Book Reviews

Gender and Diplomacy. By Jennifer A. Cassidy. Routledge: New Diplomacy Studies Series, 2017. ISBN: 978-1-315-27077-7 (e-book)

Gender and Diplomacy, edited by Jennifer A. Cassidy, positions itself as a critical intervention into a field long dominated by masculinist assumptions and historical erasures. As part of the Routledge New Diplomacy Studies Series, the volume seeks to make visible the gendered foundations of diplomatic practice and the enduring barriers that women face within Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs). While the volume succeeds in foregrounding diplomacy as a gendered enterprise and challenges the myth of neutrality embedded in diplomatic institutions, its interventions though significant expose deeper structural limitations in the field and within the book itself. The volume raises important questions but leaves several conceptual, empirical, and epistemic gaps that limit its transformative potential.

The editors frame diplomacy as a cultural, institutional, and symbolic system historically built by and for men. This foundational argument is convincingly laid out through historical chapters that demonstrate how diplomacy emerged as an elite masculine profession, with formal restrictions prohibiting women's entry well into the twentieth century. The authors make a strong case that women's exclusion was not incidental but structurally and ideologically embedded in diplomatic institutions. Yet, while the historical reconstruction is thorough, it tends to rely heavily on well-documented Western cases, which inadvertently narrows the universality of its claims. The absence of parallel historical trajectories from the Global South where colonialism, religion, and local gender norms shaped diplomatic exclusion differently, results in an incomplete genealogy of women's diplomatic marginality.

In its theoretical sections, the volume attempts to deploy feminist theory to deconstruct the gendered logic of diplomacy. However, the treatment of feminist debates often remains at a surface level. Although the book engages with distinctions between masculinity and femininity, and discusses gender as a discursive structure shaping expectations of diplomatic conduct, its theoretical critique rarely engages more radical or decolonial feminist frameworks. Feminist IR scholars such as Tickner, Enloe, and Sjoberg are cited, yet the book does not fully extend their critiques to interrogate the embeddedness of diplomacy in colonial, racialized, and heteronormative power structures. Diplomacy is treated primarily as a patriarchal institution, but not necessarily as a racialized or imperial one. This limits the capacity of the volume to address intersectional inequalities faced by women diplomats of colors, Indigenous women, or women from postcolonial states groups whose marginalization is shaped not only by gender but also by structural global hierarchies.

The empirical chapters provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of women diplomats and the institutional biases they encounter. The authors highlight persistent stereotypes—women perceived as emotional, overly collaborative, or lacking credibility in security-related roles—and the informal norms that hinder women's career progression. These accounts are particularly illuminating in demonstrating how gender operates simultaneously as a symbolic system and as an embodied, social constraint. Yet, the empirical scope of the volume remains constrained: most narratives are drawn from the experiences of Western diplomatic corps or international organizations dominated by Global North actors. The book's reliance on elite accounts risks reproducing the same epistemic privilege it critiques. Women in early-career diplomatic roles, consular officers stationed in conflict zones, and diplomats from developing nations—a majority within the global diplomatic workforce—receive far less attention.

A significant blind spot emerges in the book's treatment of institutional reform. Several chapters emphasize the need for gender mainstreaming, representation, and leadership opportunities. However, the book rarely interrogates how these reforms can be co-opted by institutions without challenging deeper structural power imbalances. For instance, initiatives aimed at increasing women's representation often assume that numerical inclusion equals empowerment. Yet, feminist

critiques have long argued that representation without structural transformation risks tokenism and reinforces neoliberal forms of gender equality that leave patriarchal logics intact. Moreover, the book does not adequately critique how MFAs selectively adopt gender policies to maintain international legitimacy—particularly when states brand themselves as champions of "feminist foreign policy" while simultaneously maintaining exclusionary domestic practices.

Another critical gap lies in the absence of a sustained discussion on intersectionality. While gender as a concept is central, the book seldom addresses how gender intersects with race, class, sexuality, disability, or religion within diplomatic institutions. Women diplomats are often treated as a monolithic category, ignoring the differentiated vulnerabilities and opportunities that shape their trajectories. The experiences of Black women diplomats, Muslim women wearing hijab, LGBTQ+ diplomats, or women from low-income national contexts are scarcely mentioned. This lack of intersectional engagement weakens the analytical depth of the volume and undermines its ability to capture the full complexity of gendered diplomatic realities.

Despite these limitations, the volume remains a meaningful contribution to ongoing debates about gender equality in diplomacy. It is particularly relevant in the context of recent global momentum around feminist foreign policy, the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, and gender-mainstreaming efforts in international organizations. The book's central message—that diplomacy is far from gender-neutral and that achieving equality requires dismantling entrenched institutional cultures—resonates strongly with contemporary discussions on inclusive governance. Its historical and empirical contributions serve as an important foundation for further research, especially for scholars and practitioners seeking to understand how gender shapes global politics at multiple levels.

In conclusion, Gender and Diplomacy offers a valuable yet incomplete project. It successfully exposes the patriarchal underpinnings of diplomatic practice and provides a platform for discussing women's agency within global politics. However, its limited geographical scope, insufficient intersectional analysis, and underdeveloped engagement with decolonial feminist critiques constrain its transformative potential. The book ultimately opens a conversation that it does not fully resolve—a conversation that future scholarship must deepen by interrogating how gender interacts with race, empire, class, and global inequality. Nonetheless, it remains an essential text for understanding how diplomacy continues to be shaped—and constrained—by gendered power relations in the twenty-first century.

Ahmad Ridwan, M.Sosio.
Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Jawa Timur, Indonesia
Email: ahmadridwan@unesa.ac.id