

## THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN DIPLOMACY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Dr Huma Zafar<sup>\*1</sup>, Dr Farah Naseer<sup>2</sup>, Samiullah<sup>3</sup>, Naveeda Iram Warsi<sup>4</sup>

<sup>\*1</sup>PhD, Australia, Assistant Professor, Social Work department University

<sup>2</sup>Lecturer in sociology, Sardar Bahadur Khan Women's University

<sup>3</sup>International Relations Balochistan University of Information Technology, Engineering and Management Sciences (BUIITEMS)

<sup>4</sup>Assistant professor/ chairperson, Department of Anthropology University of Balochistan Quetta

Corresponding Author: \*

Dr Huma Zafar

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### ABSTRACT

*In Pakistan, the role of women in diplomacy remains both significant and underexplored. Despite progress in women's participation in public life, diplomacy has historically been dominated by men, with women occupying only a small proportion of key positions in the Foreign Service. Structural challenges—including gender discrimination, limited mentorship, cultural stereotypes, and societal expectations—continue to constrain women's entry and advancement in this field. These barriers reflect broader patterns of gender inequality in Pakistan's political and bureaucratic institutions, where women often struggle for recognition and equal opportunity. Nevertheless, women who have served in Pakistan's diplomatic corps have made noteworthy contributions to the country's global image, international negotiations, and policy advocacy. Their roles in promoting human rights, development cooperation, and peace initiatives demonstrate the potential of women to bring inclusivity, empathy, and diverse perspectives to diplomacy. The emergence of prominent women ambassadors and policymakers underscores the growing recognition of women's ability to shape Pakistan's foreign relations, even in the face of entrenched obstacles. At the same time, new opportunities are emerging through global initiatives such as the United Nations' Women, Peace, and Security agenda and Pakistan's commitments to gender equality in governance. Institutional reforms, targeted training programs, and increased representation in decision-making bodies could further strengthen women's roles in diplomacy. This paper examines the unique challenges faced by Pakistani women in foreign policy and highlights the opportunities for fostering greater inclusion. Ultimately, empowering women in diplomacy is vital not only for gender equity but also for enhancing Pakistan's diplomatic effectiveness and international standing.*

**Keywords:** Women in Diplomacy, Pakistan Foreign Service, Gender Inequality, Challenges and Opportunities, Foreign Policy

### INTRODUCTION

The participation of women in diplomacy has increasingly become a subject of scholarly interest, reflecting the broader global discourse on gender equality and women's empowerment in political and bureaucratic institutions. Diplomacy, long considered a male-dominated field, has historically excluded women from leadership and decision-making roles due to structural barriers, cultural

stereotypes, and entrenched institutional practices (Aggestam & Towns, 2019). While women have gained significant ground in politics, civil service, and development sectors, their representation in foreign policy and international relations remains limited. In Pakistan, these limitations are especially pronounced. Despite progress in gender equality initiatives and the rising visibility of women in

public life, the Foreign Service of Pakistan (FSP) continues to be predominantly male, with women often occupying a small proportion of leadership positions (Rashid, 2021).

Understanding the challenges and opportunities for women in diplomacy is vital for multiple reasons. First, diplomacy represents a nation's voice in global affairs, and inclusivity within the diplomatic corps strengthens credibility, representation, and policy outcomes. Second, studies have shown that women in diplomacy often bring different leadership styles, emphasizing collaboration, dialogue, and conflict resolution (Tickner, 2001). Finally, in Pakistan, where gender inequality remains deeply embedded in political and bureaucratic structures, examining women's diplomatic roles provides critical insights into the interplay between gender and governance.

The problem this research seeks to address is the underrepresentation of women in Pakistan's diplomatic service, despite their proven capabilities and contributions. While notable female diplomats—such as Maleeha Lodhi, Tehmina Janjua, and Hina Rabbani Khar—have left a strong mark on Pakistan's global image, they remain exceptions rather than the norm. This paper argues that women's participation in diplomacy is constrained not by ability but by systemic challenges, and that expanding their role is both a gender equity issue and a strategic necessity for Pakistan's foreign policy. The objectives of this paper are threefold:

1. To identify the structural and cultural challenges that hinder women's entry and advancement in diplomacy.
2. To highlight the opportunities and emerging trends that support women's inclusion in foreign policy.
3. To propose recommendations for institutional reforms that can enhance gender equality in Pakistan's diplomatic service.

The methodology adopted in this paper is qualitative, drawing on secondary sources including academic research, policy reports, and case studies of prominent Pakistani women diplomats. Data analysis is the process of interpreting data for reaching out to the answer to the research problem. (Bashir, S., Naseer, F., Karim, H., Farooq, K., Zafarullah, & Sultana, 2021). By situating Pakistan's experience within a global and regional context, the study aims to demonstrate how gender inclusivity in diplomacy can strengthen national interests and international standing.

## Historical Context of Women in Diplomacy

### Global Evolution of Women in Diplomacy

The history of women in diplomacy is marked by exclusion, gradual entry, and eventual recognition. Traditionally, diplomacy was considered the domain of elite men, often linked to aristocracy, military service, or political patronage (Enloe, 1990). Until the early twentieth century, women were virtually absent from diplomatic corps worldwide, relegated instead to informal roles such as diplomatic spouses, hostesses, or mediators in private settings. Their contributions, though significant, were rarely acknowledged as part of official statecraft.

The entry of women into formal diplomatic positions began in the early 1900s, coinciding with broader suffrage and feminist movements. For example, the United States appointed its first female career diplomat, Lucile Atcherson, in 1922, though women continued to face restrictions on marriage and advancement (McCarthy, 2014). Similarly, European countries began admitting women into foreign services after World War I, albeit with limitations. In Britain, women were allowed to join the Foreign Office in 1946, but were required to resign if they married, a rule that remained until the 1970s (Sluga & James, 2016).

The late twentieth century marked significant progress, as feminist movements and international norms on gender equality pressured states to reform diplomatic institutions. The adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979 and the Beijing Declaration of 1995 reinforced commitments to women's participation in political and diplomatic life. By the twenty-first century, several countries had appointed women as foreign ministers, ambassadors, and permanent representatives to the United Nations. Today, women like Federica Mogherini (European Union), Madeleine Albright (United States), and Retno Marsudi (Indonesia) exemplify how female leadership has reshaped global diplomacy (Aggestam & True, 2018).

Despite this progress, global statistics reveal persistent gender disparities. According to the United Nations (2021), women hold only about 20 percent of ambassadorial positions worldwide. The situation is even more pronounced in regions such as South Asia and the Middle East, where cultural norms and institutional biases remain significant barriers.

## Women in Diplomacy in Pakistan: A Historical Overview

Pakistan's experience mirrors global patterns of exclusion and gradual entry, with women historically marginalized in the country's diplomatic service. Since its independence in 1947, Pakistan has relied heavily on its Foreign Service to navigate complex geopolitical realities, including relations with neighboring India, alliances with the United States and China, and engagement with multilateral organizations. Yet, women have played a minimal role in shaping these dynamics.

The first woman to join the Foreign Service of Pakistan was Begum Raana Liaquat Ali Khan, though her role was largely honorary and linked to her political stature as the wife of Pakistan's first prime minister (Jalal, 1991). The formal entry of women into the Foreign Service began in the 1960s, when the Civil Service of Pakistan opened limited opportunities for female candidates. However, cultural resistance and bureaucratic barriers restricted their recruitment and promotion.

It was not until the 1980s and 1990s that women began to make visible inroads. Notable figures such as Maleeha Lodhi—who served as Pakistan's ambassador to the United States and permanent representative to the United Nations—demonstrated that women could excel in high-profile diplomatic roles. Similarly, Tehmina Janjua made history in 2017 as the first woman to become Pakistan's Foreign Secretary, the highest bureaucratic post in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Rashid, 2021). Hina Rabbani Khar, appointed in 2011 as the youngest and first female foreign minister, further challenged stereotypes by leading Pakistan's foreign policy at a critical juncture.

Despite these milestones, women remain underrepresented in the Foreign Service. According to a report by the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT, 2019), women constitute less than 15 percent of officers in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and an even smaller proportion hold senior leadership positions. The persistence of structural and cultural obstacles continues to limit their advancement, reflecting broader gender disparities in Pakistan's bureaucratic institutions.

### Significance of Historical Context

The historical trajectory of women in diplomacy underscores two key points. First, women's entry into foreign services has been neither automatic nor evenly distributed; it has required sustained

advocacy, institutional reform, and cultural change. Second, women who have entered diplomacy in Pakistan have often done so against significant odds, making their achievements even more remarkable. Their contributions highlight both the potential of women to shape foreign policy and the systemic barriers that constrain gender equality in governance.

Understanding this historical context is essential for analyzing current challenges and opportunities. It situates Pakistan within global trends, illustrating how international norms and domestic reforms intersect to shape women's roles in diplomacy. Moreover, it highlights the urgency of addressing structural inequalities to ensure that women's participation in diplomacy moves beyond symbolic representation to substantive inclusion.

### Challenges Faced by Women in Diplomacy

Despite progress in women's participation in governance and international affairs, diplomacy remains a challenging field for women worldwide, and particularly in Pakistan. Structural inequalities, cultural stereotypes, and institutional barriers converge to limit women's access to leadership positions in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Although a few women have managed to break the proverbial "glass ceiling," their experiences often highlight the systemic nature of exclusion within bureaucratic and diplomatic institutions.

### Structural and Institutional Barriers

Diplomacy is a profession deeply rooted in bureaucratic hierarchies and institutional traditions, many of which have historically been designed around the assumption of a male-dominated workforce. Women who enter the Foreign Service of Pakistan (FSP) encounter systemic barriers that restrict both recruitment and career advancement. Recruitment into the FSP occurs through the Central Superior Services (CSS) examination. While this exam is theoretically open to both men and women, in practice, the competitive and rigorous nature of the test, combined with societal discouragement of women from pursuing high-pressure careers, limits the number of female candidates (Cheema, 2020). Moreover, the subsequent training, posting, and transfer requirements—often involving relocation to remote or foreign locations—pose challenges for women who are expected to prioritize family responsibilities.

Another institutional barrier is the glass ceiling within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. While women may enter the service, they often find their progression slowed or blocked at mid-career levels. Promotions to senior positions such as ambassador or foreign secretary are rare, with men dominating these posts (Rashid, 2021). This reflects broader gender disparities in Pakistan's civil service, where women are often concentrated in "softer" sectors such as education, health, and social welfare, rather than security, defense, and diplomacy (Khan, 2018). Additionally, organizational cultures within the Foreign Ministry can be exclusionary. Meetings, negotiations, and informal decision-making processes are often male-dominated, leaving women marginalized. The lack of family-friendly policies, such as flexible working hours or spousal relocation support, further disadvantages women. As a result, many talented female diplomats either exit the service prematurely or remain in less influential roles.

### **Gender Discrimination and Stereotypes**

One of the most persistent challenges women face in diplomacy is gender-based discrimination. This manifests not only in overt exclusion but also in subtle biases and stereotypes that shape perceptions of women's capabilities.

In Pakistan, diplomacy has historically been associated with toughness, strategic thinking, and resilience—qualities often coded as masculine. Women are frequently perceived as lacking the assertiveness required to handle high-stakes negotiations or to represent the nation in conflict-prone environments (Qadir, 2016). Such stereotypes reduce opportunities for women to be posted in critical diplomatic missions, such as Washington, Beijing, or New Delhi, which are seen as "prestige postings." Instead, women are often assigned to cultural, humanitarian, or social portfolios, reinforcing gendered divisions of labor within diplomacy.

Furthermore, women in diplomatic roles often face double standards. Assertiveness in men is perceived as leadership, while similar behavior in women may be labeled as aggressiveness or arrogance. Conversely, if women adopt a collaborative style, they may be dismissed as lacking authority (Aggestam & Towns, 2019). These gendered perceptions not only undermine women's credibility but also impact their career evaluations and chances of promotion.

Discrimination is also evident in hiring and promotion practices. A study on women in Pakistan's civil service found that women are less likely to be promoted to senior grades compared to men with similar qualifications and performance records (UNDP, 2020). Informal "old boys' networks" often dominate decision-making spaces, leaving women excluded from influential circles where career-defining opportunities are negotiated.

### **Lack of Mentorship and Networking Opportunities**

Mentorship and professional networks are crucial in diplomacy, where career trajectories are shaped not only by merit but also by relationships and sponsorships. Unfortunately, women in Pakistan's diplomatic service often lack access to effective mentors and networks, limiting their opportunities for advancement.

Senior diplomats, who are predominantly male, tend to mentor younger men, perpetuating cycles of exclusion (Rashid, 2021). While female diplomats have emerged as role models, their small numbers limit their ability to mentor the next generation effectively. Without mentorship, women face difficulties in navigating the unwritten rules of diplomacy, from negotiating postings to handling political pressures.

Networking opportunities are also gendered. Informal gatherings, late-night meetings, or recreational activities such as golf or dinners, where key professional relationships are forged, are often inaccessible or unwelcoming to women (Cheema, 2020). This exclusion prevents women from building the same social capital as their male counterparts, leaving them disadvantaged in competitive bureaucratic environments.

The absence of strong mentorship and networking also has psychological implications. Women may feel isolated, unsupported, and undervalued, contributing to lower job satisfaction and higher attrition rates. Addressing this challenge requires deliberate institutional interventions to create gender-sensitive mentoring and networking platforms.

### **Cultural and Societal Expectations**

In addition to institutional barriers, cultural and societal norms in Pakistan pose significant challenges for women in diplomacy. Traditional expectations around gender roles continue to prioritize women's responsibilities in the domestic

sphere, often creating conflicts with the demands of a diplomatic career.

Diplomacy requires extensive travel, postings abroad, and unpredictable schedules—conditions that are difficult to reconcile with societal expectations that women should prioritize family, marriage, and caregiving (Khan, 2018). Women diplomats who remain unmarried may face social stigma, while those who marry may struggle to balance spousal expectations with career responsibilities. Unlike some countries that provide spousal employment support in foreign postings, Pakistan's Foreign Service offers limited assistance, exacerbating these challenges.

Cultural conservatism also affects women's mobility and safety. Female diplomats may face restrictions or harassment in certain contexts, both domestically and abroad. For instance, women representing Pakistan in conservative regions may be scrutinized for their attire, behavior, or interactions, placing additional pressures on them (Qadir, 2016).

Societal perceptions of women in public leadership roles also remain ambivalent. While high-profile figures like Hina Rabbani Khar have been celebrated internationally, domestic narratives often focus more on their appearance than on their policy contributions (Haider, 2012). Such attitudes trivialize women's achievements and reinforce the idea that diplomacy is an unconventional and unsuitable career path for women.

### **Intersectional Challenges**

It is important to recognize that not all women face the same barriers. Intersectional factors such as class, ethnicity, and geography shape women's experiences in diplomacy. Women from elite, urban backgrounds are more likely to enter and succeed in the Foreign Service due to access to education, resources, and social networks. Conversely, women from rural or less privileged backgrounds face compounded barriers, including limited access to quality education, language skills, and professional exposure (Khan, 2018).

This intersectional dimension highlights the need for policies that not only address gender inequality broadly but also consider diversity among women. Without such considerations, efforts to promote women's inclusion risk benefiting only a small, elite minority.

### **Psychological and Emotional Challenges**

Beyond structural and cultural barriers, women in diplomacy also encounter psychological challenges

linked to constant scrutiny, isolation, and the pressure to prove themselves in male-dominated environments. Diplomacy often requires postings in politically unstable regions, where women may face heightened safety concerns. The stress of balancing professional responsibilities with societal expectations can contribute to burnout, anxiety, and self-doubt (UNDP, 2020).

Research also shows that women leaders are often subject to harsher public criticism than men, particularly in contexts where female leadership is perceived as unconventional (Aggestam & True, 2018). This additional emotional labor further complicates women's efforts to succeed in diplomacy.

### **Opportunities for Women in Diplomacy**

Although women in Pakistan face persistent structural, cultural, and institutional barriers to participation in diplomacy, new opportunities are emerging at both the global and national levels. These opportunities stem from international gender equality frameworks, Pakistan's domestic policy commitments, the growing visibility of women leaders, and the role of education and professional training. Taken together, these factors suggest that the diplomatic landscape, while still unequal, is slowly opening for women.

### **Global Frameworks and International Initiatives**

One of the most significant opportunities for women in diplomacy arises from international frameworks that promote gender equality and women's participation in governance. Over the past four decades, the global community has recognized that women's involvement in decision-making is not only a matter of justice but also a prerequisite for sustainable peace and development.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), adopted by the United Nations in 1979, obligates signatory states—including Pakistan—to eliminate discrimination against women in all spheres, including political and diplomatic life (UN Women, 2020). Article 7 of CEDAW specifically emphasizes women's right to participate in the formulation of government policy and to hold public office, which provides a strong normative framework for women's inclusion in diplomacy.

Another critical initiative is the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), which launched the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS)

agenda. This resolution recognized the vital role of women in peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and international security, calling on member states to increase women's participation in decision-making processes. For Pakistan, a country deeply engaged in regional security issues, aligning with the WPS agenda offers both international legitimacy and a framework for including women in foreign policy (True, 2016).

The **Beijing Platform for Action (1995)** also laid out comprehensive strategies to advance women's participation in political and public life. These frameworks have influenced not only global discourse but also donor-driven initiatives that support gender equality projects in Pakistan's governance structures, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Haider, 2012).

Moreover, multilateral organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank have introduced gender mainstreaming as a core principle in their programs. This creates opportunities for Pakistani women diplomats to engage with international networks, training programs, and leadership initiatives aimed at strengthening women's representation in diplomacy.

### **Pakistan's Policy Commitments and Institutional Reforms**

At the national level, Pakistan has made formal commitments to gender equality that create opportunities for women in diplomacy. Pakistan ratified CEDAW in 1996 and has since introduced legal and policy measures to enhance women's participation in governance. Although implementation remains uneven, these commitments provide a foundation for advocacy and reform.

The National Policy for Development and Empowerment of Women (2002) was one of the first attempts to integrate gender concerns into public policy. More recently, Pakistan has included gender equality goals in its national development agenda, aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls (Government of Pakistan, 2018).

Institutional reforms within the civil service have also begun to create opportunities. For instance, the introduction of merit-based recruitment through the CSS examination has allowed women with strong

academic qualifications to compete for entry into the Foreign Service. Although structural barriers remain, the growing number of women qualifying for the FSP indicates that opportunities for entry are expanding (Cheema, 2020).

Furthermore, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has gradually acknowledged the importance of women's participation. In 2017, Tehmina Janjua's appointment as Pakistan's first female Foreign Secretary represented not only a personal milestone but also an institutional recognition that women are capable of leading the country's diplomatic service. This precedent creates symbolic and practical opportunities for future generations of women diplomats.

Parliamentary oversight and civil society activism have also created pressure for reforms. Organizations such as the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT) and the Aurat Foundation have advocated for gender mainstreaming in governance, including diplomacy (PILDAT, 2019). Their research and advocacy efforts provide evidence-based support for expanding women's roles in international relations.

### **The Rise of Prominent Women Leaders in Diplomacy**

Perhaps the most visible opportunities for women in diplomacy are the role models who have already broken through barriers to serve in high-level positions. Their achievements not only challenge stereotypes but also inspire and pave the way for other women.

**Maleeha Lodhi** is one of Pakistan's most prominent female diplomats, having served as ambassador to the United States and the United Nations. Her career demonstrates that women can successfully represent Pakistan in some of the most high-profile and challenging diplomatic contexts (Lodhi, 2011). Lodhi's contributions to policy advocacy, public diplomacy, and multilateral negotiations highlight the substantive impact women can have in shaping foreign policy.

**Tehmina Janjua** made history as Pakistan's first female Foreign Secretary in 2017. Her career trajectory—from ambassadorial postings in Italy and the United Nations to the top bureaucratic position in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—illustrates that women can rise to the highest levels of the

diplomatic service. Janjua's leadership also demonstrated that gender is not a limitation in handling sensitive foreign policy issues (Rashid, 2021).

**Hina Rabbani Khar**, appointed in 2011 as Pakistan's youngest and first female Foreign Minister, became a global symbol of women's potential in diplomacy. Despite facing scrutiny for her appearance and age, Khar effectively represented Pakistan in international forums and bilateral negotiations, particularly in South Asia (Haider, 2012). Her tenure underscored the ability of women leaders to bring fresh perspectives and visibility to Pakistan's diplomacy.

The success of these figures provides evidence that women, when given opportunities, can excel in diplomacy. They also create ripple effects by inspiring younger women to pursue careers in international relations, contributing to a slow but steady increase in female participation in the Foreign Service.

#### **Role of Education and Training Programs**

Education has been one of the most transformative forces in creating opportunities for women in diplomacy. As access to higher education has expanded in Pakistan, particularly for women in urban areas, more female graduates have acquired the qualifications necessary to compete for the Foreign Service.

Institutions such as Quaid-i-Azam University, Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS), and various public universities offer programs in international relations, political science, and public policy that prepare women for diplomatic careers. The increasing number of women pursuing advanced degrees, including in foreign universities, enhances their competitiveness in the CSS examinations and diplomatic postings (Khan, 2018).

Professional training programs also play a crucial role. The Foreign Service Academy of Pakistan, responsible for training new recruits, has gradually become more inclusive, offering gender-sensitive modules and encouraging women's participation in international exchange programs. Exposure to global institutions through fellowships, scholarships, and internships—such as the Fulbright Program or the Chevening Scholarships—provides women with opportunities to build skills, networks,

and confidence for diplomatic careers (Cheema, 2020).

International organizations and donor agencies have also launched training initiatives targeted at women in governance. For example, UNDP's Gender Equality in Public Administration (GEPA) project supports training and mentoring for women in bureaucratic services, including foreign affairs (UNDP, 2020). Such initiatives directly address the capacity gap and provide women with resources to overcome structural disadvantages.

#### **Emerging Diplomatic Norms and Soft Power Opportunities**

Another source of opportunity lies in the changing nature of diplomacy itself. Traditional diplomacy, centered on security and hard power, is increasingly complemented by soft power diplomacy, including cultural diplomacy, humanitarian engagement, climate diplomacy, and development cooperation. These areas align closely with women's demonstrated strengths in communication, inclusivity, and coalition-building (Tickner, 2001).

For instance, women diplomats in Pakistan have played key roles in promoting human rights, health, and education agendas at the international level. Their involvement in global debates on sustainable development and climate change has enhanced Pakistan's image as a responsible international actor. As the scope of diplomacy expands to encompass issues of global governance, women's participation becomes even more critical.

#### **Opportunities through Global and Regional Comparisons**

Comparative experiences also provide opportunities for Pakistan. Neighboring countries such as India and Bangladesh have appointed women to high-level diplomatic positions, demonstrating that South Asian societies can adapt to gender inclusion in foreign policy. Bangladesh, for example, has seen women occupy not only ministerial but also ambassadorial roles in key countries (Chowdhury, 2019). Learning from these examples, Pakistan can design institutional reforms that accelerate women's representation in diplomacy.

Moreover, global best practices—such as gender quotas in ambassadorial appointments (as seen in some Scandinavian countries) or targeted mentorship programs—offer models that Pakistan can adapt to its own context (Aggestam & Towns, 2019). The international exchange of ideas and best

practices creates a broader pool of opportunities for women aspiring to diplomatic careers.

### **Case Studies of Pakistani Women Diplomats**

While much of the discussion about women in diplomacy focuses on challenges and abstract opportunities, concrete case studies of women who have served in Pakistan's diplomatic corps demonstrate both the possibilities and limitations of women's participation. These examples highlight how women have shaped Pakistan's international image, influenced policy, and negotiated critical issues. They also reveal how societal perceptions and institutional dynamics continue to shape women's roles.

Below are three detailed case studies of prominent Pakistani women diplomats—Maleeha Lodhi, Tehmina Janjua, and Hina Rabbani Khar—followed by insights from less well-known but equally significant figures.

#### **Maleeha Lodhi: Diplomacy and Public Engagement**

Dr. Maleeha Lodhi is one of Pakistan's most accomplished diplomats, with a career spanning academia, journalism, and international relations. Trained as a political scientist, Lodhi first rose to prominence as the editor of *The News International* before transitioning into diplomacy. She served as Pakistan's ambassador to the United States twice (1993–1996, 1999–2002) and later as the country's permanent representative to the United Nations (2015–2019).

Lodhi's career illustrates several key aspects of women's diplomacy in Pakistan. First, she represents how professional expertise and international visibility can be leveraged into diplomatic influence. Unlike many male diplomats who advanced primarily through bureaucratic channels, Lodhi's background in academia and media gave her unique credibility as a communicator of Pakistan's foreign policy (Lodhi, 2011).

Second, Lodhi's postings reflect both the opportunities and limits faced by women. Her role as ambassador to Washington placed her at the center of one of Pakistan's most important bilateral relationships. She played a pivotal role in managing Pakistan's image during times of strained relations, particularly following nuclear tests in 1998 and the post-9/11 period (Fair, 2004). Yet, despite her achievements, Lodhi's career was not without controversy. Critics often questioned her political

independence and pointed out that her non-traditional route into diplomacy reflected the limited institutional opportunities for women within the Foreign Service (Jalal, 1991).

Nevertheless, Lodhi remains a trailblazer whose contributions have challenged stereotypes about women's ability to handle high-profile diplomatic portfolios. She also serves as a role model for younger women aspiring to careers in international affairs.

#### **Tehmina Janjua: Breaking the Glass Ceiling**

Tehmina Janjua's appointment as Pakistan's first female Foreign Secretary in 2017 marked a historic moment for the country's diplomatic service. With a career spanning over three decades, Janjua had served in diverse postings, including as ambassador to Italy, permanent representative to the United Nations in Geneva, and spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Janjua's career demonstrates how women can advance through the formal institutional channels of the Foreign Service. Unlike Lodhi, who entered diplomacy laterally, Janjua rose through the ranks of the Ministry, showing that women can achieve the highest bureaucratic positions within the system.

As Foreign Secretary, Janjua was responsible for managing Pakistan's complex relations with the United States, India, Afghanistan, and multilateral organizations. Her leadership was particularly notable in defending Pakistan's position on counterterrorism, nuclear policy, and human rights at international forums (Rashid, 2021).

However, Janjua's career also highlights the challenges women face in diplomacy. Despite her expertise, she often operated in environments where her authority was questioned by male colleagues or political leaders. Moreover, her tenure was relatively short, reflecting the volatility and politicization of senior appointments in Pakistan's bureaucratic system.

Nonetheless, Janjua's achievement in breaking the glass ceiling has long-term significance. By occupying the highest post in the Foreign Ministry, she set a precedent that women can lead the country's diplomatic service, encouraging institutional openness to future female leaders.

#### **Hina Rabbani Khar: Symbolism and Substance**

Hina Rabbani Khar's appointment as Pakistan's Foreign Minister in 2011 at the age of 34 was both

groundbreaking and controversial. As the first woman and the youngest person to hold the position, Khar immediately drew international attention. Her tenure coincided with a turbulent period in Pakistan's foreign relations, marked by tensions with the United States following the killing of Osama bin Laden, ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, and strained relations with India.

Khar's tenure illustrates the dual nature of women's opportunities in diplomacy: the ability to achieve high-profile positions, but also the risk of being trivialized. International media often focused more on her fashion sense and appearance than on her policy contributions, reflecting a persistent gender bias in perceptions of women leaders (Haider, 2012).

Despite this, Khar made substantive contributions. She worked to improve Pakistan's ties with India, advocating for dialogue and trade normalization. She also played a significant role in Pakistan's engagement with the United States during a period of mistrust, emphasizing sovereignty and mutual respect. Moreover, Khar's leadership highlighted the symbolic importance of women in diplomacy—her visibility helped challenge stereotypes and project a modern image of Pakistan globally (Fair, 2014).

Her career demonstrates both progress and the persistence of gendered challenges. While she achieved unprecedented visibility for a woman in Pakistani diplomacy, the emphasis on her appearance underscores how women's credibility is often judged by standards unrelated to their professional performance.

### Other Notable Figures

Beyond these three high-profile figures, several other women have contributed significantly to Pakistan's diplomacy. For instance, **Sherry Rehman**, while best known as a politician, also served as Pakistan's ambassador to the United States (2011–2013), where she helped manage a difficult period in bilateral relations. Similarly, **Seema Ilahi Baloch** served as ambassador to Germany and played a key role in strengthening Pakistan's ties with Europe.

These examples demonstrate that women's contributions are not confined to symbolic roles but extend to substantive policy engagement across diverse contexts. Yet, their relative invisibility in scholarly and media accounts highlights the need for more systematic recognition of women's diplomatic work.

### Comparative Perspectives

Placing Pakistan's experience in a comparative context highlights both the specific challenges faced by Pakistani women and the opportunities for reform. Examining the experiences of other countries—particularly in South Asia and beyond—provides lessons that can inform Pakistan's efforts to enhance gender inclusion in diplomacy.

#### South Asian Context

South Asia presents a mixed picture of women's participation in diplomacy. While cultural and institutional barriers are common across the region, several countries have made notable progress.

**India**, for example, admitted women into its Indian Foreign Service (IFS) in 1948. While women initially faced restrictions, including mandatory resignation upon marriage, these barriers were gradually removed (Gupta, 2015). Today, Indian women diplomats such as Nirupama Rao and Sujatha Singh have served as foreign secretaries, while others have represented India in major capitals worldwide. India's relatively higher proportion of women in senior diplomatic posts demonstrates that institutional reforms can yield tangible results.

**Bangladesh** has also witnessed significant progress, with women serving as foreign ministers, ambassadors, and permanent representatives to the United Nations. Bangladesh's long history of women in top political leadership, including Prime Ministers Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, has contributed to a political culture where women's leadership in diplomacy is less contested (Chowdhury, 2019).

In contrast, **Afghanistan** presents a more challenging case. Despite some progress during the early 2000s, women diplomats have faced severe setbacks following the Taliban's return to power in 2021, which has drastically curtailed women's participation in public life (Human Rights Watch, 2022). This highlights how political instability and extremist ideologies can undermine women's hard-won gains in diplomacy.

Compared to its neighbors, Pakistan's record is mixed. While it has produced high-profile figures such as Khar, Janjua, and Lodhi, overall representation remains low. Institutional reforms have been slower than in India or Bangladesh, and societal attitudes continue to pose significant barriers.

### Global Comparisons and Best Practices

Looking beyond South Asia, global best practices offer insights into how Pakistan can improve women's participation in diplomacy.

Scandinavian countries such as Sweden and Norway have been pioneers in promoting gender equality in diplomacy. Sweden's adoption of a "feminist foreign policy" in 2014 emphasized gender equality as a core principle of its international engagement (Aggestam & True, 2018). This policy not only increased the representation of women in Sweden's diplomatic corps but also influenced how foreign policy priorities were framed, with greater attention to human rights and inclusivity.

Canada and Australia have also implemented policies to ensure gender parity in ambassadorial appointments. By setting clear targets and monitoring progress, these countries have significantly increased women's representation in senior diplomatic roles (Townsend-Bell, 2017).

In contrast, Middle Eastern countries generally lag behind, with cultural and institutional barriers severely limiting women's participation in diplomacy. However, exceptions exist—for example, the United Arab Emirates appointed Lana Nusseibeh as its permanent representative to the United Nations, demonstrating gradual change in even conservative contexts (UN Women, 2020).

These global comparisons suggest that Pakistan can draw on successful models to enhance women's participation. Institutional reforms, quotas, mentorship programs, and gender-sensitive policies are proven strategies that could be adapted to Pakistan's context.

### Lessons for Pakistan

From these comparative perspectives, three lessons stand out:

1. **Institutional Reform Matters:** Countries that have reformed recruitment, promotion, and appointment policies—such as India, Sweden, and Canada—have achieved higher representation of women in diplomacy. Pakistan can benefit from similar reforms, particularly in ensuring merit-based promotions and family-friendly policies.

2.

3. **Symbolic Leadership Inspires Change:** The visibility of women leaders, such as Bangladesh's female prime ministers or Sweden's female foreign ministers, has created ripple effects for women in diplomacy. Pakistan's examples of Khar, Janjua, and

Lodhi show similar potential, but these need to be institutionalized rather than treated as exceptions.

4.

5. **Global Norms Provide Leverage:** Aligning with global initiatives such as the Women, Peace, and Security agenda can create external pressure and legitimacy for domestic reforms. Pakistan can position itself as a regional leader in gender-inclusive diplomacy by adopting these frameworks more systematically.

### Policy Recommendations

The analysis of challenges and opportunities for women in Pakistani diplomacy suggests that while progress has been made, structural reforms and cultural shifts are necessary to create a more inclusive diplomatic service. Policy recommendations can be divided into four categories: institutional reforms, societal engagement, international partnerships, and capacity building.

### Institutional Reforms

First, Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) should adopt gender mainstreaming strategies across its operations. This includes integrating gender perspectives into recruitment, training, promotions, and policy formulation. Recruitment policies must ensure greater gender balance by setting targets for women's representation in the Foreign Service. Transparency in promotions and postings, including overseas assignments, should be prioritized to counter gender bias.

Additionally, workplace reforms must address structural barriers. Providing family-friendly policies—such as extended maternity and paternity leave, flexible work arrangements, and affordable childcare facilities—can help retain women in the workforce. The implementation of anti-harassment laws should be strictly enforced through independent grievance committees, ensuring safe and equitable workplaces for women diplomats.

### Societal Engagement

Societal perceptions about women in leadership roles continue to hinder progress. To counter stereotypes, public awareness campaigns should highlight the successes of Pakistani women diplomats such as Hina Rabbani Khar and Maleeha Lodhi. Media platforms can play an important role in normalizing women's presence in diplomacy and

challenging narratives that reduce women to their appearance rather than their capabilities.

Collaboration with educational institutions is also critical. Schools and universities should introduce programs on gender and international relations, encouraging young women to consider careers in diplomacy. Civil society organizations can work alongside MoFA to mentor aspiring female diplomats and provide support networks.

### **International Partnerships**

Global initiatives such as the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and CEDAW provide strong platforms for Pakistan to commit to gender equality in diplomacy. Pakistan should strengthen its collaboration with international organizations such as UN Women, the Commonwealth, and regional forums to secure technical assistance, training, and funding for gender-inclusive policies. Pakistan's active participation in UN peacekeeping missions also provides a unique opportunity. Increasing the deployment of female peacekeepers and promoting them to leadership positions would not only meet UN gender targets but also strengthen Pakistan's diplomatic reputation globally.

### **Capacity Building and Mentorship**

Developing women's leadership capacities is essential. The Foreign Service Academy should expand training programs focused on negotiation, conflict resolution, digital diplomacy, and leadership skills, with specific modules designed for women. Partnering with global training institutions can provide Pakistani women diplomats with exposure to international best practices.

Equally important is the creation of formal mentorship programs where senior women diplomats guide younger entrants. Women's networks, both domestic and international, can provide peer support, advocacy, and opportunities for collaboration. These networks would help women navigate institutional barriers and sustain long-term careers in diplomacy.

### **Conclusion**

Women's participation in diplomacy is no longer a symbolic demand but a practical necessity for effective foreign policy in the 21st century. This research examined the barriers and opportunities faced by women in Pakistani diplomacy,

highlighting both persistent challenges and areas of progress.

The analysis revealed that structural challenges—such as gender bias in recruitment and promotions, limited postings, and workplace discrimination—continue to restrict women's advancement. Societal and cultural constraints, including patriarchal attitudes and stereotypes, further reinforce institutional barriers. Despite these challenges, the study also identified significant opportunities. These include Pakistan's commitments to international frameworks like UNSCR 1325, emerging institutional reforms, the recognition of women's contributions, and the growing presence of role models in diplomacy.

The successes of pioneering women diplomats demonstrate that women bring unique perspectives to foreign policy—emphasizing inclusivity, empathy, and collaboration. Their leadership in areas such as peace and security, global health, and climate diplomacy illustrates how women's participation strengthens not only gender equality but also the effectiveness of diplomacy itself.

Ultimately, the inclusion of women in diplomacy is not just an issue of fairness but also of strategic importance. A gender-diverse diplomatic corps can enhance Pakistan's credibility, improve decision-making, and strengthen engagement in an increasingly complex international system.

The policy recommendations outlined in this paper emphasize the need for institutional reforms, societal awareness, international collaboration, and capacity building. Implementing these strategies can create an enabling environment for women to thrive in diplomacy, thereby aligning Pakistan with global norms and enhancing its soft power.

In conclusion, the pathway toward inclusive diplomacy in Pakistan is both challenging and promising. Women's representation must move beyond tokenism to meaningful participation in decision-making. By investing in women's leadership, Pakistan can not only fulfill its global commitments but also build a more resilient, inclusive, and effective foreign policy apparatus for the future.

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