



DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE  
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# GENDER OR POWER STATUS?

A qualitative study of the challenges faced by  
Swedish female diplomats in gender-conservative  
countries

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## Abstract

Throughout history, diplomacy has been male-dominated. Despite advancements regarding women's inclusion in diplomacy, female diplomats continue to face significant challenges. According to previous literature, female diplomats face challenges such as networking, hierarchies and stereotypes. This thesis aims to examine how women in diplomacy perceive and develop strategies to navigate these gender-related challenges. To this aim, six qualitative interviews were conducted with Swedish female diplomats working in gender-conservative states. This is because I expect gender-related challenges to be the most visible in states with a low levels of gender equality. The theoretical approach includes how gender intersects with other factors, in this thesis small states. I will be analysing if the perceived challenges have the source of the interviewees being female in a gender-conservative country or their country of representation being a small state. The results show that Swedish female diplomats face two types of challenges: gender-related challenges linked to their gender-conservative host country and challenges because their country of representation is a small state. However, the two different challenges are perceived in various amounts. Some diplomats described gender-related challenges as more dominant while others described challenges representing a small state more dominant. To navigate these challenges, especially gender-related ones, the interviewees have developed strategies such as using their motherhood and marriage to gain effectiveness.

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# 1. Introduction

Diplomacy can be defined as a representation of governments towards the outside world (Pouliot and Cornut, 2015, p. 299). The diplomatic field and the diplomatic corps have throughout history been male-dominated (Towns, 2022a, p. 347). Although the number of women in diplomacy has increased since the first female diplomats entered the field, there is still a clear global underrepresentation of women in diplomacy today (Niklasson and Towns, 2023b).

Alongside the number of women in diplomacy increasing, the research field of women in diplomacy has evolved. Previous literature employs both qualitative and quantitative methods (e.g. Niklasson, 2020; Niklasson and Towns, 2023). However, I have not found studies that would look at the experience and challenges faced by diplomats holistically. We only know the experiences of Swedish diplomats by asking about those related to gender, and not in a comparative way.

What this thesis wants to discover is how gender in diplomacy matters in gender-conservative contexts. This thesis also wants to discover how gender may not be the only factor that is important in the field of diplomacy. We do not know from the existing studies how gender intersects with other factors that may be important for a diplomat's efficiency. Gender may not be the only factor that can have an impact. This thesis theoretical approach has therefore focused on how the factor of small states and gender intersect in diplomacy. That is because gender equality champions are also often small states, the top five in the Global Gender Gap Index include the small states of Iceland, New Zealand, Sweden, Norway and Finland (*Global Gender Gap Report 2024*, 2024, p. 12). Also, more female diplomats come from these countries than others (Niklasson and Towns, 2023b). These female diplomats will sometimes be placed in a gender-conservative country, such as Algeria and Egypt. They will have to represent their states in male-dominated patriarchal environments and therefore may face challenges due to their gender. This speaks to why these factors are important to study together.

The aim of this thesis is to get a better understanding of Swedish female diplomats perceptions and experiences working in a gender-conservative country. Previous literature has provided great knowledge regarding gender-specific challenges female diplomats may experience. However, it is still unclear how Swedish female diplomats perceive and use strategies to handle these established challenges in gender-conservative environments. Specifically, how they perceive these challenges in gender-conservative countries. Therefore, this thesis will answer two research questions:

- How do Swedish female diplomats perceive gender-specific challenges in gender-conservative countries?
- How do Swedish female diplomats use strategies to navigate gender-specific challenges in gender-conservative countries?

To answer the research questions this thesis has conducted six qualitative interviews with Swedish female diplomats and ambassadors working in gender-conservative countries. The key takeaway is that Swedish female diplomats face specific gender-related challenges, some of which are linked to their gender-conservative host country. To navigate these challenges the interviewees have developed strategies, such as using their marriage or motherhood to get

on the right side of local people and also as an extra layer of security. Findings also indicate that there are challenges representing a small country. Both sometimes impacting their professional role negatively. Therefore, one of the main findings is that gender in diplomacy, especially in gender-conservative states, should be viewed together with other factors.

This study is relevant to European studies because equality is a discussion and phenomenon that has been studied in several other European countries. The EU itself has also committed to equality and making the EU a union of equality (*Gender equality strategy - European Commission*). When aiming for equality one must acknowledge conservative gender norms in countries that are hosting their diplomats, especially countries outside of Europe. With Sweden often being referred to as a role model in the matter of equality, it is one of the cases one may look at to better understand it. For that reason, Sweden is in this thesis a representative of gender-progressive states. This case also helps us understand relations between Europe and other, often more conservative, regions. Many European states and the EU itself are committed to strengthening gender equality in diplomacy. On the other hand, they also have to consider maintaining good relations with other countries and being effective in promoting their interests.

This structure of this thesis is as follows: a detailed presentation of previous research and a theoretical approach relevant to its aim and research questions. Then, the method and material will be discussed and presented which will be followed by a presentation and discussion of the results. Finally, conclusions will take place.

## 2. Previous research and theoretical approach

In the following chapter, previous literature on the research field will be presented. The main part will contain previous literature on challenges faced by women in diplomacy and leadership. The challenges described are what have been used as material in the interviews to be able to answer this thesis research questions and aim. In the second part of this chapter, the theoretical approach will be presented and discussed. The theoretical approach is a central part of this thesis analysis.

### 2. 1. Previous research

#### 2.1.1. History of women in diplomacy

Women have been involved in diplomacy for a long time, but not always in the official role as a diplomat. An example of this is in Canada, where women have worked in Global Affairs since its opening in 1909. (Library of Parliament, 2024). In the beginning, the women had positions of secretaries or clerks. With women not having access to the position of a diplomat because of rules prohibiting them (*Ground-breaking research on women in diplomacy / Knut and Alice Wallenberg Foundation, 2021*), being a wife to male diplomats has instead been a position set for women.

Diplomatic wives have had a great impact on diplomacy (Wood, 2005, p. 143). The article by Wood studied diplomatic wives in the American Foreign Service. In which it is stated that the wives enabled and ensured the smooth completion of operations of American missions. They did this in the form of social obligations and domestic duties, performed without payment. The domestic qualities and social skills the diplomatic wives possessed have been used as an effective tool, enhancing, in the case of America, their representation abroad (Wood, 2007, p. 530). Diplomatic wives could access contacts and information in the local community and contributed to their diplomatic husband's promotion assessments. This shows how diplomatic wives have been an important part of diplomacy throughout history.

It has varied internationally how and when the discussion of sending female diplomats started. The discussion was brought up for example in England in 1933 and was met with negative reactions (Niklasson, 2020, p. 14). It was believed that the female gender would limit female diplomats access to informal male networks and public officials. It was not until between the 1920s and 1950s that bans on women in diplomatic service started to be lifted (Kreft, Niklasson and Towns, 2022, p. 280). Though it did not include all women, married women were still banned. The ban on married women had a stronghold until it began to be lifted in the 1970s. Continuing, literature has found that there is still today a higher likelihood for male ambassadors to be married in comparison to female ambassadors (Calin and Buterbaugh, 2019, p. 218).

The number of female diplomats has increased since the first female diplomats entered the diplomatic field (Kozielska and Smith, 2024, p. 10). Thus, the legacy of exclusion still exists and can take the form of underrepresentation. Underrepresentation can be seen in the number of female diplomats in the world, data shows that it remains a big variation in which countries appoint them (Niklasson and Towns, 2023b). The data called the GenDip dataset, shows a big

variation in which countries appoint female diplomats and ambassadors. In 2021 there were 21% of the world's ambassadors being women, with a big regional variation (*More female diplomats in the world today* | University of Gothenburg, 2023).

In the same discussion, there is also a big variation regarding which countries host the female ambassadors (Jacob, Scherpereel and Adams, 2017, p. 782, 791). The authors analyse the gender-balanced-decision-making (GBDM) norm. A norm that for example includes women's participation in domestic and international political institutions. Countries that align well with the GBDM-norm, such as Canada and the US, tend to host a bigger number of female ambassadors in comparison to countries that do not align with GBDM, such as Russia and China. The variation in which countries that host female ambassadors can also be viewed in the GenDip dataset (Niklasson and Towns, 2023b).

### **2.1.2. Challenges and barriers faced by women in leadership and diplomacy**

There are several barriers and challenges that women in leadership face, these challenges can also be applied to women in diplomacy. Hoyt (2010) researches the limits women in leadership face in order to be seen as effective. The study uses the term glass ceilings, a term originally created by the two reporters Hymowitz and Schellhardt in 1986 (p. 485). Glass ceilings or glass walls represent unseen barriers that can potentially prevent women from reaching top leadership roles. A criteria for a glass ceiling have in previous literature been described as “*a glass ceiling inequality represents a gender or racial difference that is not explained by other job-relevant characteristics of the employee*” (Cotter *et al.*, 2001, p. 657). The challenge of representation is related to the terms glass ceilings and glass walls, being the first in a position means having to break these glass ceilings (Kozielska and Smith, 2024, pp. 11-14). In a practical example, glass ceilings can be seen in ambassadorial appointments, where men to a higher extent get appointed to high-status ambassadorships in comparison to women.

Female leaders will also face barriers when it comes to stereotypes (Hoyt, 2010, pp. 489-490). Due to negative stereotypes and expectations that create a challenging stigma, female leaders face a harder time gaining respect and influence in their leadership roles. It can be stereotypes such as men are the ones that should take charge, and women should be the ones taking care of others.

Stereotypes can also be related to challenges female diplomats and ambassadors face regarding the way they dress (Towns, 2024, pp. 14–15). In the article, Towns conducted interviews with diplomats of both genders regarding appearance. Findings were that it is more important for female ambassadors to dress and look professionally. This is because female ambassadors need to show that they can manage the demands of an ambassador. A female ambassador will have to manage both appearing professionally and presenting “femininity”. The findings showed that female ambassadors dedicated almost twice the time on appearance as their male colleagues (p. 20). The female ambassadors also experienced feelings of insecurity and stress regarding the diplomatic appearance standard.

Stereotypes and informal rules are not always perceived as a negative challenge for female diplomats. In Niklasson's conducted interviews with Swedish diplomats, one diplomat pointed

out that “*female diplomats may draw more attention by the way they dress*” (Niklasson, 2020, p. 26). The interviewees describe that being a female diplomat or ambassador can draw attention in a place where women ambassadors are scarce, something that instead could be an advantage. A stereotype regarding gentlemanly behaviour, one that can be expected in diplomacy, says that women should be prioritized. Which one diplomat pointed out may give female diplomats advantages, such as being granted meetings before their male colleagues.

Representation is a challenge for female diplomats, a finding from one study that conducted interviews with female diplomats from all over the world (Kozielska and Smith, 2024, pp. 13-14). The interviewees pointed out the importance of representation, with many of them being the first female in their post. Being the first female included having few role models to get help and advice from.

Women will face challenges of work-life balance, with women traditionally having more domestic responsibilities than men (Hoyt, 2010, p. 488). This uneven work-life balance can cause a conflict between the work and home for females, and end up having a negative impact on their career advancement (Kozielska and Smith, 2024, p. 11). This can especially have a negative impact on women in positions that demand being mobile, such as diplomats. A position that often includes long working days which makes the work-life balance even harder.

Another challenge for women in diplomacy is unequal and gendered hierarchies (Kozielska and Smith, 2024, p. 11). Unequal hierarchies could be a variation of challenges, for example stereotypes and informal rules (Hoyt, 2010, pp. 489–490; Blackmon, 2021, p. 181). Gendered hierarchies regarding private life still limit female ambassadors (Calin and Buterbaugh, 2019, p. 218). Significant findings show that male ambassadors are more likely to be married and have kids in comparison to female ambassadors. A finding that may be related to the ban on married women entering diplomacy that existed until the 1970s (Kreft, Niklasson and Towns, 2022).

Networking has in general been a challenge for female diplomats, which as described earlier was the topic of discussion in England in 1933 (Niklasson, 2020, p. 14). It was assumed that female diplomats were not going to have access to every type of relevant contact. This idea seems to have taken root in diplomacy because in interviews with diplomats of both genders, it has been shown that there are still tendencies to networking being a challenge for women in diplomacy today (Niklasson, 2020, p. 15).

In the previous study that conducted interviews with Swedish diplomats of both genders, the interviewees gave the message of gender being less important in comparison to the formal position as a representative of a country, regarding access to important contacts (Niklasson, 2020, p. 25). The same idea is confirmed by interviews in another article by Towns (Towns, 2022a, p. 358). Those interviewees also pointed out that female diplomats are treated as representatives of their country rather than by their gender.

### **2.1.3 A difference in postings: Where do the diplomats work?**

One aspect of women in diplomacy, and of equality in diplomacy, is where they are posted. Previous literature has found results that indicate that female ambassadors are less likely to hold high-status ambassadorships than their male counterparts (Towns and Niklasson, 2017). This can be argued that the challenges female ambassadors and diplomats face begin even before they start their work.

In the same article, Towns and Niklasson (2017, p. 532) found that female diplomats do not occupy the same amount of prestige positions in comparison to their counterparts. It is slightly easier for male ambassadors to be appointed to a top ten GDP-ranked country. At the same time, female ambassadors are appointed to a greater extent to countries that are not one of the 50 highest ranked GDP countries. It has also been found that female diplomats to a higher extent get appointed to countries with governments that have more respect for individual rights (Calin and Buterbaugh, 2019, pp. 218–219). The GenDip program at Gothenburg University has developed a dataset that provides insight into where Swedish female ambassadors are posted (Niklasson and Towns, 2023b). The dataset confirms what previous literature has found on the difference in where male and female ambassadors are sent.

Where a state sends its diplomats and ambassadors can reflect its commitment to gender equality (Jacob, Scherpereel and Adams, 2017, p. 787). Ambassadorial appointments can be described as symbolic, and whom a state appoint can send a message and signals to other states. Signals such as the states own values and how they appreciate the host states values. Diplomatic and ambassadorial appointments can therefore be summarized and described in the same way that flags represent their state, it is symbolic.

There is literature that has tried to explain and find reasons why there is a difference in postings (Niklasson, 2020). Niklasson writes that a possible explanation for the difference in postings is that female ambassadors are sent to countries that are considered gender equal (Niklasson, 2020, p. 16). This would mean a potential guarantee that the female ambassadors would receive good treatment and full access to a public life, which would also mean easier access to contacts and networking. Another reason why female diplomats to a lesser extent reach prestigious ambassador positions could be gender patterns of unpaid labour (Towns and Niklasson, 2017, p. 526). The authors highlight the fact that women do more unpaid household labour, which limits their ability to work overtime and reduces the number of hours they can dedicate to their work. Factors that all together may have a negative impact on female's opportunities for career advancement.

#### **2.1.4. Responses to gender-related challenges**

Female networks are a central part for some women in diplomacy (Towns, 2022a, p. 347). It has increased as the number of women in diplomacy has increased significantly. Female networks can be described as professional networks for female diplomats only and can be found all over the world. Towns describe them as “Lady Ambassador Groups” and “Networks of Women Ambassadors”.

The female diplomats and ambassadors who is part of a female network will meet regularly for different types of events and interactions (Niklasson, 2020, pp. 30–31; Towns, 2022a, p.

347). The meetings will have a conception of womanhood as a foundation and most often these networks do not include lower-level female diplomats. Except for hosting events, these networks provide female diplomats with access to contacts that they otherwise would not have. The female diplomats can provide each other with help and ideas that can be support for their careers (Kozielska and Smith, 2024, p. 12). It can create a sense of solidarity for one another, a diplomat states in a previous study (Towns, 2022a, pp. 356–357). These female networks can be argued to be a result of female diplomats throughout history not having the same access to important contacts as male diplomats, having female diplomats finding other ways (Niklasson, 2020, pp. 30, 31).

In one article conducting interviews with female diplomats, a discussion regarding the benefits of these women only networks takes place (Towns, 2022a). The question that arises is: why these separated women's only networks? The interviewees have a hard time answering why these females only networks are needed. In the articles results the interviewees say that they do not think of it that way, that it is instead a network with people who happens to be women (pp. 357-358). Because even though these female networks bring a lot of help to female diplomats, another article discusses the importance that female diplomats and ambassadors in these female networks continue to network with men as well (Niklasson, 2020, p. 33).

Another strategy female diplomats can use to respond to gender-related challenges is to be well prepared (Kozielska and Smith, 2024, pp. 14–15). Kozielska and Smith conducted interviews with international female diplomats, who responded that being well prepared can increase confidence and ability to speak their minds. Female diplomats will have to develop confidence regarding their knowledge, which can confound expectations and judgments. A female diplomat will have to show they are good at what they do to strengthen the female representation.

Another response to gender-related challenges can be to find leadership and mentorship (Kozielska and Smith, 2024, pp. 14–16). Finding mentorship in someone else, both women and men, can provide support and help in navigating for example gender-related challenges. It can also provide female diplomats with advice regarding progress to higher posts and the skills needed to reach them.

## 2.2 Theoretical approach

In this section, I will start with a theorization on gender-conservative states and how this thesis has operationalized the term. After that, the theoretical approach will be presented. This thesis has used a deductive strategy in the development of the chosen theoretical approach. Deductive strategy can be used in a qualitative analysis when studying individual cases as a test for general theories (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2014, p. 239). The theoretical approach should provide explanations for the findings in the conducted interviews and will be a part of the analytical framework presented in chapter 3.

### 2.2.1 Why gender-conservative states?

Why this thesis wants to investigate the perceptions of female diplomats on gender-related challenges specifically in gender-conservative states, is because I expect gender-related challenges to be the most visible and active in states with a low levels of gender equality. The international arena changes all the time and the same goes for gender equality (*Global Gender Gap Report 2024*, 2024). The global gender gap has narrowed by 0.1 percentage points when compared to the 2023 report, now being 68.6% (p. 10). Thus, the 2023 report contained 143 countries and the 2024 report contained 146, which is why the 2024 global gender gap score is still 68.5% closed. The statistics speak to how gender equality is always slowly changing.

How gender-conservative countries have been operationalized is by the gender quality index Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) (*Global Gender Gap Report 2024*, 2024, p. 10). The global average for 2024 was 0.685, which indicates that 68.5% of the gender gap has been closed. Therefore, countries with a score below the global average demonstrate larger disparities in gender equality and can be considered unequal.

## **2.2.2 How gender interacts with other factors in gender-conservative states**

Gender and diplomacy have been the focus of a lot of previous literature, some presented in the previous research section. Where I see a research gap is how gender interacts with other factors in gender-conservative states. I have not seen previous literature studying different factors together with gender in diplomacy. Therefore, this thesis theoretical approach aims to explain how gender intersects with the factor of small states in in diplomacy. Small states being an example of factors that gender may interact with in gender-conservative states.

## **2.2.3 Small states in diplomacy**

Small states are often operationalized by a population below 20 million (Thorhallsson, 2006b, p. 9), however there is no agreement on how a small state should be operationalized and can vary (Thorhallsson, 2006a, p. 652). Another description of small states is “*those states that are not great powers*”, which is also a common definition (p. 653). Small states in diplomacy can face challenges regarding their effectiveness in international politics (Thorhallsson, 2006b, pp. 27, 28). The international systems structure will influence perceptions of small states and their ability to act.

A challenge small countries may face in diplomacy is administrative capability (Thorhallsson, 2006b, p. 19). Administrative capability can refer to the states skills and possibilities in engaging in multilateral and bilateral negotiations. In diplomacy this can be shown by affecting the number of staff at their foreign services, resulting in a difference between states diplomatic resources. In a historical context, small EU countries such as Ireland and Greece, have encountered difficulties in conducting international activities and implementing EU legislation (p. 21).

In a study made on small states in the EU (Thorhallsson, 2006a, p. 659), a distinction is made on how small and large states exert influence within the EU. Small states tend to focus on promoting their own interests positively within the EU institutions. Due to limited

administrative resources, they cannot block decisions that do not directly affect them and primarily impact other states. Something that large states within the EU often do is that they systematically block decisions that benefit other states but do not align with their direct interests.

Economic size may result in small states having a harder time in the international community (Thorhallsson, 2006b, p. 23). In the case of Ireland, its economic size was in the article regarded as limited. This resulted in Ireland having a restricted ability to act in the international arena.

Previous literature on small states has focused on their vulnerability and capacity, with often the image of small states not having as much international power (Thorhallsson, 2006b, p. 9). Thus, in the case of Sweden it has been found that even though the country is a small state, Sweden has still not hesitated to contribute to the international area and their politicians believe that the contributions will be highly beneficial (Thorhallsson, 2006b, p. 26). In Sweden's first years in the European union, they could even be described as too ambitious. It is to be mentioned that the findings are from 2006 and the attitude of Sweden as a small state in the international community could have changed.

#### **2.2.4 Expected outcomes**

From the research on small states presented above, it is clear that gender may not be the only reason why the interviewees may experience challenges in their diplomatic and ambassadorial roles. For example challenges regarding networking, the factor causing it may be the interviewees country of representation. Sweden is a small state and does not have the same power and impact in comparison to bigger states, such as the U.S. For that reason, we should think differently about gender in diplomacy and look at both factors together.

Therefore, the theoretical approach this thesis will apply in its analysis and analytical framework, is regarding the source of the perceived challenges. Are the perceived challenges the interviewees describe because of their gender, being a female diplomat in a gender-conservative country? Or is it because of their country of representation, Sweden, being a small country?

There are in this thesis three expected outcomes based on the literature on gender-related challenges and the small states theory. The expectations are mutually exclusive:

- The interviewees describe gender-related challenges. The gender-related challenges are stronger because of their posting as a female diplomat in a gender-conservative state. They have developed new strategies to navigate these gender-related challenges.
- The interviewees describe challenges in their diplomatic role, but they are because of the country of representation being a small state. They have developed strategies to navigate these challenges.
- The interviewees describe both gender-related challenges and challenges because of their country of representation being a small state. They have developed new strategies to navigate these challenges.



### 3. Method and material

This chapter will include a review of this thesis material and method. That is qualitative semi structured interviews with six Swedish female diplomats and ambassadors working in gender-conservative states. There will also be a discussion regarding possible limitations. Finally, this chapter will end with a presentation of the analytical framework.

#### 3.1 Material and selection of interviewees

The material used in this thesis is six qualitative interviews with different Swedish female diplomats and ambassadors. All the diplomats and ambassadors are posted in gender-conservative countries. As mentioned earlier in this thesis, gender-conservative countries have been operationalized by the gender quality index Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) (*Global Gender Gap Report 2024*, 2024, p. 11). It is countries such as Pakistan and Egypt. The GGGI index was chosen over other gender equality indexes because of accessibility and that the GGGI index had its 2024 report posted, which others did not.

The selection of interviewing only Swedish female diplomats was purposive and was made because of accessibility. It was a purposive selection because Swedish female diplomats are the group that can provide the most information about perceptions of being a Swedish female diplomat in a gender-conservative country. With this author being a Swedish citizen, the idea would also be that the access to Swedish female diplomats would increase. Continuing, diplomats are a group of people that I did not have any contact with before the development of this thesis. For that reason, I made the conclusion of only reaching out to Swedish female diplomats with the argument being to increase the response rate and feasibility as much as possible.

It is also interesting to research how Swedish female diplomats perceive these challenges. This is because Sweden is one of the highest ranked countries in the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) (*Global Gender Gap Report 2024*, 2024). Sweden together with the Nordic countries have often been viewed as role models in the matter of gender equality and have been longstanding in their placement at the top five countries in the GGGI (p.11). That is why Sweden is in this thesis a representative of a gender-progressive state. With Sweden being gender-progressive, it may also affect the Swedish female diplomats perceptions of these gender-related challenges.

The case of Swedish diplomats and ambassadors should still be representative of several other small states that are gender-progressive. States such as France and Germany both use feminist foreign policy (Federal Foreign Office, 2023; étrangères, 2024), and may face the same challenges regarding gender-related challenges and power status outside of Europe. Thus, by interviewing solely Swedish female diplomats, the generalization may become more limited. Previous literature performing interviews with diplomats pointed out that the country of representation is more important than gender in different matters of diplomacy (Niklasson, 2020; Towns, 2022b). Therefore, it cannot be taken for granted that the Swedish female diplomats perceptions can be applied to all female diplomats.

To get in contact with the interviewees I sent an invitation to the embassies public email addresses (Appendix 1). The invitation provided information about the aim of the interview,

the duration (30 minutes) and the fact that it would take place over digital platforms. In the invitation I asked for the female ambassador, but if she was not available, I asked for another Swedish female diplomat who worked at the embassy. I contacted nine Swedish embassies, six responded that they wanted to participate and the remaining either declined or did not respond.

The interviewees are stationed at different embassies in six different countries. Three of the interviewees are ambassadors, and three are diplomats. They work in gender-conservative countries in the regions where the global gender gap is closed the least, Africa and The Middle East (*Global Gender Gap Report 2024*, 2024, p. 11). There is a variation in the countries they work in, some are posted in very gender-conservative countries and some in less gender-conservative countries.

Due to the importance of keeping the diplomat’s anonymity, I have decided to give the interviewed diplomats aliases, these can be seen in table 1. I have also chosen not to mention the exact gender-conservative countries where the interviewees are posted, this is to maximize the anonymity of the interviewees. What I have included in table 1 is if they have been posted in more than one gender-conservative country. This is to provide the results with a broader perspective of the interviewees’ experiences. Because the interviewees who have been posted in more than one gender-conservative country have more experience and can naturally make comparisons to their previous posts in their answers.

**Table 1: Interviewees**

Name	Been posted in more than one gender-conservative countries
Miranda	Yes
Astrid	No
Ingrid	Yes
Maja	Yes
Alice	Yes
Ida	Yes

### 3.2 Method

This thesis has used a qualitative method with interviews being the conducted qualitative method. The aim of my thesis was to get a better understanding of Swedish female diplomats perceptions and experiences, in which I believe interview is the most relevant method. This is because the aim of a qualitative interview is to get a better understanding of the interviewees perspectives on aspects of their life (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2014, pp. 41, 47). A qualitative interview seeks descriptions, experiences and personal perspectives, not quantification such as exact numbers.

Interviews can be conducted with different formations, in this thesis the interviews were conducted with a semi structured format. A semi structured format means that the interviews are neither strict nor an open casual conversation (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2014, p. 45). It follows an interview guide that includes themes or example questions, but it does not need to

be strictly followed (pp. 165-166). A semi structured format gives the interviewer the possibility to change, add or remove questions to extract as much as possible from the interviewees experiences. In the interviews conducted in this thesis, some needed me to ask more follow-up questions and others did not, because of a difference in the interviewees answers. I was able to do this because of the chosen method being semi structured interviews.

An interview guide was made before the first interview (Appendix 2). The structure of the interview guide was three categories with eight questions in total. The first category was introduction questions containing two questions on their professional diplomatic career. The second category was questions on challenges faced as a female diplomat, containing four questions on gender-related challenges (networking, hierarchical structures, treatment and stereotypes and other specific challenges related to gender-conservative country). The third and last category were questions on personal strategies and solutions, containing two questions (female networks and other possible strategies).

Challenges such as work-life balance and glass ceilings, described in previous literature, may be mitigated for my interviewees. The argument being that they come from a fairly gender equal country and work for a state that puts a lot of effort into mitigating gender barriers (*Jämställdhet i Sverige / Jämställdhetsmyndigheten*). That is why this thesis has not focused on those challenges in the interviews and instead focused on networking, hierarchies, treatment and stereotypes and other specific challenges related to gender-conservative country.

As mentioned, the interviews lasted around 30 minutes. That time frame was decided with the intent of increasing my chances of accessing the diplomats. It was also made because I assumed that 30 minutes was enough time to get a good understanding of the diplomat's experiences and perceptions. All of the interviews were conducted via Skype and Teams, with me recording what was being said with my phone. The recording was used to transcribe the content, for me to be able to later on analyze. The analysis was made with the help of the analytical framework, which will be presented further down in this section.

### **3.2.1 Ethical considerations**

Ethical considerations are important to discuss regarding the field of interviews (*God forskningssed* [Elektronisk resurs]. Reviderad utgåva, 2017). The interviewees in this study have been informed of this thesis aim, given consent for me to record the interview, their rights to interrupt the interview and given information about how their responses will be used. The interviewees have not received payments for them to participate in the interviews. I have not had any personal connection with any of the interviewees and I have not influenced their responses or personal reflections. If the interviewees have wanted me to remove any statements or not cite certain statements has that been considered and followed. As discussed earlier, the anonymity of the interviewees has been highly considered and of most importance. That is why their name nor their current posting will not be revealed.

### 3.2.2 Analytical framework

The thesis has developed two analytical frameworks, table 2 and table 3. The first analytical framework (table 2) sorts the perceived challenges and solutions the interviewees describe into two categories: host country (being a gender-conservative country) and country of representation (Sweden being a small country). I will use the framework to sort the challenges described in the interviews into them being because they are a woman in a gender-conservative host country, or because they represent a small country with possible limitations in power and effectiveness. It is possible that the perceived challenges can be put under more than one source.

The second analytical framework developed in this thesis can be seen in table 3. Analysing if the described strategies were developed by the interviewees before or after being posted in a gender-conservative state. The only strategy mentioned in table 3 is female only networks. This is because that is one strategy that previous literature has described and talked most about, as could be read in the previous literature section. Thus, while conducting the interviews I am open to finding and analysing both new challenges and new strategies that the interviewees describe. If discovered, they will be presented under the results.

**Table 2 Analytical framework: on the source of the challenges**

<b>Challenges</b>	<b>Host country (gender-conservative country)</b>	<b>Country of representation (small country)</b>
<b>Networking</b>	Limitations in networking are because they are a woman in a gender-conservative country	Limitations in networking are because of the country of representation being a small country
<b>Hierarchies</b>	Hierarchies that have a negative effect on their role as a female diplomat are faced because they are a woman in a gender-conservative country	Hierarchies that have a negative effect on their role as a female diplomat are faced because of the country representation being a small country
<b>Treatment and stereotypes</b>	Treatment and stereotypes that have a negative effect on their role as female diplomat are because they are a woman in a gender-conservative country	Treatment and stereotypes that have a negative effect on their role as female diplomat are because country of representation being a small country

In terms of feasibility, the first analytical framework has focused on four main gender-related challenges that previous literature has brought up. The gender-related challenges asked for in my interviews are networking, gendered hierarchies, treatment and stereotypes being a female diplomat. Hierarchies could be for example unequal and gendered. Treatment and stereotypes could be treatment by local men in their host country, treatment being a female ambassador or stereotypes regarding women. For example, gendered stereotypes regarding men being the ones that should take charge, and women should be the ones taking care of others (Hoyt, 2010, pp. 489–490).

**Table 3 Analytical framework: on strategies and its development**

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Development before</b>	<b>Development after</b>
<b>Female networks</b>	Developed or used before being posted in gender-conservative country	Developed or used after being posted in gender-conservative country

## 4. Results

In this section, I will present the results from the conducted interviews. The section is structured by the research questions. First, I will present the results on perceived challenges which will be followed by a discussion on the source of the perceived challenges. Secondly, the results on strategies will be presented which will be followed by a discussion on its development.

To keep the anonymity of the interviewees, I have removed mentioned countries or regions in certain quotes that would reveal where they work or have worked.

### 4.1 Perceptions on gender-related challenges

#### 4.1.1 Networking

When asked about challenges regarding networking, the interviewees had different views about it. Most of them perceived no challenges being a woman networking in a gender-conservative country. Alice sees no difference in networking and no reason why networking should be different for a woman:

*No, I don't feel this gender aspect of the whole networking thing at all.*

Miranda, not being an ambassador, perceives no challenges in networking for her as well. This is because she does not need to talk to everyone, only the ones working with the same questions as her. She still describes that networking can be challenging for others:

*It still happens that when you enter an event, there can still be a group of men in dark suits talking. But often I have nothing I need to discuss with that particular group. With the group I belong to, I think it's more mixed women and men, so maybe it's easier for me.*

Continuing, the situation described above is together with other diplomats. What Miranda describes is that the diplomatic community can be the source of challenges. That it is a problem that exists in a lot of countries, not only the gender-conservative states:

*There you can instead feel that among Western diplomats you can be treated differently as a woman, perhaps more than sometimes the (host country) does. That men in suits often walk and stand together. But I don't know, it's a problem or a culture that exists in Sweden as well, which I think also exists there that people then bring with them from Europe abroad as well.*

There were interviewees who have experienced challenges regarding networking. Ingrid, now being a senior diplomat, describes that when she was younger it was hard knowing who to stay and talk to, the other male diplomats or the diplomatic wives. Describing networking possibly being harder when you are a young female diplomat:

*Then it was a bit difficult to know how I should behave, because often after a dinner there was a division with the wives standing on one side and the ambassadors on the other.*

#### **4.1.2 Hierarchies**

In the interviews, I asked about gendered hierarchies, if this is something the diplomats have met in their diplomatic role. Some of the interviewees did not perceive this as a problem in their professional role. Instead, most of them talked about hierarchies regarding age, work seniority and country of representation being a challenge in their gender-conservative host countries.

Other than gendered hierarchies, the interviewees described hierarchies regarding age, that being a young female could make your professional role harder. Astrid has a hard time knowing if she has faced gendered hierarchies, but discusses that it is most likely age that can give you a hard time:

*I think that here, in a society like (host country), you sort of value seniority and experience. Then when you enter as a young woman, or a young person in general, maybe you won't be taken as seriously as someone who comes in with 10/20 years of experience.*

Hierarchies regarding rank and work seniority are more obvious rather than gendered hierarchies, for some interviewees. Ida perceives that this is more of a challenge in comparison to networking being a challenge:

*I think it's more about the experience, it's more about the title. You are quite focused on the purely hierarchical, what title you have or what position and so on. So, I think it's probably more of a challenge rather than the actual fact of being a woman or a man.*

Astrid, not being a senior diplomat, also perceives her host country as having a lot of focus on seniority. Thus, she has experienced meetings with local ministers who have wanted her to speak up on different matters. This is not always the case though; it depends on which local minister she talks to:

*It has been so strange, because sometimes I have sat in on meetings with ministers and (host country) ministers who, even though I am at the bottom of the hierarchy, if we are a group that appears from the embassy, you dare to speak up in such a context. (...) It depends on which person it is who happens to be a minister. Some are very casual, while some are very formal.*

Alice, not seeing any gendered hierarchies, instead perceives challenges in accessing people because of her country of representation:

*I think that the times you have felt that it might be difficult to get access, that is difficult to get a meeting or difficult to get the place that you think Sweden deserves in a certain issue. Rather, it has to do with Sweden, that we are a small*

*country and that we do not have as much here in (host country region) as, for example, countries such as France, Italy, Spain and Germany.*

Ingrid can also relate to this:

*Because as Sweden, being a small country and not so important in (gender-conservative country), I know that there were lots of dinners that I wasn't invited to. Not because they didn't like me, but because Sweden wasn't important enough. And I didn't have enough information to give because my embassy was so small.*

#### **4.1.3 Treatment and stereotypes**

The interviewees have described different scenarios of treatment in their gender-conservative countries. Some say that they never have felt a difference in treatment because of their gender, some say they have had moments where they have been treated differently.

Miranda discusses that there are no challenges being a female boss at the workplace, rather it is the relations with external actors that can create challenges for others, but not for her though:

*For example, the corporate culture in (host country) which is very male-dominated. There you need to be clearer in your role as a leader to show that you are the one who leads and is the boss. So, it is a bit more if you say complex. Although for me personally it has not meant any problems, because I am quite clear.*

Miranda, being one that pointed out that a lot of the treatment you get by others is dependent on how you are as an individual and not gender, still described a moment where she was treated differently by host country ministers because of her gender:

*There have been occasions when I have had a foreign ministry colleague with me who has been male and so instead of addressing me directly, they have addressed him. But then I interrupted and said that I am his boss, so you can take it directly with me. I'm not afraid to have that discussion, but it has still happened.*

Another event that Ida describes, when being younger and working in a gender-conservative country, there were local men making inappropriate comments towards her:

*I had a couple of incidents, especially when I was working with the (local group), with men contacting me in an inappropriate way. (...) So, I think it's more of an age issue. That you are in a more junior position and as a young Swedish girl, that you were not taken seriously in the same way and that older men who come more from patriarchal structures and thought they can claim the right to send inappropriate messages or make comments.*

What Ida describes is a difference in treatment being a young female diplomat, that when you are younger you face more gender-related challenges in gender-conservative countries.

Maja has also experienced moments where local men have made inappropriate jokes, but she describes that she does not get mad when this happens:

*I once sat in a country with a minister who talked about how many women there were in that country's security forces. (...) But then of course they said: although women can't do all the tasks and so on. And then all the men laughed, but there's no point in getting mad. (...). But of course, when you sometimes sit in these countries and when older men in these countries joke about things, then you think, my God, this is not something a man of my age would do.*

Results from the interviews regarding stereotypes show that there is not so much toward women per se. Rather there are a lot of stereotypes against single women and young women. Ingrid noticed a difference in behavior in the gender-conservative countries when she was there as a married woman with kids, in comparison to when she was single:

*Whereas when I was alone in (gender-conservative country), people would ask kindly: I don't understand, don't you have a brother who can come and live with you or a cousin or something? I didn't understand what they meant. I have lived alone since I started studying so what is the problem? I can manage all by myself. But what they were after was that it was not good for my honor that I lived alone and that I had male friends who came to visit me.*

In comparison to other interviewees presented above, Astrid has not noticed any clear differences in treatment in her host country. She discusses that it is hard knowing if you get treated differently than her male colleagues, because of the local men's behavior towards women:

*I rather think that (host country) men are maybe more careful because they are very, very afraid of being disrespectful to women.*

#### **4.1.4 Local norms**

Local norms can be challenging to both the interviewee's professional role, but also their private life. Ida explains that it is different living in a gender-conservative country:

*It is very clear that there is a division between men and women. In a way that I am not used to in my other postings.*

Miranda also described local norms regarding gender having an impact on her personal life:

*When you are a diplomat on assignment, you are on assignment 24 hours a day. You represent Sweden in everything you do in principle. And in private, you experience this, you should call it segregation quite clearly in these countries. (...) But there are more deeply rooted traditions that divide women and men and that discriminate against women, for example, at different levels.*

Unlike Miranda, Ida also found her professional role affected by working in a gender-conservative country. She states that she had to develop new ways of working with certain questions:

*It feels like there are other challenges here that are much more difficult to work with. So, you have to think more about how we should work to promote gender equality. How should we work with health and SRHR issues and such? We need to find ways and creative solutions to talk about these challenges at all.*

Local norms were tough as Ingrid describes, especially when she was young and not married. Ingrid enjoyed spending time with her male friends because then she was able to do more in her private time:

*And I thought it was nice because then I could go out and go to a restaurant, go to the beach with male company. Then everything was much easier. So, it was tough.*

Ingrid also experienced local norms being a challenge for her when she was young and wanted to network with locals:

*Yes, but then a little bit of a disadvantage that as a young single woman you don't get invited to people's families. It could be with other women but not, however mixed. Not to put myself in a difficult situation. Or not to put them in any strange situation either for how to socialize between women and men.*

#### **4.1.5 Small state or woman in a gender-conservative country?**

From the results above, not all the challenges the interviewees perceive have the source of them being a woman in a gender-conservative country. The challenge of networking is neither perceived as a gender-related challenge by the interviewees nor a challenge with the source being their gender-conservative host country. Instead, it is described as being possibly challenging because of other diplomats, that the diplomatic community is the source. It is interesting to see that networking is in general not seen by the interviewees as challenging. This is because I expected it to be somewhat challenging before conducting the interviews. This possible change, networking not being gendered, could speak for aspects of diplomacy becoming more equal.

There are descriptions of gendered hierarchies which have the source of their gender-conservative host country. Other than gendered hierarchies, there are hierarchies regarding seniority, rank and age. All of whom have the source of their gender-conservative host country. Some interviewees also described the challenges of representing a small country, for example not getting invited to everything. This having the source their country of representation being a small country.

Treatment and stereotypes mostly have the source of their gender-conservative host country. Treatment such as local men making inappropriate comments on women. Stereotypes described against single and unmarried women. These results were not what this author

expected. I did not think that the stereotypes toward single and unmarried women would be that strong, negatively impacting both their professional roles and private life.

Regarding local norms, some of the interviewees did not perceive it to be remarkably challenging. Thus, there were interviewees perceiving local norms making it challenging to live in their gender-conservative host country, with it being the source of the challenge. These results show that gender-conservative host countries may affect the female diplomat's private life, rather than their professional role. It was clear from both the results on treatment and stereotypes and local norms that it is especially challenging being a young female diplomat. Some of my interviewees may not experience gendered challenges at their current age, but almost all described it being harder when you are a young female in these gender-conservative countries.

## 4.2 Strategies and navigation on gender-related challenges

### 4.2.1 Female networks

In the interviews, one question asked about the interviewee's opinions on female networks and if female networks have helped them in their diplomatic career. Female networks are an established community within diplomacy (Towns, 2022b, p. 347), and in this section I will analyse if it is something my interviewees use in their diplomatic role or if they have any other opinions on the subject.

Ida describes that she has never been a part of an established female only network. Thus, she has been invited to be a part of one but has never prioritized it. She believes that it may be a good thing, but instead wants to promote networks that are inclusive, to both men and women:

*I think that it is perhaps more about a network, that is, a more inclusive network for both young girls and young guys, I think that would have been great. Not just young girls in an industry like this that we work in.*

Similarly, Miranda has not been a part of a female network. Miranda perceives that female only networks may increase exclusion and thinks there are better options:

*I always think it is better to be able to meet in a mixed group and discuss strategies on how to be inclusive together. Rather than perhaps further contributing to an exclusion that I think it can be if you divide, whether it's gender or nationality or whatever it is (...) I understand female networking of course and there are certainly advantages, but I believe more that we should get to a place where we can all meet and learn from each other. Because otherwise I think it's difficult to bridge these gaps and these different male and female norms that we have now.*

In contrast to previous answers, Alice views female networks more positively. Alice is a part of one herself together with other female heads of authorities but points out that it is only in a social matter they meet, not strategically. Still, Alice states that it is in her female network that she would bring up if something gender discriminating would happen to her. This shows

that Alice still uses female networks as a tool in navigating potential gender-related problems in her role as a female ambassador:

*But of course, it is such a forum that if you experience a gender-discriminatory situation or incident, that is where you would, in any case, raise it. And ask if it has happened to anyone else and how to deal with it, and how others have reasoned and so on. But so far, I haven't felt the need for it, as I said. But it feels good to have that network, because you never know.*

Maja, being an ambassador, is also a part of a female network together with the other female ambassadors at her posting. But she also points out the importance of having networks with local females:

*After all, we have both in (gender-conservative country) and now in (host country), we have a network of female ambassadors who meet regularly. So that's good. And then you often try in these countries to connect with the local women's rights organizations and activists and those who have worked for a long time in the system and so on, so that you can understand a little from their side how to best do your job.*

Ingrids perception, being an ambassador, of female networks is very similar to Ida when asked if female networks have helped her in her career:

*Yes absolutely. But again, I have had other types of networks as well (...) But yes, I think you still need to have female networks in large parts of the world. Also to make up for the fact that we are not a major player, we are not USA, Great Britain, France or Germany.*

Astrid believes that female networks bring a lot of good, but still thinks it is important to have conversations with men:

*But if there is an important female ambassador network or diplomatic network that you want to take advantage of, I think it's a pretty good way to make use of the female network part. Also, I enjoy going to meetings and events that are within the framework of some kind of female network.*

Here I can see a pattern of the ambassadors speaking more positively about female networks. The female ambassadors are also a part of one, in comparison to the female diplomats. These findings align with the ones from Niklasson (2020, p. 30), that often female only networks are limited to female ambassadors and not lower-level diplomats. Thus, Ida not being an ambassador has still been invited to a female only network but declined.

#### **4.2.2 Marriage and motherhood**

In the interviews, I only asked about female networks as a possible strategy in navigating gender-related challenges. Still, I was open to hearing if the interviewees described other strategies they have developed in their role as a Swedish female diplomat in a gender-

conservative country. The first strategy I noticed some interviewees talked about was using their motherhood or status as a married woman in their diplomatic role.

Astrid explains that by saying you are a married woman in her posting, it can provide extra protection against gender-related challenges, such as prejudices and judgments. Her female colleagues have been advised to say that they are married. This is because these gender-conservative countries have a lot of prejudices toward single women:

*Then it's one thing that it also helps to be married. I know that colleagues who, for example, were going to (gender-conservative country) or (gender-conservative country), female colleagues, who have been advised to basically say that they are married. If you were to be asked the question or if someone is trying to sneak in it in some way or if you yourself, feel that you need to say it for a preventive purpose or something like that. Because it's one thing to be a single woman, they have a lot of prejudice against single women as well. And then being a married woman. It's another layer of protection, so to speak.*

This quote, showing that Elizabeth's colleagues were advised to say that they are married, speaks for a big gender gap in these gender-conservative countries. A gender gap directly affecting the female diplomats working in these states, making the female diplomats develop new strategies. This finding I found very interesting and also shocking, I have never heard before that female diplomats have been advised to say that they are married, it shows a big gender gap.

When I asked Astrid if she herself was married she responded:

*Yes, I am married. So, it's been quite nice to be able to sort of say it quite quickly. (...) No, but for me it's like another way of trying to get in on the right foot. (...) it's like little strategies that you need to find in order to work your way into people's right side so you don't get to be dismissed too soon.*

What Astrid describes is that she uses her marriage as a strategy in her diplomatic role in her gender-conservative posting.

Regarding motherhood as a strategy, Ingrid says that being a mother has helped her work in one of her postings in a gender-conservative country. She had used her motherhood to show empathy in different scenarios:

*I could say I am a mother myself. And there it has been a bit disarming that I am a woman. And then I underlined by saying I am a mother, that I am a woman.*

When asked if her motherhood could be described as a strategy in her ambassadorial role, Ingrid replied:

*Yes, that I am a woman, but I am also a mother. I represent Sweden. But also, to show that I am a human being of flesh and blood with feelings like everyone else.*

### 4.2.3 Being a (foreign) female

A recurring theme among some interviewees was the use of their gender as a strategy. They acknowledged that being a female diplomat or ambassador in a gender-conservative country could be a holdback in their role. Therefore, they have found ways to use their gender as a strategy to give them advantages. All of them also highlighted that it is different being a foreign female in these countries, compared to being a local woman.

Maja says that being a foreign female gives her advantages in asking tougher questions:

*Another advantage of being a woman sometimes is that you can ask rather tough questions. Because as a foreign woman, at the same time they have this extra respect for you as a woman in a way that you can ask tough questions sometimes, which they might find uncomfortable, but they're extra polite in a way because you are a woman.*

Maja also states another advantage of being a foreign female in her ambassadorial role:

*You get access to both women and men, so to speak. You can step aside sometimes, away from your male colleagues and get to meet women who may not be in the official meetings. So there are also advantages to being a female diplomat in conservative environments.*

Likewise, Ingrid also finds ways of using her gender as an advantage:

*It can be a little disarming "look I'm a woman I'm not dangerous", and I stand by this. And that can help too. I think you have to use yourself and that can help. (..) I use the trump card I have. I don't have the trump card that I am a man. So I get to use my card, that I am a woman instead.*

Miranda describes being a female might be an advantage because local men do not want to treat you badly:

*Sometimes I even think it can be a little easier to be a woman in these countries because they are very careful not to treat women differently. So in the case here, I would say that it has rather been an advantage.*

### 4.2.4 Other groups and communities

All my interviewees have described forming other groups and communities than female networks as an important strategy in their diplomatic or ambassadorial role.

Alice has noticed a pattern that the EU community is stronger and more welded together in her gender-conservative postings, in comparison to postings in European countries.:

*I think both here and in (gender-conservative country), the EU circle is more tightly knit than it was, for example in (European country) or in (European country), because there it is easier to do things yourself.*

Alice also says that the EU community works more together in her current posting in a gender-conservative country. But Ingrid also adds that this is because of association agreements:

*Joint reports are written. Joint declarations are made. When there were EU elections recently, we made a joint statement. You try to act united as much as you can. To gain increased leverage both for European interests but also to facilitate (host country).*

Likewise, Astrid perceives the diplomatic community overall as being very much welded together because of her host country:

*I think the diplomatic community is very tightly knit because we are very dependent on each other for information sharing and other things. Because the (host country), as in many other authoritarian societies, are restrictive about the type of information they release to diplomats. (...) so, you are very dependent on each other in the diplomatic circle.*

Ingrid describes that representing a small country might not let you into all the events. That the ambassadors of the G7 countries met without the other countries. As a result, Ingrid created networks with other non-G7 countries as a strategy to navigate that challenge:

*And there quite a lot happened at their meetings that we didn't really find out about. So, then I organized a network for non-G7 countries, in the EU circle. And there were, as it were, both women and men. So, it's more a question of creating networks that you need, because you don't get into other networks.*

Another community or group my interviewees have formed and used in their professional role is the local women. The local women in their gender-conservative postings have given some of the interviewees valuable help in navigating how to best perform their job. Maja describes the local women as follows:

*Perhaps you don't want to ask the wrong questions to the men and then it's good to have the women, especially the local women and civil society. And tell them: If we want to work on these issues that can be sensitive, how do we do it so that it doesn't end up like "Oh oh oh oh, now they come with Western values and want something". But it is often that you can then get help from them regarding knowing how to do this the right way. So, it's very good to have this local network. (...) I still think the local women are a key.*

#### **4.2.5 Developed before or after posted in a gender-conservative country?**

The described strategies that my interviewees use in their diplomatic role are in general developed after being posted in their gender-conservative host country. Regarding female networks, being the only strategy I asked about in the interviews, the interviewees had different views on it. Some perceive it as a good strategy, and some believe in more inclusive networks with both men and women. In some interviews, it was clear that female networks are more used in their gender-conservative host country. But in others it was more unclear,

Alice describes using female networks in Stockholm as well in her gender-conservative host country. One interesting pattern regarding female networks, as discussed earlier, was that two of the ambassadors spoke more positively about them. This in comparison to the diplomats.

Marriage and motherhood are a strategy that the results show is related to their gender-conservative host country. It has been necessary in some cases to use it in their professional role and therefore it has been developed after being posted in a gender-conservative country. This is one finding that I found the most interesting and did not expect to find before conducting the interviews. It is interesting to see that still today, female diplomats and ambassadors may feel the need to mention their marriage or motherhood in their professional role. Especially what Astrid described, her female colleagues being suggested to mention that they are married in other gender-conservative countries, to achieve an extra layer of protection. This highlights a gender-related challenge directly linked to the source of their gender-conservative host country.

Being a (foreign) female is a strategy developed in their host country after being posted to it. In some of the scenarios described, the interviewees gender has been to their advantage. For example, the interviewees have used their gender to gain access to local women and be seen as less threatening.

Other groups and communities are also a strategy, like female networks, which are developed for some interviewees in their gender-conservative host country. But might as well be used in other non-conservative host countries. The EU group being more united might as well be the case in other regions where the EU countries do not have as much influence. The same idea can be applied to the community with other non-G7 countries. Thus, the community the interviewees have created with the local women is developed after being posted to a gender-conservative country.

From the results on strategies I also noticed that there are more strategies connected to gender-related challenges, than to challenges representing a small state. This could speak for gender-related challenges being more challenging than challenges representing a small state in gender-conservative environments. But it might as well also be because it is hard changing the fact that your country of representation is a small state, having fewer strategies for navigating that challenge.

Most interviewees did not believe that their professional role was impacted by the challenges or scenarios they perceived and described. But because a lot of interviewees still described events where they have had to adapt and adjust to navigate working in a gender-conservative state, I believe that is a result of the challenges affecting their professional role as a female diplomat or ambassador. The need to mention one's marital status and the difficulties faced by single women are direct consequences of gender-related challenges in gender-conservative countries, impacting their professional role.

## 5. Conclusions

This thesis has conducted a qualitative study on Swedish female diplomats and ambassador's experiences working in a gender-conservative state. The thesis answered two research questions, firstly: How do Swedish female diplomats perceive gender-specific challenges in gender-conservative countries? Secondly: How do Swedish female diplomats use strategies to navigate gender-specific challenges in gender-conservative countries?

While previous literature identifies several gender-related challenges, little research has explored how these challenges intersect with other factors. The theoretical approach of this thesis has shown that representing a small state may be challenging as well. In this thesis, I developed an analytical framework for studying the role of both in the experience of Swedish female diplomats. The perceived challenges by the interviewees have been analysed by their source being either gender or country of representation. The described strategies have been analysed by their development.

One finding made it clear that some of the interviewees have experienced challenges in their gender-conservative host country due to their gender. It has been challenges such as local men speaking to their male colleagues over themselves, local men making inappropriate jokes and most of all local judgments toward young and single women. In general, the interviewees do not perceive these experiences as affecting their diplomatic or ambassadorial role. Thus, the interviewees still describe strategies and adaptations that have been necessary to continue doing their job effectively in their gender-conservative host country.

The only challenge that none of the interviewees perceived as challenging because of their gender was networking. Almost all of the interviewees described networking not being a problem, or networking not being a problem because of their conservative host country. The source instead being their country of representation or the diplomatic community itself. The interviewees also described that being a woman in these gender-conservative countries may be to their advantage, giving them access to local women that their male colleagues might not have. Findings that align with previous literature regarding in networking, being a female might be to their advantage.

Continuing, I noticed a pattern while conducting the interviews. Initially, the interviewees did not want to say that they perceived the gender-related challenges that I asked about. Instead, they put a lot of focus on describing other possible sources that could be the reason for perceiving challenges, other than their gender. Still, some of them later on in the interviews described different challenges or scenarios they have faced with the source being that they are a woman in a gender-conservative country. This could show that the interviewees meet these situations where they face gendered challenges, but they perhaps do not think it is overall important for their professional role. The interviewees may perceive the described gendered challenges as small and in general not affecting their diplomatic role.

This thesis has also shown that gender in diplomacy sometimes needs to be looked at together with other factors, such as small states. The Swedish female diplomats country of representation being a small country has sometimes had a negative effect on their ability to network and access other people. Therefore, gender and small states are connected, both factors can have a negative impact on the Swedish female diplomats that I interviewed. This opens a new research field for women in diplomacy, comparing gender together with other

factors. Especially the findings of the existing hierarchies regarding seniority, rank and age confirms this research field. It shows that gender and country of representation are not the only factors that can give female diplomats and ambassadors challenges in their professional roles.

So, what do the results mean for Sweden? I believe that this study has shown that there are gender-related challenges that negatively affect Swedish female diplomats and ambassadors in these gender-conservative states. A representative of Sweden should not feel the need to mention their marriage or face challenges because of them being a young female, impacting their professional role. The results showed that being a young female diplomat in gender-conservative states is challenging, a finding I did not expect. I believe that gender-progressive countries such as Sweden, need to implement and develop new solutions to make their female representatives more protected from these challenges.

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# Appendix

## Appendix 1: Letter of invitation

The letter of invitation was sent out in Swedish and has been translated into English in order to be attached in this thesis.

### **To the Esteemed Representative of the Swedish Embassy in X,**

My name is Clara Thempo, and I am a student at the University of Gothenburg, currently working on my bachelor's thesis as part of the European Studies Program. My research focuses on female representation in diplomacy, with a particular interest in the challenges and experiences faced by Swedish female diplomats in countries where traditional gender norms may influence their professional roles and impact. This study is conducted under the supervision of Monika de Silva, PhD candidate at the Department of Political Science at the University of Gothenburg ([monika.de.silva@gu.se](mailto:monika.de.silva@gu.se); [Monika de Silva | University of Gothenburg](#)).

The aim of my research is to explore how Swedish female diplomats navigate their professional practice, especially in environments where conservative norms surrounding gender and representation may shape their work. By gathering insights from Swedish female diplomats working in such contexts, I hope to contribute to a broader understanding of gender-related aspects within diplomacy.

I would be most grateful if Ambassador X or another Swedish female diplomat from your embassy could participate in a semi-structured interview. This interview is a crucial part of my research and can be conducted in a manner most convenient for you, such as remotely via digital platforms or by phone. The interview is expected to take approximately 30 minutes and will be used solely for research purposes, with full anonymity guaranteed for all participants in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the University of Gothenburg.

If you have any questions or require clarification about the process, please do not hesitate to contact me or Monika de Silva. I hope you find this research project interesting, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Best regards,  
Clara Thempo

## Appendix 2: Interview guide

### Introduction questions: Career

- 1) How long have you been working as a diplomat/ambassador?
- 2) How many different postings have you had?
  - a. Can you name which/some of them have been in gender-conservative countries? How did these influence your personal and professional experiences of the posting?

### Questions on challenges faced as a female diplomat

- 3) How has networking been impacted by being a woman? How has networking worked for you as a female diplomat in a conservative country with low gender equality?
  - a. Imagine you are at an official dinner or a diplomatic reception. How do you go about networking with male colleagues in a culture where women are not expected to be prominent?
  - b. Are there specific countries where you have noticed that men in your network were more accepting of male diplomats, and how did you handle that?
- 4) How have hierarchical structures in different countries impacted your role as a woman?
  - a. Let's say you are trying to gain access to a senior politician or official – have you encountered obstacles due to hierarchies or because you are a woman?
  - b. In your current posting, the culture and power structures might be strictly male-dominated. Do you have any examples where this has affected your ability to make your voice heard?
- 5) Have there been situations where you felt judged or treated differently as a woman?
  - a. Suppose you are meeting with a group of male leaders in a conservative environment – have you noticed any specific expectations regarding how you should behave or dress to be taken seriously?
  - b. When you meet your colleagues for a formal meeting in a country with traditional gender roles, have you experienced that men in the room tend to speak more directly to male colleagues than to you?
- 6) Are there any specific challenges you have encountered in conservative countries or in the conservative country where you currently work? For example, can you recall a situation where local norms truly tested your diplomatic role? How did you handle it then?

### Questions on personal Strategies and Solutions

- 7) How have you adapted to handle any challenges as a woman in male-dominated cultures?
  - a. Do you have any strategies for building relationships with individuals in countries where they have a conservative view of women?
- 8) What is your view on women's networks and support systems – do they help you in your role?
  - a. Can you give an example of how a women's network has supported you in a specific situation, such as when you tried to navigate a conservative hierarchy?
  - b. Have you noticed differences in how these networks function depending on where in the world you are?

