Global Society

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cgsj20

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Ann E. Towns

To cite this article: Ann E. Towns (2022) WAW, No Women? Foucault's Reverse Discourse and Gendered Subjects in Diplomatic Networks, Global Society, 36:3, 347-367, DOI: 10.1080/13600826.2022.2052021

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2022.2052021

GLOBAL SOCIETY
2022, VOL. 36, NO. 3, 347–367
https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2022.2052021

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

WAW, No Women? Foucault's Reverse Discourse and Gendered Subjects in Diplomatic Networks

Ann E. Towns

Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden

ABSTRACT

This study has two aims. Empirically, it examines women ambassador networks, hitherto overlooked in diplomacy scholarship. Such women-only networks are fascinating, as they cut across state-based alignments that typically shape diplomatic networks. Using Women Ambassadors of Warsaw (WAW) as a case, the analysis is based on interviews with its members in 2020. Theoretically, the aim is to draw on Michel Foucault's notion of "reverse discourse" to build upon but trouble prior attempts to theorise the place of women and femininities in diplomacy. Rather than coherent scripts or stable roles, I argue, "women" are better conceived as a discursive subject position that is unstable, contradictory and reversing. Indeed, the members of WAW articulate surprisingly shifting and contradictory claims about women and the rationales of a women-only diplomatic network. Reverse discourse provides leverage for understanding these shifts, the article contends, but the analysis also shows the difficulties in reversing fragmented discourse.

KEYWORDS

Diplomacy; diplomatic networks; gender; women; discourse; reverse discourse

Introduction

Until recently, the bilateral diplomatic corps of the world were exceptionally male-dominated. In the past couple of decades, not only have the share of female diplomats increased significantly, but female diplomats have begun to form professional networks in the capitals where they are posted. There are now "Networks of Women Ambassadors" and "Lady Ambassador Groups" in capitals on every continent, ranging from Maputo to Seoul, New Delhi to Ottawa, and Cairo to Brussels. These groups of ambassadors meet regularly – as *women* ambassadors – for luncheons, seminars, dinners and other events. They thus clearly rely on some conception of womanhood as a foundation for network activities that cut across established state alignments. And yet as this article will show, their deployment of "womanhood" and justifications for all-female diplomatic networks are surprisingly fraught and seemingly contradictory. In fact, network members often claim both that these networks just happen to consist of women *and*

CONTACT Ann E. Towns ann.towns@gu.se Department of Political Science, Box 711, University of Gothenburg, 405 30 Göteborg

that women ambassadors share gender-based experiences that warrant separate organising. To make sense of such apparently conflicting claims, the article turns to Michel Foucault's concept of "reverse discourse" and post-structural feminist theorisations of gender. In doing so, the article challenges how gender is currently conceptualised in scholarship on diplomatic networks and diplomacy more broadly.

Although networks are absolutely central to diplomacy (e.g. Neumann 2012; Heine 2013), there are no studies of gender-based diplomatic networks as such. Existing scholarship on gender and networks in contemporary diplomacy is limited to two studies, by Neumann (2008) and Niklasson (2020). Both of these studies are primarily concerned with what kinds of femininities are at play in diplomacy, and neither provides a systematic analysis of any particular form or context of networking. Instead, using ethnographic observations of and/or interviews with Scandinavian diplomats as their points of departure, both studies touch on networking dispositions rather than networking practice as they grapple with whether and how women diplomats deploy femininities at work.

Neumann's and Niklasson's studies are situated in a broader body of scholarship on gender in contemporary diplomacy (e.g. Conley et al. 2014; Cassidy 2017; Towns and Niklasson 2017; Aggestam and Towns 2017, 2019; Standfield 2020; Towns 2020; Erlandsen, Hernández-Garza, and Schulz 2021; Jezierska 2021). Gender in contemporary diplomacy is an emerging research agenda that has really taken off in the past decade. This scholarship has examined a range of crucial questions, spanning the gendered career paths of diplomats to how gender figures into diplomatic negotiations. However, in part, because this is a relatively new area of research, theoretical questions of how to conceptualise gender in the study of diplomacy have not yet been addressed (though see Towns 2020).

This article is an attempt to do just that: raise the question of how to conceptualise gender in the study of diplomacy. As I will elaborate below, Neumann and Niklasson – like most scholars of gender and diplomacy – both rely on theoretical accounts that approach gender as relatively stable and durable inscriptions on the body, with "femininities" understood as "habitus" and "roles" that attach firmly to women's bodies. Such theorisations have faced significant challenges among feminist scholars, not least from those inspired by Foucault. I thus turn to an engagement with Foucault and Foucault-inspired feminist scholarship and the ways in which it draws attention to gender sameness/difference as more fickle, unstable and contradictory. To capture the implications of the fraught and often contradictory relationship the members of women ambassador networks have to the very concept of womanhood, even as they organise as women, I centre Foucault's notion of "reverse discourse". There are multiple discourses in circulation on "women", some of which emphasise difference to men in one way or another, whereas others downplay or reject any differences. I contend that WAW members invoke these fractured discourses on "women", but that they also reverse discursive subordinations of women, resulting in multiple and contradictory representations. Approaching gender as a set of multiple and possibly reversing discourses encourages scholars to look for cracks and openings in discourses that otherwise might seem simply to reproduce notions of sameness/difference. This is an important insight for the broader body of scholarship on gender and diplomacy, I contend.

The article also has a second, empirical aim: to examine women ambassador networks as a kind of network that has hitherto not been studied in diplomacy scholarship. I do so

through a case study of the Women Ambassadors of Warsaw (WAW) network, a network currently consisting of 15 women ambassadors in the Polish capital. Relying on interviews with more than half of the members, including the current coordinator, the article describes the aims, activities and motivations for such a network. In an academic field that has focused exceptionally little on gender dimensions of diplomacy or the activities of men, women and non-binary/trans diplomats *as* men, women and non-binary/trans, this empirical examination is a contribution in and of itself. It also helps illustrate the theoretical claims about gender.

The rest of this article is organised into five sections. It starts with a discussion of prior scholarship on diplomacy, gender and networks, with a particular focus on the studies by Neumann and Niklasson. The article then turns to a theoretical discussion of gender as more shifting and contradictory, unpacking Foucault's notion of reverse discourse and its implications within post-structural feminist scholarship. The following section briefly describes the design and methods of the study. The fourth section is the analysis, where the WAW network aims and activities are examined and the network members' articulations of "women" are analysed. The analysis centres on the fraught, fragmented and contradictory representations of "women", demonstrating that contrary to what one might expect in a women's network, "women" are not articulated as a coherent subject. Understanding these articulations as reverse discourses helps make sense of them, I contend, as they can be understood as a response to – and attempts to reverse – multiple disempowering discourses on women and the gendered character of diplomacy. The concluding discussion returns to the question of the implications of this study for the broader field of gender and diplomacy.

Prior scholarship on diplomatic networks and gender

The scholarship on contemporary diplomacy and gender has primarily centred on specific ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs) (e.g. McGlen 1993; Jeffreys-Jones 1995; Sjolander 2001; Neumann 2008, 2012; Aggestam and Svensson 2018; Bashevkin 2000; Niklasson 2020) or gender in diplomatic negotiations (e.g. Boyer et al. 2009; Kolb 2009; Maoz 2009; Aharoni 2011; Aggestam and Svensson 2018; Paffenholz et al. 2016; Aggestam 2019). Aggestam and Towns' (2017, 2019) agenda-setting publications thus discuss the state of the field by focusing on these two themes. To my knowledge, there are only two studies that address gender and contemporary diplomatic networks: Iver Neumann's analysis of gender scripts in "The Body of the Diplomat" (2008) and Birgitta Niklasson's analysis of gender roles in "The Gendered Networking of Diplomats" (2020). Both of these studies are exploratory and neither provides a systematic analysis of any particular form or context of networking. Instead, using ethnographic observations of and/or interviews with Scandinavian diplomats as their points of departure, both studies mention networking as they primarily grapple with whether and how women diplomats deploy femininities at work.

Neumann's wonderfully rich ethnography combines observations and conversations from years working in the Norwegian MFA with four long interviews with women diplomats to study masculinities, femininities and their hierarchies in the ministry (2008, revised as 2012). Niklasson (2020), in turn, picks up and develops Neumann's claims about femininities in an article that asks more explicitly whether male and female

diplomatic networking differs, relying on 28 interviews with Swedish diplomats. Neumann sets out, and Niklasson agrees, that diplomacy and the diplomat are scripted masculine. The masculinised character of diplomacy and male homosocial practices pose dilemmas for women diplomats, forcing them to choose between placing more emphasis on womanhood or on being a (masculinised) diplomat. "Since there was an inherent tension between the statuses 'woman' and 'diplomat'", Neumann argues, women diplomats "have no other choice but to privilege one status over the other" (2008, 687).

Neumann identifies three femininity scripts available for women diplomats. The first, "woman first, diplomat next" places priority on womanhood in diplomacy and privileges relations with other women, whether diplomats, wives or administrative staff (2008, 686–687). The networking implications would be that these diplomats would nurture ties with women in the orbit of formal diplomacy, in addition to contacts in the male world of diplomacy. The second, "diplomat first, woman next" understands herself as a diplomat who just happens to be a woman (2008, 687). She seeks social recognition among male diplomats, and she is uninterested in seeking out women as such. Neumann also identifies a third and increasingly dominant form of femininity in the Norwegian MFA, a "tactical" form of subjectivity used by some women diplomats to strategically manoeuvre the diplomatic terrain to serve career goals and other ends (2008, 688). To these women diplomats, "gender solidarity is not deemed of value beyond its instrumental uses", Neumann contends (2008, 289).

Niklasson relies on Neumann's three femininity scripts but enriches them with a more developed engagement with Rosabeth Moss Kanter's classical argument about the "tokenism" of women as numerical minorities and the implications for gender roles (Kanter 1977). Perceived as out of place, women in male-dominated contexts often become highly visible tokens and their performance is thus constantly monitored and assessed in a way that the performance of the male majority is not. Finding themselves in this situation, Niklasson contends, women diplomats respond in two main ways that align with Neumann's ideal-typical femininities: they either take on a more "masculine" role (rejecting the stereotype, toning down presumed differences and trying to be "one of the boys") or they assume a more "feminine" role (accepting stereotypes and using them to their advantage. Niklasson 2020: 19). Indeed, some of the Swedish female diplomats reported redoubling their efforts to ensure inclusion in male networks and contexts, whereas others compensated by building networks with women, whether female diplomats, public officials or members of women's organisations. This latter group of women diplomats thus provided access to contexts and actors that might be off limits to their male colleagues. However, the unwillingness of these women to fully embrace a "feminine" role or identity, and the strategic nature of their deployment of gender stereotypes, leads Niklasson to conclude that "much of the assimilation taking place is thus likely to be driven by a [tactical] femininity and not a woman-first femininity" (Niklasson 2020, 31).

In trying to make sense of the sameness/difference expressed by diplomats, Neumann and Niklasson both interpret gender as relatively stable and durable inscriptions on the body. While Neumann's study includes language of "discourse" and "subject positions" which might lead the mind to Foucault's theoretical opus, he relies more heavily on Pierre Bourdieu's conceptions of gender as habitus. As habitus, gender appears "in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body" inculcated during years of

socialisation during childhood and youth (Bourdieu 1983; 222. See also Bourdieu 2002). Indeed, even discourse and diplomatic scripts tend to be durable in Neumann's account, and he explains that it "is a necessity for discourse to have a certain permanence" (Neumann 2008, 687). Conceptualised this way, Neumann's and Niklasson's three femininities thus become something that women diplomats carry with them over time. What is more, any one woman is inscribed with one of the three – she is either woman-first, diplomat-first or tactical. Crucially, none of these femininities seems to reverse the masculinisation of diplomacy in any way. Indeed, Neumann's and Niklasson's accounts, the inclusion of women seems to entail the reproduction of diplomacy as a masculinised institution: women either reject feminisation or they perform femininities on the margins, on the terms set by diplomacy as a masculinised institution. Below, I will explore whether different theoretical tools might allow us to capture cracks in the stable inscriptions and neat typology offered by Neumann.

Gender and reverse discourse

In contrast with Bourdieu, from whom few feminists have drawn inspiration, the work of Michel Foucault has resonated widely among feminist scholars (see Deveaux 1994. For feminist critiques, see e.g. Hartsock 1990 and Fraser 1989). Whereas most scholars agree that Foucault had little to say about gender, many – including e.g. Shepherd (2008) and Kinsella (2011) among feminist IR scholars – have found inspiration in his writing on the diffuse nature of power and the production of subjects and resistance through discourse. For starters, Foucault offers a conception of embodiment that highlights its instability. In *Discipline and Punish,* he elaborates on the production of "subjects" in and through the materialisation of discourse (Foucault 1977). In *The History of Sexuality*, he then opens up for the subversion of such subjects through the very discourses that produce them. For instance, there is no doubt, Foucault argues, that the emergence in the nineteenth century of discourses of "homosexuality" both produced and enabled social control of and violence against "the homosexual". However,

> it also made possible the formation of a "reverse" discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or "naturality" be legitimated, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified. (Foucault 1978, 101)

Similar accounts have been made by feminist scholars about womanhood and how, through discourses of sexual difference, "women" have been subjectified: through discourse on sexual difference, "women" have both been made subject to power and control *and* made subjects able to speak as "women", often in attempts to reverse the subordination of "women". Indeed, with "women" came the birth of European feminism (e.g. Scott 1996, Towns 2010, 2012).

When trying to reverse the subordination of "women", "women" found themselves in a conundrum, however. In speaking in its own behalf, what were women to do with sexual difference? Whether claiming difference or sameness, they could not avoid invoking "women" and thus could not help but summon some sort of distinctiveness. As Joan Scott (1996, 3) has argued in *Only Paradoxes to Offer*,

> its goal was to eliminate "sexual difference" in politics, but it had to make its claims on behalf of "women" (who were discursively produced through "sexual difference"). To the extent that it acted for "women", feminism produced the "sexual difference" it sought to eliminate. This paradox – the need both to accept *and* to refuse "sexual difference" – was the constitutive condition of feminism as a political movement throughout its long history. (Scott 1996, 3–4)

While Scott does not use that terminology, her discussion is compatible with the notion of reverse discourse: the emergence in nineteenth century Europe of discourses of "sexual difference" both produced and enabled social control over "women". However, it also made possible the formation of reverse discourse as "women" began to speak in their own behalf, using the categories that subjectified them, whether to upgrade womanhood as different but equal or to unravel womanhood by claiming women's individuality and similarity to men. These reversals, as Scott underscores, cannot entirely undo either the notion of "sexual difference" or "women" as a subject, as they necessarily invoke "women" in making equality claims. Reverse discourse is thus not sufficient for a full-scale challenge to gender. However, what reverse discourse can and often does do is reverse claims positioning "women" as inferior due to "sexual difference".

So far, Neumann's and Niklasson's conceptualisations of femininities may seem compatible with the claim that the discourses of sexual difference has produced "women" as a subject position poised to either make claims about women's difference or sameness to men. However, Foucault and a range of gender scholars insist that gender is less stable and more contradictory and fraught than the typology of three diplomatic femininities would suggest (e.g. Braidotti 1994/2011; Haraway 1997; Lilja 2016; Scott 1996). Starting in the abstract, Foucault contended that

> … we must conceive discourse as a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable. To be more precise, we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between dominant discourse and the dominated one, but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies … (Foucault 1978, 100)

In other words, reverse discourse is not simply adopting the subject position "homosexual" or "woman" and reversing some dominant negative claim. In turn, as neither uniform nor stable, we cannot expect discourses to necessarily emerge as neat and stable packages that inscribe themselves on bodies, resulting in some individuals who downplay and others who accentuate sexual difference. Instead, the very subjects who emerge through discourse may be plural and with shifting and contradictory meaning.

With a view of discourse as less stable and unified, it might furthermore be possible to see reversals as cracks in the masculinisation of diplomacy that the multiple invocations of "women" might produce. To cite Foucault again:

> Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance, and a starting point for an opposing strategy. (Foucault 1978, 101)

Taking this dialectic instability and multiplicity of discourse on "women" as a point of departure, the analysis below will be attentive to the multiple ways in which the women's

network and the discourses the members invoke may simultaneously reproduce and reverse/subvert the masculinisation of diplomacy and the place of "women" within it.

Single case design and discourse analytic methods

One basic task of this study is to draw attention to the existence of self-designated "women's networks" in diplomacy. Such networks also provide an excellent opportunity to take a closer look at how their members represent, articulate, or reverse "women" in diplomacy. At a minimum, one would expect participants to place some emphasis on womanhood, however understood – it would be difficult to organise *as* women without giving any importance whatsoever to the category women. In fact, if anywhere, we should find Neumann's woman-first-diplomat-next diplomats here. In this sense, these women's networks are a "hard case" for my claim that the subject position "women" may be more fraught and less stable for diplomats than prior scholarship suggests.

The article focuses on the Women Ambassadors of Warsaw (WAW) network, an active network in a European capital of some significance. 95 states have placed embassies in Warsaw. As points of comparison, virtually every state in the world has an embassy in Washington D.C., whereas a capital such as Bamako is only host to 37 diplomatic missions. In 2020, of the 95 embassies in Warsaw, 16 (17%) were headed by a woman ambassador. Warsaw's 17% women ambassadors is close to the world average, which was 14% in 2014 (Towns and Niklasson 2017).

The analysis relies primarily on interviews with WAW members in 2020, generally on Zoom due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Of the 16 women ambassadors in Warsaw, all but the US ambassador were active in WAW, and my aim was to interview as many of the 15 active members as possible. Arranging interviews with ambassadors is extraordinarily difficult, often requiring many *many* emails, letters and phone calls. Even when interviews have been arranged, they are often cancelled by the ambassador due to urgent and unforeseen matters (sometimes never to be re-scheduled). Ambassadors are indeed extremely busy and careful with their time. I nonetheless managed to interview 8 women ambassadors, over half of the network members. The interviewees represent states from several continents – the Americas, Asia, Europe and Oceania – though half are European (see Table 1 in the Appendix). I also participated in one of WAWs luncheons, at the Dutch embassy in Warsaw in January of 2020, where I was able to observe and partake in discussions about their experiences as women ambassador.

The range of states that are represented by women ambassadors in Warsaw suggests a potentially broad range of voices and perspectives on the character of the network and the purposes of meeting as "women". The interviews were semi-structured (interview guide in Appendix 2), lasting between 1 and 2 h, and they were recorded, transcribed and then treated as texts. All interviewees agreed to their answers being included in my work, whether summarised or verbatim. As most of the ambassadors asked that their names not appear together with direct quotes, however, I have anonymised all the answers.

Poststructuralism and the understanding of gender as discourse are closely wedded to discourse-analytic methods. Much can and has been said about this rich terrain. My analysis is inspired by the discourse analytic strategies developed by Laura Shepherd

(2008) and Carol Bacchi (1999, 2010). Like both Shepherd and Bacchi, I understand discourse to comprise more than language – discourses are practices that are power-laden, materially manifest and mediated, and constitutive of social reality. Shepherd and Bacchi have both, in distinctive ways, developed sophisticated and complex methodological tools to critically examine gender in discourse. The aims of this article are more modest, and I focus primarily on representational practices in language, examining the ways in which "women" as a subject position are articulated in the interviews. Shepherd refers to this as an analysis of "the articulation of subjects" and suggests examining how subjects take on meaning by being positioned in relation to other subjects and objects, as temporary fixing of meaning (2008, 30–33). Bacchi similarly points to the importance of analysing "the eliciting [of] certain subject positions" in utterances and in written text (e.g. Bacchi and Eveline 2010, 118).

To examine the articulation of subject positions, Bacchi suggests posing analytical questions systematically to the texts under analysis (e.g. Bacchi 1999, 12–13). My central questions are two-fold, the first about the articulated subject positions and the second about what these might be reversing. First, I ask "what are "women" represented to be, so that they should organise into a separate diplomatic network"? This question is followed by a number of sub-questions. Are "women" or their situation represented as distinctive in some way, and if so how (e.g. positioned against what other subjects and how)? If not distinctive, then what about diplomacy is represented as warranting a woman-only network? Are "women" represented consistently as a certain kind of subject position across the interviews? Second, I ask, what kinds of discourses about "women" in diplomacy may these articulations be reversing? What do the network members themselves articulate about the network and what it may do to empower and support its women? Here, in addition to the interviews, I also draw on prior scholarship on exclusionary practices towards women in diplomacy.

These analytical questions are asked of and across the interview transcripts, to inductively tease out discursive themes in how "women" as a subject position are articulated among statements and what these articulations may be reversing. One of the aims of the analysis is also to capture whether there is coherence in the articulations of "women" by individual ambassadors, i.e. if these ambassadors represent themselves in a way that suggests that they are *either* woman-first-diplomat-second *or* (masculinised) diplomat-first-woman-second. To do so, I also focus on each individual interviewee's account, comparing statements made by the same person at different points in the interview. By adding this dimension, the analysis not only identifies coherence or diversity across interviews but also addresses whether each interviewee articulates "women" in diplomacy in a coherent manner.

The WAW network

As noted earlier, Warsaw is a fairly crowded bilateral site. In addition to the 95 resident ambassadors, another 70 non-resident ambassadors were accredited to Poland in 2020, ambassadors whose main postings were often Berlin or Brussels. Warsaw is a busy context for these ambassadors, who are expected to represent their states and advance their interests vis-à-vis a range of actors, including Polish government agencies and officials, the business sector, media, civil society and the diplomatic community.

Indeed, I have yet to interview an ambassador who does not describe incredibly busy and long work days with complex work loads.

Networks are crucial in managing these contexts. Much of an ambassador's network is a function of the positionality and resources of the state the ambassador represents and its importance and role with respect to various actors. For instance, only states of most importance to a host state have regular access to the prime minister or president. A network thus does not disappear with the move of an ambassador to another posting – the network is by and large institutional and anchored in the embassy, with new ambassadors inheriting much of the network of their predecessors. Many meetings and relations are furthermore routine. This is not to say that the networking skills of individual ambassadors have no bearing. Savvy and socially skilled ambassadors are expected to make the most of their positionality and create relations beyond those that come with the posting. But no ambassador of a small and impoverished state, no matter how skilled and savvy, can make up for the structural inequalities among diplomatic missions. And the ambassador of a superpower, no matter how inexperienced, socially inept or ignorant, will always have access to a large range of important actors. In this sense, all ambassadors are "diplomats first".

Within the diplomatic corps, ambassadors furthermore group into networks based on established state relations, often among what diplomats refer to as "likeminded" states. For instance, ambassadors representing states that are members of e.g. ASEAN, NATO or the EU may have formed groups that meet on a regular basis. Likewise, many capitals have e.g. a Nordic group of ambassadors, a Benelux group, a Caribbean group, an Asia-Pacific group and so on. These are not necessarily formal groupings – depending on the capital, they may take a more formalised or more informal form. Regardless, particularly for small states, these groupings provide vital resources both in terms of the information shared and in terms of strength in numbers. As part of a group, ambassadors may secure interactions with central host state actors that the ambassadors might not be able to access individually.

Activities of the WAW network

Women ambassador networks have emerged in such contexts of dense interactions and established, state-based groupings. The very existence of explicitly women-based networks is thus quite remarkable in itself, as it cuts across state-based cleavages and unite a diverse set of ambassadors from the Global North and South, East and West, with no given shared state interests. The WAW network is a few years old, but it has really come together under the coordination of Ambassador Bergsma of the Netherlands (Ambassador 4, 6 and 7). She arrived to her posting in Warsaw in 2019. Inspired by the Women Ambassadors Group in the Hague, and with the resources available at an embassy such as the Dutch one, she has invited the women ambassadors in Warsaw to a range of gatherings. However, some of the other members take initiative and organise events as well, so the drive to meet and to make arrangements is shared. Whether and how an ambassador takes initiative in the organisation of WAW events depends in part on resources. As Ambassador 8 explained,

> some of the colleagues are not in the ballpark to be arranging too much stuff - their governments don't have the money or they personally don't have the money to put something

> together, to organize a meal, or gifts. Some of us have a representational budget; for others, it comes out of their own pockets. (Ambassador 8)

There is no WAW schedule, no upcoming events calendar – the events are planned continuously, by someone initiating with an email to the group and asking about the interest and input of other members (Ambassador 6). The outcome of this process has been that WAW members meet roughly once a month, sometimes more frequently. The events can take the form of a luncheon, tea or other form of meeting with Polish public officials or representatives of the business or civil society sector; they can consist of a talk given by an academic on a topic of interest; or they can be a more social gathering such as an ice cream outing or a wine tasting. Sharing information about Polish politics is often central.

In addition to attending these gatherings and sharing information, WAW members also make special efforts to show up at other events organised by WAW members. Attendance at events organised by an embassy and hosted by an ambassador is a crucial status symbol, indicative of the importance others attribute a state and its ambassador. As Ambassador 4 explained,

> Diplomacy is all about your networks and your contacts. It is a reflection on you and your country if people don't feel it's important enough to come to your event. I'm not representing my country well if people are not showing up. As a diplomat, it is important to us to have large networks. If it's of no value to people to come to you, it's a challenge. (Ambassador 4)

As is often the case, the position of the state affects attendance. "If the German ambassador invites, then everyone will come. Same thing for the American ambassador", as Ambassador 6 pointed out.

Each of the interviewees emphasised that showing up at the events of other WAW members is a central dimension of the network. In the words of Ambassador 7,

> Most of the lady ambassadors attend all of each other's functions. They are at virtually all their functions, generally. If a lady ambassador is hosting something, we make sure we are there, unless we are sick or something absolutely crucial has come up. We like to support another lady.

As another ambassador explained, when a woman ambassador organises a function,

> I will try to find a way to be there and get there, to show support, even if I don't really feel like it or the value is marginal. I wouldn't make the same kinds of call for the other groups, and I say that after 3 years here. First year, you go to everything, second year you go to what you have to go to, the third year you take your pick. But, I think I could say, hand on heart, that I will make an effort to get to the national days of the lady ambassadors, their events, exhibitions, random things that are otherwise not particularly interesting. (Ambassador 8)

It is crucial to note this dimension: WAW members make the effort to attend the events of other WAW members even at times when they determine that "the value is marginal". In other words, even if not necessarily in line with the interests of the state the ambassador represents, WAW members prioritise showing support by showing up. "If one of us has an issue that is very close to her heart, you [WAW members] go and show support even though it's not an issue that is on the top of the agenda of your country", as Ambassador 1 explained.

Virtually all of the interviewees talked about such support in terms of "solidarity". When asked what she valued most with the WAW network, Ambassador 8 answered "a certain solidarity, that is unspoken … In terms of loyalty, I feel my greatest sense of loyalty to that group". Similarly, as expressed by Ambassador 4:

> It's quite important to support and attend the events of other women ambassadors. It's a solidarity thing. You probably do know that as a woman and for yourself, it's not as comfortable a space as maybe you have to let on. And I think as women, we're more honest about this.

In an exceptionally busy context, then, among a diverse set of ambassadors whose sending states share no given commonalities, WAW members make time not only to meet as a group – the purposes of which will be discussed below – but also to attend each other's events.

The unstable and reversing subject positions of women ambassadors

So, how do WAW members articulate the need for and function of this network? In their rendering, what is it about diplomacy that creates impetus for "women" ambassadors to organise separately? Why this solidarity? In brief, in the interviews, and despite underscoring the value of the network, the ambassadors articulate a fraught relation to the category "women" and express the value and function of the network with tenuous and often contradictory claims about "women". They reproduce and rearticulate multiple discursive elements on "women", I contend, in line with Foucault's understanding of discourse as discontinuous segments that are neither stable nor uniform. In doing so, however, they simultaneously reverse multiple disempowering claims at play about women and diplomacy. The first section in the analysis below examines the articulation of "women", to then, in a second section, turn to a discussion of these articulations as discursive reversals of prominent representations of women in diplomacy.

Articulating "women" in diplomacy

In the interviews, all of the ambassadors express how much they value WAW. However, it is also clear that all of them struggle to articulate what, precisely, provides motivation for a separate women's network. For instance, none of the ambassadors articulated a view of diplomacy as a masculinised arena that would provide more barriers for women than men. None of them consistently represented women as a different category of diplomats with important differences from men. As Ambassador 5 expressed it, "I never thought of the network in terms of being *women* who meet". Or in the words of Ambassador 6, "there is nothing specific to it being a women's network. It's a network of ambassadors who happen to be women". Or, as articulated by Ambassador 8:

> for me personally, I don't think it necessarily makes such a difference that it is a *women's* network. You know, I have great female colleagues, I have great male colleagues. I don't personally think about it in a gendered sort of way.

Cast this way, WAW would be a network of and by people who share the label women, people who make time for monthly all-women gatherings and who prioritise the events of

women ambassadors despite an exceptionally busy schedule, but for whom that label carries little if any significance. Without any form of shared subjectivity, it is difficult to understand the rationale of a separate women's network and the expressions of solidarity, however. Why not a network for ambassadors who like the colour red or pea soup instead?

However, WAW members weave these kinds of statements with articulations of women as having certain shared experiences that differ from those of male ambassadors. In the interviews, "women" thus emerge as a fragmented and sometimes contradictory subject. One set of experiences had to do with being treated as a "woman" *as opposed to* an "ambassador". Virtually all the ambassadors described situations in which expectations were clearly that the ambassador be male, leading officials and others to address a husband or male colleague as the ambassador. As Ambassador 3 illustrated,

> if we enter the presidential palace by car, the officer always asks the driver "are you coming with MR ambassador" so I have to correct that. If I visit small towns, they ask where is MR ambassador?

The interviewees also describe occasional sexist jokes and the feeling that there might be all-male networks that they do not have access to. However, all of them downplayed the frequency and significance of these kinds of experiences, challenging notions that diplomacy is androcentric in ways that inhibit women's professional efficiency. As for "old boy networks", Ambassador 4 stated that she was aware of "one or two" but that these

> are the kinds of networks I wouldn't want to be involved in … If I felt this was keeping me from the access I need, I would feel differently. But they're not an obstacle in any way.

They also underscored that all ambassadors are first and foremost treated as representatives of their sending state, not as a gender. "It's like you are your country, like you're wearing a flag on your head", as Ambassador 5 stated with emphasis. An occasional joke or comment does not trump this fact. Furthermore, they virtually all emphasised the importance of not being easily offended or overly concerned with comments about women.

Like many of the other interviewees, Ambassador 8 described Polish political society as hierarchical and formal:

> There is still this kind of Polish gallantry, Polish chivalry, and Polish cultural thing about how men and women interact in what is fundamentally a pretty conservative society. That means that officially, at the moment at least, in the current kind of environment, there's a more "traditional" [scare quotes in the air with her hands] approach to things. There are some very very capable women in positions of great responsibility, whether they're ministers, senior officials, whether they're running departments, whether they're ambassadors – the Poles are not short of female ambassadors around the world – so, it's not for a lack of capable women, but I think that structurally there is a bias towards men in suits here

And yet, just like the other interviewees, she did not represent this environment as inhibiting:

> whether I feel any pushback from being a woman, I would say that if I did, I would just kind of indicate that I expect to be met on equal terms. And so far, in my experience, that has tended to be a successful strategy dealing with it.

Rather than inhibiting, gender is represented as just one of a range of factors that diplomats need to navigate on the job. Ambassador 1 perhaps put this point most starkly:

> If you're a diplomat, you accept that in certain environments you may receive different reactions or be treated differently than in your home environment. I have to say that unless you are willing to accept that, you are not doing anyone any good.

Crucially, underscoring the fraught and contradictory nature of the discourse on "women", while all pointing to occasions of having being treated differently as a "woman" ambassador, these experiences were not once raised as a rationale for WAW by the ambassadors. In fact, as several of the interviewees emphasised, until I participated at their luncheon in January 2020, they had not discussed shared experiences that they would refer to as experiences of *women* ambassadors. As Ambassador 5 proclaimed, "I never thought about the network in terms of being *women* who meet".

As indication of another contradiction, while claiming not to consider the network in terms of it consisting exclusively of women, the experience of not having a diplomatic wife was articulated as a shared experience of most women ambassadors and contrasted with the situation of most of the male colleagues. And this seems to be a frequent and important topic of conversation among WAW members. Straight male ambassadors can generally count on having a female spouse who shoulders most family responsibilities of caring for children and who also assists in diplomatic work by involving herself in arranging luncheons, teas, dinners and other functions. Husbands of female ambassadors generally do not step into this traditional role of the "diplomatic wife", however, leaving the straight female ambassador with more work and more personal responsibilities to handle. In the words of one ambassador

> Women have so many roles to play. We are ambassadors but we still have to fix food at home and take care of family. We don't have a wife to prepare food for us. We play so many roles. Male ambassadors, they leave some duties to their wives to take care of. (Ambassador 7)

WAW members who are single and without children recognise this dimension as well:

> As I'm here by myself and I don't have kids, so I don't have a family situation to think about … [being posted with a family would] provide avenues for different types of experiences on the posting that I just don't come across in the same way. (Ambassador 8)

WAW is thus valued as a context in which the practical necessities of managing family life and diplomatic hosting without a "diplomatic wife" could be discussed, along with sharing crucial political information.

> With the ladies, we discuss everything: husbands, personal issues, our children, shopping, food, when we put on weight, our size, our emotions. Also the political agenda. We say where to go to shop for good food and groceries, when there is a sale. We look after our family, so we need to know where the best vegetables and clothes are. (Ambassador 7)

In the words of Ambassador 5:

> we can talk about many different items and everybody can understand what we are talking about. This can happen when there are all women. A man couldn't follow. They can't understand what we are saying. In the women's group, we can discuss what is going on at the

> senate, at the same time how is the rate of the currency *and* pass some recipes. This doesn't happen in any of the other diplomatic groups.

Again, these expressions about the distinctiveness of the experiences of "women" ambassadors should be understood in light of simultaneous claims that there is nothing distinctively masculine about diplomacy; if there are gender issues in diplomacy, you navigate around them; and that the network is a network that just happens to contain women. Indeed, the interviews virtually all contain seemingly contradictory claims about the place of "women" in diplomacy. Typically, the interviewee may first fully downplay gender or the significance of being a "woman" ambassador, to subsequently describe ways in which "women's" experiences might differ from those of male diplomats.

To capture the ambivalence and contradictions, it is necessary to follow some of the sequences in the statements in the interviews. Using Ambassador 6 as a first illustration, she was one of the ambassadors who downplayed differences among male and female ambassadors most emphatically. When asked what WAW provides that other groups do not, she first responds that there is "nothing specific to its being a women's network … there is nothing different from other networks". A few minutes later, however, still on the topic of what WAW provides, she explains that

> Women are more likely to talk about being tired and other things you don't talk about with male colleagues. As women, we are a different collective. We talk about high heels, feet hurt, being tired. [Outside of WAW], nobody ever says to me "how are you doing"? I say to my female colleagues that we are maternal, so our instinct in responding to a crisis is very human. We talk about those things: we're mothers, we're partners. You might ask "how's your family" to a male ambassador, but not in a girlfriend way.

Ambassador 4 is another illustration. When asked whether the numerical dominance of men matters in any way, she responds with a rhetorical question:

> Is it a male environment? Culturally, I'm not overly conscious of that kind of thing. I mean, I just go into a room and see a room of professionals and I know that they're there representing their country or their organization and I deal with them on that basis. (Ambassador 4)

In other words, professionals are professionals, and gender makes little if any difference. However, further into the interview, the ambassador suggests that contexts in which women are in the overwhelming majority are distinctive. Describing a Women's Day event she organised a few years back:

> We invited women only. That was pretty unusual. All of the women ambassadors were invited, about half came. An afternoon event. And then we invited all kinds of people from across the spectrum in Poland: Polish academics, Polish journalists, Polish officials … who else … Polish scientists, Polish business women. All sorts, but it was all women. And these people arrived, came into our space, and looked around, and started listening … and it was like they did a double take, because they were absolutely not expecting to be at an all women event. There was one man at the event, one of my team members. He didn't know where to put himself. He was really quite intimidated.
>
> You could just tell that the noise in the room was completely different, the types of conversations were completely different. People met each other in a different way and on a different level than would have been possible. They were really quite surprised by how much of a difference it seemed to make to be all women on that occasion. (Ambassador 8)

In this articulation, "women" emerge as a collective subject position that is "completely different" from men – engaging in different conversations, meeting each other in a different way and a different level. By the end of the interview, the ambassador nonetheless returns to claims about the irrelevance of men being in the majority in diplomacy, relying instead on a discourse of the gender neutrality of diplomacy. Women's alleged difference from men thus gives way to their similarity, and she states again that it is of little relevance that WAW consists of women diplomats.

Reversing the positioning of "women" in diplomacy

Foucault not only enables addressing "women" as a shifting subjectivity – his understanding of reverse discourse also helps make sense of the dynamic of these shifting subjectivities. Indeed, I would argue, the members of the WAW network articulate "women" in response to exclusionary representations of women and diplomacy in diplomatic contexts more broadly. The network participants' multiple and seemingly contradictory articulations of "women" thus make sense as reverse discourses, responding to at least three disempowering discourses prevalent in diplomacy.

First, one set of pervasive representations portray diplomacy as gender neutral, a place where professionals of any gender classification thrive as long as they are skilled. Gender neutrality can of course come to serve as a certain kind of platform for including women in diplomacy, on the premise that female diplomats can practice diplomacy unencumbered by gender. It is thus not surprising that the gender neutrality of diplomacy is a claim which all of the interviewees reproduced. However, such representations may simultaneously help disempower women in diplomacy by ignoring systematic disadvantages. For instance, they do so by masking that ambassadorial positions remain modelled on twentieth century Western heterosexual diplomatic couples: a male ambassador and a supportive ambassador's wife. When diplomacy is represented as gender neutral, the different professional implications of having a husband or a wife are concealed and silenced. In the gender neutral frame, diplomats without a wife are treated as if their professional life is not systematically made more demanding without significant spousal professional assistance.

As the analysis above showed, WAW members also reversed such representations by articulating "women" as having different and more difficult professional experiences than "men". And their voicing "women" as diplomats who struggle with multiple roles and double burdens is a way to diagnose and thus challenge the unrecognised androcentrism of ambassador work that disadvantage diplomats without a wife. Importantly, such representations reverse claims about diplomacy as gender neutral and "women" as little but an empty label. These reversals entail presumptions that gender *does* matter in diplomacy. Accordingly, "women" are articulated as a group that is systematically disadvantaged by the fact that rather than an individual, the heterosexual couple – with a male breadwinner and supportive wife as a model – remains hegemonic as the diplomatic envoy (e.g. Erlandsen, Hernández-Garza, and Schulz 2021).

However, such reversals of gender neutrality stir up different challenges. Voicing "women" as bogged down by not having a "diplomatic wife" might strengthen a second set of disempowering claims about women in diplomacy: since married (straight) women cannot count professionally on the labour of a "diplomatic spouse", their

marriage is a drain on rather than support for their diplomatic position. This discourse was prevalent in the twenteith century and informed the marriage bans that were placed on female diplomats until the 1970s (e.g. McCarthy 2014, Aggestam and Towns 2019). Read in this light, when ambassadors reverse the gender neutrality of diplomacy, they may simultaneously undermine the place of "women" in diplomacy. Indeed, it is easy to see how drawing attention to difficulties in doing a job as well as a man-with-a-wife might strengthen doubts about the ability of "women" to serve as effectively as men as ambassadors.

This takes us to a third prevalent set of disempowering representations that WAW-members seem to reverse, namely the idea that many diplomatic contexts are highly gendered in ways that might make "women" diplomats ineffective, as they are allegedly unable to fully access male centres of power (e.g. Niklasson 2020). For instance, as McCarthy (2014:108) has shown, rules against allowing British women to serve as diplomats hinged in part on ideas about "the supposed backwardness of the societies to which female diplomats might be sent". Such representations have been prevalent in a range of diplomatic sites, initially central in justifications for keeping women out of diplomacy altogether and subsequently important in justifying why female diplomats should serve in some capitals and not others. None of the WAW-members interviewed simply reproduced such representations. In fact, as the analysis above showed, while recognising the existence of some male networks and sexist comments, the interviewees rejected their significance. A few of the ambassadors did so in ways that reversed the discourse, arguing that gender norms enable them to play on their being "women" in ways that helped them advance their state's interests. In other words, rather than a disadvantage, being a "woman" in diplomacy was reversed as an advantage.

Conclusions

What might at first seem to be contradictory and random claims about "women" in diplomacy make sense when understood as reverse discourses that respond to fragmented but disempowering representations of the place of "women" in diplomacy. The fractured nature of prevalent claims in diplomacy – e.g. claims about the gender neutrality of diplomacy co-existing with claims about diplomacy being gendered in ways that make women ineffective as diplomats – poses dilemmas for women ambassadors. There is no obvious recourse when prevalent representations, to borrow the language of Joan Scott, only has paradoxes to offer. As the analysis showed, reversing one disempowering discourse may serve to fortify another.

These are novel insights in the study of gender and diplomacy. The presence of women's networks among ambassadors might lead one to guess that the members organise around some shared sense of womanhood, perhaps even identifying as the "women first – diplomat second" – kinds of diplomats first described by Neumann in his ground-breaking work. But even in the case of a network of ambassadors such as WAW, a woman-only network with members who express solidarity with one another, none of the members represented "women" or WAW in terms that would warrant classifying them as "women first"-diplomats. Instead, the subject position "women" emerged as fraught and contradictory in the interviews. On the one hand, diplomatic work was often portrayed as gender neutral. On the other hand, the very same

interviewees would then also describe diplomacy as a gendered landscape, where the ambassadors were sometimes differentiated as "women" and thus compelled to respond as such. There were similar shifts in the descriptions of the network, where members were both represented as people who just happen to be women *and* as an empowering space for "women" as subjects with different experiences and ways of interacting than men.

As the research field on gender in contemporary diplomacy continues to develop, scholars need to more critically reflect on their theoretical assumptions about gender. To date, and in contrast with feminist IR work on e.g. international security, much diplomacy scholarship has relied on understandings of gender that align with Bourdieu's notion of gender as enduring and coherent embodiments. A post-structural understanding of discursive subject positions instead draws attention to the shifting and contradictory representations of "women" in diplomacy. This helps make sense of the fact that representations of "women" did not align among the interviewees (with some as "women-first" and others as "diplomats-first") but manifested in multiple and shifting representations by each interviewee. Indeed, the ambassadors found ways to negotiate tensions between "woman" and "diplomat" that did not entail consistently privileging one status over the other (cf Neumann 2008, 687). Likewise, even when organised as a women-only network, the ambassadors of WAW made no clear and coherent claims about diplomacy as a gendered terrain or the place of "women" therein. Instead, "womanhood" alternated between being irrelevant, daunting, and empowering. As such, "women" as a subject position seems almost impossible to fully embrace for ambassadors. This is an important insight when grappling with the gendered character of diplomacy and its changes. A more diverse set of perspectives will not only unearth new and distinctive diplomatic practices and phenomena – it will also stimulate theoretical debate and innovation on gender in the study of diplomacy.

Acknowledgements

For very helpful feedback and comments, I would like to thank Rebecca Adler-Nissen, Kristin Anabel Eggeling, Katarzyna Jezierska, Birgitta Niklasson, the special issue editors Mikael Baaz and Mona Lilja, and the three anonymous reviewers.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Knut and Alice Wallenberg Foundation [grant number KAW 2013.0178] and Vetenskapsrådet [grant number 2013-00638].

Notes on contributor

Ann E. Towns is professor in political science at the University of Gothenburg and a Wallenberg Academy Fellow. She heads GenDip, a research program on the gender of diplomacy (https://www.gu.se/en/gendip). Towns is co-editor of *Gendering Diplomacy and International Negotiation*

(with Karin Aggestam, 2018, Palgrave) and author of *Women and States: Norms and Hierarchies in International Society* (2010, Cambridge University Press) and numerous journal articles on gender, diplomacy, states, norms and international hierarchies.

ORCID

Ann E. Towns http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2066-3616

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Appendices

Appendix 1. List of interviewees

Women Ambassadors in Warsaw 2020 (those interviewed in bold)

Sending country	Name	Date of interview
Albania	Kureta, Shpresa	
Argentina	**Ramírez, Ana María**	**June 10, 2020 (WhatsApp)**
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Spiric, Kovalijka	
Canada	**Scanlon, Leslie**	**May 29, 2020 (WhatsApp)**
Congo, Democratic Republic of	Shakembo Kamanga, Clèmentine	
Hungary	**Kovács, Orsolya**	**June 11, 2020 (Zoom)**
Indonesia	Mauludiah, Siti Nugraha	
Ireland	**O'Connell, Emer**	**May 29, 2020 (Zoom)**
Lebanon	Charbel, Reina	
Korea, Republic of	Sun, Mira	
Malaysia	**Ramiah, Chitra Devi**	**June 24, 2020 (WhatsApp)**
Netherlands	**Bergsma, Daphne**	**Jan 20, 2020 (at the Dutch Embassy)**
New Zealand	**Mary Thurston**	**June 22, 2020 (Zoom)**
Phillippines	Basinang-Ruiz, Leah	
Slovenia	**Forstnaric Boroje, Bozena**	**May 28, 2020 (Zoom)**
Yemen	Hasson Mojali, Mervat Fadhle	
Woman ambassador not active in WAW		
USA	Mosbacher, Georgette	

WAW. Appendix 2: interview guide

Warsaw as environment + general networks

(1) When you arrived to your post as ambassador in Warsaw, what struck you about the job? Similarities to what you had done before? What was distinctive?
(2) How would you describe Warsaw as a diplomatic environment? Relationship among ambassadors? Are these important? Friendly? Competitive?
(3) How are relations to Polish politicians organised? Do you primarily interact with counterparts at the MFA? In government? In Parliament?
(4) You obviously inherit networks. Have you tried to build new ones? What kinds of actors did you prioritise? How approach them?
(5) "Like-minded states" that you coordinate with in Warsaw? Which? How do you meet and coordinate?
(6) Did Warsaw strike you as a "male" diplomatic environment? In what ways, or why not?
(7) Are there networks (formal or informal) of men ambassadors or diplomats in Warsaw? "Old Boys Networks"? If so, where and how (e.g. golfing, bars)? With what effects?

Women Ambassadors of Warsaw

(8) How often do you meet? Where and what time of the day, typically?
(9) How are these meetings organised – what do you do?
(10) What do you value most with this network?
(11) Have do developed friendships within the network? If so, do these friendships assist your diplomatic work? If so, in what ways?
(12) What kinds of issues do you discuss with the network members? With friends within the network?
(13) What does this network provide that other networks do not?
(14) Why is it important to have a network of women ambassadors?

(15) In what ways does your womanhood, or femininity, matter (or not) in diplomatic work?
(16) Is your womanhood something you value in diplomatic interactions? If so, why and how? If not, why not?
(17) Have there been instances when you have really been made to feel like "a woman" in diplomacy? If so, can you describe?

Anything else you want to add? Reflections?

GenDip and EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) statement:

Participation in the research project is voluntary and you have the right to cancel at any time, without specific explanation. Your answers will be anonymised in the publications – quotes and summaries of interviews will not be connected with named individuals. A list of the interviewees will appear at the end of the publications (name, title, posting, date of interview). However, in this particular study, the number of interviewees is relatively small so I cannot guarantee that it would be impossible for a person familiar with the context to figure out who might have provided a particular answer. I will do my best to make this difficult, however. Your answers and your results will be processed so that unauthorised persons cannot access them. Data collected will be stored within within the GenDip program on Gender and Diplomacy, Department of Political Science, at the University of Gothenburg, available only to the researcher working in the project. Personal data will be processed in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). For questions or concerns, please contact GenDip P.I.: Professor Ann Towns, ann.towns@gu.se.

Recording the interview?

Solely for the purposes of accurately transcribing the interview and to better be able to concentrate on our conversation (rather than note-taking), could I record our interview? I would delete the recording as soon as the interview has been transcribed.