Representation Without Influence: Evidence from Gender Disparities in the U.S. Foreign Service*

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Abstract

Does increasing women's representation increase women's influence in government? We investigate this question in the context of the U.S. Foreign Service, an elite bureaucracy which has greatly increased women's representation over time. To do so, we introduce the most comprehensive dataset on any modern diplomatic corps: the Key Officers of the U.S. Foreign Service, covering 34,000 unique officers across all U.S. foreign missions from 1966–2017. We document substantial gender gaps in retention and promotion. We theorize that these gaps reflect an effort by the State Department to increase the appearance of gender parity, while resisting deeper changes to the gendered balance of power. We find that women face relative penalties in promotion to positions with high influence but low visibility, and that women are systematically assigned to less important posts. These results suggest that improving representation alone is insufficient to increase women's influence within organizations.

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Women should get a fairer shake. . . [T]he country is stupid if they don't find a way to tap the resources that are in women's heads.

William Macomber, Deputy Under Secretary of State for Management, 1971[1]

In most polities and for most of recorded history, women have been underrepresented in a wide range of governmental, corporate, and civic organizations. Over the last few decades, women's underrepresentation has come to be seen as a problem that should be addressed with public policy. The 1995 Beijing Declaration, issued at the fourth World Conference on Women and adopted by the UN, lists increasing women's representation as a central pillar of the global fight for gender equality;[2] this motivated the European Union's adoption of a "gender mainstreaming" policy,[3] and a range of national legislatures and local governments have adopted gender quotas for public officials since the 1990s (Baltrunaite et al., 2014; Clayton, 2021). In many organizations, substantial improvements in women's representation have been achieved during this time; for example, while only 2% of U.S. Senate seats were held by women in 1991, this figure rose to 26% by 2021.[4]

Descriptive representation is valuable in its own right.[5] However, as the Beijing Declaration makes clear, the ultimate goal of increasing women's representation in organizations is to enhance women's ability to meaningfully participate in the functioning of those organizations.[6] Do advances in women's representation necessarily lead to increases in women's influence?

We investigate this question in the context of an elite diplomatic corps: the U.S. Foreign Service, which staffs U.S. embassies and consulates around the globe. Foreign service officers (FSOs) play a crucial role in U.S. foreign policy; they are given the broad mandate of advancing U.S. interests abroad, and substantial autonomy in pursuing those interests (Jett, 2014; Gertz, 2018; Malis, 2021; Suong, 2023; Goldfien, 2024; Kim and Fu, 2024; Thrall, 2024). The foreign service is, at first glance, a success story for women's representation. Gender discrimination was so rampant within the service in the mid-20th century that women FSOs filed a class action lawsuit against the

[1] Calkin (1978, p. 157)
[2] See https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/pdf/BDPfA%20E.pdf.
[3] See https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/what-is-gender-mainstreaming?language_content_entity=en.
[4] See https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/fact-sheet/the-data-on-women-leaders/.
[5] See e.g. Kao et al. (2025).
[6] For example, Page 79 of the Declaration states: "Women... in Governments and legislative bodies contribute to redefining political priorities, placing new items on the political agenda that reflect and address women's gender-specific concerns, values and experiences, and providing new perspectives on mainstream political issues." See Footnote 2.

State Department in 1976 (Strano, 2016), and only one in ten ambassadors and deputy chiefs of mission (second in command at an embassy) were women in 1990. By 2017, however, more than one in three of these positions was held by women, a statistic that the Director General of the Foreign Service proudly broadcast on social media.[7] Gender balance is even greater among newly commissioned officers, of whom nearly 45% were women in 2017. Extrapolating forward, one might expect that as women continue entering the foreign service and matriculating up the career ladder at increasing rates, they will soon occupy positions of influence and authority on par with their male counterparts.

In this paper, we evaluate these predictions using the most comprehensive dataset on diplomatic representation ever assembled: the Key Officers of the U.S. Foreign Service (hereafter KOFS). This original dataset, compiled from over 150 digitized directories of foreign service personnel, contains information on the names and positions of all officers holding leadership roles at every U.S. foreign mission from 1966–2017—covering 198 embassies and 343 other diplomatic posts, averaging around 20 officers per post in recent years. We use a combination of automated and manual record-linking techniques to create unique identifiers for over 34,000 individual officers, yielding a panel dataset of roughly 450,000 officer-quarter-year observations, which enables us to track diplomats from post to post throughout their careers. To build a more complete picture of these officers' career trajectories, we further supplement the KOFS data with additional novel datasets of newly commissioned officers, as well as Deputy Assistant Secretaries of State (positions based in Washington with roughly equal status to that of ambassadors).

These data open the door to substantial advancements in the quantitative study of individual diplomats, a research program which thus far has largely restricted its attention to ambassadors as the primary representatives of their home government to a foreign country (Gertz, 2018; Malis, 2021; Lindsey, 2023; Goldfien, 2024; Kim and Fu, 2024). Research at the intersection of gender and diplomacy has likewise focused its lens on the highest levels of diplomatic representation, finding across a variety of contexts that women both hold fewer ambassadorships than men, and are systematically assigned to less important or less prestigious ambassadorships (Niklasson and Towns, 2017; Calin and Buterbaugh, 2018; Towns and Niklasson, 2018; Schiemichen, 2019; Stephenson, 2019, 2022; Flowers, 2022; Niklasson and Towns, 2023; Park, 2023). These documented empirical

[7] See https://x.com/StateDG/status/648541189524844544.

patterns, however, are consistent with a variety of distinct mechanisms—including gendered patterns of self-selection into or out of the foreign service, discrimination on the part of individual decision-makers, or broader institutional forces that restrict women's advancement (Aggestam and Towns, 2019)—which are empirically indistinguishable when examining representation at the ambassadorial level alone. Our novel data allow us to both measure the aggregate gender composition of U.S. diplomatic posts across countries and over time, and estimate the role of gender in the retention and promotion of *individual diplomats* over the course of their careers. We can thus directly address issues relating to the diplomatic career pipeline and the candidate pools for top-level diplomatic appointments, and compare ambassadorial appointments against other positions in the foreign service to gain better insight into the mechanisms driving the appointment patterns we observe.

In brief, our findings indicate that even as women's representation in the U.S. diplomatic corps continues to trend upward, there is substantial gender-based discrimination which manifests in different ways at different stages of the career pipeline. We begin by studying promotion into management roles, by gender: relative to male officers, we find that women are substantially less likely to reach the middle and upper levels of the service. Puzzlingly, however, this disparity does not exist at the very top: women are no less likely than men to become ambassadors overall, and conditional on having reached the upper levels, they are *more* likely to become ambassador. What explains these divergent promotion patterns?

We theorize that this discrepancy arises as a result of two competing objectives being pursued by decision makers within the State Department: increasing the *visibility* of women in the foreign service, while resisting pressure to meaningfully change the gendered balance of power within the organization. We provide two main forms of evidence in support of this interpretation. First, we examine two pairs of positions which are roughly equal in terms of influence but which vary in terms of visibility. We find that women face a relative penalty in promotion into the low-visibility positions (deputy chief of mission and deputy assistant secretary), as compared to promotion into positions with higher visibility (consul general and ambassador). Second, at all position levels, we find that women are consistently assigned to smaller posts, and to posts that are located in countries with smaller economies, lesser military capabilities, and weaker trade relationships with the United States. We suggest that this strategy allows the State Department to maintain an appearance

of increasing gender parity according to the most easily observable metrics, while maintaining significant qualitative disparities which are less readily apparent to external audiences.

Additional analyses indicate that the gender disparities we report cannot be explained by the State Department responding strategically to *host state* gender conditions. Rather, the impetus for discrimination originates within the organization itself: from the earliest career stages recorded in our data, we find that women are sorted into professional tracks (or "cones") that are least conducive to future advancement; and we further provide evidence of an implicit "quota" system that prevents multiple women from being assigned to leadership positions within the same embassy.

Our findings suggest that mandating gender representation is no panacea for gender-based discrimination. Organizations that are resistant to ceding substantial authority to their female members can implement a variety of strategies in order to increase women's representation without meaningfully increasing women's influence, such as shifting women into more salient and less influential roles. This phenomenon has been documented, for instance, in the context of modern German political parties, who respond to external pressure to achieve gender balance by running female candidates in districts where the party is less likely to win *a priori* (Fujiwara, Hilbig, and Raffler, 2025). Similar evidence comes from Indian village councils, where women who are elected to councils to meet gender quotas are then sidelined from the councils' actual decision-making (Heinze, Brulé, and Chauchard, 2025). Such strategies remain viable insofar as governments and other stakeholder groups find it easier to monitor and evaluate representation, as opposed to influence or authority per se. Thus our results cast doubt on the "underlying assumption [among policy makers] that diplomatic norms and practices will become more gender equal or diverse simply by adding more women to the field", as discussed by Aggestam and Towns (2019, 20).

Scholars have long recognized the importance of descriptive representation for the bureaucracy at home in terms of legitimacy and effectiveness (Pitkin, 1967; Park, 2013). This is all the more true in the context of diplomacy, given that diplomats embody the state and serve as its public face to foreign audiences (Cornut, 2015). Sending women (or not) to conduct diplomacy is an important signal about their home states, and one that the world will notice (Erlandsen, Hernández-Garza, and Schulz, 2022; Niklasson and Towns, 2023). A lack of diversity within the diplomatic corps may generate legitimacy costs in foreign policy (Chow and Han, 2023; McDowell and Steinberg, Forthcoming). If women are underrepresented in positions and partner countries of importance, as

we demonstrate, this may impede the generation of trust and goodwill among host state publics that is necessary to conduct successful bilateral diplomacy.

A fast-growing body of work in international relations also highlights the value-added of individual bureaucrats in the conduct of foreign policy (Arias, 2022; Clark and Dolan, 2021; Gertz, 2018; Gray and Potter, 2020; Lindsey, 2023; Malis, 2021; Schub, 2022). Any form of gender bias in diplomatic appointments—making assignment based on factors other than ability and merit—implies a misallocation of human capital, and inefficiency in policy execution. Further, previous work demonstrates that the presence of women in policy-making roles leads to outcomes which are more aligned with women's interests (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004; Brollo and Troiano, 2016; Hessami and da Fonseca, 2020). Women's political representation has been found to influence policies such as tariff rates (Betz, Fortunato, and O'Brien, 2021), development assistance (Breuning, 2001), the success of peace negotiations (Paffenholz et al., 2016), and gender mainstreaming in World Bank projects (Heinzel, Weaver, and Jorgensen, 2025). Therefore, both the content and effectiveness of diplomacy depend critically on who ascends to top diplomatic roles, and who is kept out of positions of influence.

1 Empirical Context: The U.S. Foreign Service

Our study focuses on the context of the U.S. State Department's Foreign Service. The State Department plays the lead role in American diplomacy, and its corps of officers fill most American diplomatic roles.[8] In this section, we provide an overview of the organization of the State Department, and describe the processes by which officers are assigned to positions. We then briefly discuss the history of gender discrimination within the foreign service and attempts to combat it.

1.1 Organization of the State Department and Foreign Service Roles

The State Department's workforce is composed of civil service officers, foreign service officers, and political appointees. Within the foreign service, there are two major divisions: "generalists" and "specialists". Generalists are the officers engaged in the more substantive work of diplomacy,

[8]The U.S. Foreign Service has also included employees from USAID, the Department of Commerce, the Department of Agriculture, the U.S. Agency for Global Media, and the United States Information Agency. Nearly 90% of foreign service personnel are employed by the State Department (Nutter, 2020). In this paper, unless otherwise specified, references to the foreign service signify only the State Department corps.

divided into five career tracks (or "cones"): political, economic, consular, management, and public diplomacy. Specialists (formerly known as Foreign Service staff) fill a diverse range of occupations necessary to support diplomatic work, including diplomatic security, information technology, administrative support, and human resources, among others. Our analysis below focuses on foreign service officers in generalist positions.

The most senior roles in the State Department are typically filled by political appointees. This extends down to the level of assistant secretaries, who run the department's bureaus, which serve as its primary administrative subunits (1 FAM 014.3).[9] Geographic bureaus have the lead responsibility for the "general conduct of US foreign relations with countries within the [assigned] geographic region" while functional bureaus manage substantive issues with global scope or internal support functions (1 FAM 112).

Our analysis focuses on staffing below the assistant secretary level, where career appointees predominate and authority splits between Washington-based bureau staff and overseas missions under bureau supervision. In Washington, a deputy assistant secretary (DAS) ranks immediately below the assistant secretary. Each DAS supervises one "major function" of the relevant bureau and manages subordinate offices (1 FAM 014.4). In recent years, there have been around 100 DAS roles at any given time. Overseas, the equivalent level is occupied by a chief of mission (i.e., ambassador) who leads an American diplomatic mission to a foreign country or international organization. Formally, ambassadors are personal representatives of the president, but as a practical matter they report to the relevant assistant secretary.[10] Ambassadors hold overall responsibility for the U.S. relationship with the country or international organization to which they are accredited, and supervise essentially all U.S. government personnel therein (2 FAM 113.1).

Each ambassador has a deputy chief of mission, who serves as second-in-command. The DCM typically serves as the "chief operating officer" of the mission, focusing on day-to-day operations and allowing the ambassador to concentrate on major policy questions and external engagement (ADST Michael Cleverley, p. 240; ADST Greg Delawie, p. 116).[11] As retired foreign service officer

[9] We abbreviate references to the State Department's *Foreign Affairs Manual* and *Foreign Affairs Handbook* throughout this document as FAM and FAH respectively with appropriate section numbers. Both can be found online at https://fam.state.gov/.

[10] The assistant secretary, for example, prepares the annual employee evaluation report for each ambassador (3 FAH-1 H-2813.4).

[11] References to oral history interviews conducted by the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training throughout this documented are abbreviated as ADST and the name of the interview subject. All interviews can be found

and oral historian Charles Stuart Kennedy describes the role: "The DCM runs the embassy while the ambassador is Mr. or Mrs. America to the host country" (ADST Roland Kuchel, p. 52). Subordinate staff within the embassy report in turn to the DCM.

In large countries, the American diplomatic mission often includes not just an embassy but also some number of subordinate posts in other major cities. The most important such posts are consulates general, led by the consuls general (CGs).[12] CGs are subordinate to the ambassador, occupying a roughly parallel position to the DCM with overall responsibility for U.S. government activities within their jurisdiction (2 FAM 113.9). The defining feature of a consulate general is that its activities extend beyond purely consular tasks into political, economic, and other work (2 FAM 131); thus a consulate general can be described as a "mini embassy" (ADST Robert Lynn Brown, p. 49). In fact, the largest consulates general rival or exceed embassies, in both their workforce and their scope of activity. The consulate general in Frankfurt, for example, is the fourth largest American diplomatic post in the world with over a thousand staff as of 2024.[13]

Below the DCM level (at embassies) or the CG level (at consulates general), posts are organized into sections, handling particular functions. The modal post has five sections led by generalist foreign service officers: consular, economic, management, political, and public affairs. Section chiefs manage lower-ranking foreign service officers and locally engaged staff. As front-line managers, section chiefs have the opportunity both to influence policy within their areas and to develop the skills eventually needed for the higher ranks. Posts also host attachés from various other executive branch agencies, including (but not limited to) foreign service personnel from other agencies.

Together, the section chiefs, lead attachés, and senior management comprise the post's "country team", an informal but standard organizational structure. A typical country team is depicted in Figure 1. The country team generally aligns with the set of officers recorded in our Key Officers data, as we discuss in Section 2

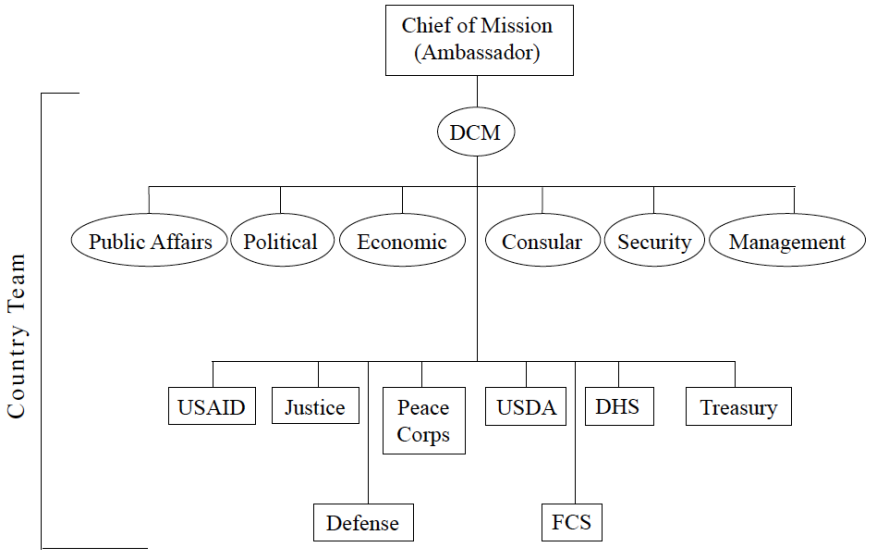
Table 1 summarizes the positions described so far, along with the appointment process for each and our data sources for the role (described below). As a rough gauge of each position's importance, we also include the proportion of officers in each position who are members of the Senior Foreign

at https://adst.org/oral-history/oral-history-interviews/.

[12]State Department regulations also authorize the use of this title by the chiefs of consular sections at large embassies (see 3 FAH-1 H-2436.3-1). Here, we use the title only to refer to those who lead consulates general.

[13]See "Inspection of Embassy Berlin and Constituent Posts, Germany" at https://www.stateoig.gov/uploads/report/report_pdf_file/inspection-embassy-berlin-and-constituent-posts-germany-isp-i-25-03.pdf

Figure 1: **Typical embassy "country team", from Kopp and Naland (2017)**



Service (the roughly one thousand senior-most officers within the foreign service in terms seniority by *rank*, which attaches to the individual officer regardless of the position she occupies, as discussed below). There is a clear, but not exact, hierarchy to these roles. That is, while every section chief is subordinate to their own DCM, a section chief at an especially large and important post might have more aggregate influence than a DCM at an especially small and unimportant one. Our analyses below address this heterogeneity by examining both movement between levels, and variation in post quality within levels.

1.2 The Foreign Service Assignment Process

1.2.1 The rank-in-person system

The State Department's personnel system for the foreign service operates on two tracks simultaneously: one for rank (or "grade"), and one for position. Each officer holds an individual rank-in-person, regardless of their position at the time; this rank determines salary and seniority, as well as "time-in-class" restrictions (after which an officer must either be promoted or leave the service). Selection boards, organized by the Director General of the Foreign Service (the head of human resources within the State Department), periodically review eligible candidates and award

Table 1: Officer "Levels", Appointment Processes, and Data Sources

Position Category	Level	% SFS	Appointment Process	Data Source
Newly commissioned officer	Entry	0	Selection boards	Congressional Record
Section Chief	Middle	15%	Assignment panels	Key Officers
Consul General (CG)	Upper	51%	DCM committee	Key Officers
Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM)	Upper	57%	Amb. selection from DCM committee's shortlist	Key Officers
Ambassador	Top	96%	WH appointment, based on D committee recommendation	Key Officers (validated by State Dept. Historian)
Deputy Assistant Secretary (DAS)	Top	95%	D committee	State Dept. Organizational Directories, and Congressional Directories

Note: "Level" is our grouping of position categories, for the purpose of analyzing promotion patterns, and may not correspond to internal usage. "% SFS" denotes the portion of career officers of a given position category who are members of the Senior Foreign Service; see discussion of rank-in-person vs. assignment to positions in the main text.

promotions to a higher grade on a merit basis (3 FAM 2320).[14] The four highest grades within the service are known collectively as the "Senior Foreign Service".

Operating separately from this promotion process, the assignment process within the State Department matches available members of the foreign service to open positions. While there is a preferred rank for an appointee to any given position, there is no requirement to fill the position with an officer at that rank. Officers may be assigned to positions classified above their own grade (known as a "stretch" or "upstretch" assignment) or below it (known as a "downstretch"). Stretch assignments are fairly common—a 2012 audit, for example, found that about 16% of officers posted overseas held upstretch assignments. The department also sometimes temporarily regrades positions to correspond to the rank of the assignee (Courts, 2012).

Advancements in grade have been the subject of recent audits by the State Department and the

[14]Promotions to or within the Senior Foreign Service require presidential appointment with Senate advice and consent, though this is largely a formality.

Government Accountability Office (described in the Section C in the appendix). We are interested here in the exercise of authority within American diplomacy rather than these advancements in pay grade, and so focus on the foreign service assignment process.

1.2.2 Assignment processes, by position

Foreign service officers rotate frequently to new positions; assignments to a given country typically last two to three years, and career progress requires rotation to a new post rather than promotion within the same one. The specific mechanics of the assignment process vary somewhat by position. Generally, assignments are made by internal committees with input from various stakeholders. For some positions, committees directly choose whom to assign; for others, they make a recommendation to some other decision-maker. The assignment process handles appointments up to the level of an ambassador or deputy assistant secretary of state, while the most senior roles in the State Department (those at the assistant secretary-level or above, which fall outside the scope of our analysis) are handled by the White House.

Beginning at the top, chiefs of mission (i.e., ambassadors and their equivalents) and deputy assistant secretaries of state are selected by the State Department's "D Committee"—a group of senior officials chaired by the Deputy Secretary of State and typically composed of the department's under secretaries. The Director General of the Foreign Service and the department's regional bureaus are officially empowered to make suggestions to the committee, but the D committee is free to make its own choices. For ambassadorships, the department forwards its selections to the White House for formal nomination by the president and Senate confirmation. Deputy assistant secretaries are appointed directly by the department (3 FAH-1 H-2425.8-2). The process within the D Committee is informal and opaque. Personal connections, horse trading among principals, and informal networking reportedly play an outsize role in selections (ADST, William B. Whitman, p. 55; ADST, Anthony Quainton, p. 182; ADST Teresa Jones, p. 94).

Moving down one level, the selection process for deputy chiefs of mission (DCMs) and consuls general (CGs) is led by the DCM committee, which is chaired by the Director General and composed of other members of department management. The committee directly selects CGs. For DCMs, the committee supplies a shortlist to the ambassador, who makes a final selection from it (3FAH-1 H-2425.8-2). The committee frequently defers to suggestions from the regional bureaus in its

decisions (ADST Anthony Quainton, pp. 182-183).

Below the DCM level, remaining embassy positions are filled by assignment panels operated by the State Department's Bureau of Global Talent Management (previously known as the Bureau of Human Resources) through a matching process (see 3FAH-1 H-2425.3). The department advertises open positions. Officers then bid on openings of interest, ranking them according to personal preference, while the regional bureaus rank their preferred candidates. For overseas positions, the ambassador, DCM, and other embassy officials have input into these decisions, but the bureau still holds the ultimate ranking authority. Officers often work out informal, handshake deals with bureaus to fill particular slots, and assignment panels typically respect these (Kopp and Naland, 2017, pp. 208-209). The department officially embraces this informal process. The 2009 internal guidance to officers on the process advised, for example: "It is virtually impossible to get a sought-after job without promoting yourself to the bureau and post/office in which you wish to serve. Lobbying should begin after position vacancies are posted ... the earlier the better."[15] One former human resources official observes: "getting the best jobs depends far more on who you know than what" (Keene, 2016, p. 21).

1.3 History of gender discrimination in US Foreign Service

Throughout the State Department's history, a combination of implicitly and explicitly discriminatory practices served to largely exclude women from the foreign service. As of 1970, women made up only 5% of the officer corps and held less than 1% of senior roles (Calkin, 1978, p. 128). Seeking to remedy this imbalance, the department issued a directive in that year, pledging that all positions would be made available regardless of sex, except in "extremely rare circumstances" when required by "compelling reasons of foreign policy." (Calkin, 1978, p. 128). A prohibition against married women serving in the foreign service was lifted in 1972, and in 1974 the department invited married women who had been forced to resign to apply for reappointment (Calkin, 1978, pp. 145-146). A 1975 presidential memorandum required agencies to make overseas appointments solely on a merit basis without regard for host nation sensitivities.[16] The Foreign Service Act of 1980 codified this

[15] State Department Cable 00075515; at https://wikileaks.org/gifiles/attach/172/172240_Bidding%20Instructions%20-%20Full.doc

[16] See "Memorandum on Actions to Respond to Discriminatory Foreign Boycott Practices," November 20, 1975 at https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/memorandum-actions-respond-discriminatory-foreign-boycott-practices

new status quo, not only barring sex discrimination within the foreign service, but also requiring "the development and vigorous implementation of policies and procedures, including affirmative action programs [to] facilitate and encourage entry into and advancement in the Foreign Service by persons from all segments of American society."[17]

Despite this end to explicit discrimination, *de facto* discrimination remained pervasive, leading to a protracted legal battle. In 1976, a group led by Alison Palmer filed a class action lawsuit against the State Department, alleging discrimination in hiring, performance evaluations, assignments, and promotions. Negotiations and litigation continued over the next two decades. In a 1987 trial, a federal court concluded that the State Department had discriminated against women in several areas: the granting of awards, assignments to DCM positions, upstretch and downstretch assignments, overassigning women to positions in the less desirable consular cone, and certain performance evaluations.[18] The plaintiffs and the department then negotiated a series of consent decrees governing personnel practices to settle the case with the aim of achieving final implementation of the desired changes by 1995 (Lewis, 1990, p. 53). After missing this deadline, the parties agreed to a new global consent decree in early 1996. The provisions of this governing promotions and assignments terminated on October 31, 1997. This marked the end of intensive judicial involvement in the State Department's personnel practices.[19] That same year, Madeleine Albright took office as the first female secretary of state, arguably marking a broader turning point in the department's climate for women.

Our analysis focuses on this contemporary period, beginning in 1997.[20] On a broad descriptive level, the representation of women in American diplomacy has trended upward throughout this period. Figure 2 reports the portion of women at each level of the mission hierarchy covered in our data—ambassadors, CGs, DCMs, and section chiefs. We find a fairly steady increase in women's representation over time at each level, with the higher positions lagging slightly behind section chiefs, but all levels converging at around 35% by the start of the first Trump administration.

The State Department has recognized the failure to achieve gender parity at the upper levels in

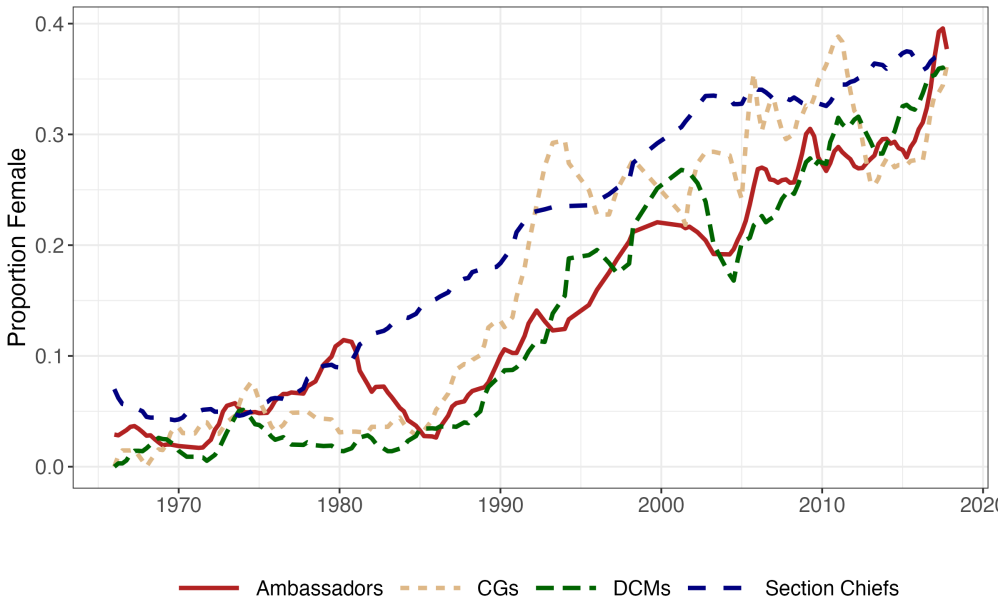
[17] 22 U.S. Code 3901(b)(2)

[18] See Palmer v. Shultz, 662 F.Supp. 1551 (D.D.C. 1987) at https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp/662/1551/1392821/

[19] Other aspects of the litigation continued for over a decade. See Document #322 in 77-cv-2006-HKK Palmer v. Clinton.

[20] None of the substantive results that follow are sensitive to this particular choice of starting date.

Figure 2: Representation of Women Across Embassy Positions



this era, but officially attributes it to a lag from the entry-level. An internal 2014 study concluded: "Female cohorts are moving from entry level to senior level in proportion to their hiring... The senior level of today is the entry level of 20 years ago" (Strano, 2016). The analyses that follow, however, will reveal more concerning patterns of gendered disparities in diplomatic assignments which are not evident from these top-line numbers alone.

2 Data

Existing empirical studies of U.S. diplomatic personnel have restricted attention to the types of diplomats for whom data are readily available, namely, ambassadors.[21] While there is much to be learned from this sample, it contains only a small fraction of the officers who engage in diplomacy and who occupy key roles at foreign embassies and consulates. In order to capture a more complete picture of the individuals who carry out U.S. foreign policy, we collect a novel dataset on the officers who served at each U.S. embassy, consulate, and other diplomatic posts at a quarterly frequency between 1966 and 2017. To our knowledge, our Key Officers of the U.S. Foreign Service (KOFS) dataset is the largest existing dataset on U.S. diplomatic personnel, or on any modern diplomatic

[21] These data are accessible from the website of the State Department's Office of the Historian (https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/people/principals-chiefs). Studies that make use of this data source include Gertz (2018); Arias and Smith (2018); Malis (2021); Goldfien (2024); Kim and Fu (2024)

Figure 3: Sample Entry from "Key Officers" Publication

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AMB:	Marc C. Ginsberg
AMB SEC:	Kelli Adams
DCM:	Gary S. Usrey
POL:	Joseph Mussomeli
ECO:	Alexandra M. Sundquist
POL/LAB:	Elizabeth Lee Martinez (resident in Casablanca)
CON:	Andrea Levin
ADM:	Richard E. Kramer
RSO:	Lawrence H. Liptak
PAO:	James L. Bullock
COM:	(Vacant)
IMO:	Nicodemo F. Romeo
ISO:	Lucille Smithson
AGR:	Quintin Gray
AID:	Michael Farbman
DAO:	Col. Alan J. Tinder, USAF
ODC:	Col. Stephen Fenton, USAF
IRS:	Frederick D. Pablo (resident in Paris)
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CG:	Marcia Bernicat
POL/LAB:	Elizabeth Lee Martinez
ECO:	Daniel K. Balzer
COM:	Albert Nahas
CON:	Shelley S. Midura
ADM:	Sylvia Nasri
IPO:	Raymond Harger
BPAO:	Philip A. Frayne

corps. In addition to the KOFS dataset, our analysis incorporates data from a number of other sources, which are discussed at the end of this section.

2.1 Key Officers of the U.S. Foreign Service (KOFS)

We collect our data from a series of directories, titled *Key Officers of the U.S. Foreign Service* from 1966-2001 and *Key Officers List/Telephone Directory* afterwards, which the State Department released quarterly and made available to Americans living and working abroad (primarily businesspeople).[22] These directories provide complete lists of U.S. diplomatic posts abroad (along with their contact information), as well as the names, titles, and positions of the "key" officers stationed at each post. Directories from 1966-1998 were released in print form only; we collected recently-digitized versions of these documents from HathiTrust. To collect directories that were released online post-1998, we accessed archived versions of the State Department website.[23] After transcribing the documents through a combination of manual and automated processes, the final dataset consists of approximately 36,000 unique officers, and 430,000 officer-quarter-year observa-

[22] Until 2001, the documents were released with the subtitle "A Guide for Businessmen/Business Representatives."
[23] See Appendix A for additional details on temporal coverage.

Table 2: Generalists, Specialists, and External Officers, by Post Type

	Generalist	Specialist/ Others	External	Unique Posts	Total Officer-Quarter-Years
Overall	49%	32%	19%	486	448,965
Embassies	45%	34%	21%	198	336,727
Other Posts	60%	26%	14%	343	112,238

Note: Values in the bottom two rows of the "Unique Posts" column do not sum to 486 due to posts changing status over time (e.g. from consulate general to embassy).

tions.[24]

Throughout the time span of the dataset, each post's entry in Key Officers covers a set of officers that mostly coincides with the "country team" (see Figure 1). Figure 3 presents a sample entry for the U.S. mission in Morocco from the June 1997 publication of the Key Officers list. The entry includes both the embassy in Rabat, and its subordinate post, the consulate general in Casablanca. Among the officers listed at the embassy are the Ambassador and DCM; a range of generalists and specialists leading their respective sections (Political (POL), Economic (ECO), Consular (CON), Administration (ADM), Security (RSO), Public Diplomacy (PAO)); foreign service officers based in other agencies (Agriculture (AGR) and AID); and two military attachés (DAO and ODC). Likewise, the consulate general lists a Consul General (CG) who leads the post, along with several section chiefs below her.

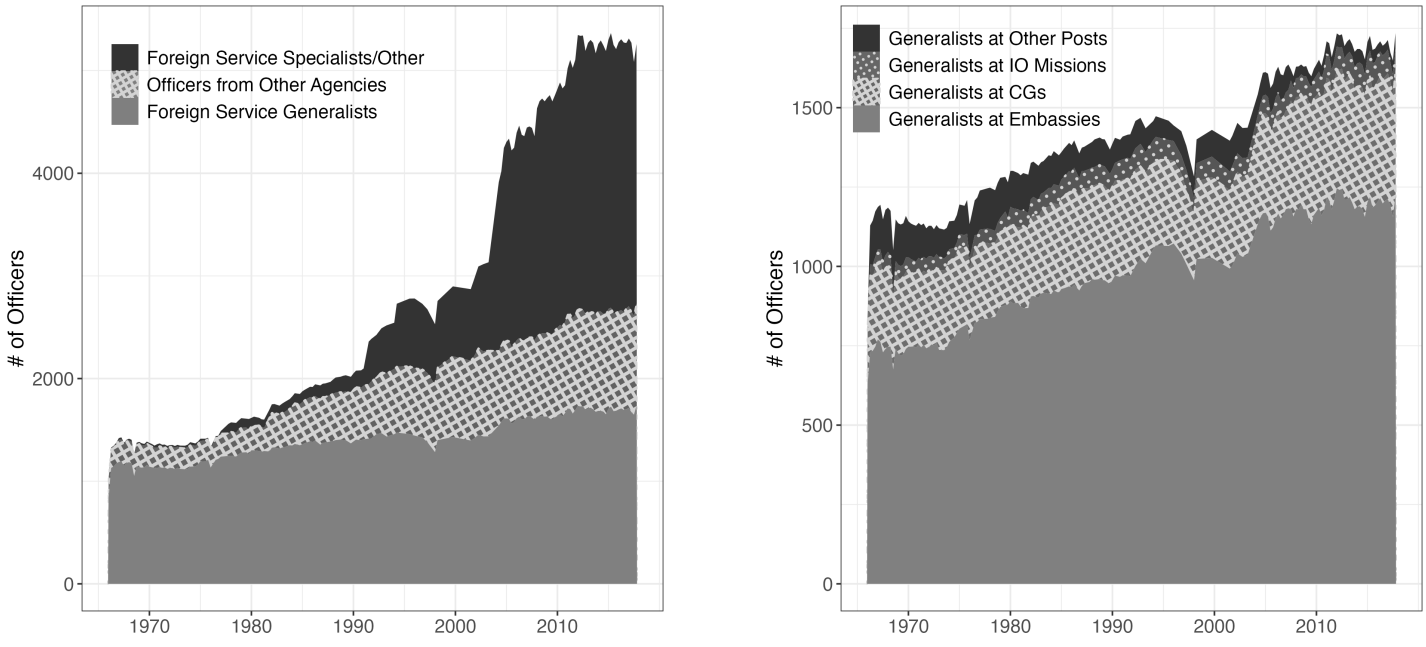
Table 2 reports the breakdown of officer categories across post types. The vast majority (78%) of our officer-quarter-year observations are posted at bilateral embassies, rather than other post types. Though embassies only constitute a small portion of the posts in our data (36%), embassies are almost always the largest posts in their respective countries.

Temporal trends in the distribution of officers across personnel categories and post types are reported in Figure 4. In the left panel, we see increases in all three personnel categories, which are most pronounced among the Specialist/Other category.[25] The trends in specialists and external officers at least partly reflect changes in reporting practices within the Key Officers publications: for instance, the publications only start recording military attachés at the end of 1981, and office

[24]The descriptive statistics in this section characterize the entire sample of the KOFS data, rather than the restricted post-1996 sample used in the main analysis. This paper's replication archive includes the entire sample.

[25]This category includes some positions clearly held by specialists, and others (such as Community Liaison Officer (CLO) or International Cooperative Administrative Support Services (ICASS)) which could be held by either specialists or generalists (or occasionally, officers outside of the foreign service).

Figure 4: Generalists, Specialists, and External Officers Over Time



(a) (b)

Note: Panel (a) reports the number of officers in the KOFS data by quarter-year, disaggregated by officer category. Panel (b) reports the number of generalists by quarter-year, disaggregated by post type.

management specialists in 2001 (after which point they are regularly reported for most missions). In contrast, the more modest increase in the number of generalists over time primarily reflects extensive-margin growth in the number of embassies being opened over time, as countries become newly independent and establish diplomatic relations with the US; the median number of generalists listed per embassy remains constant over time at seven (ambassador, DCM, and five section chiefs). The breakdown of generalists across mission types is visualized in the right panel, with the bulk of the growth coming from embassies, and secondarily from consulates general.

In Appendix A, we compare the coverage of our KOFS data against other sources of aggregated information on U.S. diplomatic personnel, finding that in recent years, our data cover about 39% of the State Department's overseas workforce, or about 26% of all U.S. direct-hire staff at a typical embassy. (The difference in these figures reflects the presence of employees from non-State U.S. agencies at foreign missions).

2.2 Other data sources

In addition to the KOFS dataset, the analyses reported below also draw on the following data sources:

2.2.1 Newly commissioned officers

Foreign service officers must receive commissions granted by the president with Senate advice and consent in order to use diplomatic titles overseas (3 FAH-1 H-2432.1). Most foreign service officers are, therefore, commissioned when first assigned. After three to five years of service, officers either receive "tenure" (i.e., permanent career status) or are dismissed from service. At this time, officers who still require one are granted a commission (3 FAM 2234.1). Grants of commission are listed in the Congressional Record, and we have downloaded all such records from 1981 to the present, linking individual officers to their appearances in the Key Officers data. This allows us to compile a comprehensive dataset of entry-level foreign service officers.[26]

2.2.2 Deputy Assistant Secretaries

We have also compiled an original dataset on deputy assistant secretaries of state, beginning in 1967. This is drawn from two distinct sources: internal organizational directories published by the State Department, and the *Congressional Directory*, a reference publication for Congress that includes lists of senior officials at executive departments. The temporal coverage of the available resources is somewhat uneven, but we typically have one record per year.

2.3 Coding Officer Gender

We rely on the R package `gender` (Mullen, 2021) to automate the assignment of genders to each of the officers in our dataset based on their first names. While imperfect, the number of diplomats in the KOFS data as well as the scarcity of publicly available information about them precludes a more nuanced treatment of gender assignment. Over 95% of officers in our data are assigned a gender by the algorithm with at least 95% confidence, and our hand-checking of ambassadors (for

[26] A small number of officers who do not require a diplomatic title when first assigned (typically those assigned to consular roles) and leave the service before tenure will be absent from this dataset.

Table 3: Position Visibility and Appointment Process

	Low Visibility	**High Visibility**
Committee Only	Deputy Assistant Secretary (DAS)	Consul General (CG)
Committee + Other Decision-maker	Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM)	Ambassador

whom gender information is publicly available) indicates that the automated assignment is highly accurate.[27]

3 Theoretical Framework and Research Design

Our objective is to investigate the nature and causes of women's underrepresentation in the modern U.S. diplomatic corps. As illustrated in Table 1, our data cover several different "levels" within the foreign service hierarchy: entry level (new commissioned officers), "middle" (Section Chief), "upper" (DCM and CG), and "top" (DAS and Ambassador).[28] Our analysis proceeds from the bottom to the top, examining promotions from one level to the next. We consider both quantitative disparities at each promotion stage—among officers at a given level, are men more likely to be promoted than women?—as well as qualitative disparities at each level, considering whether men of a given level are systematically assigned to more important or more desirable posts than women of the same level.

The variety of positions included in our data allows us to further investigate the mechanisms underlying any disparities we observe. Table 3 outlines the pertinent distinctions across the positions. Given these distinctions, we consider two potential mechanisms: an *appointment-process* mechanism, and a *visibility* mechanism.

The visibility mechanism. On the one hand, the positions in our data can be grouped according to their visibility. We can consider both ambassadors and CGs to be roles that are relatively high in visibility, as both serve as the chief officers of their respective posts with important representational duties. DASes and DCMs, in contrast, occupy second-in-command roles with far lower profile.

[27] The officer-level analyses below use the algorithmically predicted Pr(female) as the independent variable of interest, rather than a binary variable.

[28] It is worth clarifying that our categorization of "low" and "middle" ranks does not necessarily align with how the terms are generally used within the foreign service.

An ambassador is the chief representative of the United States in the relevant country. They hold extremely high symbolic status, outranking even the Secretary of State in the ceremonial order of precedence.[29] Ambassadorial appointments draw considerable attention and are publicly tracked by the State Department, the media, and other interested parties.[30] As described above, a DAS holds a similar position within the State Department's hierarchy—both report to an assistant secretary and are selected by the D Committee—but a DAS has little public profile. For protocol purposes, they rank below state legislators and inevitably operate under the shadow of multiple layers of more senior State Department officials in Washington. To our knowledge, no one has even publicly tracked DAS appointments prior to our data collection here.

A consul general is the senior representative of the United States within their consular district, outranked only by the relevant ambassador when they are present. Just as ambassadors are charged with national-level representation, consuls general hold the primary responsibility for local representational and ceremonial activities within their assigned regions (2 FAM 113.9). The State Department describes CGs as the "public face of the U.S. government" in their districts.[31] In contrast, DCMs are the second-ranking officer within an embassy, focused on its internal day-to-day operations. Scott Kilner, who served as both a DCM and CG, observes of the difference between the roles: "At an embassy... there is an ambassador who does high-level policy work and public diplomacy. She or he is the public face of the U.S. Mission. The DCM in general concentrates on internal operations. But when I got to Istanbul [as Consul General], I quickly realized that I was supposed to do both, both external and internal" (ADST Scott Kilner, p. 179). If the relatively visibility or public profile of a position is an important determinant of gender disparities in appointments to that position, then we should observe similar patterns in appointments of DCMs and DAS, and similar patterns in CGs and ambassadors.

Given women's aggregate underrepresentation in the foreign service, the State Department may have an incentive to steer women towards high visibility roles rather than influential but less visible ones. Biases within the institution (of the sort documented in the Palmer case) likely work

[29] See "The Order of Precedence of the United States of America" at https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/United-States-Order-of-Precedence-February-2022.pdf

[30] See, for example, the appointee tracker maintained by *The Washington Post* and the Partnership for Public Service at https://ourpublicservice.org/performance-measures/political-appointee-tracker/

[31] See State Department Inspector General, "In the National Interest: Diplomatic Transformation on our Southern Border" (2006) at https://www.stateoig.gov/uploads/report/report_pdf_file/isp-i-07-02_1.pdf

to exclude women from positions of influence. At the same time, the department faces external pressure to improve representation. The path of least resistance between the two likely involves a kind of a tokenism in which women are given highly visible roles.

The appointment-process mechanism. Alternatively, we can consider how these positions vary according to the processes by which officers are selected to fill them. For the roles of DAS and CG, individuals are selected only by the relevant committee (the D Committee for DAS, and the DCM Committee for CG), as discussed in Section 1. The other positions are selected through a combination of these same committees, along with input from a separate decision-maker: DCMs are selected by their respective ambassadors, from a short list put forward by the DCM committee; and ambassadors are selected by the White House, typically following the recommendation of the D Committee.

A natural expectation is that these different actors may face different incentives and hold different preferences regarding women's advancement into particular foreign service roles. Ambassadors, for instance, are unique in that the DCM they select will have a direct impact on their own ability to manage their embassy and achieve their diplomatic objectives; all other actors involved in the various appointment processes are much more removed from the consequences of their selection decisions. The president and their personnel team may be unique in their susceptibility to political and public-image concerns regarding the diplomatic assignments they make; or conversely, they may care less about the perception and performance of the State Department, as compared to other actors with stronger and narrower institutional commitments. In the analyses that follow, we will consider whether the empirical patterns we document can be explained by the potentially divergent preferences of the various actors involved in the appointment processes.

4 Analysis

This section reports a range of analyses of gender disparities in diplomatic assignments. We start by analyzing vertical movement along the hierarchy outlined in Table 1—from newly commissioned officers (entry level) to section chiefs (mid-level), to DCMs and CGs (upper level), to

Table 4: Career Outcomes of Newly Commissioned FSOs

	DV: Does this officer ever become:				
	Section Chief	DCM	CG	DAS	Amb.
Female	-0.044***	-0.016***	-0.005*	0.000	0.000
	(0.010)	(0.005)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
DV mean	0.292	0.051	0.02	0.006	0.02

Note: Sample of 18,196 newly commissioned officers, 1981–2012. Regressions of each career outcome on officer gender, plus commission-year FE, with standard errors clustered by commission-year. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

ambassadors and DASes (the top level governed by the assignment process).[32] Next, we analyze qualitative distinctions in assignments, considering variation in post quality across positions within a given level. We then examine whether alternative considerations, including host-country gender conditions or the internal organization of individual posts, play a role in gendered disparities in diplomatic assignments. Finally, we summarize and synthesize our collection of findings in light of the theoretical mechanisms outlined in Section 3.

4.1 Career Outcomes of Newly Commissioned Officers

We begin by analyzing diplomats' career trajectories starting from the earliest stage at which we are able to observe them: an individual's "commissioning" as a foreign service officer. Table 4 examines the sample of newly commissioned officers from 1981–2012.[33] In the first column, the outcome is a binary variable indicating whether the officer ever appears as a section chief in the Key Officers data, which is regressed over the officer's gender and fixed effects for the year of commissioning.[34] Subsequent columns report analogous regressions for different career outcomes.

Table 4 shows that among newly commissioned officers, women are substantially less likely to reach the "middle" and "upper" ranks (section chiefs, and DCMs/CGs) in our data. While the *absolute* differences in promotion rates are largest when considering the move from newly

[32] See Appendix B.2 for discussion of promotion to the Assistant Secretary level and above.

[33] 1981 is the first year that lists of commissioned officers are available online in usable format. While the commission lists are available through the present day, we end this analysis in 2012 because officers commissioned more recently are very unlikely to reach the various career outcomes measured in Table 4 within the period covered by the Key Officers data.

[34] Time fixed effects adjust for the fact that women constitute an increasing share of commissioned officers over time, while the rates of reaching higher positions are mechanically decreasing over time due to right-censoring.

Table 5: Officers' First KOFS Listings Differ by Gender

	# of Officers Commissioned (1997–2012)	Among those who reach Key Officers, portion whose first listing is in each cone				
		Political	Economic	Management	Public	Consular
Men	6510	0.29	0.14	0.13	0.12	0.23
Women	4758	0.22	0.12	0.11	0.20	0.28

commissioned officer to section chief (4.4 percentage points), the largest disparities relative to base rates are found for reaching DCM and CG (roughly 31% and 25% of the sample average outcomes, respectively). In contrast, we find no detectable differences in the likelihood of reaching the top career ranks (DAS and ambassador). Thus the claim by the State Department presented above—that the senior ranks today look like the entry ranks from twenty years ago—is partially corroborated by our analysis: in strictly quantitative terms, women entering the foreign service in recent decades are no less likely than their male counterparts to reach the highest positions that are typically available to career diplomats. However, this apparent quantitative parity in reaching the top level masks important qualitative disparities in assignments within that level, as we demonstrate further below; and the quantitative disparities in the middle ranks are substantively large and warrant further examination.

The first column of Table 4 showed that women are substantially less likely to reach the level of section chief. Tables 5 and 6 show that even conditional on reaching section chief, women's initial assignments tend to be in positions that are less conducive to subsequent career advancement.[35] We see that the two cones which are most likely to lead to an eventual appointment as DCM or ambassador—the political and economic cones—are both cones to which men are disproportionately assigned in their first appearances.[36] In contrast, the two cones to which women are disproportionately initially assigned—public diplomacy and consular—are two of the three cones that are least likely to give rise to subsequent promotion.

[35] A report by the think tank fp21 (Huang et al., 2023) conducts a similar analysis of the breakdown of officer gender across foreign service cones, also drawing on the Key Officers publications, and finds broadly similar patterns.

[36] The disparity between the number of first-time political officers (1540) and economic officers (716) in Table 6 is largely explained by the number of officers listed as "POL/ECO" (592). As a rule, we assign officers to the first position "group" in their position title (so, e.g., "POL/ECO" is grouped into "Political", while "ECO/POL" is grouped into "Economic").

Table 6: Career Outcomes by Initial Cone Assignment

		Portion who later become:	
First KOFS Listing	# Officers (1997–2012)	DCM	Ambassador
Political	1540	0.117	0.021
Economic	716	0.108	0.035
Public	995	0.072	0.018
Management	1026	0.061	0.016
Consular	1258	0.051	0.009

4.2 Promotion and Retention

Our next set of analyses provide a more thorough investigation of the movement of officers from one level of the diplomatic career ladder to the next. In general, our theoretical estimand of interest involves the following thought experiment: suppose that the State Department is considering the pool of officers at one level for promotion to the next. Imagine two candidates who hold equivalent positions at the first level but differ only in that one is a woman and the other is a man. We want to identify the difference in the probabilities that either of these candidates are selected, aggregated over the population of candidates.

4.2.1 Empirical Specification

Throughout this section, our analyses are structured at the officer-quarter-year level, examining a sample of officers at a particular level (i.e. section chiefs in some analyses, DCMs in others) in the quarters in which they appear in the Key Officers data, from 1997 to 2012. We estimate a series of regressions of the form

$$y_{it} = \text{Female}_i \; \beta + \begin{pmatrix} \text{Position Controls, Mission Controls,} \\ \text{Officer Controls, Time Controls} \end{pmatrix} \theta + \varepsilon_{it} \tag{1}$$

for officer i in quarter-year t. The outcomes y_{it} will include promotion to a certain position within a certain window of time—e.g. reaching DCM within five years, or reaching ambassador within five years—or exiting the foreign service within a certain window of time. For each outcome, we report a variety of specifications with different combinations of controls and fixed effects.

As previously explained, the Key Officers data covers a variety of position and post types.

For the following analyses, we code four categories of post types: bilateral embassies, missions to international organizations, consulates general, and an "other" category. Likewise, among section chiefs, we code nine categories of officer positions: the five generalist cones (political, economic, management, consular, and public diplomacy), labor, law enforcement, scientific, and an "other" category.[37]

Position controls in the regressions refer to the interaction of post type and position (that is, 36 separate post-type-position fixed effects). Including these controls adjusts for the possibility that, for example, political officers at an embassy have a different baseline probability of promotion as compared to political officers at a consulate (as well as, e.g., political officers vs. consular officers within an embassy having different promotion probabilities, as suggested by Table 6).

Mission controls include both post fixed effects (e.g. a Barcelona FE and a Madrid FE),[38] and a set of time-varying country-level controls, including: the total number of Key Officers listed in the country; GDP, population, bilateral imports from and exports to the US (all log-transformed); ideal point distance from the US in UNGA voting; capabilities index (CINC); the State Department's hardship pay and danger pay differentials; and two indices meant to capture gender equality conditions within the host country—the World Bank's Women in Business and the Law (WBL) index, and the portion of women in the executive cabinet.[39]

For officer controls, we include fixed effects for the number of years since the officer was commissioned. This approach flexibly controls for the effect of tenure without imposing any assumptions of linearity or monotonicity. Since we cannot link all Key Officers to an entry in the commissioning records, including the years-since-commission FE decreases the sample size considerably; thus we report results separately on the full sample, on the commission-linked subset without years-since-commission FE, and then including years-since-commission FE.

Time controls are either simply quarter-year (QY) fixed effects, or the QY FE interacted with post-type-position FE. The more demanding specifications additionally include post-position FE (e.g. a "Madrid-Political" FE, rather than just a Madrid FE and an Embassy-Political FE).

[37] "Labor", "law enforcement", and "scientific" are not distinct "cones" within the foreign service, but rather are sections within posts that are typically occupied by an officer from one of the five generalist cones.

[38] Note that posts are nested within countries, so the inclusion of post FE subsumes country FE.

[39] See Appendix B.4 for sources and coding details for these control variables.

Table 7: Among Section Chiefs, Women are Less Likely Than Men to Become DCM, but No Less Likely to Become CG

Panel A	DV: DCM within 5 years					
	mean = 0.085				mean = 0.099	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Female	-0.037***	-0.031***	-0.029**	-0.027**	-0.030*	-0.029*
	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.012)	(0.012)
Panel B	DV: CG within 5 years					
	mean = 0.026				mean = 0.031	
	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Female	-0.007	-0.007	-0.003	0.000	0.000	0.001
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.006)
$\hat{\beta}_{\text{SC to CG}} - \hat{\beta}_{\text{SC to DCM}}$	0.030**	0.024*	0.026*	0.027*	0.030*	0.030*
	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.011)	(0.014)	(0.014)
Num. Obs.	49160	49160	49160	49160	33999	33999
FE: Quarter-year	✓		✓			
FE: Post-type-position-QY		✓		✓	✓	✓
FE: Post			✓			
FE: Post-position				✓	✓	✓
FE: Years since commission						✓
Country-year controls			✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: Officer-quarter-year observations, among Section Chiefs, 1997–2012. FE included for four post types, nine position types, 335 posts, and/or 1,535 post-positions (see main text for details). Country-year controls (interacted with post type) include: total number of key officers in country; UNGA ideal point distance from US; population, GDP, bilateral imports from and exports to the US (log-transformed); capabilities (CINC); female cabinet ratio; WBL index; hardship pay; and danger pay. Sample in last two columns of each panel restricted to officers who are linked to the commission records. See Appendix B for details on comparisons of coefficients across the two panels. Standard errors robust to clustering by officer and by post. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

4.2.2 Results: Promotion and Retention of Section Chiefs

The top panel of Table 7 reports estimates of the various specifications of Equation (1), among the sample of section chiefs from 1997–2012, where the outcome is an indicator for whether an officer reaches the position of DCM within five years. The results are remarkably consistent across all specifications: on average, women face a three percentage-point penalty in promotion from section chief to DCM, compared to men occupying comparable positions. This effect is substantively large, constituting about 30–35% of the 5-year promotion rate across the sample.

An analogous set of regressions is reported in Table 8, where the outcome is an indicator for

Table 8: Among Section Chiefs, Women are More Likely Than Men to Exit Service

	DV: Exits service within 5 years					
	mean = 0.51				mean = 0.46	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Female	0.054***	0.051**	0.054***	0.055***	0.058**	0.065**
	(0.015)	(0.016)	(0.015)	(0.016)	(0.020)	(0.020)
Num. Obs.	47954	47954	47954	47954	33124	33124
FE: Quarter-year	✓		✓			
FE: Post-type-position-QY		✓		✓	✓	✓
FE: Post			✓			
FE: Post-position				✓	✓	✓
FE: Years since commission						✓
Country-year controls			✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: Officer-quarter-year observations, among Section Chiefs, 1997–2010. See caption of Table 7 for additional details. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

whether an officer exits the foreign service within five years. Specifically, this takes a value of 1 if the officer is not observed in the data more than five years from the current date, and 0 otherwise.[40] Again, the effects are quite consistent across specifications: women are 5–6 percentage points more likely to exit the service than men holding otherwise comparable positions.

These disparities in promotion and retention rates do not necessarily provide evidence of discriminatory practices in diplomatic staffing. To infer that discrimination is occurring, we would further need to believe that, holding constant all of the variables that are included in the Table 7 regressions, women are, on average, (1) no less competent than men, and (2) no less likely than men to seek out assignments to DCM.

To deny the first point would require assuming the presence of some form of reverse discrimination in the process of selection *into* the ranks of section chiefs. That is, we would need to assume that women are given an advantage over men in section chief assignments, such that when a woman and a man occupy equivalent section chief positions, the woman is less objectively qualified for that position, on average. This assumption, however, would seem difficult to reconcile with first result reported in Table 4: that among newly commissioned officers, women are *less* likely to reach the level of section chief. Altogether, the claim that women section chiefs are less competent than men

[40]Since the Key Officers data ends in 2017, we restrict the sample of analysis for Table 8 to 1997–2010, to allow for at least a two-year window in which an officer's absence from the data can be reasonably interpreted as having exited the service.

in equivalent position rests on the assumptions that (i) among newly commissioned officers, women are less competent than men, and (ii) this competence gap is not corrected for by the substantial penalty (4.4pp, or 15%) that women face in accession from the entry level to the level of section chief. We find it unlikely that these assumptions are satisfied, though future work may seek to bring more direct evidence to bear on these questions.

On the second point—that women are no less likely than men to seek out assignments to DCM—we again cannot validate this assumption directly, but find it to be substantively reasonable. Table 8 reported that women are more likely than men to exit the foreign service, which might appear to be consistent with the explanation that women are self-selecting out of seeking promotions. However, Table D.1 in the appendix reports that, even among section chiefs who do *not* exit the service within five years, women are still less likely than men to receive a DCM appointment—and the penalty among this subset is estimated to be even larger in magnitude than the 3-pp penalty reported in Table 7. We see little reason to believe that among the section chiefs who are still seeking out and accepting assignments to foreign missions, the women would want positions of lesser status than men.

Thus far we have only considered the top panel of Table 7, which reports the disparity in promotion rates from section chief to DCM. An analogous set of results is reported in the lower panel, with an outcome of promotion to CG within five years. Across all specifications, we find very precisely estimated null effects: women section chiefs are not differentially likely to be promoted to CG, compared to men occupying equivalent positions. The bottom row of the table verifies that the effects of officer gender are significantly different across the two outcomes.[41]

Taken in isolation, these two sets of results can be interpreted as being consistent with either of the two theoretical mechanisms posited above. Since ambassadors play a direct role in selecting DCMs but not CGs, the fact that women only face a substantial penalty in promotion to DCM could indicate that the ambassadors are exerting a discriminatory influence on the process. Alternatively, the differences could be explained by CG being the more visible position, in contrast to the lower-profile but still influential role of DCM. Additional analyses will help us further distinguish between the two mechanisms.

[41] See Appendix Section B.3 for further discussion of how we estimate these differences and conduct the corresponding hypothesis tests.

Table 9: Among DCMs, Women are More Likely Than Men to Become Ambassador, but No More Likely to Become DAS

Panel A	DV: Ambassador within 5 years			
	mean = 0.199		mean = 0.215	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Female	0.035	0.090**	0.128***	0.116**
	(0.031)	(0.028)	(0.035)	(0.035)
Panel B	DV: DAS within 5 years			
	mean = 0.091		mean = 0.102	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Female	0.003	0.033	0.022	0.018
	(0.021)	(0.022)	(0.029)	(0.029)
$\hat{\beta}_{\text{DCM to Amb}} - \hat{\beta}_{\text{DCM to DAS}}$	0.032	0.057+	0.106**	0.097*
	(0.034)	(0.031)	(0.039)	(0.039)
Num. Obs.	7634	7634	5455	5455
FE: Post-type-position-QY	✓	✓	✓	✓
FE: Post-position		✓	✓	✓
FE: Years since commission				✓
Country-year controls		✓	✓	✓

Note: Officer-quarter-year observations, among DCMs, 1997–2012. FE included for two post types (bilateral embassy or IO mission), two position types (DCM or Chargé), 195 posts, and/or 311 post-positions (see main text for details). Country-year controls (interacted with post type) include: total number of key officers in country; UNGA ideal point distance from US; population, GDP, bilateral imports from and exports to the US (log-transformed); capabilities (CINC); female cabinet ratio; WBL index; hardship pay; and danger pay. Sample in last two columns of each panel restricted to officers who are linked to the commission records. See Appendix B for details on comparisons of coefficients across the two panels. Standard errors robust to clustering by officer and by post. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

4.2.3 Results: Promotion of DCMs

Our next set of analyses considers promotion from the level of DCM to the higher levels of ambassador and DAS.[42] We estimate regressions in the form of (1), on a sample of DCMs in bilateral embassies and IO missions.[43]

The outcome in the top panel of Table 9 is promotion to ambassador within five years. In the first column, conditioning only on time fixed effects (interacted with the two post types and two

[42]In Appendix Section D.2, we report a set of regressions analogous to those in Table 8, analyzing DCMs exiting the service, and find no significant gender disparities.

[43]We include Chargés d'Affaires in this sample, as that position is typically simply a title assigned to the DCM during a brief gap in between presidentially-appointed ambassadors. Results are substantively unaffected by excluding Chargés from the sample.

positions), we find no significant differences in promotion rates between male and female DCMs. Once we condition on post- and country-level covariates, however, a substantial and statistically significant disparity emerges—in *favor* of women over men. In the second column, we find a 9 percentage point promotion bonus for women DCMs relative to men, an effect which is nearly half (45%) of the sample outcome mean; when restricting the sample to commission-linked officers in columns (3) and (4), excluding officers who were commissioned prior to 1981, the effect is even larger.

Mechanically, the difference between the results in column (1) vs. the other three columns can be explained as follows: When women are assigned to DCM positions, those positions tend to be in the kinds of posts which are less likely to lead to subsequent ambassadorial promotion (as corroborated in Table 10 below). Holding post quality constant, female DCMs are more likely to be promoted than their male counterparts. But without conditioning on post quality (that is, pooling DCM posts of varying quality), the "within-post-quality" and "across-post-quality" effects offset, leading to the null finding for the unconditional difference reported in column (1). Substantively, the latter three columns better approximate the decision-making process that determines which DCMs get selected for ambassadorships, as those decision makers have access to all the information that we condition on in our analyses.

In Panel B, we report an analogous set of regressions, with an outcome of promotion to DAS within five years. Here we find no significant differences between male and female DCMs across all specifications. The bottom row of the table confirms that, for columns (2) through (4), the DCM-to-Ambassador disparities are significantly different from the DCM-to-DAS disparities (rather than simply reflecting a lack of precision in the latter estimates).[44]

Like the previous results, this set of findings, taken in isolation, is indeterminate with regards to the theoretical mechanism it supports. That female DCMs face a greater advantage in promotion to ambassador, as compared to DAS, could be a function of either the relative visibility of the two positions, or of White House's direct involvement in the selection of ambassadors but not DASes. In Section 4.6, we further evaluate these two mechanisms in light of the totality of the evidence presented.

[44]See Appendix Section B.3 further discussion.

4.3 Qualitative Disparities

In the analyses reported in Tables 7 and 9, the outcomes were operationalized as promotion to a particular position category—DCM, CG, DAS, or ambassador—while effectively treating all positions within a category as equivalent. Of course, not all ambassadorships (nor all DCM posts, etc.) are actually equal in importance or prestige, and quantitative gender disparities in promotion need not correspond to qualitative disparities in the kinds of posts to which officers of different genders are assigned.

To more thoroughly investigate these qualitative disparities, we can consider a set of regressions in a country-quarter-sample, of the form

$$y_{it} = X_{it}\beta + \tau_t + \varepsilon_{it} \tag{2}$$

for country i in quarter-year t. Across different specifications, the outcomes y_{it} are various measures of staffing in the bilateral embassy, including: an indicator for whether the ambassador is female; whether the DCM is female; whether the political section chief is female; and the portion of all section chiefs in the embassy who are female. The predictors X_{it} (each in separate regressions) are various measures meant to capture the "importance" a particular country to U.S. foreign policy priorities, including: the total number of Key Officers listed at the bilateral embassy; GDP, bilateral imports, and bilateral exports (all log-transformed); and the country's military capabilities (CINC score). We include quarter-year fixed effects τ_t, and adjust standard errors for clustering by country and by quarter-year.

Results are reported in Table 10. A remarkably consistent pattern emerges: across 19 of the 20 regressions, the measures of country importance are significantly negatively predictive of female diplomatic appointments. All predictors are standardized, so that each coefficient estimate corresponds to the effect of a one-standard-deviation change in the underlying variable. For instance, the first row of the first column indicates that a one-SD increase in the size of bilateral embassy staff corresponds to a 6.1 percentage point decrease in the likelihood that the ambassador will be female—a substantively large effect, relative to the sample outcome mean of 25%. The remaining cells of the table demonstrate that across all measures, countries that are more important to U.S. foreign policy are less likely to have female diplomats assigned at all levels of embassy leadership.

Table 10: Country-Level Predictors of Embassy Personnel Gender

	Female Amb.	**Female DCM**	**Female Pol.**	**% Female SC**
Embassy Size	-0.061***	-0.045*	-0.042*	-0.041***
	(0.016)	(0.017)	(0.016)	(0.011)
GDP (log)	-0.098***	-0.039*	-0.039*	-0.040***
	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.017)	(0.010)
CINC	-0.040**	-0.031***	0.002	-0.020+
	(0.015)	(0.008)	(0.014)	(0.011)
Imports (log)	-0.078***	-0.048**	-0.056***	-0.035***
	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.015)	(0.010)
Exports (log)	-0.087***	-0.040**	-0.048**	-0.031***
	(0.015)	(0.014)	(0.015)	(0.009)
Observations	8309	8501	8727	9436
DV mean	0.25	0.27	0.27	0.34

Note: Country-quarter-year observations, 1997–2017. Each coefficient is from a separate regression of the outcome (in the column header) on the specified predictor, plus QY fixed effects. Predictors are rescaled to have standard deviation of one. Standard errors clustered two ways, by country and by QY. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table D.3 in the appendix reports a similar pattern among consulates: larger (and thus, presumably, more important) consulates are less likely to have female principal officers, and have a smaller share of female officers overall.

4.4 Host Country Gender Conditions

The foreign service is unique among federal bureaucracies in the degree to which its core responsibilities involve interacting with foreign governments and integrating its officers into foreign societies. A conventional wisdom within the foreign service, which we illustrate with qualitative accounts in Appendix D.4, has long held that female diplomats are less effective in foreign contexts with greater gender inequality. If this view has been influential in shaping diplomatic appointment practices, it would follow that female diplomats' opportunities for career advancement would be limited relative to men's, given the restricted set of assignments that are made available to them.

Here we consider whether this explanation can account for the gender disparities in diplomatic appointments reported above. Specifically, we examine whether host-country measures of women's rights and political inclusion predict the gender composition of U.S. diplomatic assignments within

Table 11: Host Country Gender Conditions Do Not Predict U.S. Diplomatic Assignments

DV:	**Female Amb.**	**Female DCM**	**Female Pol.**	**% Female SC**
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Female Cabinet Ratio	0.023	0.017	-0.009	0.009
	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.012)	(0.006)
R^2	0.014	0.018	0.008	0.013
R^2 Adj.	0.006	0.010	0.000	0.007
	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
WBL Index	-0.012	-0.001	-0.010	-0.020**
	(0.016)	(0.015)	(0.012)	(0.008)
R^2	0.012	0.016	0.008	0.019
R^2 Adj.	0.004	0.009	0.000	0.013
Num.Obs.	8385	8599	8806	9519
DV mean	0.25	0.26	0.27	0.34
FE: Quarter-year	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: Country-quarter-year observations, 1997–2017. Outcomes Standard errors robust to clustering by country. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

that country. We conduct analyses at the country-quarter-year level, estimating regressions of each of the four outcomes featured in Table 10—whether there is a female ambassador, a female DCM, a female political section chief, and the portion of women among all of the embassy's generalist section chiefs—on measures of host-country gender equality. We consider two separate measures of gender equality within host states:[45] first, the proportion of women serving in the host government's executive cabinet (Nyrup and Bramwell, 2020); and second, the World Bank's Women, Business, and the Law (WBL) index, which reflects the "laws, regulations, policies, and their enforcement. . . [on] topics relevant to women's economic opportunity."[46] For both variables, higher values indicate greater gender equity; for interpretability, we normalize both to have a standard deviation of one.

Table 11 reports regressions of each of the four outcomes on each of the two gender equality measures, including quarter-year fixed effects to account for secular trends in women's equality and diplomatic representation. Across all specifications, we find no evidence in support of the

[45] In Appendix D.4, we demonstrate that these measures are predictive of the proportion of female ambassadors a host country receives from *other* countries, excluding the U.S.

[46] https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/wbl

claim that U.S. diplomatic assignments are responsive to host country gender conditions. A host country's female cabinet ratio is positively associated with the US assigning female ambassador and female DCM, but these relationships are not statistically significant at the 95% level; the independent variable explains very little of the outcome variation in either of the first two models, with adjusted R^2 measures no greater than 0.01. In the second panel of the table, the WBL Index is, surprisingly, negatively associated with the assignment of female US diplomats, even exhibiting a statistically significant negative relationship with the total portion of female section chiefs at the US embassy.[47] Altogether, we find no support in the empirical record for the idea that obstacles to women's advancement within the foreign service are driven by the existence of a set of posts that are "off-limits" to women due to their perceived inability to function effectively in patriarchal cultures.

4.5 Implicit Quotas

In oral history interviews with women who served in the foreign service, there are recurring references to a particular form of gender discrimination in diplomatic assignments: the notion that there existed within the foreign service informal rules regarding the *maximum* number of women that could be assigned to a given post simultaneously. For example, former FSO Helen Weinland recalls her experience, seeking to become chief of the political section in Kenya, where a woman was serving as ambassador in 1989:

> [The ambassador] designated her deputy chief of mission to speak with me...The first thing he said to me was, "I hope you didn't write to Ambassador Constable about this job because you are a woman and you thought that would give you an inside track." I said, "I wrote to Ambassador Constable because I have a lot of experience in Africa and I think I would do a good job for you."
>
> This gives you some idea of how the conversation proceeded because among other things he said, "All things being considered, we would really rather have a man in that job because there are already too many women in the embassy." I have never heard anyone complain about too many men in the embassy. (ADST Helen Weinland, p. 85)

[47] This negative relationship does not appear to simply reflect unobserved confounding; see discussion in Appendix D.4.

Table 12: Embassies With Female Ambassadors Are Less Likely to Have Women in Other Leadership Positions

	Female DCM		Female Pol		% Female SC	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Female Amb.	-0.035	-0.059*	-0.032	-0.053+	-0.008	-0.029*
	(0.026)	(0.025)	(0.029)	(0.030)	(0.014)	(0.014)
Num.Obs.	8551	8551	8489	8489	9096	9096
DV mean	0.27		0.28		0.34	
FE: Quarter-year	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Controls		✓		✓		✓

Note: Country-quarter year observations, Controls include: total number of key officers in country; UNGA ideal point distance from US; population, GDP, bilateral imports from and exports to the US (all log-transformed); capabilities (CINC); female cabinet ratio; WBL index; hardship pay; and danger pay. Standard errors robust to two-way clustering, by country and by quarter-year. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Ambassador Walter Curley confesses that he nearly blocked the appointment of a highly qualified woman as his DCM in France in 1991 (before relenting in response to a direct appeal from the deputy secretary) on the grounds that his mission already had women in high-profile positions, replying: "We are already gender-imbalanced here at the moment. The head of our commercial section is a woman. All of our senior consular people — consuls general and consuls — are all women... If we have another here, it's I think, a little de trop [French: overboard]. Nothing to do with ability or anything" (ADST Walter J.P. Curley, p.15). Nineteen of Curley's twenty-six key officers at the time were men.

To systematically investigate the existence of this form of discrimination, Table 12 reports a series of regressions in a sample of country-quarter-year observations: the independent variable is an indicator for whether the U.S. ambassador to a given country is a woman, and the outcomes are measures of the proportion of women in other embassy leadership positions (DCM, political section chief, and all generalist section chiefs). We observe similar patterns across each of the three outcomes. All coefficients are negative, though statistically insignificant when the regressions do not condition on country-level covariates. When the controls are included, the estimated effect of having a female ambassador becomes larger in magnitude and statistically significant.[48] Substantively, we

[48] We can interpret the diminished effect sizes in the odd-numbered columns (without controls) as reflecting the fact that the treatment and confounding effects work in opposite directions: female ambassadors and other female officers are sent to similar kinds of countries, as reported in Table 10; once we condition on these country-level factors, we are able to detect the negative treatment effect of having a female ambassador.

find that when an embassy is led by a female ambassador, it is 5–6 percentage points less likely to have a female DCM or female political section chief (or about a 20% decrease, relative to the sample outcome mean), and has a 3 pp smaller share of women among all generalist section chief positions.

It is also possible that these relationships result from an attempt by the State Department to maximize the extensive rather than the intensive margin of women's representation abroad, ensuring that high-level women officers are spread out across different host states. However, we note that this would be a distinction without a substantive difference; such a strategy, even if not intentionally discriminatory, would still have the effect of limiting the number of senior positions open to women relative to men. Further, our finding that female ambassadors, DCMs, and section chiefs are all regularly assigned to systematically less important posts than their male counterparts (see Table 10) seems inconsistent with a strategy of maximizing women's representation across all host states.

4.6 Summary and Interpretation

Table 13 summarizes the collection of empirical findings reported above. How can we reconcile these various findings? Here we revisit the two theoretical mechanisms outlined in Section 3—the visibility mechanism, and the appointment-process mechanism—and consider how well each one can account for the reported findings.

4.6.1 The visibility mechanism

One parsimonious explanation that seems to fit the empirical record is the existence of simple taste-based discrimination against female candidates, the effects of which are mitigated by public-image concerns and externally-imposed demands for numerical gender parity in appointments. We can interpret the empirical findings in light of this explanation as follows.

First, women face an overall numerical disadvantage in accession from the entry level (commissioning) to the mid-level (section chief); but when they do reach the middle level, they are disproportionately sorted into the more visible, externally-facing cones (public diplomacy and consular, as per Table 5). Next, conditional on reaching the middle level, women face an additional penalty in rising to the position of DCM, which is a position with a high degree of influence and

Table 13: Summary of Findings

Among newly commissioned officers (entry level):	Women are less likely than men to reach the lower level (Section Chief) and middle level (DCM and CG), but no less likely to reach the upper level (Ambassador and DAS) of foreign service assignments	Table 4
Among first-time Section Chiefs:	Women tend to be assigned to the cones that are less likely to lead to future promotion	Tables 5 and 6
Among Section Chiefs who hold otherwise equivalent positions:	Women are less likely than men to be promoted to DCM	Table 7, Panel A, and Table D.1
	Women are more likely than men to exit the foreign service	Table 8
	Women are no more or less likely than men to be promoted to CG	Table 7, Panel B
Among DCMs who hold otherwise equivalent positions:	Women are more likely than men to be promoted to ambassador	Table 9, Panel A
	Women are no more or less likely than men to be promoted to DAS	Table 9, Panel B
At all position levels:	Women are assigned to smaller and less important posts than men	Tables 10 and D.3
	Gendered patterns of diplomatic assignments do not systematically reflect gender conditions within the host country	Table 11
Female DCMs and section chiefs are less likely to be assigned to embassies with female ambassadors than embassies with male ambassadors		Table 12

responsibility within the embassy, but with little public profile. Yet they face no such penalty in reaching the more visible but hierarchically equivalent position of CG.

In moving from the upper level (specifically, DCM) to the top level of assignments, women enjoy a substantial advantage in appointments to ambassadorships. This may be partly an artifact of the severe penalty that women face in entering the DCM ranks: the SC-to-DCM screening process results in pool of female DCMs that is more competent, on average, than the pool of male DCMs; so an unbiased DCM-to-ambassador selection process would result in a larger share of female DCMs than male DCMs being promoted. Yet we observe no similar bonus for female DCMs being promoted to the less visible role of DAS, despite the same screening effects being operative in shaping the distribution of competence among male vs. female DCMs. That women enjoy

a greater advantage in promotion from DCM to ambassador, than from DCM to DAS, is again consistent with a strategy of assigning women to more visible roles, while limiting their access to more influential positions.

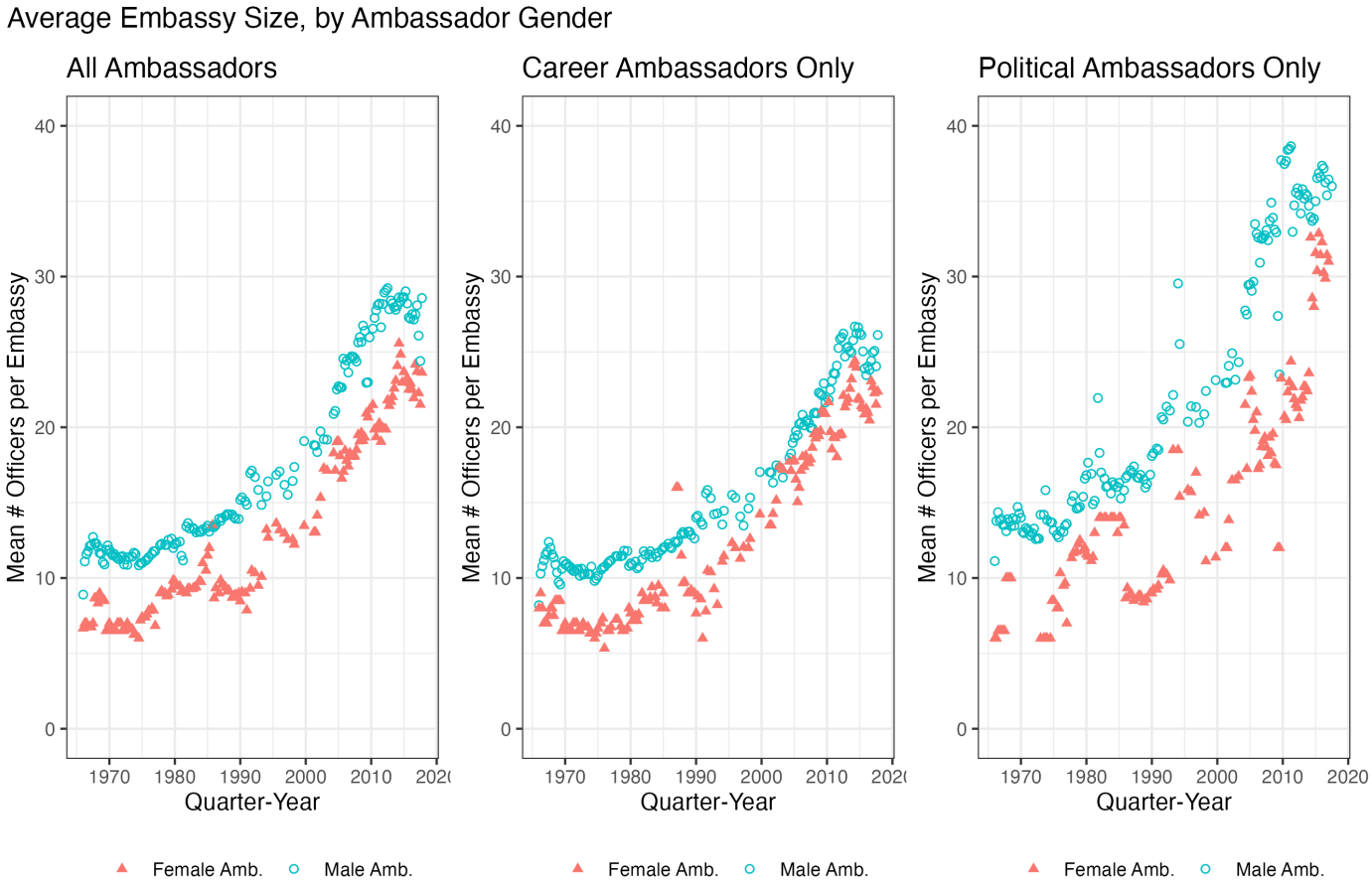
The finding of qualitative disparities in the types of posts to which women are assigned can also be interpreted as an implication of the visibility mechanism. When external stakeholders with an interest in gender equality are evaluating appointment patterns in the foreign service, the most readily available criterion to consider is the raw proportion of women occupying a particular position category (for instance, the vast disparity in women reaching DCM, as documented in the Palmer lawsuits). The State Department can mitigate disparities according to these more easily observable measures, while still systematically assigning women to posts that are less important for U.S. foreign policy priorities.

4.6.2 The appointment-process mechanism

An alternative explanation was discussed in Section 3: that differences in gender disparities by position reflect different preferences or biases among the actors involved in the appointment decisions. This explanation has more difficulty accounting the observed empirical patterns. First, consider the differences in section chief promotions to DCMs vs. CGs; recall that appointments to both positions emanate primarily from the DCM committee, with the key difference being that the committee assigns CGs directly but presents a shortlist of DCM candidates for the ambassador's final selection. The finding that female candidates only face a penalty in reaching the DCM position would be interpreted as reflecting the ambassador's discriminatory influence in the selection process, which does not bear on CG selections.

This interpretation, however, runs up against the finding from Table 12 that women face a larger penalty in reaching DCM under female ambassadors than under male ambassadors. The notion that female subordinates face greater discrimination from female supervisors than male supervisors cannot be ruled out definitively, but it is inconsistent with a large body of research that suggests that women receive *better* promotion outcomes under female managers (Flabbi et al., 2019; Kunze and Miller, 2017). Further, the fact that the presence of a female ambassador imposes an almost identical penalty on female DCMs as it does on female political section chiefs—where section chiefs are selected by assignment panels similar in composition to the DCM committee, but

Figure 5: Female Ambassadors are Assigned to Smaller Embassies



Note: The outlying point in the middle plot reflects the fact that there was only a single female career ambassador serving in the first two quarters of 1987 (Elinor Greer Constable, Ambassador to Kenya from 1986–1989).

without direct ambassadorial input—suggests that the implicit quota system is being enforced by the foreign service as an institution, rather than by individual female ambassadors.

A second difficulty arises in applying this alternative explanation to the empirical findings regarding ambassadorial assignments. In the process of assigning officers to positions of ambassador or DAS, female DCMs are much more likely than male DCMs to become ambassador, but no similar gap exists in assignment to DAS. The process-focused explanation for this difference would point to the fact that, while the same D Committee selects a candidate for each position, only ambassadors are ultimately appointed by the president directly; the implication would be that the president has a stronger preference for gender equality, as compared to the aggregated preferences of the D committee.

But again, this explanation becomes difficult to reconcile with the findings of qualitative dis-

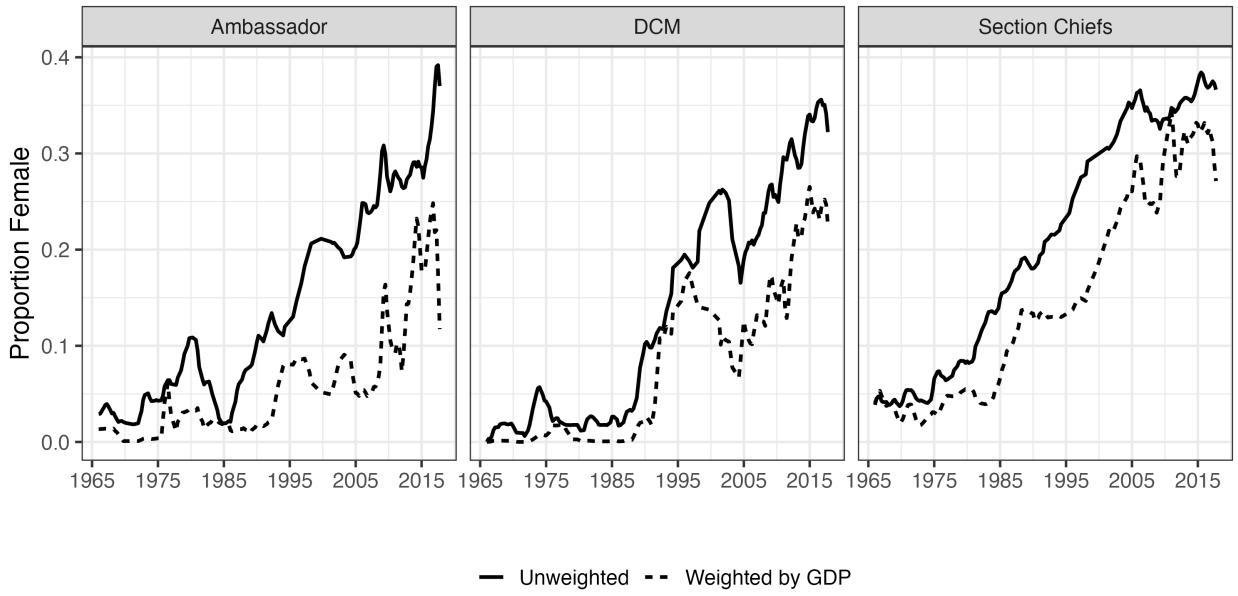
parities in ambassadorial assignments. Table 10 reported that female ambassadors are assigned to smaller and less important embassies than male ambassadors. Figure 5 further disaggregates this analysis by career diplomats vs. political appointees, the latter of which are drawn from outside the ranks of the foreign service. Throughout the entire period covered by the KOFS data, we find persistent gaps in the average embassy sizes led by male vs. female ambassadors. Yet the gaps are substantially larger among political ambassadors as compared to career ambassadors—where the president has free rein to select political ambassadors from any professional background, in contrast to the much more restricted set of career candidates he is presented with. If the president has stronger preferences for gender equality than those produced by the State Department's internal personnel processes, we should expect to see those preferences manifest even more strongly in the appointments where the president faces a less constrained choice set; however, we observe the opposite.

5 Conclusion

Despite great advancements in women's representation over the last few decades, we find substantial evidence that women continue to face discrimination within the U.S. Foreign Service; this discrimination prevents women from advancing into high-authority positions at the same rate as men, and results in women being assigned to posts in states that are significantly less strategically important than those in which their male counterparts serve. We find support for our theoretical explanation that, in order to respond to external stakeholder pressure to increase women's representation within the service, the State Department promoted women to high-visibility roles that carry little influence over U.S. foreign policy while continuing to discriminate against them in less visible roles. This misallocation of diplomatic talent carries serious consequences for the efficacy and legitimacy of U.S. diplomacy (Chow and Han, 2023).

Our results suggest that women's representation, when calculated in the standard way as the share of women in an organization (or in a given position within an organization), is imperfect as a measure of women's influence within that organization. Instead, we suggest that governments and stakeholder groups looking to evaluate gender balance within organizations consider computing a *weighted* representation measure instead, such that positions carry different weights based on

Figure 6: Women's Representation in Embassy Positions, Weighted by Host-Country GDP



Note: For each quarter-year, we calculate $(\sum_i \text{female}_i \times w_i)/(\sum_i w_i)$, summing over countries i, where female_i denotes (i) the ambassador is female (left panel), (ii) the DCM is female (middle panel), or (iii) the portion of generalist section chiefs within the embassy who are female (right panel). The solid lines denote $w_i = 1$, and the dashed lines denote $w_i =$ host country GDP. Values are three-quarter-year rolling averages, for visual clarity.

their relative importance. The choice of weighting variable is context-specific, but should capture variation in the importance or authority of a given position. For example, rather than simply calculating the proportion of a firm's regional managers that are women ($\sum_i^N \text{female}_i/N$), one might decide to weight each regional manager position by the number of employees in that region ($[\sum_i^N \text{female}_i \times \text{emp}_i]/\sum_i^N \text{emp}_i$); as another example, rather than calculating the proportion of legislative committee appointments held by women, one might decide to weight each committee by the proportion of the federal budget overseen by the committee.

As a concluding exercise, we calculate a weighted representation measure for our own data; specifically, we weight women's representation in ambassadorial, DCM, and section chief positions by the GDP of the states to which they are assigned. Figure 6 plots these weighted averages over time, alongside unweighted measures that are simply equal to the share of women in each position. The results are striking: first, note that the weighted averages never exceed the unweighted averages, suggesting that a naive representation measure will always overestimate the proportion of the global economy with female diplomatic representation. Even more notably, while the overall trends in weighted and unweighted measures are similar, they often diverge substantially in the short run.

For example, while the proportion of ambassadorial positions held by women increased from 12% in 1995 to 21% in 2000, the GDP-weighted measure *declined* from 8% to 5% during the same period. Likewise, the advent of the Trump presidency in 2017 resulted in little change to the unweighted representation of women in ambassadorial and section chief positions, but this masked substantial drops in the weighted averages. This example highlights how weighted representation measures, which can be easily calculated using available data, can paint a more realistic picture of women's standing within an organization.

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Appendix

Contents:

A Coverage of the Key Officers data

While the Key Officers dataset provides the most comprehensive source of data on U.S. diplomatic personnel from 1966–2017, it is not a complete record of all U.S. diplomats that served during this period. Here we consider what portion of the Foreign Service is captured in our data, and discuss the temporal gaps in the records we were able to collect.

Cross-sectional coverage. We are not aware of any routinely released data on total headcounts at American foreign missions, but periodic inspection reports prepared by the State Department's Office of Inspector General do report these for inspected missions (i.e., encompassing both the embassy and any consulates within the country in question). We have compiled a sample of headcounts in all inspection reports from 2010 to 2017, covering 127 countries. In the median country, the key officers dataset covers 26% of all US direct-hire positions.[49] We also find a very strong correlation ($r = 0.8$) between the number of distinct key officers and the overall US direct-hire headcount, allowing us to use the number of key officers as a strong proxy for embassy size.

Table A.1: Coverage of the Key Officers Data Over Time

Year	Generalist Key Officers	Specialist Key Officers	Total FS Key Officers	Total Foreign Service	Percentage
1970	1,144	0	1,144	8,932	12.8%
1980	1,313	63	1,376	9,326	14.8%
1985	1,394	86	1,420	9,441	15.7%
1990	1,420	148	1,568	8,814	17.8%
1995	1,477	591	2,068	8,207	25.2%
2000	1,444	601	2,045	9,238	22.1%
2005	1,482	1,221	2,958	11,238	26.3%
2010	1,569	1,574	3,429	12,859	26.7%
2015	1,660	1,702	3,714	13,872	26.8%

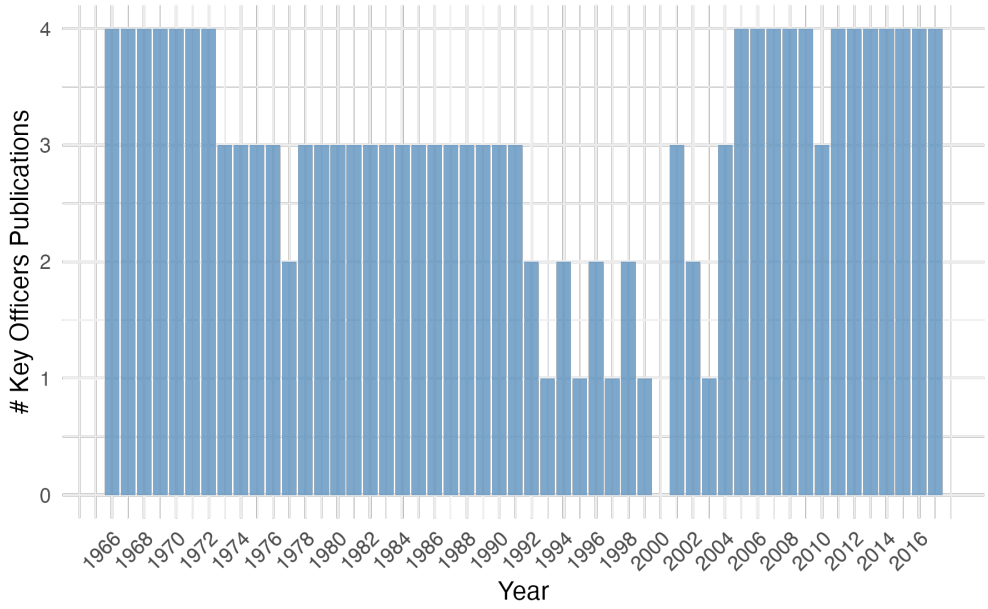
Table A.1 reports trends in the total number of key officers in our dataset over time in comparison to the overall size of the State Department's foreign service. From 1970 to 2015, the State Department's foreign service grew by about half while the number of reported State Department foreign service key officers more than doubled. The first three columns of the table report aggregates from our data. We classify officers as probable foreign service generalists or specialists based

[49] In most countries, the majority of embassy employees are locally engaged staff (i.e., host country nationals hired to assist with administrative, clerical, janitorial, and other support tasks) rather than American diplomats.

on the roles they hold; most roles can be categorized relatively unambiguously but certain roles can be held by either a specialist or a generalist. Thus, the first column counts clear generalists, the second column counts clear specialists, and the third column presents total personnel including the the ambiguous cases (thus it is not the straightforward sum of the first two). The fourth column reports the total size of the foreign service in each identified year as reported in statistical releases from the American Foreign Service Association.[50]

At any given time, approximately one third of the Foreign Service is posted domestically, so our estimates reflect a proportionately larger share of the overseas Foreign Service. In 2015, for example, we capture about 39% of the State Department's overseas workforce.

Figure A.1: Temporal Coverage of the Key Officers Data



Temporal coverage. As discussed in the main text, the Key Officer publications were released in print form until 1998, and then published online after that; to collect the online publications, we relied on archived versions of the State Department website. Unfortunately, the Internet Archive's coverage for the period of 1999 to 2003 is relatively sparse, with only seven versions of the directories available over those four years (12/1999, 4/2001, 8/2001, 10/2001, 6/2002, 11/2002, and 5/2003).

[50] See https://afsa.org/sites/default/files/Portals/0/Dept%20of%20State%20Stats%20042313.pdf and https://afsa.org/foreign-service-statistics

These are the largest temporal gaps in the compiled dataset. Figure A.1 visualizes the number of publications per year that are included in our dataset across the entire period.

From 2004 onward, the directories were updated on a seemingly ad-hoc basis, but with at least quarterly frequency. We collected and recorded the directories at the quarterly frequency, for consistency with the pre-1998 batch of directories.

B Details on analyses from main text

B.1 Coding promotion to ambassador

In addition to the data sources discussed in the main text, another source of personnel data that we draw on is the State Department Office of the Historian's "Principal Officers and Chiefs of Mission" database.[51] This source supplements our KOFS data by providing additional information on ambassadors and other chiefs of mission, including: (i) specifying their *appointment* date (which may not perfectly coincide with the date they first appear in the KOFS data), which we use to code the outcome variable in the promotion analyses in Section 4.2.3; (ii) identifying which officers are career FSOs vs. political appointees; and (iii) identifying which positions within IO missions are equivalent in status to ambassadorships.[52]

B.2 Promotion above ambassador/DAS

Our analysis of movement up the ranks ends with Ambassadors and DASes, without proceeding further to the Assistant Secretary level and above. This is primarily because those higher-level appointments are made by actors outside of the State Department, and our interest is in understanding the State Department's institutional decision-making processes and their implications. In addition, appointments to positions above ambassador and DAS are rare, particularly among a candidate pool of career FSOs (more than half of positions at the Assistant Secretary level and above are held by non-career appointees). Note that within our sample of analysis, only 38 officer-quarter-years (out of over 60,000), or six distinct officers (out of 6,583), experience promotion to a

[51] https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/people/principals-chiefs

[52] Several positions within IO missions are listed in the KOFS data with ambiguous titles such as "REP" or "DIR", which may or may not denote that the officer is the chief of mission. We count these positions as equivalent to ambassadorships if they appear in the "Principal Officers and Chiefs of Mission" database.

position above ambassador within a five-year window, while bypassing an ambassadorship.

B.3 Details on Table 7 and Table 9 Analyses

Panel A of Table 7 reported regression results from an officer-quarter-year sample of Section Chiefs, with an outcome of promotion to DCM within five years. Panel B reported an analogous set of regression results, with an outcome of promotion to CG within five years.

Below Panel B, the table reports values for $\hat{\beta}_{\text{SC to CG}} - \hat{\beta}_{\text{SC to DCM}}$, with standard errors. These coefficients and standard errors were obtained as follows:

- Create a stacked sample, consisting of two observations (one for each outcome, DCM or CG) for each officer-quarter-year. This gives us a sample of officer-QY-outcome observations.
- Re-run regression (1) with each combination of covariates and FE, while interacting the outcome-type dummy with all righthand-side variables.
- Report the coefficient and standard error for the interaction term of outcome-type $\times$ female. (We adjust for the double-counting by clustering standard errors by officer.)

The same process was applied to obtain the point estimates and standard errors for $\hat{\beta}_{\text{DCM to Amb}} - \hat{\beta}_{\text{DCM to DAS}}$ from Table 9.

B.4 Covariates

Table B.1: Data Sources and Details for Covariates

Variable(s)	Source
GDP and population	World Bank's World Development Indicators, accessed via the `peacesciencer` (Miller, 2022) and `WDI` (Arel-Bundock, 2025) `R` packages
U.S. bilateral trade	Smoothed values from Barbieri, Keshk, and Pollins (2009), accessed via `peacesciencer`, up through 2014; supplemented with U.N. Comtrade data (`https://comtradeplus.un.org/`) for 2015–2017
Capabilities	Composite Index of National Capabilities (CINC score), from Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey (1972), accessed via `peacesciencer`
UNGA ideal point distance	Bailey, Strezhnev, and Voeten (2017)
Female Cabinet Ratio	Portion of women in the executive cabinet, computed from WhoGov dataset (Nyrup and Bramwell, 2020)
Women, Business, and the Law	World Bank's WBL Index (`https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/wbl`)
Danger Pay and Hardship Pay differentials	Recorded from State Department website (from 1997–present: `https://allowances.state.gov/web920/hardship.asp`) and from "U.S. Department of State Indexes of Living Costs Abroad, Quarters Allowances, and Hardship Differentials" publications (from 1982–1996: `https://www.google.com/books/edition/_/72yuwY1_ET4C?gbpv=0&kptab=editions`)

C Previous Analyses of Pay Grade Advancement

Existing analyses of advancement within the foreign service have typically focused on pay grade promotions, most notably including a 2020 Government Accountability Office (GAO) audit using detailed internal data and covering the years 2002 to 2018. GAO found that women had a slight advantage over men in advancing to a higher grade (Bair, 2020). In recent years, the State Department has also published its own internal data on rates of advancement by grade, disaggregated by gender and other characteristics. Notably, however, these statistics only cover officers who competed for promotion, leaving them susceptible to selection bias concerns. However, the data generally do not reflect any disadvantage for women in advancing to higher grades. Using these data, the conservative Heritage Foundation has argued that the State Department is discriminating against men (Hankinson, 2024). Finally, an internal State Department Bureau of Human Resources study covering the years 1994 to 2014 concluded (as described by the American Foreign Service Association) that "women's promotion has been proportionate to their percentage when they entered the Foreign Service," attributing gaps in senior positions to a lag from year of entry (Strano, 2016). Publicly available data do not allow us to comprehensively replicate these results; however, our analyses (not shown here) do find that women appear to advance into the senior foreign service at about the same rate as men.

As noted above, advancements in pay grade do not necessarily correspond to the exercise of authority (although there is obviously a general relationship), so these results do not directly speak to the same question as ours. Contextually, there are several plausible reasons why the promotion-by-rank system may function without the same biases as the assignments system.

Most importantly, the rank-promotion process is regularized and designed to operate with a degree of independence from department management. Every eligible officer is automatically considered for rank-promotion. There are clear, written criteria and considerable procedural safeguards within the process. Selection boards include both foreign service officers and members of the general public.[53] Under the Foreign Service Act of 1980, boards are required by law to include "a substantial number of women and members of minority groups."[54] In recent years, women have

[53] Public members are selected by the Director General based on "extensive experience in a profession" and "overseas experience" (3 FAM 2326.1-2).

[54] See 22 U.S. Code 4002

made up about half of the membership of selection boards (El-Hodiri, 2024). The committees handling assignments lack these features.

Another possibility is that increased scrutiny of the rank-promotion process as opposed to the assignment process leads to less biased outcomes. The rank-promotion process is governed by a legally binding agreement between the American Foreign Service Association (AFSA), the labor union representing foreign service officers, and the State Department, and intensively scrutinized on an ongoing basis. Rank-promotion has also been the subject of significant ongoing scrutiny by Congress, the GAO, and the department's inspector general. There has not been comparable attention to the issue of assignments.

D Additional results

D.1 SC to DCM promotion, conditional on remaining in service

Table D.1: Among Section Chiefs Who Do Not Exit the Service, Women Are Less Likely Than Men to Become DCM

Panel A	DV: DCM within 5 years					
	mean = 0.137				mean = 0.147	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Female	-0.055***	-0.049**	-0.040*	-0.044**	-0.042+	-0.037+
	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.017)	(0.022)	(0.022)
Num. Obs.	23431	23431	23431	23431	17886	17886
FE: Quarter-year	✓		✓			
FE: Mission			✓			
FE: Mission-type-position-QY		✓		✓	✓	✓
FE: Mission-position				✓	✓	✓
FE: Years since commission						✓
Country-year controls			✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: Officer-quarter-year observations, among Section Chiefs who do *not* exit service within five years, 1997–2010. See caption of Table 7 for additional details. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

D.2 DCM exit from service

Table D.2: Among DCMs, Women are No More or Less Likely Than Men to Exit Service

	DV: Exits service within 5 years			
	mean = 0.41		mean = 0.31	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Female	0.010	-0.009	0.020	0.031
	(0.039)	(0.040)	(0.049)	(0.049)
Num. Obs.	7455	7455	5306	5306
FE: Post-type-position-QY	✓	✓	✓	✓
FE: Post-position		✓	✓	✓
FE: Years since commission				✓
Country-year controls		✓	✓	✓

Note: Officer-quarter-year observations, among DCMs, 1997–2010. See caption of Table 9 for additional details.

D.3 Consulates

Table D.3: Larger Consulates Receive Fewer Female Personnel

	Female Principal Officer	% Other Female Officers
	(1)	(2)
Post Size	-0.014**	-0.005+
	(0.004)	(0.003)
Num.Obs.	4779	5559
FE: QY	✓	✓
DV mean:	0.32	0.36

Note: Post-quarter-year observations, among consulates (including "consulates general" and "consular agencies"), 1997–2017. "Post Size" is the total number of officers listed at the post (mean=7.9, sd = 5.6). Outcomes are (1) an indicator for whether the principal officer at the post is a woman, and (2) the portion of women among other Generalist positions at the post. Standard errors robust to clustering two ways, by post and by quarter-year. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table 10 reported the consistent pattern that countries that are more important to U.S. foreign policy priorities—countries with larger GDP, military capabilities, bilateral trade flows, and more U.S. diplomats assigned in country—are less likely to have women at all levels of embassy leadership, as compared to less important countries. Table D.3 shows that this pattern extends to consulates, in addition to embassies. The table reports two regressions, in samples of consulate-quarter-years; the first column only includes consulates general, while the second column also includes consulates and consular agencies (the difference is due to the fact that only CGs have clearly identified principal officers). The main predictor in both regressions is the number of officers at a given post, as a proxy for the importance of the post. A similar pattern emerges from Table 10: larger consulates are less likely to have female principal officers, and have a smaller overall share of women across other generalist positions.

D.4 Host country gender conditions

A conventional wisdom within the foreign service has historically held that many countries are unsuitable for women to conduct effective diplomacy. In response to the suggestion that "you couldn't send a woman to an Arab country", Ambassador Richard K. Fox, who served as the first Director of Equal Employment Opportunity within the State Department, observes: "That was the feeling. It went beyond the Arab countries. There weren't many women going to Latin America; they weren't going to the Far East. ... There weren't even many women serving in European posts" (ADST Richard K. Fox, p. 5). Former FSO Helen Weinland recalls learning that the Department had blocked an assignment for her to Indonesia in the 1970s: "The argument against my assignment had been that was I was a woman, it was a Moslem country, I could not be effective, even as a very junior officer, so I didn't get the job" (ADST Helen Weinland, p. 84). Such concerns were at least in part informed by diplomats' experiences in certain foreign contexts. As the first female administrative officer at the US Consulate General in Bombay in 1984, Prudence Bushnell was told directly in her first meeting with the local Chief of Police, "I can't believe the United States of America would send a woman to do this job!" (ADST Prudence Bushnell, p. 36)—even when India itself was lead by a female prime minister.

Table 11 showed that the U.S. does not systematically assign fewer female diplomats to countries with worse gender inequality, as compared to countries with better gender conditions. These analyses used two measures of host-country gender conditions: the portion of women in the host country's executive cabinet, and the World Bank's Women, Business, and the Law (WBL) Index. Here, we verify that this null result does not simply reflect poor measurement validity of the variables used as predictors in the Table 11 regressions, by showing that they are strongly predictive of other countries' diplomatic assignment practices.

Specifically, for a given country-year, we consider as an outcome variable the portion of the ambassadors that country receives (from all countries other than the U.S.) are women, drawing on the GenDip dataset (Niklasson and Towns, 2023). We use the same two measures of host-country gender equality as predictors, with time fixed effects, as in the Table 11 regressions. Table D.4 demonstrates that ambassadorial appointments from countries other than the U.S. do systematically reflect the gender conditions within the receiving state. Not only are the coefficients positive and

Table D.4: Host Country Gender Conditions Predict Other Countries' Ambassadorial Assignments

	DV: % Female among Incoming Ambassadors	
	(1)	(2)
Female Cabinet Ratio	0.025***	
	(0.004)	
WBL Index		0.036***
		(0.003)
Num.Obs.	784	784
R2	0.231	0.312
R2 Adj.	0.226	0.307
FE: Year	✓	✓

Note: Country-year observations; 153–160 countries observed in 1998, 2003, 2008, 2013, 2014, reflecting coverage of the GenDip dataset (Niklasson and Towns, 2023). DV is the proportion of women among ambassadors sent to a given host country, from countries other than the U.S. Standard errors robust to clustering by country. + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

highly statistically significant (despite the much smaller sample size, due to limited coverage of the GenDip data), but the predictive performance (adjusted R^2) of these models is much higher than for any of the Table 11 regressions.

To gain some qualitative insight into why U.S. diplomatic practices might differ in this respect from those of other countries, we can consider he experience of Janice Bay, the first woman to serve as an economic officer in Saudi Arabia in 1982. Bay recalls that she "wasn't a very popular choice for job... they said that's going to be very hard because you can't sit in an office and do it. You've got to get out and see people" (ADST Janice Bay, p. 54). Once on the job, she would "go to offices where no women had ever been" and couldn't even drive herself to meetings because women were forbidden to drive. The challenges Bay faced are put on stark display in the following anecdote:

> And one particular day that I remember, I was on my way to see the head of Civil Aviation in Saudi Arabia, and he was waiting for me. And the people at the gate said, "you can't come in, you're a woman." But I said I have an appointment with your boss, the General who was in charge of Civil Aviation. They said well, you just can't come. And so, my driver said you can't go in, and I said I have an appointment, I have to go in. And so, he said well, I'm not going, and I said well, I'm getting out of the car. So I got out of the car and started walking.

> And I had to walk. It was almost a mile down a long gate lined road to this large building where this General was waiting for me. So pretty soon these guys started following me in a car with guns. They were sort of waving their guns and said you can't do this, you're a woman. You have to stop. And I said I'm not stopping. I have an appointment with the General. And so, I finally got to the front door, and by this time there was quite a lot of attention being paid to me. And I went in and said I have an appointment with the General. And so, a person called up and said yes, you do. And so, I went up to his office. He apologized, and at that moment these guys with guns came charging in, and they were petrified. They said we're so sorry. We tried to stop her. We didn't mean to let her in. And the General said she's not a woman, she's a diplomat. She has an appointment with me. Get out of here! So, from then I could sort of write my own ticket (ADST Janice Bay. pp. 55-56).

As a representative of the U.S., Bay was able to operate in her host country in ways unthinkable to its own female citizens. Other, less powerful sending states may not feel so confident in their ability to advance their diplomatic objectives vis-á-vis a host state like Saudi Arabia while disregarding its domestic gender norms. This power disparity may partly explain why the U.S. stands apart from other sending states in making diplomatic appointments which are systematically unresponsive to host country gender conditions.

Finally, recall that in Table 11, we observed a negative and statistically significant relationship between a host country's WBL index, and the portion of U.S. embassy personnel in the country who are women. Our post-hoc exploratory analysis to try to understand this relationship suggests that it does not simply reflect an omitted confounding factor such as quality of life or desirability of the post, as the relationship is almost entirely unaffected by the inclusion of a large set of seemingly relevant covariates. Rather, the relationship seems to hold only with weaker host states (low CINC scores), and with states with less friendly relations with the US (higher UNGA ideal point distances). This suggests that the US may be sending female diplomats to patriarchal host countries as a sort of symbolic statement, or as a means of shaming or even antagonizing the host government, but only when it is relatively costless to do so.