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Recognising Women's Role in and Contribution to Diplomacy: An Implication to SDG Goal 5 Achievement

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Diplomacy has long been considered a male-dominated profession. This view is a reflection of the long-existing gender stereotypes that are predominant in many societies. A distinct example of these typical gender stereotypes is that women are homemakers and caretakers, while men are breadwinners and leaders. Several studies with empirical evidence have found that such stereotype attitudes are considered one of the greatest obstacles to achieve gender equality in the labor market, including in diplomatic sphere. Generally, since the beginning of diplomacy until the middle of the 20th century, women's role in and contribution to diplomacy were viewed as wives and daughters of the male diplomats and consular officers. In this capacity, women accompanied their husbands

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abroad, presided as hostesses, helped their husbands entertain their guests, took care of their children and homes, and prepared dinner.

A change in women's opportunities in employment, including in diplomacy, has been made by numerous efforts of international women's movements in the 20th century. When the United Nations (UN) was established in 1945, following the devastation of World War II, with the aim as to foster international cooperation, its Charter enshrines gender equality as the fundamental human rights that says, "We the peoples...reaffirm faith...in the equal rights of men and women". One of the remarkable steps to recognise women's rights and ensure women's empowerment and gender equality was laid in 1946 when the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) formed the Commission on Status of Women (CSW). CSW has become the first intergovernmental body that is exclusively dedicated to gender equality. Women's movements through the four CSW World Conferences on Women that took place in Mexico City in 1975, Copenhagen in 1980, Nairobi in 1985, and Beijing in 1995 had greatly contributed to the efforts for gender equality attainment.

The fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 in Beijing was a milestone as 189 countries unanimously adopted the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action as the major international policy framework with strategic objectives and actions for empowering women and girls and achieving gender equality worldwide. Khunying Supatra Masdit, an outstanding Thai female politician and strong advocate for gender equality and women's empowerment, was the convenor for the NGO Forum on Women in this Beijing World Conference on Women. This has demonstrated Thailand's leading role and commitment in advancing gender equality on a global level, particularly when Thailand signed the Beijing Declaration. Another turning point for

achieving gender equality and advancing the roles of women and girls globally has been demonstrated through the adoption of the SDG Goal 5 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the UN in 2015. The 17 UN SDGs serve as a global call for action to advance global development, eradicate poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that all people on our planet enjoy peace and stability by 2030. The adoption of SDG Goal 5, set to achieve gender equality, eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and girls, and empower women and girls, has shown the sense of urgency for the international community to cooperatively tackle the issues pertaining to gender equality, including equal rights in employment.

In today's world, women's participation in paid employment has tremendously increased. This is largely due to the breakthroughs made by international women's movements throughout history, leading to women's more opportunities and access to education. With more education, women become more empowered and are able to enjoy economic and social status. With more education, women can perform the job that once was not allowed for women or was limited to only for men. This includes diplomacy. Like many other professions, diplomacy in the old days was criticised to have exploited women for their unpaid and unrecognised labors and skills. Madeleine Albright once said that "the only way a woman could truly make her foreign policy views felt was by marrying a diplomat and then pouring tea on an offending ambassador's lap".

Nowadays, the world can witness a large number of female candidates being recruited each year in foreign services around the world, something that would have surprised our ancestors in the past centuries. Currently, we have female diplomats, the profession that has been shaped by masculine values and worldviews. Today, there is an immense increase in the number of female ambassadors, the most senior position at a diplomatic mission abroad. In addition, the trend of

having more women practicing diplomacy is the result of the changing nature of today's diplomacy. At the present time, we live in a fast-paced and constantly changing world with challenges, derived from such non-traditional security issues as transnational crime, terrorism, disaster management and relief, information security, food and energy security, cybersecurity, climate change, public health epidemics. The changing nature of today's diplomacy with these non-traditional challenges certainly requires diplomats with a broad spectrum of personal attributes, linked with human capital in the forms of knowledge and skills, gained through education and training. Personal attributes can also be in the forms of international skills, communication skills, negotiation skills, networking behaviours, ability to take risk, adaptability, and proactive personality.

With more women in diplomacy, their role in and contribution to diplomatic service has been significantly recognised and celebrated. Since the beginning of the 21st century, nine women (Shirin Ebadi, Wangari Maathai, Tawakkol Karman, Leymah Gbowee, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Malala Yousafzai, Nadia Murad, Maria Ressa, Narges Mohammadi) have been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their work and contribution to peace-building, democracy, and human rights. Women's rights and empowerment have also been highlighted with greater awareness and commitment in numerous international institutions. Since 2000, the UN's Security Council has adopted 10 UN's resolutions on women, peace, and security. The creation of the UN Women in 2010 is another achievement, reflecting global efforts to accelerate progress of the UN Member States in accomplishing gender equality and women's empowerment. On the other side of the coin, the establishment of UN Women also shows that women and girls in many parts of the world are still deprived from enjoying equal participation in all aspects of life, including income security, decent work, and economic autonomy, and thus it needs such a global body to help address the issue.

Target 5.4 of SDG Goal 5, calling for the recognition and value of unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate, is another evident example of the existing gender stereotype being discussed earlier. If such stereotypes were no longer prevalent, why did the international community need to implement the SDG Goal 5 and its Target 5.4? Having adopted this Target, it reflects the reality that women around the world are still expected to fulfill the role of caregivers and homemakers. It also shows that gender stereotypes still influence the society attitudes in segregating the roles of women and men, and that social expectations on women are still persistent in many societies. Women are still expected to shoulder the “second shift”, which is the unpaid care and domestic work at home, after finishing their “first shift” at paid work. According to UN Women, women spend double the hours on their second shift than men, leaving women with longer working hours, without economic gains, and with more time poverty than their male counterparts.

The first and second shifts also reflect that, for women with familial obligations and without any social support, it may be impossible or very difficult for them to attain an outstanding performance in order to break the glass-ceiling at their workplace. A single woman without children is likely to be freer to take independent decisions and devote to her career than a woman with a family and children. Statistics have shown that the proportion of female ambassadors who are single or without family obligations is greater than those with family and children. For those women, having the family support, may it be from spousal or extended-family, they are likely to gain tangible help at home and psychological support, which are crucial elements for them to pursue their career goals, while maintaining work-family balance. Just imagine, how can a mother be able to devote herself to her work if she is unsure that her children are well taken care of at home

and being taken to and picked up from school safely. This is why many professional women, including female diplomats, tend to resign from their career once they become a mother or adopt lateral career advancement, instead of the vertical career progress, in order to gain work-family balance.

This article is timely as it is published on 8 March 2024, which is celebrated annually and globally as the International Women's Day to recognise the roles of women in contributing to social and economic progress. The Day, though just once a year, is also marked to remind the world that gender equality is a global issue that needs worldwide efforts to address. And only through definite achievement of gender equality in every society, the world can surely attain true peace and security and achieve absolute sustainable development. In addition, the Day should also be reminded among women that to achieve gender equality, women should recognise the differences among themselves and that there are several sub-groups with diverse circumstances among women in all professions, including diplomacy. Women should stop being their own worst enemies, but rather, they should support, help, and empower each other. In addition, it is crucial that organisations recognise workforce diversity within their workplaces and are able to adopt appropriate human resource policies and practices that ensure career development and career advancement opportunities to all sub-groups who are their workforce. These include family-friendly policies and practices that should be critically underlined to help women with family responsibilities achieve work-family balance and be able to pursue their career goals and career advancement, which is a crucial component to achieve SDG Goal 5 and its Target 5.4.