

AGDA Reflection

How to Be Your Best Ambassador

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Women in diplomacy are essential. They bring diverse perspectives, and they prioritise collaboration, conflict resolution and inclusivity — all qualities critical to navigating the international world order. Ensuring that women have equal opportunities to lead not only strengthens foreign policy outcomes but also paves the way for a more just, peaceful and equitable world. Yet, despite their proven impact, women remain underrepresented in senior diplomatic roles worldwide.

Canada, the country that I had the honour to represent for 22 years, ranks first among the top-performing nations with women making up 53% of its ambassadors globally. Canada serves as a prime example, having made significant strides over time. This progress aligns with Canada's shift towards a 'feminist foreign policy' and reflects a robust commitment to gender equality in diplomacy, including reaching parity at the senior-most leadership levels.

In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a country where I served as consul general and ambassador, I witnessed first-hand how women empowerment policies led to the country being ranked first regionally and 7th globally on the United Nations Development Programme's Gender Inequality Index, proving that the UAE is one of the least unequal states for women. It also ranks first on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report because it managed, through legal and political reforms, to close most of its gender gaps.

In addition to state-driven approaches to ensure better representation, achieving gender parity in diplomacy also requires concerted efforts by individuals. Adopting strategies that enhance leadership, resilience, relationship-building, and vision, can help women better navigate the complex landscape of international relations.

1. Representation Matters – Be Your Own Ambassador

How a country shapes and manages its brand on the world stage sends a clear message about its values, priorities and capabilities. A country's brand influences its ability to thrive — politically, economically and culturally. For example, in the UAE, "Impossible is Possible" is part of the country's brand that allowed it to attract the imagination of the world, create futuristic skylines, deliver a world-class World Expo during the COVID19 pandemic, and send a land rover to Mars designed by a team of female scientists.

The same holds true for careers, and you are the ambassador of your own success. As women, we often bring unique strengths to the table — emotional intelligence, collaborative problem-solving and the capacity to build consensus — all qualities that are indispensable in mending a fractured world. To identify what makes you unique, you can start by identifying your key strengths and values. Self-awareness is not only important for developing your leadership skills but is also key to your resilience. The diplomatic journey is fraught with challenges, especially for women, and knowing yourself is the first step to realising your potential. The more you define and refine your skills, the more effectively you can control how you are perceived, creating opportunities for career advancement. The onus is on you to ensure that your communication — both verbal and non-verbal — align with your professional aspirations.

2. Be Your Own Advocate – Be the Ambassador of your Success

Like diplomats advocating for their country's interests, you also need to proactively advocate for your career goals and achievements. Speaking up for yourself is essential in a profession where visibility and influence matter. As women we need to remember to be assertive, be strategic and advocate for our place in the professional world. When I began my foreign service career, I volunteered for every job that no one wanted because I knew that in the long run, it would help me build my profile and advance my career. The key is to be proactive, play to your strengths and seize opportunities, especially ones that others might overlook.

One way you can advocate for yourself is by keeping track of your achievements and having a "war story" in your back pocket that illustrates what you are capable of, and one that people will remember you by. A "war story" can be a great accomplishment or it can describe how you overcame

adversity, tackled a difficult challenge, or navigated a tough situation. Remember that opportunities won't seek you out if you remain silent. Your voice, your contributions, and your ambition deserve to be seen and heard. Be your own advocate to ensure your own progress and become the ambassador of your own success.

3. Forge Strong Alliances: Build your Networks and Communities

In diplomacy, forging alliances is critical to success. Whether negotiating a trade deal or securing a vote at the United Nations, success rarely comes without the support of others. Think of the UAE again here: in a multipolar world fraught by political uncertainty and trade wars between the world's largest powers, the UAE manages to have solid and strategic relations with everyone. It strives for harmony and peace and leverages its relations and networks to create that peace.

The same applies to your career. Every aspiring diplomat should surround themselves with a trusted group of allies — mentors, coaches, colleagues, and networks — that help support their growth and create opportunities. This is especially true for women, who often need to work harder to establish credibility. That said, women excel at building deep, meaningful connections, and by investing in long-term professional relationships, they are perfectly suited to create a strong support system to advance their careers.

To build and sustain these alliances, invest time in both formal and informal networking. Attend events, join professional organisations, and engage in mentorship programmes. Strong alliances are built on trust, and by consistently demonstrating reliability and collaboration, you create a network that champions your success. Focus on cultivating relationships that are reciprocal — offering support when needed and seeking guidance in return. As women in diplomacy, you need to find your allies and be an ally to be the ambassador of your networks and communities.

4. Think Long-Term – Play the Long Game

Like diplomats pursuing long-term national interests, building and sustaining a career over time is the key to long lasting success. As the saying goes, "Rome wasn't built in a day," and neither are careers — especially for women. Diplomatic careers demand long hours, high pressure, travel, and relocation, which women are perfectly suited for. However, they also face a "50% added burden tax" on their paid work, meaning that, whether stepping out of the workforce to raise children, taking on extra household duties, or caring for aging parents, women perform 2.5 times more unpaid care work, globally than men. This imbalance is one of the barriers that prevent fewer women from reaching the ambassadorial level.

I often share my own career journey with a reminder that, "You can have it all, but not all at the same time." If you want the marriage, kids, career, health, and happiness, you have to play the long game. It's not our fault that our prime childbearing years coincide with critical career

growth years, but instead of fighting biology, we must take a long-term view of success. I learned this the hard way in my late 30s — managing a diplomatic career abroad, a working husband, two kids under five, and a high-pressure position. The weight of it all became unbearable, and I crumbled, taking months to recover and then needing to reset my priorities. And yet, I still made it to the top — a consul general at 42 and an ambassador at 54 — with time to spare. Careers are longer now because we are living longer, so think long term, and play the long game.

5. Envision Your Path: Be the Ambassadors of your Future

Just as diplomats chart a course for international relations with a clear vision, having a vision for your career is equally important. You need to be the ambassador of your future. This means setting a long-term vision, creating a strategic roadmap, and adapting to changes with foresight and a sense of purpose. In other words, envision where you want to go, map out the steps to get there, and always keep your ultimate goals in sight. To borrow from the UAE's example, the principles and visions the country has adopted outline clear and attainable objectives for the future, with the prosperity and the well-being of its people at the heart of all its projects. If you are a woman in diplomacy, you might not be able to imagine yourself as an ambassador because you have fewer role models to draw from, or you lack confidence or maybe your family or community don't support you. But my message is this, "If you can see it, you can be it".

Like many, my career was not a straight line. When people ask me how I went from criminal psychologist to Canadian ambassador, I tell them it was part vision and part magic. The vision part is that I always had a dream of working internationally. While I wasn't able to translate my correctional experience into a foreign posting, I did manage, through a series of very fortunate and "magical" events, to land a position in an international organisation — Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. And the rest as they say, is history.

Conclusion: Redefining Success for Women in Diplomacy

Although women in diplomacy face systemic barriers, cultural biases, and work-life balance challenges, these glass ceilings are meant to be broken. In Canada's foreign service before 1976, there were very few female foreign service officers, and the ones who broke that first barrier had an extra disadvantage. They had to quit their jobs if they got married. Why? Because of the notion that their husbands would never give up their jobs and concede to following their wives abroad. Of course, that was not true and was an artificial barrier, and today Canada is above parity with 53% of ambassadors being female. The UAE has also broken many barriers, becoming a model and an example for women's economic and political advancement.

Women diplomats are uniquely positioned to reshape the field of international relations. By representing themselves with confidence, advocating for their success, forging strong alliances, thinking long-term, and envisioning their path forward, they can create careers that are not only successful but also transformative.