



Bolstering the Boys Club: Security Vetting, Diversity and Diplomatic Gatekeeping

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Summary

Much of the research on gender and diplomacy has focused on those already let into the 'club'. This article analyses the 'threshold' to diplomacy: security clearance processes. Security vetting ultimately determines who progresses, and what level of clearance (and therefore seniority or position) a diplomat can achieve. This article seeks to trace the journey for individuals entering a diplomatic career. It argues that security vetting is simultaneously based on legitimate processes for assessing potential national security threats, and on values interpretation (such as loyalty, maturity and trustworthiness) which may invite bias or lead to illegitimate processes of exclusion. By excavating the gendered history of vetting, we can better understand the limitations of the current de-historicised and 'impartial' process. We argue that clearance processes have not sufficiently evolved over the past decades of social progress, which has negative implications for the evolution of diplomacy as a social practice.

Keywords

security vetting – diplomacy – gender – diversity – security clearances

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1 Introduction

Much of the research on gender and diplomacy to date has focused on those already let into the ‘club’ of international elites and details the impact of the exclusion of women in senior positions and the impact on diplomatic agendas. This has resulted in a fast-growing field of research that has detailed, for example, that women make up only 15 per cent of permanent representatives to the United Nations (UN) and only 21 per cent of ambassadors.¹ From 1992-2019, women made up only 2 per cent of chief mediators, 4 per cent of witnesses and signatories, and 9 per cent of negotiators worldwide.² Data has shown that women are less likely to be posted to ‘high status’ countries and are more likely to be posted in lower-ranking or deputy positions.³ The field has evolved to think about structural explanations for such exclusion,⁴ yet this has also resulted in scholarly enquiry that may be too temporally limited to fully grasp the nature and extent of gendered (and other) diplomatic inequality regimes. Feminist methods often require ‘excavation’ techniques to understand how, despite legal and rhetorical commitments to diversity, the lived experience of people engaging with these institutions may tell a different story.⁵ This article also draws upon the recent sociological turn in intelligences studies.⁶

This article therefore pioneers a major research innovation by looking at the ‘threshold’ to diplomacy: security clearance processes. Security vetting ultimately determines who progresses, and what level of clearance (and therefore seniority or range of position) individuals can achieve in diplomacy. This has specific implications for women and minoritised groups, given that ‘[t]he higher an organisation’s security clearance is, the worse the gender balance.’⁷ This article builds off a world-leading research project into vetting to trace the inclusion journey for individuals seeking entrance to a diplomatic career. It finds that while security vetting processes are based on legitimate processes for assessing potential national security threats, they are also informed by subjective judgements and values interpretations — plus an inherent ‘right’ to discriminate to safeguard national security — which may invite bias or lead to illegitimate processes of exclusion that fail to keep pace with social change.

1 UN Women 2019; Towns 2023.

2 UN Women 2019.

3 Towns and Niklasson 2017.

4 Towns and Niklasson 2017; Aggestam and Towns 2019.

5 Charlesworth, Chinkin and Wright 1991.

6 Hoffman, Chalati and Dogan 2023; Nolan 2018.

7 Cave et al. 2019, para. 9.

As Scott notes, ‘fundamental issues about vetting — who is vetted, how they are vetted, why they are vetted — appear never to have been considered in a systematic fashion’ — a gap we intend to interrogate.⁸

This article first explores the research methodology and inspiration for research, before canvassing the history and context of vetting processes as they relate to diplomacy. Individuals’ paths through the security vetting process are traced to understand critical junctures and barriers for those seeking entrance to diplomacy. Finally, the article concludes with the implications and ramifications of current vetting processes, as well as directions for future research.

2 Uncovering the Research Project: Methodology

This project is the result of a world-leading research collaboration in Australia to research and develop training modules to support diversity and inclusion in the vetting process. Five modules were developed to support policy and practice on gender, sexuality, cultural and linguistic diversity, First Nations and Indigenous inclusion, and generational differences throughout the security clearance process. Three more are planned to focus on neurodiversity, mental health and people living with disabilities. Modules were co-designed with practitioners. Additionally, an exhaustive global literature review of security vetting research as it applies to diversity was canvassed in order to understand best practice. The article draws directly from this research, which was analysed thematically in a separate detailed literature review, and specifically digs into the literature and practice of vetting from publicly available materials. Indeed, previously we have argued that the topic of security vetting as it applies to gender, sexuality, ethnicity and other forms of diversity is one that ‘warrants greater exploration’.⁹

The specific focus on security vetting as it applies to diplomacy developed out of this aforementioned project, with critical research insights and theoretical questions applied to the field of gender and diplomacy research. Security vetting processes are relevant to diplomacy studies in three core ways. Firstly, diplomacy generally requires some level of security clearance, and so the very functioning of the foreign ministry and its staff is dependent on security clearance processes that act as a first ‘gate’ or threshold to cross, ultimately influencing diversity in diplomacy.

⁸ Scott 2020.

⁹ Stephenson and Harris Rimmer 2023.

Secondly, the increased whole-of-government approach to international relations has resulted in a much more professionally diverse posting cohort, with diplomatic missions hosting not only the ministry of foreign affairs (MFA) but envoys from across national security, intelligence, policing, trade and beyond, plus private security personnel,¹⁰ all vetted as part of strict security clearance processes. Therefore, security vetting directly impacts not only on those who seek to become diplomats in the MFA, but also on a whole raft of pseudo-diplomats and envoys across other fields who contribute to the overall culture, gender diversity and make-up of missions. This cohort generally includes intelligence officers. Indeed, Manjikian even notes that to spy is to be a 'perverse diplomat', and that intelligence workers (who may sometimes fill the ranks of those at post) can be said to be 'performing diplomacy' or 'passing' as diplomats.¹¹ The intelligence community also shares similarities, being part of what Hoffmann, Chalati and Dogan see as 'epistemic communities' that share similar beliefs, practices and procedures that overlap and interlay.¹² Missions often function as their own closed ecosystems, providing support, social networks and information to progress individual careers. It is reasonable to expect that the gender (and ethnic) balances of missions as a greater whole are significant for understanding the gendered dynamics of diplomacy, and so any impact that security vetting has on diversity (as part of a wider suite of processes/practices that impact on diversity) is worth considering.

Thirdly, auto-ethnographic literature from female diplomats suggests that keeping a security clearance and operating within its parameters affects their experience of being a diplomat in material ways, especially on a posting. As Tonka Kostadinova writes, '[d]iplomats themselves operate in [an] environment of strict hierarchical rules and different controlling mechanisms (e.g. surveillance by national security agencies) and are traditionally cautious in providing information to external parties, especially when sensitive issues such as gender, race, sexuality, and human security are concerned'.¹³ In this light, the purpose of the article is to problematise and interrogate security vetting practices as a critical site of gendered diplomatic relations and understand its potential impact on the diplomatic 'pipeline' and the informal and formal 'rules of the game' for those within the institution.¹⁴

10 Cusumano 2017.

11 Manjikian 2020, 76 and 198.

12 Hoffmann, Chalati and Dogan 2023.

13 Kostadinova 2022, 145.

14 Chappell and Waylen, 2013.

While the closed nature of security clearance processes makes them challenging to study, vetting processes are critical to research. Approximately 5 million people hold security clearances in the United States (nearly 2 per cent of the population).¹⁵ In Australia, the primary focus of the work we have undertaken, roughly 50,000 new clearances are issued each year by a vetting cohort of roughly 550 staff who vet staff across diplomacy, intelligence, national security and other spheres of government.¹⁶ Roughly a few hundred of those will enter the MFA as diplomatic staff each year. A lack of transparency around the process, questions and methods used remains a challenge to researching this topic. All resources drawn on throughout this research were publicly accessible and unclassified: published on agency websites, from first-hand published accounts (e.g. biographies), auto-ethnographies, reviews in tribunals and courts in the public domain, or existing research and news publications.

3 Security Vetting Processes for Diplomats: an Overview

Most diplomats globally require a security clearance on top of normal employment vetting processes as they represent the state and have access to classified information as part of their role, as well as producing cables that create classified human intelligence. Vetting processes vary from state to state, incorporating various processes designed to determine whether an individual possesses and can demonstrate an appropriate level of integrity.¹⁷ We present here the Australian security vetting process as an example common to most countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Under the Australian Government Protective Security Policy Framework (PSPF), personnel who need ongoing access to security classified resources must hold a security clearance at the appropriate level. Security classified resources include protected, secret and top secret information, systems that hold classified information and classified assets. A diplomat may also be required to hold a security clearance when posted overseas as they occupy a position of trust requiring additional assurance about the integrity of the position's occupant.

The purpose of the security vetting process is to determine whether an individual possesses and can demonstrate an appropriate level of integrity. In the security context, integrity is defined as a range of character traits that indicate the individual is able to protect state resources. In Australia, for instance, the

15 Manjikian 2020.

16 Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) 2018.

17 Nolan 2018; Scott 2020.

character traits that candidates are vetted against are honesty, trustworthiness, maturity, tolerance, resilience and loyalty.¹⁸

The vetting process needs to establish confidence that the applicant possesses a sound and stable character, and that they are not unduly vulnerable to influence or coercion. As an example, the Australian framework, like most others globally, requires that any doubt regarding an individual’s suitability to hold a security clearance be resolved in the national interest; in other words, national security trumps all other factors.

We outline a common path to security vetting in Figure 1.

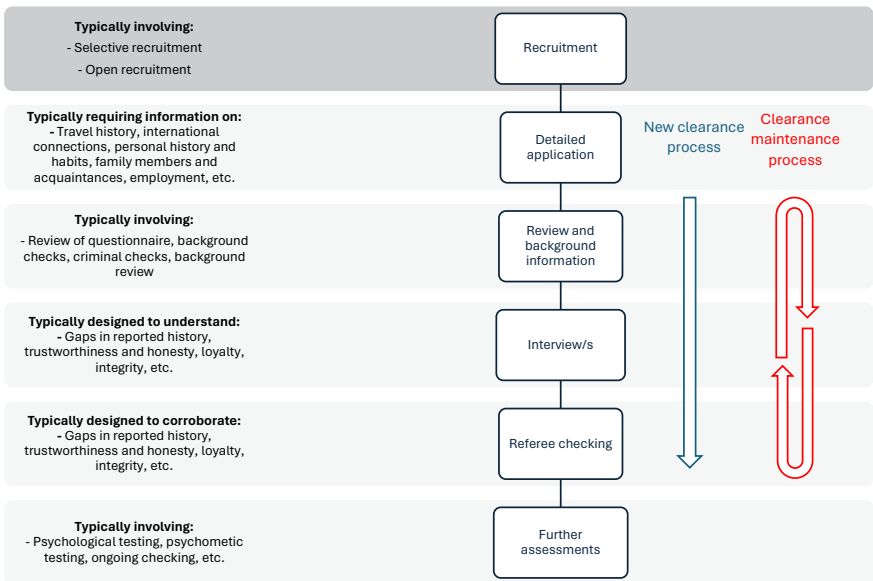


FIGURE 1 Typical security vetting process
SOURCE: AUTHORS

The vetting process typically includes a recruitment phase, involving either selective or open recruitment (practices vary, from regular job advertisements to, historically, ‘tap on the shoulder’ and insider approaches), followed by security vetting, which typically involves some form of intake form or questionnaire, review and background analysis, interview/s, referee checks and further assessments (psychometric or psychological testing, for instance). Some stages of this process may be repeated as part of maintaining a candidate’s security clearance. This process is not indicative of any one state’s approach to vetting

18 Australian Government 2023.

but rather an amalgamation of approaches as sourced from open-source information (see, e.g., the UK's *Personnel Security & Vetting Guide*, the US Defense Contract Audit Agency's *Road to Your Security Clearance*, and auto-ethnographic accounts).¹⁹ In the literature, while scholars such as Scott have begun to interrogate questions of who is vetted, by whom and for what,²⁰ and a few auto-ethnographic accounts of the process exist,²¹ there is a dire need for intersectional analyses of how the vetting process may influence, and be influenced by, diversity.

4 The Problematic History of Vetting

Current security vetting practices in places such as the United States or Australia were largely formulated in the 1940s and 1950s in response to the emerging Cold War and the need to combat insider threats. The clearance process assesses candidates for 'a sound and stable character' and that they are not unduly vulnerable to influence or coercion.²² This may include checking for drug and alcohol issues, problems with credit or bankruptcy, failure to meet tax obligations, unsatisfactory employment records, criminal record or violations of the law, extensive travel, education, residence and/or employment overseas, dual citizenship, foreign contacts, pornography use and deviant behaviour, and other forms of risk-taking. In Australia, vetting practices are informed by the PSPF and are designed to look for 'suitability indicators' — honesty, trustworthy, tolerance, maturity, loyalty and resilience. Similar practices are followed globally, such as in the United States, where the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) Security Executive Agent Directive 4 (SEAD-4) outlines that national security eligibility determinations look for 'stability, trustworthiness, reliability, discretion, character, honesty and judgement'.²³ We argue that these seemingly neutral values could be interpreted through a lens that elevates masculine interpretations or exemplars of those values.

There are differences in vetting processes globally, with some states adopting a centralised vetting process that encompasses the whole of government, and others taking an agency-by-agency approach. In some states, such as Australia, security clearance processes are carried out by a centralised

19 Defense Contract Audit Agency 2023; Nolan 2018.

20 Scott 2020.

21 See Nolan 2018; Kostadinova 2022; Ministry of Defence n.d.; UK Government 2023.

22 Department of Defence 2022, para. 4.

23 Office of the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) 2017, 5.

government agency, in this case the Australian Government Security Vetting Agency (AGSVA), which oversees Australian federal government vetting and coordinates vetting contractors. Additional security vetting or organisational suitability assessments might be undertaken at an agency level (such as the MFA) — although these agency-specific checks are not always recognised by other agencies. In the US, vetting is undertaken by individual agencies, and federal agencies will normally accept another agency's investigation as the basis for granting a security clearance. Despite these differences in national approaches to vetting, the process across agencies and countries is similar and seeks to vet for similar qualities and security risk profiles that may expose states to reputational damage, security threats, espionage, foreign influence or other compromises of sensitive information.

The clearance process is ultimately designed to ensure the safety and security of sensitive personal and government information, and therefore some form of clearance is usually a prerequisite for foreign service. Like in other forms of government (intelligence and national security), diplomatic personnel need to be 'known' entities 'whose discretion and background can be checked and assured'.²⁴ Given the values and characteristics vetting seeks to understand and judge, questions around who is deemed trustworthy, reliable, honest and stable, and what types of 'character' are accepted, are pertinent. While current policies in countries such as Australia and the US are explicit in not discriminating on the basis of 'race, color, religion, sex, national origin, disability, or sexual orientation in making a national security eligibility determination', security vetting practices are ultimately designed to discriminate.²⁵ Not just anyone and everyone is eligible for clearance, and many of the vetting processes are determined by subjective assessments about individual trustworthiness and risk. There are very few grounds on which to challenge a vetting decision in the courts, and the findings of any appeal may not be public or address the merits of the decision. Veters may often rely on 'gut feel' to establish their judgements, and even when all other things are equal, individuals with 'complicated histories' can experience such lengthy wait times that they drop out of the pipeline (or get another job) before their security check is even finished. While baseline clearance processes can take as little as a month, top secret clearance levels may take over a year to complete depending on the individual.

Given that policies and practices are influenced by the prevailing social milieu, laws and norms of the time, it is worth considering the origins of vetting

24 Proctor 2005, 451.

25 DNI 2022, 5.

and the degree to which security clearance processes have adapted over time. Although forms of vetting predate modern clearance processes, many states' vetting procedures were established in the 1940s–1950s. In a study of UK intelligence communities, Proctor describes security vetting examinations as having 'a distinctly class bias', as well as a bias for being 'from the right sort of family' and a gender bias.²⁶ Proctor found that gendered assumptions about loyalty in intelligence considered men 'to be more patriotic and selflessly loyal' while also vulnerable 'to the wiles of women'.²⁷ Women, meanwhile, encountered many challenges, with their 'true and overriding loyalties' familial ones, not national ones.²⁸ Women were vetted through their male connections, with the assumption made that while they may betray the state, they would never betray their husband, parents, children or kin. Thus, 'women who were well connected to men of status, integrity and patriotism, were deemed acceptable security risks'.²⁹ This has evident impacts on diversity within the cohort of women historically given security clearances, with poor, ethnic, sexuality diverse and lower/working-class women seen as greater security risks, potentially discounted entirely from service. This is evidenced to this day in diplomacy, with Kostadinova noting that in Bulgaria, the State Security Agency refused renewal of several women's security clearances 'on the grounds of "untrustworthy behaviour" while networking with foreign male diplomats and "misconduct" during their diplomatic postings abroad'.³⁰

Although there is a dearth of research on security vetting in diplomacy, findings from surrounding studies in intelligence and national security are likely to impact on security clearance processes for diplomacy as well. This is particularly the case given some states' centralisation of security clearance processes, as well as consistencies across government portfolios around recruitment and retention policies. And, ultimately, what is considered a national security risk for intelligence remains a national security risk for diplomacy. Indeed, in August 2021, the Australian Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee handed down a report after inquiries heard that the government's current security clearance processes 'may be creating a barrier' to recruiting diplomatic staff with desirable skill sets and expertise.³¹ The Committee further recommended that the government review security clearance processes to ensure they remain 'fit for purpose' and do not discount

26 Proctor 2005, 451.

27 Proctor 2005, 452.

28 Proctor 2005, 452.

29 Proctor 2005, 452.

30 Kostadinova 2022, 480.

31 Jenkins 2021, para. 9.

individuals from particular backgrounds. The Committee found that while security clearance processes ‘must be robust, the process should not act as an inadvertent impediment to Australians of a particular heritage, in-country experience or country expertise being employed by DFAT [the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade] or other agencies’.³²

Lomas’s research into diversity in intelligence in the UK context found that traditional methods of recruitment, security vetting and background checks factored heavily into explicit and implicit discrimination ‘against those from non-Oxbridge backgrounds’ in government, with a small exception for specialist linguists or clerical grades.³³ Some of the limitations were the result of nationality rules, yet latent racism and monoculturalism also prevailed. There was some flexibility for candidates with dual nationality from Commonwealth or English-speaking countries, yet the growth of the ‘wrong sort of British subject’ led to curbs in security departments.³⁴ This is akin to recent findings in Australian international affairs agencies, where Stephenson noted a reluctance to appoint candidates with an accent and recorded careful scripts around ethnic diversity being seen as a ‘security risk’.³⁵ Medcalf notes that ‘[t]he rigidities of the current [security vetting] system, which dates back to the 1950s, can be an obstacle to harnessing the talent of multicultural Australia, or new generations who live and think differently’.³⁶

Additionally, for much of the UK government’s recent history, there were ‘officially’ no gay officers in service, ‘their sexuality hidden thanks to Positive Vetting (PV) rules banning gay officials dealing with secret information’.³⁷ However, LGBTIQ+ individuals certainly did exist, with subsequent accounts and research outlining some LGBTIQ+ diplomats’ hiding their sexuality for career purposes.³⁸ The sexuality restrictions on officers stemmed from perceived security risks of employing homosexuals, which went back to the 1950s and rules that were a result of the Cadogan report on security, which argued that ‘sexuality was a mark of unreliability that would also undermine the ability of the department to manage Britain’s diplomatic relations’.³⁹ Similar trends are found in the United States, with Callum noting that prior to 1975, the intelligence community openly barred employing homosexuals

32 Jenkins 2021, para. 14.

33 Lomas 2021, 9.

34 Lomas 2021, 10.

35 Stephenson 2024.

36 Medcalf in Bucci and Hurst 2020, para. 25.

37 Lomas 2021, 11.

38 Stephenson 2024; Janoff 2021.

39 Lomas 2021, 12.

and looked for evidence of ‘sexual deviance’ during background checks and security vetting.⁴⁰ Among the main concerns was that individuals would be able to be blackmailed; however, the loyalty of individuals was also a subject of contention, and wider homophobia (legally and socially sanctioned at the time) also impacted on individuals. Callum notes that while the social stigma has decreased over time, ‘the logic of prohibition has become increasingly strained’.⁴¹ It was not until 1980 that an openly gay individual was able to retain security clearances in the United States, and not until the early 1990s that sexual orientation or preference was removed as a point of emphasis during background screening and vetting.

Differential treatment on the basis of gender, race or sexuality is crystallised in the overall mandate of security clearance processes, which is the *right to discriminate on national security grounds*. In the UK, this is highlighted by the 1968 Race Relations Act, which made racial discrimination illegal in housing, employment and so on, but also gave government the right to discriminate on national security grounds — an exemption from the terms of the Act. Therefore, while Lomas recorded that around 15 per cent of the applicants to the Secret Intelligence Service were from a Black, Asian or marginalised ethnicity background, just 9 per cent of staff overall were from a minority group, and they often did not have the highest security clearances.⁴² The Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament in the UK noted that security vetting is currently a process that is ‘too bureaucratic’, takes too long and is considered an ‘inhibitor to diversity’ — all findings that are reinforced in the Australian and US contexts as well.⁴³ Additionally, a lack of diversity in the vetting cadre and a need for cultural awareness and training for vetting staff are seen as crucial issues to be addressed.

The topic of security vetting as it applies to gender, race and sexuality is one that warrants greater exploration given vetting’s focus on uncovering ‘deviance’ and secrets, the deeply personal nature of gender and sexuality identity, and the ongoing systemic forms of discrimination and harassment marginalised communities face generally in society, as well as through state-sanctioned government systems. The ‘right to discriminate on national security grounds’ is worth understanding further in the context of enduring problematic social norms, diplomatic norms and the legacy of laws that differentiate treatment on the basis of gender, race and sexuality. Additionally, given the ‘Lavender

40 Callum 2001, 28.

41 Callum 2001, 28.

42 Lomas 2021.

43 Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament 2018.

Scare' and 'Lesbian Witch Hunts' moral panic during the mid-20th century, which saw overt homophobia and many homosexuals' expulsion from government service, as well as colonial policies such as the White Australia Policy and denigration of First Nations people, LGBTIQ+ and ethnically diverse communities may have more to fear than others from vetting requirements. This calls for deeper understanding and the generation of knowledge now, so as not to repeat past mistakes in practice, as well as to understand enduring sites of contention and reform.

5 Tracing the Inclusion Journey

Prior research on gender and diplomacy characterises diplomacy as a 'closed' club with a tendency to promote from within and see diplomacy as a 'career for life'. Indeed, it is so 'closed' that Manjikian notes those who seek to operate in foreign policy and international relations 'must undergo vetting and initiation rituals unique to secret organisations', comparing such entry processes to those used by the priesthood or the Mafia.⁴⁴ In Australia, there is a tendency for diplomats to be recruited through graduate programmes and retained and promoted within the MFA, with fewer instances of lateral transfers in or out compared with the rest of government.⁴⁵ Once in, the literature is more extensive around the challenges for women, including patterns of appointments and postings that result in women gatekept from the most prestigious, high-status posts or most important countries.⁴⁶ Vertical and horizontal segregation is witnessed, and even despite some MFAs rapidly progressing in terms of women's representation, gendered challenges are noted to 'evolve' within MFAs. Indeed, a diplomatic glass cliff has been evidenced in Australia, resulting in women achieving parity in leadership just as funding and power within the diplomatic institution is stagnating (Stephenson, 2024), while Kreft, Niklasson and Towns found that despite some progress in women's representation, gender patterns in diplomacy do not diminish over time.⁴⁷ Further, race and sexuality (as well as disability and class) are known to have a further multiplicative effect on women in diplomacy, as diverse women face gendered, racist/racialised and heteronormative policies and practices constraining their representation and experiences.

44 Manjikian 2020, 149.

45 Stephenson 2024.

46 Towns and Niklasson 2017.

47 Kreft, Niklasson and Towns 2022.

Before even reaching ambassadorship or being on the path to posting or leadership, recruitment and vetting processes are key to diplomatic gatekeeping. In Australia, candidates must be sponsored by the MFA to get a security clearance, which usually involves some type of offer of employment conditional on security clearance. There are four levels of security clearance in Australia: baseline, negative vetting level 1 (NV1), negative vetting level 2 (NV2) and positive vetting (PV). Security clearance can take between one month and over a year to complete, with the Australian National Audits Office (ANAO) finding that the chief vetting agency, AGSVA, 'consistently failed to meet its clearance processing benchmark timeframes'.⁴⁸ Clearance processes may involve filling out demographic and life details on a form, identity document checking and interviews with the candidate, referee checks and interviews with referees, in-person visits to a person's hometown, criminal checks and more. Veters, who are often retired public servants themselves, must make their assessment based on the PSPF, with the final decision on whether to grant a clearance or to what level undertaken by a secondary, unrelated person from the vetter themselves — but based on the vetter's recommendation.

Through this process, security vetting can be seen as an overt practice of gatekeeping. This is not necessarily problematic in and of itself, given that the aim of such gatekeeping is to minimise or eradicate the risk that sensitive information falls into the wrong hands. Yet this licence to discriminate can be problematic given many states' controversial social histories regarding women's employment participation and wider gender bias and inequality, plus systemic and social racism, and ongoing discrimination of LGBTIQ+ people. As Manjikian notes, many accountability processes in intelligence, for instance, feature a 'hierarchical relationship characterised by high levels of distrust between participants'.⁴⁹ This can be additionally problematic in the context of diversity and inclusion.

Indeed, although the PSPF (or SEAD-4 or other similar policy documents globally) provides the guiding framework for making subjective assessments and judgements about a person's character, what is deemed in the 'national interest' or a 'national security threat' are shifting terms and concepts that morph and adapt over time, depending on the operational realities and threats of the day. Complementing the PSPF, veters may be influenced by everything from White Papers (for example, Australia's 2016 Defence White Paper or 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper) to media commentary, government speeches and events, news, think tank and university publications, reports, colleagues or

48 ANAO 2018, section 1.16.

49 Manjikian 2016, 686.

others in their professional network, as well as vetters' social networks, friends and family. The subjective nature of assessments combined with legal, procedural and contextual issues ultimately result in a troubling threshold that may not only vet out trustworthy, talented and diverse candidates from diplomacy, but also discourage them from applying in the first place. The fact that clearance must be maintained through regular and ongoing checks further guarantees that vetting processes may even be used as a punitive measure against 'misbehaving' individuals, enforcing compliance in subjectively assessed and often highly gendered ways.⁵⁰ On postings, diplomats also receive high levels of diplomatic protection from security actors.⁵¹

In tracing the inclusion journey in diplomacy, core problematic gatekeeping processes are canvassed in this section, under the themes of contemporary context, procedural issues and legal legacies.

5.1 *Contemporary Context*

As already mentioned, while security clearance processes do not discriminate on grounds such as gender, sexuality or ethnicity, and there are key documents such as the PSPF to guide assessment of individual values and character, security clearance processes are ultimately reliant on a wide range of subjective judgements beyond the simple scope of the PSPF. This has specific ramifications for women and minorities given the colonial, gendered, racialised, heteronormative, ableist and classed histories of many contemporary nations, such as Australia, as well as the gendered, raced and other institutional dynamics of the MFA. The subjective nature of assessments is also affected by the contemporary context — whether and what kinds of emerging diplomatic or military tensions, trade wars and other conflicts, terror attacks, social events, pandemics and disasters are happening at the time of the vetting process.

This contemporary context has specific implications for certain identity groups seeking clearance and ultimately progress within diplomacy. Anti-Asian hate crime soared during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic following news that the virus had originated in Wuhan, China.⁵² This has only accelerated the cooling of diplomatic relations between Australia and China, with the Lowy Institute's 2021 Poll finding that trust, warmth and confidence in China and China's leaders began to decline in Australia in 2017. The Lowy Institute found that in 2023, nearly one in five Chinese Australians had been threatened

50 Kostadinova 2022.

51 Cusumano 2017.

52 Hooper 2021.

or attacked in the previous year,⁵³ while a 2019 study by the Australian National University found that 81.9 per cent of Asian Australians had experienced some form of discrimination, the highest among all the self-identified ethnic groups in the sample.⁵⁴ In 2021, the Lowy Institute quantified whether China's military activities and system of government had a positive or negative influence on an individual's overall view of China: 93 per cent said 'negative influence' to China's military activities in our region and 92 per cent said 'negative influence' to China's system of government.⁵⁵ Not only has anti-China rhetoric proliferated both in the media and in some political circles, but it was also a theme of previous research on gender and diplomacy conducted by Stephenson.⁵⁶ Indeed, previous research noted that anti-Chinese sentiment not only affected Chinese Australians' treatment within international affairs, but also impacted on security vetting time frames and diplomatic colleagues' overlooking their expertise and contributed to an overarching culture of distrust or caution within the MFA and security agencies. Within this social and political context, and based on recorded experiences within international affairs organisations, it is expected that wider social sentiment would also influence an individual's perceived trustworthiness, reliability and credibility within a security vetting context.

Wider gender inequality, bias and discrimination is also salient to consider. In the literature, White argues that while spies and spying are often characterised as male, femininity is entwined with conceptions of deception and espionage,⁵⁷ with sexual perversion and moral corruption problems Proctor and Manjikian argue have been associated with women.⁵⁸ Given that Australia's 2018 ANAO review into security vetting highlighted insider threats as a challenge that AGSVA is failing to appropriately vet for,⁵⁹ it is worth being critical of the way in which gender has often been conflated or associated with insider threats, espionage and deviance — security vetting 'red flags'. Indeed, Manjikian notes that a narrative exists 'which represents the traitor as effeminate and lacking in agency', and that the double agent is seen as a 'queer figure' that 'appears to lack both agency and masculinity — having been coerced by someone stronger or more powerful'.⁶⁰ The gendered norms and language

53 Hsu 2023.

54 Biddle et al. 2019.

55 Lowy Institute 2021.

56 Stephenson 2024.

57 White 2007.

58 Proctor 2005; Manjikian 2020.

59 ANAO 2018.

60 Manjikian 2020, 103 and 118.

surrounding trustworthiness and security threats is pertinent to consider in terms of its impact on how vetters view passable characteristics and traits for security clearance.

Alongside increasing anti-Chinese sentiment, two decades of the ‘war on terror’ have exacerbated other forms of racism and xenophobia, including Islamophobia. Patel notes that ‘[t]wo decades of permissive rules for intelligence collection, coupled with weak protections for speech and against discrimination, have subverted legitimate counterterrorism aims’.⁶¹ This presents an important opportunity to revisit ‘invidious profiling under the guise of national security’ that might have previously kept ethnically diverse candidates from diplomacy.⁶²

5.2 *Procedural Issues*

Procedural issues also impact on diverse candidates’ experience of vetting, as well as their ultimate progression through the diplomatic pipeline. A number of problematic procedural issues are covered in this section, including the power dynamics of vetting interviews, practices and behaviour during interviews, and issues stemming from documentation constraints.

Interviews with both a candidate and a candidate’s referee/s can involve inherent power imbalances. The vetter is tasked not only with assessing a candidate’s value alignment (in terms of trustworthiness, loyalty, reliability and so on as discussed earlier), but also with establishing rapport and interview safety to allow a candidate or referee to disclose private, sensitive and personal information. Sometimes this may involve the disclosure of particular information for the first or only time. The role that the vetter plays, plus the demographics of the vetter and their approach, can have an impact. Although the exact demographics of vetters are not published or accessible in annual reports in Australia, anecdotally we have been told they are typically older or retired public servants and are predominantly white Australians in terms of ethnic background. Although there is a mix of genders among vetting staff, gender did feature as a concern in terms of power imbalances during interviews. Interviews can often involve finding out particularly sensitive personal information and include questions around a candidate’s sexual activity, preferences, any ‘deviance’, illegal behaviour, pornography use, debt, drug and alcohol use, and criminal behaviour, as well as the behaviour of close associates. For young women or gender diverse folk, or those from particular ethnic or religious backgrounds, questioning of this nature may be additionally

61 Patel 2021, para. 1.

62 Patel 2021, para. 1.

troubling or problematic if the vetter is of a different gender, of a different religion or significantly older.

Considering gender, racial and heteronormative hierarchies in wider society as well as in diplomacy, those who do not conform to the traditional 'white, straight, male' archetype might experience anguish, distress, discomfort or distrust in invasive vetting systems designed to establish belonging or exclusion. This may manifest in security clearance processes in several ways, such as fear of persons in authority (particularly those in uniform); fear of putting relatives or friends in danger; fear of the interview process; and fear of the consequences if the application is rejected. Issues around loss of self-esteem may also be present for those who have experienced trauma, and candidates may seek to withhold information which they believe will lower the respect of others towards themselves. The disclosure of sexual history in particular may be troubling or traumatic for historically marginalised or minority individuals, given that research has found that women, trans people, First Nations and people living with a disability face well-documented high rates of sexual violence and abuse.⁶³ Gender, cultural and societal expectations therefore impact on individuals' willingness and openness to disclose key information.

Culture shock can also impact on those undergoing vetting processes, given that individuals who move from one culture to another — especially if this implies a move from a less developed country to a more developed environment — may experience bewilderment and anxiety. This in turn can affect a candidate's ability to make clear and coherent statements. For instance, those who have been asylum seekers or refugees may speak in a confused and unconvincing manner not because they are lying, but because of the insecurity and anxiety caused by the difficulties of life in a new social and cultural environment. Unfamiliarity with the style of question-and-answer vetting interviews may be another factor which inhibits communication, particularly for communities previously subjected to surveillance and policing. Disparities in notions and concepts can also impact on vetting communication and the assessment of reliability, trustworthiness and integrity. Common words can carry different meanings from one culture to another and be a source of misunderstanding, which can have serious repercussions for individuals of diverse ethnic backgrounds. Common words that can give rise to misunderstanding include relational words, such as brother, sister and cousin. For many cultures, these words are not limited to close relatives but extend to all members of a group or tribe. Notions of time, truth and falsehood can also vary from culture

63 Parliament of Australia 2022; Hudson and Leidl 2015.

to culture and give rise to misunderstandings that put the applicant's credibility in doubt.

These examples reinforce the social reality that while vetting in and of itself may be considered to be an impartial process, different groups of people have different relationships and levels of trust with government and security processes. Despite being impartial, de-gendered, de-racialised and so on, security vetting processes are deeply gendered, racialised and heteronormative in practice and lived reality.

In addition to procedural issues surrounding interviews, documentation can present challenges. While the legalisation of same-sex marriage in Australia has done much to improve the lives and circumstances of LGBTIQ+ communities and wider social attitudes, challenges remain. For example, for candidates listing their parents on security clearance forms, only one 'mother' and 'father' option remains, meaning that individuals cannot accurately list where they have two parents of the same gender. No non-gendered parental language is used. Additionally, vetting forms still make it difficult for gender diverse individuals to correctly identify themselves, including not providing options other than 'male/female' or not providing options for individuals to identify what pronouns (he/she/they) they use. For transgender individuals, further challenges can arise where their chosen name or gender does not reflect the name or gender listed on their birth certificate. Trans individuals are at increased risk of being 'deadnamed' without vetter training and support around LGBTIQ+ inclusion, which can be experienced as deeply isolating, disrespectful and, at worst, traumatising for individuals.

Birth certificates are problematic not just for trans individuals, but also for Indigenous people and refugees. Past government legislation and policies have had lasting intergenerational impacts, with 'multiple disadvantages already experienced by Indigenous people ... compounded by the lack of tangible evidence of legal recognition.'⁶⁴ In New South Wales for instance, although 86.9 per cent of all births that occurred in 2011 were registered in that year, the same was done for only 68.9 per cent of Indigenous births. Likewise, securing the appropriate documentation to prove identity and history can be problematic for refugees, who may have had to flee their country without critical paperwork. Although legal identification and documentation is critical to security vetting processes, securing the correct paperwork cannot be viewed as an impartial and de-historicised process. Lack of access to the 'right' documentation does not always indicate deviance or criminal behaviour, and to penalise individuals or exclude them from the process due to factors outside

64 Calabro 2013, 811.

their control is deeply problematic and may continue to perpetuate inequalities, such as the already severe under-representation of Indigenous Australians in wider government, as well as in diplomacy.⁶⁵

While each of these procedural challenges may present as minor and subject to individual handling of individual cases, they combine additively to present an institutional context fraught with challenges, potential missteps and possibly long delays for women and minority groups. The lack of a robust or transparent review process has not ameliorated these issues for security clearances, unlike other areas of employment law in the public service.⁶⁶ As a threshold process for those seeking a diplomatic career, the ramifications are significant. Even with all the institutional support of an agency behind an individual, ultimately the decision on whether to issue a security clearance, how long it will take and to what level an individual will be cleared is a highly siloed, sacred and secret decision.

5.3 *Legal Legacies*

On top of surrounding context, plus procedural issues and documentation challenges, states' laws can at times present challenges for individuals seeking a security clearance. Laws around homosexuality exemplify some of the legal challenges for diverse groups seeking security clearance. As already highlighted, LGBTIQ+ folk have a long history of being viewed as 'the other', as 'strangers and outsiders engaging in deviant behaviour'.⁶⁷ In the few public records that exist around LGBTIQ+ diplomats, their stories reveal deep and systemic homophobia and state-sanctioned suspicion about their loyalty and conduct.⁶⁸ Coupled with social histories of suspicion, denigration and discrimination, the abolition of the criminalisation of homosexual acts has only occurred gradually and inconsistently globally, with roughly 70 nations still criminalising forms of homosexuality or homosexual acts.⁶⁹ Alongside long-standing homophobia and transphobia, the criminalisation of LGBTIQ+ peoples has an enormous impact on their ability to gain and retain security clearances, both for those who are 'out' and for those still 'in the closet'. For those whose sexuality is hidden or who attempt to hide it during security clearance processes, their perceived risk of being blackmailed is high and their honesty and trustworthiness may be questioned. For those already out, subjective judgements around their

65 Conley Tyler 2016.

66 Scott 2020.

67 Janoff 2021, 33.

68 Janoff 2021, 32; Stephenson 2024.

69 Human Dignity Trust 2022.

sexuality as a form of deviance or lifestyle ‘choice’, although outdated, may still impact on vetters’ judgements of character, discretion and reliability. When combined with recent decades of moral panic around the AIDS crisis, plus the ‘Lavender Scare’ and ‘Lesbian Witch Hunts’ in Australia and the United States from the 1950s (when many contemporary security vetting processes were established) onwards, LGBTIQ+ individuals still face a tenuous and exposed position in undergoing security clearance processes.

In Australia, Tasmania was the last state to repeal the criminalisation of homosexual acts, in 1997, and although individuals can now apply to have their conviction expunged, not all who were convicted have come forward to have it removed from their record. Therefore, when vetting for criminal history, those who were previously convicted for homosexual acts may not have had this removed from their record. This does not mean they are exempt from obtaining a clearance; however, it may complicate and delay the clearance process. Given the already long time frames in processing security clearances, additional delays may further impact on LGBTIQ+ individuals. The criminal label attached to acts and identities now exonerated may still be felt as traumatic, deeply shameful or embarrassing for candidates.

As one example, the above case highlights the impact of legal legacies (and possibly contemporary realities, depending on where you are in the world) on security vetting. Security clearances’ quest to establish clear criminal records and honesty, trustworthiness, reliability and other key characteristics is incomplete and faulty without understanding the deep cultural and social contexts of the marginalisation and criminalisation of identity, and its impact on contemporary LGBTIQ+ candidates. In this way, the vetting process cannot be de-historicised. To de-historicise the process is to rob individuals of critical context that may explain their experience and reactions to the security vetting process and to deny vetters access to the full information from which to make their assessments.

6 Problematic Gaps in Security Vetting

Although the focus of this article has been on security vetting as part of the diplomatic pipeline, it is also relevant to understand how security vetting not only gatekeeps individuals out of diplomatic careers, but also has the potential to overlook problematic beliefs and behaviours that contribute to gendered diplomatic institutions. While the focus of vetting often rests on establishing trustworthiness and reliability, the process also seeks to identify problematic attitudes, behaviours and beliefs that may pose a security threat — and keep them out. Yet not all threats are viewed equally. In a social context that has

overlooked the significance and impact of sexist beliefs and gendered behaviour, extremist misogynistic beliefs and violent interpersonal behaviours such as domestic violence are not always identified as problematic to workplace culture, let alone a security threat.

Indeed, while some researchers now argue that these kinds of radicalised extremist beliefs and behaviours must be treated as a national security threat, misogyny, sexism and even gendered discrimination and abuse have not always been seen as such.⁷⁰ This is troubling given that misogynistic extremism and anti-women movements, such as incels (involuntary celibates), are on the rise globally. Canada has now begun to prosecute incel terror acts, yet the nation is at the vanguard of recognising extreme forms of misogyny as a security issue. Similarly, while vetting screens for criminal history, illegal acts such as perpetrating domestic violence may not be flagged as a security risk — although other forms of illegal behaviour usually are.

Some of these issues prompt a necessary discussion around ‘how far is too far’ with racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic and other kinds of discriminatory or violent beliefs and behaviours in diplomacy. If they are currently not flagged as issues through security clearance processes, should they be? Manjikian argues that because there is a tendency to view those who deal in secret information as having ‘exceptionalism’, some feel such agencies and institutions should not be held to the same standards with reference to sovereignty, transparency, constitutionality or adherence to human rights.⁷¹ Yet particularly for diplomats — who are chosen as the ‘face of the nation’ and to represent the people and the state — exhibiting values, beliefs and behaviours consistent with national values is important.⁷² Bastick and de Torres note that when perpetrators of sexism or gender-based violence pass security vetting, it results in the ‘institutionalisation of impunity’, which has troubling implications for those who exhibit gendered, racist or homophobic values, beliefs or actions and are ultimately vetted, cleared and promoted to senior diplomatic positions.⁷³

7 Discussion

Manjikian argues that ‘there is something dirty, disreputable and “queer” in the activities of intelligence’, something we would extend to the activities involved

⁷⁰ Leidig 2021; Tomkinson, Harper and Attwell 2020.

⁷¹ Manjikian 2020, 4.

⁷² Stephenson 2024.

⁷³ Bastick and de Torres 2010, 21.

in security vetting.⁷⁴ Manjikian uses queer theory to problematise what we would otherwise see as unquestionable. In claiming intelligence as queer, she does not speak about sexuality but rather about intelligence as a deviant activity, dealing with the illegal, the clandestine and the hidden. Although this language is somewhat problematic — sharing terminology between queer as sexuality or identity, and queer as deviant or subversive — security vetting could be viewed as similarly ‘queer’. The process is both secretive from outside scrutiny and simultaneously demanding of all secrets from those vetted. The power of security vetting is therefore without question, demanding compliance and complete transparency and honesty of individuals but reluctant to exhibit the same honesty in return. By problematising the security vetting process as a critical but overlooked element of the diplomatic pipeline, through this article we have sought to unpack what has become so ‘given’ it is almost completely forgotten about even in analyses of women’s and minorities’ experience of diplomacy or wider government. By making such practices visible, Manjikian argues that ‘the project of political emancipation may be brought forward — since it is necessary to know and name a phenomenon fully in order to question its claims and indeed even its existence’.⁷⁵

Ultimately, there are a few key lessons for diplomacy. As Charlesworth highlights in her analysis of gender mainstreaming in the UN system, it is important not to be ‘dazzled by the inclusive language’; rather, it is important to ‘look below the surface’ to where language or practices diverge from policy.⁷⁶ This is critical to the study of security vetting, where entrance to the hallowed halls of the MFA is still closely guarded. It is not that women or minorities are not getting in, as women represent 59 per cent of Australia’s MFA and the agency has achieved parity in senior diplomatic leadership in 2023.⁷⁷ Yet we do know that diversity beyond an increase in women’s representation is yet to be measured. Australia has still only had one Indigenous woman ambassador, and while Australia has now appointed its first queer woman of colour as foreign minister, challenges remain for women of colour and gender/sexuality diverse individuals in diplomacy. Although security vetting forms only one part of the challenges experienced in gaining diverse representation in diplomacy, it critically forms an important part of the threshold processes that impact on women’s and minorities’ gendered, racialised and heteronormative experience of the diplomatic pipeline. Furthermore, given that security clearances have

74 Manjikian 2020, 6.

75 Manjikian 2020, 10.

76 Charlesworth 2006; Otto 2009, 9.

77 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2023.

an expiry date and require maintenance and ongoing checks, there is potential for security clearance downgrades to be used as a punitive measure for those who are seen as risks or who 'cause trouble' in the MFA. Although few accounts of this exist, it has been documented for some LGBTIQ+ individuals, including ambassadors.⁷⁸ Therefore, as a process at the 'front door' to diplomacy, and a process that allows individuals to progress and remain 'in the club', it is negligent to ignore security vetting.

8 Conclusion

This article has attempted to question and problematise security vetting processes as key, understudied areas of gendered, racialised and heteronormative challenges for those seeking diplomatic careers. While security vetting processes are based on legitimate processes for assessing potential national security threats, they are also informed by subjective judgements and values interpretation — plus a 'right' to discriminate — which may invite bias or lead to illegitimate processes of exclusion. Despite intentions otherwise, security vetting processes cannot be viewed as impartial and de-historicised processes with equal effect on all genders, ethnicities or sexualities. They do not represent the full picture when it comes to women's under-representation in some states' diplomatic forces, yet they are an important part of threshold activities guiding entry to diplomacy, impacting on women's and minorities' experiences of the pipeline, as well as potentially influencing their willingness to apply to join in the first place. Further to that, it is unclear to what extent security clearance levels are used as an enforcement tool or punitive measure for individuals seeking to maintain their security clearance; however, from what little literature exists globally, this is an important area for future research.

Given that there are methodological challenges to studying security clearance processes, it is suggested that future research directions not only address the dearth of research on the impact of security vetting processes on gendered dynamics in diplomacy globally, but also develop methodological frameworks that navigate the lack of transparency around processes. Given the emancipatory potential of critical feminist research, a focus on these more 'closed', secret processes in diplomacy could be transformative to both the practice of diplomacy and scholarly enquiry around gender and diplomacy. Ultimately, despite progress being made in some states, particularly around women's and minority groups' experience of diplomacy, we argue that clearance processes have not

78 Janoff 2021; Manjikian 2020.

ultimately sufficiently evolved over the past decades of rapid social progress. Vetting processes and practices continue to neglect the fact that exclusion of women and sexual minorities from state service was once — and, we argue, remains — explicit policy and practice. Problematising security vetting is a critical next step.

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