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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# Gendering Diplomatic Careers. Distance and Time in International Assignment Practices Among 600 French Diplomats

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## ABSTRACT

Over the past few decades, diplomatic organizations have recruited increasing numbers of women as career diplomats. However, research in the fields of both expatriation and diplomacy emphasizes that transnational careers have been historically monopolized by men, that most “trailing spouses” are still women, and that men’s transnational careers still take precedence in dual-career couples. Our study uses the “gender turn” in diplomatic studies to better understand how gender disparities continue to structure diplomatic careers, even as more women take on primary roles in expatriation. We focus on international assignment practices that we redefine as “gendered diplomatic practices”. We present an original random sample of 300 male and 300 female French diplomats employed in 2015. We show that men cover 1.5 times more distance than women throughout their careers, and that they travel 1.3 times further for each international assignment. We also show that men spend 14 years abroad on average, 3 years more than women. In addition, women spend 1 year longer in each assignment to avoid frequent relocation. These gendered disparities hold for diplomats who access managerial positions. They underscore the necessity for ongoing research and efforts to address sex disparities in transnational careers and measure the gendering of diplomatic practices.

## 1 | Introduction

Diplomatic organizations have undergone an unprecedented—albeit limited—rise of female diplomats over the past few decades. In the US, the number of senior officers who were women rose from 3% in 1985 to a quarter in 2003, and from 7% to 29% for heads of mission between 1987 and 2011 (Bashevkin 2018). In France, the proportion of female diplomats went from just 8% in 1950 to 38% in 2020 (Lecler and Goltrant 2021). In Sweden, women jumped spectacularly from 4% of the diplomatic workforce in 1971 to 56% in 2014, with the number of female managers rising from 3% to 42% over the same period (Niklasson and Robertson 2018). In addition, this rise of female

diplomats has not been limited to Western countries. In Turkey, for example, the number of female diplomats rose from 17% in 1990 to 31% in 2016 (Rumelili and Suleymanoglu-Kurum 2018). There has been a huge push within the UN system to achieve gender equality: the proportion of women appointed in the professional and higher categories has increased over two decades from 33% in 2000 to 39% in 2010 and 46% in 2020, and for the first time, gender parity was reached at headquarter locations with 51.3% of women in higher categories in 2021 (United Nations Secretary-General 2023). Meanwhile, the figure of the female ambassador or foreign minister has gone from nearly invisible in global representations to a fixture of popular culture, as reflected in recent TV shows such as *The Diplomat*

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(Netflix 2023) and *Under Control* (Arte 2023) or novels such as *The Diplomat* (Fricke 2022).

However, women still face a glass ceiling which prevents many of them from reaching the top positions in diplomatic administrations. They accounted for only 15% of ambassadors from the world's richest countries in 2015 (Townes and Niklasson 2018) and 21% from all countries in 2023 (Chehab 2023). They remain in the minority even considering that they accounted for only 0.9% of ambassadors in 1968 (Niklasson and Townes 2023). There are also wide discrepancies around the world. While there is near parity among the ambassadors appointed by Canada, the Maldives, Finland, Ghana, Nicaragua, or Sweden, the share falls below 5% for Iran, Russia, Belarus, North Korea, South Korea, Japan, Myanmar, Iran, Kuwait, Qatar, Central Asian countries, Chad, Togo, and Djibouti (Chehab 2023).

This rise of female diplomats is at odds with a centuries-long male monopoly over transnational mobility, international careers and expatriation in general. This led Connell and Wood (2005) to coin the well-known concept of “transnational business masculinity” and Enloe (2014) to wonder “where are the women in international relations?” and lament that less than 5% of female diplomats were in senior positions in the US in the late 1980s (Enloe 2014). In most studies of expatriation, international relocation and transnational work, men are portrayed as the active agents and primary movers, who travel to new posts while their female partners stay at home or follow them.

To date, three research areas have been explored on the gendered experience of transnational mobility: documenting the male monopoly on transnational careers; exploring the alternative viewpoint of “trailing spouses” and the many challenges they face; and showcasing the differential impact of expatriation on “dual career” couples (e.g., in academia). One puzzling area remains unexplored: what happens when women—and not men—are the primary agents of expatriation?

The case of diplomacy offers a key opportunity to understand the gender dynamics at work in transnational mobility. While the rise of female diplomats has been well documented, we do not fully understand how this process unfolds within diplomatic organizations. Do female diplomats have the same career paths as their male counterparts? Are they assigned abroad as often? Are they posted to the same locations? There is a need to better scrutinize diplomatic assignments, in a context where the research has mostly focused on the share of women among high-ranking diplomats. In this paper, we address this puzzle by focusing on the case of France's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Our argument proceeds through the following steps. In the first section, we outline the three main perspectives on the gender of transnational mobility, primarily developed in expatriation studies: the “border ceiling”, the “trailing spouse”, and the “dual career” perspectives. We then explain how the case of diplomatic assignments, where expatriation issues have been underexplored, can further this line of questioning, taking advantage of the “gender turn” in diplomatic studies that has fostered ground-breaking research on the recent rise of women in diplomacy (Enloe 2014; Aggestam and Townes 2019). We

reframe diplomatic assignments as “gendered diplomatic practices” (Standfield 2020) that lead to male and female diplomatic career patterns diverging with respect to distance and time, and we discuss how (chances of) promotion might influence them.

Next, we introduce the original dataset for our study, which includes 300 male and 300 female French diplomats, randomly selected from a total of 2923 diplomats employed in 2015. In our results section, we show that women tend to be posted closer to home and to spend less time abroad over their full careers. We also demonstrate that these differences depend only slightly on the position career diplomats hold within the organization. Last, we discuss gender in diplomatic expatriation and the conduct of diplomacy, in a context where many states boast feminist foreign policies and see posting female diplomats abroad as part of a public diplomacy push to promote gender equality on the international stage. We also emphasize the key limitations of our study and call for further research on the gender of transnational careers and diplomatic practices.<sup>1</sup>

## 2 | Three Takes From Expatriation Studies

### 2.1 | The “Border Ceiling”: A Male Monopoly on Transnational Careers

In this section, we highlight the studies that have identified men's long-standing monopoly over transnational careers. Despite overwhelming evidence from the past three decades that female expatriates are as effective as men (Westwood and Leung 1994; Bastida 2018), or perform even better than them (Lauring and Selmer 2014), expatriation remains overwhelmingly a male privilege (Cieri 2020). Two decades ago, here is how a “typical expatriate” was described: a man who is “approximately 31 years old when he first goes abroad, is married with an accompanying spouse who is mobile and committed, spends at least 3 years on each foreign assignment, and has three such assignments during his career” (Linehan and Scullion 2004, 440). A decade later, a survey of 640 academic expatriates in Greater China by Lauring and Selmer (2014) found that 75.8% were men and 67.3% were married.

Despite the growing realization that “global managers were no longer men alone” (Adler 2002, 743), women are still a long way from catching up. Over the 1990s, the share of female expatriate managers rose slightly from 2%–5% to 12%–15% (Linehan and Scullion 2004), but even recently, 80% of all expatriates are still men (Rossier-Renaud and Meier 2020). Although an increasing number of studies have looked at “high-skilled female immigrants” (Colakoglu, Yunlu, and Arman 2018, 258), “full profiles of women who undertake international careers, what motivates them, or their career cycles”, with information based on large samples and longitudinal studies, still seem to be in short supply (Shortland and Altman 2011, 209). And women willing to be posted abroad by their companies cannot expect to be offered a mission abroad and often have to initiate their own expatriation (Tharenou 2010). To account for this disparity, scholars long ago coined the concept of a “glass border” (Haines and Saba 1999) and also, more recently, defined an expatriate “second layer of glass” ceiling (Insch, McIntyre, and Napier 2008, 19).

The literature offers many explanations. First, organizations have long stereotyped women as “less appropriate workers than men for international assignments” or “unsuitable for international rotational assignments”, as Shortland (2020, 693) showed recently in the oil and gas sector. This is consistent with earlier studies showing that male managers assumed women were not interested in pursuing overseas assignments (Westwood and Leung 1994), while a survey of North American business students showed the opposite (Adler 1984; Wang and Bu 2004). These findings possibly reflected the fact that very few managers across the world were women, or tended to “confuse the role of female expatriate managers with that of the female expatriate partner, whose frequent failure to adapt has been one of the most commonly cited reasons for premature expatriate returns” (Linehan and Scullion 2004, 439).

Organizations were traditionally more inclined to recruit married male expatriates with children while rejecting women in the same situation: in the United Kingdom, for example, among foreign managers, fewer than 3 in 5 women were married, compared to 9 out of 10 men. And those men were three times more likely to be parents (Linehan and Scullion 2004). Organizations could also expect men to leave their family behind: Korean male employees who had young children in preschool or primary school seemed particularly eager to go abroad even if they had to go alone without their spouse (Kim and Froese 2012). In general, organizations seemed to fear that women would be more pressured to take care of immediate family members, elderly parents, and relatives (Linehan and Scullion 2004).

Second, organizational processes seemed to be detrimental to women's expatriation. In past studies, women were shown to have less access to mentors, role models, professional networks, and information on expatriation in general (Haines and Saba 1999). Even more recently, they still lacked sufficient or relevant training before being posted abroad (Shortland 2020). Women got less recognition for skills and competencies acquired abroad, and less financial rewards than men upon their return home (Tharenou 2010). They experienced more difficulties in re-entering the labor market back home, leading to a “de-skilling and downward occupational mobility” (Colakoglu, Yunlu, and Arman 2018, 259). For a long time, international assignments appeared to be “geared to traditional male career paths” because they favored those who could maintain an uninterrupted career without conflicting commitments (Linehan and Scullion 2004, 440).

Third, scholars pointed to discrimination in the host societies. In an earlier pioneering study, three in five female foreigners posted to Hong Kong mentioned discrimination in a society depicted as patriarchal and “culturally tough”. However, they insisted that the situation for women managers was better in Hong Kong than back home and criticized sexism from older fellow expatriate men, thus challenging “the excuse used by some companies for not sending women on overseas assignments” (Westwood and Leung 1994, 81). More recent research showed that gender stereotyping and discrimination might in fact be intra-ethnic (Tzeng 2006). That said, host country prejudices against women seemed to have a negative impact on the performance of female expatriates (Shen and Jiang 2015), and acceptance of female expatriates varied across countries even

though credibility and legitimacy challenges remained widespread (Napier and Taylor 2002).

Fourth, social norms seemed to censor women's willingness to expatriate. Following an earlier observation by Bielby and Bielby (1992) that wives in dual-earner couples were less inclined than husbands to relocate for a better job, scholars found that women were more likely to turn down an international assignment if they had children or if their spouse could not find an adequate job abroad. For a long time, conflicts between work and family were exacerbated for female expatriates (Harris 2004). Two decades ago, women were three times more likely to follow a partner abroad than the other way around (Haines and Saba 1999). Women also tended to repatriate more often for family reasons (Tharenou 2010). Past studies indicated that they tended to avoid international assignments that exceeded a duration of 2 years, when most missions abroad were expected to last a few years (Haines and Saba 1999).

Solutions that could help feminize the expatriate workforce were not viewed as socially acceptable, such as “commuter marriages, putting the male career on hold, giving priority to the female career for a number of years, or the male partner retiring from employment” (Linehan and Scullion 2004, 443). Yet, social norms seemed to vary across the world. For example, family problems appeared to have no impact on the performance of Chinese female expatriates although most of them were married with family responsibilities: they seemed “willing to compromise their family lives because international assignments represent all-too-rare opportunities to obtain financial and career benefits” (Shen and Jiang 2015, 310).

## 2.2 | The “Trailing Spouse”: A Shift in Focus Toward Expatriates' Partners

In this section, we explore the second perspective, which shifted the focus from male expatriates to their female spouses. Feminist scholars criticized the “methodological individualism” that focused on male expatriates (Leung 2017) and made their spouses “invisible” (Yeoh and Khoo 1998; Fechter 2007). Instead, many advocated “more research on the spectrum of women's migratory trajectories from ‘trailing wives’ to skilled professionals” (Ryan and Mulholland 2014, 252), or a “linked life” perspective (Leung 2017). This implied a new focus on “trailing spouses” or “trailing wives” (Yeoh and Khoo 1998; Cooke 2007; Lundström 2013; Slobodin 2019), “accompanying partners” (Suter and Cangià 2020), “tied movers” (Leung 2017), “non-work” migrants (Colakoglu, Yunlu, and Arman 2018), “expatriate wives” (Lundström 2013) or “corporate expatriate wives” (Fechter 2010).

Many authors emphasized that female spouses have always been “active agents” in shaping the family migration and return processes (Yeoh and Khoo 1998; Leung 2017). Female spouses weighed on company decisions (Lauring and Selmer 2010) and played a critical role in the local adjustment of their partners (Black and Stephens 1989; Mäkelä, Käsälä, and Suutari 2011) or their amount of stress (Harvey 1998). Married expatriates tended to report higher levels of satisfaction (Lauring and

Selmer 2014). A premature return was often blamed on the “inability or unwillingness of the spouse to adapt” (Andreasson 2008). They organized the family’s social life, managed domestic work, negotiated daily life in the local country, achieved community work and maintained a cultural identity or national lifestyle abroad—not without colonial reminiscences (Shutt 2014; Lundström 2012, 2013, 2014; Cosquer 2018; Le Renard 2019; Fechter 2007, 2010; Ryan and Mulholland 2014; Walsh 2006; Yeoh and Khoo 1998; Yeoh, Huang, and Willis 2000; Fechter Anne-Meike 2007).

For many years, relocation was seemingly more challenging for female spouses, due to the “devalorization of their productive functions and a relegation to the domestic sphere” (B. S. A. Yeoh and Khoo 1998), their “altered positions as ‘trailing spouses’” (Lundström 2013) and the difficult transition “from being a full-time professional to being a full-time homemaker” (Suter and Cangià 2020, 814). Abroad, spouses faced “a sudden loss of essential social and psychological functions that establish identities, such as a sense of belonging, professional achievement, and social interactions” (Slobodin 2019, pp.1491) and “a dramatic loss of network contacts and support” (Ryan and Mulholland 2014, 254). They could feel “in limbo” (Tremayne 1984), emotionally ambivalent (Cangià 2017), “‘stuck’ in an endless present” (Cangià and Zittoun 2020, 641), and could even go through a massive breakdown (Cangià 2018, 15). They have been described as “desperate housewives” (Kupka and Cathro 2007) with the sole “task of being content” (Arieli 2007).

Female spouses faced many hurdles in finding an occupation and settling in (Cole 2011) and often depended on their husband’s income (Lundström 2021). Even when they worked abroad, they were “more likely to have a job than a career: it is a gendered strategy which involves a flexible number of work hours and prescribes the role as a primary caregiver” (Kōu, Mulder, and Bailey 2017, 2791).

In this connection, some authors argue that expatriation allows spouses to revalue and “regain ‘control’ over their personal and intimate time with family”: they reframe the expatriation as a “time of exception” and a “liminal experience” in the sense it is “a passage from a past working life to a new work condition that is not yet in place” (Suter and Cangià 2020, 829), as a transformative experience that turns their life into a family “adventure” (Suter 2019). They also employ many strategies to cope with repeated mobility: reinforcing daily life routines, practicing the same activities across countries, detaching from most of their belongings except a few emotional items, strengthening a circle of transnational friends and “focusing inward on the relationships within the nuclear family” (Levitan 2019, 278). Companies sending employees abroad have also increasingly developed professional counseling and assistance in placement for “trailing spouses”, or lobbied with foreign governments to issue work permits for them.

Last, scholars have examined the case of male trailing spouses. Three decades ago, the situation was already framed as “a dramatic challenge for international organizations in the coming decades” because of the increasing numbers of female expatriates (Punnett, Crocker, and Stevens 1992, 585). Men seem to be more

willing than women to travel abroad, not only as an expatriate but also as a following partner (van der Velde, Bossink, and Jansen 2005). However, research shows that a majority of female expatriates are not followed by a male partner. Already in the 1990s, only two out of 45 women posted to Hong Kong were accompanied (Westwood and Leung 1994) and men constituted only 16% of all accompanying partners from the US abroad (Anderson 2001). Until recently, numerous studies have shown that female expatriates are very rarely followed by a male partner (Fechter 2007; Lundström 2014; Cosquer 2018; Le Renard 2019) and that most trailing spouses remain women (Anderson 2001; Cole 2012; Suter and Cangià 2020).

In fact, male trailing spouses seem to face even more severe feelings of isolation and status loss—“here I am just me” (Suter and Cangià 2020, 822). They are under more pressure to find a job (Westwood and Leung 1994; Anderson 2001) although 85% admit facing career challenges abroad (Cole 2012). Scholars therefore advocate for specific support for them (Harvey 1998; Cole 2012). In this configuration, an age difference between the spouses can become an asset: men who are in their 50s or 60s “often expressed the appreciation of the increase of free time that mobility enabled, with a reference to their age and their long employment years” (Suter and Cangià 2020, 821). Male spouses eventually normalize their situation after a certain period of time (Cangià 2018; Cangià, Zittoun, and Levitan 2019). They can even enjoy an “an ‘exotic bonus’” as a “rare specimen” abroad (Davoine et al. 2013, 103).

### 2.3 | “Dual-Career” Couples: Transnational Mobility as a Disadvantage for Women’s Careers

In this section, we turn to a consequential subset of studies about dual-career couples that show that mandatory international assignments for both partners disproportionately affect women’s careers. Young academics, who are expected to accept positions abroad, have been a key focus of research (Bilecen and Van Mol 2017). In such a situation, men are generally the primary movers. When they are not, it generally results in professional frustrations and a “‘gender-troubled’ configuration” exposing the couple to deep-seated prejudices (Schaer, Dahinden, and Toader 2017, 1300). On the other hand, women scientists who follow their partners usually find a job below their qualifications and experience a scientific devaluation. Worse, female scientists are more likely than men to be in an intimate relationship with a fellow scientist, and therefore to face such a dilemma (Schaer, Dahinden, and Toader 2017). This prevailing “imperative of mobility” has long been considered a contributing factor to gender inequality within academia because family obligations not only impeded women’s careers: they also advantaged men’s careers (Shauman and Xie 1996). It still seems to be a prominent explanation of the “leaky pipeline” of women in sciences (Schaer, Dahinden, and Toader 2017, 1304).

Life-history interviews with 150 dual-career academics show the negative impact relationships have on women’s careers. The effect is more pronounced in the early stages of the career, during the postdoc period. Women not only travel less but also

host fewer visiting researchers (although they host twice as many women than men, when they do); therefore, “the academic world of female researchers tends to be less international” (Jöns 2011, 205). This reflects on their international publications (Vabø et al. 2014). Finally, women seem to face more difficulties back home in gaining recognition for their experience abroad (Bilecen and Van Mol 2017).

Consequently, the ideal of “flexible academic entrepreneurs ‘without obstacles to mobility set by domestic partnership and family’” mostly remains a male ideal (Leemann 2010, 620). If they aim for international assignments, women are left with two options: giving up on a private life or facing a series of “impossibilities and difficulties, such as broken relationships or the impossibility of planning two uncertain careers together” (Leemann 2010, 621). Otherwise, female academics have to devise workaround strategies such as investing in short-term visits abroad or in the “everydayness of ‘internationalism’” through international collaborations, rather than traveling abroad physically (Nikunen and Lempiäinen 2020, 568).

### 3 | International Assignments as “Gendered Diplomatic Practices”

#### 3.1 | Combining Expatriation Studies With the “Gender Turn” in Diplomatic Studies

In the following sections, we broaden the line of questioning applied in expatriation studies to look at the case of diplomatic assignments. Paradoxically, the gender perspectives of transnational mobility have remained underexplored in the literature focusing on diplomats. However, in the past few years, scholars from a subfield known as the “gender turn” in diplomatic studies have started to document the rise of women in diplomatic organizations. They have also advanced a new research agenda on “forms of ingrained masculinity norms, scripts and practices” in diplomatic activities (Aggestam and Towns 2019, 19). In fact, many of the issues they examine parallel the expatriation studies agenda and its three main perspectives, thus providing a valuable theoretical framework that can be used to integrate expatriation and diplomatic studies.

##### 3.1.1 | The “Border Ceiling” Perspective

Gender turn scholars observe that, in diplomatic organizations too, transnational activities were historically monopolized by men. To quote Aggestam and Towns (2019, 9), “diplomacy has traditionally and formally been a domain reserved for men only (...) A century later, men still remain grossly overrepresented in contemporary diplomacy”. Up until very recently, female diplomats remained a minority, especially in top positions. Among other examples, 62% of all French diplomats employed in 2020 were men, a proportion that rises to three-quarters in top positions (Lecler and Goltrant 2021). Only 14% of Czech female diplomats access higher positions (Fellegi, Kočí, and Benešová 2022).

Conversely, 64% of spouses of all German diplomats are women (Rosenbaum-Feldbrügge et al. 2022).

##### 3.1.2 | The “Trailing Spouse” Perspective

Diplomatic studies scholars devote considerable attention to this issue. In her pioneering work, Hochschild (1969, 73) showcased the “vicarious role” expected from ambassadors’ wives who are supposed to “specialize in the more purely symbolic aspects of diplomatic life and in the communication of political messages through nonofficial channels”. There is a blur between their public and private life, leisure and work that exposes them to a “pinch between personality and role”, that is, between the demands of their husband’s career and their own private and social life (Hochschild 1969, 87). More recent studies have revisited and expanded upon these findings. They show that, in history, “the foreign service depended on the logistical, practical, and representational work done by wives” (Wood 2015, 1). In fact, “without a wife’s active cooperation, a male diplomat cannot perform the essential social tasks well”, making “diplomatic wives” essential for their husbands’ careers (Enloe 2014, 185). For example, in a survey of French career diplomats, one interviewee admits that his wife played an instrumental role in his move abroad: “I don’t know how people who have a wife who works or doesn’t accompany them do it, because you absolutely don’t have the time to deal with the everyday problems that arise” (Piotet, Loriol, and Delfolie 2013, 273). For male expatriates, female spouses influence diplomats’ adjustment abroad (Gudmundsdottir, Gudlaugsson, and Adalsteinsson 2019). Typically, they behave like “go-betweens” in social events and vis-à-vis the local community (Standfield 2020).

Conversely, female diplomats cannot rely on male partners to follow them abroad. In the past, female diplomats even had to resign once they got married—a rule enforced until 1972 in the United States, 1973 in the United Kingdom, and 1986 in Brazil (Aggestam and Towns 2018). For example, only one out of the 15 female French ambassadors in 2006 was followed abroad by her husband (Loriol 2009). British male partners of female diplomats refuse to follow them because they are reluctant to work in areas outside their expertise or in low-paying jobs (Coles 2007). Consequently, up to 84% of spouses of all European diplomats posted abroad are women—a percentage much higher than the share of women diplomats (Gudmundsdottir, Gudlaugsson, and Adalsteinsson 2019). In addition, the female spouses of Swiss diplomats spend 19 years abroad, compared to 11 years for male spouses. To enhance their chances of being followed abroad, female diplomats tend to prefer older male partners who are already retired or pre-retired (Davoine et al. 2013).

The case of male trailing spouses is also addressed in diplomatic studies. They seem to be under more pressure to find an occupation abroad: 16% of women and 25% of men among diplomatic spouses intend to work abroad (Rosenbaum-Feldbrügge et al. 2022). Moreover, male trailing spouses behave differently from women in the same situation: although they provide emotional support for their spouses, they tend to avoid

diplomatic events and dismiss household duties (Davoine et al. 2013).

### 3.1.3 | The “Dual Careers” Couple Perspective

Unlike expatriation studies, diplomatic studies have remained blind to dual diplomatic careers, although the rise of female diplomats has inevitably resulted in an increase in diplomat couples. The situation has led to institutional innovations, such as the creation of “tandem” positions for diplomat couples. In an even more innovative way, diplomat couples have been assigned the same ambassadorial position to share, as in the recent case of a couple of Swiss ambassadors posted to Thailand in 2009, French ambassadors to Hungary in 2016, and German ambassadors to Slovenia in 2020 to Sweden in 2021 or Canada in 2024 (with varying rotation methods such as alternating half of the week or half of the year). Thus, dual diplomatic careers could provide a compelling observatory for gender biases within diplomatic organizations.

### 3.2 | The Specificity of Diplomatic Assignments

Despite the parallels between expatriation and diplomatic studies, diplomatic assignments stand out in at least two key ways when compared to expatriation. The first difference is the growing presence of women in diplomacy. While expatriation remains overwhelmingly male-dominated, the percentage of women in diplomacy, although still significantly lower than that of men, continues to rise. The share of female ambassadors went from 2% in 1978 to 3% in 1988, 6% in 1998, 12% in 2008, and 20% in 2019. And while in 1998 only six states had more than 40% of female ambassadors, 26 were in that situation in 2021 (Niklasson and Towns 2023).

Second, diplomatic assignments are a very specific type of transnational mobility. Expatriation typically refers to moving from one country to another single country. It can be long-term, but it usually does not involve repeated moves across multiple countries. By contrast, career diplomats are expected to move to many different countries throughout their careers. They typically remain stationed abroad for a few years, with a 3–5 years cap, before having to relocate again. Career diplomats thus experience an exceptional type of transnational mobility. Known as “international repeated geographical mobility”, it can be defined as “the movement lived by people and motivated by work, which leads to geographical and semantic displacement and subsequent relocation of housing and occupational arrangements across countries” (Levitan 2019, 261).

Both differences are compelling. First, female diplomats can no longer be considered as “invisible”, “trailing”, or disadvantaged partners in a “dual careers” couple: in diplomacy, many women have become the primary movers. Second, diplomatic expatriation showcases an exceptional—and somewhat extreme—version of transnational mobility, since it does not occur once only: it is repeated throughout a career. Thus, diplomats’ career paths offer a key opportunity to understand the gender dynamics at work in transnational mobility, and reexamine the issues addressed by expatriation studies from a fresh

perspective: how does transnational mobility remain gendered once women have become primary agents of expatriation?

### 3.3 | How Gendered Are Diplomatic Assignments?

To address this puzzle, we see the practices used to assign diplomats abroad as pivotal because we assume that male and female diplomatic careers diverge through such practices. We can investigate these gendered patterns by drawing upon the concept of “gendered diplomatic practices” (Standfield 2020). Rooted in the gender turn of diplomatic studies, this concept is inspired by another “turn” in international relations, known as the “practice turn”.

In this other subfield, “practices” refer to “what practitioners do”: studying them allows scholars to “zoom in on the quotidian unfolding of international life” (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 1). “Practices” encompass “habits”, “routines”, and habitual “ways of doing things” by international practitioners (Adler and Pouliot 2011; Adler-Nissen 2016; Autesserre 2014)—and among them, diplomats have commanded significant attention (Adler-Nissen 2015; Neumann 2007; Cornut 2015; Pouliot 2016; Brundage 2018; Bruneau 2023). A key assumption of the practice turn is that “everyday actions are consequential in producing social life”, that is, they help naturalize and reify social orders and are generative of classifications, distinctions, categories, and world visions (Adler-Nissen 2016, 7). From the perspective of the other social sciences, observing practices may seem like a straightforward way to understand social life and actions. However, it challenges a longstanding tradition in international relations, which favors abstract, theoretical, and model-driven analyses of world politics.

Remarkably though, as (Standfield 2022) observes, most “practice turn” scholars have tended to overlook gender perspectives, despite the fact that gender categories, classifications, and distinctions are highly effective in structuring social orders. Reciprocally, feminist scholars in international relations have shown a lack of engagement with the “practice turn” (Drieschova and Bueger 2022). We align with (Standfield 2022) in recognizing that the gender turn and the practice turn mutually reinforce each other in the study of gender in diplomacy. Drawing on her concept of “gendered diplomatic practices”, we examine the gender dynamics at play in diplomatic assignments.

International assignment practices have been thoroughly documented in expatriation studies, in line with the pioneering argument that “selection systems for international assignments” have unintended gender bias (Harris 2002). Yet, they remain underexplored in diplomatic studies, despite their clear reflection of diplomacy itself. When a state dispatches a large number of diplomats to another country, it signals that the country holds considerable diplomatic importance. In a notable contribution from the practice turn, Pouliot (2016) assesses the significance states attach to international organizations by comparing the number of diplomats they send for representation. Conversely, a diplomatic fallout between two states is often marked by the expulsion or recall of diplomats. Thus,

analyzing diplomatic assignments is also crucial to exposing diplomatic priorities.

Within the scope of “gendered diplomatic practices” (Standfield 2020), includes “incorporation” and “intimacy” practices, in line with the “trailing spouse” perspective that has drawn most of the attention of gender turn scholars. But it remains centered on male career diplomats. We suggest expanding the focus to include female diplomats and their careers. This allows us to reframe the question for our case study: how do international assignments differ between male and female diplomats over the course of their careers?

## 4 | Hypotheses, Data, and Research Design

### 4.1 | Three Sets of Hypotheses: Time, Distance, and (Chances of) Promotion

In the following two sections, we outline the three hypotheses we used to answer this question and present our research design and original database. To answer our question, expatriation studies offer only limited insights because they mostly highlight the general challenges women face in pursuing overseas assignments: organizational biases, gender stereotypes, homosocial environments, conjugal sacrifices, childcare concerns, caregiving responsibilities, etc. We can reasonably infer that these challenges explain differences in diplomatic assignments for female and male diplomats. But we aim to better define these differences. Drawing from the limited information available in the literature, we therefore suggest three sets of hypotheses.

#### 4.1.1 | Time

Time variables are well-explored in the literature. Expatriation studies scholars have specifically explored how the recurrence and duration of international assignments shape the identity and professional expectations of expatriates and their partners (Suter and Cangià 2020). We already know, for example, that Brazilian female diplomats spend on average 55% of their career abroad, compared to 60% for men (Farias and do Carmo 2018). Female spouses of Swiss diplomats spend 19 years abroad compared to 11 years for male spouses: female diplomats probably tend to spend less time abroad because their male partners are more reluctant to follow them (Davoine et al. 2013). The literature also suggests that female expatriates find “ways to make internationalization periods short enough to fit into one’s life” (Nikunen and Lempiäinen 2020, 567). In addition, women prefer long-term assignments in order “to maximize or achieve high levels of both career and family outcomes” (Shortland 2021, 1113). We therefore assume that female diplomats tend to spend less time abroad in total while spending more time in each assignment to diminish the costs of repeated mobility.

#### 4.1.2 | Distance

Surprisingly, distance variables, unlike time variables, are almost absent from the literature, despite the expectation that

female expatriates, given heightened personal challenges, might travel to less distant locations compared to their male counterparts. In diplomatic studies, Aggestam and Towns (2019, 17) acknowledge that “we still have very little knowledge of where women and men are positioned and located in diplomacy”. One exception in the expatriate studies literature is the “cultural distance” argument: female expatriates are said to avoid “high cultural distance” destinations, due to their partner’s reluctance to move and thereby forgo a rewarding job or put a promising career on hold (Dupuis, Haines III, and Saba 2008). Beyond cultural disparities, other studies suggest more bluntly that the relationship with distance is, in itself, gendered. For example, in flight crews, women tend to prefer short- or medium-distance flights contrary to men who opt for long-distance flights (Lambert 2018). We therefore hypothesize that female diplomats cover less distance, on average, than male peers, throughout their career, because of the personal constraints they face that retain them closer to home.

#### 4.1.3 | Promotions

We finally need to determine if the observed differences persist when comparing high-ranking diplomats to their lower-level counterparts. The existence of a “glass ceiling” has been well documented in global diplomacy (Aggestam and Towns 2017). In the French diplomatic service, men occupy approximately three-quarters of all managerial positions (Lecler and Goltrant 2021). Beyond mere discrimination, research shows that women find it harder to follow progressive and linear career models because they suffer from more career interruptions, a pattern that “may lead to occupational segregation in organizations” (Linehan and Scullion 2004, 440). For example, in Brazil, only 20% of women diplomats reach the final career stage before retiring, compared to 45% of men, because they tend to take more leave and retire earlier (Farias and do Carmo 2018).

In diplomatic organizations, a lesser commitment to transnational mobility may therefore be associated with less successful careers. However, within professionalized diplomatic systems, career steps usually adhere to well-defined advancement practices such as competitive examinations and established status criteria, which can potentially serve as safeguards for women’s promotions. Furthermore, certain countries have implemented legislation to promote gender diversity in senior positions within the public administration, addressing career disparities between men and women. Both assertions hold true in the context of French diplomacy.

This leads us to assume that high-ranking women diplomats could spend more time abroad and cover more distance than low-ranking women. High-ranking women could commit more to international mobility because they know it is a prerequisite for obtaining high-ranking positions. Many of them could also anticipate being promoted to higher positions because they hold a high entry status in diplomacy (typically obtained through competitive entrance examinations). They probably do not want to waste their chances by refusing to take assignments abroad.

## 4.2 | An Original Database of French Diplomats

In terms of data, we applied the recommendation by Aggestam and Towns (2019) to move beyond descriptive single case studies and implement larger *n*-studies. We studied international assignment practices on a broad scale in the field of French diplomacy. To solve our puzzle, the French case proved highly valuable for three reasons. First, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs has seen a notable increase in the number of women within its ranks. The percentage of women among all diplomats has doubled in less than 40 years, from 18% in 1980 to 36% in 2015 (Lecler and Goltrant 2021). Second, its extensive global network makes it especially useful for testing our hypothesis regarding the distances traveled by career diplomats. The French diplomatic service boasts one of the world's most extensive networks of embassies and consulates, comprising approximately 160 embassies and 90 consulates in the mid-2010s. However, this should also be viewed as a bias in our general findings, since France's global diplomatic network stems from its unique legacy as a former colonial power and a key player in the post-war international order (see discussion below).

Finally, we were able to utilize a unique source: the official yearbook published by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs every year since its first edition in 1879. This data is normally provided for internal use by French diplomats only. However, scholars can be granted access at the national archives of the ministry in La Courneuve near Paris. Yearbooks are available in print format only, meaning data has to be transcribed by hand.<sup>2</sup> Each yearbook is a few hundred pages long. The 2015 edition, the most recent available at the beginning of this research project, has around 2000 pages. It covers recent promotions, results of entrance examinations, registered associations at the ministry, organizational charts of embassies and consulates, and government decrees, along with targeted ads for wine, international boarding schools or moving companies.

We focused on one section listing all French diplomats employed by the Ministry and key elements of their career paths: their age, degrees, and positions in France and abroad (with location, status, and duration). Other French researchers have used this section to study diplomats in top positions only (Denéchère 2003; Loriol 2009; Lequesne and Heilbronn 2012). We instead included the full spectrum of diplomatic careers. Even though they may have received less attention in previous research, low-ranking diplomats who may never ascend to top positions and those in the early stages of their careers are integral components of the diplomatic services. We therefore extended the scope of analysis to all 2923 diplomats listed in 2015 (1867 men and 1056 women).

## 4.3 | Research Design

We randomly selected 300 men and 300 women from the list with at least a 20-year career span. In our database, we referenced and numbered each career step entry recorded in the yearbook, obtaining a total of 7416 entries for 600 diplomats, that is, 12.36 entries on average for each career. We distinguished between two categories of entries. The first category of 6220 entries covers

durations with a start year and end year: “posting” ( $n = 5493$ , 74% of all entries and 88.3% of entries with durations), “leave” ( $n = 158$ ), “academic training” ( $n = 170$ ), “secondment” to another administration” ( $n = 245$ ), “army duty” ( $n = 70$ ), and “no information” ( $n = 84$ ). In our paper, we only focus on this first category. We exclude a second category of entries that reference a single event with just one date, that is, 1196 entries of three types: success in an “entrance examination” ( $n = 479$ ), “appointment” to a higher position ( $n = 388$ ), and a national “award” ( $n = 329$ ).

To help visualize the data, we offer the example of one diplomatic career path below. The individual has 17 separate entries, starting from the competitive diplomacy entrance examination in 1988 to a posting to Warsaw as third secretary from 1988 to 1989, a posting to France from 1990 to 1993, a posting to Budapest as first secretary from 1993 to 1997, etc. Besides the postings, the entries also record an appointment (here, “plenipotentiary minister” in 2013, a status that allows the person to be appointed to an ambassadorial position), an award (here, “chevalier de la légion d'honneur” in 2011), or leave (here, parental leave from 1998 to 2000):

1/competitive examination/1988/“secrétaire des affaires étrangères (orient)”.

2/posting/1988–1989/third secretary/Warsaw.

3/posting/1990–1993/central administration.

4/posting/1993–1997/first secretary/Budapest.

5/leave/1998–2000/parental leave.

6/posting/2000–2003/central administration.

(...)

14/posting/2010–2013/consul-general/Saint Petersburg.

15/award/2011/“chevalier de la légion d'honneur”.

16/posting/2013–2015/ambassador to the International Maritime Organization/London.

17/appointment/2013/plenipotentiary minister.

Regarding the time hypotheses, this allowed us to make calculations about the total duration of each career, the total time spent abroad, and the duration of each posting. In our example, if we consider the first six entries only of the diplomat's career, we see that 5 years were spent abroad (1 in Warsaw and 4 in Budapest) and 8 at home (including 2 years of parental leave). In the first 15 years of this career, a third was spent abroad. On average, each posting lasted 3 years and each posting abroad 2.5 years. Based on these calculations, we can then compare result distributions between all male and female diplomats.

Regarding the distance hypotheses, we collected the location of each posting. This allowed us to calculate the kilometric distance between Paris, where the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is located, to all the cities ( $n = 265$ ) where French diplomats are

posted throughout their careers.<sup>3</sup> By convention, we consider this distance to be zero for postings to France, even though a few missions can involve being posted outside Paris in France (56% of all entries with durations are located in France). The distances traveled each year are then summed up throughout the career. In our example, we consider that the diplomat posted to Warsaw for 1 year (1 \* 1586.19 km) and in Budapest for 4 years (4 \* 1265.71 km, i.e., 5062.84 km) has covered a total of 6649.03 km. We then compare the resulting distributions of distances for male and female diplomats.

To better account for career sequence patterns in relationship to distance, we used a longitudinal sequence analysis based on four categories of distances: home, very close to home (0–1800 km), far from home (1800–6800 km), and very far from home (more than 6800 km). We restricted the analysis to the 20 first years of all careers to obtain sequences of the same length. We then conducted a classification analysis of all sequences to group together career paths that resembled each other most closely. Last, we compared the share of women and men in each of these groups.

Finally, regarding the (chances of) promotion hypotheses, we identified a subset of 165 diplomats who attained managerial positions at some point during their career. In this paper, we call them “high-ranking” diplomats for further simplicity. The comprehensive list of all such positions across all French ministries is officially disclosed annually, stemming from a legislative mandate in 2012 to push for gender parity among managers in the public administration. It requires every ministry to appoint women to 40% of its first-held managerial positions. Noncompliance results in proportional fines that the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs has had to pay every single year since then (Lecler

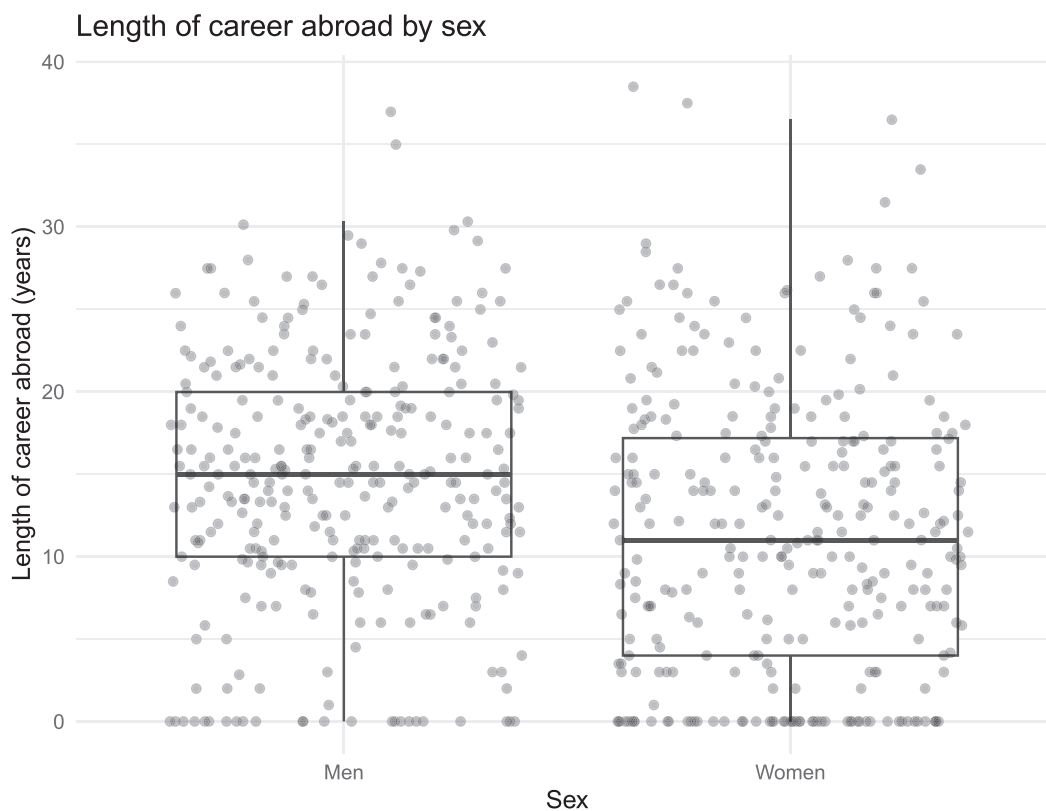
and Goltrant 2021). Our point of reference is the official 2015 list which counts 269 managerial positions. Last, we compared time and distance result distributions between low-ranking and high-ranking male and female diplomats.

## 5 | Results

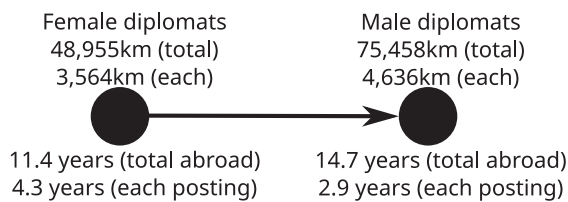
### 5.1 | Time Hypotheses

As a first step, we aimed to assess the total time diplomats spend in assignments abroad throughout their careers. We assumed female diplomats spend less time in international assignments than men throughout their career because they face greater constraints that keep them home. Our findings strongly support this. We find that the 300 women diplomats in our sample spent on average 11.4 years abroad (36% of their entire career of 31.93 years). By contrast, the 300 men in our sample spent on average 14.7 years abroad (47% of their entire career of 31.15 years) (see Figure 2). Men spent 3.3 years more than their female counterparts on diplomatic assignments abroad. Gender disparities between the two distributions are clearly illustrated by boxplots comparing the careers of female and male diplomats abroad (see Figure 1).

This average 3.3-year gap is approximately equivalent to an extra international assignment. This represents a substantial difference over the course of a diplomatic career. An additional international assignment may enrich one's international experience, language skills, negotiation expertise, network of diplomatic contacts, and familiarity with international organizations, not to



**FIGURE 1** | Boxplots of the length of career abroad by sex, in years<sup>4</sup>.



**FIGURE 2** | Average distance to Paris covered by female and male diplomats in total throughout their career<sup>5</sup> and in each diplomatic assignment abroad<sup>6</sup>; average time spent abroad by female and male diplomats, in total throughout their career<sup>7</sup>; and average time spent by female and male diplomats in each assignment<sup>8</sup>.

mention the higher salaries abroad. Capitalizing on an extra assignment may therefore enhance one's diplomatic competence.

Part of this discrepancy comes from leave periods (which include personal and parental leaves or professional training). On average, 11.3% ( $n = 34$ ) of women take leave during their careers, compared to only 2.3% ( $n = 7$ ) of male diplomats, a clear difference of 9% points.<sup>9</sup> Part of the gap can also be explained by the fact that 18% of women are never posted abroad, compared to only 8% of men, another clear 10% point difference.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, this seems to reflect personal constraints that weigh more heavily on women than on men. It is reasonable to infer that leave periods correlate with time spent on childcare or with a spouse's reluctance to relocate abroad.

Second, we also hypothesize that female diplomats spend more time than men in each international assignment. Our data partially validates this hypothesis. On average, women spend 4.3 years in each posting versus only 2.9 years for men (see Figure 2). Again, this is a very significant gap of 1.4 years. The turnover between assignments is quicker for men than for women. It shows that female diplomats strategically remain in each assignment for a longer period. It helps them to avoid frequent relocations that could be detrimental to their spouse's career or children's education. However, by staying longer in each assignment, female diplomats gain less diverse diplomatic experience than men. Even if they could spend as much time abroad as men—which they do not—they would still have fewer diverse diplomatic experiences abroad throughout their career.

However, when examined independently, the average duration of foreign assignments is nearly identical for men (2.9 years) and women (3.1 years).<sup>11</sup> This minor difference can be attributed to the standardized duration of international postings, typically set at 3 years, with the fourth year granted as an exception. This finding suggests that female diplomats engage in foreign assignments as much as their male counterparts, once they agree to be posted abroad. However, they tend to remain in each domestic position for longer periods, likely as a strategy to reduce the frequency of foreign postings.

## 5.2 | Distance Hypotheses

Regarding distance, we find that women cover an average of 48,955 km in total throughout their career. The distance covered

by men is much higher: they travel 75,458 km on average (see Figure 2). This means that, on average, the distance covered by men is 1.54 times greater than that covered by women diplomats throughout their career. One might argue that this difference is due to men's longer careers: if men remain diplomats longer than women, they logically cover more distance over the course of their careers. This is actually not the case. In fact, in our database, career duration is slightly longer for women: 31.93 years compared to 31.15 years for men.

One could still argue that men spend more time abroad throughout their careers. This would explain why they cover greater distances overall since they are more frequently assigned abroad. This is indeed the case (see the section on time above). To address this disparity, we propose an alternative measurement for distance: the average distance to each international assignment. This excludes years spent back home in France, and therefore neutralizes the difference in time spent abroad throughout a career. We discover that, on average, women diplomats cover 3564 km in each posting abroad versus 4636 km for men (see Figure 2). It means men are traveling 1.3 times further away from home than women, on average, every time they are assigned abroad.

We illustrate this unequal gender distribution with two boxplots, comparing the average distance of international assignments for men and women (see Figure 3). As the graphs clearly show, women cover less distance than men regardless of the distribution across the boxplots.

Additionally, one could argue that some diplomats may be inclined to accept distant postings at certain points in their careers but not at others. For instance, diplomats with young children—women in particular—may be more reluctant to take assignments far from home. Averages are a poor measure of such sequences because they smooth out and obscure the various phases and idiosyncratic sequences of a career path. Thus, to account for discontinuous patterns in diplomatic careers, we rely on a longitudinal sequence analysis, which is the most effective method for identifying and comparing sequence patterns.

We therefore applied a sequence analysis to the 600 diplomatic trajectories in our database, based on four categories of distances: home, very close to home (0–1800 km), far from home (1800–6800 km), and very far from home (more than 6800 km). We restricted the analysis to the first 20 years of all careers to obtain sequences of the same length. We then conducted a classification analysis of all sequences to group together career paths that resemble each other most closely. This led us to identify seven distinct types of career paths<sup>13</sup> (see Figure 4).

Groups 1 and 2 comprise 45% of the diplomats in the database. Most of them remain posted at home (Group 2, only 6 years abroad and 817 km on average) or very close to home (Group 1, 12 years abroad and 987 km on average): in both groups, women are clearly in the majority (60%). One should remember that our sample contains 50% women. Therefore, any higher percentage in a group indicates an overrepresentation of women. As the results show, women are most significantly overrepresented in the first two groups of diplomats that take almost no assignment abroad.

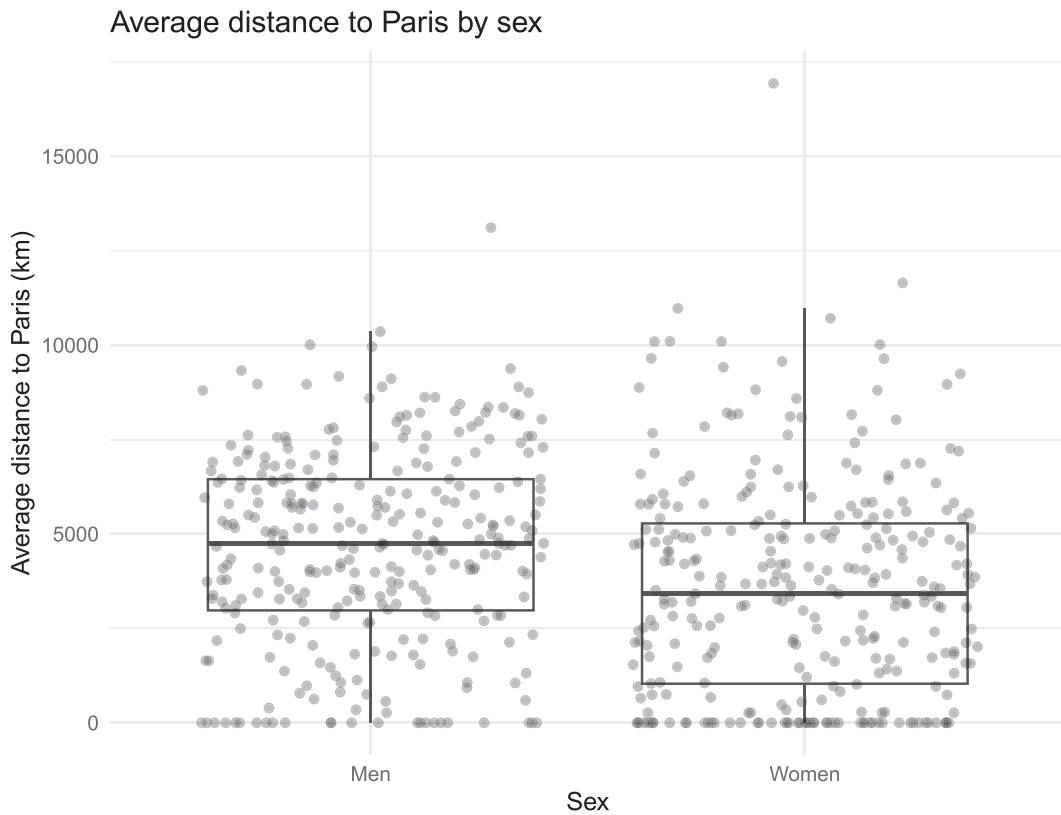


FIGURE 3 | Boxplots of the average distance to Paris covered by women and men in each diplomatic assignment abroad, in kilometers<sup>12</sup>.

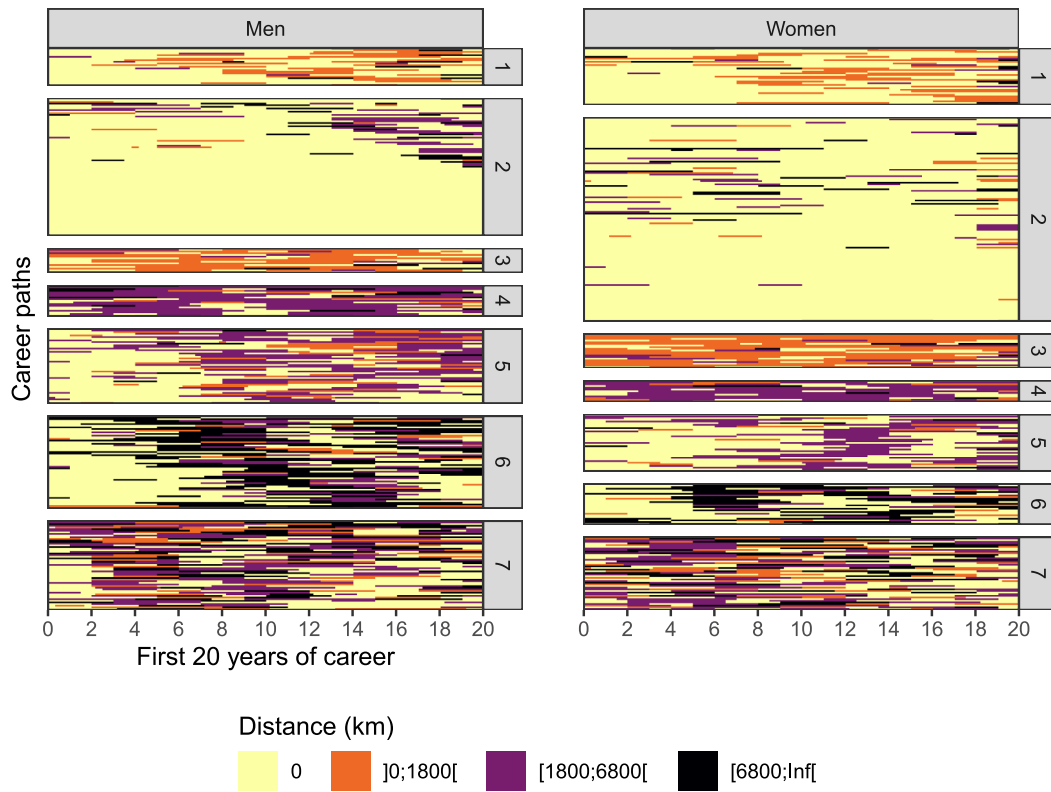


FIGURE 4 | Classification of career paths sequences of 600 French diplomats employed in 2015, according to the distance of international assignments from home. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

Groups 3, 4, and 5 comprise 25% of all individuals in the database. These diplomats are frequently posted abroad but to closer locations. Group 3 diplomats (6% of all diplomats, 23 years abroad, and 1599 km on average) are frequently assigned abroad, but to very close locations: again, this group has a large majority of 58% of women. In contrast, Group 4 (5% of all diplomats, 24 years abroad, and 3514 km on average) and Group 5 (14% of all diplomats, 15 years abroad, and 1988 km on average) are frequently assigned abroad to more distant locations: both have a minority of 41% and 43% of women. Finally, Group 6 (16 years abroad and 3865 km on average) and 7 (18 years abroad and 3279 km on average) comprise 30% of diplomats in the database. Group 6 diplomats are posted to the most distant locations: it has a minority of 30% of women, that is, the smallest percentage across all groups. Group 7 diplomats are frequently posted abroad to locations that are far or very far: it has a minority of 45% of women (see Table 1).

Consequently, women are overrepresented in the three groups of diplomats who either travel infrequently abroad or remain assigned to positions close to home. Moreover, 42% of all women (against 28% of all men) are Group 2 diplomats who are almost never posted abroad. Conversely, only 8% of all women (against 19% of all men) are Group 6 diplomats who travel to the most distant locations. We can conclude that women are overrepresented among diplomats who never travel throughout their careers. In addition, women are underrepresented among diplomats who are frequently assigned to more distant locations.<sup>15</sup>

This aversion to distance can likely be attributed to the greater constraints faced by female diplomats, such as a spouse's reluctance to relocate or relinquish their career, the necessity of relying on a nearby family network for child-rearing, or the preference to place children in schools relatively close to their home country. Additionally, it is possible that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, perhaps unconsciously, offers fewer overseas positions to female diplomats and, when it does, tends to propose assignments that are closer to home. These two explanations are likely complementary. In any case, these findings alone underscore the extent to which diplomatic assignment practices are gendered in a sample where the number of female and male diplomats is purposely made equivalent.

### 5.3 | (Chance of) Promotion Hypotheses

Last, we want to understand how the positions diplomats hold within their organization could influence their relationship to time and distance. Diplomats aspiring to managerial roles may be more inclined to undertake international assignments to enhance their chances of climbing up the hierarchy within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We called this the (chance of) promotion effect and wanted to verify whether it influences our findings. In our database, 28% of diplomats accessed high-ranking positions during their careers. Women were twice less likely than men to access these positions: 16.7% of women ( $n = 50$ ) versus 38.3% of men ( $n = 115$ ) were high-ranking diplomats. This is a striking 21.5% point difference.<sup>16</sup>

We needed to dissociate gender and promotion effects. Low-ranking female diplomats could make up the majority of those who tend to avoid international assignments and distant postings. On the contrary, high-ranking female diplomats could undertake as many international assignments as their male counterparts and cover the same distance as them. Part of this reasoning is validated by our findings. We calculated that high-ranking female diplomats cover a total distance of 55,360 km throughout their careers. This is 7686 km more than low-ranking female diplomats.

However, differences between men and women remain highly significant. High-ranking female diplomats travel 19,398 km less than their male counterparts, who cover 74,758 km. They also travel 19,533 km less than low-ranking male diplomats. In addition, one should note that the promotion effect runs in opposite directions for men and women: while low-ranking female diplomats cover the least distance throughout their careers, that is, 47,674 km, their male counterparts actually cover the most, that is, 75,893 km (see Figure 5). This could be attributed to the fact that very remote locations are of lesser diplomatic importance for the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and are therefore assigned to low-ranking diplomats.

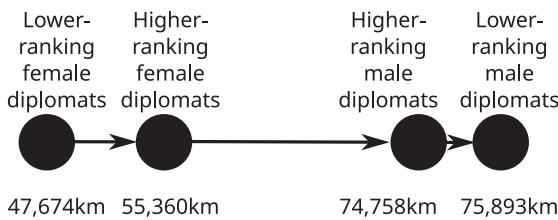
We also wanted to account for variations within diplomatic careers. We assumed that each career has different sequence patterns and that, for example, some diplomats may be inclined

**TABLE 1** | Classification of career paths sequences: group characteristics<sup>14</sup>.

Group #	No. of diplomats	No. of men	No. of women	% of women	Average distance* (km)	Average no. of years abroad*
1	58	23	35	60%	987	12
2	211	85	126	60%	817	6
3	36	15	21	58%	1599	23
4	32	19	13	41%	3514	24
5	81	46	35	43%	1988	15
6	82	57	25	30%	3865	16
7	100	55	45	45%	3279	18
Total	600	300	300	50%	2009	13

to accept distant postings at certain points in their careers but not at others. Does the (chance of) promotion influence such patterns? To answer this, we revisited our sequence analysis on diplomatic career paths over 20 years. We observed that the 600 diplomats are distributed differently across the seven identified groups, whether they are men or women, and whether or not they have access to high-ranking positions.

High-ranking male diplomats are overrepresented in Group 5, among diplomats who are frequently assigned abroad to quite distant locations. High-ranking female diplomats are slightly overrepresented in Group 7, among diplomats who travel frequently to locations that can be far and very far. They also feature prominently in Group 5, which includes diplomats who frequently travel medium distances. But they are mostly overrepresented in Group 1, among diplomats who sometimes go abroad but not very far. Low-ranking women are overwhelmingly overrepresented in Group 2 diplomats who almost never travel.



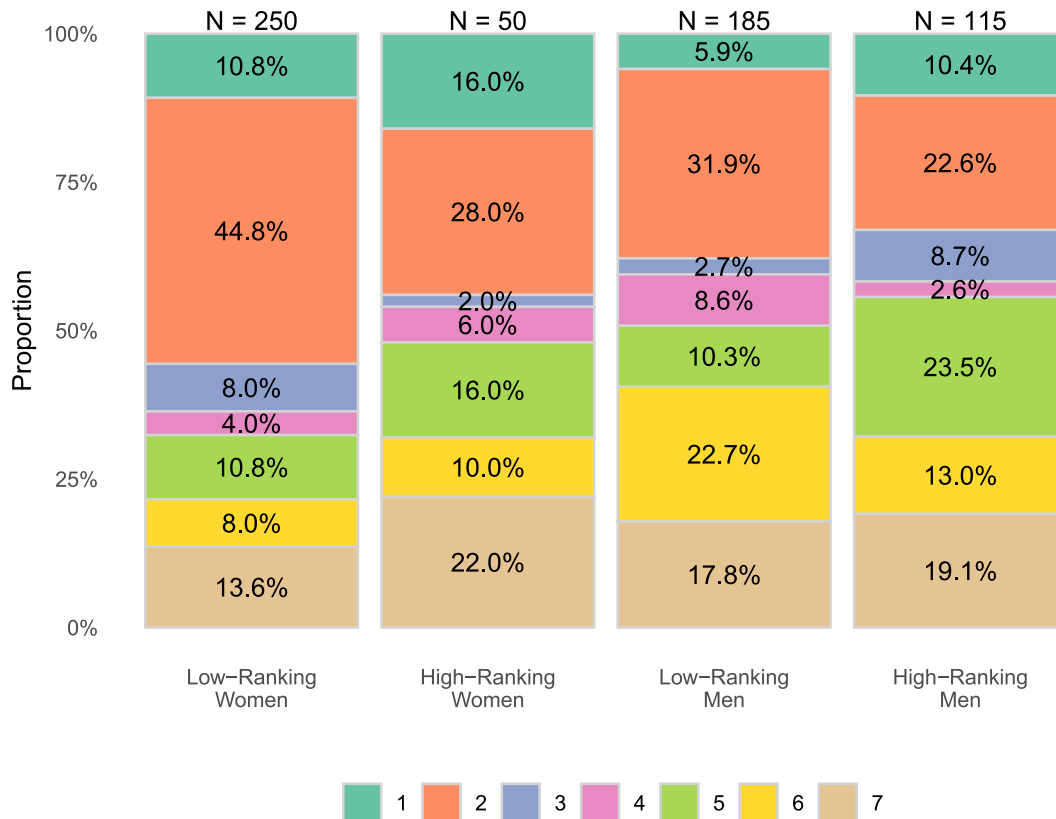
**FIGURE 5** | Average distance to Paris covered by low-ranking and high-ranking women and men in total during their career<sup>17</sup>.

Conversely, low-ranking men are overrepresented in Group 6 diplomats who cover the most distance (see Figure 6.).

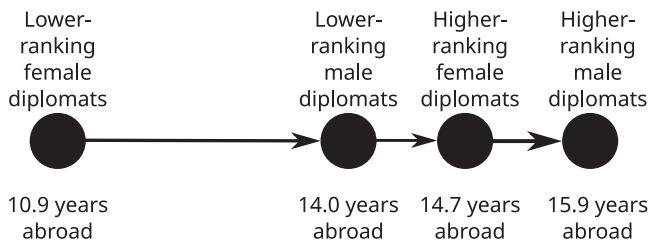
The sequence analysis thus confirms earlier findings: low-ranking female diplomats undertake very few or no international assignments, while their male counterparts do the exact opposite and take on the most distant ones. By contrast, all high-ranking diplomats tend to be posted to medium-range locations, with female diplomats assigned closer to home than their male counterparts. Those locations are likely the most sought-after destinations for advancing a career in diplomacy. Besides, being a high-ranking diplomat may protect against very remote and challenging locations.

The (chance of) promotion has also an effect on the time spent abroad. We calculate that high-ranking female diplomats spend 14.7 years abroad over the course of their careers. This is 3.8 years more than low-ranking female diplomats (10.9 years in-career)—a very consequential gap that is equivalent to at least one international assignment.

Contrary to our findings about the distance covered, it appears that the promotion effect outweighs the gender effect: high-ranking women spend 1.2 years less in international assignments than high-ranking men (15.9 years abroad). But they spend 0.7 more years abroad than low-ranking male diplomats (14 years abroad). As a result, it is primarily low-ranking female diplomats who spend the least amount of time abroad in international assignments (see Figure 7.).



**FIGURE 6** | Distribution of low-ranking/high-ranking female and male diplomats across the 7 classification analysis groups<sup>18</sup>. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]



**FIGURE 7** | Length of career abroad for low-ranking/high-ranking female and male diplomats, in years<sup>19</sup>.

## 6 | Discussion

### 6.1 | Gender Norms In Diplomatic Assignments

Our findings unveil striking disparities between diplomatic assignments, in relation to time and distance: female diplomats spend less time abroad than their male counterparts over the course of their careers, stay longer in each assignment, and are posted closer to home—findings that hold true even among high-ranking female diplomats. We assume from the literature that such disparities result from a combination of individual constraints and organizational decisions, both deeply structured by gender norms.

First, a greater hesitancy among female diplomats to embark on international assignments, to venture to more remote destinations, and to remain abroad for extended periods of time may be attributed to constraints already well documented in the literature, such as the reluctance of male partners to follow their partners abroad or higher expectations regarding family involvement. Female diplomats may favor closer locations to facilitate the relocation of their families or even avoid relocation entirely and opt instead for regular visits back home. They may also tend to apply for postings where their partners have more opportunities—or even just the right—to find employment. Given these constraints, they may particularly favor European countries. In contrast, male diplomats may be less concerned about their partners' employment prospects and thus display a greater willingness to accept more distant assignments.

Second, diplomatic studies have already demonstrated that male and female diplomats are not uniformly assigned across all regions of the world. For example, interviews with high-ranking female French diplomats reveal that “the only area where men and women admit that there is a difference between them is on the fact that women diplomats cannot be sent ‘anywhere’ (...) for example to certain African countries or certain Muslim countries” (Dalak 2021). In a context where many ministries of Foreign Affairs are striving to recruit more women and assign them abroad, diplomatic organizations may also opt to send more women to countries that are considered more favorable in terms of gender equality and that are easier to relocate to because they are closer to home.

This could partly explain why many French female diplomats undertake international assignments in Europe. European countries facilitate frequent round trips and provide opportunities for partners to find employment, thanks to a unified European job market. Diplomatic organizations also assign

more women to international organizations (Townes and Niklasson 2018), where they are more visible, as part of a public effort to promote gender equality on the international stage. Indeed, the gender turn literature shows that “the feminization of diplomacies has become in itself a way for states to take place in the international hierarchies addressing gender issues” (Townes 2012). In line with the UN’s “Women, Peace, and Security” agenda and alongside the gender mainstreaming policies of international organizations, many states have now adopted feminist foreign policies (Hudson and Eason 2019). France ranks prominently among the countries that have such a policy, and its foreign administration consistently updates action plans for its implementation (Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires étrangères 2024). This has led some authors to describe it as “hegemonic feminization,” where states “symbolically rank and evaluate each other based on their perceived performance on gender equality” (Zhukova 2023).

For instance, in 2020, according to our calculation, women represented 50% of French ambassadors leading permanent missions to major international organizations<sup>20</sup>—a marked contrast to their 28% representation among all French ambassadors and directors. A majority of those international organizations are located in Western Europe (Brussels, Geneva, Vienna, Rome, London, the Hague, and Paris) or the East Coast of North America (New York City, DC, and Montreal), making them, again, closer to home for French female diplomats.

### 6.2 | Key Limitations

Nonetheless, our work has several limitations that could be addressed in future studies. First, our findings are influenced by the French context, with its specific colonial history and international influence. French diplomacy remains notably active in its former colonies in North and West Africa and boasts an extensive network of consulates and embassies worldwide, reflecting its claim to universality. Additionally, France has several long-standing traditions: a strong presence in all international organizations, mediation in numerous international negotiations, and consular protection for all French citizens worldwide. Future research should verify if the same results hold in other contexts, for example, in countries that were not colonial powers or that disposed of a more limited diplomatic network. Such comparisons would also be instrumental in understanding how national backgrounds influence how diplomats move abroad and what gendered expectations are involved in diplomatic assignments.

Second, while distance and time are straightforward variables, they also simplify the assignment practices under examination. Sometimes, the status or the nature of an international assignment prevails over distance considerations. For example, the first French female ambassadors were appointed to countries of lesser diplomatic importance but sometimes in very distant locations: Panama, Luxembourg, and Bulgaria in the early 1970s for France (Denéchère 2003). Similarly, the first female British ambassador was appointed to Sri Lanka in 1974 (McCarthy 2015). In the French diplomatic service, ambassadorial positions in the most strategic countries are still predominantly

held by men, regardless of location. The literature also shows that a gender division of labor assigns “soft” policy areas to women—culture, development, and consular activities, while men are overrepresented in the “hard” fields of military and finance (Aggestam and Towns 2018, 2019; Conley Tyler, Blizzard, and Crane 2014). Consequently, distance and time alone are insufficient to capture the full complexity of gendered diplomatic assignments.

Third, our research does not allow an exploration of the differences between generations or determine whether the gender disparities we observe are diminishing. One possible avenue to explore is the effect of a new generation of individuals for whom transnational mobility feels far more natural than it did for the previous generation. Many may have grown up in various countries, in an era of heightened transnational mobility. Called “third culture kids” because they live in “the same mobile international lifestyle”, they have “accompanied parent(s) into a country that is different from at least one of the parent’s passport country(ies) due to a parent’s choice of work or advanced training” (Tan, Wang, and Cottrell 2021, 82). They are often better prepared than the previous generation of expatriates and more eager to adapt and engage with the host country when they themselves become expatriates (Lauring, Guttormsen, and McNulty 2019). One could question the impact of such a new generation among expatriates and diplomats, and how their unique backgrounds could remodel gendered diplomatic practices.

Fourth, our data does not contain precise information on the marital and family status of diplomats, although this data would shed some precious light on career sequences. We know that work–family dynamics have a greater impact on women’s willingness to accept international assignments (Dupuis, Haines III, and Saba 2008). In particular, educational opportunities for children are pivotal (Kim and Froese 2012). Lesser time spent abroad or shorter distances to international assignments are likely to be correlated with having a partner or children. We would also need more precise timing, as certain periods, like the transition to college, are critical in the emotional development of kids. Relocating during such transitions can be very detrimental and cause “adjustment struggles” that “range from navigating activities of daily living, to difficulty in forming friendships or even being bullied” (Tan, Wang, and Cottrell 2021, 92). One could verify if such critical periods retain diplomats at home or closer to home.

Finally, our research restricts the concept of “feminization” to its literal definition, “*a process in which more and more women become involved in an activity where there are traditionally more men*” (according to the Cambridge Dictionary). We are aware that this is a narrow definition for the purpose of our quantitative project and that this analysis considers only sex, thereby excluding gender-diverse individuals. This concept of feminization should be questioned and broadened. For example, the gender turn in diplomatic studies scrutinizes gendered representations of diplomats (Towns 2020) or gender performances in diplomacy (Neumann 2008). As Standfield (2020, 149) notes, “when diplomats represented their country, they not only represented policy positions but also virile masculinity”: diplomatic

competence remains framed in masculine terms and homosociality still permeates diplomatic activities (Standfield 2020, 2022). Such gender performances have also been analyzed in international negotiations. For example, female leaders are more likely to escalate a dispute or act “tougher” to make credible threats (Reiter 2015; Barnes and O’Brien 2018; Schwartz and Blair 2020; Post and Sen 2020). Conversely, female diplomats seem to trigger “chivalry reactions” from male colleagues in international negotiations, if they behave in a stereotypically vulnerable way (Naurin, Naurin, and Alexander 2019). Future research could thus complement quantitative analyses on diplomatic assignment practices by a more qualitative investigation of gender performances in overseas assignments.

## 7 | Conclusion

As the number of women has surged in many diplomatic services, many female diplomats have increasingly become primary agents of expatriation. This is unprecedented. In expatriation studies, women either stay behind the scenes due to a historic male monopoly on transnational mobility or remain confined to the role of “trailing spouse”, sacrificing their ambitions to advance their partner’s career. In a new context in which the number of women diplomats is increasing, the question is whether gender disparities persist in international career paths.

To answer this question we used diplomatic careers as a magnifying glass, because diplomatic assignments showcase an extreme case of expatriation known as “international repeated geographical mobility” (Levitan 2019). We assumed that the practices used to assign diplomats abroad followed gendered patterns and we redefined them as “gendered diplomatic practices” (Standfield 2020). While the gender turn in diplomacy has addressed glass ceiling issues and documented historic discriminations against women (Aggestam and Towns 2017), it has not yet fully examined how the diplomatic career paths of men and women differ intrinsically. Who is sent where, and for how long? We answer this question quantitatively from a gender perspective by comparing the career paths of a large sample of male and female diplomats.

Based on an original sample of 600 male and female French diplomats, we show that male and female diplomats’ career paths diverge on two key aspects: time and distance. We find that women spend on average 11.4 years abroad versus 14.7 years for men. Women are five times more likely to take leave during their careers and twice as likely to avoid all international assignments. Furthermore, women spend at least one more year than men in each posting (4.3 years on average vs. 2.9 years), mostly back home in France, probably to minimize the frequency of their foreign assignments.

We also find that men tend to travel 1.3 times further from home than women, on average, for each international assignment. Throughout their entire careers, we also find men cover on average 26,503 km more than women (75,458 km vs. 48,955 km). A sequence analysis further underscores these disparities, with women predominantly concentrated in groups characterized by

little or no international travel, while men feature prominently in groups that venture to very distant locations.

Controlling for chances of promotion allows us to qualify these results. First, we observe that women are twice less likely to access high-ranking positions (16.7% vs. 38.3% of men). Second, we observe that high-ranking female diplomats cover more distance than low-ranking ones (55,360 km vs. 47,674 km) and spend much more time abroad than them (14.7 vs. 10.9 years). However, they still cover much less distance than their male peers (74,758 km), while low-ranking male diplomats are the ones posted to the most distant locations (75,893 km). High-ranking female diplomats appear to spend more time abroad than their male peers (14 years) but less than low-ranking male diplomats (15.9 years): low-ranking female diplomats are the ones who spend, by far, the least time abroad.

These disparities between male and female diplomat's career paths could be the combined result of personal choices and organizational decisions, both constrained by gender norms ingrained in the very fabric of diplomatic careers. Our findings should be generalized beyond the specific French context. But they are a promising avenue to explore the gender of transnational mobility and to address gender disparities across all diplomatic practices.

Last, they open new perspectives and carry a range of policy implications. First, one should not forget the managerial and financial consequences of our findings for diplomatic administrations. Gender disparities have tangible effects on the salaries, diplomatic experience, and career prospects of female diplomats because a large part of a diplomat's competence and wages come from international assignments. Spending more time abroad and undertaking diverse postings allows diplomats to build valuable international experience. Expatriation bonuses, which are usually higher in more distant locations, contribute substantially to a diplomat's income throughout their career. However, since female diplomats spend less time abroad and are assigned to closer destinations, they accumulate less experience and earn lower wages over the course of their careers—regardless of other gender barriers such as the glass ceiling.

Second, such practices have regional consequences. In our case, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs posts more female diplomats to other European countries. That may lead to a strengthening of gender equality norms across Europe, through diplomatic representation. When diplomatic organizations send more female diplomats to neighboring countries that defend gender equality, they foster and consolidate a regional dynamic toward more gender equality. Such a dynamic could also be replicated in other regions where greater progress toward gender equality is still needed.

Finally, international assignment practices have an impact on the structure of diplomatic representation abroad. Not only do male diplomats still form a majority of almost all diplomatic corps but male diplomats also tend to spend more time abroad during their careers. This means that even parity in the recruitment of male and female diplomats would not lead, in itself, to gender parity in foreign postings. In a context where issues of gender equality are increasingly used as an evaluation

criterion between states, the number of women in diplomatic work as well as the number of female diplomats posted abroad has gained strategic importance. Diplomatic administrations are therefore torn between a desire to demonstrate their commitment to gender equality on the international stage by making female diplomats more visible, and the persistent reality of gender-based disparities in recruitment, promotion to the most prestigious roles and—our focus in this paper—overseas postings. While this instrumentalization of female diplomats should raise concerns, our findings could also reshape assignment practices by foreign affairs administrations seeking to increase the presence of women in their diplomatic corps abroad.

## Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The authors would like to thank the journal's three anonymous reviewers for their precious insights, Anton Perdoncin and Elsa Favier for preliminary discussions on the research project as well as Benjamin Waterhouse for proofreading the manuscript.

<sup>2</sup> The authors would like to thank research assistants Lisa Campano and Romain Jobert for their help gathering the data.

<sup>3</sup> We used the website <https://www.distance.to> that references flying distances between cities around the world.

<sup>4</sup> Wilcoxon rank-sum test:  $p$ -value < 0.001. We use the Wilcoxon test, a nonparametric test that allows us to test whether two distributions are significantly different when we cannot assume that they are normal. The test shows that the differences we observed are highly significant.

<sup>5</sup> Wilcoxon rank-sum test:  $p$ -value < 0.001.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Fisher's exact test:  $p$ -value < 0.001, odds ratio: 5.3. We apply Fisher's exact test for  $2 \times 2$  tables, as in this instance where we cross the gender variable (male/female) with the leave variable (yes/no). The test shows that the differences we observed are highly significant.

<sup>10</sup> Fisher's exact test (see above):  $p$ -value < 0.001, odds ratio: 2.5.

<sup>11</sup> Wilcoxon rank-sum test (see above): 0.17.

<sup>12</sup> Wilcoxon rank-sum test:  $p$ -value < 0.001.

<sup>13</sup> According to the dendrogram of the sequence analysis (see Appendix A: Figure A1), we could have reduced this to 4 groups by not distinguishing between Group 1 and 2, Group 4 and 5, and Group 6 and 7. However, Group 2 is very distinct from Group 1, as it includes diplomats who rarely go abroad, whereas those in Group 1 regularly travel but only to nearby destinations. Additionally, it was crucial to distinguish between Group 6 and Group 7, as their percentage of women differs by 15 points. Group 5 is also a much more common career path for high-ranking male diplomats while Group 4 is more common for low-ranking male diplomats.

<sup>14</sup> Pearson's chi-squared test:  $p$ -value < 0.001; Cramér's  $V = 0.214$ ; Kruskal-Wallis\*:  $p$ -value < 0.001. We use the Chi-squared test of independence between two qualitative variables (here, sex and sequence group). We also use Cramér's  $V$  test, which measures the strength of the relationship between two qualitative variables (i.e., size effect). The differences we observe are highly significant with a moderate size of effect. We finally use the Kruskal-Wallis test, a generalization of the nonparametric Wilcoxon rank-sum test, which allows us to check

whether several distributions are significantly different without assuming normal distributions. Here, we test the independence between sex and average distance, as well as between sex and the average number of years abroad. Both are highly significant.

<sup>15</sup> We also conducted a polytomous ordinal logistic regression that shows that men are 2.15 times more likely than women to progress to a more distant category, controlling for managerial positions (see Appendix A: Table A1).

<sup>16</sup> Fisher's exact test (see above):  $p$ -value < 0.001, odds ratio = 3.1.

<sup>17</sup> Kruskal–Wallis rank sum test:  $p$ -value < 0.001.

<sup>18</sup> Pearson's chi-squared test:  $p$ -value < 0.001; Cramér's  $V$  = 0.189. The chi-squared test of independence and Cramér's  $V$  test (see above) both show that the observed differences are highly significant. The table of residuals from the chi-squared test confirms that low-ranking female diplomats are underrepresented in Group 6, that low-ranking male diplomats are overrepresented in Group 6, and that high-ranking male diplomats are underrepresented in Group 2 and overrepresented in Group 5 (see Appendix A: Table A2)

<sup>19</sup> Kruskal–Wallis rank sum test:  $p$ -value < 0.001.

<sup>20</sup> This list includes the permanent missions to the UN in New York City, Vienna, Geneva and Nairobi, the UNESCO, the OECD, the EU, the Council of Europe, the WEU, the NATO, the FAO, the OSCE, the UNODA, the ICAO, and the IMO (16 positions).

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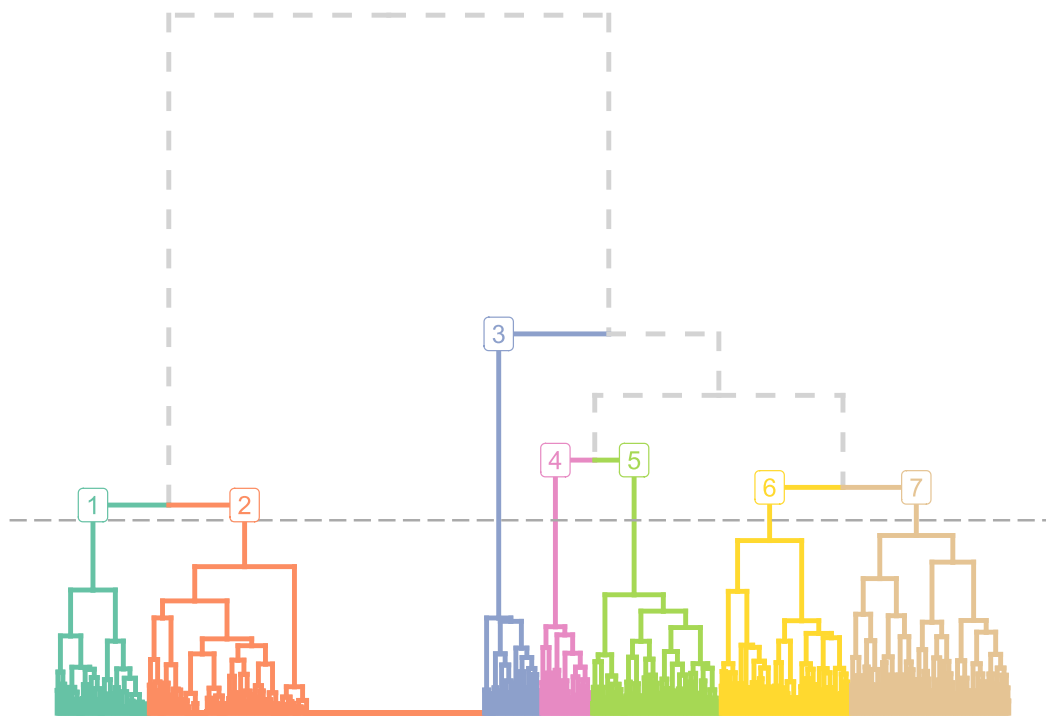
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## Appendix A

### Sequence analysis dendrogram of the career paths

Using a hierarchical analysis—agglomerative nesting (agnes) with Ward’s method—this dendrogram visually represents the possible partitioning clustering options based on the desired number of clusters and the acceptable level of inertia loss (height). The dendrogram indicates that two clusters (associated with a significant loss of inertia), four clusters (with a minor loss), or seven clusters (also with a minor loss) are viable options. We made the decision to retain seven clusters, as two clusters would have been overly simplistic for our analysis, and four clusters would not have been sufficiently nuanced to capture the gendered disparities in career paths.



**FIGURE A1** | Sequence analysis dendrogram of the career paths of 600 French diplomats employed in 2015, based on the distance of international assignments from home. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

**Ordered polytomous logistic regression**

This table displays the results of a polytomous ordinal logistic regression on the probability of moving to more distant categories (0–1800 km, 1800–4000 km, 4000–6800 km and more than 6800 km). When controlling for managerial positions, the results indicate that men are 2.15 times more likely than women to move to a more distant category.

**TABLE A1** | Ordered polytomous logistic regression on the probability of moving to more distant categories for male (vs. female) and high-ranking (vs. low-ranking) diplomats.

Characteristic	Odds ratio	95% Confidence interval	p-value
0–1800 km	0.21		< 0.001
1800–4000 km	0.47		< 0.001
4000–6800 km	1.37		0.007
+ 6800 km	7.76		< 0.001
Male (vs. female)	2.15	1.59–2.91	< 0.001
High-ranking (vs. low-ranking)	1.10	0.80–1.51	0.57

Note: The effect of being a high-ranking diplomat on moving to more distant categories is not significant because the relationship between the two variables is not linear (see above).

### Residuals from the chi-squared test

The following table displays the residuals from the Chi-squared test of independence between sex and managerial position and sequence group. The magnitude of these residuals in absolute terms indicates the extent to which there is deviation from independence. The sign indicates the direction of over- or under-representation.

**TABLE A2** | Table of residuals from the Chi-squared test.

	<b>Group 1</b>	<b>Group 2</b>	<b>Group 3</b>	<b>Group 4</b>	<b>Group 5</b>	<b>Group 6</b>	<b>Group 7</b>
Low-ranking female	0.58	<b>2.57</b>	1.29	- 0.91	- 1.16	- <b>2.42</b>	- 1.19
High-ranking female	1.44	- 0.85	- 1.15	0.20	0.48	- 0.70	0.92
Low-ranking male	- 1.63	- 0.75	- 1.83	1.95	- 1.20	<b>3.32</b>	0.39
High-ranking male	0.26	- <b>2.27</b>	1.18	- 1.27	<b>2.91</b>	- 0.18	0.65

Note: The categories where individuals are over- or under-represented are indicated in bold.