Centering the Intersectional Contributions and Talents of Diverse Women to Strengthen Foreign Policy and National Security Strategy

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At a time when strengthening global diplomacy and combatting democratic backsliding is paramount, we must reflect on how to cultivate and engage vital voices in our foreign policy and national security spaces. This paper examines how the inclusion of diverse women of color in every aspect of U.S. foreign policy and national security strategy is not only vital to achieving true inclusiveness and equity within our government institutions, but also greatly strengthens the United States’ ability to advance our objectives abroad.

Examining Progress Made

In recent years, the topic of the representation of diverse women across the governmental foreign policy sector has grown more prominent. Women of color are currently underrepresented in the ranks of our foreign policy institutions across the U.S. government. However, we know that this is not for lack of talent or merit, prompting advocacy and affinity groups to call for greater equity in representation. Feminist foreign policy organizations have promoted gender equality and access in the field and have begun including broader equities such as anti-racism, economic justice, climate justice, and human rights in their priorities.

Some organizations, such as the Leadership Council for Women in National Security have also identified diverse women currently qualified to be appointed into leadership positions across the government, underscoring the existing talent pool. Alongside advocates, the current administration has instituted two key initiatives that aid in progressing women of color in the workforce: (1) Executive Order 14305 to advance diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility in the federal workforce and (2) the National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality. Other positive steps include the State Department’s appointment of Ambassador Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley to serve as the first Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer in 2021 to address systemic issues with inclusion within the ranks of our nation’s diplomatic workforce. In addition, some agencies maintain fellowship programs and hiring initiatives to attract diverse talent, including women of color, from underrepresented backgrounds into their ranks.

Building upon this progress, there is an opportunity for more targeted strategies designed to drive even further-reaching and more salient solutions. Targeted approaches that enhance intentional mentorship, sponsorship, exposure, retention, and access to networks will shape opportunities for women of color at the academic, private, and public intersections of the field. Expanded support for women of color in the field will in turn benefit the innovativeness of our foreign policy and national security strategies.

Moving the Needle Forward

Our recommendations for advancing women of color within our foreign policy institutions are driven by currently available research, data, and policy. With the support of advocates, external partners, and administration officials eager for continued progress, we see a pathway for the government to actively and intentionally address the remaining gaps. We encourage foreign policy and national security institutions to affirm their commitment to diversity, with a focus on women of color, through:

1. Utilizing Intersectionality as a Security-Enhancing Tool
2. Using a Comprehensive Data Analysis to Guide the Approach
These recommendations provide a roadmap to create impactful foreign policy that resonates with constituencies at home and interlocutors abroad. They also serve as a starting point to remove systemic barriers and make cultural shifts for the betterment of our foreign policy institutions.

**Intersectionality as a Strategic Tool to Enhance Security**

Intersectionality is the acknowledgement that everyone has their own unique experiences of discrimination and oppression, and as such, we must consider everything and anything that can marginalize people—gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, ability, etc.\(^6\) The work of Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw, a pioneering black woman scholar whose intersectionality research focuses on these multiple layers of identity in relation to power dynamics, provides us with a rubric to drive the necessary changes to build a stronger national security strategy in both policy and practice.\(^7\) Her work helps us understand how the experiences of women of color in the field are shaped; and in turn, how women of color are uniquely poised to lead in the field and shape policy, as the threats facing the United States are rapidly evolving.

Women of color bring perspectives from their diverse experiences which allows them to analyze unconventional policy challenges in a critical way, especially in complex security environments. Their work and research have pointed out how unabated threats such as racism, xenophobia, and domestic terrorism affect our safety, sustainability, and peace.\(^8\) Further, their nuanced approaches to policy can deviate from the historically homogenous thought space in foreign policy institutions. Women of color can also offer valuable insight into conflicts and provide critical input when the government is assessing how threats to national security are determined.

In practice, women of color have demonstrated the ability to build strong ties with international partners and interlocutors from multinational and multi-racial communities. We have witnessed leaders such as United Nations Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield underline and approach our nation’s top foreign policy and national security issues with innovative solutions. For example, Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield stood before the UN General Assembly and stated that “we must face [racism] down, every time, no matter whom it’s directed towards” and shared how her truth of being a descendant of slaves shapes her current worldview.\(^9\) Likewise, Navy Admiral Michelle Howard has often shared her views on diversity being paramount to her leadership decisions and into shaping the teams she’s led to produce better military outcomes. These are examples of how having diverse representation in our foreign policy and national security spheres expands our definitions and approaches to national security; therefore, affirming intersectional livelihoods like theirs strengthens U.S. foreign policy strategy as it relates to addressing systemic and institutionalized issues. The ascension of women of color to leadership positions at the highest levels of government can be a catalyst for greater intersectional integration within our institutions and can aid in dismantling historic barriers that affect many, but that women of color often feel the brunt of. Furthermore, applying intersectionality can help cultivate changes that solidify the U.S. national security sector’s innovativeness in combatting global challenges, in comparison to its counterparts.\(^10\)

**Conducting Comprehensive Data Analysis to Guide the Approach**

Based on the limited data available, women of color are currently underrepresented in leadership across the U.S. government in foreign policy roles. For example, data points from the Government Accountability Office, an independent non-partisan government agency, show that women of color are lacking in the top leadership positions in the civilian and uniformed ranks of the U.S. Departments of Defense, State, and Homeland Security; the Federal Bureau of Investigation; and other entities representing the defense, diplomacy, and intelligence communities.\(^11\) Women of color are disproportionately underrepresented as flag or general officers in the U.S. Armed Forces.\(^12\) Similarly, less than 8% of the senior ranks of the State Department are held by women of color\(^13\) and they also hold fewer U.S. ambassadorships in both political and career appointments.\(^14\) These trends trickle into the working-level ranks of these institutions. However, in-depth data tracking and monitoring of this specific demographic is currently too limited to begin a reformatory approach to create long-term solutions.
for better recruitment, retention, and promotion in this field. This is why we recommend that our foreign policy and national security agencies conduct comprehensive, intersectional data analyses of the diversity of the staff employed at their institutions. Utilizing intersectionality in the data collection process would allow us to assess how women of color can integrate their diverse foreign policy expertise into our institutions.

Prioritizing targeted, intersectional data collection will help us know where progress is needed and serve as a baseline for measuring solutions that remove systemic barriers to the participation of women of color. Furthermore, data analysis that is inclusive and intersectional will expand the available key metrics to ensure that agencies are succeeding in their approach to intentional diplomacy and enhanced security. Data can help institutions optimize the quality of work, draw valuable insights, predict trends, prevent risks, and make better decisions. Additionally, this process will allow for a whole of government assessment, with external partners' input and personnel surveys that can generate positive outcomes for long-term efficiency. This data should have clearly defined parameters to assess the success of women of color in foreign policy. It should also include factors such as age, education, years of employment, promotional trends, wage, and safety and support sentiments. With this data, we can then learn how to retain and leverage women of color working in this field, which will enhance our greater security priorities.

Removing Systemic Barriers and Making Cultural Shifts

We are optimistic about what progress can be made to continue reshaping our foreign policy and national security institutions in a way that allows women of color to fully participate and thrive in leadership. We acknowledge the progress that has been made on addressing the absence of women of color in foreign policy and national security and recommend ongoing examination for the remaining barriers to be addressed. We need to instill cultural shifts, including a culture of accountability, to ensure women of color will progress in the long term. Furthermore, we see the prioritization of an intersectional approach and comprehensive data collection as a way to define the present disparities. This will aid in developing solutions-based approaches that target intentional mentorship, sponsorship, exposure, retention, and access to the networks that shape opportunities at the academic, private, and public intersections of the field.

The United States stands to gain greatly by centering women of color’s intersectional perspectives through leadership in diplomacy, defense strategy, development, and intelligence. A commitment to fostering environments where women of color are equally valued at the table will bring us closer to achieving true inclusion in the foreign policy space and give us a more united, effective, and representative national security apparatus for all.

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