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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Feminising diplomatic work: Driving devaluation?

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Abstract
While the growing representation of women in diplomacy is often celebrated, scholarship on occupational feminisation warns that feminisation can trigger a devaluation of professional work. This article focuses on two conditions identified as inhibitors of such devaluation – the overall status of the occupation and the value accorded to female labour within the occupation – and traces how these two conditions have varied over time and interacted with feminisation in diplomatic work. We contend that in the transition from a classical to a polylateral mode of diplomacy, feminisation has not led to devaluation, as it coincided with an increase in the status of diplomatic work and reinforced the salience of 'feminine' skills. However, currently, the rise of populism is undermining these safeguards against devaluation in diplomatic work by constraining the autonomy of diplomats and delegitimising their expert knowledge. To illustrate these dynamics, the article examines the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (TMFA). We show that the growing diversification and ambition of Turkish foreign policy in the 2000s enhanced the status of diplomatic work and the value of female labour in it. However, by the mid-2010s, these safeguards against devaluation for a more gender-equal TMFA have weakened in the populist–authoritarian political context. Thus, in the context of rising populism in Turkey as well as globally, it is imperative for initiatives to increase women's representation to be accompanied by strategies that preserve and elevate the status of diplomatic work.

Keywords: diplomacy; gender; occupational feminisation; populism; Turkey

Introduction

The diplomatic profession has for some time been experiencing two parallel transformations. On the one hand, along with the evolution of diplomacy, understood broadly as the institution and practice[1] of managing international relations without recourse to war,[2] the nature, scope, and salience of diplomatic work, that is, the activities and responsibilities of diplomats formally employed in ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs), has been changing. With the rise of summit diplomacy since the 1950s, diplomats have gradually relinquished their high-profile roles in the actual conduct of strategic negotiations to chief executives[3] and resigned themselves to backroom roles in preparation, networking, and agenda-setting. This decline in the authority and visibility of diplomats was compensated with the expanding number of multilateral organisations to which all member states appointed diplomatic representatives. With multilateralism, international

[1]Ole Jacob Sending, Vincent Pouliot, and Iver B. Neumann, 'The future of diplomacy: Changing practices, evolving relationships', *International Journal*, 66:3 (2011), pp. 527–42.

[2]Paul Sharp, *Diplomatic Theory of International Relations*, vol. 111 (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[3]Jan Melissen, *Summit Diplomacy Coming of Age* (Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2003); David H. Dunn (ed.), *Diplomacy at the Highest Level: The Evolution of International Summitry* (Springer, 2016).

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diplomacy expanded into many issues of functional cooperation, such as trade, environment, and arms control, where diplomatic work required greater technical expertise.[4]

The rise of public diplomacy, which was spearheaded by the democratisation of political systems,[5] also shaped diplomatic work. Diplomats, who are accustomed to the highly insular, elitist, and secretive world of diplomatic work, have been increasingly called upon to conduct public relations, communication, and outreach activities with non-diplomatic actors, such as business groups, diasporic organisations, civil society groups, and the broader public.[6] The pluralisation of diplomatic actors in this fashion has encroached upon and thus limited professional diplomats' roles and authority.[7] The most current challenge that diplomatic work is facing is also arising from domestic political changes: populism. In many countries, MFAs are increasingly having to contend with political executives, who are publicly challenging their relevance, skills, and authority and weakening their institutional resources.[8]

On the other hand, a parallel transformation, which we refer to as the feminisation of diplomatic work, has been ongoing in the gender composition of diplomatic professionals. Instituted as an exclusively male profession in the latter half of the nineteenth century, diplomatic work has witnessed the entry of a growing number of women professionals into its ranks, especially after the elimination of various formal obstacles in the 1970s, largely owing to the pressure exerted by the transnational feminist movement. The percentage of women ambassadors rose from less than 1 per cent in 1968 to 5.9 per cent in 1998 to 15.3 percent in 2014 and to 23.4 per cent in 2024 globally, and up to 50 per cent in some leading countries, such as Australia, Canada, Finland, New Zealand, and the United States.[9] Consequently, albeit more gradually, the masculinity norms of the diplomatic profession also began to be undermined. The inclusion of women in diplomacy assumed a greater significance beyond meeting goals of gender equality, fuelling expectations that it will pave the way for more peaceful and cooperative international relations. In that spirit, a number of states have declared an explicit adherence to feminist foreign policy, which is defined around the principles of inclusion, peace, and gender equality.[10]

These two concurrent transformations have largely been studied in separate literatures. A very wide literature has examined the historic evolution of diplomacy and assessed the repercussions of trends, such as the rise of public diplomacy,[11] digitalisation,[12] and new diplomatic actors on

[4]Paul Sharp, 'Who needs diplomats? The problem of diplomatic representation', *International Journal*, 52:4 (1997), pp. 609–34; Brian Hocking, 'Catalytic diplomacy: Beyond "newness" and "decline"', in Jan Melissen (ed.), *Innovation in Diplomatic Practice* (Macmillan Press, 1999), pp. 21–42.

[5]Erik Pajtinka, 'Democratization and its impact on diplomatic methods – public diplomacy', in Getnet Tamene, William T. Bagatelas, David Reichardt, and Bruno S. Sergi (eds), *Studies in International Relations and Politics: New Europe and Beyond* (Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2010), pp. 168–77.

[6]Sending, Pouliot, and Neuman, 'The future of diplomacy'; Ian Manor, *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

[7]Jan Melissen, *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Shaun Riordan, *The New Diplomacy* (Polity Press, 2003); Geoffrey Wiseman, 'Polylateralism and new modes of global dialogue', in Christer Jönsson and Richard Langhorne (eds), *Diplomacy*, vol. 3 (Sage, 2004), pp. 26–57; James Pamment, *New Public Diplomacy in the 21st Century: A Comparative Study of Policy and Practice* (Routledge, 2012).

[8]Berkay Gülen, 'Turf wars in foreign policy bureaucracy: Rivalry between the government and the bureaucracy in Turkish foreign policy', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 18:4 (2022), orac021; Johannes Plagemann and Sandra Destradi, 'Populism and foreign policy', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 15 (2019), pp. 293–301; Georg Löfflmann, 'America first and the populist impact on US foreign policy', *Survival*, 61:6 (2019), pp. 115–38.

[9]Ann E. Towns and Birgitta Niklasson, *The GenDip Dataset on Gender and Diplomatic Representation*, version June 25 (University of Gothenburg: The GenDip Program, 2025), available at: {www.gu.se/en/gendip/gendip-data}, accessed 7 November 2025.

[10]Karin Aggestam, Annika Bergman Rosamond, and Annica Kronsell, 'Theorising feminist foreign policy', *International Relations*, 33:1 (2019), pp. 23–39.

[11]Seong-Hun Yun and Elizabeth L. Toth, 'Future sociological public diplomacy and the role of public relations: Evolution of public diplomacy', *American Behavioral Scientist*, 53: 4 (2009), pp. 493–503.

[12]Manor, *Digitalization of Public Diplomacy*; Sending, Pouliot, and Neuman, 'The future of diplomacy'; Corneliu Bjola and James Pamment (eds), *Countering Online Propaganda and Extremism: The Dark Side of Digital Diplomacy* (Routledge, 2018).

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diplomatic work.[13] Similarly, a new research agenda on gender and diplomacy has documented the rise of women in diplomatic work,[14] continuing, mostly informal, restrictions on women's advancement in MFAs[15] and the varied gender enactments of diplomats.[16] However, the question of whether and how these parallel transformations are interconnected and potentially influencing one another has been neglected.

Recently, Stephenson has identified a troubling connection in the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DAFTA).[17] She has noted that the increasing representation of women has coincided with the decline in the power, status, and influence of this diplomatic institution relative to more militaristic agencies carrying out Australian foreign policy. As we will explain later, these findings validate the foundational thesis of the literature on occupational feminisation, which posits that the entry of women into traditionally male dominated professions brings about a devaluation of those professions in terms of prestige and pay.[18] Such a possibility of devaluation is troubling to say the least because it upends the prevailing expectations about feminisation, meaning increasing share of women, leading to progressive transformations in diplomatic work, diplomacy, and the management of relations between states in general. Scholars and practitioners increasingly expect that greater representation of women in diplomatic work will transform the masculinity norms of diplomatic work and reshape diplomacy as a more inclusive, less combative, and more public practice in service of a more principled and peaceful foreign policy. The concurrent devaluation of diplomatic work would offset these positive effects by simultaneously shifting the locus of diplomacy away from diplomats to political leaders, unauthorised individuals, and non-institutional channels and exalting more confrontational and violent means of managing relations between states above diplomatic ones. That is why we contend that the possibility that feminisation may be driving a devaluation of diplomatic work deserves further exploration in terms of its underlying causal mechanisms, scope conditions, and generalisability.

In the next section of the article, we first delve into the literature on occupational feminisation and highlight recent studies where feminisation has been found *not* to lead to devaluation in high status occupations and in occupations where 'feminine' skills,[19] and consequently female labour, are highly valued. Then, focusing on these two scope conditions as safeguards against devaluation, we identify the factors that affect the status of diplomatic work and shape the valuation of female labour in diplomatic work. Subsequently, in the third section, we trace how these factors have varied over time and interacted with feminisation, as diplomacy has evolved from the classical to polylateral mode and are likely to vary with the rise of populism. This structured temporal analysis suggests that a mono-causal relationship between feminisation and devaluation of diplomatic work does not

[13] Melissen, *The New Public Diplomacy*; Keith Hamilton and Richard Langhorne, *The Practice of Diplomacy: Its Evolution, Theory and Administration* (Routledge, 2010).

[14] Ann Towns and Birgitta Niklasson, 'Gender, international status, and ambassador appointments', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 13:3 (2017), pp. 521–40; Iver Neumann, *At Home with the Diplomats: Inside a European Foreign Ministry* (Cornell University Press, 2012); Ausra Park and Gerda Jakstaite-Confortola, 'Small states' diplomacies: Changes in women's descriptive representation in the Baltic states' foreign services (1991–2021)', *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 56:3 (2024), pp. 575–598.

[15] Erika Svedberg, 'East–West negotiations', *Gendering Diplomacy and International Negotiation* (2018), pp. 259–75; Karin Aggestam and Ann E. Towns (eds), *Gendering Diplomacy and International Negotiation* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

[16] Iver B. Neumann, 'The body of the diplomat', *European Journal of International Relations*, 14:4 (2008), pp. 671–95; Neumann, *At Home with the Diplomats*; Birgitta Niklasson, 'The gendered networking of diplomats', *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 15:1–2 (2020), pp. 13–42; Rahime Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm and Bahar Rumelili, 'From female masculinity to hegemonic femininity: Evolving gender performances of Turkish women diplomats', *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 17:3 (2022), pp. 402–30.

[17] Elise Stephenson, 'The diplomatic glass cliff: Women's representation and diplomacy's decline', *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 17:3 (2022), pp. 553–87.

[18] Felix Busch, 'Occupational devaluation due to feminization? Causal mechanics, effect heterogeneity, and evidence from the United States, 1960 to 2010', *Social Forces*, 96:3 (2018), pp. 1351–76; Meiying Li, 'Devaluation for whom? Feminization and wages in an economically polarized labor market, 2003–2019', *Social Forces*, 103:2 (2024), pp. 495–519.

[19] We place 'feminine' and 'masculine' in quotes when used to describe occupational tasks and skills to underscore the constructed and contingent nature of these attributions.

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exist. In fact, we find that feminisation in its incipient stages coincided with an increase in the status of diplomatic work and reinforced an increase in the value of female labour in diplomacy. However, the current decline in the status of diplomacy and diplomatic work due to rise of populism may instigate a vicious cycle where it reinforces and is further reinforced by feminisation.

Then, in the fourth section of the article, we analyse how the increasing representation of women in the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (TMFA) has interacted with Turkey's evolving foreign policy priorities, institutional changes in foreign policy bureaucracy, and the populist–authoritarian turn. We find that in the course of Turkish diplomacy's specific transformations, the status of diplomatic work and value of female labour followed the patterns identified in our historical sketch. In the 2000s, along with Turkey's rising diplomatic ambitions and adoption of soft power strategies, the status of diplomatic work remained high, and the value of female labour increased and supported the growing presence of women in Turkish diplomacy. However, since the mid-2010s, the centralisation of foreign policy-making under the increasingly populist and authoritarian government undermined the status of diplomatic work and set a conducive context for feminisation to be a contributing factor to devaluation. In conclusion, we summarise our argument and discuss its implications for the future of diplomacy.

Feminisation: Transformation or devaluation?

The view that women's participation promotes a progressive transformation in diplomacy and more peaceful international relations underpins much advocacy for their inclusion. Research in peace studies shows that women are generally less militaristic[20] and improve peaceful outcomes when involved in negotiations.[21] Thus, greater participation of women in foreign affairs bureaucracies is expected to transform diplomacy in the direction of a more inclusive, less combative,[22] and more public practice, and in service of a more principled and peaceful foreign policy.

Feminist institutionalism, on the other hand, underscores that diplomacy has been constituted as a 'gendered institution' shaped by masculinity norms[23] and thus is likely to resist change despite increasing female participation. However, feminist institutionalism also underlines the possibility that incremental, layered shifts – driven by women's agency and growing representation – can gradually challenge these norms and transform institutional practices over time.[24]

Focused thus on the question of transformation, the relevant literatures in IR have neglected the risk of devaluation, which has been the main concern of the literature on occupational feminisation. This largely empirical literature has focused on demonstrating and explaining the correlation between the entry of women in previously male-dominated occupations and the decline of average wages in those occupations.[25] It is argued that male-dominant occupations experiencing a large inflow of female workers experience devaluation because of occupational gender stereotypes and cultural norms that attribute more economic value to the work done by men than to the work done by women.[26] While mostly manifest in terms of a decline in pay, it has also been demonstrated that

[20] Pamela Johnston Conover and Virginia Sapiro, 'Gender, feminist consciousness, and war', *American Journal of Political Science* (1993), pp. 1079–99.

[21] Laurel Stone, 'Women transforming conflict: A quantitative analysis of female peacemaking' (2014), available at SSRN: {https://ssrn.com/abstract=2485242}, accessed 7 November 2025

[22] Sarah Childs, 'A feminised style of politics? Women MPs in the House of Commons', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 6:1 (2004), pp. 3–19.

[23] Joan Acker, 'From sex roles to gendered institutions', *Contemporary Sociology*, 21:5 (1992), pp. 565–69.

[24] James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen, 'A theory of gradual institutional change', in James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen (eds), *Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency, and Power* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 1–37; Rachel Minto and Lut Mergaert, 'Gender mainstreaming and evaluation in the EU: Comparative perspectives from feminist institutionalism', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 20:2 (2018), pp. 204–20.

[25] Lisa Catanzarite, 'Race–gender composition and occupational pay degradation', *Social Problems*, 50:1 (2003), pp. 14–37; Asaf Levanon, Paula England, and Paul Allison, 'Occupational feminization and pay: Assessing causal dynamics using 1950–2000 US census data', *Social Forces*, 88:2 (2009), pp. 865–91.

[26] Busch, 'Occupational devaluation'; Levanon, England and Allison, 'Occupational feminization and pay', p. 68.

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the prestige and perceived potency of an occupation declines when it is stereotyped as female[27] and that the nature of work changes towards more routine tasks or tighter managerial control.

The literature has highlighted two main causal mechanisms through which feminisation leads to devaluation: First, the increasing share of women in an occupation leads to the (trans)formation of occupational gender stereotypes, which are beliefs about different occupations and tasks requiring 'masculine' or 'feminine' traits and skills and hence being better suited for women or men.[28] In other words, the increasing share of women in an occupation generates beliefs about the occupation being better suited for women. Second, gender stereotypes interact with a cultural bias against the value of the female labour, leading to devaluation. Hence, devaluation occurs if the perception of an occupation to be is paired with the judgement that women's work is worth less than men's work. As England et al. put it: 'somehow, the low status of women "rubs off" on employers' evaluation of the occupation'.[29] The factors underlying these causal mechanisms, namely occupational stereotypes and cultural bias against female labour, operate mostly implicitly and are thus hard to ascertain empirically. While some scholars have noted that stereotypes are becoming less significant with changes in gender composition and advances in gender equality,[30] others have found that gender stereotypes attached to occupations remain stable[31] and continue to generate value judgements[32] even as people are more reluctant to publicly express them.[33]

Recent research in the occupational feminisation literature has also specified some conditions under which occupational devaluation does not occur or is mitigated. Felix Busch[34] has found that the devaluation effect has been restricted to the bottom 80 per cent of occupations in terms of pay in the United States. Numerous studies have shown that devaluation impact is limited in high-skilled professions because high returns to education conceal the devaluation dynamics.[35] Feminisation does not lead to devaluation in occupations that simultaneously gain prestige for other reasons.[36] Additionally, male and female workers in a feminising occupation may also experience a reverse revaluation impact under certain conditions.[37] Remaining male workers in a feminised occupation may disproportionately benefit from gender stereotypes about male competence and leadership qualities and be promoted to supervisory and managerial positions. At the same time, feminisation may enhance the value of female work if it drives changes in stereotypes about an occupation as specifically requiring 'feminine' skills.[38] Such changes occur when gender-essentialist attitudes

[27]Wenhao Jiang, 'The cultural devaluation of feminized work: The evolution of occupational prestige and gender typing in the United States, 1900–2019', *SocArXiv* (2023), *doi* 10.

[28]Charles Stangor and Mark Schaller, 'Stereotypes as individual and collective representations', in Charles N. Macrae, Charles Stangor, and Miles Hewstone (eds), *Stereotypes and Stereotyping* (Guilford Press, 1996), pp. 3–40.

[29]Paula England, Paul Allison, and Yuxiao Wu, 'Does bad pay cause occupations to feminize, does feminization reduce pay, and how can we tell with longitudinal data?', *Social Science Research*, 36 (2007), pp. 1237–56 (p. 1238).

[30]Michael J. White, Theresa A. Kruczek, Michael T. Brown, and Gwendolen B White, 'Occupational sex stereotypes among college students', *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 34:3 (1989), pp. 289–98; Amanda B. Diekman and Alice H. Eagly, 'Stereotypes as dynamic constructs: Women and men of the past, present, and future', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 26:10 (2000), pp. 1171–88.

[31]Lloyd B. Lueptow, Lori Garovich-Szabo, and Margaret B. Lueptow, 'Social change and the persistence of sex typing: 1974–1997', *Social Forces*, 80:1 (2001), pp. 1–36.

[32]Mahzarin R Banaji, Curtis Hardin, and Alexander J. Rothman, 'Implicit stereotyping in person judgment', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 65:2 (1993), pp. 272–81.

[33]Michael J. White and Gwendolen B. White, 'Implicit and explicit occupational gender stereotypes', *Sex Roles*, 55 (2006), pp. 259–66.

[34]Busch, 'Occupational devaluation', p. 1353.

[35]Hadas Mandel, 'A second look at the process of occupational feminization and pay reduction in occupations', *Demography*, 55:2 (2018), pp. 669–90; Alice H. Eagly, Christa Nater, David I. Miller, Michèle Kaufmann, and Sabine Sczesny, 'Gender stereotypes have changed: A cross-temporal meta-analysis of U.S. public opinion polls from 1946 to 2018', *American Psychologist*, 75:3 (2020), pp. 301–15.

[36]Inmaculada García-Mainar, Pablo García-Ruiz, and Víctor M. Montuenga, 'Gender and occupational prestige: Testing the devaluation theory in Spain', *Gender, Work & Organization*, (2025), pp. 1982–93.

[37]England, Allison and Wu, 'Does bad pay cause occupations to feminize'.

[38]Busch, 'Occupational devaluation'.

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towards occupational tasks and skills intersect with increased demand for female-typed tasks and skills in those occupations. According to Li, the positive effect of feminisation on wages materialises due to the increasing demand for 'people skills' in higher-skilled occupations and the association of these skills with women.[39] In sum, newer scholarship has moved away from broad generalisations about the effects of feminisation and supports evaluating the risk of devaluation in relation to occupation-specific dynamics.

Surprisingly, the risk of devaluation has not attracted the interest of the growing literature on gender and diplomacy, until Stephenson's study of the Australian context.[40] However, findings that are relevant for the mechanisms and conditions of occupational devaluation are amply present. For example, relevant for our understanding of diplomacy's gender stereotyping is Ann Towns's finding that, despite being a male-dominant institution, diplomacy and the figure of the diplomat have traditionally been the target of various feminising depictions, which have been used to delegitimise diplomatic policy options and to discredit the diplomats.[41] Similarly, studies that have analysed the assignment of male and female diplomats to tasks of differing prestige and power[42] indicate that male labour continues to be more highly valued in diplomatic work. On the other hand, analyses of gender practices and performances have found especially newer generations of female diplomats to be alternating between 'masculine' and 'feminine' behaviours depending on situational demands.[43] This shows that 'feminine' skills are becoming more highly valued in some types of diplomatic work.

Thus, it cannot be assumed that feminisation is driving the devaluation of diplomatic work because such a correlation has been found in other occupations. The question requires an analysis of whether the conditions for (or safeguards against) devaluation are present in diplomatic work and empirically demonstrating that the underlying causal mechanisms are at play. In this article, we primarily focus on the conditions. In the following, we start by applying the conditions identified in the occupational feminisation to diplomatic work to conceptually specify the factors that prevent (or reinforce) the devaluation of diplomatic work in the course of feminisation.

The first condition stipulated by the literature on occupational feminisation is that devaluation is less common in high status occupations and rendered more complex with the evolving prestige of occupations. Assessing the status of diplomatic work requires going beyond an analysis of market conditions, such as average pay and skill level, and focusing on political factors at the systemic, state, and domestic levels affecting the overall status of diplomacy. At the systemic and state levels, the status of diplomacy and diplomatic work is affected by factors such as the salience of international issues, preferences for militarised versus diplomatic solutions to disputes, level of institutionalisation in the international system, and scope and ambition of foreign policies. The status of diplomacy and diplomatic work is enhanced in systemic and state contexts where international issues are salient, international influence is sought, international order is highly institutionalised, and diplomatic solutions are preferred.

[39] Li, 'Devaluation for whom?'

[40] Stephenson, 'The diplomatic glass cliff'.

[41] Ann E Towns, '"Diplomacy is a feminine art": Feminised figurations of the diplomat', *Review of International Studies*, 46:5 (2020), pp. 573–93.

[42] Ann E. Towns and Birgitta Niklasson, 'Where are the female ambassadors? Gender and status hierarchies in ambassador postings', in Karin Aggestam and Ann Towns (eds), *Gendering Diplomacy and International Negotiation* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 25–44; Bahar Rumelili and Rahime Suleymanoglu-Kurum, 'Women and gender in Turkish diplomacy: Historical legacies and current patterns', in Karin Aggestam and Ann Towns (eds), *Gendering Diplomacy and International Negotiation* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 87–106; Anne-Kathrin Kreft, Birgitta Niklasson, and Ann E. Towns, 'Do gender patterns in diplomacy disappear over time?', *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 5:3 (2022), pp. 279–302.

[43] Daniel Naurin, Elin Naurin, and Amy Alexander, 'Gender stereotyping and chivalry in international negotiations: A survey experiment in the Council of the European Union', *International Organization* 73:2 (2019), pp. 469–88; Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm and Rumelili, 'Female masculinity to hegemonic femininity'; Birgitta Niklasson and Ann E. Towns, 'Introduction: Approaching gender and ministries of foreign affairs', *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 17:3 (2022), pp. 339–69.

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At the domestic level, the status of diplomacy and diplomatic work is contingent on its positioning vis-à-vis political authority and other bureaucracies. Centralisation of foreign policy-making around the executive diminishes the status of diplomatic work by limiting the authority and autonomy of diplomats and relegating them to operational tasks. The bureaucratic organisation of foreign policy and external relations is also an important domestic factor. The creation of specialised bureaucracies outside of MFAs that are responsible for policies with an external dimension, such as migration or public diplomacy, reduces diplomats to a coordinating role. Additionally, populist leadership and discourse diminish the status of diplomatic work by forging a moral hierarchy between the bureaucratic elite and the real people.

The second condition concerns the valuation of female labour in an occupation: if the value of female labour increases, then the feminisation of an occupation does not lead its devaluation. While the lower valuation of female labour is ultimately rooted in social and cultural biases against women, it has been argued that devaluation is less common when feminisation also drives changes in perceptions about occupations as specifically requiring 'feminine' skills and abilities. This claim assumes, firstly, that gender-essentialist attitudes, marking specific tasks, roles, and functions alternatively as 'masculine' versus 'feminine' and associating them respectively with male and female bodies, persist at the institutional and societal levels. Secondly, it draws the controversial implication that these gender-essentialist attitudes may advantage female workers if the perceived value of 'feminine' tasks, roles, and functions in an occupation increases relative to 'masculine' ones. Thus, feminisation may not lead to devaluation if it intersects with transformations that enhance the weight and salience of 'feminine' tasks and roles, relative to 'masculine' ones, and consequently enhance the value of female labour in an occupation. In diplomacy, tasks and roles such as communication, organisation, and care are constructed as 'feminine', while, for example, bargaining is considered 'masculine'. While this potentially positive effect of gender essentialism ought to be acknowledged and studied, it should also be stressed that gender essentialism cuts both ways. Its persistence, while the weight and salience of 'masculine' tasks and roles are increasing in an occupation, would drive devaluation of female labour and, along with it, the devaluation of the feminised occupation. In fact, this article shows this reverse scenario materialising in diplomatic work.

In sum, our conceptual application of the occupational feminisation framework to diplomatic work indicates that broader developments and transformations in diplomacy impinge in at least two ways on the relationship between feminisation and devaluation: firstly, by affecting the status of diplomacy and diplomatic work, and secondly, by changing the balance between 'masculine' and 'feminine' tasks in diplomatic work. This supports the initiating premise of this article that gender in diplomacy ought to be studied in tandem with other transformations in diplomacy. Thus, in the next section, we present a three-stage sketch of the evolution of diplomacy in tandem with feminisation, focusing on how the status of diplomatic work and valuation of female labour in diplomatic work have varied over time.

Feminisation and the evolution of diplomacy

Diplomacy along with the factors that we have identified above as affecting the status and value of female labour in diplomatic work are in continuous evolution at the systemic and state levels. In this section, we use the construct 'mode of diplomacy' to refer to specific constellations of these factors. Employing terminology widely used in the literature to describe the evolution of diplomacy, we discuss below how these factors have coalesced in distinct ways in classical and polylateral modes of diplomacy and currently are shifting under the rise of populism.

Initially, diplomacy, as formalised and institutionalised in the Congress of Vienna in 1815, was exclusively based on a state-centric conception of relations, maintained around the Westphalian principle of sovereign equality of states, focused on concepts such as reciprocity, hard power, and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. In this classical mode of diplomacy, foreign

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ministries and diplomats are the primary agents through which states interact with one another.[44] The status of diplomatic work is high; as diplomats guided political elites in the conduct of foreign policy, their skills were considered critical in shaping diplomatic outcomes.[45] Career diplomats also enjoy exclusivity, with negotiations held in secrecy, away from the involvement of other public actors.[46]

The classical mode of diplomacy supported the male dominance in the profession and was in turn reinforced by it. Men were perceived to naturally possess the necessary skills to conduct classical diplomacy, such as rationality, status, hard bargaining, the ability to keep secrets, and project status.[47] Male diplomats, in turn, reinforced the masculine codes of honour and the realist principles that dominated inter-state relations.[48] Even as formal barriers against women in diplomacy began to be lifted, implicit stereotypes continued to discriminate against women as they were assigned to 'feminine' tasks such as consulates or functional units as well as less prestigious posts as ambassadors.[49]

According to most studies, even as new practices were introduced, classical diplomacy remained dominant until the 1990s. Starting with the 1970s, diplomats' roles have started to expand significantly[50] with the dramatic increase in multilateral organisations, tackling global problems such as climate change, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, international migration, trade, sustainable development, and humanitarian assistance.[51] Career diplomats had to share this growing diplomatic terrain with new diplomatic actors, such as NGOs, multinational corporations, individuals, celebrities, activists, diaspora groups, and local administrators. In characterising this new mode of diplomacy, we use the term 'polylateral', introduced by Wiseman to capture the intensification of systematic relations between not only states but also state and non-state actors in diplomacy.[52] In the polylateral mode of diplomacy, the status of diplomatic work remained high. While the exclusivity of MFAs in the conduct of diplomacy was diminished, career diplomats retained their central role in leading the negotiations between these diverse actors.[53]

Parallel to these developments, significant changes in the gender make-up of diplomacy were observed. The United Nation's (UN) efforts through organisation of specialised women conferences since 1975 as well as the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) in 1995 and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda in 2000 led MFAs to remove formal barriers to women's representation.[54] The percentage of women ambassadors rose from 5.9 per cent in 1998 to 15.3 per cent in 2014,[55] even though postings to prestigious positions remained limited.

In the context of these transformations, several factors enhanced the value of female labour in diplomacy. Security-focused, hard power–based foreign policy, which had reinforced male dominance in the diplomatic profession through their cultural association with masculinity, lost its

[44] Jan Melissen, 'Public diplomacy', in Andrew F. Cooper, Jorge Heine, and Ramesh Thakur (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy* (Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 436–51.

[45] Sharp, 'Who needs diplomats?', p. 609.

[46] Manor, *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy.*

[47] Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, (University of California Press, 2014); Neumann, 'The body of the diplomat'.

[48] Amelia M. Kiddle, 'In Mexico's defense: Dueling, diplomacy, gender and honor, 1876–1940', *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos*, 31:1 (2015), pp. 22–47.

[49] Aggestam and Towns, 'Where are the female ambassadors?'; Ann Towns and Birgitta Niklasson, 'Gender, international status, and ambassador appointments', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 13:3 (2017), pp. 521–40.

[50] Melissen, *The New Public Diplomacy.*

[51] Ramesh Thakur and Luk Van Langenhove, 'Enhancing global governance through regional integration', in Andrew F. Cooper, Christopher W. Hughes, and Philippe De Lombaerde (eds), *Regionalisation and Global Governance* (Routledge, 2007), pp. 33–58.

[52] Wiseman, 'Polylateralism', p. 41.

[53] Pamment, *New Public Diplomacy in the 21st Century.*

[54] Karin Aggestam and Ann Towns, 'The gender turn in diplomacy: A new research agenda', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 21:1 (2019), pp. 9–28.

[55] Towns and Niklasson, *The GenDip Dataset.*

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dominance.[56] Instead, states became more interested in projecting soft power through exercising leadership on global normative issues, such as protection of human rights, promotion of human development, and environmental protection. With the growing concentration of diplomatic work in multilateral fora, issue-based expertise, agenda-setting, and the ability to lead positive sum cooperation assumed greater value as diplomatic skills.[57] The pluralisation of diplomatic actors increased the relative weight of administrative and communication tasks in daily diplomatic work. Care work, in the form of delivery of humanitarian aid, addressing specific concerns of women and other vulnerable groups, and providing services to citizens abroad, became diplomatic priorities. Sweden and, following it, ten other countries declared themselves to be specifically pursuing a 'feminist foreign policy', prioritising women's rights, resources, and representation in international affairs.[58] Studies have shown that many women diplomats, entering the profession in greater numbers, chose to capitalise on these empowering transformations in diplomacy by presenting attributes and skills that are traditionally associated with femininity, such as empathy, sensitivity, and organisational and communication skills and care, as granting them a comparative advantage in the profession.[59]

Currently, the rise of populism is driving a decline in the status of diplomatic work and in the valuation of female labour in diplomatic work. Populism has been defined in alternative ways,[60] and we acknowledge that conceptual variants recently introduced to the literature, such as liberal populism and anti-populism, make it especially difficult to draw broad conclusions about populism's unique detrimental effects.[61] While populism cannot be reduced to a single, unified notion, it continues to offer an indispensable vantage point for interpreting current shifts in domestic politics, identifying general patterns amid significant contextual variation. In analysing the effects of the rise of populism on diplomatic work, we focus on what varied definitions take to be its core characteristic: governing through constructing antagonism between the people and the elite. This core aspect of populism allows populist leaders to frame bureaucracies, including the MFAs, as elements of the 'corrupt' elite, obstacles to the will of the people, and to delegitimise their expert knowledge.[62] Claiming, instead, to be the 'champion' of the 'good' people, populist leaders assume bilateral and multilateral diplomatic roles rather than delegating such tasks to MFAs and adopt a performative style that disrupts traditional diplomatic norms, characterised by coarse language, public display

[56]Helen McCarthy, *Women of the World: The Rise of the Female Diplomat* (Bloomsbury, 2014).

[57]Ole Jacob Sending, Vincent Pouliot, and Iver B. Neumann (eds), *Diplomacy and the Making of World Politics*, vol. 136 (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[58]Ann Towns, Elin Bjarnegård, and Katarzyna Jezierska, *More than a Label, Less than a Revolution: Sweden's Feminist Foreign Policy* (The Expert Group for Aid Studies [EBA] Report, 2023).

[59]Neumann, 'The body of the diplomat'; Niklasson, 'The gendered networking of diplomats'; Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm and Rumelili, 'Female masculinity to hegemonic femininity'.

[60]While Cas Mudde has defined populism in ideological terms, Laclau has focused on the underlying politico-discursive logic and Moffitt on the stylistic and performative aspects. See Cas Mudde, 'The populist zeitgeist', *Government and Opposition*, 39:4 (2004), pp. 541–63; Ernesto Laclau, 'Populism: What's in a name?', *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, 48 (2005), pp. 103–14; Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Stanford University Press, 2016).

[61]For example, Pacewicz contends that populism may actually bolster liberal democracy by drawing citizens back into political life rather than alienating them. On the other hand, Stavrakakis et al. highlight how actors who position themselves against populism, the anti-populists, also heighten polarisation and can undermine the legitimacy of democratic demands. See Josh Pacewicz, 'When is populism good for liberal democracy?', *Sociological Theory*, 41:2 (2023), pp. 129–53; Yannis Stavrakakis, Giorgos Katsambekis, Alexandros Kioupkiolis, Nikos Nikisianis, and Thomas Siomos, 'Populism, anti-populism and crisis', *Contemporary Political Theory*, 17:1 (2018), pp. 4–27.

[62]Kira Huju and Christian Lequesne, 'Career diplomats and populist leaders: Mediating or marketing estrangement?' in David Cadier, Angelos Chryssogelos, and Sandra Destradi (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Populism and Foreign Policy* (Routledge, 2025), pp. 289–307; populist challenges to closed bureaucracies and foreign policy establishments may open opportunities for greater representation of women in foreign service roles. Yet, as this article argues, such gains are offset if populism simultaneously undermines the status of diplomatic work.

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of emotions, and direct and public communication with counterparts through social media.[63] Additionally, they create new agencies composed of 'loyal' bureaucrats to reduce the influence of MFAs in foreign policy-making.[64]

Populism as a style of governing manifests itself differently across political and ideological contexts, and its adverse impact on the status of diplomatic work is more pronounced in some contexts than in others. When coupled with authoritarianism, populism reinforces and legitimises the executive's attempts to gain exclusive control over foreign policy-making and to constrain the autonomy of professional diplomatic corps. When coupled with nationalist and anti-globalist ideological stances, populism foments distrust of international cooperation and institutions by projecting the people versus elite antagonism also externally. Depicted most clearly in Trump's 'America First' slogan, the egoistic pursuit of short-term national interest at the expense of institutional commitments and global and humanitarian concerns has become the cornerstone of populist foreign policies.[65] This undermines the liberal internationalist and globalist visions upon which the polylateral mode of diplomacy has been built[66] and, along with it, the status that diplomats have gained in championing such visions. Additionally, the shift to nationalist, protectionist, militarist foreign policies has the general effect of undermining the value of female labour in diplomacy by demoting the significance of priorities and skills, such as soft power, communication, and care, which were considered as unique assets of women diplomats previously.

In some far-right ideological contexts, the 'opportunistic' synergy that has developed between anti-gender advocacy and populism[67] directly affects the valuation of female labour in diplomatic work. As populist executives mobilise the polarising potential of gender for domestic and international political gain, they reinforce convictions about natural differences and hierarchy between men and women. This sets a suitable context for the devaluation of the diplomatic work undertaken by the highly feminised MFAs along with their feminist priorities. The liberal-right government of Sweden, for example, retracted its feminist foreign policy in 2022 on the same day it took office.[68]

In approaching populism as a style of governing, we do not isolate its effects to leaders, parties, and regimes that we prima facie identify as populist, and we consider the presence and prevalence of a populist style of governing in different political and ideological contexts as an empirical question. On the one hand, certain effects that we associate with the rise of populism, such as the centralisation of foreign policy-making around the executive and the shift to a geopolitical outlook and the pursuit of autonomy in international affairs, are developing into general trends impacting diplomacy and diplomatic work. On the other hand, the purported effects of populism on diplomacy and diplomatic work are being actively resisted and counteracted by MFAs and diplomatic practice[69] as well as liberal and globalist actors. Thus, while the effects of the rise of populism on diplomatic work are increasingly visible, we characterise the current mode of diplomacy as populist–polylateral to capture these contingencies.

[63] Bertjan Verbeek and Andrej S. Zaslove, *Populism and Foreign Policy*, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2017); Angelos Chryssogelos, 'State transformation and populism: From the internationalized to the neo-sovereign state?', *Politics*, 40:1 (2020), pp. 22–37; Ehud Eiran, Piki Ish-Shalom, and Markus Kornprobst, 'Populism in international relations: Champion diplomacy', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 28 (2025), pp. 80–104.

[64] Gülen, 'Turf wars in foreign policy bureaucracy'.

[65] Sandra Destradi, David Cadier, and Johannes Plagemann, 'Populism and foreign policy: A research agenda (introduction)', *Comparative European Politics*, 19: 6 (2021), pp. 663–82; Daniel F. Wajner and Philip Giurlando, 'Populist foreign policy: Mapping the developing research program on populism in international relations', *International Studies Review*, 26:1 (2024), viae012.

[66] Löfflmann, 'America first'.

[67] Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk, *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment* (Routledge, 2022).

[68] Towns, Bjarnegård, and Jezierska, *More than a Label.*

[69] Monika De Silva and Mariia Tepliakova, 'Populist challenge? Negotiating the EU's accession to the Istanbul Convention in the Council', *Politics and Governance*, 12 (2024), pp. 1–18.

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Table 1. Feminisation and evolution of diplomacy.

Mode of diplomacy	Gender composition of MFAs	Status of diplomatic work	Value of female labour in diplomatic work	Interaction of context with feminisation
Classical (dominant until 1990s)	First exclusively and then predominantly male	High: central, policy shaping, exclusive authority	Profession not suitable for female workers	N/A
Polylateral (most prevalent 1990 – 2015)	Increasing entry of women	High: supporting political executives with technical and expertise-based authority	Diplomacy is also a female profession; certain tasks are better suited for women	Not conducive to devaluation, potential revaluation
Populist–polylateral (increasingly prevalent 2015–)	More gender equal than ever before	Declining: sidelined, viewed as elitist and technocratic; centralisation of foreign policy in the executive	'Feminine' skills are becoming less relevant to increasingly militarist and unilateralist foreign policies	Conducive to devaluation

Most notably for our purposes, the rise of populism and its effects on diplomatic work have coincided with the peak point of women's representation in foreign affairs bureaucracies. The percentage of women ambassadors rose from 15.3 per cent in 2014 to 23.4 per cent in 2024 globally. Moreover, it is becoming increasingly common for states to appoint women ambassadors to critical and visible posts such as Washington – not only in more gender-equal countries such as Sweden and the UK but also in states seeking to cultivate such an image, such as Saudi Arabia.[70] Feminised figurations of the diplomat[71] have also become more common. This coincidence creates a context where feminisation can also be used to reinforce the devaluation of diplomatic work. Feminisation allows populist leaders to use gender stereotypes and hierarchies to further weaken the MFAs. Within a broader masculinist discourse, populist leaders can also use feminised MFAs to construct a gendered division of labour where they assume 'masculine' roles like crisis management and competitive bargaining while assigning 'feminine' tasks, like administrative or coordination work, to MFAs.

In sum, the rise of populism is expected to bring about a decline in the status of diplomatic work and in the value ascribed to female labour in diplomatic work, thus undermining the two conditions that the literature has identified as safeguards against devaluation in feminising occupations. The coincidence between feminisation and populism also allows populist leaders to use gendered stereotypes to disempower the MFAs.

Table 1 summarises the claims of this section on how the increasing representation of women in diplomacy has occurred in tandem with the evolution of diplomacy as an institution. We have found that during the transition from the classical to the polylateral mode of diplomacy, there was not a context suitable for feminisation to lead to devaluation. This is because the entry of women into the diplomatic profession in greater numbers occurred while the status of diplomatic work remained high and the value of female labour in diplomatic work was enhanced as diplomacy shifted to issues and skills, such as soft power, communication, and care, that are culturally associated with femininity. Conversely, however, we have pointed out that currently, under the influence of populism, the status of diplomatic work as well as the value of female labour in diplomatic work is in decline, setting a context conducive for feminisation to lead to devaluation.

In the next section, we show how feminisation has interacted with broader changes affecting the status of diplomatic work and the value of female labour in diplomatic work in the case of Turkey. The case study allows us to apply the systemic patterns we have identified in this section and

[70]Towns and Niklasson, *The GenDip Dataset*.
[71]Towns, 'Diplomacy is a feminine art'.

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to evaluate the pertinence of Stephenson's findings[72] in a different political and cultural context. Turkey is a case of high-status foreign service undergoing rapid feminisation.[73] With the expansion of its foreign policy agenda, Turkey made a belated transition to a polylateral mode of diplomacy in the early 2000s, and also, in the past ten years, the Turkish political regime has experienced a slide into populist authoritarianism.

In our analysis, we trace how, since the 1970s, the priorities of Turkish foreign policy, political developments affecting the status of the TMFA, and the valuation of female labour in Turkish diplomacy have varied alongside the growing representation of women in the TMFA. We draw on a diverse set of sources, including secondary literature, interviews with former and currently serving diplomats, published interviews with and memoirs of diplomats, data – both personally obtained from and publicly reported by TMFA – regarding the changing gender composition of the Turkish diplomatic corps, and public data about the budget allocation of the TMFA and other agencies conducting foreign policy. A longitudinal perspective enables us to capture the dynamic, multifaceted relationship between feminisation and other factors affecting the status of diplomatic work rather than relying solely on patterns observed at present.

'Oral history interviews',[74] conducted with five male and nine female career diplomats who have formerly served or are currently serving in ambassadorial, senior, or mid-career positions, are a key pillar of our research for assessing the (changing) valuation of women's labour in diplomatic work. Interviewees were approached in three phases (2016, 2019, and 2022) using snowball sampling, a purposeful strategy well suited for accessing closed elite institutions such as the TMFA. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face, most often in exclusive diplomatic clubs, or via secure online communication. Interviews ranged from forty-five to ninety minutes and followed a semi-structured format, guiding the respondents to reflect on the changing nature of diplomatic work and the shifting attitudes towards gender in diplomacy on the basis of their personal experience.

Feminisation and the evolution of TMFA

Until the 2000s, Turkish foreign policy focused almost exclusively on what were considered as existential security concerns of Turkey arising from regional rivalries, such as Cyprus and relations with Greece, Syria, Armenia, and Iran.[75] Turkish national interests were rigidly defined and the defence of those interests, through hard bargaining and, if necessary, the threat of force, were the top priorities. Even as diplomacy evolved into a polylateral mode at the global level, a state-centric conception of world politics and distrust of international institutions and non-state actors in the defence of Turkey's sovereignty and territorial integrity persisted. Diplomacy was considered an elite profession, with TMFA recruiting only graduates of a highly select set of universities in Turkey.[76] Diplomats enjoyed a considerable degree of autonomy, operating within a foreign policy bureaucracy long shaped by military and bureaucratic tutelage, particularly through the dominance of the National Security Council (MGK) and the Office of General Staff in security-related decision-making.[77]

[72]Stephenson, 'Diplomatic glass cliff'.

[73]Rahime Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm and Bahar Rumelili, 'Diplomaside kadın ve egemen maskülenlik: değişen normlar ve pratikler', *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, 15:57 (2018), pp. 3–18.

[74]Rahime Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm, 'Feminist oral life history in gender and diplomacy research', in Elise Stephenson and Khushi Singh Rathore (eds), *Gender and Diplomacy: Critical Junctures, Innovations and Future Research Directions* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2025), pp. 259–84.

[75]Gülen, 'Turf wars in foreign policy bureaucracy'

[76]Rahime Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm, 'The sociology of diplomats and foreign policy sector: The role of cliques on the policy-making process', *Political Studies Review*, 19:4 (2021), pp. 558–73.

[77]Zeki Sarıgil, 'Civil–military relations beyond dichotomy: With special reference to Turkey', *Turkish Studies*, 12:2 (2011), pp. 265–78.

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This earlier period in Turkish diplomacy was also characterised by male dominance. Women constituted only 13.4 per cent of the career employees in 1990. In 1982, Turkey had its first and only female ambassador, Filiz Dinçmen, in The Hague. The country wouldn't appoint another woman to the role until 1992. Occupational gender stereotypes characterising women as emotional and unable to keep secrets were common, and these stereotypical attributes were considered as constraining factors for women in diplomacy and liabilities in the defence of Turkish interests. In fact, the only notable mention of a woman diplomat in the published memoirs of male diplomats about this period is an anecdote about a female Turkish diplomat breaking down in tears when confronted by a Greek-Cypriot diplomat in 1975. In response, the author of the memoirs, her male superior, steps in as the masculine saviour to protect the honour and national interest of the Turkish state.

> [I was informed that]: 'In the Sub-Committee on the Protection of the Environment, the Greek Cypriot representative … claimed that Turks had burned all the forests in the region they had occupied and made very serious accusations against our country. The Turkish representative, on the other hand, was unable to respond to these charges and cried on the spot.' I went to the Sub-Commission in question. Our representative lady was really crying and sobbing. The Greek Cypriot was silent. I had the power to take the floor in every committee due to my position as charge d'affaires. Our representative told the lady to sit somewhere in the back row, I sat at the table in a place allocated to our country, and as soon as I sat down, I asked the President about the 'procedure'.[78]

That emotional sensitivity, a prevalent gender stereotype about women, was not considered an asset in the profession in this period was also stressed by one of our male interviewees: 'I do not recall that someone is praised for being a sensitive person. On the contrary, it is perceived as a sign of weakness' (Interview 5). Consequently, women diplomats who entered the profession during this period recall being actively discouraged:

> The Foreign Minister of the time was our neighbor when I entered the TMFA and he told me that 'you have chosen a very difficult profession, this is not a woman's profession, but a male profession'. I heard this with my own ears (Interview 6).

In this period, women diplomats faced difficulties in being promoted to the rank of ambassador and were generally assigned to consular services and administrative units as those tasks were perceived to be more suitable for women. In fact, in 1990, women constituted 23.25 per cent of the consulate and expert officers category, while they made up only 13.4 per cent of diplomatic staff. Rumours about women's carelessness and failures were propagated to exclude women from important tasks. For example, only male diplomats were trusted to be diplomatic couriers, as a result of a circulating rumour that once a female diplomat went to the toilet and lost the courier bag. According to one of our interviewees, this unconfirmed incident that no one seemed to have first-hand knowledge about circulated as a rumour until 2003 and justified the exclusion of women from this task, which was considered to be a very prestigious one for young diplomats in the first two years of their profession (Interview 13).

Starting in the 2000s, Turkish foreign policy began to replace its reactive, unilateral, and coercive tactics with a more proactive diplomacy seeking peaceful and multilateral solutions to its problems. With the EU's granting Turkey candidacy status in December 1999, Turkish foreign policy elite began to acknowledge the necessity as well the value of seeking diplomatic solutions to Turkey's bilateral disputes, starting with Greece and Cyprus.[79] Recognising the need for specialised technical expertise to guide Turkey's EU accession process, a new foreign policy bureaucracy, the General Secretariat for EU Affairs (EUGS), was created in 2000. Additionally, following the election of

[78] Kamil Erdil Akay, *Dışişlerinde 40 yıl 2 ay 21 gün: Emekli büyükelçi anıları* (Erko Yayıncılık, 2010), p. 216.

[79] Bahar Rumelili, 'Transforming conflicts on EU borders: The case of Greek–Turkish relations', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 45:1 (2007), pp. 105–26.

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the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power in 2002, especially during Ahmet Davutoglu's tenure as advisor (2002–9) and foreign minister (2009–14) gaining recognition as a 'soft power'[80] and expanding the scope of Turkish foreign policy to new regions such as Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, Asia, and the Pacific became priorities. From 2000 to 2012, TMFA opened forty-eight new overseas missions, mostly in African countries.[81] Turkish foreign policy began to encompass humanitarian, diaspora, public diplomacy, and nation branding initiatives.[82] Turkey also dramatically increased its humanitarian aid and official development assistance (ODA), from 71 million USD in 2003 to 785 million in 2011 and to almost 9 billion USD in 2020,[83] and became a leading donor country.[84] Thus, the salience and status of diplomatic work remained high as these changes were seen as necessary to buttress Turkey's influence and status in international affairs.

However, the election of AKP to power in 2002 also spawned strong tensions between government and the old military/foreign policy elite, who suspected the former to be following an Islamist ideological agenda to dismantle Turkey's pro-Western identity and foreign policy orientation and manipulating Turkey's EU accession and reform process for its political advantage. As it consolidated power in the 2007 and 2011 elections, the AKP governments undertook various institutional measures to pluralise the foreign policy actors, empower independent specialised agencies relative to TMFA, reform the TMFA, and incrementally increase the role of the executive in foreign policy-making. For example, the EUGS was granted greater authority over the TMFA in leading Turkey's EU accession process, and the scope of another independent agency, initially established in 1992, the Directorate for Economic, Cultural, and Technical Cooperation (TIKA), was expanded to the Middle East and North Africa, reflecting the diversification of Turkey's foreign policy agenda.[85] In 2007, the Yunus Emre Institute was established to conduct cultural diplomacy.[86] In 2009, another specialised agency, Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) was established to govern relations with the Turkish diaspora and thereby to contribute to the 'foreign policy, soft power, and public diplomacy' activities of Turkey.[87] In July 2010, far-reaching reforms in the TMFA changed the organisational structure and the recruitment policies, allowing the entry of diplomats from more diverse educational and socio-economic backgrounds[88] and the appointment of non-career diplomats. Even as Turkey's accession prospects waned, the EUGS was transformed into a separate ministry, Ministry for EU Affairs, in 2011, headed by AKP-affiliated bureaucrats.[89] In the same year, TIKA was reorganised through an executive order that increased its organisational and financial capabilities.[90]

[80]Tarik Oğuzlu, 'Soft power in Turkish foreign policy', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 61:1 (2007), pp. 81–97.

[81]Talha Köse, 'Türkiye'nin Kuzey Afrika ve Ortadoğu bölgesindeki gücü: zorlayıcı olmayan gücün imkân ve sınırları', *Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi*, 11:41 (2014), pp. 29–61 (p. 39).

[82]Bahar Rumelili and Rahime Suleymanoglu-Kurum, 'Brand Turkey: Liminal identity and its limits', *Geopolitics*, 22:3 (2017), pp. 549–70; Cemalettin Haşimi, 'Turkey's humanitarian diplomacy and development cooperation', *Insight Turkey*, 16:1 (2014), pp. 127–45.

[83]All figures are expressed in constant 2022 US dollars. In 2018, OECD shifted from net disbursement to grant-equivalent methodology.

[84]OECD (2025) – with major processing by Our World in Data. 'Foreign aid given – Net disbursements' [dataset]; OECD, 'OECD Official Development Assistance (ODA) – DAC1: Flows by provider (ODA + OOF + Private)'; OECD, 'OECD Official Development Assistance (ODA) – DAC2A: Aid (ODA) disbursements to countries and regions' [original data], available at: {https://archive.ourworldindata.org/20250624-125417/grapher/foreign-aid-given-net.html}, accessed 30 July 2025; Rahime Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm, *Conditionality, the EU and Turkey: From Transformation to Retrenchment* (Routledge, 2018), pp. 123–24.

[85]Gülen, 'Turf wars in foreign policy bureaucracy', pp. 13–14.

[86]Erman Akıllı, 'Yunus Emre Institute as a tool for cultural diplomacy and nation branding', *Electronic Turkish Studies*, 13:22 (2018), p. 19.

[87]Damla Bayraktar Aksel, 'Turkey's diaspora engagement policies: Past and present', in Ayça Arkılıç and Banu Şenay (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Turkey's Diasporas* (Routledge, 2024), pp. 185–199.

[88]Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm, 'The sociology of diplomats'.

[89]Gülen, 'Turf wars in foreign policy bureaucracy', pp. 13–14.

[90]Gülen, 'Turf wars in foreign policy bureaucracy', pp. 13–14.

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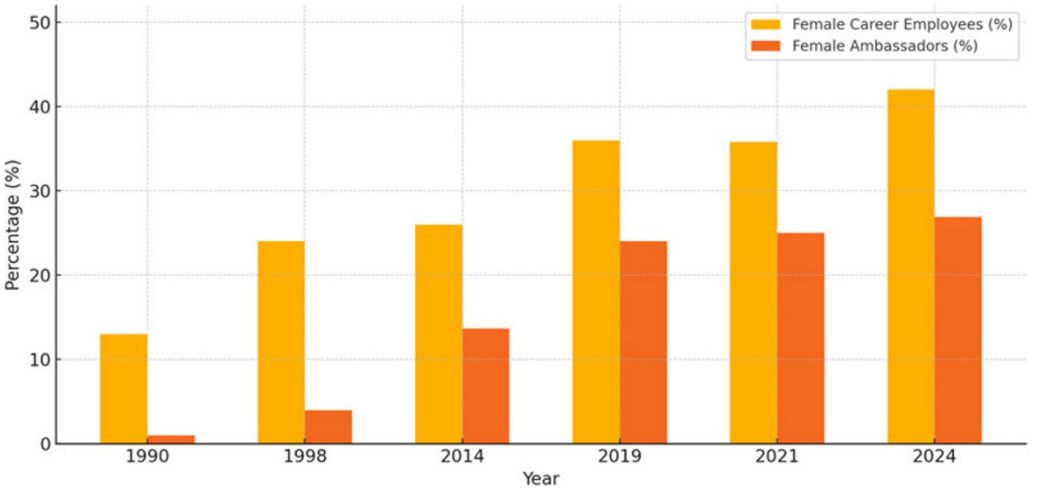


Figure 1. Female career employees and ambassadors in TMFA.[91]

In the context of the tensions concerning the direction of Turkish foreign policy, President Erdoğan, like other populist leaders, sought to undermine the legitimacy of TMFA with a moral discourse that framed the diplomats as distant from and acting against the interests of the Turkish people. He frequently referred to diplomats as '*mon chers*', a phrase that was so over-used by French-inspired late Ottoman elites in the nineteenth century that it acquired a derogatory connotation in the Turkish language as degenerately Westernised, alienated, snobbish, spoiled, and effeminate. For example, when retired diplomats criticised his spat at President Shimon Peres during the World Economic Forum meeting in 2009, Erdoğan angrily retorted, 'I came from politics; I don't know about the ways *mon chers* behave. And I don't want to know.'[92]

In the meantime, parallel to world trends, the gender make-up of TMFA started to change. TMFA adapted to the demands from the UN and the feminist movement in Turkey to encourage the recruitment of women into the profession, improve the gender make-up of Turkish diplomatic delegations (Interviews 2 and 3), and abolish policies that hindered women's professional advancement, such as the ban on the appointment of diplomatic couples to the same city, in 1998. Consequently, as indicated in Figure 1, the proportion of women diplomats in diplomatic staff improved, rapidly rising from 13 per cent in 1990 to 24 per cent in 1998, and after remaining in that range in the 2000s and early 2010s, rose to 31 per cent in 2017,[93] to 36 per cent in 2019, and to 42 per cent in 2024. The gendered division of labour caused by the relatively higher representation of women diplomats in consular services also diminished and was eliminated by 2019. The proportion of women increased in every rank, including Head of Mission (ambassador or consul general), Directors General, or Deputy Directors General.[94] While women constituted only 9.6 per cent of all ambassadors in 2009, this ratio increased to 24 per cent in 2019 and to 27 per cent in 2024.

> Our foreign policy has evolved towards a humanitarian and developmental foreign policy. In this context, it was understood that women could contribute more, and it turned out that they could be more successful (Interview 6).

[92] Damla Aras, 'Turkey's ambassadors vs. Erdoğan', *Middle East Quarterly*, 18:1 (2011), pp. 47–57 (p. 48).
[93] Rumelili and Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm, 'Diplomaside kadın ve egemen maskülenlik'.
[94] Rumelili and Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm, 'Diplomaside kadın ve egemen maskülenlik'.
[91] Data for this graph has been compiled from multiple sources, including newspaper articles, the authors' previous publications, official figures provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Türkiye via email correspondence in 2014, annual Twitter announcements by the Ministry on International Women's Day (8 March), and other publicly available materials.

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As indicated in the above statement made by a female ambassador, both female and male diplomats we interviewed have underlined that a changed attitude towards women in diplomacy is dictated by the evolution of diplomacy and the new priorities of Turkish foreign policy. They consider that the rise of multilateralism has opened a wider space for women diplomats to excel on the basis of issue-based expertise on global issues, as opposed to bilateral diplomacy, where diplomats only transmit messages to the other party based on the instructions given to them. On the basis of gender-essentialist assumptions associating women diplomats with 'feminine' skills, both male and female interviewees have highlighted that women's sensitivity, 'humanist nature', care for vulnerable groups such as women and children (Interviews 1, 2, and 3), and 'integrity' (Interview 11) facilitate better implementation of the responsibility to protect doctrine and effective management of humanitarian and public diplomacy, and foster greater responsiveness to global challenges, such as human trafficking, drugs trafficking, and combating corruption (Interview 3). It is recognised that women's empathy, patience, and problem-solving skills allow them to better serve citizens abroad and conduct public diplomacy and nation branding initiatives. In contrast, male diplomats are characterised as less capable in conducting such tasks as they are less emotional.

Our interviewees have also characterised women diplomats as more 'communicative', 'able to consider multiple dimensions of an issue', 'better at multi-tasking and handling multi-dimensional challenges', 'masters of problem solving' (Interview 6), and better at networking and dealing with diverse audiences. Characteristics such as 'flexibility' and 'mild temperament' that are associated with female diplomats are considered as assets in reaching 'win–win solutions',[95] while 'toughness' and 'rigidity' are found to be limiting. It is also recognised that women diplomats benefit from gender-essentialising stereotypes in negotiation contexts, as they are treated more kindly and generously by their male colleagues. Male diplomats think twice before saying 'no' to a proposal from women, we were told (Interview 2).

In the words of a male diplomat interviewee:

> … As women approach all issues in a more subtle and indirect way, they do not elicit confrontation. Especially if it is a large mission and a difficult task, women diplomats are preferred because men can get harsher reactions from their counterparts (male) (Interview 5).

This viewpoint is also endorsed by several other participants (Interviews 2 and 3) and the TMFA. This can be seen in their official communication of the ratio of the female personnel in the Ministry with the message 'our ministry is stronger with women personnel'.[96]

Thus, until roughly the mid-2010s, the AKP government's incremental steps towards undermining the status of TMFA were largely offset by the growing ambition of Turkish foreign policy. The extension of Turkish foreign policy into humanitarianism, soft-power projection, and multilateral influence raised the value of female labour, preventing feminisation from leading to devaluation. However, subsequently, as the TMFA became much more gender-equal, Turkish politics became growingly authoritarian and foreign policy-making increasingly centralised around the Erdoğan presidency and his closed circle of advisors, starting with the forceful repression of Gezi protests in 2013, intensifying after the botched coup attempt in July 2016, and consolidating in the transition to a presidential system in 2017. Under the institutional structure of the presidential system, key foreign policy functions were absorbed by the presidency's advisory bodies, the National Intelligence Organization (MIT), transferred from the Office of Prime Ministry, and the newly established Directorate of Communications. As President Erdoğan's political confidantes assume the critical roles in advising and policy-making, the exclusive authority of the TMFA in the making of Turkish foreign policy diminished. This is recognised by a diplomat we interviewed:

[95] Lebibe Gülhan Ulutekin, 'A Brief Glance at the Turkish Foreign Policy, Euro-Atlantic!' (17 December 2014), available at: {https://issuu.com/slovakatlanticcommission/docs/eam_01_2014/19}, accessed 17 February 2019.

[96] TMFA, 'Kadın personelimizle daha güçlüyüz!', *X* (8 March 2019), available at: {https://x.com/TC_Disisleri/status/1103919656975253505}, accessed 7 August 2025.

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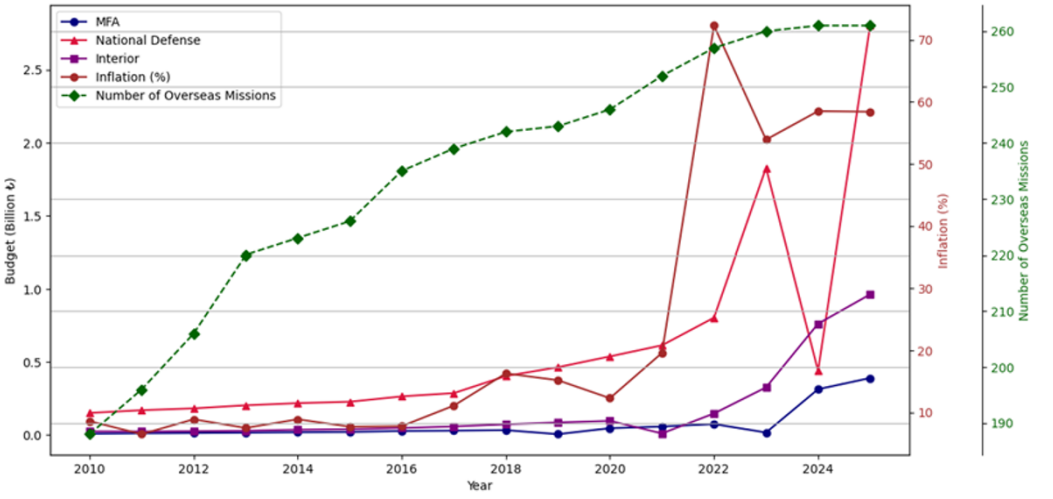


Figure 2. Budget of TMFA (2010–2024) compared to the Ministries of Interior and National Defense.[98]

> There is the Presidential Foreign Affairs Chief Advisory. It is a department within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. There is also the Presidential International Relations department. This includes various advisors close to Mr. Tayyip Erdoğan, whom he trusts. For example, a Presidential visit file is being prepared. Foreign Policy Chief Advisory is preparing but his advisor is also preparing. And both files are presented to our President. Such a duality still exists (Interview 11).

Also in his recently published memoirs, retired Ambassador Volkan Vural, who served in the TMFA from 1964 to 2006, laments that TMFA is no longer the 'school of diplomacy' that it was once widely regarded as:

> The value of diplomacy depends on its power to influence political authority and its weight in decision-making processes. Institutions that merely implement decisions taken solely by political authorities, or that lack the power to influence and shape those decisions, cannot serve as schools of diplomacy.[97]

As Figure 2 indicates, the decline in the status of TMFA is also reflected in its eroding budget allocation since 2010. Despite the rapid increase in the number of overseas missions, reflecting Turkey's growing international ambition, the Ministry's budget has remained stagnant, outpaced by inflation, especially when viewed alongside the significant budgetary growth of the Ministries of National Defense and Interior.

Meanwhile, Turkish foreign policy became increasingly unilateral, militaristic, and erratic. In the turbulent regional context caused by the Syrian civil war, the National Intelligence Agency (MIT) assumed critical foreign policy functions.[99] These trends overshadowed the prominence of those aspects of diplomatic work where 'feminine' skills are most appreciated, such as multilateral

[97] Volkan Vural, *Olağanüstü ve Tam Yetkili: Bir Büyükelçinin Belleğinde Kalanlar*, ed. Aslı Güneş (Doğan Yayınları, 2025), pp. 19–20.

[98] The budget data for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Defense, and Ministry of Interior were collected from the official records of the Presidency of Strategy and Budget of Turkey, available at: {https://www.sbb.gov.tr/merkezi-yonetim-butce-kanunlari/}. Inflation data were sourced from the World Bank Open Data platform, available at: {https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/FP.CPI.TOTL.ZG?locations=TR}.

[99] Merve Seren, 'The nexus between intelligence and foreign policy in the Turkish context: Strategic implications of the MIT's transformation', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 25:1 (2025), 75–98.

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organisations and humanitarian diplomacy, even though they remain an important component of Turkish foreign policy. President Erdoğan fuelled a populist anti-Western discourse at home to legitimise Turkey's growing alienation from traditional Western allies. In January 2020, an incident clearly demonstrated how far the government was ready to go to suppress any objections from diplomats. In reaction to President Erdoğan's re-statement of his intention to construct a canal in Istanbul to divert the dangerous maritime traffic along the Bosphorus, 126 retired ambassadors issued a joint statement, warning the government that such a canal would violate the 1936 Montreux Convention, which gave Turkey control over the Straits and guards the delicate geopolitical balance in the Black Sea. This joint statement, even though issued by retired diplomats, was framed by high-ranking governmental officials as an attempt to re-institute bureaucratic tutelage and thus a threat to democratic order, an accusation that, in turn, prompted the Ankara Chief Public Prosecutor's Office to launch of an ex officio investigation.[100]

However, as the authority and responsibilities of the TMFA were thus curtailed, the ratio of women diplomats and ambassadors continued to grow. As we indicated in Figure 1, by 2021, women constituted 36 per cent of career diplomats and occupied 25 per cent of the 257 ambassadorial posts.[101] In 2024, the number of ambassadors further increased to 305, and the ratio of female ambassadors to 27 per cent.[102] Paradoxically, these improvements in gender representation occurred in the context of serious anti-gender interventions and the adoption of a conservative discourse advocating complementarity rather than equality between men and women by the AKP government.[103] Most notably, Turkey announced in 2021 that it is withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention, an international accord on the prevention of domestic violence that Turkey itself had pioneered in 2011. However, apart from the feminising connotations of the phrase 'mon cher', we have not identified in President Erdoğan's discourse an explicit use of gendered stereotypes to disempower the TMFA.

In sum, the patterns we have identified in our historical sketch of the evolution of diplomacy in tandem with feminisation in the earlier section were largely manifest in the case of TMFA. Although Turkey's transition from a classical to a polylateral mode of diplomacy was delayed to the 2000s, in line with our expectations, it supported the growing presence of women in Turkish diplomacy. In this period, feminisation did not lead to devaluation of diplomatic work. Despite incremental steps taken by the AKP governments towards constraining the authority of the TMFA, the growing diversification and ambition of Turkish foreign policy ensured that the status of diplomatic work remained high and, as clearly indicated by our interviewees, enhanced the value of female labour in diplomatic work. However, following the mid-2010s, a much more gender equal TMFA began to operate in a populist–authoritarian political context where its authority and autonomy are significantly curtailed and in a more unilateralist and militarist foreign policy context where 'feminine' diplomatic skills are less relevant. Thus, the two conditions that prevent feminisation from leading to devaluation – the high status of diplomatic work and high value of female labour in diplomatic work – are no longer as present.

[100] Euronews, 'Ankara Cumhhuriyet Başsavcılığı, Montrö bildirisi yayımlayan amiraller hakkkında soruşturma başlattı' (4 April 2021), available at: {https://tr.euronews.com/2021/04/04/ankara-cumhuriyet-bassavc-l-g-montro-bildirisi-yay-mlayan-amiraller-hakk-nda-sorusturma-ba}, accessed 30 November 2025.

[101] Deniz Ayhan, 'Diplomasi Kadınlara Emanet', Sözcü (21 March 2021), available at: {https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2021/gundem/diplomasi-kadinlara-emanet-6322134/}, accessed 7 November 2025.

[102] Berkin Gülsoy, 'Dışişleri Bakan Yardımcısı Ekinci: Türk kadın diplomatlar olarak Ulu Önder Atatürk'ün vizyonu sayesinde avantajlı bir noktadan yola çıktık', *Anka Haber Ajansı* (8 March 2024), available at: {https://ankahaber.net/haber/detay/disisleri_bakan_yardimcisi_ekinci_turk_kadin_diplomatlar_olarak_ulu_onder_ataturkun_vizyonu_sayesinde_avantajli_bir_noktadan_yola_ciktik_185041}, accessed 30 November 2025.

[103] Didem Unal, 'Securitization of gender as a modus operandi of populism: Anti-gender discourses on the Istanbul Convention in the context of AKP's illiberal transformation', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 25:4 (2023), pp. 611–31; Özge Zihnioğlu and Nur Sinem Kourou, 'Unravelling anti-feminist social network in Turkey: An analysis of actors, relationships and political influence', *Mediterranean Politics*, 30:4 (2025), pp. 848–69.

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Conclusion

The literature has studied the growing representation of women largely independently from other ongoing transformations in diplomacy and celebrated its progressive effects on diplomacy and global politics. Prompted by Stephenson[104] and building on the large literature on occupational feminisation, in this article, we asked if the growing number of women in diplomacy could also have a negative consequence: the devaluation of diplomatic work itself. Applying the occupational feminisation literature to diplomatic work, we identified two conditions that inhibit devaluation: the overall status of diplomatic work and the value of female labour within it. We then analysed how the feminisation of diplomatic work has intersected with other transformations in diplomacy that affect these two conditions.

Our findings guard against a wholesale pessimistic conclusion that the greater representation of women in MFAs paves the way for the devaluation of diplomatic work. Any association between feminisation and devaluation is contingent on the presence of other factors influencing the status of diplomatic work. When the status of diplomatic work is high and/or rising, as it was in the evolution from classical to polylateral diplomacy, a virtuous cycle maintains the high status of diplomatic work and enhances the value of female labour, and consequently the entry of women in diplomacy in greater numbers did not trigger a devaluation. However, we caution that developments that reduce the status of diplomatic work, such as the current rise of populism, may set a context conducive for feminisation to reinforce the devaluation of diplomatic work. Populist discourse on MFAs as elitist institutions that hinder the will of the people and foreign policies that promote a deep distrust of international cooperation and institutions are bound to undermine the status of diplomatic work. Moreover, feminisation of MFAs allows populist executives to employ gendered discourse and hierarchies to diminish diplomatic work as 'feminine', while portraying their own unilateral and combative approach as 'masculine'.

We have subsequently analysed how this pattern that we have postulated was manifested in TMFA. We found that the expanding scope and ambition of Turkish foreign policy in the 2000s supported a significant rise in women's representation in TMFA and prevented devaluation even in the context of the government's encroachments on TMFA's authority. However, since the mid-2010s, a more gender-equal TMFA operates in a populist–authoritarian context where the status of diplomatic work and value of female labour are being eroded. While there is no direct evidence – in neither our interviews nor public discourse – of increased presence of women being perceived as independently devaluing diplomatic work, the safeguards identified in the occupational feminisation literature have definitely weakened.

In this respect, the re-election of Donald Trump to the US presidency is highly problematic for the future of increasingly feminised diplomatic work, given his distrust of bureaucratic expertise and shameless promotion of gender stereotypes. The steps that Donald Trump is likely to take towards diminishing the status and undermining the value of female labour in the US State Department[105] will legitimise similar moves and rhetoric in other countries, and possibly drive a transition towards a populist mode of diplomacy at the systemic level. Under these conditions, it is incumbent upon scholars of gender and diplomacy to take the risk of devaluation seriously. Doing so does not implicate scholars in conservative arguments that gender-equality reforms should be halted or that the growing presence of women in diplomatic roles constitutes a liability. To the contrary, systematic theorisation of the scope conditions under which feminisation leads to devaluation and analysis of how these conditions materialise within diplomatic institutions operating in different political and cultural contexts would guard against letting untested assumptions crystallise into misguided policy prescriptions. In this respect, the primary policy lesson to be derived from this article is that gender equality in diplomacy should not be pursued as a stand-alone objective. Efforts to increase women's representation must proceed alongside strategies that safeguard and strengthen the status of diplomatic work itself.

[104] Stephenson, 'The diplomatic glass cliff'.

[105] On Trump's first term, see Towns, 'Diplomacy is a feminine art'.

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Video Abstract. To view the online video abstract, please visit: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210525101708.

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