

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. Including 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. Policymakers have made significant progress towards inclusion in our federal workforce,¹ but reports from the Government Accountability Office, Department of Defense,² Office of the Director of National Intelligence,³ and the State Department, to name a few, reveal that barriers to diversity remain in our defense, diplomacy, and intelligence sectors.⁴ Women of color are particularly underrepresented in our foreign policy institutions across the U.S. government. Knowing that this is not for lack of talent or merit, advocacy and affinity groups have called for more significant equity in representation across our institutions. Feminist foreign policy organizations have promoted gender equality and access in the field and have begun including tailored equities such as anti-racism, economic justice, climate justice, and human rights in their priorities.⁵ Some organizations, such as the Leadership Council for Women in National Security, have also identified diverse women currently qualified to be appointed to leadership positions across the government, underscoring the existing talent pool.⁶ 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 workforce⁷ and (2) the National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality.⁸ Other positive steps include the State Department's appointment of Ambassador Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley (now retired) 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.⁹ In addition, some agencies, like the State Department, maintain robust fellowship programs and hiring initiatives to attract diverse talent, including women of color, into their ranks.¹⁰

Building on this progress, there is an opportunity for more targeted strategies designed to drive even further reaching and more salient solutions across the field. 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 increase innovation in 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 current 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 Comprehensive Data Analysis to Guide the Approach

These recommendations provide a roadmap to creating an 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 a vital tool for enhancing the longevity of the critical diversity reforms in our foreign policy and national security institutions. The term "intersectionality" was coined by Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw, a pioneering black woman scholar, to describe the multiple layers of identity in relation to power dynamics. Her work helps explain why women of color are pivotal in these roles and provides us with a tool to drive the necessary changes to build a more robust national security strategy in both policy and practice.¹¹ Intersectionality is the acknowledgement that everyone has their own unique experiences of discrimination and oppression. As such, we must consider anything and everything that can marginalize people—gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, ability, etc.¹² We acknowledge the concept of intersectionality examines multiple levels of identity, and each of those layers could merit individual in-depth evaluations in the context of foreign policy and national security. However, here we focus on how Dr. Crenshaw's 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 and shape policy, as the threats facing the United States are rapidly evolving.

Women of color bring perspectives from their diverse experiences, cultures, and ethnic groups that enable them to analyze unconventional policy challenges critically, 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.¹³ Further, their nuanced approaches to policy often deviate from the historically homogenous thought space in foreign policy institutions. Women of color can also offer innovative insight into conflicts and provide critical input when the government assesses 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 U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield, a black American woman from Louisiana, underline and approach foreign policy and national security issues with a distinct perspective. Her practice of "Gumbo Diplomacy," a term she coined to describe how she forges personal connections with international interlocutors through her own culture, is a prime example.¹⁴ She also stood before the UN General Assembly in her first address as Ambassador to the UN and stated that "we must face [racism] down, every time, no matter whom it's directed towards," highlighting racism as a top national security issue. Additionally, the ambassador has shared how her truth of being a descendant of enslaved people shapes her current worldview and, in turn, the policies she promotes globally.¹⁵ Likewise, Navy Admiral Michelle Howard has often shared how her background and views on diversity are paramount to her leadership decisions and to shaping the teams she has led to produce better operational military outcomes. These are just two examples of how having diverse representation at the helm of our foreign policy and national security spheres expands our national security priorities, definitions, and approaches; therefore, affirming intersectional livelihoods like theirs strengthens U.S. foreign policy. The ascension of women of color to leadership positions at the highest levels of government can catalyze greater intersectional integration within our institutions and can aid in dismantling historic barriers that affect many other groups. Furthermore, applying intersectionality can help cultivate changes that solidify the U.S. national security sector's competitive advantage in combatting global challenges in comparison to its counterparts.¹⁶

Conducting Comprehensive Data Analysis to Guide the Approach

Better integrating and retaining talented women of color into our institutions in the long run will require data-driven approaches. Though some agencies like the Departments of State and Defense have released diversity reports in recent years, we need diversity data collection efforts across all our foreign policy and national security institutions. However, based on the limited data that is available for review, we know women of color are currently underrepresented in leadership across the U.S. government. 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.¹⁷ In the U.S. Armed Forces, women of color are disproportionately underrepresented as flag or general officers.¹⁸ Similarly, minority women hold less than 9% of the senior ranks of the State Department¹⁹ and out of the 2,363 political and career ambassador appointments in U.S. history, only 2.3% have been held by black women.²⁰ Similar trends trickle into the working-level ranks of these institutions.

In-depth data tracking and monitoring of women of color, as they enter, rise within, or leave these institutions, need to be expanded to begin a reformative approach to address disparities and create long-term solutions for better recruitment, retention, and promotion. We recommend that our foreign policy and national security agencies conduct comprehensive data analyses of the diversity of the staff employed at their institutions, keeping the spectrum of intersectionality in mind. With this data, institutions could then analyze the gaps and make actionable recommendations for how and where to better integrate women of color into our institutions. Data can help institutions optimize the quality of work, draw valuable insights, predict trends, prevent risks, and make better decisions.²¹ Targeted data can help us know where progress is needed and serve as a baseline for measuring our current and future efforts to remove systemic barriers to the participation of women of color. Furthermore, data collected with an intersectional lens will expand the available key metrics to measure agency success in their approach to intentionally creating inclusive foreign policy institutions. Additionally, this process can make way 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 intersectional identities. It should also include factors such as age, education, years of employment, promotional trends, wage, and safety and support sentiments. Additionally, a data collection endeavor across our institutions could build off of similar undertakings like the State Department's DEIA Demographic Baseline Report (DBR), released for the first time in June 2023 to provide a bureau-by-bureau description of the Department's workforce data—broken down by race, ethnicity, sex, disability, rank, and job series/skill codes.²² The report used census data and employee makeup data from the U.S. Department of Labor to help assess where the department stood on diversity. With targeted data such as this across all of our foreign policy and national security agencies, we can more effectively measure progress towards better retaining and leveraging women of color working in this field, which will enhance our broader 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 participate and thrive in leadership fully. We acknowledge the progress made to address the absence of women of color in foreign policy and national security and recommend ongoing examination for the remaining barriers to be eliminated. Moreover, current efforts to recruit diverse talent into our institutions without making the necessary institutional changes to retain it will ultimately call into question the efficacy of those efforts. We acknowledge that complete institutional transformations and removal of barriers will take time; however, we can inch further towards that goal by understanding how intersectional diversity tangibly strengthens our national security and by using data to develop strategies to instill salient institutional shifts. These shifts include fostering cultures of accountability that reinforce operational changes and ensuring our foreign policy

institutions can sustainably recruit *and* maintain diverse talent, particularly women of color, long term. Furthermore, we see prioritizing intersectional approaches and comprehensive data collection as a means to do this by outlining the present disparities; which will aid in developing solutions-based approaches that target issue areas like mentorship, sponsorship, exposure, retention, and access to the networks that shape opportunities for diverse women 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 not only bring us closer to achieving true inclusion in the foreign policy space, but also give us a more credible, united, influential, and representative national security apparatus for all.

The views expressed by the authors are presented in a personal capacity and do not represent the official views or policy positions of the U.S. Department of State, U.S. government, or FOX Corporation.

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