

Gender, International Status, and Ambassador Appointments

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Focusing on ambassador appointments, the aim of this pioneering article is to address some fundamental questions about where men and women are positioned in diplomacy. Most of the gender-related diplomacy studies are limited to individual Ministry of Foreign Affairs and say little about diplomacy as an aggregate set of practices. We draw on theories of gender and positional status to ask whether there are gender patterns in ambassador appointments—with men occupying positions of higher military and economic status than women—much like the ones found in other institutions. Our analyses are based on a unique data set containing almost 7,000 ambassador appointments, made by the fifty highest ranked countries in terms of GDP in 2014. The results show that female ambassadors are less likely to occupy high-status ambassadorships than men. In short, gender patterns, linked to power and status, are present also in ambassador appointments. Diplomacy studies need to do much more to address the presence and impact of gender in international affairs.

Introduction

In the past two decades, an increasing number of women have entered the field of diplomacy. Women now make up 25–40 percent of the ambassadors of a number of states, such as Finland (44 percent), the Philippines (41 percent), Sweden (40 percent), Norway (33 percent), the United States (30 percent), Canada (29 percent), Colombia (28 percent). Women constitute an even larger share of the lower-level diplomats. A number of female ambassadors have in turn reported that gender makes very little difference in diplomatic practice and the path toward becoming ambassador (for example, [Morin 1994](#)). Conducting interviews with diplomats of different rank in Stockholm during the fall of 2014, we were

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asked more than once why we were focusing on gender. Women face few limits *as women* in diplomacy, we were told.

Until recently, however, Foreign Service remained a patriarchal stronghold, indeed one of the most male-dominated spheres of the state and one into which women have had a difficult time entering (for example, [Enloe 1990](#); [Neumann 2008](#)). The recent entry of larger numbers of women thus constitutes a rather dramatic change in the sexual makeup of diplomats. A large body of feminist work has demonstrated that when women have entered other male-dominated arenas, complex adjustments have been triggered that have channeled women into certain positions and men into others. A number of these have centered on the relation between gender and positional status, noting how the overrepresentation of men tends to increase with the power and prestige of positions. For instance, almost forty years ago, Robert [Putnam \(1976, 33\)](#) revealed the “law of increasing disproportion,” which claimed that “the higher the level of political authority, the greater the representation for high-status social groups [such as men].” Many studies have since documented the tendency of the proportion of women to decline as the importance of a position increases.

Ambassadors serve as heads of diplomatic missions, representing a sending state’s interests abroad. Any ambassadorship is a position of prestige and esteem ([Krook and O’Brien 2011, 14](#)). Being a politically appointed ambassador carries great status, and for career diplomats, the ambassador position is the apex of a diplomatic career. Given the trend of male overrepresentation in high-status positions, the general overrepresentation of men in ambassador positions is not surprising. But clearly, not all ambassadorships are of equal weight. Some appointments, generally those for states at the center of military and economic power, are considered much more weighty than others. Being appointed ambassador to Washington DC or London is clearly not equivalent in significance to being posted in Maputo or La Paz.

Focusing on ambassador appointments, the aim of this pioneering article is to address some fundamental questions about where men and women are positioned in diplomacy. After mapping out the basic numbers and where female and male ambassadors are stationed geographically, we examine whether women tend to cluster in ambassadorships of lesser status while remaining underrepresented in the ambassador positions of power and clout. Our endeavor speaks to the increasing interest in gender in the burgeoning and dynamic literature on diplomacy. As we will show below, most of the gender-related diplomacy studies, while rich and insightful, are limited to individual MFAs and thus say little about diplomacy as an aggregate set of practices. The few studies that have moved beyond individual MFAs ask different kinds of questions of diplomacy, such as about the role of women as diplomatic wives and as negotiators. Some of the fundamental questions of where the women and men are positioned in diplomacy thus still remain to be asked. How many female ambassadors are there in the world? Where are male and female ambassadors posted, especially with respect to positions of power and prestige? In other words, are there gender patterns in ambassador appointments? In answering these basic questions, we seek to broaden the knowledge base about men, women, and diplomacy.

It is worth emphasizing that our study is based on a unique data set containing all ambassador appointments made by the fifty highest ranked countries in terms of GDP in 2014 (the states that appointed most ambassadors). We have coded almost 7,000 ambassador appointments as the foundation of our analysis. It is also worth emphasizing that although the paper maps out variations in numbers of female ambassadors, it does not seek to explain why some states appoint relatively high levels of women while other states do not. We set this important question aside for a future study, focusing on the equally interesting question of where the

women and men who *are* appointed end up in terms of the prestige of the position.

Our inquiry also speaks to the concern in international relations (IR) scholarship with questions of gender and international hierarchies. In diplomacy, the gender norms and practices of specific MFAs come into contact with those that guide interstate interactions. As organizers of social relationships, gender norms are power-laden in terms of distributing social power and prestige between different gender roles. The prestige of ambassador positions is in turn in large part a function of international military and economic hierarchies, hierarchies that are fundamentally international in nature. Filling ambassador positions, women and men are channeled into these hierarchies. We argue that if women end up in low-prestige positions and men in high-status ones, this not only reflects gender norms and processes in individual states, it also reflects and reinforces the equation in international politics between men and high status and women and lower status. We thus point to an additional practice—ambassador appointments—whereby the gender of international hierarchies is produced and potentially challenged.

The rest of this article proceeds in five sections. We begin by situating our contribution in the literatures on gender and diplomacy as well as gender and international hierarchy. The following section discusses the theoretical foundations of the study, including the reasons one may expect men and women to end up in different positions in diplomacy. The third section then presents our design, unique data, and methods, followed by the results and analysis. The fifth and final section provides a concluding discussion of the implications for gender, diplomacy, and international hierarchy.

The Scholarship on Gender, Diplomacy, and International Hierarchy

Diplomacy is a large and hot academic field, involving some of the cutting-edge scholars of IR (for example, Neumann 2012; Adler-Nissen 2015; Sending, Pouliot, and Neumann 2015). A number of prior studies have mapped out the gender patterns and gender norms within individual MFAs, such as the US Department of State and the Norwegian Ministry for Foreign Affairs (for example, Crapol 1987; McGlen and Sarkees 1993, 1995, 2001; Jeffreys-Jones 1995; Neumann 2008, 2012). Moving beyond the single case study, Niskanen and Nyberg (2010) provide a comparison of gender patterns within the MFAs of Norway, Denmark, Finland, and Iceland. However, very little prior work has addressed the “big picture” of gender and diplomacy. A widely read chapter by Cynthia Enloe (1990) remains one of very few academic treatments of diplomacy in the aggregate, as an international institution and set of practices. Writing in the late 1980s, she presented diplomatic work as a male world, guided by norms of masculinity and inhabited by men. “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,” she argued (Enloe 1990, 97–98). While important and insightful, Enloe’s analysis does not include an empirical mapping of numbers and postings. We thus know very little about where the women who actually do enter diplomacy and reach the ambassador level end up or even how many female ambassadors there are. Our focus on charting the basic numbers and the status of the postings of male and female ambassadors is, to our knowledge, the first attempt of its kind.

Our focus on women and men in ambassador positions also has bearing on the large and vibrant body of scholarship, which has explored the connections between gender and international hierarchies. Diplomacy is a practice where national institutions—most notably Ministries of Foreign Affairs—meet international politics. Here, institutional gender practices and the internal hierarchies of specific Foreign Service organizations come into contact with international ones.

Decisions made on the national level about ambassador appointments funnel men and women into hierarchies among states with higher and lower military and economic clout. These decisions also impact the prevalent association between men and power in international affairs. Indeed, as we will discuss below, there are good reasons to assume that the overall number of women filling ambassador positions (as well as other top international leadership positions), status positions in particular, is one important factor which reproduces or challenges the equation between men and power in international affairs.

Feminist work in IR has highlighted the close links between masculinity and power in international affairs. Scholars such as Carol Cohn (1987) and David Campbell (1992) have underscored ways in which the security-seeking behavior, which is so central to statehood, has been legitimated through appeals to idealized forms of masculinity. Understandings of masculinity that emphasize heroism, strength/violence, domination, and even sexual prowess are intimately woven into the language and practices of foreign policy (Cohn 1987; Campbell 1992; Ruddick 1993; Elshtain 1995; Kinsella 2005; Sjoberg 2011, 2012). Femininity, in contrast, is often associated with weakness, subordination, and being conquered. States and behaviors can thus be devalued and located as inferior through feminization, by being attributed putatively feminine traits. Drawing on this work, Sjoberg (2012) argues that gender tropes function to set up or reproduce hierarchies among states, so that states “position themselves relatively according to the degree to which other states meet their gender expectations or measure up to their ideal-typical masculinity” (Sjoberg 2012, 23). The binary hierarchies between male–female, power–weakness, and dominant–subordinate seem to map onto one another quite tightly in international affairs.

Much of the recent feminist work on gender and international hierarchies has stayed clear of questions about where men and women are located in international affairs, however. The tendency has been to focus on the gender norms and tropes of international institutions and international representational practices, with an adjacent emphasis on the masculine and masculinist character of foreign policy irrespective of the sex of the individuals who carry it out. As Zillah Eisenstein’s has argued about women in the military, “just the sex has changed; the uniform remains the same. Male or female can be a masculinized commander” (2007, 37). We do not disagree with her claim nor with the general focus on gendered institutions. However, we want to suggest that whether a military commander or foreign policy official is male or female carries meaning in terms of the kinds of traits and attributes that are associated with men and women in international affairs. If women can be masculinized commanders, then the link between traits such as authority or a propensity for violence and men is loosened. Likewise, if women enter international positions of power and status in large numbers, the association between power, status, and men is loosened. Indeed, social psychological scholarship has shown that exposure to women in leadership positions helps change engrained views of authority as male (for example, Beaman et al. 2012; Latu et al. 2013). It therefore seems feasible to assume that with more women in international positions of authority, the binary hierarchy between men–power–dominance and women–weakness–subordination could become less tightly bound. We thus point to an additional practice—ambassador appointments—whereby the gender of international hierarchies is produced and potentially challenged.

Theories of Gender and Positional Status

In this section, we set out our main theoretical assumptions and expectations about gender, positional status, the hierarchy among ambassadorships, and where women and men may be expected to end up in this hierarchy. We begin with a

brief account of how we understand the concepts of gender and gendered institutions, to then discuss some of the theoretical reasons why we expect that men may be overrepresented in high-status ambassador positions while women cluster in those of less weight. As the aim of this article is to explore whether such patterns can in fact be detected and the form they may take, we do not attempt to adjudicate between competing explanations for gender patterns. The discussion of potential explanations should instead be read as a justification for asking questions about hierarchical patterns to begin with. We end this section with an elaboration of how we approach the status order among ambassador positions by turning to international hierarchy, setting out our expectations of where men and women may end up in this hierarchy among ambassadorships.

Following [Scott's \(1986, 1067\)](#) classic formulation, we use the concept of gender as "a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes." Gender thus points to a relational view of male, female, and trans categories as contextually and relationally defined. Gender consists of norms—socially shared standards of behavior for men and women (and, to a lesser extent, transgender persons)—which set out what is desirable and possible to do as a male or female. Gender norms function as social rules of behavior, and they help shape actor's practices, choices, and preferences. Gender norms thus help organize social relationships into relatively stable, predictable, and patterned relations. As organizers of social relationships, gender norms are power-laden both in terms of defining the roles and expectations of men and women and in terms of distributing social power and prestige between different gender roles, including transgender ones (for example, [Scott 1986](#)).

There are important omissions in our use of gender. For one, unlike much contemporary feminist work, we do not investigate the intersection of the male/female nexus with, for example, race, class, ability, sexual orientation, or ethnicity (on intersectionality, see for example, [Crenshaw 1989](#) and [Yuval-Davis 2006](#)). We ask, simply, about the location of persons labeled men and women, a question which says nothing about the complexities and multiple other axes of identity. Second, in doing so, we admittedly force all ambassadors into one of these two categories: male or female. This precludes transgender, queer, and other classifications that individuals who transgress or reject the male/female binary may use to identify themselves. We do so primarily for practical and empirical reasons. Virtually all contemporary ambassadors seem to present themselves as male or female (regardless of what sex they may have been assigned at birth). Although there is evidence of occasional transgender diplomats in history—such as the French top diplomat d'Eon, who negotiated the 1763 Treaty of Paris with England ([Kates 1995](#))—we have found no evidence in our 2014 material of ambassadors who openly transgress the binary to defy being labeled as either male or female.¹

Gender can be institutionalized in social and political organizations, such as those of diplomacy. Institutional scholarship has demonstrated that institutions can be gendered, containing "collections of interrelated rules and routines that define appropriate actions in terms of relations between roles and situations" ([March and Olsen 1989](#), 161). Indeed, as [Acker \(1990\)](#) showed in her pioneering work on gender in organizations, institutions themselves (and not just the people working within them) are bearers of gender. They contain gender symbols and norms that create and reproduce gender divisions of labor, ideas about femininity and masculinity, and what are appropriate tasks for men and women. Two general trends can be seen in the research on gendered state institutions. On the one

¹US Secretary of State John Kerry recently spoke in support of the first US transgender Foreign Service officer to come out as such on the job and stated that as Secretary of State, Kerry is "working hard" also to have transgender ambassadors ([Bier 2014](#)).

hand, comparative scholarship reveals that inside cabinets and legislatures, female ministers and legislators often cluster in what are seen as “feminine” or “soft” fields traditionally “linked to the private sphere and/or to women as a group” whereas men congregate in “hard” fields of military and finance (Krook and O’Brien 2011, 13. See also for example, Wängnerud 1998 and Towns 2003). Many public institutions are characterized by a division of labor, manifest in, for example, standing committee, section, and work assignments, with men performing stereotypically “male” tasks and women performing “female” tasks.² In addition, in the world of diplomacy, expectations that women may be ineffective as ambassadors in capitals and diplomatic milieus that are particularly male-dominated or sexist may also help create a clustering of female ambassador postings to what are politically more gender equal states.

As a second and related general trend, of more relevance for our article, women tend to cluster in less prestigious assignments and work roles, whereas men tend to cluster in the more prestigious ones (for example, Putnam 1976; Bashevkin 1993; Studlar and Moncrief 1999; Hawkesworth 2003; Connell 2006). Gender thus centrally involves the distribution of social power and prestige among actors. Putnam’s (1976, 33) classic generalization about political elites, “the law of increasing disproportion,” predicts numbers of women will decrease with each step toward the apex of power. There are several reasons why such hierarchical patterns may emerge. For one, fields and positions of public status and power have generally been occupied by men, presumed to be the bearers of “masculine” traits. Power and positions of influence are often associated with alleged traits of masculinity, whereas femininity is instead often linked with positions of subordination and lesser status. Among career diplomats within specific MFAs, men may thus be favored to status sections and positions that require allegedly “masculine” traits—for example, divisions of military and political affairs—whereas women may be channeled toward more “feminine” and less prestigious positions. This funneling can be the cumulative effect of individuals’ career choices (as preferences are also shaped by gender), the existence of discrimination, male homosocial networks, and biased recruitment patterns within hierarchies, or some combination of these. Among ambassadors who are political appointees, experience from high political posts and access to the executive are often important, experience and access which in most states is still dominated by men. Appointees are more susceptible to political will than are career diplomats, however, which could work in the favor of appointing female ambassadors.

Gender patterns may also in part be a function of factors outside the institution in question, such as the gendered divisions of unpaid labor. When women shoulder more unpaid care and household responsibilities than men, this may affect the number of hours at work, ability to work overtime, ability to take on certain tasks, and other factors that may influence career advancement. An unequal division of family responsibilities may lead to female diplomats being held back, having more difficulty reaching ambassador positions in general and the prestigious ones in particular. It is quite telling that a disproportionate number of female ambassadors and top female diplomats appear to pursue their careers as single individuals without children (for example, Morin 1994; interviews Stockholm).³

²What is considered “male” and “female” can vary contextually and by institution, however, and it is not always immediately clear to the outside observer why certain assignments and duties are understood as “male” rather than “female.” Institutions are furthermore dynamic, so that even though they may tend toward stability and routines, they are not fixed or completely stable entities—what is considered appropriate changes over time (for example, Katzenstein 1990 and Thelen and Steinmo 1992).

³Upon opening Foreign Service to women, many MFAs instituted a marriage ban on women, requiring them to choose between a marriage and a foreign service career. For the past few decades, this ban has been lifted and women diplomats have since struggled with combining a career that involves being stationed abroad and family commitments.

What is the hierarchy among ambassador positions? Which capitals are most prestigious for an ambassador outpost? To some extent, this may vary country by country (and even individual by individual). But as others have pointed out before us, the pecking order of ambassadorships is also established in the context of international politics and is therefore in large part shared among states (for example, Adler-Nissen 2013, 73; Klingvall and Ström 2012). In this article, we thus make a simple and presumably uncontroversial assumption: the relative military and economic weight of states will be reflected in the relative status of ambassador positions. In other words, being placed in capitals of militarily or economically powerful states will be considered more prestigious than being posted in poorer and/or militarily less significant states. The hierarchy we examine is thus a hierarchy widely acknowledged among IR scholars, ranging from realists to liberals and constructivists. To be clear, this means that potential variations in how individual states value and rank ambassador postings (including for neighboring states) do not enter into our study. However, while conceivable, we find it unlikely that the overall findings would change considerably if this were to be factored in.

Where do male and female ambassadors end up in the hierarchy between the militarily/economically weak and strong? The main aim of this article is to investigate whether women are overrepresented in postings of lesser status while men are overrepresented at the top. Prior scholarship on gender and positional status suggest at least two possibilities for such a pattern, however. One is a linear progression, captured in Putnam's notion of "the law of increasing disproportion" or what Sylvia Bashevkin (1993) has called "the higher, the fewer." In this view, there is a proportionate increase in the ratio or overrepresentation of men the higher the status ladder one moves. Among ambassadorships, women would be overrepresented in lower status positions and underrepresented in higher status positions, and there would be a gradual decrease of women between low and high positions.

The second possibility is captured in the notion of the "glass ceiling." The glass ceiling points to the top of the hierarchy, claiming that discrimination actually *increases at the top* of the hierarchy (for example, Hermsen and Cotter 2001). "A ceiling implies that some upward movement has been made in the past but that later in one's career, more severe discrimination sets in to block further progress" (Cotter et al. 2001, 660–61). The existence of glass ceilings for women has been documented in a large number of institutions, including in public administration (for example, Guy 1992; Connell 2006). Among ambassadorships, a glass ceiling pattern would consist of relatively proportionate representation of men and women at the lower to middle levels of the pecking order, combined with underrepresentation of women at the top of the hierarchy. The main aim of this article is to explore whether men are overrepresented in higher status positions and women in lower status ones. These two variations—increasing disproportion and glass ceiling—give us some additional theoretical tools to dig deeper into the shape of that pattern.

Design and Data

The analyses in this article are based on a unique data set containing all ambassador appointments made by the fifty highest ranked countries in terms of GDP in 2014.⁴ These fifty countries are selected primarily because they have the financial means to send out a substantial number of ambassadors, which allows for enough variation in the variables under study. The average number of appointments made by these states is 96, varying between 33 (Singapore) and 165 (China). As a

⁴This means that the lowest ranked sender country has the rank of fifty-one, since Hong Kong, which is ranked thirty-nine, is not an independent country with foreign representation of its own.

comparison, five of the lowest ranked GDP countries in the world—Comoros, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Palau, and Tuvalu—only appoint on an average four ambassadors each and information about these appointments is hard to come by. Lower ranked countries are therefore excluded from this study, something that of course limits its generalizing scope. We are nonetheless convinced that an analysis of the ambassador appointments made by the top fifty countries is still highly relevant for improving our understanding of the role gender plays in the international game of which these appointments are an important part. After all, the great majority of the ambassador appointments in the world are made by these fifty countries.

In total, 6,990 ambassador appointments have been coded. Of these, 4,730 will be used in most of the analyses, for several reasons. First, several positions were vacant at the time of the data collection. Second, ambassadors posted in the home MFA have been excluded, primarily because it has not been possible to find information about all ambassadors posted in the sending states' home MFAs. Third, not all ambassador appointments are unique, as some ambassadors act as envoys to several countries simultaneously. In these cases, we have only regarded the position where the ambassador is actually stationed since we assume that this is their most important position.

It is interesting to note, however, that female ambassadors are more often appointed to these multiplacement positions than their male counterparts (31 percent of the women compared to 26 percent of the men). This means that it is more common that female ambassadors are in charge of several small embassies in low-status countries that are not considered to require full-time representation. We interpret this as a first hint that women are more frequently sent to less prestigious postings than their male counterparts.

Measures

The focus of this study is on the relationship between gender and ambassador appointments. More specifically, we want to know if there is a gender pattern with regards to who is appointed and the economic and military status of the position to which that person is sent. This aim requires a discussion of how we operationalize our most central theoretical concepts: gender, economic status, and military status (more statistical details are provided in the Appendix in [Table A1](#)).

As pointed out in the theoretical section, we apply two categories of gender: women and men. There is no missing data on this variable, which means that we have been able to identify all ambassadors in the data set as either women or men. The coding has been based on their names, pictures, and presentations of the ambassadors available on the embassies' websites. We have also used Google and Google Images when the embassy websites have not posted pictures of the ambassadors and we have been unable to decide their gender just based on their names. On those few occasions when we have not been able to find any pictures or any other leads (for example, gendered titles like Mr, Mrs, or Ms) on the web either, we have contacted people with the relevant lingual and cultural expertise and asked them whether they are able to decide the ambassadors' genders just based on their names. They have always been able to do so.

The economic status of a country has been measured in three different ways. First, we have looked at the GDP rank of different countries provided by [the World Bank \(2015, Data-catalog/GDP-ranking-table\)](#). Second, to gauge economic status, we have coded if an actor is one of the G20 members or not since G20 members represent economies "whose size or strategic importance gives them a particularly crucial role in the global economy" ([OECD 2015, G20/About](#)). G20 does not only include countries, however; the European Union is also a member. We have therefore coded the European Union as a G20 member, but not all of

the twenty-eight EU member states. However, those EU countries that are also individual members of the G20 have been coded as G20 members in our analysis. The third economic measure is based on the level of trade (import + export) that passes in and out of a specific country. The level of trade represents the value of all goods and other market services that are received and provided to the rest of the world. This includes the value of merchandise, freight, insurance, transport, travel, royalties, license fees, and other services such as communication, construction, financial, information, business, personal, and government services. This information has been retrieved from [the World Bank \(2015, Indicator/NE.EXP.GNFS.CD, Indicator/NE.IMP.GNFS.CD\)](#).

The military status of different states is operationalized through their military expenditure, which we have retrieved from the SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute) Military Expenditure Database (2014, Milex data). Based on these figures, we have ranked the countries; the state that spends the most is ranked number 1, the state that spends the second most is ranked number 2, etc. Apart from this, we will also use permanent membership in the UN Security Council as an indicator of high military status.

It would have been better, of course, if we had been able to use status indicators that capture the bilateral relationships between the sending and receiving states, for example, to what extent a sending country is involved in trade or military collaborations with each receiving state or the status accorded to neighboring states. However, this would have required an extensive data collection beyond our present resources. Again, as we discussed above, prior scholarship suggests that status hierarchies in ambassador postings are largely worked out among states and are thus shared to a large degree. We have furthermore found no reason to believe that the importance ascribed to the more powerful states, like the United States, would differ much between the individual sending states. If anything, it is more likely that states may differ in their perceptions of the middle-ranked countries. For this reason, the most prestigious states receive the greatest focus in our analyses.

Results

We start out by offering a general overview of the share of female ambassadors and where they are sent. [Figure 1](#) shows to what extent different geographic regions send out female ambassadors (as percent of total number of appointments).

From this first analysis, we can conclude that women are clearly underrepresented in ambassador appointments made anywhere in the world. Indeed, women only occupy 15 percent of these top positions. There are regional differences, however. The Nordic countries stand out as those who appoint the most women as ambassadors (35 percent), a share that stands in sharp contrast to the female ambassadors of the Middle East (6 percent) and Asia (10 percent). Several countries in the two latter regions (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kazakhstan, Iran, and South Korea) actually appoint no women at all. Still, it is important to note that there are exceptions to this general regional pattern; 17 percent of Israel's ambassadors are women, for example, as are 41 percent of the Philippine ones. The Philippines thus appoint almost as many female ambassadors as Finland (44 percent) and nearly twice as many as Denmark (22 percent), whereas Russia, which is included as a part of Europe,⁵ appoints almost no women (1 percent). Other exceptions worth mentioning are South Africa, which sends out 27 percent female ambassadors and Colombia with 28 percent female ambassadors.

⁵For a detailed description of what countries are included in Europe, see the Appendix.

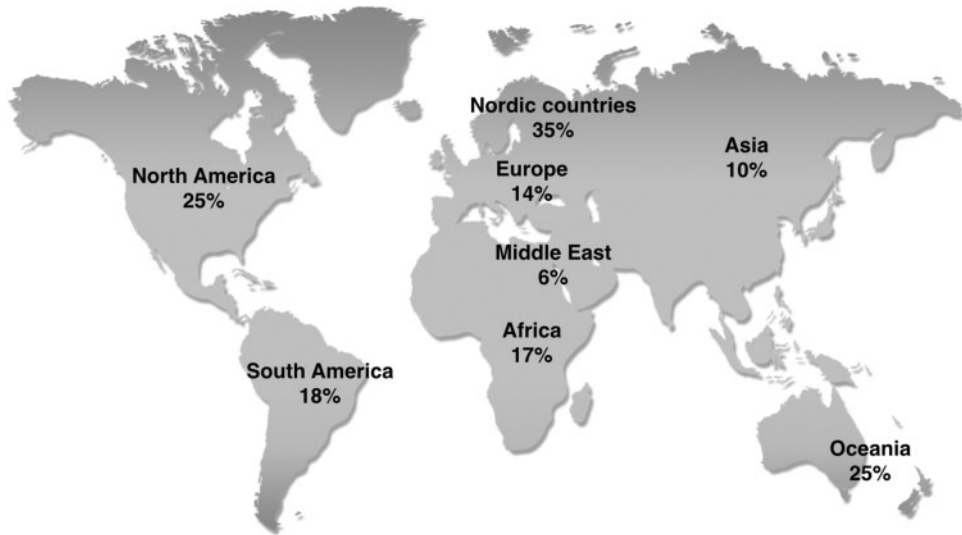


Figure 1. Share of women (%) of different regions' ambassador appointments

Note: The number of cases for the regions are North America = 317, South America = 457, Nordic countries = 347, Europe = 1,696, Middle East = 565, Africa = 247, Asia = 1,020, and Oceania = 81. For information about the classification of countries into regions, see the Appendix.

If we now turn to looking at where the ambassadors are sent, the general picture remains. The figures in [Figure 2](#) follow a similar if weaker pattern with regards to which regions receive the highest and lowest proportion of female ambassadors.

The Nordic countries turn out not just to belong to the region that sends out the most women; they also receive them to a greater degree than the other regions. Twenty-two percent of the ambassadors placed in the Nordic countries are women, compared to 15 percent of the ambassadors overall. Similarly, fewer women are sent to Middle Eastern (10 percent) and Asian (11 percent) countries, these also being the two regions that appoint the lowest share of female ambassadors. This implies that there is some degree of reciprocity in the ambassador exchanges; countries may be more willing to send female ambassadors to postings from where they also more likely to receive women. As an illustration, none of the forty-two foreign ambassadors posted in Saudi Arabia are women and, as noted above, Saudi Arabia sends none. There are of course outlier cases. Fifteen percent of the ambassadors posted in Qatar are women, even though Qatar also is one of the countries without any female ambassadors of its own. Curiously, the Philippines, which is one of the countries that appoints the most women, only receives 5 percent female ambassadors. The issue of reciprocity in turn raises the interesting question of whether women are more likely to be placed in ambassadorial posts in countries with higher levels of gender equality. Our data suggest that yes, this is indeed the case.⁶ (Also, the more gender equal countries are, the more

⁶The difference is statistically significant on a 90 percent confidence level (two-tailed *t*-test) regardless of whether gender equality is measured according to the Gender-related Development Index (GDI), the GDI female to male ratio of the Human Development Index, or the Gender Inequality Index (GII). The average GDI female to male HDI ratio in the states that the female ambassadors are sent from is, for example, 0.961 compared to 0.946 in those that send males and the corresponding figures for the states that receive female and male ambassadors are 0.949 and 0.935, respectively. Higher figures indicate higher levels of gender equality.

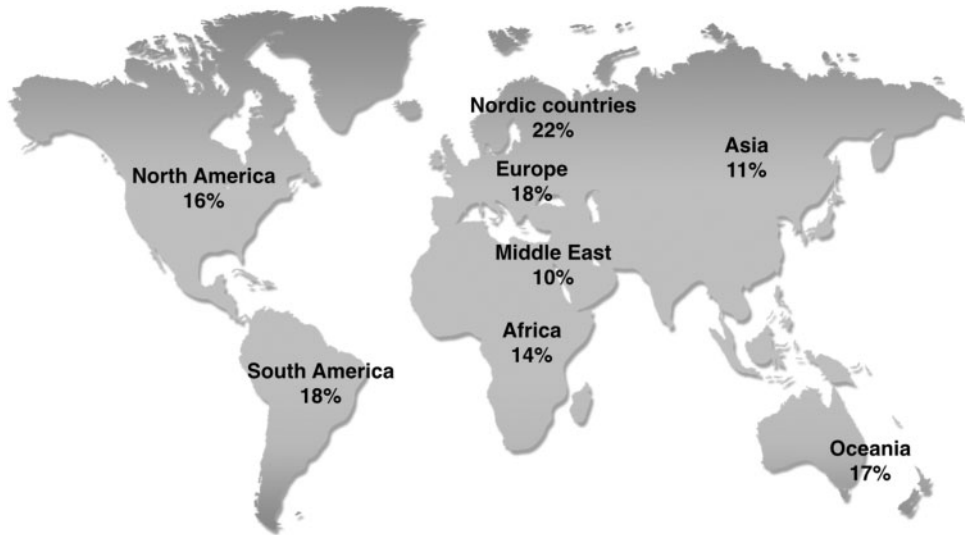


Figure 2. Share of women (%) of the ambassadors received by different regions

Note: The number of cases for the regions are North America = 368, South America = 312, Nordic countries = 171, Europe = 1,233, Middle East = 446, Africa = 926, Asia = 839, and Oceania = 111. For information about the classification of countries into regions, see the Appendix.

likely they are to appoint female ambassadors—but this is a question that lies beyond the scope of this article).

One region that diverges noticeably with regards to the share of female ambassadors sent and received is North America. Twenty-five percent of the ambassadors appointed by this region are women, but only 16 percent of the foreign ambassadors that are posted there are. This difference can probably in large part be accounted for by the case of the United States. Although the United States appoints 30 percent female ambassadors, only 7 percent of the ambassadors posted in Washington, DC by other states are women. The United States is a country that scores relatively well on a number of gender equality measures. We suspect that the very high economic and military status of the United States is at play here, although—again—the aim of the article is not to explain why women are underrepresented in particular postings.

It is also interesting to note that the variation in the share of female ambassadors received is lower than that of the share sent. Even though there seems to be an aspect of reciprocity in the distribution of female ambassadors, there is also an element of leveling. The difference in percentage points between the regions that send the most (Nordic countries: 35 percent) and the least (Middle East: 6 percent) female ambassadors is twenty-nine. The corresponding number when it comes to receiving female ambassadors is twelve (Nordic countries: 22 percent and Middle East: 10 percent). It thus appears that the extreme gender inequality that prevails in some countries is mitigated on an international level so that the gender composition of the diplomatic communities becomes fairly similar in most regions of the world.

After this quick review of the geographic distribution of ambassador appointments, we now move on to a deeper analysis of where ambassadors are sent. Our first finding—that there are relatively few female ambassadors overall—is hardly surprising. The main interest of this article, however, is what happens to those women who actually succeed in acquiring an ambassador position. Where in the

world are they stationed and are these positions associated with the same level of prestige as those of their male counterparts? We will answer these questions by testing whether female ambassadors are less likely than their male counterparts to be appointed to economic and military high-status countries.

Economic Status

Let us start with the economic status of the receiving states. Again, the idea is that women will be appointed ambassadors to countries with high economic status to a lower degree than men. We test this by looking at the GDP rank, the G20 membership status, and the level of trade of the receiving countries.

Table 1 shows the results for the first of these measures: the GDP rank. In this first analysis, we look at how female and male ambassadors are distributed between five evenly sized groups of receiving countries. The groups are based on GDP rank, the highest ranked countries being placed in Group 1 (rank 1–38), the lowest ranked countries in Group 5 (rank 155–192), and the other countries in the groups in between.

The figures in Table 1 reveal that more than 50 percent of women as well as men are sent to countries in Group 1 or 2, whereas only 4 percent are placed in Group 5 countries. Sending countries apparently prioritize securing diplomatic relationships with the most economically important states. Interestingly enough, they display a slight preference for using male ambassadors rather than female ones when doing so. The difference is not large; 35 percent of the women compared to 39 percent of the men are appointed to Group 1, but the difference is significant ($p = .068$, Kendall's tau-c)⁷. A comparison of the average ranks of female and male ambassadors' appointments confirms this pattern. The average rank of male ambassadors is 61, while it is only 65 for female ambassadors' postings ($p = .099$, two-tailed *t*-test)⁸.

There is no obvious sign of women being hidden away in the most low-status countries, however, even though female ambassadors are somewhat more likely to be sent to all groups except Group 1, the highest status group. This indicates that there might be a glass ceiling effect at the very top positions. Following this idea, we take a closer look at the countries that belong to the global economic elite. Table 2 shows to what extent female and male ambassadors are sent to positions in those countries, as well as to the countries on the lower end of the scale.

Two of the measures included in Table 2 are also based on GDP rank, but in these cases, we have limited our focus to the top ten countries and those that are not one of the fifty highest ranked countries. The reason why we have drawn the line at rank fifty is because this is the lowest rank of the sending countries that we have included in the sample, so this variable captures to what extent female and male ambassadors are sent outside this sphere. The result points in the same direction as in the previous table, that is, it appears somewhat easier for a male ambassador to be appointed to one of the top ten GDP-ranked countries. Ten percent of the male ambassadors occupy such a position, compared to 7 percent of the females ($p < .01$, Kendall's tau-c). Similarly, the share of female ambassadors who are appointed to a country that does not belong to one of the fifty highest ranked GDP countries is higher than that of the males (60 compared to 56

⁷We will test the statistical significance of our results throughout the empirical analysis even though we are not working with a random sample, but with the whole population such as we have defined it. These tests are therefore primarily used as indicators of how robust observed differences between various groups in our population are, not whether these differences are significantly different from zero in a statistical sense at a certain significance level in our population.

⁸This gender pattern is the same in almost all geographic areas studied (see Figure 2). The only exception is female ambassadors appointed by Asian countries. The average rank of their postings is fifty-five compared to sixty-three of their male counterparts. This difference is not quite significant, however ($p = .111$, two-tailed *t*-test).

Table 1. Share of female and male ambassadors (%) in groups of receiving countries divided by GDP rank

	Group 1 (rank 1–38)	Group 2 (rank 39–77)	Group 3 (rank 78–116)	Group 4 (rank 117–154)	Group 5 (rank 155–192)	All
Female	35	28	21	12	4	100 (642)
Male	39	27	19	10	4	100 (3,625)
Gender difference	-4	+1	+2	+2	+/-0	

Note: Number of cases are given in parenthesis. Receiving countries have been divided into five groups with an equal number of countries in each group. Group 1 includes the highest ranked countries and Group 5 the lowest ranked ones. $p=.068$, Kendall's tau-c.

Table 2. To what extent (%) different regions send female and male ambassadors to high- and low-economic status countries

Receiving country is...	...of top ten GDP rank			...a G20 member			... of top fifty GDP rank		
	Yes	No	All	Yes	No	All	Yes	No	All
South America ($N=536$)									
Female	11	89	100	21	79	100	42	58	100
Male	12	88	100	24	76	100	50	50	100
Gender difference	-1	+1		-3	+3		-8	+8	
Africa ($N=247$)									
Female	7	93	100	12	88	100	50	50	100
Male	13	87	100	24	76	100	45	55	100
Gender difference	-6	+6		-12**	+12**		+5	-5	
Asia ($N=1,020$)									
Female	10	90	100	24	76	100	48	52	100
Male	10	90	100	19	81	100	44	56	100
Gender difference	+/-0	+/-0		+5	-5		+4	-4	
Oceania ($N=81$)									
Female	5	95	100	15	85	100	40	60	100
Male	15	85	100	25	75	100	51	49	100
Gender difference	-10	+10		-10	+10		-11	+11	
Nordic countries ($N=347$)									
Female	7	93	100	19	81	100	42	58	100
Male	14	86	100	27	73	100	54	46	100
Gender difference	-7*	+7*		-8*	+8*		-12**	+12**	
Middle East ($N=565$)									
Female	6	94	100	16	84	100	47	53	100
Male	11	89	100	21	79	100	47	53	100
Gender difference	-5	+5		-5	+5		+/-0	+/-0	
Europe ($N=1,696$)									
Female	5	95	100	13	87	100	35	65	100
Male	9	91	100	18	82	100	40	60	100
Gender difference	-4**	+4**		-5*	+5*		-5*	+5*	
North America ($N=238$)									
Female	4	96	100	7	93	100	29	71	100
Male	8	92	100	17	83	100	39	61	100
Gender difference	-4	+4		-10**	+10**		-10	+10	
All regions ($N=4,730$)									
Female	7	93	100	16	84	100	40	60	100
Male	10	90	100	20	80	100	44	56	100
Gender difference	-3***	+3***		-4**	+4**		-4**	+4**	

Note: * $p<.1$,

** $p<.05$,

*** $p<.01$, Kendall's tau-c.

Table 3. Average trade (in billion USD) of the receiving countries where female and male ambassadors are stationed

	Female ambassadors	Male ambassadors	Difference
Import	181	234	-53
Export	186	240	-54
Total trade	368	474	-106

Note: The number of female ambassadors is 632 and male ambassadors is 3,504. Total number is 4,136. Two-tailed *t*-tests show that the differences are significant, $p < .01$.

Table 4. Share of female and male ambassadors (%) in groups of receiving countries divided by trade (in billion USD)

	Group 1 (trade >619)	Group 2 (trade 182-619)	Group 3 (trade 70-181)	Group 4 (trade 20-69)	Group 5 (trade 0-19)	All
Female	17	23	20	21	20	100 (632)
Male	22	19	21	19	20	100 (3,504)
Gender difference	-5	+4	-1	+2	+/-0	

Note: Number of cases are given in parenthesis. Receiving countries have been divided into five groups with an equal number of countries in each group. Group 1 has the highest level of trade (more than 619 billion USD) and Group 5 has the lowest (less than 20 billion USD). $p = .151$, Kendall's tau-c.

percent), and the same pattern is discernible when it comes to the G20 members. Twenty percent of the male ambassadors are envoys to one of these actors, but only 16 percent of the females ($p < .05$, Kendall's tau-c). Again, the differences in percentage points are not great, but all three measures indicate that women are indeed less often appointed to the most economically prestigious positions. Furthermore, the pattern reoccurs for all the sending geographic regions, except for Asia and Africa. Asian female ambassadors in particular do not seem to face the same disadvantage as their fellow sisters once they have reached an ambassador position.

Our last measure of economic status is the level of trade of the receiving country. The figures are presented in Table 3, and they show that the average trade (export + import) of the countries to which men are appointed is significantly higher ($p < .01$, two-tailed *t*-test) than that of the countries to which women are appointed. The average of the male ambassadors' postings is 474 billion US dollars, compared to 368 billion US dollars for the females.⁹

If we divide all receiving countries into five groups based on the size of their trade, the pattern is less clear (see Table 4), even though there is still a larger share of male ambassadors who are appointed to the most trade-intensive countries.

We have thus tested whether women are more frequently placed in countries with lower economic status in three different ways: the countries' GDP rank, their G20 membership status, and their level of trade. The differences between the postings of female and male ambassadors are not great, but they consistently point in the same direction, namely that men are to a greater extent appointed to the most prestigious economic positions.¹⁰ We therefore conclude that there is support for our first claim.

⁹The pattern is the same for all geographic regions, with two exceptions: the Asian female ambassadors are sent to countries with a higher import rate and female ambassadors from Oceania are sent to countries with a higher export rate.

¹⁰We have also reached the same conclusion when we have tested the economic status of the receiving countries in the three following ways: the receiving country is (1) one of the three highest ranked GDP countries, (2) a G8 member, and (3) an oil exporter.

Military Status

The second part of the analysis regards the military status of the receiving countries. We will test if women are more often appointed ambassadors to countries with lower military status than their male counterparts. Military status is measured in mainly two ways: military rank based on military expenditure and permanent membership on the UN Security Council. The results are presented in [Table 5](#).

We start looking at the ten highest ranked countries. This analysis shows that there is a significant ($p < .01$, Kendall's tau-c) difference between the female and male ambassadors. Ten percent of the men are sent to these prestigious posts, but only 6 percent of the women. The same pattern appears if we turn to the average rank of the countries to which women and men are sent. The average military rank of the countries that male ambassadors are posted in is fifty-one, compared to fifty-six for the females ($p = .001$, two-tailed t -test).¹¹ The figures regarding the permanent members of the UN Security Council point in the same direction, even if the difference between female and male ambassadors is small; 4 percent of the women and 5 percent of the men are sent to one of these military powers. On the bottom of the scale, the pattern is the opposite; it is more common that a woman is sent to one of the ten lowest ranked countries than a man (4 compared to 2 percent).

So, if we look at the receiving countries with the highest and with the lowest military status, female ambassadors appear to stand a lower chance of being appointed to the first of these groups than to the latter, a pattern that is consistent across all geographic regions. The question is what happens if we include the whole spectrum of states. Does the overrepresentation of male ambassadors increase gradually, or is there an equal share of males and females, except for when it comes to the most prestigious positions?

In [Table 6](#), we have divided all receiving countries into five groups based on their military rank. The results indicate that women are less likely to be appointed to a country the higher ranked that country is.¹² Women are slightly overrepresented in the two groups with the lowest status, a little less overrepresented in the middle-ranked countries, and clearly underrepresented in the highest-ranked countries. The differences in Group 2–5 are very small, however. It is primarily when we reach the highest ranked group—Group 1—that something happens. Twenty percent of the female ambassadors are sent to this group compared to 30 percent of the males.

Thus, we find support for our second claim as well as the first one; women are less often appointed ambassadors to countries with the highest military status.¹³ The differences are small, but they consistently point in the same direction.

Summary

We will conclude this empirical section with a combined analysis of the economic and military status of the receiving countries. [Figure 3](#) shows the share of female ambassadors in receiving countries of different economic and military status, measured in GDP and military rank.

¹¹This gender pattern reoccurs in all geographic regions except for in Asia. The average military rank of the countries that Asian female ambassadors are sent to is lower than those of their male counterparts (forty-six compared to fifty-one), but not significantly so ($p = .196$, two-tailed t -test).

¹²This pattern is more or less consistent across all geographic regions, with the exceptions of Asia and the Middle East. Female ambassadors from these two regions are more frequently sent to Group 1 countries than their male counterparts, but the differences are not statistically significant ($p = .154$, Kendall's tau-c).

¹³We have reached the same conclusion when operationalizing the military status of the receiving country in the following two ways: the receiving country is (1) one of the top three military ranked countries and (2) a nuclear power.

Table 5. To what extent (%) different regions send female and male ambassadors to high- and low-military status countries

Receiving country is... ...of top ten military rank	...permanent member of the UN Security Council			...of bottom ten military rank					
	Yes	No	All	Yes	No	All	Yes	No	All
South America (<i>N</i> =536)									
Female	9	91	100	5	95	100	6	94	100
Male	12	88	100	6	94	100	4	96	100
Gender difference	-3	+3		-1	+1		+2	-2	
Africa (<i>N</i> =247)									
Female	5	95	100	2	98	100	67	33	100
Male	13	87	100	7	93	100	33	67	100
Gender difference	-8*	+8*		-5	+5		+34	-34	
Asia (<i>N</i> =1,020)									
Female	7	93	100	4	96	100	3	97	100
Male	10	90	100	5	95	100	2	98	100
Gender difference	-3	+3		-1	+1		+1	-1	
Oceania (<i>N</i> =81)									
Female	5	95	100	5	95	100	5	95	100
Male	15	85	100	7	93	100	2	98	100
Gender difference	-10	+10		-2	+2		+3	-3	
Nordic countries (<i>N</i> =347)									
Female	6	94	100	5	95	100	2	98	100
Male	15	85	100	6	94	100	0	100	100
Gender difference	-9**	+9**		-1	+1		+2	-2	
Middle East (<i>N</i> =565)									
Female	6	94	100	3	97	100	3	97	100
Male	11	89	100	5	95	100	2	98	100
Gender difference	-5	+5		-2	+2		+1	-1	
Europe (<i>N</i> =1,696)									
Female	5	95	100	4	96	100	3	97	100
Male	9	91	100	4	96	100	3	97	100
Gender difference	-4***	+4***		+/-0	+/-0		+/-0	+/-0	
North America (<i>N</i> =238)									
Female	3	97	100	0	100	100	9	91	100
Male	9	91	100	5	95	100	4	96	100
Gender difference	-6**	+6**		-5**	+5**		+5	-5	
All regions (<i>N</i> =4,730)									
Female	6	94	100	4	96	100	4	96	100
Male	10	90	100	5	95	100	2	98	100
Gender difference	-4***	+4***		-1*	+1*		+2*	-2*	

Note: * $p < .1$,

** $p < .05$,

*** $p < .01$, Kendall's tau-c.

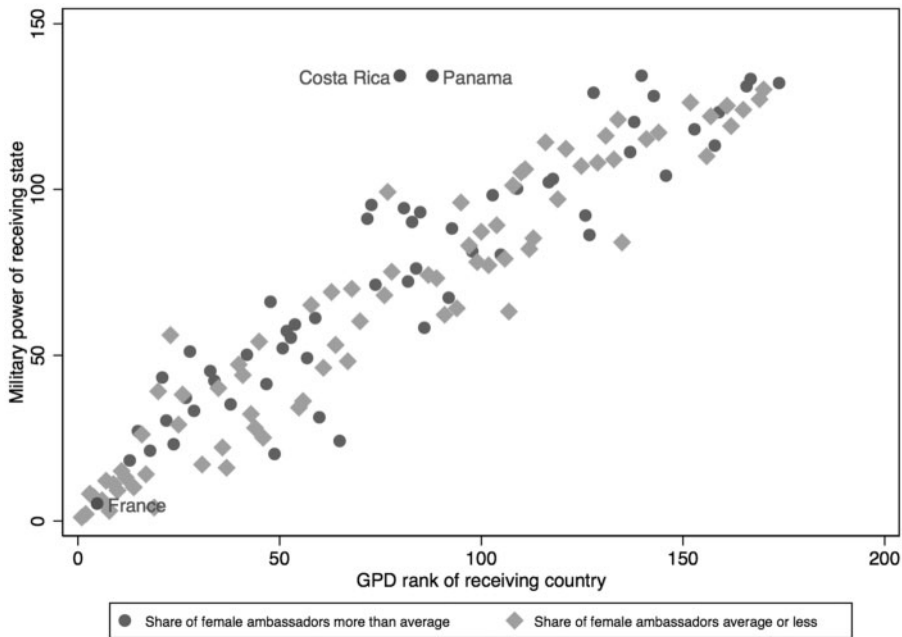
A first observation in Figure 3 is the striking, but perhaps not so surprising correlation between GDP and military rank. The only two outliers are Costa Rica and Panama. Both score relatively high on GDP rank but low on military rank. In both cases, the share of female ambassadors exceeds the average 15 percent.

Overall, the pattern in Figure 3 is consistent with our previous findings in the sense that there are small differences between the postings of female and male ambassadors. Countries that receive 15 or less percent female ambassadors are spread more or less evenly across the board, but the pattern looks slightly different in the lower left corner, where the most prestigious postings are found. In this little cluster of high-status receiving countries, only France—with 21 percent female ambassadors posted in Paris—receives more than the average share of

Table 6. Share of female and male ambassadors (%) in groups of receiving countries divided by military rank

	Group 1 (rank 1–27)	Group 2 (rank 28–53)	Group 3 (rank 54–80)	Group 4 (rank 81–107)	Group 5 (rank 108–134)	All
Female	25	28	22	16	10	100 (584)
Male	30	27	21	14	8	100 (3,172)
Gender difference	–5	+1	+1	+2	+2	

Note: Number of cases are given in parenthesis. Receiving countries have been divided into five groups with an equal number of countries in each group. Group 1 includes the highest ranked countries and Group 5 the lowest ranked ones. $p=.004$, Kendall's tau-c.

**Figure 3.** Share of female ambassadors in receiving countries of different GDP and military rank. *Note:* The average of female ambassadors equals 15 percent.

female ambassadors. Given the status of Paris as a Class One posting (Morin 1994), being the old capital of European diplomacy (Hamilton and Langhorne 1995, 96), this exception is an important one, but the fact remains that it is an exception. The rest of the countries of similar economic and military dignity¹⁴ receive a noticeably lower share of women.

Conclusion

The share of female ambassadors is low, glaringly so. Eighty-five percent of the world's ambassadors are male, making this high prestige post yet another international post that is still dominated by men. The share of female ambassadors is not distributed uniformly among countries and regions, however. Overall, the Nordic

¹⁴The countries surrounding France are Brazil, China, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

countries send out the most women, followed by North America and Oceania, in contrast with Asia, which sends particularly few women. To be sure, there are individual countries that break this general pattern, such as the Philippines. As the number of female ambassadors seems to be on the increase at a relatively rapid pace in the twenty-first century, however, the world of ambassadors may not remain as male dominated much longer.

The main aim of this article was to focus on the women (and men) who *are* appointed ambassadors to explore into what positions they are channeled. Do the women who do become ambassadors end up in lower status positions than their male counterparts? Our results—whether one looks at the economic or military status of the receiving country—consistently point in the same direction: women are less likely than men to end up as ambassadors in countries with the highest economic and military status. The pattern is not gradual, as Putnam’s “law of increasing disproportion” would lead us to expect, but rather follows a glass ceiling form. While women are underrepresented among the highest status ambassadorships, they are not particularly overrepresented among the lower status postings. A question for future research concerns whether this pattern would change if the study took into consideration potential variations among states in how ambassador postings are ranked. We cannot see any obvious reasons to expect that the pattern would look different.

It is of course important to point out that while consistent, the gender differences in status appointments are not enormous. It is not as if women cannot reach the top at all; some female ambassadors clearly do succeed in reaching the most prestigious economic and military postings, but women’s prospects for doing so are worse than for their male counterparts. The bigger challenge clearly remains the overall low level of women appointed as ambassador at all, rather than where they end up once appointed.

This is particularly true in Asia, where the difference in economic and military status between the women’s and men’s postings is less obvious. In several of the analyses, female ambassadors appointed by Asian countries stand out in that they appear to be sent to countries of equal, or even higher economic and military status than their male counterparts. This pattern calls for further studies, since Asia is also one of the regions that appoint the lowest share of female ambassadors.

With men holding 85 percent of the ambassador positions, and particularly the most prestigious ones, there is little reason to doubt that the diplomatic community continues to reproduce the link between men and power that is predominant in IR. How and the extent to which they do so may vary regionally and contextually. As we have shown in this article, there is a lower share of female ambassadors posted in the Middle East (10 percent) and Asia (11 percent) than in the Nordic countries (22 percent). What is more, individual high-profile ambassadors—such as US ambassador to Japan, Caroline Kennedy—may help challenge predominant assumptions about men, women, and international power.

There is little evidence from our study to support the claim that gender is irrelevant in the world of diplomacy. Women *are* less likely to be appointed to the highest status postings. And they constitute only 15 percent of the ambassadors. Precisely why this is so is not a question our study is designed to answer, but it seems highly unlikely that these patterns would have nothing to do with the institutional norms, rules, and practices of diplomacy and the MFAs themselves. What is more, while the formal marriage ban on female diplomats may have been lifted in most states, in practice, the combination of life as a Foreign Service officer and a marriage (especially with children) continues to be particularly problematic for women.

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