Locked In and Left Out: A Feminist Institutionalist Analysis of Gendered Lock-In during the Creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS)

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A Feminist Institutionalist Analysis of Gendered Lock-In during the Creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS)

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Through this thesis, I hope to highlight their long-standing struggle to carve out a place for themselves in a world still largely dominated by men and shaped by masculine norms and behaviors. These women laid the groundwork for change, making it possible for future generations, including mine, to work in healthier, more inclusive environments that are open to all and free from discrimination or inappropriate intimidation.

Abbreviations

- CoE: College of Europe
- EC: European Commission
- EEAS: European External Action Service
- EIGE: European Institute for Gender Equality
- EU: European Union
- EUMS: European Union Military Staff
- FFP: Feminist Foreign Policy
- HR/VP: High Representative/Vice President
- ILO: International Labour Organisation
- LGBTQIA+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, Inclusive of other sexual orientations, gender identities, and expressions not specifically covered by the preceding initials
- MAGA: Make America Great Again
- MS: Member States of the European Union
- NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
- OSCE: Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe
- SG: Secretaire-General
- TFEU: Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
- US: United States
- WatEEAS: Women at European External Action Service
- WEDinEU: Women Empowerment and Diplomacy in the European Union
- WIS: Women in International Security
- WPS: Women Peace and Security

Introduction

In 2010, the European External Action Service (EEAS) was launched as a landmark initiative to consolidate the European Union's external action and provide the EU with a stronger, more coherent diplomatic presence on the global stage. It was a transformative moment in EU institutional development, a rare opportunity to reshape foreign policy architecture and embed new norms within an emerging body. This moment of institutional innovation coincided with a broader normative shift within the EU towards gender equality. In the years leading up to the EEAS's creation, the EU had positioned itself as a global leader in promoting gender mainstreaming. Flagship policies such as the 2010 Women's Charter and the Strategy for Equality Between Women and Men (2010–2015) had reinforced a rhetorical and legal commitment to equality, framing gender not only as a human rights concern but as a principle of good governance and policy effectiveness (Strategy for Equality Between Women and Men 2010-2015 | EUR-Lex, 2010). Given this convergence, the birth of a major foreign policy institution and a peak in EU gender policy, there appeared to be a rare window of opportunity to institutionalise gender considerations within the foundational structures of EU diplomacy. However, despite the convergence of normative commitment and institutional innovation, the EEAS emerged with a largely gender-blind design. This outcome cannot be fully explained by lack of political will or overt resistance alone. Rather, it reflects the deeper institutional dynamics of bureaucratic pragmatism, compromise, and continuity, which constrained the emergence of gender-sensitive reform despite a favourable political context. To fully grasp the extent of this, it is important to trace the evolution of the EU's gender equality framework leading up to 2010. The European Union's commitment to gender equality dates back to the founding treaties. As early as 1957, the Treaty of Rome enshrined the principle of "equal pay for work of equal value" in the Community's primary legislation

(European Parliament, n.d.). This commitment took concrete form in the 1970s and 1980s with the adoption of the first European directives on equality in the labour market, in particular Council Directive 76/207/EEC of 9 February 1976, which aims to guarantee equal treatment for men and women regarding access to employment, training, professional promotion and working conditions (Directive 2006/54/CE du Parlement européen et du Conseil, 2005). These texts marked a decisive turning point, laying the foundations for a binding legal framework that would gradually structure the Union's action in favour of gender equality in all its policies. In 2006, the EU further institutionalised its action with the creation of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), whose mission is to analyse, monitor and support policies based on solid data, notably through the Gender Equality Index launched in 2013 (De Bonfils et al., 2014). This growing institutional focus on gender equality has coincided with tangible progress in employment, with the female participation rate rising to around 62.5%, supported by the creation of more than 9.8 million jobs for women between 2000 and 2009 (*Legal Provisions of COM(2010)491- EU Monitor*, 2010). As far as salaries were concerned, the gender pay gap persisted at around 17-18%, and the EU was stepping up its measures: pay transparency, equality labelling, the creation of a "European Equal Pay Day", and the promotion of women in innovative or green sectors. In terms of governance, a similar observation was made: women remained under-represented, with quantified targets (25% in research, 40% in the Commission's expert groups) and incentives to increase their electoral and institutional participation (*Strategy for Equality Between Women and Men 2010-2015 | EUR-Lex*, n.d.).

Despite this comprehensive approach, the EU launched a new strategy for the years 2010-2015, which aimed to transform the achievements of the 2006-2010 Roadmap and the Women's Rights Charter (presented on the occasion of the 15e anniversary of the Beijing Conference) into concrete actions (Strategy for Equality Between Women and Men

2010-2015 | EUR-Lex, n.d.). Structured around five priorities (economic autonomy, equal pay, representation in decision-making bodies, the eradication of gender-based violence and the promotion of equality in external policies) this strategy is part of a dual reinforcement mechanism: gender mainstreaming, which aims to integrate the gender dimension into all EU policies, and targeted measures adapted to each area. The plan also included a part on the EU's external policy with targeted dialogue with candidate countries, neighbourhood partners and humanitarian areas (Strategy for Equality Between Women and Men 2010-2015 | EUR-Lex, n.d.). Hence, in 2010, the EU laid the foundations for a comprehensive plan combining legislation, incentives and gender mainstreaming, while setting ambitious targets to bring social realities in line with these. Therefore, by the time the European External Action Service (EEAS) was created in 2010, the European Union had already made a good start on its commitment to gender equality. Solid legal foundations, sectoral directives, a strategy for equality 2010-2015 and the consolidation of institutional tools such as the EIGE had gradually shaped a political environment favourable to the integration of the gender dimension into European policies. This context offered a propitious opportunity for this new diplomatic service to be part of the continuity of this egalitarian dynamic. However, this opportunity was not fully seized, revealing the limits of an approach that is still unevenly reflected in the EU's organisational structures, particularly in its foreign policy instruments.

This thesis addresses the following question: *How did the EEAS's gender-blind institutional design emerge, despite a supportive policy context, and how did early organisational choices shape the long-term marginalisation of gender considerations within its structures and practices?* Rather than framing the EEAS as a simple missed opportunity, the thesis argues that its foundational gender-blindness was a product of interlocking structural, legal, and discursive constraints. Bureaucratic decisions, while presented as neutral, reflected and reproduced deeply embedded assumptions about diplomacy, leadership,

and legitimacy, assumptions historically shaped by masculine norms. The aim is to investigate how gender inequality became structurally embedded through early design choices, organisational practices, and the reproduction of informal diplomatic norms. To this end, the thesis adopts an interdisciplinary approach that draws on feminist International Relations and historical institutionalism. It seeks to contribute to an understanding of how gender exclusion persists not simply through active resistance but also through passive processes of institutional continuity and path dependency.

The central argument of this thesis is that the EEAS's failure to embed gender equality can be explained through the interplay of two closely connected dynamics: the critical juncture represented by its creation in 2010, and the path dependency that followed from the institutional choices made at that moment. The creation of the EEAS marked a rare moment of institutional openness, an opportunity to redefine the norms, values, and operational structures of EU foreign policy from the ground up. At such a juncture, the direction of institutional development is particularly malleable, and decisions taken can have long-lasting consequences. However, instead of using this opening to advance gender-sensitive reform, the foundational design of the EEAS replicated existing, gendered hierarchies. Bureaucratic choices, presented as neutral or pragmatic, were in fact guided by deeply embedded assumptions about diplomacy, leadership, and expertise, assumptions historically shaped by masculine norms. These early decisions triggered a path-dependent process, in which subsequent developments were increasingly constrained by the institutional logic established at the outset. Over time, the absence of gender considerations in the EEAS's founding architecture led to a self-reinforcing cycle of exclusion, making it progressively harder to challenge or reverse these patterns. In this sense, the EEAS exemplifies how gender-blindness at moments of institutional creation can lead to the long-term entrenchment of exclusionary practices, even in environments that profess strong normative commitments

to equality. The failure to integrate gender at the outset did not just reflect a missed policy opportunity; it constituted a structural decision with enduring effects. In this way, the gender-blindness of the EEAS was not a temporary oversight but a consequence of foundational design choices that continue to shape the institution's approach to gender today.

Thus, this thesis examines how, even under favourable conditions, institutional ambiguity and competing priorities allowed pre-existing gendered norms to persist, making the EEAS emerge as a gender-blind institution. Foundational documents such as Council Decision 2010/427/EU made only a brief reference to "gender balance", treating it similarly to geographical balance without elaborating on its meaning or implications (*Decision - 2010/427 - EN - EUR-LEX*, 2010). Early staff appointments largely mirrored the prevailing male-dominated patterns typical of diplomatic representation. The lack of integration between the EU's gender equality agenda and the institutional design of its new diplomatic service raises important questions about the nature of institutional change, the resilience of gendered norms, and the limits of normative commitments within bureaucratic politics.

This thesis focuses primarily on the period between 2010 and 2015, a formative phase during which the European Union reaffirmed its commitment to gender equality through key policy initiatives and institutionalised new structures such as the EEAS. This period is analytically significant for two reasons. First, it saw the adoption of flagship gender policies that positioned gender mainstreaming as a core normative principle across EU institutions. Second, it was during these years that the EEAS began developing internal norms, staffing patterns, and organisational practices, many of which became structurally embedded. The thesis conceptualises this timeframe as both a critical juncture, when institutional change was possible, and the starting point of a path-dependent process that gradually resulted in *gendered lock-in.* By focusing on this window, the study captures not only the presence of a supportive policy environment but also the reproduction and consolidation of gendered

standards within the new diplomatic service. It is within this moment of apparent normative openness that early institutional decisions laid the groundwork for enduring patterns of exclusion. Examining this period allows for a critical assessment of why the EEAS, despite this favourable context, failed to embed substantial gender representation practices from the outset.

This paper adopts a qualitative and interpretive methodological approach to examine the institutional evolution of the EEAS and its implications for gender dynamics in European diplomacy. Drawing on historical institutionalism and insights from diplomatic studies, the analysis traces how the Service navigates tensions between bureaucratic standardisation and diplomatic innovation. The research combines a critical review of secondary literature and official documents with original empirical material from semi-structured interviews with current and former EEAS officials. These interviews offer insider perspectives on institutional design, professional norms, and the gendered structures shaping representation and advancement within the Service. This dual approach allows for an in-depth exploration of how early institutional decisions contributed to patterns of gendered lock-in within the EEAS.

This thesis contributes to several overlapping fields of scholarly inquiry by bridging feminist International Relations, diplomacy studies, and historical institutionalism. Feminist IR scholars have long pointed to the gendered foundations of global politics, critiquing the masculine norms embedded in diplomacy, security, and foreign policy-making. Meanwhile, historical institutionalists have examined how path dependency and critical junctures shape the development of political institutions. This thesis brings these two traditions into direct conversation by using a feminist institutionalist lens to analyse a specific empirical case, the formation of the EEAS. In doing so, it offers both a conceptual and a practical contribution. Conceptually, it advances our understanding of how gendered exclusions are produced not only through deliberate opposition but also through institutional design and bureaucratic

inertia. Practically, it sheds light on the structural conditions that limit women's participation in EU diplomacy, providing insights that are relevant for policymakers, institutional reformers, and advocates of gender equality. Ultimately, this research underscores that achieving gender parity in international politics requires more than rhetorical commitments; it demands a rethinking of how institutions are built, who they serve, and whose voices are valued from the very beginning.

Literature Review

This literature review explores the concept of critical junctures within historical institutionalism, focusing on how foundational decisions shape long-term institutional trajectories. It examines key debates around agency, structure, path dependency, and gendered institutional design, with particular attention to the EEAS as a case of missed gender reform. The review identifies gaps in the existing literature, especially in accounting for how gendered exclusions become entrenched during critical junctures. It draws on feminist and discursive institutionalist insights to analyse how dominant norms are reproduced or contested during moments of institutional openness. These gaps are then addressed and theorised further in the following theoretical framework section.

The concept of critical junctures originates within the broader tradition of historical institutionalism, a school of thought in political science that emphasises the enduring effects of past decisions on institutional development. Unlike rational choice institutionalism, which often focuses on the strategic behaviour of actors within fixed structures, or sociological institutionalism, which emphasises the normative and cultural embedding of institutions, historical institutionalism is particularly concerned with temporal sequences and causal processes. It seeks to explain how institutions evolve over time, especially how early decisions constrain later choices, producing path-dependent trajectories that shape the long-term direction of political and organisational systems (Steinmo et al., 1992). Within this tradition, critical junctures are defined as short but consequential periods of institutional fluidity in which the usual structural constraints on political actors are temporarily loosened. During these periods, multiple institutional outcomes are possible, and the choices made can have disproportionately large and durable effects (Steinmo et al., 1992). As Capoccia and Kelemen argue, critical junctures are not merely episodes of change but are characterised by

heightened contingency and agency, followed by a return to institutional stability in which the new path becomes reinforced over time (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). These moments often emerge in response to major disruptions, such as crises, wars, regime transitions, or organisational reforms, that destabilise established patterns and open the door to significant institutional reordering. Crucially, critical junctures are not defined solely by the magnitude of change but by their temporal positioning within the broader arc of institutional development. They are brief relative to the extended periods of path-dependent stability that follow. This is what Pierson calls the "asymmetry of time": significant change may occur rapidly, but its consequences unfold slowly and cumulatively, making early decisions particularly consequential (Pierson, 2004). Capoccia further refines the concept by highlighting three defining features of critical junctures: (1) relaxed structural constraints, which broaden the space for political action; (2) decisive actor choices, which close off alternative paths; and (3) lasting legacies, which shape subsequent institutional development through self-reinforcing mechanisms (Capoccia, 2016). Importantly, not all moments of institutional change qualify as critical junctures. What distinguishes a true critical juncture is not just that change occurred, but that it could have taken plausibly different directions under the same conditions, a point that underscores the importance of reconstructing the historical context, actors' preferences, and the available alternatives at the time. The concept is also rooted in a processual view of institutional change, where the causal focus lies not just on outcomes but on the mechanisms that produce them. As Falleti and Lynch argue, process-tracing methods are essential to critical juncture analysis, as they allow scholars to identify the specific choices, interactions, and institutional configurations that channel the initial disruption into a particular trajectory (Falleti & Lynch, 2009). This methodological approach is particularly well-suited for studying bureaucratic creation and reform, where informal norms and elite negotiations often determine the content of institutional design.

While critical junctures offer the possibility of institutional innovation, they do not guarantee progressive or inclusive outcomes. In fact, many scholars have pointed out that such periods often result in the reproduction of dominant power structures. As Capoccia and Ziblatt note, moments of institutional openness are typically sites of intense contestation, where actors with greater resources and organisational capacity are best positioned to shape outcomes (Capoccia & Ziblatt, 2010). This observation is particularly salient for gender-sensitive institutional analysis, as feminist scholars have shown that foundational moments are frequently gender-blind, and that failing to explicitly prioritise gender inclusion during a critical juncture can result in long-term institutional exclusion (Mackay et al., 2010; Chappell & Waylen, 2013).

A central debate in the critical juncture literature concerns the relative roles of agency and structure in shaping institutional outcomes. While critical junctures are moments of heightened possibility, scholars differ on whether these openings are primarily driven by willful actor choices or still heavily constrained by pre-existing structural forces. Understanding this tension is essential for analysing why certain paths, such as the gender-blind institutional design of the EEAS, are chosen over others, even when alternatives are feasible. On one side of the debate, agency-centred perspectives emphasise that critical junctures are defined by a temporary relaxation of structural constraints, which allows political actors to exert greater influence than is normally possible. James Mahoney describes these moments as instances of "relative structural indeterminism," where actors, freed from institutional inertia, can make meaningful and even radical choices (Mahoney, 2000). This view foregrounds the role of leadership, strategic calculation, and political entrepreneurship in shaping institutional trajectories. Critical junctures, from this perspective, are not deterministic, but contingent upon the agency of actors capable of recognising and seizing reform opportunities. This emphasis on agency is particularly relevant in contexts where

political crises, leadership transitions, or treaty reforms create institutional ambiguity, allowing for novel interpretations and institutional experimentation. Structuralist approaches, by contrast, warn against overstating the freedom of actors during critical junctures. Scholars such as Tulia Falleti and Julia Lynch argue that even in moments of apparent fluidity, actors' choices are deeply embedded in socio-political and institutional contexts (Falleti & Lynch, 2009). These antecedent conditions shape not only the menu of feasible options but also the interpretive frameworks through which actors understand those options. From this perspective, the outcomes of critical junctures reflect not the free will of unconstrained agents but the reproduction of longstanding power asymmetries, ideologies, and organisational routines. For example, when studying the EEAS, Morgenstern-Pomorski observes that the Service emerged not as a clean institutional slate but as a contested field where national and supranational actors competed over symbolic and material resources (Morgenstern-Pomorski, 2018). In such spaces, gender equality initiatives are often marginalised in favour of institutional consolidation and status quo preservation. This interaction between agency and structure is further illuminated by the concept of strategic interaction under constraint. Even reform-minded actors are rarely operating with a blank slate; rather, they must navigate competing interests, institutional logics, and culturally embedded norms. Chappell and Waylen argue that feminist institutional change requires both opportunity structures and actor mobilisation, meaning that the presence of a window for change does not guarantee feminist outcomes unless accompanied by sustained and well-positioned advocacy (Chappell & Waylen, 2013). The logic of institutional legitimacy also plays a role here. March and Olsen's concept of the "logic of appropriateness" suggests that actors tend to behave in ways that align with what is considered legitimate or normal within their institutional context (March & Olsen, 1989). In diplomacy, as feminist scholars have shown (e.g. Aggestam & Towns, 2019), this often means conforming to masculinised expectations of leadership,

professionalism, and neutrality, further constraining the ability of actors to pursue gender-progressive reforms, even during moments of institutional change. Thus, the outcome of a critical juncture is best understood not as a binary between agency and structure, but as a complex interaction between the two. Actors may possess discretion, but that discretion is always situated within broader institutional legacies, power relations, and normative constraints.

Furthermore, critical junctures are often analysed through the lens of path dependency, a core concept in historical institutionalism that explains how early decisions, particularly those made during periods of institutional openness, can become self-reinforcing over time. As Pierson argues, once a particular institutional path is selected, it generates increasing returns, whereby each step down the path raises the costs (material, cognitive, and political) of reversal (Pierson, 2000). This process leads to institutional lock-in, where change becomes not only unlikely but structurally constrained, even if the original decision was suboptimal or politically contested. Historical institutionalist scholars stress that this continuity is not merely the result of inertia (Pierson, 2000). Rather, institutions actively reproduce their original configurations through mechanisms such as learning effects, coordination incentives, and power consolidation. For example, despite increasing rhetorical commitments to gender equality within the EU, the foundational choices, shaped by male-dominated national diplomatic traditions, solidified an institutional architecture that made later inclusion efforts difficult to implement effectively. Theories developed by scholars such as Pierson, Capoccia, and Kelemen help explain how these gendered norms persist. Pierson's theory of path dependency elucidates how institutional actors become locked into established routines, not necessarily because they are optimal, but because deviating from them imposes mounting costs or disrupts vested interests (Pierson, 2000). Capoccia and Kelemen expand this logic by focusing on the moments when path dependency begins,

critical junctures, which they define as short periods of heightened institutional fluidity during which multiple future trajectories are possible (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). However, these moments are rarely neutral or egalitarian. They are often shaped by asymmetrical power relations, elite interests, and the uneven distribution of ideational and material resources. March and Olsen's concept of the logic of appropriateness provides a complementary lens, illustrating how institutional actors tend to conform to established behavioural scripts that appear legitimate and natural within their professional setting (March & Olsen, 1989). In diplomatic contexts, these scripts are often implicitly gendered, privileging traits coded as masculine, such as assertiveness, strategic detachment, and competitiveness, while marginalising alternative models of leadership associated with collaboration, empathy, or relational diplomacy. Over time, the repeated enactment of these behaviours reinforces their institutional legitimacy, narrowing the perceived space for transformative change. Skocpol and Pierson further argue that institutional continuity is often the product of strategic action rather than structural inertia alone (Skocpol & Pierson, 2002). Dominant actors, typically those who benefited from the initial institutional configuration, have both the incentive and the capacity to resist reforms that threaten their status or disrupt established power dynamics. Hence, the concept of path dependency highlights how institutional trajectory can become locked in through a combination of early design choices, informal behavioural norms, and strategic resistance to change. This approach reinforces the importance of the initial conditions set during critical junctures, as they generate long-term institutional effects that are difficult to reverse without significant political will, resources, or structural disruption.

While the concept of critical junctures is typically associated with systemic transformations, such as regime changes, revolutions, or constitutional reforms, scholars have increasingly recognised that not all junctures occur on such grand scales. There exists a

spectrum of critical junctures, ranging from broad, regime-wide upheavals to more sectoral or institutional disruptions, where significant change is confined to a specific policy domain or organisation. Indeed, in their seminal study of labour incorporation in Latin America, Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier distinguish between critical junctures of wide-ranging systemic consequence and those affecting more narrowly defined institutional arenas (Collier & Collier, 1991). The former can reshape political regimes or entire state-society relations, while the latter involve significant, though often more technocratically framed, institutional changes within ongoing political structures. Capoccia further refines this understanding by arguing that critical junctures can vary not only in scale but also in scope and depth (Capoccia, 2016). Some junctures provide actors with wide latitude for change (high discretion), while others are more constrained by antecedent institutional and ideological legacies. This insight is particularly relevant to gender-focused institutional analysis. Even where formal discretion exists, informal norms, cultural expectations, and elite configurations can narrow the effective range of outcomes. Moreover, Capoccia and Ziblatt argue that critical junctures in one institution can occur within a broader political system that remains stable, which is highly relevant in the case of the EEAS, as we will explore later on (Capoccia & Ziblatt, 2010). Importantly, the impact of a critical juncture cannot be measured solely by the immediate scale of change, but rather by the durability and direction of its legacy. A seemingly modest institutional reform, if embedded during a formative moment, can have long-lasting consequences by shaping organisational culture, professional expectations, and recruitment pipelines. Therefore, recognising the varieties and scales of critical junctures helps nuance our understanding of institutional change. It highlights the need to examine critical junctures not only at the level of macro-political transformations but also within the micropolitics of bureaucratic formation, where the stakes, though more discreet, are no less consequential.

Understanding the causal dynamics of critical junctures requires more than identifying moments of institutional change; it demands a methodologically rigorous reconstruction of the historical processes through which those changes were made possible, and ultimately consolidated. Among the most effective tools for this kind of analysis is process-tracing, a qualitative method that allows scholars to unpack the temporal and causal sequences linking antecedent conditions to institutional outcomes. In the study of critical junctures, process-tracing is particularly valuable for identifying the mechanisms through which agency, structure, and contingency interact, shaping the trajectory of institutional development. Falleti and Falleti and Lynch argue that process-tracing enables researchers to examine how initial conditions, such as political crises, elite configurations, or normative shifts, interact with actor choices and institutional environments to produce path-dependent outcomes (Falleti, 2006; Falleti & Lynch, 2009). Rather than treating critical junctures as singular events, process-tracing focuses on the micro-level decisions, interactions, and strategic calculations that unfold during the window of institutional fluidity. This makes it possible to assess not just what changed, but how and why certain options prevailed over others. In line with this approach, Capoccia and Kelemen emphasise the importance of historical reconstruction for identifying the range of plausible alternatives available to decision-makers at the time (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). They caution against retrospective determinism, insisting that scholars must consider not only the path that was taken, but also the paths not taken, and the reasons those alternatives were excluded. This involves analysing elite bargaining processes, institutional constraints, prevailing ideational frames, and the relative strength of competing actors. One of the advantages of process-tracing is that it allows for a multi-causal, layered understanding of institutional development. Rather than isolating a single explanatory variable, it traces how multiple mechanisms, such as elite negotiations, norm diffusion, strategic framing, or informal power dynamics, combine to shape outcomes over time. This is

particularly relevant to feminist institutionalist approaches, which stress the interplay of formal and informal rules in reproducing gendered power structures. Scholars such as Mackay et al. and Chappell and Waylen have used process-tracing to uncover how gender-blind decisions, informal networks, and masculinised norms become embedded into institutions during their formative stages, often without explicit resistance or contestation (Mackay et al., 2010; Chappell & Waylen, 2013). Additionally, process-tracing sheds light on the discursive conditions that shaped perceptions of legitimacy and competence. As feminist scholars have noted, institutional actors often default to masculinised understandings of professionalism, particularly in diplomacy, where qualities like toughness, control, and detachment are privileged (Aggestam & Towns, 2019; Holmes & Yarhi-Milo, 2017). A process-tracing approach allows the analyst to follow how such norms were reproduced at key junctures, e.g. through informal selection processes, policy framing, or internal bureaucratic hierarchies, thereby revealing the cultural logics underpinning gendered institutional continuity. Ultimately, process-tracing aligns with the goals of feminist historical institutionalism by making visible the contingent, strategic, and often invisible dynamics through which gendered institutions are created and sustained. It offers a powerful framework for tracing not only the what of institutional gender bias, but also the how and when, an analytical approach that is indispensable for a thesis investigating the EEAS as a missed critical juncture for gender reform.

A growing strand of literature examines how institutional design during critical junctures often embeds gendered norms and power asymmetries, despite periods of formal openness. Feminist institutionalist scholars such as Mackay, Krook and Mackay, and Chappell and Waylen argue that institutions are not gender-neutral; rather, they are shaped by deeply embedded cultural assumptions and informal rules that reproduce masculinised logics of authority and leadership (Chappell & Waylen, 2013; Krook & Mackay, 2011; Mackay,

2010). These gendered dynamics are particularly salient during foundational moments, when institutions are more fluid and new practices could be established, yet often are not. As Mackay contends, such junctures frequently result in the layering of gender-blind decisions that, once stabilised, become difficult to reverse through path-dependent reinforcement (Krook & Mackay, 2011). The creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS) is a compelling example of this phenomenon. While its formation in 2010 offered an institutional blank slate following the Lisbon Treaty, the EEAS quickly reproduced the masculinised norms prevalent in national diplomatic services. Scholars like Bátora describe the EEAS as an "interstitial organisation", neither fully supranational nor intergovernmental, which theoretically allowed for innovation but in practice facilitated the importation of dominant norms from member states (Bátora, 2013). In this context, gendered diplomatic traditions, already entrenched within national ministries, filled the organisational vacuum. Morgenstern-Pomorski highlights how the EEAS became a contested institutional space where supranational and national actors negotiated authority, often sidelining gender concerns in favour of bureaucratic consolidation (Morgenstern-Pomorski, 2018). These dynamics reflect a broader tendency noted by Lindner and Rittberger, who argue that new institutions, far from being neutral or transformative, frequently replicate existing structures due to strategic constraints and interpretive frames shaped by antecedent conditions (Lindner & Rittberger, 2003). Aggestam and Towns illustrate this by showing that masculinised norms remain dominant in high-stakes negotiations and elite diplomatic roles (Aggestam & Towns, 2019). Their research demonstrates that while women are overrepresented in administrative or support functions, men continue to monopolise the symbolic and strategic domains of diplomacy. Feminist scholars have long argued that diplomacy is not a neutral or technocratic field but a gendered practice steeped in historically masculine norms and exclusions. Foundational feminist IR work, such as that by Jill Steans, has challenged the

gender-blindness of traditional international relations, emphasising that the structures and language of global politics systematically marginalise women and feminised perspectives (Steans, 1998). Cassidy develops this critique by showing how diplomacy remains tied to conventional gender norms, marginalising women not only numerically but symbolically, through narrow constructions of leadership and legitimacy (Cassidy, 2017). These critiques build on Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) insight that gender is socially constructed and performative, a lens that highlights how masculine-coded norms are naturalised and perpetuated in institutions like the EEAS. Feminist scholars also challenge the idea that increasing women's representation alone is sufficient. They argue instead that we must examine the deeper institutional logics that determine who is recognised as a legitimate diplomatic actor. Towns, for example, demonstrates how essentialist claims (e.g. women as more empathetic or better listeners) are often used both to justify and to undermine women's presence in diplomacy (Towns, 2020). Similarly, Standfield draws on Bourdieu to show how the symbolic capital of masculinity, manifested in norms of availability, assertiveness, and informal networking, reproduces male dominance in diplomatic spaces, even as institutions nominally commit to gender equality (Standfield, 2020). These findings reinforce the idea that without structural reform and binding mechanisms, institutions will continue to replicate gendered hierarchies under the guise of neutrality. This insight underscores the importance of analysing critical junctures not simply as opportunities for inclusion, but as contested moments in which dominant norms are either reproduced or strategically reconfigured. Together, these studies reinforce the argument that critical junctures are not merely opportunities for reform, but also high-stakes moments when dominant actors can entrench exclusionary practices under the guise of institutional neutrality. Without active, structurally embedded mechanisms for inclusion, the default outcome during such junctures is often the preservation of existing hierarchies. This insight underscores the necessity of understanding

gender not as an add-on to institutional analysis, but as a central axis through which power, norms, and authority are negotiated and reproduced, particularly at critical moments of institutional formation.

Finally, while structural and institutional analyses help explain the material and organisational conditions that shape institutional trajectories, scholars have increasingly turned to the role of ideas, norms, and discursive practices in explaining why certain institutional paths become legitimate and others are foreclosed. This ideational turn, particularly prominent in historical institutionalism, constructivism, and feminist theory, underscores that institutional change is not only a struggle over resources and positions, but also over meaning, legitimacy, and recognition. Discursive institutionalism, as articulated by scholars like Vivien Schmidt, emphasises the power of discourse in shaping both the construction of institutional rules and the perceptions of what is feasible or appropriate (Schmidt, 2008). Institutions, in this view, are not just rule-bound structures but arenas of meaning-making, where actors articulate, contest, and legitimise particular norms. The ideas and values that dominate these discursive arenas, whether about competence, neutrality, merit, or leadership, play a central role in shaping institutional outcomes. Feminist scholars have been particularly effective in showing how these discursive norms serve to marginalise women and feminised styles of leadership. As Cassidy argues, diplomacy continues to be shaped by archaic norms that equate effective performance with masculine-coded behaviours, thereby excluding other forms of expertise and engagement (Cassidy, 2017). Even when formal commitments to gender equality exist, as they do in the EU context, the symbolic construction of legitimacy within diplomacy can neutralise or undermine those commitments. These discursive constructions become embedded in the institution's hiring practices, career trajectories, and informal norms, creating what feminist institutionalists call "gendered organisational logics", norms that appear neutral but in fact reproduce gendered hierarchies

(Acker, 1990; Mackay et al., 2010). Moreover, the gendered nature of these norms is often reinforced through essentialist narratives, even when they purport to be inclusive. As Ann Towns notes, women in diplomacy are often praised for traits like empathy, listening, or emotional intelligence, but these same traits are simultaneously used to rationalise their exclusion from high-stakes or strategic roles (Towns, 2020). This double bind, where gendered traits are both valued and devalued, serves to entrench the perception that women are inherently better suited to support roles rather than leadership. In critical juncture analysis, such discursive dynamics are essential for understanding why certain paths are taken while others are abandoned. Even when structural conditions allow for institutional innovation, as they arguably did during the EEAS's creation, ideas about what is appropriate, feasible, or legitimate can powerfully constrain the range of viable choices. This underscores the insight from Capoccia and Kelemen that outcomes at critical junctures are shaped not only by actor preferences and strategic interactions, but also by the interpretive frames through which those preferences are formed and justified (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). Overall, analysing the role of ideas and discursive legitimacy highlights how gendered power operates not just through rules and structures, but also through meanings, narratives, and cultural assumptions. In conclusion, this review has shown that critical junctures are not inherently transformative but are shaped by power, norms, and institutional legacies. Understanding these dynamics through historical and feminist institutionalism highlights the importance of embedding structural change at formative stages.

Despite these insights, existing literature does not fully explain how gendered exclusions become durably embedded during institutional formation, particularly in hybrid, contested organisations like the EEAS. While feminist institutionalism highlights the gendered nature of institutional design, there is a need for a more precise conceptualisation of the mechanisms through which these exclusions are locked in during critical junctures. The

following theoretical framework develops the concept of gendered lock-in to address this gap, offering a novel explanation for how exclusionary gender norms persist even in formally egalitarian institutional environments.

Theoretical Framework

This thesis investigates how the European External Action Service (EEAS), established after the Lisbon Treaty, failed to institutionalise gender equality at its inception, despite operating within a broader EU context that formally supported such values. To explore this puzzle, the research proposes a new theoretical concept, gendered lock-in, informed by institutional feminism, as its central contribution. Gendered lock-in refers to the process by which gendered exclusions become embedded in institutional structures and persist over time, even in contexts formally committed to equality. This concept is developed by drawing on two interlocking theoretical approaches: historical institutionalism and feminist institutionalism. Together, they offer a comprehensive framework for analysing how gendered exclusions are embedded, reproduced, and legitimised during moments of institutional formation. The preceding literature review identified a gap in existing institutionalist and feminist scholarship: while much work has explored how gender is sidelined in institutional formation, fewer have examined how this exclusion becomes durably embedded through a combination of formal, informal, and discursive mechanisms. This theoretical framework responds to that gap by proposing the concept of gendered lock-in, which synthesises insights from historical and feminist institutionalism to explain how gender inequality becomes institutionalised during critical junctures.

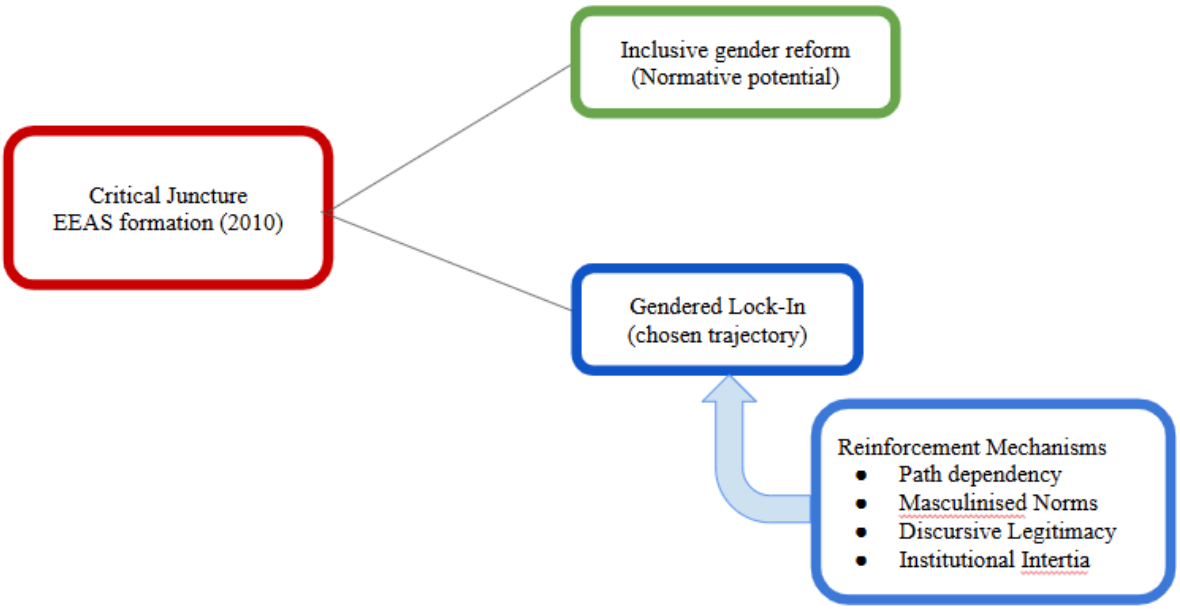

Figure 1: Critical Juncture

Historical Institutionalism and Critical Junctures

At the heart of this thesis lies the concept of the critical juncture, a central construct in historical institutionalism, which provides a powerful framework for understanding how institutions are formed, solidified, and maintained over time. Historical institutionalism focuses on the long-term impact of early institutional choices, particularly those made during periods of heightened contingency, moments when existing structures are temporarily loosened and multiple outcomes become possible (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). These moments, known as critical junctures, are characterised by a relaxation of constraints, increased agency, and the potential for divergent institutional trajectories. Once a choice is made, however, it tends to set the institution on a particular path-dependent course, reinforced through mechanisms such as increasing returns, institutional inertia, coordination effects, and the consolidation of power (Pierson, 2000). The creation of the EEAS is conceptualised in this thesis as precisely such a critical juncture. It was a rare moment of institutional

innovation and reconfiguration within the EU, one in which the structures of European diplomacy were not only open to change but actively being reimagined. The establishment of a dedicated diplomatic service for the Union marked a major symbolic and structural step in the EU's evolution as a global actor. It was also an unprecedented institutional experiment: a fusion of bureaucratic elements from the European Commission, the Council Secretariat, and the national diplomatic services of the Member States. This blending of institutional cultures created a unique space of inter-institutional convergence, where new norms, procedures, and hierarchies could have been shaped (Bátora, 2013; Spence & Bátora, 2015). However, this moment of opportunity did not translate into structural progress on gender equality. Despite the EU's normative commitments to gender mainstreaming and equal representation, long enshrined in foundational treaties and reinforced by successive directives and strategies, gender considerations were effectively absent from the EEAS's founding texts and institutional architecture. This absence cannot be reduced to simple oversight. Rather, as historical institutionalism suggests, it reflects a decisive choice made during a formative period, one whose consequences would prove enduring. Once the institution was launched without binding gender mechanisms or accountability structures, it became increasingly difficult to introduce them retroactively. The early exclusion of gender thus became locked in, shaping not only the internal composition of the Service but also its organisational norms and professional culture (Pierson, 2000; Mahoney, 2000).

The EEAS was created under considerable institutional and political pressure, amid intergovernmental bargaining and Member State concerns over sovereignty in foreign policy. As such, its design prioritised bureaucratic pragmatism and institutional compromise over normative ambition (Spence & Bátora, 2015). The institutional logic of "getting it done", assembling a functioning service quickly, by balancing competing national interests, left little space for structural innovation on equality. This logic also explains why the appointment of

Catherine Ashton as the first High Representative for Foreign Affairs, while symbolically significant, did not translate into broader feminist reform. Her gender made her a visible figure, but as numerous interviewees confirmed, she did not prioritise gender issues during her mandate. The masculine culture of diplomacy remained unchallenged, and the role of Secretary General, the true centre of administrative authority within the EEAS, continued to be held by men, further entrenching traditional hierarchies (Aggestam & Towns, 2019). This institutional configuration is a clear illustration of what historical institutionalists describe as increasing returns: once an organisational path is chosen, the costs of reversal rise, and the benefits of continuity, even if suboptimal, are perceived to outweigh the risks of reform (Pierson, 2000). Furthermore, the EEAS's hybrid nature, drawing from multiple sources of institutional legitimacy (national, supranational, intergovernmental), made internal reform especially slow and contested. In such a fragmented structure, introducing transversal changes like gender mainstreaming would have required not only internal political will but also the alignment of multiple actors across different institutional and national cultures, a difficult undertaking once the moment of openness had passed (Bátora, 2013). Thus, the EEAS offers a paradigmatic case of a missed opportunity: an institution created under favourable normative conditions for gender-sensitive reform, yet one that failed to act on these principles when it mattered most. The gender-blind design choices made at its inception did not simply reflect bureaucratic inertia or technical oversight. They represent a form of political decision-making that prioritised institutional cohesion and expediency over equity and inclusion. In doing so, these early decisions initiated a path-dependent trajectory in which subsequent efforts to address gender inequalities were constrained by the institutional architecture itself. In this sense, historical institutionalism helps to explain how and why foundational exclusions matter. It shows that decisions made during moments of institutional flux carry disproportionate weight, and that failure to institutionalise equality during those

moments creates long-term structural constraints. While later reforms are possible, they often face significant resistance, both from the embedded logics of the institution and from the actors who benefit from the status quo. The case of the EEAS illustrates how early design choices become sticky, solidifying into routines, norms, and practices that shape the organisation's identity and its operational logic, often in ways that appear neutral, but are in fact deeply gendered (Chappell & Waylen, 2013).

Feminist Institutionalism and Gendered Logics of Appropriateness

While historical institutionalism provides a framework for understanding how foundational decisions become path-dependent and shape long-term institutional trajectories, it does not fully account for how power and legitimacy are constructed through gendered norms and informal practices. To address this, the thesis integrates insights from feminist institutionalism, which brings to light the ways in which institutions are not gender-neutral but are structured by implicit norms, assumptions, and routines that systematically privilege masculinised behaviours, values, and actors (Mackay et al., 2010; Chappell & Waylen, 2013). Feminist institutionalism argues that institutions are governed not only by formal rules and procedures but also by informal logics of appropriateness, unwritten norms about who belongs, who leads, and what counts as professional or legitimate. These norms are historically gendered and are reproduced through daily practices, discourses, and expectations. In the case of diplomacy, such logics have traditionally valorised traits coded as masculine: assertiveness, decisiveness, hierarchical command, availability for constant mobility, and emotional detachment (Aggestam & Towns, 2019). These traits are subtly but powerfully positioned as the "default" standard of diplomatic professionalism, marginalising those who do not or cannot conform. Within the EEAS, these gendered logics of

appropriateness were evident from the start. The early configuration of the Service, shaped by intergovernmental negotiation and institutional compromise, lacked not only formal mechanisms for gender equality but also any challenge to the dominant norms of what a diplomat should be. While the EU had long affirmed its normative commitment to gender equality, these principles were not embedded in the founding architecture of the EEAS. Instead, the recruitment and promotion practices within the Service reproduced patterns of exclusion that had long characterised the diplomatic field. For example, the allocation of leadership posts and the criteria for advancement often relied on informal expectations such as uninterrupted career paths, international postings, and availability for high-stress, high-mobility roles. These expectations inherently disadvantaged women, particularly those with caregiving responsibilities or non-linear professional trajectories, realities disproportionately shaped by gendered divisions of labour in both public and private life. While the EEAS may have appeared formally open to gender inclusion, in practice, it privileged those who conformed to a masculinised model of professional legitimacy.

Moreover, symbolic gestures of inclusion, such as the appointment of a woman to lead the Service, did not translate into structural transformation. Catherine Ashton's role as the first High Representative for Foreign Affairs was politically significant but institutionally hollow in gender terms. As several interviewees pointed out, Ashton did not advance a feminist agenda during her mandate, nor did she initiate reforms to address gender disparities within the Service. Her appointment thus remained largely representational rather than transformational, underscoring the limits of symbolic inclusion in the absence of institutional backing. Feminist institutionalism helps to explain why such symbolic gestures often coexist with entrenched exclusion. The concept of "performative equality" is useful here: institutions may appear to support gender diversity on the surface, through statements, appointments, or token representation, while maintaining deeply gendered practices that preserve existing

hierarchies. For instance, while some women were promoted to visible roles in EU delegations abroad, strategic decision-making remained concentrated in Brussels-based positions largely occupied by men. Such arrangements suggest a form of gendered spatial segregation, where women are made visible in peripheral roles while core authority remains male-dominated. Furthermore, the persistence of gendered norms in the EEAS reflects broader cultural assumptions about what constitutes neutrality and meritocracy. As feminist scholars have argued, these concepts are themselves socially constructed and often mask exclusion. Discursive institutionalism, closely aligned with feminist critiques, highlights how ideas like neutrality and objectivity are mobilised to legitimise existing power structures. In the EEAS, gender-blind discourses created an illusion of fairness, even as informal norms continued to shape recruitment, leadership evaluations, and access to influence.

This dynamic can be understood through the concept of gendered lock-in, introduced in this thesis to describe the layered and mutually reinforcing mechanisms through which gendered exclusions become durable and legitimate. Unlike traditional forms of institutional lock-in, which emphasise material incentives or procedural inertia, gendered lock-in highlights how informal norms, symbolic capital, and discursive frames interact to naturalise exclusion. Traits associated with male-coded diplomacy become embedded not only in career paths but also in institutional imagination, shaping what leadership looks like, who deserves authority, and what types of knowledge are valued. Drawing on Bourdieu-inspired feminist theory, particularly the concept of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2001), feminist institutionalism reveals how institutions like the EEAS reproduce exclusion not through explicit discrimination but through subtle, cumulative processes that define belonging and legitimacy. Women entering the Service often face what one interviewee called a “double scrutiny”: their competence is questioned more readily, and their failures are more visible, while their successes are often attributed to diversity quotas or symbolic motives rather than

merit. These dynamics not only affect individual careers but also shape the broader organisational culture, discouraging feminist advocacy and limiting institutional imagination. However, feminist institutionalism does not treat institutions as static or completely deterministic. It acknowledges the role of agency, particularly from actors who work from within to challenge and reshape institutional norms. Several women interviewed for this thesis shared how they developed strategic forms of institutional activism, mentoring junior staff, advocating for inclusive hiring practices, or subtly questioning promotion criteria that undervalue relational and collaborative leadership styles. Rather than confronting institutional norms head-on, many employed incremental tactics to widen the space for gender-sensitive practice. These efforts show that even within locked-in structures, contestation and change are possible, especially when legitimacy is redefined through practice. This attention to internal resistance highlights the importance of not only analysing institutions from the top down, but also from the ground up, paying close attention to the everyday practices, micro-decisions, and informal networks that shape how norms are reproduced or challenged. It also underscores the need to differentiate between formal openness and real inclusiveness. Without tackling the gendered logics that structure daily work and shape professional identities, even the most well-intentioned equality policies will remain superficial.

Gendered Lock-In: A Conceptual Synthesis

Building on the insights of historical institutionalism and feminist institutionalism, this thesis introduces the concept of gendered lock-in to capture how gendered exclusions become embedded, legitimised, and stabilised over time through the interplay of structural, normative, and discursive forces. While each theoretical tradition highlights different mechanisms of institutional reproduction, gendered lock-in brings them together to offer a

more comprehensive understanding of how exclusion persists even in contexts nominally committed to equality. Historical institutionalism explains how foundational decisions made during critical junctures, such as the creation of the EEAS, set institutions on path-dependent trajectories that are increasingly difficult to reverse. Feminist institutionalism, meanwhile, reveals how institutions are governed by informal norms and gendered logics of appropriateness, which privilege masculinised behaviours and leadership styles, often under the guise of neutrality or professionalism.

The concept of gendered lock-in synthesises these insights by emphasising how exclusion is not simply the result of inaction or oversight, but of mutually reinforcing mechanisms: formal structures (like recruitment systems), informal practices (such as mobility-based promotion criteria), and legitimising discourses (e.g., meritocracy, neutrality). These mechanisms interact to make gender inequality both invisible and resilient, particularly in elite bureaucratic contexts like diplomacy, where authority is often coded in masculine terms. What distinguishes gendered lock-in from traditional accounts of institutional inertia is its attention to how discourses and norms naturalise exclusion, making it seem logical, unintentional, or even meritocratic. It explains why institutions like the EEAS, created under ostensibly progressive conditions, can nevertheless reproduce exclusionary logics, despite formal commitments to gender equality. Moreover, gendered lock-in is not unique to the EEAS. It is a conceptual tool with broader applicability to other institutions shaped by similar tensions between normative aspirations and structural constraints. It highlights how even symbolic gestures of inclusion, such as appointing women to visible leadership roles, can coexist with underlying patterns of exclusion if they are not accompanied by systemic reform. Importantly, this concept does not suggest that institutions are immutable. Rather, by diagnosing how exclusion becomes entrenched, it clarifies where and how change might occur. As later sections of this thesis show, individual agency and internal resistance can

begin to challenge gendered lock-in, even if only incrementally. Understanding the layered nature of this dynamic is essential for identifying not only how exclusion is produced, but also how it can be dismantled. In this way, gendered lock-in serves as both an analytical and diagnostic lens. It offers a contribution to institutional theory by foregrounding gender as a structuring force during institutional formation, and to feminist scholarship by illustrating how exclusion is maintained through the convergence of structure, practice, and discourse, often under the appearance of neutrality. Applied to the EEAS, it allows us to trace how an institution born from compromise and fragmentation failed to become a site of feminist transformation, and why that failure continues to shape its practices today.

Institutional Contradictions and Spaces for Resistance

While gendered lock-in helps explain the persistence of exclusion within the EEAS, institutions are not static or immune to change. Bureaucracies, even those shaped by path-dependent structures and masculinised norms, remain contested spaces, where meanings, norms, and practices are constantly negotiated. The contradictions between the EU's formal commitments to gender equality and the organisational realities of the EEAS create tensions that can, paradoxically, open opportunities for resistance and gradual transformation. These contradictions are not merely rhetorical. On one hand, the EU projects itself as a global advocate for equality, human rights, and inclusiveness. On the other hand, the institutional design and operational logic of its diplomatic service remain shaped by practices that reproduce elite, male-dominated hierarchies. This disconnect between values and structures is not only a political problem, it is also a space of friction in which alternative visions of professionalism and leadership can emerge.

The EEAS's hybrid and decentralised structure, formed through the integration of staff from the Commission, Council, and national diplomatic services, has contributed to organisational complexity and inertia. Yet this very hybridity also introduces institutional ambiguity, making it more difficult for any one set of norms to fully dominate. It is within these ambiguous zones, between competing institutional logics, that spaces for subtle forms of resistance can be found. Across different parts of the organisation, some actors have worked to reshape institutional norms from within. These efforts are not necessarily overt or confrontational. They often take the form of incremental, informal practices: mentoring younger staff, proposing more inclusive criteria for advancement, or questioning assumptions about mobility and full-time availability as markers of commitment. Such practices represent a form of institutional agency, small but meaningful acts that challenge dominant expectations and broaden the institutional imagination of what leadership and merit can look like. These forms of resistance are important not only because they seek change, but because they illuminate the boundaries of what the institution considers legitimate. Where actors face friction, for example, when gender concerns are dismissed as "personal" or "non-strategic", we see the contours of institutional resistance to change. Yet rather than withdrawing, some actors persist through strategic pragmatism, framing their proposals in ways that align with institutional priorities such as efficiency, effectiveness, or cohesion. This kind of resistance, quiet, negotiated, and embedded in everyday practice, underscores a key insight from feminist institutionalism: that change is not always revolutionary. Instead, it often comes from inside, through the cumulative impact of actors who reinterpret norms, model alternative behaviours, and stretch the meaning of what is possible within the system. These efforts may not immediately disrupt path-dependent structures, but they challenge their stability and open possibilities for reinterpretation and future reform. Moreover, these internal practices do not exist in isolation. They intersect with broader EU-level developments,

including stronger policy attention to diversity, equality, and transparency. While these frameworks are not always fully implemented within the EEAS, they provide external reference points that can be leveraged internally. In this way, resistance operates at multiple levels, drawing from institutional contradictions, policy tools, and the everyday actions of those who refuse to fully conform to exclusionary norms. Ultimately, the existence of resistance within the EEAS complicates any deterministic reading of gendered lock-in. It reminds us that structures constrain but do not eliminate agency. Understanding these micro-practices of resistance is crucial not only for explaining how change might occur within the EEAS, but for expanding our understanding of how institutions evolve, not through sudden shifts, but through gradual, contested, and negotiated processes.

Conclusion: A Diagnostic Lens for Gender and Institutional Design

This theoretical framework contributes a diagnostic lens for understanding how institutions that proclaim a commitment to equality can nonetheless reproduce exclusionary logics. By integrating historical institutionalism and feminist institutionalism, it provides a multi-layered account of how gendered outcomes emerge not from individual bias alone, but from a complex interplay of early design choices, informal norms, and legitimising discourses. The case of the EEAS does not represent a failure in the conventional sense, but rather a revealing example of how institutional design processes, even those launched in a favourable policy environment, are shaped by structural ambiguity, normative inertia, and implicit hierarchies of legitimacy. What appeared as gender neutrality functioned as a form of depoliticisation, effectively sidelining gender concerns in the name of pragmatism and intergovernmental compromise. This diagnostic lens reveals not a simple oversight, but a complex layering of constraints and norms that gradually resulted in gendered institutional

drift. This thesis, therefore, argues that founding moments like the creation of the EEAS are not just technical or administrative events, they are deeply political, and the choices made within them shape the possibilities for inclusion, representation, and transformation long into the future.

Methodology

This thesis employs a qualitative research design to explore the representation of women in the EEAS. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for this study because it allows for an in-depth examination of complex social phenomena, including institutional practices, norms, and the representation of women within the diplomatic sphere. The interpretive nature of qualitative research enables a nuanced understanding of how gender dynamics are shaped within the EEAS, as well as how these dynamics are influenced by historical and institutional factors. Through this approach, the study aims to reveal how the processes of institutional continuity and change impact gender diversity within the EEAS, as conceptualised by path dependency theory. Path dependency theory is essential for this study as it frames the creation of the EEAS as a critical juncture in EU diplomacy, during which foundational decisions shaped the long-term institutional culture. By focusing on how early design choices led to the marginalisation of gender considerations, the study sheds light on how entrenched norms became embedded within the organisational structure. This theoretical lens is crucial in understanding why the EEAS, despite being established in a favourable context for gender equality, failed to institutionalise gender-sensitive practices.

It is worth emphasising the resolutely academic and theoretical nature of this thesis, which is reflected in a certain binarity in the sources used. On the one hand, the secondary sources, mainly from the academic literature, provide the conceptual basis for understanding the dynamics of gender and institutional design analysed in this work. However, these concepts are often unfamiliar, if not completely foreign, to the interviewees, who have not studied them or used them in their professional lives. This partly explains the asymmetry between the theoretical depth of the analysis and the more empirical scope of the interviews. Nevertheless, this apparent dissociation between theory and practice should not be seen as a

methodological flaw. On the contrary, the use of specialised literature, sometimes very abstract, makes it possible to construct a rigorous and nuanced analysis grid, on which the interviews can then be grafted. The stories and experiences of the people interviewed thus take on meaning in the light of this analytical framework, while enriching it and anchoring it in the reality on the ground. By cross-checking the data from the interviews with the theoretical contributions, it quickly becomes clear that the concepts used in the literature are deeply inspired by the dynamics observed in the field. Clear correspondences emerge between the academic analyses and the practitioners' accounts, confirming the relevance of the dialogue between theory and practice in this type of qualitative research.

Data was collected through seven semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Two of the interviewees were national diplomats who collaborated closely with the EEAS during the period under study (2010–2015), providing an external yet informed perspective on the institution’s evolution. One interviewee was part of the EU Military Staff, offering valuable insight into the more securitised dimensions of the EEAS. Another interviewee worked within the office of the Secretary-General of the EEAS, while one held the position of Head of Unit. One respondent worked on the EEAS’s foreign policy portfolio, and another served as an advisor.

The chosen method for this study is semi-structured interviews, which are particularly well-suited to exploring both predetermined themes related to gender representation and emerging issues raised by participants. In practice, I prepared an interview guide in advance (an example is included in the appendix), but the conversations did not follow a rigid or linear format. Instead, they were adapted to each participant, allowing for open-ended responses and a more natural, spontaneous dialogue. This flexibility was essential for capturing the nuanced and diverse perspectives of individuals with first-hand experience in the institutional practices of the EEAS and the European Commission.

The interviewees came from varied professional and personal backgrounds and sometimes held contrasting views which I made a conscious effort to reflect in both the interviews and the writing of this thesis. My goal was to create a space where participants felt comfortable sharing personal anecdotes, field experiences, or more intimate reflections. To this end, I frequently encouraged interviewees to elaborate on their remarks or expand on briefly mentioned points, in order to collect rich qualitative data that could reveal the complex dynamics of gender representation within EU diplomacy.

This thesis does not aim to offer a comprehensive institutional audit of the EEAS's gender equality practices. Instead, it provides a critical, interpretive account of how a small group of practitioners experienced and understood the gendered dynamics of diplomacy. The goal is not statistical generalisation, but analytical depth, mapping recurring themes, narratives, and perceptions that shed light on institutional logics and exclusions. Furthermore, although the number of interviewees is modest, the diversity of their positions, ranging from policy officers to senior advisors and military personnel, provides insight into gendered dynamics across institutional levels. These perspectives are particularly valuable in a highly hierarchical and opaque system like the EEAS, where informal norms and organisational culture play a significant role in shaping inclusion. Several interviewees also occupied leadership roles or worked within proximity to strategic decision-making, offering insights into how gender is perceived, operationalised, or sidelined in both policy and practice.

Moreover, although the sample may appear heterogeneous in terms of institutional roles and areas of expertise, this diversity proved analytically fruitful. It allowed for a multi-level understanding of the EEAS's internal work culture and organisational norms, capturing perspectives from both strategic and operational levels of the hierarchy. Importantly, the diversity of institutional positions enabled a more precise examination of how organisational norms and gendered expectations manifest across different ranks,

shedding light on the potential existence and mechanics of a glass ceiling within the EEAS. The interviewees' varied vantage points made it possible to discern how gendered barriers may be experienced differently depending on one's proximity to leadership roles or exposure to decision-making arenas. Furthermore, six of the seven interviewees were women, which added significant depth to the gender analysis by centring the lived experiences of those most directly affected by structural inequalities. Interviewing a male official also offered valuable insights into gender relations and underscored the importance of involving all genders in conversations about equality. Despite differences in institutional affiliation and seniority, the interviews revealed a remarkable convergence in terms of diagnosis and critique. Most respondents described similar patterns of exclusion, informal norms, and missed opportunities for institutional change. Their testimonies also aligned in identifying practical steps that could have been taken, particularly during the early years of the EEAS, to embed more inclusive and gender-sensitive practices. This consistency across interviews reinforces the credibility of the findings and highlights the value of qualitative inquiry in uncovering deeply rooted organisational dynamics that may otherwise remain invisible. The sample was selected through purposive sampling, a technique that allows for the intentional selection of participants based on their expertise and role within the relevant institutional contexts. This sampling method was chosen to ensure that the voices of key decision-makers, policy advocates, and gender experts were included, thereby providing a comprehensive view of the gender dynamics within the EEAS. By selecting participants with strategic and operational roles, the study captures both macro-level policy perspectives and micro-level implementation challenges. Thematic analysis was employed to systematically examine the interview data. This method involves analysing the transcripts to identify recurring patterns, themes, and insights related to gender representation and institutional practices. By employing qualitative interviews and thematic analysis, this methodology aims to provide a

comprehensive understanding of the challenges and missed opportunities regarding women's representation in EU diplomacy. This approach not only highlights the institutional barriers to gender equality but also provides insights into the strategies that could have been employed to address these challenges at the EEAS's inception.

Finally, as a student researcher, my access was limited by institutional hierarchies and the geopolitical sensitivity of the EEAS's work. While this constrained the breadth of the sample, it also offered a revealing glimpse into which actors felt authorised, or not, to speak on gender issues. This asymmetry itself reflects the marginal position of gender within the EEAS, confirming many of the dynamics explored in this thesis. It is also important to emphasise how difficult it was to reach people and successfully secure interviews. As a student conducting research, I don't necessarily have a high level of perceived legitimacy, which understandably made things more challenging. While I did have access to many professional email addresses, this did not guarantee any engagement. Many people did not see a clear reason to respond to a student, or simply didn't consider my request as a priority. Moreover, the topic of my research is relatively specific, and I received several replies from individuals saying they didn't feel qualified enough to speak on the subject. It's also worth noting that the diplomatic world, especially within European institutions, is highly structured and hierarchical, involving individuals in high-level positions of responsibility. Given the current geopolitical climate, it is even more difficult to get a response or secure an interview, particularly from those in leadership roles. These factors significantly limited the number of interviews I was ultimately able to conduct.

Findings

I cross-referenced the information from the seven interviews and extracted seven distinct categories. This structuring considerably clarifies the data and avoids redundancy. The following table represents the different categories. Below are the cross-referencing of the information I got from each interview.

Table 1

	Interviewee 1	Interviewee 2	Interviewee 3	Interviewee 4	Interviewee 5	Interviewee 6	Interviewee 7
EEAS Origin & Design							
Top Leadership Impact							
Military vs Diplomatic Cultures							
Institutional and Cultural Barriers							
Gender Equality Tools and Initiatives							
Discrimination and Exclusion Experiences							
Strategic Vision and Feminist Frameworks							

EEAS Origin & Design

The foundational design of the European External Action Service (EEAS) is widely seen by interviewees as a key source of its persistent institutional limitations, particularly in the realm of gender equality. Several interviewees (1, 3, 4, 5, and 6) explicitly point to the chaotic nature of the EEAS's creation in 2010 as a hybrid construction of the Commission, Council, and Member States (MS), which embedded structural fragmentation and reinforced male-dominated institutional norms from the outset. Interviewee 3 describes this fusion as "disjointed," arguing that it created a workplace culture burdened by legacy hierarchies and a lack of coherent identity. Interviewee 5 offers a sharp critique of the foundational moment, lamenting that gender equality "fell through the cracks" due to political battles between the institutions involved, and stressing that foundational rules, "such as requiring multiple female

applicants per post", should have been written into the design from the beginning. Their experience with "toothless quotas" (e.g., the 40% rule) underscores how weak or symbolic commitments produce limited change in practice. These observations are echoed in Bátora's characterisation of the EEAS as an 'interstitial organisation,' which, rather than innovating, imported national diplomatic cultures and hierarchies, including their gendered assumptions (Bátora, 2013). Similarly, Morgenstern-Pomorski notes that EEAS formation was shaped more by institutional turf wars than by normative reform agendas, leaving little room for structural gender mainstreaming (Morgenstern-Pomorski, 2018). Interviewee 4 shares this view, calling the founding a "missed opportunity" and warning that without explicit legal and institutional commitments, deeper structural change remains out of reach. Interviewee 1 also points to how MS influence continues to shape internal policy and staffing decisions, particularly through their control over senior postings. This results in strategic decisions, such as sending women abroad for visibility, that reinforce a gendered imbalance at headquarters. Compounding this is the EEAS's temporary staffing model (e.g. 4-year contracts), which limits long-term institutional learning and reform consistency. Interviewee 6 further highlights the EEAS's intentionally weak legal status as a "service" rather than a formal institution, which was a deliberate choice meant to avoid infringing on MS sovereignty. This has downstream effects: EEAS staff are not recognised as diplomats by MS, and the service remains financially dependent on the Commission. The resulting lack of political and symbolic authority undermines the EEAS's capacity to implement reforms, including those related to equality and representation. From the military side, Interviewee 2, who was not present during the founding, notes that the EUMS remains institutionally and culturally separate from the EEAS, with its own pay structure and secondment system managed by MS. As such, the EEAS has little control over staffing or gender balance within its defense arm, reinforcing its structural limitations. Finally, Interviewee 7, reflects on the broader challenges

of merging institutional logics and professional cultures, particularly in civil–military environments, which resonates with the fragmentation described by other interviewees. Though she does not directly assess the EEAS's origin, her comments underscore how hybrid and compromise-based institutional setups often struggle to build coherent, inclusive, and reform-ready systems. Together, the interviews converge on a clear conclusion: the EEAS's foundational design, shaped by intergovernmental power struggles, male-coded institutional legacies, and legal ambiguity, has left a lasting imprint that continues to constrain its effectiveness, especially in advancing gender-sensitive diplomacy.

Top Leadership Impact

Across the interviews, leadership within the EEAS emerges as both a potential catalyst for change and a site of symbolic stagnation, where appointments often fail to challenge entrenched power dynamics. Several interviewees (1, 3, 4, 5, 6) discuss high-profile figures like Catherine Ashton and Federica Mogherini, who, though publicly celebrated as women leaders, were largely seen as symbolic selections with limited power. Ashton, HR/VP from 2009-2014, was characterised as a political compromise, British, Socialist, and female, but ultimately ineffective, while Mogherini, HR/VP from 2014-2019, was described as passive, with real power attributed to Helga Schmid, her Secretary-General. Schmid receives widespread praise (especially from Interviewees 1, 3, and 4) for instituting concrete internal reforms such as equality surveys, career advancement taskforces, and support networks. Her leadership was portrayed as substantively engaged in shifting internal culture, particularly around gender equality. This distinction between symbolic representation and transformative leadership is a well-documented phenomenon in feminist diplomacy literature. Towns (2020) and Cassidy (2017) both argue that women's presence in high-profile

roles is often celebrated rhetorically while institutional norms remain unchanged, echoing Interviewee 5's concern that appointments without reform deepen the perception of women as quota figures. However, Interviewee 4 warns that Schmid's departure created a vacuum, exposing the fragility of reforms dependent on individual leadership. They now feel unsupported when applying for senior roles, describing the following leadership as a "boys' club," and pointing to exclusionary dynamics perpetuated by other leaders, who publicly champions merit-only appointments while paradoxically leading the women's network. Interviewee 6 offers a more positive view of current Secretary-General Martínez-Carbonell, praising her assertiveness, strategic visibility (especially in multilateral settings like GAP III), and ability to use soft power to advance gender objectives despite the EEAS's limited formal authority. Meanwhile, Interviewee 5 reflects more broadly on the limits of leadership: although Schmid introduced tools to promote women, she is also critiqued for not addressing the deeper workplace culture, which continues to treat many high-ranking women as "quota appointments." They argue that real leadership must go beyond appointing women, it must actively reshape institutional norms and confront embedded structural barriers. In contrast, Interviewee 2, coming from the military sphere, underscores how rigid hierarchy and national secondment models in the EUMS limit leaders' ability to enact structural gender reforms. She shares her own experience as the "first woman" in multiple roles, highlighting the burden of visibility and the paternalism she encountered, including a superior feeling the need to "protect" her, as proof that leadership remains deeply shaped by gendered assumptions. Finally, interviewee 3 emphasises that meaningful change always requires active leadership, pointing to her own career trajectory as enabled by supportive (male) superiors who opened access to male-dominated networks. She stresses that symbolic leadership alone is insufficient unless backed by policies and cultural commitment. Interviewee 7 offers a more sociocultural perspective on female leadership, observing that women who rise to leadership

in midlife are often perceived as threats, unless, like Angela Merkel, they neutralise their femininity through style and presentation. Her reflection that Merkel only became "acceptable" as a leader when she adopted a desexualised public image, and the controversy caused by a single gala dress, underscores the lingering cultural tension between gender visibility and legitimacy in power. Across the board, interviewees converge on a key insight: leadership can make or break progress on gender equality, but only when it combines personal commitment, structural influence, and cultural awareness. Without these, even the most visible women in top roles risk being reduced to symbols rather than agents of transformation.

Military vs Diplomatic Cultures

The interviews reveal a complex, deeply entrenched divide between military and diplomatic cultures within the EU's external action structures, particularly between the EEAS and the EUMS. Structurally, the military and diplomatic branches operate on separate tracks: military personnel are seconded by national authorities, limiting the EU's control over gender balance, while diplomats are recruited through EU-level processes that allow for more gender-conscious hiring. As a result, the diversity profiles differ significantly, military spaces remain overwhelmingly male-dominated, rigid, and hierarchical, while diplomatic spaces, though still shaped by male-coded leadership norms, are gradually becoming more inclusive. Several interviewees emphasise that promotion within the military is time-bound and formulaic, which stalls women's advancement, particularly in leadership roles. One thing that was repeated by interviewees 2 and 7 is the importance of experience in the military. To be considered for a leadership position, you must go through all of the steps and the ranks before that. Ultimately, it means that it takes much longer to access those positions, mostly for

women, considering that the military world was opened to them rather late. In contrast, the diplomatic field, is seen as relatively more progressive, with women today occupying more and more senior roles. However, male-centric behaviours from the military, such as long hours, last-minute travel, and inflexible scheduling, have bled into diplomatic environments, reinforcing exclusionary workplace norms. Women often feel compelled to adopt these male-coded behaviours to be perceived as competent or leadership-ready. Additionally, women working in military or defence-related environments reported subtle but persistent forms of exclusion, not through overt harassment, but via systematic marginalisation, such as being left out of key meetings or decision-making forums during high-pressure security situations. This culture of implicit exclusion was often exacerbated by a fallback to "primitive reflexes" during crises, reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies. While initiatives like NATO's Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda and EEAS-led gender-responsive leadership training aim to shift institutional norms, the interviewees largely agree that substantive reform is slow, fragmented, and heavily dependent on national-level will and leadership from the top. Most foresee that achieving meaningful gender parity, particularly in military leadership, will take at least another decade, even as more women enter military careers. These challenges align with broader patterns observed in military institutions, including those documented by the EIGE. In its 2023 report on 'Gender Balance in the Security Sector,' EIGE notes that women's access to command positions in EU-linked security institutions remains limited due to inflexible hierarchies, national secondments, and stereotypical expectations, precisely the dynamics described by Interviewees 2 and 7 (*Gender Balance in the Security Sector*, 2023).

Institutional and Cultural Barriers

The interviewees collectively highlight a constellation of entrenched institutional and cultural barriers that inhibit meaningful progress on gender equality within the EEAS. As mentioned above, a core issue is the overarching dominance of member states, who retain decisive control over foreign policy and staffing via secondments, severely limiting the EEAS's autonomy and capacity to implement gender-balanced reforms. This national control is especially rigid in military appointments, where the EU has no authority to nominate personnel, resulting in a structurally male-dominated and slow-to-change environment. In the civilian branch, as pointed out by interviewee 1, many EEAS headquarters personnel are employed on four-year temporary contracts, which undermines institutional memory and continuity, discourages long-term cultural change, and limits the development of a coherent reform agenda. Personnel distribution is further shaped by systemic biases: member states often prefer to post men in Brussels, considered prestigious, while women are disproportionately sent abroad for symbolic visibility, reinforcing gendered hierarchies. These patterns reflect a diplomatic model built historically for men with non-working spouses, a model that remains largely unchanged despite the growing presence of women. Traditional expectations persist: late-night meetings, last-minute scheduling, and assumptions of total availability continue to disadvantage women, especially those with caregiving responsibilities. High childcare costs in postings like Tokyo or London, lack of partner employment opportunities, and insufficient parental leave support compound these challenges for the diplomats sent abroad. Meritocracy is also called into question. Recruitment and promotion practices in both civilian and military spheres are often opaque and reliant on informal male networks, privileging seniority and rigid hierarchies that sideline mid-career

women balancing professional and family life. Several interviewees (1, 3, 4) also cite a lack of institutional support at key moments, delayed responsiveness to practical needs, such as appropriate gear for women, and an undercurrent of trivialisation, from inappropriate jokes during maternity leave to strategic exclusion from meetings or leadership discussions. Initiatives like women's networks and internal task forces, while well-intentioned, are perceived by many as symbolic at best. Interviewees 4 and 7 describe networks like WEDinEU as performative, poorly communicated, and lacking measurable outcomes, while interviewees 6 and 7 caution that such networks can also exclude men and thus risk reinforcing the very dynamics they aim to challenge. This echoes critiques made in the Court of Auditors' 2019 review of EU gender mainstreaming, which found that institutional gender equality mechanisms across EU bodies often lack enforcement powers and suffer from vague mandates. Similarly, Aggestam and Towns show that informal male-dominated networks persist even in organisations that profess gender parity (Aggestam & Towns, 2019). The double bind for women in leadership is also a recurring theme: as interviewee 5 notes, women are criticised whether they advocate for gender agendas or remain silent, judged more harshly than their male counterparts either way. Structurally, the EEAS's status as a "service" rather than a full EU institution limits its legal authority and weakens its diplomatic standing with both member states and third countries. Additionally, interviewee 7 highlights that the external geopolitical factors shape internal limitations: in conservative contexts, such as when dealing with MAGA-aligned U.S. officials, terms like "gender" or "identity" can shut down dialogue entirely, muting progressive initiatives and requiring diplomatic subtlety. This disconnect between internal values and external realities further complicates cultural coherence. Underlying all of this is a deeper cultural resistance: gender-related work is frequently perceived as "soft" or secondary, and legal frameworks like the Istanbul Convention and ILO Convention 190 remain largely ineffective without leadership

commitment and cultural change. Interviewees also referenced psychological phenomena like the “sticky floor” and “glass cliff,” in which women internalise barriers, self-censor, or are placed in precarious leadership roles likely to fail. Amid this context, interviewee 7 observes that younger women are adapting strategically, keeping a low profile, capitalising on training, and navigating barriers silently, indicating a generational shift in survival strategies. Yet, without structural reform, inclusive leadership, and a recalibration of workplace expectations around family life and visibility, cultural norms rooted in male-coded professionalism are unlikely to be dismantled.

Gender Equality Tools and Initiatives

The interviewees reveal a complex and often frustrating picture of the legal, policy, and institutional framework underpinning gender equality within the EEAS. While the organisation officially emphasises merit-based recruitment and adheres to EU Staff Regulations that allow for a mild form of positive discrimination, many question whether structural biases persist, particularly in how “merit” is defined and operationalised. Interviewee 1, for example, critically asked, “Is being a woman a merit?”, reflecting scepticism toward how gender considerations are integrated into staffing decisions. Although today gender is an area in EU staffing where affirmative action is legally permissible, favouring women over men where qualifications are equal and women are underrepresented (e.g., in leadership), interviewees broadly agree that these provisions lack impact without strong enforcement and committed leadership. This sentiment extends to legal frameworks like the Istanbul Convention and ILO Convention 190 (focused on workplace harassment and violence), which were referenced as foundational tools, but which appear limited in practice without cultural buy-in or active mechanisms for enforcement. Practical challenges, such as

negotiating diplomatic immunity or partner employment rights abroad, remain unresolved in many cases, though the Argentina–Belgium agreement was cited by Interviewee 1 as a rare success. Many interviewees reflected on missed foundational opportunities during the EEAS's creation, particularly the failure to embed binding equality norms into its legal structure. This has contributed to the marginalisation of gender goals and allowed superficial measures, such as the 40% gender quota introduced in 2014–15, to be mocked by male colleagues or dismissed as performative. Tokenistic appointments, where women are promoted without structural support, often result in heightened scrutiny and reinforce rather than disrupt institutional resistance. All interviewees warned that without top-down political will, even well-intentioned tools remain symbolic gestures, disconnected from the deeper cultural transformation required to make them effective. Nonetheless, progress has occurred. Under Helga Schmid's leadership around 2017, the EEAS launched an internal taskforce, on careers and on equality, which helped diagnose structural obstacles and inform initiatives such as gender-responsive leadership training and the WEDinEU network. These efforts aimed to bolster confidence, visibility, and upward mobility for women and underrepresented groups. Similarly, targeted bilateral diplomatic efforts, such as the Argentina–Belgium agreement, addressed specific barriers like partner employment abroad. Some interviewees also praised former Secretary-General Sanino for advancing visibility on gender and LGBTQIA+ issues, although some noted this work remains rooted in soft diplomacy and symbolic visibility rather than institutional redesign. Mentorship and professional networks emerged as a recurring theme, viewed as key instruments in addressing gender inequality, particularly in diplomatic environments where informal male networks dominate. Many welcomed these structures as important starting points. Initiatives such as WatEEAS, WEDinEU, and WIS (Women in International Security), as well as the College of Europe (CoE) mentoring program, were noted for fostering dialogue, support, and solidarity,

especially for early-career women. Several interviewees personally benefited from such programs and later served as mentors themselves, highlighting the importance of intergenerational support. However, scepticism remains about the effectiveness of certain networks. Interviewees criticised WEDinEU in particular as performative or poorly communicated, with unclear outcomes. Interviewee 4 critiqued even the network's name, suggesting it reinforced traditional gender stereotypes associating women to weddings. Still, most interviewees appreciated that these networks created a sense of community and visibility, even if they lacked strategic follow-through or institutional clout. Importantly, Interviewees 6 and 7 warned that gender-focused spaces must remain inclusive: excluding men from mentorship and equality efforts risks reproducing the very exclusion these initiatives aim to dismantle. Instead, they advocated for leadership cultures that engage all genders in advancing institutional equality. Overall, interviewees agreed that while the EEAS possesses a robust toolkit, including quotas, legal mandates, leadership programs, and international conventions, these tools are often underutilised, disconnected from accountability frameworks, or perceived as symbolic. For gender equality to become systemic rather than symbolic, these instruments must be accompanied by profound cultural change, encompassing leadership modelling, work-life balance adjustments, inclusive strategic planning, and institutional courage.

Discrimination and Exclusion Experiences

The interviewees reveal a range of discriminatory experiences, both overt and subtle, that underscore persistent gender-based inequities within the EEAS, especially for younger, lower-ranked, or newly promoted women. Several interviewees shared first-hand accounts of inappropriate remarks and exclusionary behaviour that reflect how power and hierarchy intersect with gender. One described hearing comments like "She's as cute as she is smart" early in her career and being publicly doubted while visibly pregnant and working on high-level issues. Such incidents were not isolated but part of a broader pattern of gendered diminishment, especially targeted at junior women or trainees, and typically dismissed rather than addressed. These microaggressions were not about sexualisation per se but revealed entrenched assumptions about who belongs in positions of authority and influence. When women did confront such behaviour, as in the case of male colleagues expressing objectifying remarks, the response was to contain the discomfort (e.g., "We'll close the door") rather than acknowledge or correct the inappropriate conduct. Others reported more institutionalised forms of exclusion. One senior official recalled being mocked by male superiors after taking parental leave, her leave framed as a financial burden in front of colleagues. Despite occupying leadership roles, she described feeling silenced, unsupported, and isolated, particularly under male-dominated management structures post-Helga Schmid. Another shared the experience of being the only woman in a strategic meeting, excluded until she physically inserted herself into the discussion, highlighting a culture of "silent, normalised exclusion." These accounts illustrate how exclusion functions through both interpersonal and structural channels, often going unchallenged due to fear of reprisal, lack of allies, or normalised sexist attitudes. Some interviewees, particularly those with military backgrounds, did not report direct discrimination but noted the emotional burden and professional isolation

of being “the first woman” in a leadership role. One was told by her Director General that he would “protect her,” a statement laced with paternalism that subtly reinforced gendered assumptions about capability. Others pointed out the critical role of informal male networks in shaping access to opportunities and advancement, those excluded from these circles face structural disadvantages, even in systems that claim to be meritocratic. While some men in leadership offered support or mentorship, the absence of gender parity and peer support often left women navigating these systems alone. There was widespread recognition that gender-related work is institutionally devalued and framed as “soft,” undermining both the women who lead these initiatives and the legitimacy of the work itself. Women in senior positions experience a double bind: if they advocate for gender equality, they risk accusations of tokenism or are seen as pushing a personal agenda; if they don’t, they’re criticised for neglecting their responsibility as women in leadership. This unresolvable tension constitutes a form of structural discrimination and underscores the difficulty of sustaining gender equality efforts in a professional culture that remains male-centric. Even interviewees who did not personally experience discrimination (notably male respondents) emphasised that diplomatic discourse around gender equality is increasingly constrained by geopolitical shifts. Engaging with actors who reject terms like “gender” or “identity” (e.g., MAGA-aligned U.S. officials) has a chilling effect, not only externally but internally, by muting progressive language and initiatives. Thus, the ideological resistance outside the EU directly shapes the tone, priorities, and ambition of internal policy discourse. Ultimately, while few reported outright harassment, the interviews reveal a pervasive culture of marginalisation, exclusion, and unequal scrutiny, embedded in everyday interactions and institutional practices, and particularly acute for women trying to ascend or assert influence in leadership settings.

Strategic Vision and Feminist Frameworks

In my research, the concept of Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) came up frequently, which is why I felt it was important to address it directly and include it in the interviews. Countries like Sweden and Canada, often cited as pioneers in FFP, have made notable progress in gender equality and representation, particularly in diplomacy and leadership roles. These examples initially positioned FFP as a promising framework worth exploring. However, as the interviews revealed, FFP is also a highly contested and often criticised concept, especially within the specific context of the European Union. The interviewees expressed consistent scepticism, if not outright rejection, of the feasibility of implementing a formal FFP within the EEAS, citing deep structural and political limitations. The most explicit critiques came from those who view FFP as unworkable in an environment where institutional autonomy is limited, member states dominate decision-making, and temporary staffing models hinder long-term strategic change. Many member states also lack strong domestic pipelines for female diplomats, making it difficult to populate EEAS leadership roles with women and further weakening the foundation for an FFP agenda. Even when gender-sensitive practices are pursued, such as encouraging female diplomats abroad to engage with local women, these efforts are often seen as symbolic and disconnected from a broader strategic or ideological commitment. Several interviewees, while not referring to FFP by name, shared perspectives that aligned with feminist foreign policy values, particularly through support for the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. Examples included deploying female soldiers to engage local communities in conflict zones and valuing diverse perspectives in foreign policy. However, these ideas were often framed pragmatically, accompanied by warnings against essentialist assumptions that women are inherently more peaceful or better leaders, and by resistance to oversimplified feminist narratives. There was

a clear preference across interviews for substance over symbolism. Gender equality, in their view, should be achieved through concrete policy reform rather than ideological branding. One interviewee emphasised that the real missed opportunity was not the absence of a feminist label, but the failure to embed enforceable gender parity into the EEAS's founding legal framework. Another strongly advocated for rules-based change, including 50/50 quotas and leadership-driven reform, positions that reflect feminist institutional critiques, even if not labeled as such. Direct critiques of FFP focused on its ideological polarisation, definitional ambiguity across EU member states, and political fragility. Sweden's retraction of its FFP was cited as a cautionary tale, whereas Finland's more pragmatic, substance-driven approach, centred on gender-responsive governance without politicising the feminist label, was praised. A recurring recommendation was that the EEAS and the EU foreign policy apparatus should embed equality structurally, through leadership training, anti-discrimination policy, and legal protections, rather than adopt FFP as a branded doctrine. Across these perspectives, the consensus was clear: gender equality in foreign policy should not be seen as an ideological gift, but as an intrinsic right rooted in representation, justice, and institutional legitimacy. As one interviewee put it, "Women are not merely consumers of security, they are also its providers." This underscores a desire to deconstruct traditional gender/security paradigms while remaining strategically attuned to the realities and limitations of the institutional landscape.

This vision for change was reinforced through the final question I posed in each interview: whether the interviewees had any messages for future generations. As I elaborate further in my analysis, the individuals I spoke with were among the first to establish themselves in professional environments still shaped by male dominance. In doing so, they helped to widen the door for other women, making the workplace more accessible, inclusive, and navigable for those who followed. Throughout the interviews, a clear and urgent call for

structural, cultural, and leadership-driven reform emerged. Interviewees stressed that strong top-down commitment is indispensable, without it, gender reforms risk remaining performative or fragmented. Many pointed to the need for rules-based approaches such as enforceable 50/50 quotas, leadership accountability mechanisms, and the full integration of gender equality into operational and leadership practices. The most effective equality work, they argued, is not loud or ideological, but embedded quietly into institutional processes, driven by credibility, data, and long-term commitment. Several interviewees noted that gender equality should be treated as a strategic imperative, supported by evidence such as stronger peace outcomes and improved institutional performance when women are in leadership. They also highlighted the need for gender mainstreaming to be depoliticised and normalised, especially through an intersectional lens that includes LGBTQ+ equality as complementary, not competing. Some advocated for continued narrative adaptation, adjusting language and messaging based on political context to maintain momentum in diplomatically sensitive environments. Others focused on cultural transformation, calling for workplace models that normalise caregiving among both men and women and better support mid-career women managing family responsibilities. Role models and peer encouragement were seen as essential, particularly the visibility of resilient leaders like SG Martínez-Carbonell. At the same time, interviewees acknowledged that women in leadership are still unfairly scrutinised, whether they advocate openly for equality or not, reinforcing the need for collective responsibility in backing those who rise. Several spoke personally about the emotional and professional toll of navigating male-dominated institutions. While proud of having opened doors, they also reflected on the sacrifices required, especially in personal life, underscoring the urgency of reforming the system so future generations do not carry the same burden. Ultimately, there was strong confidence that younger generations, more diverse, open-minded, and strategically aware, are well-positioned to push further. Young women,

they urged, should resist internalising harmful narratives like “you got the job because you’re a woman,” and instead embrace their competence, ambition, and the right to define success on their own terms. In sum, the vision for change expressed by these senior figures is both principled and pragmatic. It demands structural enforcement, cultural renewal, and leadership with integrity. Gender equality must be visible not only in discourse but in appointments, career progression, and institutional norms. As one interviewee put it powerfully: “It’s not a privilege for women to be there. It’s their right.” This captures the essence of the broader message: gender equality in EU foreign policy is not a gesture of goodwill, it is a strategic and democratic necessity.

Discussion

Structural Constraints and Gendered Drift During EEAS Formation

While the creation of the EEAS may appear to have been a critical juncture for embedding gender-sensitive reform, this thesis suggests a more nuanced interpretation. The conditions of the Service's formation, fragmented authority, intergovernmental bargaining, and legal ambiguity, limited the transformative potential of gender mainstreaming. Rather than a missed opportunity in the normative sense, the EEAS's institutional trajectory reflects a form of gendered drift, in which gender equality was passively sidelined as institutional routines became consolidated. From its creation (2010) and until 2015, the Service suffered from a stark leadership vacuum regarding gender equality. Despite a unique political opportunity to embed gender concerns structurally, this issue was entirely absent from the agenda under the mandate of the first High Representative, Catherine Ashton. From the perspective of historical institutionalism, this moment constituted what Capoccia and Kelemen (2007) define as a critical juncture, a brief period of relaxed structural constraints in which actors possess heightened agency and multiple institutional outcomes are possible. Yet, the EEAS failed to seize this window. There was no sustained leadership commitment to promoting gender equality, and without this top-down drive, efforts to advance women's roles remained symbolic at best. The institutional chaos of merging three distinct entities, the Commission, the Council, and national diplomatic services, further complicated this opportunity for reform, creating a contested bureaucratic space shaped by conflicting interests and norms (Morgenstern-Pomorski, 2018). Feminist institutionalist scholars have shown that such foundational periods often reproduce existing power asymmetries unless deliberate gender-sensitive reforms are prioritised (Mackay et al., 2010; Chappell & Waylen, 2013). In the case of the EEAS, the absence of mobilised feminist actors or supportive institutional

frameworks allowed masculine-coded diplomatic traditions to take root unchallenged. Compounding this, the EEAS lacked strong female leaders capable of championing reform and integrating gender equality into the organisation's core. As Mahoney (2000) notes, critical junctures involve "relative structural indeterminism", moments when structure is loosened but not absent, meaning that agency matters, yet is still shaped by pre-existing institutional logics. In this context, the leadership vacuum represents a failure of agency in a moment of opportunity. This omission stands in sharp contrast to progress made elsewhere in the EU, particularly within the European Commission, where emerging female leadership was beginning to effect change. The choices made at this early stage initiated a path-dependent trajectory (Pierson, 2000), in which the institutional failure to prioritise gender equality became increasingly difficult to reverse due to self-reinforcing mechanisms, such as internal norms, coordination incentives, and growing institutional inertia. As a result, men within the EEAS were neither encouraged nor expected to engage with gender issues, reinforcing the false notion that such matters concerned only women. Over time, the absence of early structural integration led to what Krook and Mackay describe as institutional reproduction: the normalisation of masculine norms through gender-blind design choices (Krook & Mackay, 2011). The experiences described by interviewees also align with what they call 'layered gender-blindness,' in which new institutions nominally committed to equality reproduce dominant norms due to bureaucratic priorities and strategic silence (Krook & Mackay, 2011). This is reinforced by Chappell and Waylen's analysis of institutional legitimacy, where deeply embedded masculine standards are disguised as neutral professional norms (Chappell and Waylen, 2013). The leadership vacuum at the EEAS's creation not only stalled structural reforms but also generated long-term conceptual fragmentation. As interviewees recalling the 2010–2015 period reveal, perceptions of past leadership remain contradictory and incoherent, with many interviewees offering divergent accounts of the

priorities, or lack thereof, of former Secretaries General. This inconsistency reflects the absence of a shared institutional vision, what March and Olsen (1989) term a logic of appropriateness, the internalised norms that guide what is seen as legitimate behavior within an institution. In the absence of such norms concerning gender equality, women were left to navigate challenges based on personal experience, leading to a diverse but disjointed patchwork of strategies and interpretations. The long-term costs of this missed opportunity have been high, especially for the women who worked through these conditions. Yet through resilience and perseverance, these early pioneers laid the groundwork for a more inclusive future, a foundation upon which the current generation can now build.

This failure to seize the moment becomes even more striking when viewed in light of the broader political context. The EEAS stood at a crossroads, a classic sectoral critical juncture in the sense described by Collier and Collier (1991), with the rare political momentum necessary to embed gender equality into its institutional foundations. However, as Falleti and Lynch (2009) argue, the outcomes of such junctures are shaped not only by opportunity, but by antecedent conditions and strategic interactions. In the EEAS, these conditions included entrenched national diplomatic norms, bureaucratic complexity, and an ideational environment that did not frame gender equality as a core priority. The appointment of Catherine Ashton as the first High Representative symbolised a step forward for gender representation at the highest level. Yet in Pitkin's (1967) terms, this act remained purely symbolic representation, as gender equality was never substantively prioritised during her mandate nor embedded into the institutional agenda. As Towns (2020) and Cassidy (2017) point out, such symbolic inclusions often rely on essentialist narratives that simultaneously elevate and constrain women, praising their empathy or relational skills while implicitly marginalising them from high-stakes or strategic domains. Indeed, while the appointments of Catherine Ashton and Federica Mogherini were widely celebrated as breakthroughs for

gender representation in EU foreign policy, they ultimately exemplify the limits of symbolic inclusion. Their mandates occurred within an institutional architecture that lacked binding gender mechanisms and rewarded conformity to masculinised norms of leadership. Thus, their presence served more to legitimate the existing order than to disrupt it, reinforcing rather than challenging the gendered logic embedded in the EEAS's design. Furthermore, Ashton's reluctance to embed gender-sensitive practices in the EEAS's design may also reflect the 'logic of appropriateness' theorised by March and Olsen. Operating in a male-dominated diplomatic culture and as a politically fragile appointee, Ashton may have felt compelled to conform to traditional expectations of neutrality and professionalism, expectations implicitly coded as masculine. This internalisation of diplomatic norms exemplifies how gendered logics of legitimacy operate not only at the structural level but also within individuals occupying leadership roles. This distinction between symbolic and substantive leadership is critical in evaluating the EEAS's gender dynamics. While figures like Ashton and Mogherini were publicly celebrated, their impact on the Service's internal gender culture was minimal. In contrast, Helga Schmid, though less publicly visible, implemented concrete mechanisms for equality. This pattern reflects a broader institutional logic that rewards women's symbolic visibility while limiting their capacity for structural intervention. Meanwhile, elsewhere in the European Union, particularly within the European Commission, a nascent wave of committed female leadership was beginning to drive real structural change. This contrast highlights what could have been a pivotal moment for the EEAS to align itself with broader progressive currents across the EU. Instead, the absence of structural ambition and the lack of concrete reforms led to a significant missed opportunity. The organisation failed to capitalise on the favorable political climate, resulting in long-term institutional inertia and path dependency (Pierson, 2004). As rooted in developments during the 2010–2015 period, today the EEAS continues to reckon with the consequences of that

early omission, as gender equality remains unevenly integrated and often marginalised in both policy and practice. This missed opportunity was compounded by an absence of unified leadership, as reflected in the conflicting perceptions of former Secretaries General and senior staff. Interviewees reported contradictory views on gender equality efforts, evidence that no clear institutional framework or policy direction was established at a time when it would have mattered most. Despite the momentum for change, the EEAS lacked both clarity and conviction in defining a coherent, inclusive gender agenda. As a result, feminism and gender equality came to be interpreted through individual lenses rather than being guided by a shared institutional commitment. This conceptual ambiguity, not simply the lack of formal policies, but the absence of a coherent vision, represents one of the clearest markers of the EEAS's failure to translate political opportunity into lasting structural transformation. This long-term stagnation points to what can be understood as a form of *gendered lock-in*. Unlike overt exclusion, gendered lock-in refers to the subtle entrenchment of inequality that occurs when gender is omitted from foundational decisions, allowing unequal norms to become the default setting of an institution. Once embedded, these norms shape expectations of leadership, professionalism, and legitimacy in ways that are difficult to reverse. In the case of the EEAS, the lack of early structural commitments to gender equality created an environment where masculine-coded behaviors and priorities continued unchallenged, not by design, but by default. Over time, this has made later reform efforts harder to introduce and easier to dismiss. The interviews reflect this dynamic clearly: even when political will emerges or policies are introduced, they often struggle to gain traction in an institutional culture still shaped by unspoken assumptions about who belongs and whose leadership matters. Gendered lock-in thus captures the invisible but powerful continuity of exclusion, rooted in institutional beginnings and reinforced through silence as much as action. These challenges were exacerbated by the institutional chaos and deep structural complexity that

defined the EEAS's early years. The merger of the European Commission, the Council, and various national diplomatic services created a disjointed internal structure, reinforcing what Morgenstern-Pomorski (2018) identifies as a contested and hybrid institutional space where supranational and national norms coexisted uneasily. This fragmentation left little space or political energy for systemic reform. Amid this upheaval, a male-dominated organisational culture quickly took root, not through formal exclusion, but through the persistence of unspoken norms, rigid hierarchies, and informal practices inherited from traditional diplomatic institutions. Interviewees consistently reported disorientation and a lack of clear leadership expectations, particularly on gender issues at the outset of the EEAS. Feminism and gender equality were interpreted differently by nearly every woman consulted, not because of ideological conflict, but due to the absence of institutional clarity or guidance. This ambiguity left a vacuum where masculine-coded norms remained unchallenged, and women were forced to navigate a professional environment that was neither built for nor meaningfully adapted to their presence. Standfield (2020), drawing on Bourdieu, further explains how this dynamic reinforces the symbolic capital of masculinity in diplomacy, where traits like assertiveness, availability, and informal networking define legitimacy in leadership roles. While no formal rules barred women from advancement, the absence of structural reforms and inclusive mechanisms left them sidelined. In such a setting, women were tolerated but not fully integrated, operating in spaces that maintained the appearance of neutrality while quietly reinforcing existing power dynamics. This inertia is not simply the passive legacy of institutional design but, as Skocpol and Pierson (2002) argue, often the result of strategic inaction by dominant actors who benefit from maintaining the status quo. In the EEAS, the problem lies not in the founding texts or official procedures, which never explicitly barred women's participation, but in the absence of sustained and concrete action to translate symbolic gestures into meaningful change. Through this inertia rather than

intentional exclusion, gender inequality became embedded in the organisation's fabric, reproducing itself across roles, ranks, and responsibilities.

Consequences and Complexities

Compounding this structural stagnation is the EEAS's dual institutional architecture, comprising internal administration in Brussels and external diplomatic action through delegations. This configuration has only deepened the complexity of addressing gender equality. Internally, questions of women's advancement and representation have remained confined to procedural concerns and organisational culture. Externally, gender tends to appear more as policy discourse than as a consistently implemented priority, with its integration varying significantly depending on local context and leadership commitment. As Schmidt (2008) argues in her theory of discursive institutionalism, institutions are shaped not only by rules and structures but by dominant narratives and ideational frames. Within the EEAS, these narratives have rarely prioritised gender inclusion as a core institutional value, limiting its potential to shape practice and culture. While successive Secretaries General have addressed gender in different ways, and while isolated resistance persists in the form of inappropriate behavior or outdated attitudes, efforts to address gender are nonetheless genuine. However, in the absence of deep structural consolidation, gender equality risks remaining a rhetorical aspiration rather than a guiding institutional principle. This dynamic is further complicated by the lack of formalised policies to support progression, retention, and representation, meaning that even well-intentioned leadership is constrained by the structural frameworks it inherits.

Closely linked to this institutional lock-in is another persistent barrier: cultural inertia resulting from the absence of strong, binding structural policies. Despite the efforts of individual actors and isolated initiatives, progress has remained marginal because these efforts lack the formal and legitimising backing needed to transform organisational norms. Without explicit and sustained policies, resistance to gender reform continues to manifest

through informal norms and symbolic ceilings, practices that reproduce inequality even in the absence of overt bias. The EEAS's experience stands in stark contrast to that of the European Commission, which in recent years has introduced concrete diversity and inclusion policies, including carefully implemented forms of positive discrimination. Though modest and carefully framed within a meritocratic logic, these mechanisms provide a crucial political and legal framework that legitimises women's claims to equality and strengthens their capacity to challenge systemic barriers. It creates what Pierson (2000) would call institutional feedback loops, formal mechanisms that increase the cost of reverting to exclusionary norms. This contrast underscores a crucial lesson: even strong rhetoric is insufficient without institutionalisation. As Schmidt (2008) notes, ideas matter most when they are backed by structures that translate them into practice. Without such frameworks, inclusion remains aspirational and vulnerable to reversal. The quiet persistence of the status quo, maintained through informal routines and normalised expectations, reveals just how deeply gender is embedded within the operational logic of organisations like the EEAS.

Further complicating this landscape is the conceptual and experiential fragmentation revealed in interviews reflecting on the 2010–2015 period, particularly around how feminism itself is understood and enacted within the EEAS. One of the most revealing insights from the data is that feminism within the organisation is far from a unified concept. The women interviewed expressed a wide range of views on leadership, recognition, and equality, some felt their efforts had been appreciated, while others experienced persistent marginalisation. This conceptual ambiguity highlights the richness of the topic but also complicates any attempt at uniform analysis. In the absence of a shared institutional framework or consensus, individuals have been left to chart their own paths, resulting in contrasting experiences and divergent interpretations. What one woman views as progress, another may see as insufficient or tokenistic. Each initiative can thus be simultaneously praised and critiqued, depending on

the lens through which it is viewed. This plurality illustrates that debates around gender remain very much under construction, with no singular definition of leadership, empowerment, or feminist strategy prevailing across the institution.

Yet, despite this fragmentation, one striking pattern emerges: a remarkable capacity for adaptation among women operating in male-dominated environments. In historically patriarchal professional spaces such as diplomacy, many women have succeeded by turning marginality into strategic advantage. Faced with intimidating settings, heavier workloads, and symbolic pressures, they have often leveraged their outsider status into visibility. In countries where male and female spheres remain strictly separated, female diplomats have uniquely been able to access women's spaces, offering them insights into half of society that remain largely inaccessible to their male colleagues. This privileged access often enhances their diplomatic effectiveness and provides a deeper, more nuanced understanding of local contexts. Their rarity in decision-making spaces can also heighten their symbolic power, making them more visible and at times even more positively received (Towns, 2020). While Standfield (2020) highlights how women often lack the symbolic capital of traditional diplomatic authority, these adaptive strategies demonstrate how resilience and creativity can generate new forms of influence. However, such strategies do not lessen the underlying institutional burden. They illustrate the scale of the challenge women continue to face: succeeding within a system not built for them requires not just competence, but continual negotiation of legitimacy and space. The fragmentation of feminist views is therefore not a weakness, but a reflection of the multifaceted institutional reality in which women operate. It highlights the need for more than isolated reforms, it calls for a deeper reimagining of the organisational norms and discourses that structure diplomacy itself.

Evolving Dynamics and Partial Progress

For many women in the EEAS, especially those at the forefront of their careers, female support networks played a crucial role in helping them navigate male-dominated professional environments. Often the only women present in meetings or leadership spaces, they were exposed to persistent feelings of isolation, intimidation, and invisibility. Their presence was tolerated, but rarely fully acknowledged or valued. In this context, support networks offered more than camaraderie, they were vital sources of solidarity, reassurance, and strategic guidance. As Mackay et al. (2010) argue, such informal institutional levers can be essential in sustaining women's resilience within gendered systems that provide limited formal support. Over time, however, the workplace landscape has begun to shift. Thanks to ambitious public policies, legal reforms, and a growing collective awareness, the presence of women in professional settings has become more normalised. Women are now more visible, more numerous, and generally better integrated. Younger generations, in particular, are more assertive in claiming their legitimacy, buoyed by a professional environment in which female representation has markedly improved.

In this changing context, these women's networks can sometimes appear outdated. Some view them as limited in practical impact, misaligned with present-day challenges, or ill-suited to the evolving nature of gender inequality. Nonetheless, these spaces continue to hold relevance, albeit in a more marginal role. They remain important venues for experience-sharing and mutual support, especially in contexts where gender disparities persist or where women still find themselves underrepresented. Even if they are no longer central to career advancement in the same way, their continued existence serves a meaningful function: they address specific needs that formal structures often overlook and remind us that gender equity remains an ongoing and uneven process. As such, these networks still represent an

essential, if evolving, component of the institutional ecosystem supporting women within the EEAS. They also exemplify what feminist institutionalism calls embedded informal mechanisms, social structures that persist despite formal change, sustaining both solidarity and critique.

These shifts are also illuminated through intergenerational dynamics, which reveal a deep contrast between the strategies of earlier pioneers and the evolving outlook of younger generations. A central theme emerging from the analysis is the profound intergenerational difference in how women experience and respond to gender inequality in the workplace. The women interviewed, aged between 40 and 70, belong to the generation that first actively pushed against male-dominated professional norms. These pioneers grew up in contexts where their own mothers often did not work or worked only marginally, and they were the first to enter the full-time labor market en masse. As a result, they found themselves navigating a world shaped by deeply ingrained gender codes: men were expected to occupy the public sphere of power and career, while women were relegated to the private sphere of home and caregiving. This traditional division of roles gave rise to rigid gender stereotypes, and the pioneers interviewed were among the first to confront, challenge, and subvert them. For these women, finding legitimacy in environments that had not anticipated their presence required exceptional resilience and ingenuity. Different strategies emerged in response to these constraints: some adapted by adopting traditionally masculine behaviors in order to gain acceptance, while others asserted a distinctly feminine leadership style, even at the cost of personal or professional sacrifice. Their experiences resonate with Holmes and Yarhi-Milo's (2017) feminist critique of diplomacy's masculine culture, which forces women to adapt to exclusionary norms or resist them at personal cost. Similarly, Standfield (2020) illustrates how women strategically mobilise their marginality in such settings, turning outsider status into visibility and symbolic leverage. These pioneers did not just enter a male-dominated

world, they helped change it. While earlier generations may have only cracked open the door, these women had the courage to walk through it fully, laying the foundation for future generations to build upon.

Today, it is my generation, commonly known as “gen-Z”, that inherits this legacy. While gender inequalities and sexist remarks have not entirely disappeared, the professional environment has evolved significantly. Women are now less isolated, more supported, and better equipped to assert their place. Thanks to the efforts of those who came before them, who built networks, broke silences, and reshaped expectations, Gen Z enters the workforce with a stronger foundation and a clearer sense of possibility. According to Inglehart and Norris (2003), such generational shifts reflect broader value changes: Gen Z emphasises inclusion, balance, and authenticity, rejecting the rigid, performance-based cultures that shaped earlier professional environments. This new generation is not content to merely succeed within existing structures; it seeks to redefine them entirely. Their approach reflects what Waylen (2017) terms actor-centered institutionalism: individual agency operating within, but also reshaping, institutional constraints. With different values and priorities, Gen Z has the opportunity, and the responsibility, to consolidate the gains of previous generations while continuing to push for a truly inclusive and equitable world of work.

These evolving generational attitudes toward work are further amplified by broader structural changes in the professional sphere, most notably those brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. In recent years, the world of work has undergone profound structural transformation, accelerated dramatically by the global health crisis. Before this shift, professional norms were notoriously rigid: late meetings, last-minute decisions, and an expectation of constant availability were commonplace, conditions that effectively excluded many women, particularly those with caregiving responsibilities. The pandemic, however, acted as a discursive opening (Schmidt, 2008), forcing institutions to reconsider long-held

assumptions about work and flexibility. It normalised remote work and prompted organisations to fundamentally rethink how work is structured. The reorganisation of professional life during and after COVID-19 challenged many of the embedded routines that had reinforced gender inequality. Since then, many employers have adopted more flexible models, adjusting both working hours and locations to better accommodate the balance between professional and personal life. This evolution in workplace expectations has opened up new possibilities for inclusivity and gender equity. At the same time, Generation Z has emerged as a powerful force in reshaping professional culture. It is a phenomenon already observed by some of the interviewees working with them. This generation firmly rejects the idea that one must choose between career success and personal fulfillment, instead insisting on a sustainable, integrated approach to both. Work is no longer viewed as the primary space for socialisation or self-definition; young professionals often enter the workforce with strong personal networks already in place, built through education, activism, travel, or digital communities. This aligns with Cassidy's (2017) argument that visibility and legitimacy for women in diplomacy increasingly derive from symbolic performance as much as structural position, particularly in spaces shaped by changing generational norms. These shifting priorities also contribute to a delayed entry into professional life, as advanced degrees, such as master's or even PhDs, have increasingly become prerequisites for positions of responsibility. As a result, the transition into the workforce is slower but more intentional, reflecting a generational desire to redefine not just when and how people work, but also what they expect from their careers. Together, these shifts signal a rebalancing of professional expectations, one that holds the potential to create more equitable, flexible, and inclusive work environments for all.

Conclusion: Looking Forward

Across all interviews, one point of consensus stood out clearly: the decisive importance of leadership support in advancing gender equality. This support must not only be declared but actively and continuously demonstrated over time. Without clear and sustained commitment from the top of the organisation, even the most well-designed policies risk remaining ineffective or symbolic. A top-down approach is thus a necessary condition for structural change within the EEAS, but it is not sufficient on its own. Real transformation also requires concrete and sustained action: the active appointment of women to leadership roles, the development of work-life balance policies, and institutional recognition of the disproportionate mental burden still carried by many women. The goal is not simply to include women, but to fully legitimise their place in historically male-dominated professional spheres, dismantle systemic barriers, and build the confidence necessary for women to pursue and sustain ambitious career paths.

Within this framework, three fundamental levers emerged with striking unanimity across all testimonies: leadership, role models, and networks. Leadership remains the catalyst, without it, gender policies rarely yield meaningful results. Role models are equally essential; they make women's success visible, legitimate, and attainable in environments where men still dominate, helping to break professional isolation and inspire ambition. Finally, support networks, though sometimes viewed as outdated or limited in scope, continue to offer critical spaces for solidarity, experience-sharing, and mutual support, especially in contexts where inequality remains deeply entrenched. These three pillars must not operate in isolation. They must be strengthened, institutionalised, and interconnected, forming the foundation of any serious and lasting commitment to gender equality. Without them, efforts

risk stagnation or even regression. Their integration into both public frameworks and internal organisational policies is not a supplement to change, it is its very condition.

In parallel, a crucial, and often underemphasised, condition for achieving real and lasting progress in gender equality is the active inclusion of men as allies. Without their meaningful engagement, existing power dynamics cannot evolve in a sustainable or structural way. While the advancement of gender equity is often driven by women, who are directly and disproportionately impacted, the transformation of institutional cultures and norms ultimately requires the participation of all, including those who currently hold the most power. Several positive examples of male allies emerged from the interviews, demonstrating that constructive involvement is both possible and impactful. However, these men remain the exception rather than the norm. Their limited presence highlights the urgent need for stronger political and institutional will to foster male engagement, not as passive supporters, but as co-responsible actors in dismantling systemic barriers and reshaping professional environments. Encouraging men to open up space, share influence, and challenge entrenched norms is not only a matter of fairness; it is a strategic necessity for building inclusive, equitable, and modern institutions.

Looking ahead, the continued advancement of gender equality within the EEAS will depend not only on sustained leadership and inclusive practices, but also on the institution's ability to recognise and embrace its broader symbolic and geopolitical role. A greater female presence in spheres of power can help to gradually transform the institution's cultural norms and internal mentalities, provided that leadership remains actively engaged in driving this change. While it is regrettable that years were lost before these issues were addressed in earnest, and that an opportunity to embed gender equality into the EEAS's foundations was missed at its creation, it is equally important not to overlook the progress that has since been

achieved. Significant advances have been made, and the groundwork for lasting transformation is now in place.

This incremental progress must be understood within the wider context of the European Union's institutional framework, where decision-making is often constrained by the competing agendas of Member States and their shifting political cycles. Like many other EU institutions, the EEAS is limited in its capacity for autonomous reform. Yet despite these challenges, it remains uniquely positioned to function as a soft-power model, disseminating values of equality and influencing cultural and political norms both within Europe and globally. The EEAS's symbolic weight, particularly in external relations and diplomatic representation, gives it considerable potential to lead by example. That is why the ambitious and legally grounded implementation of gender equality policies is not just desirable but essential. Well-established policies create precedents that resist political reversals and ensure continuity even amid changing leadership. Our institutions must not only reflect the societies they serve; they must also serve as role models of justice, equity, and inclusion. In this respect, the EEAS can and must move beyond its administrative role to become a true driver of cultural and political transformation across the international stage.

This study contributes to the existing literature on gender and diplomacy by critically applying path dependency theory to the creation of the EEAS, an angle that has received limited attention in current scholarship. While previous works have examined the underrepresentation of women in EU institutions or the symbolic commitments to gender equality, few have systematically analysed how early institutional choices during moments of organisational formation shape long-term gender outcomes. The EEAS illustrates how institutional ambiguity during periods of organisational formation can reinforce, rather than disrupt, existing gendered norms. Rather than framing the absence of gender mechanisms as a missed opportunity, this thesis suggests that such outcomes reflect deeper logics of

bureaucratic neutrality, compromise, and legitimacy. These dynamics obscured the political nature of institutional design and allowed masculinised norms to become re-embedded, despite a broader EU commitment to gender equality. By conceptualising the EEAS's creation as a critical juncture, this analysis reveals an illustrative case of structural entrenchment that led to a form of institutional inertia, reinforcing traditional diplomatic norms and limiting reform potential. In doing so, it extends the application of historical institutionalism to gender studies within EU foreign policy, a field that has often remained descriptively focused rather than analytically grounded in theories of institutional development. The convergence between these practitioner experiences and feminist scholarship highlights the value of analysing the EEAS as a case of gendered lock-in, not through overt exclusion, but through institutional drift, symbolic inclusion, and the resilience of masculinised legitimacy criteria

Moreover, the empirical findings based on elite interviews provide new evidence on the everyday lived realities of women within EU diplomacy, adding a grounded, practice-based dimension to the normative and policy-oriented literature. While feminist scholars such as Aggestam and Towns have long highlighted the gendered nature of diplomacy, this research deepens the analysis by showing how formal absence of gender-sensitive structures has translated into informal cultural norms that persist and reproduce inequality. The voices of practitioners across different ranks and roles offer insight into how these dynamics manifest not only at the policy level but in interpersonal relations, career trajectories, and perceptions of legitimacy. By doing so, the study fills a critical empirical gap and bridges theoretical frameworks with institutional practice, reinforcing the call for a more transformative, feminist-informed understanding of EU diplomacy.

Ultimately, this analysis brings us back to the central question: How did the EEAS's failure to institutionalise gender diversity from its inception, despite a politically favorable

context, contribute to the marginalisation of gender within its structures and diplomatic practices? The findings are unequivocal. The absence of clear political commitment and structural mechanisms at the EEAS's creation relegated gender equality to the periphery of institutional priorities. This initial omission has had lasting consequences: it has deprived gender equality advocates of the recognition, resources, and legitimacy needed to drive meaningful reform from within. The lack of foundational embedding has made subsequent progress harder to achieve and easier to dismiss.

One of the most persistent consequences of this foundational omission is what I would call gendered lock-in. Without clear commitments early on, the institution developed in ways that made future reforms more difficult to implement. Even as formal barriers have disappeared, informal norms and everyday practices continue to reflect older, male-dominated diplomatic traditions. This kind of slow, structural entrenchment means that inequality no longer needs to be actively imposed, it sustains itself through inaction. As a result, efforts to advance gender equality today must work not only against present resistance but also against inherited assumptions about who belongs, who leads, and whose voices count. Undoing this kind of embedded bias requires more than isolated measures, it calls for long-term cultural and institutional transformation.

Institutionalising gender equality through normative texts, concrete mechanisms, and explicit leadership support is not a symbolic gesture, it is a necessary condition for real and lasting change. Unless these commitments are fully embraced, sustained at the highest levels, and embedded into the core operational logic of the institution, inequality will persist. It may no longer manifest through overt exclusion, but instead through more insidious and systemic forms: undervaluation, underrepresentation, and the continued sidelining of gender perspectives in key decisions. The challenge now is not simply to acknowledge past failures, but to ensure that gender equality becomes a non-negotiable institutional norm, resistant to

reversal, responsive to evolving needs, and firmly rooted in the organisation's identity and future direction.

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