

Introduction: Approaching Gender and Ministries of Foreign Affairs

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Abstract

This introductory article situates Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs) as gendered institutions at the intersection between domestic and international relations. Based on an extensive literature review and analysis of articles on Australian, Bulgarian, Czech, Japanese, Turkish, UK, and US MFAs in this special issue, we claim that research on gender and MFAs has made important contributions to diplomatic studies by deepening, challenging, and diversifying understandings of what MFAs are; MFAs' institutional structures; and power struggles within MFAs. MFA relations with other actors remain decidedly understudied from a gender perspective, however. Future research on gender and MFAs should direct attention to these relationships, including how they shape MFAs as gendered institutions. Future studies would also benefit from global and intersectional analyses of multiple axes of power and differentiation. By identifying research questions, new theoretical perspectives, and largely unapplied research designs, we hope to facilitate the pursuit of such studies.

Keywords

Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFAS) – gender – diplomacy – international relations – foreign policy – gendered institutions

1 Introduction

In the past few decades, an increasing number of women have entered Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAS) as diplomats, though unevenly across the world. The diplomatic profession has thus ceased to be virtually all male during the same period that MFAS have had to face some clear challenges. Not least due to globalisation and regionalisation, MFAS are now often bypassed, as other ministries and political actors increasingly forge direct cross-national links with one another.¹ After the 2008 financial crisis, many foreign ministries have suffered significant budget cuts, reductions of staff and foreign missions, and reorganisations.²

Yet foreign ministries persist. In fact, despite cuts and reorganisations, there is little sign of their demise; indeed, they continue to be among the largest and most prestigious of state ministries. On the one hand, there seems to be institutional inertia — the institutions just carry on.³ On the other hand, they adapt by making themselves relevant in new ways.⁴ For instance, MFAS and their embassies have increasingly turned into platforms for nation branding and national business promotion abroad,⁵ which has prompted heavier reliance on new technologies and new communication channels. MFAS and embassies also increasingly provide consular care assistance to citizens abroad.⁶

To perform these changing tasks, MFAS avail themselves of seconded diplomats, ‘desktop’ ambassadors who remain based in their home capital, and pooling of embassy buildings and resources with like-minded states.⁷ Apart from diversification of tasks, MFAS are also changing with respect to diversity of staff, and many MFAS are actively recruiting among groups previously largely

1 E.g., Moses and Knutsen 2001; Bátorá and Hocking 2009; Lequesne 2020.

2 Balfour, Carta and Raik, 2015, 199.

3 E.g., Neumann 2012; Adler-Nissen 2015.

4 E.g., Bratberg 2008; Bátorá and Hocking 2009, Uilenreef 2014.

5 E.g., Merkelsen and Rasmussen 2012; Browning 2015; Bátorá 2006; Balfour, Carta, and Raik, 2015.

6 E.g., Leira 2018; Tsinovoi and Adler-Nissen 2018.

7 E.g., Uilenreef 2014.

absent in or even actively excluded from diplomacy, including women.⁸ For institutions notoriously resistant to change, MFAS are simultaneously clearly changing, transforming their standard operating procedures. No wonder MFAS continue to fascinate international relations scholars.

The aim of this introductory article is to direct attention to the central issue of gender and MFAS. The article — and the special issue it introduces — does so for two main reasons. For one, much of the scholarship on foreign ministries pays little if any attention to gender, despite the obvious and fundamental ways in which MFAS are gendered institutions, continually in transformation. A brief historical recount might illustrate this point. When MFAS emerged as professionalised and bureaucratised institutions among the states of the 19th century — a period during which diplomacy was part and parcel of European imperialism — they were also masculinised in particular ways. Accordingly, women became barred from serving as diplomats. Most states lifted these bans during the second half of the 20th century, roughly during the period of decolonisation when a large number of new states — with new MFAS — entered the diplomatic system.

Since then, and particularly in the 2000s, women have entered MFAS as diplomats in increasing numbers around the world. The number of female diplomats now equals or surpasses the number of men in several MFAS, and women make up a large minority of diplomats in others. That said, most MFAS continue to be heavily male dominated, not least in more senior and prestigious positions. These variations among MFAS do not necessarily follow general levels of gender equality in different states. Nor do they align neatly along international cleavages, such as those between newer and older states, the Global North and South, or the so-called Western and other states. Indeed, the two dozen states that appoint women to at least 40% of their ambassador postings include a number of African, Caribbean, North and Central American, north European, and Oceanian states. The states of continental Europe, in contrast, appoint on average a smaller share of female ambassadors (16%) than the global average (20%).⁹ Explaining these variations remains a task for future research.

Most MFAS also continue as heteronormative and elite institutions, which, in turn, is intimately interwoven with the gender norms, practices, and professional identities of foreign ministries. Yet the ways in which MFAS are gendered have also been changing, with adjustments and reorientations of institutional norms, rules, and practices. Drawing attention to some of the (changing) ways in which MFAS are gendered — and the ways in which gender intersects with

⁸ E.g., Niklasson and Robertson 2019; Lequesne et al. 2020.

⁹ Niklasson and Towns 2022.

other axes of power and differentiation in MFAS — is a crucial corrective, as this brings to light institutional norms, practices, identities, and relations otherwise overlooked in MFA scholarship. Indeed, with this article and special issue, we hope to stir interest in the gender dimensions of MFAS among gender scholars and also among diplomacy scholars not usually attentive to gender. If we are successful, these readers will be convinced not only that MFAS are fascinating objects of study but also that gender is integral to what MFAS are, what they do, and the relations in which they are embedded.

To be sure, there is already an emerging literature on gender and MFAS. While fruitful, this scholarship is scattered and has yet to come together as a cohesive and comparative conversation about MFAS. A second rationale for this article is thus to take stock of existing studies — including the studies in this special issue — in order to marshal such a conversation among gender- and -MFA scholars. Ann Towns has called for more careful and sustained attention to how gender is theorised in diplomacy studies more broadly.¹⁰ The study of MFAS would also benefit from discussions of different ways of theorising gender and the implications for approaching and understanding foreign ministries. However, in this article, while we touch on gender conceptually, we instead suggest that the study and discussion of gender and MFAS can productively be organised around three empirical themes: (1) MFAS as gendered institutions, (2) gender and relations between MFAS and domestic politics and society, and (3) gender and the international relations of MFAS. In bringing in the domestic and international relations of MFAS, we follow Christian Lequesne's argument that 'MFAS must be understood in relation to a number of other actors — both state and non-state'.¹¹

Our broad themes thus follow a simplified and stylised understanding of MFAS as situated at the intersection of domestic and international forces (see Fig. 1).

As we will show below, most of the scholarship on gender and MFAS centres on the MFA itself as a gendered institution. We thus devote most attention to this theme. However, the contributions to this special issue span all three



FIGURE 1 Situating MFAS between the domestic and the international

¹⁰ Towns 2020 and 2022.

¹¹ Lequesne 2020, 3.

themes, also making novel and important claims about gender in MFA relations domestically and internationally. To introduce and showcase the range of contributions of the special issue, and gender-and-MFAS scholarship more generally, and to highlight the enormous potential for future scholarship, we thus discuss all three research areas but to varying degrees.

The rest of this article consists of three sections. The first is brief and provides a short conceptual discussion of gender. The second and main section then turns to the scholarship and special issue contributions on gender and MFA in terms of the three identified themes. The third and final section provides a concluding discussion that summarises our main claims about fruitful directions for future studies of gender and MFAS.

2 Gender as a Theoretical Concept

What might it mean to think about gender in relation to MFAS? In Joan Scott's classic and widely used formulation, gender is 'a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes'.¹² As such, gender centrally concerns the social construction of masculinities and femininities, including the hierarchical ordering between them. Masculinities and femininities are relationally produced, so that a putatively 'feminine' behaviour or attribute is made to be distinctive from a 'masculine' contrast, each often made to be what the other is not. Gender is furthermore a process, a 'doing' consisting of the ongoing creation and reproduction of differences in particular ways.¹³ Importantly, gender is not only expressed by and through individuals. As Mimi Schippers has contended:

masculinity and femininity and their constructed relationship to each other are an available rationale for practice and a referent with which to interpret and judge, not just the gender displays and practices of individuals, but all social relations, policy, rules, and institutional practice and structure.¹⁴

A massive amount of feminist scholarship has approached organisations of various kinds — including MFAS — as gendered institutions. Following Joan Acker's early and ground-breaking intervention, to say that an organisation, such as a foreign ministry, is gendered means that

¹² Scott 1986, 1067.

¹³ E.g., West and Zimmerman 1987; Butler 1999.

¹⁴ Schippers 2007, 92-93.

advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine. Gender is not an addition to ongoing processes, conceived as gender neutral. Rather, it is an integral part of those processes, which cannot be properly understood without an analysis of gender.¹⁵

Studying what kinds of masculinities and femininities are operative in an organisation, and examining institutional roles, rules, practices, and power relations in terms of gender is essential to analyses of MFAS. This may entail examining gendered divisions of labour within the MFA; institutional gender norms and gendered professional identities (which help maintain divisions of labour); gendered language and symbols operative in the ministry and its relations with others; and gendered networks, interactions, and practices within the MFA or between its members and others.¹⁶

Such analyses may also involve examining how gender intersects with other axes of power and differentiation, such as class, sexuality, and race.¹⁷ With multiple femininities or masculinities simultaneously in play, there may be hierarchies not just between masculinity and femininity but also among different forms of masculinity or femininity.¹⁸ While a number of gender studies of MFAS pay some attention to class,¹⁹ more thoroughly intersectional studies of MFAS remain exceedingly rare. And there is still very little, if any, scholarship on the intersection of gender and race in foreign ministries.

There is wide agreement among gender scholars on the basic theoretical premises set out above. That said, feminist scholarship on gender is far from uniform. There is a wealth of academic feminist traditions (e.g., socialist, liberal, radical, Black (US), postcolonial, decolonial, Islamic, queer, post-structural, psychoanalytical, and more) that theorise these basic premises differently. Few of these traditions have made inroads into the study of MFAS or diplomacy more generally, however, leaving plenty of room for different kinds of gender analyses. Indeed, instead of providing distinctive theoretical interventions, existing scholarship on gender and MFAS have stayed fairly close to these basic premises, even if focused on different institutional facets of gender. Below, we thus discuss gender and MFAS in terms of the empirical

15 Acker 1990, 146.

16 See e.g., Acker 1990.

17 E.g., Crenshaw 1989; Parpart and Zalewski 2008; Henry 2017.

18 E.g. Connell 1993, 1995, 2002 and all the scholarship their work has influenced; also Collins 1990, 2004; Hamilton et al. 2019.

19 E.g. Neumann 2008, 2012.

directions this scholarship has taken. We return to questions of intersectionality in the concluding discussion.

3 Approaching Gender and MFAS — Three Empirical Directions

In the past decade, a large and growing body of scholarship on various gender dimensions of MFAS has emerged. This scholarship follows a sparser tradition of studying women in foreign ministries. Most of this scholarship has focused on MFAS as gendered institutions, in different ways. We thus start with a discussion of that scholarship, to then turn to the more limited literature on gender in the domestic and international relations in which MFAS are embedded.

3.1 *MFAS as Gendered Institutions — Internal Dynamics and Structures*

The scholarship on MFAS as bureaucratic organisations is sizeable, but until recently, this research has largely been gender blind. The functions and structures of MFAS, the composition of MFA staff, their diplomatic career developments, and their work have all been described and analysed without much consideration of the fact that MFAS were, and in most places still are, dominated by men. What that means for how MFAS perceive, organise, and practice diplomacy has only recently begun to be analysed. Below, we discuss the insights gained about MFAS from the growing and diverse kinds of gender analyses applied to these organisations and what implications these insights have for future studies of MFAS. We contend that gender sensitive research on the internal dynamics of MFAS has made at least three major — and interrelated — contributions: rethinking what MFAS *are* in gender terms; identifying and examining MFA's gendered organisational structures; and delineating power struggles within MFAS related to these gender structures.

3.1.1 Rethinking What MFAS *Are*

When MFAS developed as professionalised and bureaucratized organisations among then existing states during the second half of the 19th century, they restricted the diplomatic career to men (of means) only. Women were thus barred from taking the new diplomatic service exams, regardless of their education or their social or economic standing. When these bars were lifted — generally between the 1920s and 1960s — marriage bars were placed on female diplomats, forcing them to leave the MFA if they married.²⁰ Whereas male diplomats were expected to marry a woman (and the wife, in turn, was expected to carry out unpaid duties in support of her husband's career and the MFA),

²⁰ E.g., Aggestam and Towns 2018.

female diplomats were not allowed to marry at all if they wanted to remain diplomats. These marriage bars were not lifted until the 1970s. Other marriage bars remain, however. In the past decade or so, some MFAs have begun issuing diplomatic passports to same-sex spouses, officially recognising domestic partnerships that have been denied and suppressed by MFAs for a very long time. Yet most MFAs continue to deny diplomatic recognition to same-sex spouses of diplomats.

The (classed, raced and heterosexual) male dominance of MFAs, gender scholars contend, is intimately connected to what kinds of institutions MFAs have come to be. These scholars thus underscore that MFAs need to be rethought, not only as gendered institutions but also as institutions that are masculinised and feminised in particular ways.²¹ In other words, MFAs are not properly conceived as gender neutral institutions whose numbers of men, women, and non-binary people vary over time. Instead, gender must be understood as an integral part of the very fabric of MFAs, of their norms, rules, identities, and practices. This rethinking of the nature of MFAs is a crucial and central insight, as it fundamentally alters how MFAs should be understood and studied.

In what ways MFAs are gendered, and with what consequences, varies across time and space. Since masculinities are often ascribed to men, it is not surprising that male-dominated MFAs — and the diplomacy that they are supposed to organise and channel — have been masculinised in ways that reflect prevalent ideas about elite and heterosexual manhood. For instance, emotional restraint, strategic negotiation skills, a transactional use of language, a certain kind of ‘male’ appearance and a willingness to turn to force if necessary have often been understood as ‘masculine’ and central to diplomacy.²² MFAs have thus carefully selected certain kinds of men, assuming the desired traits and dispositions to follow. In Cynthia Enloe’s forceful formulation, ‘men are seen as having the skills and resources that the government needs if its international status is to be enhanced. They are presumed to be the diplomats.’²³ Iver Neumann has developed this argument, identifying three distinctive masculinities that came to dominate Western MFAs during the 20th century: a hegemonic bourgeois masculinity (economically privileged, cultivated, intellectually independent), a numerically dominant petit bourgeois masculinity (diligent, straight-laced, rule-following), and a more unconventional troublemaker.²⁴ Femininities

21 E.g., Aggestam and Towns 2018 and 2019.

22 For an analysis that troubles this claim, see Towns 2020.

23 Enloe 2000, 93.

24 Neumann 2008 and 2012.

were thus defined out of diplomatic office, and so were women, during much of the 20th century.

If MFAS have nurtured certain kinds of masculinities and selected suitable men as diplomats, feminised traits, skills, and labour have simultaneously made possible the masculinised and male diplomat. Even if official diplomatic positions have been monopolised by men, women — presumed to be carriers of ‘feminine’ skills — have been present, plentiful, and important in various support functions: as wives, servants, maids, cleaners, typists, secretaries, filing clerks, interpreters, switchboard operators, note takers, and more.²⁵ Clearly, without this labour, whether paid or unpaid, it would be difficult for MFAS to function. For instance, through much of the 20th century, MFAS counted on the unpaid labour of diplomatic wives.²⁶ And yet these roles and this labour have been made to appear marginal to diplomacy, made invisible by both the organisations and by most scholars studying them. Feminist and other gender scholars have deepened, challenged, and diversified our understanding of MFAS by insisting that feminised labour, generally carried out by women, be brought into the analysis of MFAS.

Catriona Standfield’s article in this special issue forcefully highlights how masculinised the institutional definitions of diplomatic competence were in the 1940s and 1950s, and how this disqualified and side-lined women from MFAS.²⁷ Engaging diplomacy scholarship that has drawn on Bourdieu’s theory of practice, she contends that MFAS, as part of a broader diplomatic field, contain gendered, classed, and raced norms that set the terms for who is regarded as a ‘competent’ or even a ‘virtuoso’ diplomat and how. Her analysis follows the career of Margaret Anstee, who joined the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) in 1948, two years after the diplomatic profession had been opened to women in the UK. The assumption that women were less competent diplomats was institutionalised in FCO norms and practice: Anstee was paid less than male counterparts, consistently met resistance as a woman, and had to leave the profession when she married in 1952. Since she married a fellow diplomat, she transitioned from a diplomat to a ‘diplomatic wife’, trailing her husband to his posting in Manila. As Standfield points out, ‘this was common: the marriage bar turned paid diplomatic staff into unpaid, but equally useful, diplomatic wives’.

Since the 1950s, even if still largely masculinised, MFAS have become gendered in less coherent ways, with multiple gender scripts in motion and in

25 See E.g., Enloe 2000; Johnson 2020; Erlandsson 2021.

26 E.g., Hickman 2002; Enloe 2014; McCarthy 2014.

27 Standfield 2022.

tension. This has been interwoven with the entry of women into diplomacy. There is not much scholarship tracking the share of women and men across MFAs,²⁸ but from existing work, it seems clear that the share varies substantially among MFAs. What is causing these differences is something that we still know very little about. Interesting to note is that differences cannot simply be explained by the general level of gender equality or the economic prosperity of the country that the MFA serves. The Nordic MFAs may be among those that send the largest share of women ambassadors abroad today, for instance, but this is a recent phenomenon. A little more than a decade ago, in 2008, Oceanian and North American MFAs had more female ambassadors than their Nordic counterparts. If we go back to 1968, not a single MFA of the Global North ranked among the top ten in terms of share of female ambassadors. Today, only three Global North MFAs are among the top ten, and seven of the ten MFAs with highest number of female ambassadors are Oceanian, African or Caribbean.²⁹

Women and men who pursue diplomatic careers have grappled with masculinised diplomatic scripts, or, standards of behaviour. On the one hand, many of the women who have entered the diplomatic profession seem to try to enact dominant diplomatic masculinities.³⁰ However, there are simultaneous expectations that female diplomats enact femininity visually, emotionally, and socially.³¹ Some female diplomats indeed turn to more stereotypical femininities, in part strategically.³² In their fascinating contribution on masculinities and femininities in the Turkish MFA, in this issue, Rahime Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm and Bahar Rumelili argue that in order to understand the drivers and implications of the masculinities and femininities at play in an MFA, diplomatic studies need to take the social and political contexts of MFAs more seriously.³³ While Turkish diplomats may be enacting masculinities and femininities similar to those reported in north European MFAs, the subversive and empowering potential of stereotypical femininities may be lost in a 'conservative, anti-feminist context' because they 'reinforce the notion that women are in a complementary relationship to men'.³⁴

In their compelling article in this issue on the gender strategies of women in the Czech MFA, Zuzana Fellegi, Kateřina Kocí, and Klára Benešová draw a

28 See E.g., Towns and Niklasson 2017; de Camargo Lima and Silva Nunes de Oliveira 2018; Farias and do Carmo 2018; Erlandsen et al. 2021; Jacob, Scherpereel, and Adams 2021.

29 Niklasson and Towns 2022.

30 E.g., Neumann 2008, 2012; Niklasson 2020; Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm and Rumelili 2022.

31 E.g., Towns 2021.

32 E.g., Neumann 2008, 2012; Niklasson 2020; Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm and Rumelili 2022.

33 Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm and Rumelili 2022.

34 Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm and Rumelili 2022.

similar conclusion.³⁵ Noting the enactment of the same kinds of diplomatic femininities that prior scholarship has identified in northern Europe, they argue that ‘conservative social and institutional norms in the MFA as well as in Czech society in general, present one of the major obstacles to the increased representation of women in top diplomatic positions’. Interestingly, the authors identify an additional kind of diplomatic femininity — the ‘principled feminist’. The principled feminist may mix diplomatic femininities and masculinities to intentionally change the masculinised and patriarchal nature of the MFA.

These studies, which insist on taking contextual variation seriously, suggest that MFAs are differently gendered and that their gendering changes over time. Tonka Kostadinova’s contribution to this special issue also emphasises this point, arguing that the institutional culture of the Bulgarian MFA is deeply shaped by a communist and authoritarian legacy.³⁶ This institutional culture includes a securitised model of masculinised diplomacy that renders women as alleged security threats and thus ill-suited for diplomacy, Kostadinova contends.

Read in the light of existing scholarship on the fundamentally gendered character of MFAs, the contributions in this special issue clearly demonstrate the importance of moving beyond Western Europe and North America. For one, studying cases such as the Bulgarian, Czech, and Turkish MFAs suggests that there may be a transnational circulation of diplomatic femininities and masculinities, as similar kinds of scripts and identities seem to be in play in these different organisations. In a way, this is not surprising, since MFAs are embedded in the international institution of diplomacy. Yet many more studies of MFAs as gendered institutions — in varying political contexts and in other parts of the world — are needed to better understand whether similar scripts are in fact in play universally. Such studies would also contribute to a second important insight from this special issue: the need to take context and contextual variation seriously. Even if a transnational circulation of diplomatic masculinities and femininities is likely, these will surely take different forms across institutional space and time and may have different drivers and implications.

3.1.2 The (Discriminating) Gender Structures of MFAs

The gendered character of MFAs, discussed above, manifests in a number of structural features of these organisations. A second major contribution of feminist scholars is that they name, expose, and examine gendered organisational

35 Fellegi, Kocí and Benešov 2022.

36 Kostadinova 2022.

structures of MFAs in terms of their formal rules and procedures, task assignments, and career development — structures that may discriminate against employees. Several case studies of different MFAs have shown that, as in many other kinds of organisations,³⁷ two interrelated gender logics (gender division and gender hierarchy) contribute to separating the work, placements, and status of women and men in a way that impede women's advancement to senior and prestigious positions.³⁸

MFAs are generally thematically organised based on geographical, functional, and administrative units. The prominence and prestige of these different kinds of units vary over time and across contexts.³⁹ This said, administrative units are usually ascribed relatively low status and this is also where a disproportionately large share of female employees end up.⁴⁰ Indeed, this is also where women first formally entered these organisations. They were often first admitted as typists, secretaries, telephone operators, and so forth,⁴¹ just as in many other organisations in the public and private sectors.

The kinds of functional MFA units differ greatly. A recurring pattern, however, is that women tend to cluster in units with lower status, such as administrative units, consular units,⁴² and those in charge of development and human rights. Men, on the other hand, dominate in high status units such as business, trade, and international security.⁴³ This pattern begs the question to what extent the gendered character of MFAs has actually changed over time. Two prevalent arguments for not letting women become diplomats were, for example, that women were too peaceful and that their lack of military training and combat experience would prevent them from fully grasping the gravity of foreign policy making.⁴⁴ Now, when there are female diplomats, their positions within the MFAs still mirror those notions of women.

The gendered division of labour also shows in MFAs' appointments of women and men geographically as heads of diplomatic missions. Comparative studies, case studies, and studies over time have all found that women ambassadors are often underrepresented at postings of economic importance, such

37 Scott 1986; Acker 1990.

38 E.g., McGlen and Sarkees 1993.

39 Berridge 2015.

40 See e.g., Calkin 1978; Olmsted et al. 1984; McGlen and Sarkees 1993; Bashevkin 2018a; Niklasson and Robertson 2018.

41 Calkin 1978; Wood 2015; Farias and do Carmo 2018; Johnson 2020.

42 Scott and Rexford 1997; Farias and do Carmo 2018; Niklasson and Robertson 2018; Rumelili and Süleymanoglu-Kürüm 2018.

43 Scott and Rexford 1997; Niklasson and Robertson 2018; Stephenson 2019.

44 Scott and Rexford 1997.

as major trade partners,⁴⁵ and at those involving high security risks.⁴⁶ An interesting exception to this pattern, however, is the Brazilian Itamaraty, which sends an equal number of female and male ambassadors to postings included in the prestigious 'Elizabeth Arden Circuit'.⁴⁷ Apart from generally recognised high status bilateral postings — Washington, DC, London, Paris, and Berlin, for example — the Itamaraty also considers all multilateral postings a part of this circuit. Yet the status of multilateral postings varies considerably between MFAs, and there are many MFAs where multilateral postings have lower status than bilateral ones.⁴⁸ It is therefore in line with the general pattern that many MFAs appear more willing to assign women ambassadors to international organisations.⁴⁹

Findings also suggest that MFAs send women to relatively gender equal contexts,⁵⁰ where they are expected to be effective as state representatives.⁵¹ Even though the formal structures of diplomacy ensure women's inclusion in situations ruled by protocol, they may still face greater difficulties in entering informal settings.⁵² Female diplomats claim that informal male networks do not impede their work, however; they build their own informal networks, consisting of women ambassadors,⁵³ wives of diplomats, civil society organisations, and so on.⁵⁴ There is still much to learn about these informal networks, though: how different kinds of actors navigate around and through them in different contexts, and in what ways they may matter to the kind of information accessed, the collaborations accomplished, and the career development of diplomats.

Although postings in gender equal states are not necessarily of lower status, gender scholars have shown that the two logics of division and hierarchy usually operate in tandem in MFAs, causing female employees to cluster in less prestigious missions abroad and to carry out lower status functions and tasks at home. Some might assume that these differences will disappear gradually over time, as the number of women grows. Such a development should not be taken for granted, though. On the contrary, in a comparative longitudinal

45 Towns and Niklasson 2017; Calin and Buterbaugh 2019; Kreft, Niklasson and Towns, 2022.

46 Towns and Niklasson 2017; Flowers 2018; Rumelili and Süleymanoglu-Kürüm 2018; Kreft, Niklasson and Towns 2022.

47 Farias and do Carmo 2018.

48 Kostadinova 2022.

49 Rumelili and Süleymanoglu-Kürüm 2018.

50 Towns and Niklasson 2017; Jacob, Scherpereel, and Adams 2021.

51 MacCarthy 2014; McKenzie 2015; Wood 2015.

52 Barrington 2017; Niklasson 2020.

53 Towns 2022.

54 Niklasson 2020.

study of the US, UK, Denmark, and Sweden, Kreft, Niklasson and Towns show that gender differences in ambassador postings are consistent over 40 years.⁵⁵

One explanation for this consistency is that the organisational structures of MFAs rest on gendered norms that are slow to change. One of these norms is that of professionalism. Diplomats are expected to work long and irregular working hours,⁵⁶ and to accept postings abroad on a regular basis. These expectations require a high degree of flexibility, not just of the MFA employee, but also of her family.⁵⁷

MFA rules and procedures also often express heteronormative and patriarchal expectations, modelled on a male breadwinning diplomat and his trailing and supportive wife. While spouses often do have more benefits and support from MFAs than previously, most MFAs still do little to accommodate diplomats with working spouses, pregnant diplomats, diplomats nursing small children, and so on.⁵⁸ Furthermore, women often continue to face more caretaking responsibilities than men, since male spouses continue to be less willing to step into the position of 'diplomatic wife'. Balancing a diplomatic career with family is thus often particularly demanding for women, as most MFAs provide only limited parental leave, part time work options, and other measures easing the combination of work and family.⁵⁹

There are several palpable consequences of this. One, women's career development in MFAs tends to be slower than that of men.⁶⁰ Second, diplomacy is a leaky pipeline for women — they drop out of the diplomatic profession at higher rates than men do.⁶¹ Third, women diplomats remain unmarried and/or childless to a greater degree than male diplomats.⁶² These outcomes are in part produced by rules and procedures of MFAs still modelled on the male, heterosexual, and married diplomat with his 'diplomatic wife'.

As the next section will show, it often takes a joint and conscious effort to change these structures. Changing them is predicated on our knowing more about them: how they work in different cultural contexts and in different kinds of MFAs. Future research should therefore focus more on systematic

55 Kreft, Niklasson, and Towns 2022.

56 Farias and do Carmo 2018.

57 Waibel, Aevermann, and Rueger 2018; Mildorf 2019.

58 Mildorf 2019.

59 E.g., Conley Tyler, Blizzard, and Jane 2014; Barrington 2017; Mildorf 2019; Calin and Buterbaugh 2019; Stephenson 2019; Svala et al. 2019; Hart and Baruch 2021.

60 E.g., Farias and do Carmo 2018.

61 E.g., Farias and do Carmo 2018.

62 Waibel, Aevermann, and Rueger 2018; Calin and Buterbaugh 2019; Kostadinova 2022.

comparative studies between different MFAS, but also between MFAS and other kinds of organisations and public agencies.

3.1.3 Gendered Power Struggles within MFAS

Nurtured by patriarchal, heteronormative, and professional norms, the logics of division and hierarchy are still at play in the organisational structures of many MFAS, but there are also changes taking place. These changes are not occurring automatically; they are driven by the conscious efforts of several different actors, efforts that have sometimes encountered fierce resistance from the MFAS. An important contribution of feminist and other gender scholars is that they have delineated these power struggles and thus expanded our knowledge of how discriminating gender structures may be diminished in diplomacy as well as in other kinds of organisations.

Compared with most other public service organisations, MFAS have proved unusually resilient against demands of greater social diversity and gender equality over time. This resilience may be explained by the relatively high degree of autonomy of MFAS. Being less exposed to the public, as well as to parliaments and the executive than other public agencies, MFAS have escaped criticism of their social composition, even when other parts of government experienced an increasing pressure to transform from a patrimonial recruitment system into a more democratic and meritocratic one.⁶³

MFAS' resistance to greater social diversity took many forms and it was not just directed towards women. Sexual harassment, for example, may have been carried out by individuals, but these assaults also served to uphold the dominant masculine culture.⁶⁴ The same culture also contributed to a suspicion of homosexuals. During the Cold War, around 1,000 individuals working for the US State Department were fired, or forced to resign, based on unjust accusations of their constituting a national security threat, simply because they were (or were suspected of being) homosexuals.⁶⁵

It was not until the 1970s that MFAS seriously started considering the persistent claims of fairer treatment of marginalised groups in diplomacy (scholarship is limited to the Western world, however). These claims were pursued by MFA employees,⁶⁶ but also by the general public;⁶⁷ diplomatic wives,⁶⁸ women's

63 Nightingale 1930; Niklasson and Robertson 2018.

64 Barrington 2017; Stephenson 2019.

65 Dean 2001; Johnson 2004.

66 E.g., McCarthy 2014; Farias and do Carmo 2018; Niklasson and Robertson 2018; Kostadinova 2022.

67 E.g., Niklasson and Robertson 2018.

68 E.g., Hickman 1999; McCarthy 2014.

movements;⁶⁹ and gay movements, labour unions, and politicians.⁷⁰ Success in achieving these pursuits often relied upon joint efforts by several of these actors. MFAS were thus confronted from different directions simultaneously.

The gender equality demands made on MFAS have shifted as they have met with growing sympathy from the organisations. Initially, they were about the recognition of the work carried out by diplomatic wives and the right for women to become diplomats and formally represent their country abroad. Later, the struggle concerned work conditions inside the MFAS — for instance, the marriage bars, the right to marry same sex partners, improved possibilities for partners to find employment when accompanying a diplomat abroad, parental leave, and the right to be treated with respect.

The tools for achieving these demands varied greatly. The women's movements in the UK engaged in campaigns and verbal battles with the conservative forces in the Foreign Office.⁷¹ The Diplomatic Services Wives Association in the UK persuaded several foreign missions to employ wives on a part-time basis, so that they would receive at least a little pay for work that they otherwise carried out for free.⁷² Female diplomats in Sweden formed networks that exchanged information and support, and to secure the sponsorship of senior officers and the political leadership.⁷³ Politicians in the US initiated studies and commissions to prompt action,⁷⁴ a strategy also used by labour unions in Sweden.⁷⁵ Moreover, US presidents have the discretion to change the social composition of the Foreign Service quite literally through political appointments, something that has also been done to some extent.⁷⁶ Exactly what the relationship looks like between the number of political appointments of diplomats and the gender balance of MFAS is an important question of which we have very limited knowledge.

Step by step, these efforts have increased the awareness and acceptance of gender equality claims within MFAS. Broader societal gender changes have also contributed to this acceptance, such as women gaining ground on the labour market in general, a growing number of women in politics, and post-Cold War shifts away from military power in favour of issues where there is a greater

69 E.g., Scott and Rexford 1997; McCarthy 2014; Niklasson and Robertson 2018.

70 E.g., Scott and Rexford 1997; Niklasson and Robertsson 2018.

71 McCarthy 2014.

72 McCarthy 2014, 328.

73 Niklasson and Robertson 2018.

74 Calkin 1978; Scott and Rexford 1997.

75 ALVA 1993.

76 Scott and Rexford 1997; Bashevkin 2018b; Nash 2020.

acceptance of women as credible and competent diplomatic actors.⁷⁷ Some MFAS nonetheless seem to remain as masculinised institutions that attract men and repel women and non-binary people.

Working for an MFA is clearly not the only way to engage in international issues, however. In contexts where actors other than men struggle and fail to gain recognition within their MFAS, turning to other diplomatic careers may be an option. One of these options is described in the contribution by Petrice Flowers to this special issue.⁷⁸ Flowers shows that Japanese women, facing poor career options in the Japanese MFA, have instead turned to the UN to pursue their aspirations in international affairs. Built on a comparative mapping of where Japanese men and women are located in UN agencies and the Japanese MFA, combined with a number of in-depth interviews with female Japanese diplomats, Flowers presents the convincing argument that the UN simply offers better career opportunities to Japanese women, opportunities that they have seized upon.

To what extent this escape route is attempted also by women from other countries is something that future studies could investigate further. The status of UN postings and positions is another issue in need of more analytical attention. Philip Nash has raised the point that the UN may have come to serve as a 'dumping ground' for US women, as the prestige of such positions in US foreign affairs has plummeted in the past decades.⁷⁹ The UN remains a cornerstone and thus high status in the diplomacy of other states, however, including Japan, as Flowers points out. Her contribution, along with that of Nash, thus pave the way for more comparative work on diplomacy, gender, and the status of different bilateral and multilateral postings. Such work could also include questions about what options for diplomatic careers, if any, are open for non-binary people and the strategies they pursue to carve out space in diplomacy.

3.2 *Gender and MFA Relations to Domestic Politics and Society*

Christian Lequesne recently argued that 'domestic constraint plays a bigger role than in the past for MFAS because domestic publics want diplomats to be as accountable for their actions as any other state bureaucrats'.⁸⁰ We could not agree more. What we would like to add is the claim that MFA relations to other domestic actors need to be understood and studied in part through a gender lens, as gender permeates, shapes and is shaped by these relations.

77 Scott and Rexford 1997.

78 Flowers 2022; see also Standfield 2022.

79 Nash 2020.

80 Lequesne 2020, 3.

In the section below, we briefly discuss three sets of domestic-MFA relations and how these may be gendered. First, MFA relations to the political sphere. Second, MFA relations to other ministries and public agencies, and third, MFA relations to civil society and business.

3.2.1 MFA Relations to the Political Sphere

The relationship between MFAs and domestic political actors has been pointed out as a domain for future research.⁸¹ Although there is some research on the political appointment of diplomats,⁸² particularly in the US,⁸³ there are hardly any studies that engage in systematic analyses of how politicians attempt to steer, control, and evaluate the work of MFAs. This is surprising, given the vast literature on politico-administrative relationships involving other parts of government. Furthermore, the processes and tasks that MFAs are involved in are highly political, which makes it reasonable to expect that politicians should take a great interest in their activities.

There is even less research on the relationship between MFAs and the domestic political sphere from a gender perspective.⁸⁴ The article by Sylvia Bashevkin in this special issue thus provides a welcome step in this direction.⁸⁵ Bashevkin thoroughly examines the foreign policy views of seven US secretaries of state and UN ambassadors — that is, women who have headed the US State Department or held important ambassadorships — showing that the foreign policy views have grown more partisan and polarised on questions of feminism, religion and women's rights in international affairs over the past 40 years. This includes efforts to recruit more women and other under-represented groups to the State Department. Bashevkin's study is an excellent foundation for asking subsequent questions about the impact on MFAs of gendered leadership and foreign policy views of male and female foreign ministers.

A recent study on political appointments of ambassadors by Erlandsen et al. also contributes to a better understanding of how politicians steer and shape MFAs.⁸⁶ They investigate the relationship between the gender of the president in ten Latin American countries and the share of female ambassadors appointed by those states. They find that the number of female ambassadors in the MFAs is likely to increase under the rule of left-wing governments led by female presidents in political systems that provide the president with a high

81 Lequesne 2020.

82 E.g., Stein 2007; de Camargo Lima and Silva Nunes de Oliveira 2018; Lequesne 2020.

83 E.g., Hollibaugh 2015; Fredderke and Jett 2017.

84 Though see Bashevkin 2014; Erlandsen et al. 2021.

85 Bashkevkin 2022.

86 Erlandsen et al. 2021.

degree of discretion. Many more studies are needed to examine the relations between elected officials and MFAS, however, not least studies that integrate a gender perspective.

3.2.2 MFA Relations to Other Public Agencies

Much has been written about the fact that state diplomacy is no longer channelled exclusively or even primarily through MFAS, as the centralised control over diplomacy has loosened and fragmented.⁸⁷ Other ministries have come to take a larger diplomatic role, but their status and policy influence vis-à-vis the MFA clearly vary among states and over time. According to Geoff Berridge,⁸⁸ the status and influence of MFAS is usually greatest among states with a constitutional form of government and long-established Foreign Offices, such as France, Sweden, and the UK. Yet even in such cases, the MFA may be side-lined by other ministries, not least due to their internationalisation.

Among states where security concerns are consistently prioritised or acute, Ministries of War or Defence may take centre stage in international affairs.⁸⁹ The US, as a perennial 'national security state', is a case in point, where there is a vast imbalance between the Department of Defence and the Department of State, not just in terms of budgets and personnel but also in terms of foreign policy influence.⁹⁰ The increasing use by some states of economic policy for geostrategic aims have also shifted influence away from MFAS, towards Ministries of Finance, as Olsen demonstrates in a recent analysis of France and Germany.⁹¹

These distributions and shifts in departmental status and influence are gendered. For one, the conception of what diplomacy — and the ministry formally in charge of it — *is* is infused with gendered understandings. In a recent analysis of US policy discourse, Towns shows that diplomacy (and the US Department of State) is regularly feminised,⁹² i.e. symbolically and rhetorically represented as consisting of traits and practices ascribed to femininity. This is especially so when diplomacy is contrasted against military affairs. Shifts in influence from the MFA to Defence and Finance are thus likely to be accompanied with shifting and more feminising representations of the MFA

87 E.g., Moses and Knutsen 2001; Bratberg 2007; Hocking and Bátorá 2009; Hocking et al. 2012; Olsen 2020.

88 Berridge 2015, 15.

89 Berridge 2015, 15.

90 E.g., Wrage 2008.

91 Olsen 2020.

92 Towns 2020.

and diplomacy, contrasted against masculinising understandings of the military and finance.

What is more, as Elise Stephenson's contribution to this special issue shows, the symbolic gendering of diplomacy and military affairs may be implicated in the share of men and women in these ministries and agencies.⁹³ While MFAS and Ministries of Defence and War have both remained male-dominated much longer than many other ministries, recent decades have seen a marked increase in the share of women in MFAS.⁹⁴ In a mixed methods longitudinal analysis that compares the funding and status of Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) with the Departments of Defence and Home Affairs and the Australian Federal Police, Stephenson shows unequivocally that the rapid increase in the share of women in the DFAT has paralleled a decrease in influence. In the meanwhile, the Departments of Defence and Home Affairs and the Australian Federal Police enjoy increased budgets and policy influence in a context of militarising Australia's foreign affairs. These agencies also remain firmly in the hands of men. While it may be next to impossible to tease out whether there are causal relations between these parallel trends — the marginalisation of DFAT and the large increase in female diplomats, on the one hand, and the ascendance of military institutions and the predominance of men within them, on the other — it is crucial to pay attention to these trends in conjunction. There is furthermore a dire need for more such analyses in other contexts.

Kostadinova, in a fascinating auto-ethnographic account, analyses the relationship between the Bulgarian MFA and two other highly masculinised Bulgarian public agencies: the National Security Agency and the State Security Agency. She describes how homosocial networks between male intelligence officers from these two public agencies and male diplomats have sustained male dominance and privileges in the MFA. Female diplomats' room to manoeuvre is thus very small; they are excluded from the male informal circles associated with their own MFA; and they are suspected of treason if engaged in networking with those of others. Being seen in the company of foreign male diplomats can be enough for the State Security Agency to deny a female diplomat access to classified information, Kostadinova claims, something that would be detrimental to her diplomatic career. Kostadinova's original article is hopefully the first of many future studies exploring the intriguing relationships between gender, diplomacy, and national security intelligence.

93 Stephenson 2022.

94 E.g., Aggestam and Towns 2018, 2019.

3.2.3 MFA Relations to Domestic Civil Society Organisations

Another fascinating set of MFA — domestic relations for gender scholars to examine are those between MFAS and domestic civil society organisations (CSOs). Globally, along with the massive growth in CSOs that has taken place since the end of the Cold War, CSOs have become important actors in diplomacy. In this context, MFAS have come under pressure to collaborate with CSOs in the formulation and implementation of foreign policy.⁹⁵ While there is a growing body of scholarship on civil society actors in multilateral diplomacy, studies on relations between CSOs and MFAS remain few.⁹⁶

Since access to MFAS and to foreign policymaking has historically been masculinised in particular ways, diplomatic office has been limited to elite men. Women have instead turned to social movement activism — often transnational in character — and have used international organisations and multilateral arenas to mobilise and advocate for all kinds of gender change, along with other issues. While there is an enormous body of scholarship on this mobilisation, there is much less research on social movements and CSOs targeting and interacting with MFAS. We see great potential for gender analyses here. For instance, when MFAS were still all-male bastions of elite masculinities, to what extent and how did various kinds of social movements and CSOs — themselves often highly gendered — approach and seek to influence these institutions? With what gender(ed) agendas? Today, as many MFAS have become less walled off and more diverse, how have relations to CSOs changed? In what ways may these relations be differently gendered now?

3.3 *Gender and the International Relations of MFAS*

Yet another area of great potential for gender scholarship concerns the international relations of MFAS. This is a huge area of research, worthy of a much more elaborate discussion than we are able to provide here. We will limit ourselves to a cursory discussion of how gender may play into how MFAS act towards foreign actors, on the one hand, and how international processes shape and affect MFAS, on the other. How MFAS act internationally and how international processes shape MFAS are obviously linked and recursive, but for the sake of simplicity, we treat each in turn.

In actions towards foreign others, MFAS concretise and carry out foreign policies in myriad ways, not least through the work of diplomats in multilateral and bilateral fora. There is a large body of scholarship on the gender(ed)

95 E.g., Heine 2013; Melissen 2018.

96 For a rare exceptions, see e.g., Alejo and Villanueva Ulfsgard 2019.

contents of these policies,⁹⁷ including an explosive upsurge in studies on the recent emergence of expressly ‘feminist’ foreign policies.⁹⁸ MFA website contents and use of social media have also been examined from a gender perspective. For instance, Katarzyna Jezierska shows that the number of tweets on gender equality from Swedish embassies in Warsaw and Budapest were not only small,⁹⁹ but actually decreased after Sweden’s feminist foreign policy was launched in 2014. In addition, the status of women, gender issues and feminism are now a regular feature of the public diplomacies of MFAs and gender and public diplomacy is developing into its own research agenda.¹⁰⁰ There is a need for more comparative scholarship, however, and for more studies beyond Western Europe and North America. We also see great potential for more scholarship that tries to tie the international practices of diplomats — for example, their networking, negotiations, physical positioning and bodily displays, exchange of gifts and compliments, and more — to the gender(ed) structure, training and instructions from MFAs.

MFAs not only structure actions towards others — they are also deeply shaped and affected by the world around them. For instance, European integration and the development of the European Union External Action Service (EEAS) has led to restructuring and reform of national European MFAs.¹⁰¹ To our knowledge, there is little if any attention to gender in analyses of how external processes and interactions shape MFAs, and there are ample opportunities to new and fascinating gender scholarship in this domain. Contributing to such a research agenda, in an innovative article in this special issue, Elise Rainer argues that foreign policy may diffuse between MFAs, highlighting how the actions of one MFA may shape those of another.¹⁰² Focusing on the emergence of foreign policy promoting LGBTI rights, Rainer shows that diplomats at the Swedish MFA were crucial for the initial development of such policy but that diplomats at the US State Department subsequently made sure the US threw its weight behind this policy. She carefully traces the interactive process whereby LGBTI policy developed in the two MFAs, relying on a rich array of archival and interview data.

97 E.g., Richey 2001; Achilleos-Sarl 2018.

98 E.g., Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond 2017; Bergman-Rosamond 2020; Jezierska 2021.

99 Jezierska 2021.

100 E.g., Jezierska and Towns; Kaneva and Cassinger 2022.

101 E.g., Balfour 2015.

102 Rainer 2022.

4 Conclusions

Scholarship on gender and MFAS is burgeoning, having developed from a few books and articles on women in North American and Western European MFAS in the 1990s to dozens of studies on gender in and the gender of these organisations in various parts of the world today. Most of the scholarship approaches MFAS as gendered institutions, examining the organisational hierarchies and divisions of labour in gender terms and studying the femininities and masculinities at play in organisational norms, rules, and practices. There are now enough studies to make some tentative and more general claims about how MFAS are gendered, as this article has set out to do above. Many questions nonetheless remain to be addressed. For one, studies of gender in the relations between MFAS and domestic and international actors are scarce. Moreover, questions about the causes and consequences of the ways in which MFAS are gendered have hardly been asked. Turning to these kinds of questions would necessitate moving away from single case studies to more comparative work. What is more, even if the cases that have been examined so far are not exclusively Western MFAS — for instance, this special issue includes studies of the MFAS of Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Japan and Turkey, and there are other studies of gender in the MFAS of, for instance, Brazil and Indonesia — gender studies of more MFAS in Africa, Asia, and Latin America are needed. In addition to new case studies, more systematic and comparative studies of how gender operates within and across MFAS would help scrutinise gender in, for instance, colonial legacies and other dimensions that relate to the global hierarchies and international history of how diplomacy has developed and when, where, how and through what relations MFAS emerged in different parts of the world.

Placing the study of gender and MFAS in a global context would simultaneously focus attention on the intersectional nature of gender in these institutions. As we have shown in this article, while some MFA scholarship looks at the intersection of class and gender, most studies focus primarily on the male-female or masculinity-femininity nexus without attention to how gender intersects with other axes of power and differentiation, such as, for example, sexuality and race. There is thus ample opportunity to develop and complicate existing scholarship. While sexuality and race may vary institutionally, they are simultaneously expressions of transnationally circulating scripts and discourses and embedded in international relations, and they are therefore fruitfully studied as such. How these dimensions relate to the changing character and status of MFAS — budget cuts, reorganisations, and the diminished influence of MFAS discussed in the introduction — is another pressing question.

Indeed, the impressive body of scholarship that has emerged on gender and MFAS is but the beginning of a promising research agenda.

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