related to the host culture where they were serving. Women interviewed had served virtually all over the world, including Middle Eastern countries, which, according to many conventions of political correctness, are considered male dominated societies. Women interviewed did not generally see the attitudes of host country men to be problematic. As one woman put it, "Even when I was in a Middle Eastern country they saw me as representing the US first and the fact that I was a woman second."

Several women commented that men in host countries where they were serving did not know what the rules of politeness were when the foreign rep-

representative was a woman. The rules of etiquette have not kept up with types of roles women are beginning to fill. Two women described such situations as “amusing,” and two others called them “annoying.” One woman had even developed strategies to help avoid potentially awkward situations. For example, she would introduce herself by name and title even though this was contrary to her shy personality style. She felt that it helped everyone from unintentionally ending up in a potentially embarrassing situation.

Family

The issue of family and career was a central theme for the majority of women interviewed. They expressed a wide range of opinions relating to this issue. One single woman put it starkly: “If I were to give advice to a young woman thinking of becoming a diplomat, I would say that you need to choose between family and career.”

The sentiment expressed in this woman’s comment reflects the statistics provided by the US Department of State for this study. Thirty-five percent of foreign service employees serving overseas are women. Forty percent of all foreign service employees are single, but that figure increases to a whopping 57 percent for female foreign service employees. Naumann¹³ points out that families and dependents are an important issue that needs consideration when looking at expatriates working abroad.

Several of the mothers interviewed commented that it was much easier to combine a career working overseas for their government with family concerns than in similar situations in one’s own country. For example, the cost of a nanny and other household staff members in many developing countries is a fraction of what it would be in the United States or in many European countries. One woman said that she and her husband liked being overseas in part because her country’s government paid for their children to attend very fine private schools.

Fogarty and Raporport¹⁴ remind us that as women become more active in the workplace, it is extremely challenging for them to balance career and family. However, some who work for a US embassy believe that in response to the Palmer case the US Foreign Service went too far in helping employees balance career and family. Two individuals shared with me the post-Palmer decision nickname for the US Foreign Service: the US Family Service. This derogatory nickname implies that the Foreign Service may be putting too much emphasis on the family. According to these women, it is not that families are unimportant; it is just that families and the needs of families may have become too predominant in the workplace. One participant felt that it was absurd for

embassies to bend over backwards to try to create positions for family members so that the spouse can have employment, even if it is a low level clerical position.

Regardless of the banter among ministry of foreign affairs and US Department of State employees, a real tension can exist between one's career and one's family. The last US Ambassador to Pakistan exemplifies a woman diplomat torn between job and family responsibilities; she quit her post to be with her children (who were being evacuated). Women in this study described conflicts between work and family that were less dramatic, but nevertheless real.

In many families, the wife chooses to work and to balance a job with family. Quite often, both the wife and husband wish to work in professional capacities and they are referred to as a dual career couple. As was pointed out during the interviews, this is not nearly as simple as it appears on the surface for couples embarking on diplomatic careers. Dual career couples residing in their home countries have opportunities to work for different employers. This is not the case with dual career couples who reside abroad. The spouse cannot merely go out and get a job, since in many countries regulations prohibit work by non-citizens. At times, exceptions can be made, for example with waivers often given to school teachers married to diplomats who wish to work in the host country. In some countries, bilateral agreements permit diplomatic spouses to work in the local economy. (Employment of diplomatic spouses in the private sector is complicated by the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Privileges and Immunities.)

According to a representative of the US Department of State, approximately ten percent of foreign service staff are married to other foreign service staff members. The term "tandem couple" is used to designate a couple where both the husband and wife work for the foreign service on a career basis. Other governments use similar schemes, including the inherent problems associated with both members of a couple working for a ministry of foreign affairs or the foreign service.

Although on the surface it may seem like the perfect solution for situations where both members of a couple wish to have an active and vibrant life in the field of diplomacy, a number of women interviewed for this study had serious concerns regarding this basic practice. These concerns ranged from supervision to time off. Many governments have either written or unwritten rules that an individual may not supervise his or her spouse. One participant described a situation that could arise where a woman was the ambassador and the spouse was working in the motor pool. No one can guarantee that the ambassador would not get detailed reports on a daily basis as to what was transpiring in the

motor pool. However, for junior level staff at a large embassy, one would not expect much of a problem with one spouse potentially supervising the other. The problem, as it was pointed out, is when you have mid-career to high-level staff who supervise others in small embassies.

I was also told about some governments which try to post husband and wife couples in neighbouring countries. While not considered an ideal situation, it is a way of keeping both members of the couple working in their chosen careers at the same time. It was also explained that, at times, at a post where positions are not available for both husband and wife, someone has no option but to stay home.

Another participant described a different situation, one in which the tandem couple's needs negatively impact other members of the embassy staff. A tandem couple usually prefers to take vacations together at the same time. If the embassy has only four staff members, this means that half of the embassy is on vacation and the other two staff members are responsible for a disproportionate amount of work. Another problem occurs when a tandem couple's children are evacuated. The question is who leaves his or her duties to escort the children out of the country.

The issue of dependents – non-working wives or husbands – was also addressed by all of the women who had or had had dependents while abroad. Three women mentioned the problem of dependent husbands. Blackwelder¹⁵ points out how difficult it can be for a man to suddenly find himself in the role of dependent and not in the role of provider; this was the experience of several women who participated in this study.

Men traditionally have been the breadwinners and women traditionally identified as the dependents. One woman discussed what it was like for her husband to be labelled the “dependent” on his diplomatic ID card. She pointed out that he tried to be a very good sport about it even though it was awkward. Participants also mentioned how difficult it can be for the dependent spouse to try to find a professional career when he is not in the foreign service or ministry of foreign affairs. One woman told tales of her husband commuting across many time zones back and forth to his family from their home country where he was trying to start and run a business. Another woman mentioned a very creative solution to this problem: the husband served as a priest for the local expatriate community where his wife was the ambassador. In this way their work was complementary and not conflicting. This same woman wished to see more solutions such as the one described.

Mothers who participated in this study brought up the issue of schooling for children. Two women pointed out that their children received very

good educations because they were abroad. However, one woman cited a serious problem for families whose native language is not spoken or studied in the country of posting. Her concern was with regard to her daughter who wished to attend university in their native country; the daughter had no options in the host country to acquire the necessary first language skills that would gain her admission to a university in her home country. The daughter needed to remain in her country, unfortunately away from her mother, if she wished to gain the first language skills necessary to succeed in her home country. Smith¹⁶ points out many issues for children, known as Third Culture Kids, who are raised abroad because of their parent(s). The issue of schooling was the only issue related to Third Culture Kids that arose in this study.

Discussion

Several findings from this study are worth noting with regard to other research conducted in similar fields. The need to know the work culture was identified as a prominent theme in this study and this finding is consistent with other research regarding corporations as well as women. Sacks¹⁷ points out that learning the corporate or work culture is so important that some companies even offer courses in it. Renshaw¹⁸ explains that it is essential for the few women managers who exist in Japan to know the corporate culture.

Although the issue of the work culture was very strong, this was in sharp contrast to issues related to the cultures of the host countries. None of the interviewees expressed concern over this issue. This is interesting, since Kohls¹⁹ advises individuals moving abroad to live and work to know the host culture but fails to mention the need to know the culture of one's own organisation.

The family issues discussed by women in this study are similar to those found in the literature. Séphocle²⁰ underscores the tension between having a family and having a career. Austin²¹ points out that corporate culture does not always accommodate the needs of the family. It appears that members of the diplomatic corps from some countries receive better consideration for family needs than those at similar professional levels in their home countries.

Conclusions and Implications for Further Research

Some of the challenges facing women working abroad for diplomatic missions are similar to those facing other women who have broken through the glass

ceiling and entered careers traditionally held by men. Women need to know the culture of their work environment. Unfortunately, as reported in this study, women still need to work harder than their male counterparts and they may still have trouble advancing as quickly as men. Research needs to be undertaken which investigates the most efficient avenues for women to learn the culture of their government's diplomatic corps. In addition, researchers should explore whether women working for diplomatic missions are indeed working twice as hard and whether they are advancing as quickly as their male counterparts. It is also important to help women in diplomatic positions access existing resources, such as the Women Ambassador project.

Many issues related to family emerged in this study. Men serving abroad are more likely to have families than their female counterparts. In order to gain a more accurate picture of women in diplomatic positions, it is necessary to examine the reasons that women are more likely to be single. For example, the problem could be that women are working so hard that they do not have time for a social life.

Special considerations apply when both husband and wife are working as part of a dual career family. The concept of dual career family is not immediately transferable from one's home country to the overseas environment. Research needs to be undertaken to determine the best models for dual career couples working and living abroad.

Finally, numerous issues relate to women who have husbands and children as dependents. For example, special family issues arise when the woman has a career outside the home and the husband does not. In addition, preparing children to return for education in their home countries can be an important issue. Investigators need to determine how women have successfully coped with the special needs of husbands and children as dependents.

Appendix 1

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. How did you decide to work for the foreign service or ministry of foreign affairs?
2. What have been the biggest challenges that you have faced in your career? Were there any special challenges because you are a woman?
3. What advice would you give someone considering working for your ministry of foreign affairs or foreign service?

The author wishes to thank all of the women
who participated in this study.

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