



The Role of Indian Women Diplomats in Negotiation and Peacebuilding

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ABSTRACT:

Over time, there has been a growing recognition of the significant contributions women make to global negotiations and peacebuilding efforts. Till the beginning of the 20th century, women were largely marginalised from formal diplomatic negotiations. Throughout history, women in India have played a vital role in peacebuilding efforts, actively resolving conflicts, fostering social cooperation, and contributing to diplomatic relations and agreements. Despite several social constraints and limitations, women's leadership emerged in India, breaking barriers. Women in Indian diplomacy face a series of challenges, both structural and cultural, that hinder their full participation and advancement. That includes gender bias and stereotype, underrepresentation in senior roles, work-life balance and family life responsibilities, lack of institutional support, cultural and geopolitical challenges, tokenism and symbolic representation, and safety and security concerns. This article tries to address the underrepresentation of women in diplomacy and the role played by Indian women diplomats in shaping global policies and fostering peace. In shaping India's foreign policy and taking forward Indian diplomacy globally, Indian women diplomats have played and are playing vital roles. Remarkable women have represented India with distinction on the global stage, paving the way for future generations of female diplomats. Their contributions continue to inspire and influence the fields of international relations and gender equality.

Key words: Diplomacy, Gender bias, Underrepresentation, Safety and Security concerns, Global negotiations, Marginalised, Peacebuilding.

INTRODUCTION:

Diplomacy serves as a vital mechanism through which nations and international actors engage to resolve disputes, foster cooperation, and uphold their strategic interests, all through dialogue and peaceful negotiation. Historically, diplomacy has been largely dominated and characterised by realpolitik and power dynamics. However, the landscape of global diplomacy is gradually transforming to embrace inclusivity, where attributes

like emotional intelligence, cross-cultural communication, and collaborative problem-solving are becoming increasingly valued alongside traditional diplomatic skills.

In this context, the emergence of women in diplomatic roles, particularly in the realms of negotiation and peacebuilding, marks a significant shift. Globally, women diplomats have played crucial roles in conflict mediation and in crafting more inclusive peace processes. India, with its diplomatic heritage rooted in non-alignment, peaceful resolution, and global cooperation, offers a unique setting to study the growing participation of women in foreign affairs. Indian women diplomats are not only representing the country at the highest levels, such as in the United Nations and multilateral forums, but are also involved in critical negotiations, development diplomacy, and soft power initiatives.

This article delves into the expanding influence of Indian women diplomats in international negotiations and peace efforts. It investigates how their roles reflect broader gender transformations within the Indian Foreign Service and align with international calls for greater female representation in diplomacy. By exploring notable individuals, policy shifts, and systemic challenges, the discussion aims to shed light on both advancements and ongoing obstacles in achieving gender-inclusive diplomacy in India's foreign policy apparatus.

Over time, there has been a growing recognition of the significant contributions women make to global negotiations and peacebuilding efforts. The underrepresentation was due to the traditional view that diplomacy was considered an extension of male-dominated statecraft or patriarchal, where women's roles were limited in international relations. Till the beginning of the 20th century, women were largely marginalised from formal diplomatic negotiations. There was a notable exception in 1919 when an "Inter-Allied Conference was held parallel to the Paris Peace Conference. On February 1, 1919, a group of French women with a consensus met with Woodrow Wilson at his residence in Paris to request the participation of women as delegates in the Peace Conference. The request was denied by stating that women's labour issues were part of the conference agenda, and the civil and political rights of women were limited to domestic issues only. The French Union for Women's Suffrage invited women leaders from other nations to be part of a parallel conference, the Inter-Allied Women's Conference, which was held in Paris starting from the 10th of February, 1919 (Stradling, B., 2019, December 4) Women delegates from Armenia, Belgium, Britain, France, Italy, New Zealand, Poland, Romania, South Africa and the United States of America. An attempt was made by the international women's delegation to request the inclusion of women and women-related agenda in the Paris Peace Conference by meeting Woodrow Wilson on the 11th of February. There was no change in the response from the then male-dominated international society. Consequently, on 11th March, a delegation representing the Women's Conference met the Supreme Council and discussed several issues related to voting rights for women, women's employment rights, prostitution, prison reforms, child marriage and trafficking of women and children. The response from the Supreme Council was not encouraging. The Supreme Council delegated the issues of women's civil and political rights to the governments of the concerned nations. At the same time, it did propose that the women's delegation present their case to the Commission on International Labour Legislation and the League of Nations Commission, which was done on 18th March 1919. The recommendations on equal pay, maternity leave, limits to working hours and child labour were adopted by the International Labour Organisation as international standards for employment.

Though Article 7 of the Covenant of the League of Nations did specify that all positions at the League of Nations should include a policy of “should be open equally to men and women” (Stradling, B., 2019, December 4). The League of Nations had just under 250 women staff by 1925, and most of them were in administrative work.

Table-1
The year women were first allowed into the Foreign Service career

| S. No | Year | Country |
|-------|------|--|
| 1 | 1918 | Brazil (then prohibited from 1938 to 1954) |
| 2 | 1920 | United States |
| 3 | 1932 | Turkey (then prohibited from 1934 to 1957) |
| 4 | 1934 | Denmark |
| 5 | 1939 | Norway |
| 6 | 1945 | France |
| 7 | 1946 | Great Britain |
| 8 | 1947 | Canada |
| 9 | 1948 | Sweden |
| 10 | 1949 | Japan |

Sources: Aggestam, K., & Towns, A. (2018). The gender turn in diplomacy: a new research agenda. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 21(1), 9–28.

It is quite interesting to understand that the Brazilian nation was one of the first nations to welcome women into foreign services when compared to their sister nation, like the United States, which included women only in 1920. Though Brazil prohibited women from participating from 1938 to 1954 due to the governing bodies' interruption, they have a history of giving a place for women in the first place. Countries like France, Great Britain, Canada, Sweden and Japan gave a place for women in foreign services only after the end of the Second World War. It took them a long time to accommodate women and identify their potential in the field of diplomacy and peacekeeping.

During the First and Second World Wars, several prominent women played crucial roles in promoting peace and humanitarian relief. Clementine Churchill actively supported civilians affected by war, leading initiatives through the Red Cross and YMCA, and chairing the Red Cross Aid to Russia Fund. Edith Wilson, following President Woodrow Wilson's stroke, managed key governmental functions and upheld his vision for global peace through the League of Nations. In World War I, Elsie Knocker and Mairi Chisholm set up a frontline medical station in Belgium, directly aiding wounded soldiers. Eleanor Roosevelt emerged as a powerful voice for peace during and after WWII, later spearheading global human rights efforts as Chair of the UN Human Rights Commission.

During World War II, Indian women from nationalist and elite backgrounds played pivotal roles in shaping both resistance and reform. Sarojini Naidu, a prominent poet and freedom fighter, connected the ideals of peace and Indian independence, advocating non-violent resistance to colonial rule. Aruna Asaf Ali, a key figure in the Quit India Movement, challenged imperial war efforts, emphasising the need for self-determination. In contrast, Lakshmi Sahgal took a militant path, leading the Rani of Jhansi Regiment in the Indian National

Army. Though not aligned with pacifism, her leadership reflected a radical form of female participation in India's struggle for freedom. Collectively, these women embodied diverse forms of wartime activism, ranging from civil disobedience to armed resistance, while continuing to push for justice, peace, and sovereignty.

In India, women have traditionally remained passive participants in international policy and diplomatic discussions, despite being among the most affected by policy changes. This is largely due to the lack of recognition and integration of their role in Track II Diplomacy. However, Indian women have consistently been active in domestic politics and have played significant roles in addressing India-Pakistan border issues, conflicts in the Northeast, and other regional disputes. Their deep, lived understanding of these issues enabled them to contribute meaningfully to finding common ground and fostering resolution. 85% of the world's ambassadors were men in 2014, and men have a higher rate of participation as negotiators and chief mediators in peace negotiations (Aggestam, K., & Towns, A., 2018). Throughout history, women in India have played a vital role in peacebuilding efforts, actively resolving conflicts, fostering social cooperation, and contributing to diplomatic relations and agreements. Their commitment to peace and reconciliation has been evident since the pre-independence era. Indian women emerged as strong contributors to the country's freedom struggle, both in grassroots activism and the leadership roles. They stood forward, challenging the entrenched societal norms and taboos. Women actively participated in the freedom movement, and a significant upsurge was seen in nationalist movements like the Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, Formation of Women's Organisations, etc.. In the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-22), women actively participated in boycotting British goods, in peaceful protests, and picketing liquor shops. This brought them into the limelight of public life of political activism from domestic roles. A first of its kind, the Mahila Rashtriya Sangha was established in Bengal by Latika Ghosh and Prabhavati Bose in 1928, aimed at encouraging women in political activism, working towards educating women and their empowerment. The Civil Disobedience Movement in 1930 saw the involvement of prominent female leaders like Sarojini Naidu and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay. Sarojini Naidu could take the lead in the Dharasana Salt Works protest after Gandhi's arrest, which demonstrated women's capacity for leadership roles.

Despite several social constraints and limitations, women's leadership emerged in India, breaking barriers. Sarojini Naidu became the first Indian woman to preside over the Indian National Congress in 1925, highlighting her prominence in the political sphere. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit participated in non-cooperation and civil disobedience movements, and she later held significant diplomatic positions, which included India's ambassador to various countries. Another poignant figure in Salt Satyagraha, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, was bold and committed to the nation. From the First War of Independence to the Swadeshi Movement, the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Dandi March, the Quit India Movement, and the attainment of freedom, women leaders pledged their lives and devoted themselves to the nation's freedom. Though the participation was from the urban, educated and upper caste women in the initial stages, as the struggle intensified, they tried to empower themselves along with the marginalised. The active involvement of women during the period of the freedom struggle laid the foundation for their future participation in free India's political and social domains. They have

transformed societal norms and taboos of women's roles in India and marched forward. India is a nation where women got their right to vote along with the freedom, unlike many developed countries.

Although the Inter-Allied Women's Conference in 1919 was not a success, it achieved success in the inclusion of women's rights in the League of Nations' agenda, marking a breakthrough in women's diplomatic participation. The beginning of the 21st century has seen a major shift with the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security in 2000 (Sharma, S., Raman, N. M., & Mishra, A. K., 2024, July 23). It emphasised the importance of women's involvement in peace processes and called for women to increase their participation at all the decision-making levels in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Peace agreements negotiated and signed with the participation of female delegates are more likely to be durable and successful in their implementation, according to the research. Despite significant changes and developments made in recognising and incorporating women's contributions to diplomacy and peacebuilding, challenges exist. There is a need for continuous efforts to dismantle barriers and obstructions in promoting gender equality in diplomacy, not just at the national level but at the international level. A more inclusive approach must be applied to achieve more effective and enduring solutions. Recently, women have also been underrepresented in leadership roles at the international level. As of 2024, only 20% of ambassadorial positions were held by women, which highlights the continuing gender gap in diplomacy (UNHRC, 2024 June 24).

Framing the Focus - Indian women diplomats making their strides:

The main focus of the article is to explore and highlight the pivotal roles Indian women have played in shaping international relations and peace efforts and the impact they have created in the sphere of international diplomacy, negotiation, and peacebuilding. This article tries to address the underrepresentation of women in diplomacy and the role played by Indian women diplomats in shaping global policies and fostering peace. In shaping India's foreign policy and taking forward Indian diplomacy globally, Indian women diplomats have played and are playing vital roles. Their contributions can be traced from the time of India's independence to the contemporary international engagements. The first Indian woman to hold a cabinet position, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit and served later as an ambassador to countries like the Soviet Union (1947-49), the United States and Mexico (1949-51), Ireland (1955-61), Spain (1958-61), and high commissioner to the United Kingdom (1955-61). She was the first woman President of the United Nations General Assembly (1953 to 1954), which marks not only the commitment of India to international cooperation but also to gender equality. In 1953, she was elected as the 8th President of the United Nations General Assembly and the first woman to hold the post. In 1979, Vijay Lakshmi Pandit was appointed as an Indian representative to the UN Human Rights Commission (United Nations. (n.d.). A notable contribution of Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit was that she presided over critical discussions on international peace and security, which included US President Dwight D Eisenhower's "Atoms for Peace" speech on the use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. She addressed the concerns of preserving and preventing threats to peace, emphasising the importance of women's roles in the UN, and highlighting the urgent need for international cooperation during a time when the world is facing challenges. She utilised her diplomacy to give a stage for India's presence in the formative years of Indian Independence. Pandit took the

platform of the UN to address the challenges of racial discrimination and colonialism with India's foreign policy objectives of supporting liberation movements and fostering human rights.

In 1949, when C.B. Muthamma became the first Indian Foreign Service diplomat, she faced challenges of gender discrimination within the service. She took the Ministry of External Affairs to the Judiciary when her due promotion was denied. Her legal battle is significant in bringing reforms and ensuring gender equality within the services. During the formative years of India's Independence, Muttamma was the first Indian woman to clear the Indian Civil Services examination with the 5th all-India rank. At the time of her appointment, she was required to sign an undertaking that she would resign if she got married, which reflected the existing gender biases in the field (Shankar, R., 2023, January 24). She was a Gold Medalist for securing distinction in M.A.- English. She had her services in Paris, London, and Rangoon, representing India as a diplomat. She was also in charge of the IAS training college in Shimla. The government of India sponsored her for a fellowship at Columbia University in the USA in the year 1970-71. To Hungary (1973-76), Ghana (1976-79) and then to the Hague (1979-82), she was the first lady to be posted in the rank of Ambassador (Kodagu Heritage. (n.d.). After retiring in 1982, India's first female Indian Foreign Service officer remained active in human rights and disarmament initiatives, also contributing to philanthropic causes. A trailblazer for gender equality in the civil services, she inspired future generations of women diplomats. Her 2003 autobiography, *Slain by the System: India's Real Crisis*, offers sharp reflections on systemic challenges, including gender disparities, bureaucratic stagnation, and democratic decline, drawn from her decades of diplomatic experience.

Hansa Mehta had her mark and was instrumental in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. She was influential in both national and international diplomacy. Lakshmi Menon is a member of India's delegation to the United Nations. She advocated for women's rights and social welfare. She contributed to shaping policies that advocated gender equality and social justice on international platforms.

A new milestone was set by Nirupama Rao by becoming India's first woman ambassador to China, and later she served as the Foreign Secretary. She contributed to strengthening bilateral relations and cultural diplomacy, which include initiatives like establishing the India-China Business Forum. Her key role in managing delicate negotiations with Pakistan following the critical incident, such as the 26/11 Mumbai attack, was instrumental.

Ruchira Kamboj, a committed and seasoned diplomat, has held several positions, including India's Permanent Representative to UNESCO and later to the United Nations. Her efforts contributed to India's soft power on global platforms, where Indian sites were included in UNESCO's World Heritage list. She was the first Indian woman diplomat for Bhutan before representing at UNESCO (Hindustan Times News Desk., 2022, June 24). Her leadership is a contemplation of gender inclusion in global negotiations and policy-making processes.

Lakshmi Puri served at the United Nations for 15 years as the Assistant Secretary-General of the UN and the founding Deputy Executive Director of the UNWOMEN. She served as Director International Trade Division, UNCTAD. Her work revolved around promoting gender equality and women's empowerment globally. She has engaged actively in multilateral diplomacy since 1981. She is a distinguished fellow of the Indian Association

of International Studies (IAIS), and she received the prestigious Eleanor Roosevelt Prize for Human Rights (Puri, L., 2023, May 4).

Vidisha Maitra, a 2009 batch IFS officer, created a significant impact when she was elected to the UN Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, a subsidiary organ of the General Assembly, in November 2020. She won the “best training officer” during her training, and later served as undersecretary for policy, planning and research at the Ministry of External Affairs (HTND., 2022, June 24). Her contributions to the field of diplomacy are a reflection of the growing presence and influence of Indian women in international diplomacy.

Sneha Dubey, an IFS officer of the 2012 batch, served as India’s first Secretary at the United Nations. She made headlines in the media and received immense accolades for her response to the then-Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan trying to rake up the issue of Kashmir in his address to the UN General Assembly (HTND., 2022, June 24).

Poulomi Tripathi is another name to recall when it comes to fake news of Pakistan. She was a 2007-batch IFS officer, who was lauded by many for outrightly calling it out as fake news, when a Pakistani Ambassador showed a picture of a girl from Palestine to the UN General Assembly and claimed that it was from Kashmir (HTND., 2022, June 24).

An IFS officer of the 1992 batch, Neena Malhotra, served as the ambassador to Italy and the Republic of San Marino from September 2020 to April 2024. In October 2024, she was appointed as India’s Ambassador to Sweden.

Nagma Mallick has served as an ambassador to India to Poland, and Lithuania since 2021. She earlier served as India’s ambassador to Tunisia from October 2012 to November 2015.

Pooja Kapur took charge as the Ambassador of India to the Republic of Bulgaria in July 2017, with concurrent accreditation to North Macedonia. In March 2021, she was appointed as the Ambassador to Denmark. As of April 2024, she holds the position of Additional Secretary (G20) and Sous Sherpa in the Ministry of External Affairs.

Sujatha Singh, a former Foreign Secretary, headed India’s diplomatic missions in key countries such as Germany and Australia, playing a significant role in advancing India’s strategic and economic diplomacy during pivotal periods.

Arundhati Ghose, who led India’s delegation during the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) negotiations, strongly asserted the country's stance on nuclear sovereignty. Baisali Mohanty, an Indian diplomat and United Nations official, was appointed Special Envoy to Romania in 2022 to oversee evacuation operations from war-affected Ukraine. In addition to her diplomatic work, she is recognised for her contributions to foreign policy analysis and Indian classical dance. Together, their achievements highlight that Indian women diplomats are not only skilled negotiators but also integral to shaping national security strategy.

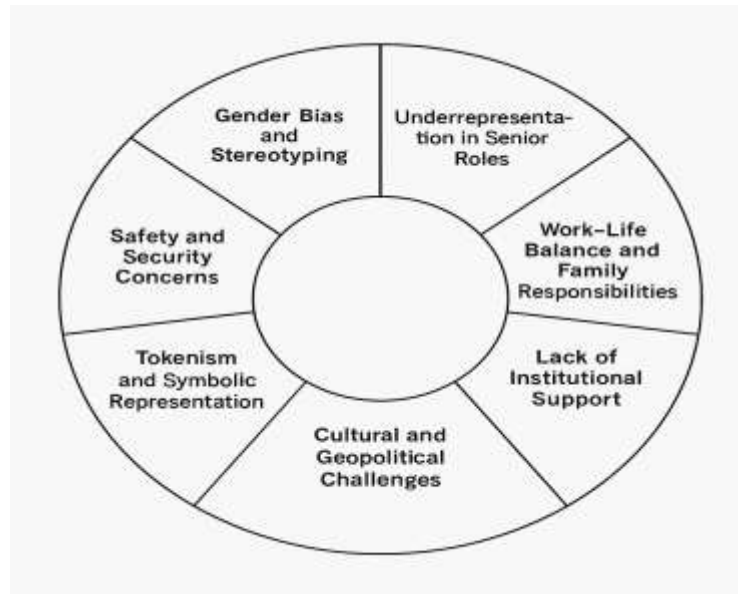
In 2001, Chokila Iyer made history as India's first female Foreign Secretary. Since then, only two other women have held this prestigious position: Nirupama Menon Rao (2009–2011) and Sujatha Singh (2013–2015). In 2014, Beno Zephine became the first fully visually challenged individual in India to join the Indian Foreign Service (IFS), marking a significant milestone in inclusive representation (Mukherjee, 2021). Women diplomats have consistently demonstrated their capabilities in conflict zones such as Afghanistan, Libya, and the Middle East (Mukherjee, 2021). A notable example is IFS officer Deepti Jharwal, who was the sole woman in the Indian delegation that engaged in talks with Taliban leaders in Kabul in 2022—an important step forward for women's representation in high-stakes diplomacy (Sharma, S., Raman, N. M., & Mishra, A. K., 2024).

India has witnessed strong female diplomatic leadership through prominent personalities like Indira Gandhi and Sushma Swaraj. As Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi played a pivotal role in shaping India's foreign policy during critical periods, including the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, asserting India's strategic autonomy on the global stage. Sushma Swaraj, as External Affairs Minister, brought a compassionate and people-centric approach to diplomacy, strengthening India's global image and effectively engaging with the Indian diaspora. Both leaders exemplified how women in high-level positions can significantly influence and elevate a nation's international standing.

Indian women diplomats have played a transformative role in shaping the nation's foreign policy, breaking down barriers traditionally. Trailblazers like Chokila Iyer and Beno Zephine have challenged societal and institutional norms, reaching top diplomatic positions. Figures such as Arundhati Ghose, Sujatha Singh, and Deepti Jharwal have demonstrated exceptional leadership in critical negotiations, from nuclear diplomacy to conflict zones. Smt. Sushma Swaraj, India's first full-term female External Affairs Minister, redefined diplomacy through citizen engagement and digital outreach. These women not only bring strategic acumen to diplomacy but also introduce empathy, inclusivity, and innovation. Their growing presence reflects a significant shift in gender representation and underscores the value of diverse voices in global diplomacy and peacebuilding.

From Tokenism to Transformation: Tackling Challenges in Women's Diplomatic Roles:

Women in Indian diplomacy face a series of challenges, both structural and cultural, that hinder their full participation and advancement. That includes gender bias and stereotype, underrepresentation in senior roles, work-life balance and family life responsibilities, lack of institutional support, cultural and geopolitical challenges, tokenism and symbolic representation, and safety and security concerns.



Women diplomats are often confronted with implicit gender bias that comes in the form of questioning their authority, negotiation skills, and ability to make decisions in geopolitical and defence-related roles. There is a stereotype portrayal of diplomacy as a male-dominated or “tough” profession that influences within and outside the service. Indian women diplomats have made a significant contribution to overcoming the gender gaps within the IFS, which can be attributed to both the efforts of the Indian government and various NGO’s. It resulted in a notable surge in the representation of women in the IFS, with numbers climbing from 20% to 40% over the past decade (Sharma, S., Raman, N. M., & Mishra, A. K., 2024, p. 11).

Despite their remarkable achievements, female diplomats continue to face challenges in achieving work-life balance. The cultural and patriarchal norms that exist in society place an exhausting pressure on women to shoulder the household responsibilities and childcare. These responsibilities on the shoulders of women alone are becoming obstacles in their careers, however hard women are trying to navigate. Marriage itself was a major hurdle for women in IFS for a very long time. It was the battle of brave women like C.B. Muthamma that the clause being deleted from the IFS recruitment and promotion rules. Marriage was not only a hurdle in the Indian Foreign Services, but it was in many countries for the recruitment of IFS, which they later lifted. Here are a few countries which lifted the “marriage ban” at a later stage:

Several countries historically imposed a "marriage ban" on female diplomats, requiring them to remain unmarried to serve. While countries like Turkey and Japan did not enforce such restrictions, others lifted them gradually over time. Brazil abolished its ban in 1966, with further reforms in 1988. The United States followed in 1971, Sweden in the early 1970s, and Great Britain in 1973. These changes marked significant progress toward gender equality in foreign services worldwide (Aggestam, K., & Towns, A., 2018).

A committee on civil services reforms was set up in 2004, under the former chairperson of the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC), P.C. Hota, which recognised the pressure of maintaining a work-life balance by female diplomats. There is always an additional burden on women diplomats due to their domestic responsibilities, which pushes them to seek additional benefits. The committee recommended for over and above the leaves applicable for all, an additional leave of four years with full pay in their entire service career (Sharma, S., Raman, N. M., & Mishra, A. K., 2024, p. 12).

In certain host countries, women diplomats have to face cultural and geopolitical challenges, especially with conservative or patriarchal norms. They face hurdles in the inclusion of negotiations. Gendered cultural norms can affect diplomatic protocol, invitations and engagement with local leadership.

Safety and security are critical concerns for Indian women diplomats, particularly in conflict-prone or conservative regions such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and parts of Africa or Central Asia. These postings pose unique gender-specific risks, including threats of harassment, abduction, restricted mobility, and inadequate access to gender-sensitive facilities. In 2022, IFS officer Deepti Jharwal's participation in talks with the Taliban highlighted both the growing role of women in high-risk diplomacy and the vulnerabilities they face. While all diplomats encounter dangers in volatile areas, women are disproportionately affected by gendered threats. These risks, combined with inconsistent institutional safeguards, may hinder women's postings and career advancement. Although the MEA has initiated safety improvements, there remains a need for comprehensive, gender-sensitive security protocols, such as a dedicated women's security unit, to ensure equal and safe opportunities for female diplomats in strategic global roles.

Table-2

Safety and Support for Women Diplomats: A Comparative Study of India, USA, AND UK:

| S No | Aspect | India | United States (US) | United Kingdom (UK) |
|------|----------------------------|---|---|---|
| 1 | High-Risk Assignments | Increasing inclusion of women (e.g., Kabul 2022), but concerns persist around safety and institutional reluctance | Women serve in conflict zones with strong embassy security & support | UK FCDO places women in global hotspots, backed by a strong safety infrastructure |
| 2 | Security Protocols | General diplomatic security lacks gender-specific risk assessments or infrastructure | The Diplomatic Security Service (DSS) offers tailored training, gender-awareness policies | Risk assessments include gender sensitivity; local support networks exist |
| 3 | Support Systems | Inconsistent policies on dual careers, family, and trauma support | Structured support for families, mental health services, and relocation help | Offers flexible working, mental health resources, and gender policy units |
| 4 | Institutional Preparedness | Lacks a dedicated women's safety division within MEA | Dedicated Gender Advisor roles and internal grievance redressal systems | Gender Equality Plan within FCDO promotes inclusion and field preparedness |

Inclusion of women diplomats is growing in India, but safety and institutional hesitancy remain, whereas in the USA, women serve in conflict zones with robust security support. In the UK, women are deployed globally with strong safety systems in place. Security protocols, support systems, and institutional preparedness need more integrated and supportive laws and systems in India. Whereas in the USA and UK, these systems exist with preparedness and tailored training, and gender awareness policies. They offer structured support for families, flexible working and mental health resources.

India's current Landscape for women in Diplomacy:

India has achieved certain notable achievements in promoting gender equality on the international stage. India ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1993 and is a member of the UN Commission on the Status of Women. It has also crossed milestones in peacekeeping initiatives and high-level representation of women. Yet there are milestones like workforce representation and policy gaps which are to be studied and addressed to the best possible extent.

Table-3
Women in Diplomacy in India's Current Landscape:

| S No | Aspect | Details |
|------|---------------------------|---|
| 1 | International Commitments | Ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1993; member of the UN Commission on the Status of Women |
| 2 | Peacekeeping Initiatives | Deployed the first all-female Formed Police Unit to Liberia in 2007 |
| 3 | High-Level Representation | Women like Ruchira Kamboj appointed to key roles (e.g., Permanent Representative to the UN) |
| 4 | Workforce Representation | Women make up only ~16% of IFS officers |
| 5 | Policy Gaps | No formal Feminist Foreign Policy; gender lens not fully integrated into diplomacy |

During the time of Smt. Sushma Swaraj, "fast-track diplomacy" was introduced, emphasising a proactive, strong and sensitive approach to foreign relations. She played a pivotal role in transitioning India's "Look East" policy to the more action-oriented "Act East" policy, strengthening ties with ASEAN countries and emphasising strategic partnerships with nations like Vietnam and Japan. Humanitarian diplomacy became part of the agenda when India could evacuate its citizens during crises such as the Nepal earthquake of 2015, where India assisted not only its nationals but also citizens from other countries. Smt. Swaraj became the first Indian to address the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) summit as a guest of honour in 2019, showcasing India's commitment to engaging diplomatic relations despite challenges. She strengthened connections with the Indian diaspora. She was characterised by citizen-centric diplomacy, strategic international engagement, and the effective use of technology to bridge the gap between the government and the people.

Women's Role in India's G20 Presidency (2023):

Women played important roles in shaping international policies during India's tenure as the G20 president. The Indian Finance Minister, Nirmala Sitharaman, maintained active participation in debt restructuring talks, as well as economic policy discussions, and international trade reforms and negotiations. During India's G20 Presidency in 2023, women diplomats and leaders were instrumental in crafting the summit's priorities, with a strong focus on the theme of "Women-Led Development". This signified a meaningful departure from

conventional frameworks, placing women at the forefront, not merely as recipients of policy, but as key drivers and shapers of international progress.

The biggest contribution of women in India's G20 Presidency is the institutionalisation of women's empowerment. The formation of the G20 working group on the empowerment of women under India's leadership took place, which was unanimously endorsed. The group aimed to advance women's rights and tackle gender inequalities internationally. Operationalisation of Tech Equity was given a digital platform (Online Bureau Agencies., 2023, August 2) to bridge the digital divide by providing digital skills training to women and girls in over 120 languages.

Women 20 (W20) is an official G20 engagement group that focuses on women's issues. Under India's presidency, it emphasised women's leadership at the grassroots, female entrepreneurship, bridging the digital divide, education and skill development and women's role in climate resilience (Puri, L., 2023, May 4). India's Presidency in 2023 marked a milestone by placing gender equality at the heart of international policymaking. The active involvement and leadership of Indian women during this period significantly advanced the cause of women's empowerment and laid a strong foundation for upcoming G20 presidencies to carry this momentum forward.

Policy recommendations:

To effectively address the unique challenges faced by women in diplomacy, it is essential to reform existing policy frameworks and embed a gender-sensitive approach within India's foreign service infrastructure. One crucial step would be the creation of a dedicated Women's Security and Risk Assessment Cell, aimed at identifying and mitigating gender-specific risks in host nations. Mandatory pre-deployment training should be introduced, incorporating modules on gender-based safety, cross-cultural awareness, and emergency response.

For postings in high-risk or conflict-prone regions, institutional support must be bolstered. This includes provision of safe and secure accommodation, reliable transportation, and work environments designed with women's safety in mind. Embassies and missions should offer round-the-clock support services, including access to gender-sensitive healthcare, mental health counselling, and crisis helplines.

To ensure equal representation in frontline and strategic roles, it is vital to revise assignment procedures to promote transparency and fairness. Informal biases that prevent women from being considered for sensitive or high-profile postings due to perceived vulnerabilities must be actively dismantled.

Support systems should also accommodate the needs of women diplomats with families. This includes developing more inclusive policies for dual-career spouses, establishing on-site childcare facilities, and offering flexible deployment arrangements. Furthermore, post-deployment reintegration support, particularly for those returning from high-stress or crisis zones, should be prioritised to address psychological well-being.

Additionally, integrating women into the core of policy-making on issues such as peace, conflict resolution, and national security is essential. Targeted leadership development programs, supported by structured mentorship from senior women in the Indian Foreign Service, can help build a robust pipeline of female leaders in diplomacy.

Ultimately, addressing these multifaceted challenges calls for a comprehensive strategy—combining institutional reform, gender-sensitive training, leadership development, and broader societal change. This transformation must begin within the Ministry of External Affairs and extend outward to reflect a truly inclusive vision of Indian diplomacy.

CONCLUSION:

While numerous opportunities exist for women in Indian diplomacy, realising their full potential requires deliberate efforts to challenge and dismantle entrenched norms. One significant step toward this transformation would be the adoption of a feminist foreign policy. Such a policy could elevate India's standing as a leader in progressive diplomacy, both within South Asia and on the global stage, while reinforcing its commitment to gender equality. Encouragingly, India has already begun integrating gender-sensitive approaches and feminist principles into its diplomatic engagements, signalling a shift toward more inclusive and equitable international representation. While India does not formally follow a feminist foreign policy, several principles associated with feminist diplomacy are increasingly reflected in its international engagement. These include a growing presence of women in the Indian Foreign Service, an emphasis on peacebuilding and dialogue, and a citizen-centric approach, especially evident during Sushma Swaraj's tenure as External Affairs Minister. India's commitment to multilateralism, gender equality at international forums, and inclusive development also aligns with feminist ideals. However, challenges remain in ensuring equal representation, safety, and institutional support for women diplomats. Strengthening gender-sensitive structures and promoting inclusive leadership can further embed feminist values into India's diplomatic framework.

The evolving landscape of international diplomacy has increasingly recognised the indispensable role of women in peacebuilding and negotiation. Indian women, through their diverse engagements in politics, international organisations, civil society, and grassroots movements, have begun to reshape traditionally male-dominated arenas. Personalities such as Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, India's first female diplomat at the UN, and more recent leaders, including Syed Akbaruddin's successors and several Indian women in top diplomatic posts, highlight a steady yet significant shift toward gender inclusivity in foreign affairs. However, their contributions are not just symbolic. Indian women bring to diplomacy a unique blend of empathy, cultural fluency, and negotiation strategies rooted in dialogue, inclusiveness, and resilience. These qualities have proven critical in conflict resolution and sustainable peace processes both within South Asia and globally.

Despite these advancements, challenges remain. Institutional barriers, traditional norms, and the underrepresentation of women in high-level diplomatic roles persist. Addressing these issues requires not only policy reform and political will but also a broader societal shift that values and supports women's leadership in international relations. Ultimately, gendering diplomacy is not about sidelining men but about enriching global discourse by embracing diverse voices and experiences. The increasing participation of Indian women in diplomacy and peacebuilding stands as a powerful testament to this inclusive vision, one that holds promise for a more equitable and peaceful global order.

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