

# Gendering Science Diplomacy: A Feminist Critique of Science, Technology and Innovation Systems

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**Abstract:** Science and technology occupy a central place in contemporary societies, shaping economic development, public policy, and international affairs. Far from being external to politics, they are deeply entangled with power dynamics, informing governance structures and shaping whose knowledge is recognized as legitimate. This entanglement becomes particularly visible at the intersection between science and international relations, where scientific authority and diplomatic action increasingly overlap. While science diplomacy has traditionally been portrayed as a cooperative and technical instrument oriented toward trust-building and the provision of global public goods, more recent approaches emphasize its strategic and competitive dimensions. Although these perspectives acknowledge the political character of science, they tend to overlook how inequalities internal to science, technology, and innovation (STI) systems structure international engagement. In particular, the persistent underrepresentation of women in senior scientific roles, technological sectors, and international advisory bodies raises questions about whose expertise circulates globally and whose authority is institutionalized in diplomatic arenas. Therefore, this article asks: how do gendered hierarchies within STI systems shape science diplomacy? Drawing on a feminist epistemological framework grounded in strong objectivity, situated knowledges, and reflexivity, the paper argues that gender is not an external normative concern but a constitutive dimension of science diplomacy. By examining the three dimensions of science diplomacy—science in diplomacy, diplomacy for science, and science for diplomacy—the analysis demonstrates how inequalities in access, authority, and representation are reproduced in international settings. At a time when the neutrality and universality of science are increasingly questioned, the article contends that epistemic concern is a structural condition for the legitimacy and effectiveness of science diplomacy in global governance.

**Keywords:** Science diplomacy, Gender studies, Science, Technology and innovation, Feminisms, International relations

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## 1. Introduction

Since the Enlightenment, our world is marked by an imaginary structured around “grand narratives” or “metanarratives” centred on universality, equality, reason, and citizenship (Benhabib, 1995). Its promises of historical, moral, and scientific progress consolidated metaphors and images—such as the machine, the rational and competitive individual, and society as an adjustable mechanism—that came to orient the modern understanding of the world (Midgley, 2003). Within this modern imaginary, science and technology came to occupy a privileged position, not merely as explanatory instruments, but as fundamental symbolic and institutional elements.

In the twenty-first century, it is clear to see how science and technology shape economic development, inform public policy, structure responses to global challenges, and underpin international influence. This centrality is explicitly reflected in multilateral frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which portray scientific knowledge, technological innovation, and data-driven governance as essential instruments for achieving sustainable development.

Nonetheless, the disillusionment with narratives of continuous progress—particularly in light of wars, totalitarian regimes, technological violence, and contemporary crises—has made explicit the nexus between science, power, and politics (Benhabib, 1995). Global challenges such as climate change, pandemics, artificial intelligence, and technological security are therefore not merely technical issues; they involve disputes over epistemic authority, political responsibility, and the legitimacy of knowledge. Science, technology, and innovation (STI) systems thus emerge not as neutral domains, but as central arenas in which power and governance are negotiated domestically and internationally.

Despite this centrality, scientific systems continue to be widely portrayed as neutral, objective, and meritocratic enterprises. Such representations tend to obscure the political and institutional conditions that structure knowledge production. Scientific agendas are shaped by funding priorities, state strategies, institutional and social hierarchies, and global asymmetries. Recognizing the political embeddedness of science does not simply mean acknowledging strategic competition among states or disputes over technological leadership. It is important to argue that it also requires examining how inequalities internal to science, technology, and innovation systems shape whose knowledge is produced, validated, and mobilized.

Among these inequalities, gendered structures remain particularly persistent. Historically excluded from both formal political authority and scientific institutions, women have faced structural barriers in access to funding, leadership positions, research networks, and decision-making arenas. Although important progress has been made, women remain underrepresented in senior scientific roles, high-prestige technological sectors, and international advisory bodies. These disparities are not merely matters of representation; they influence research priorities, epistemic authority, and the global circulation of expertise. In this sense, the fragility of women's position within STI systems has direct implications for how science intersects with governance and international politics.

In this context, while the nexus between science and politics can be explored in multiple ways, it has become increasingly prominent in the domain of science diplomacy—conceived as an interface between scientific knowledge and international action. As scientific expertise and technological capacity have acquired strategic relevance in global governance, states and international organizations have increasingly mobilized research collaboration, innovation partnerships, and expert networks as instruments of foreign policy and international positioning.

Science diplomacy thus operates at the very point where national STI systems intersect with global governance structures. It is not merely a mechanism for facilitating cooperation or promoting dialogue, but a space in which epistemic authority, technological access, agenda-setting power, and geopolitical interests converge. The actors who participate in scientific advisory bodies, represent states in technical negotiations, or lead international research consortia are drawn from existing institutional hierarchies within STI systems. Consequently, science diplomacy does not stand apart from the structural inequalities that characterize science and technology; it reflects and projects them onto the international stage (Ruffini, 2017; 2020a).

Traditionally framed as guided by universal values such as neutrality, rationality, and the pursuit of the common good, science diplomacy often reproduces the broader modern representation of science as an impartial domain above political contestation. Yet its practices reveal a more complex dynamic in which cooperation coexists with competition, and universalist rhetoric intersects with asymmetrical power relations. It is within this tension that the gendered configurations of STI systems become analytically central. If women remain structurally marginalized within national and international scientific hierarchies, this marginalization is unlikely to disappear at the level of international engagement. Rather, it is rearticulated in the composition of expert panels, the circulation of knowledge, and the distribution of authority in multilateral arenas.

This raises a central question: how do gendered hierarchies within science, technology, and innovation systems shape the practices, claims to neutrality, and power dynamics of science diplomacy? While existing scholarship has highlighted the cooperative and competitive dimensions of science diplomacy, it has paid comparatively limited attention to the social structures that condition who participates in these processes and whose expertise is recognized as legitimate.

To address this question, the first section exposes how STI systems operate as gendered organizational and epistemic structures, examining how institutional norms, hierarchies of excellence, and patterns of women's underrepresentation reproduce asymmetries in authority and knowledge production. The second section turns to the field of science diplomacy, outlining its conceptual foundations and examining its dual logic of collaboration and competition. The third section then brings feminist epistemologies into dialogue with science diplomacy, demonstrating how gendered power relations shape the production, circulation, and authorization of knowledge in international arenas.

## **2. Science, Technology and Innovation Systems and Gendered Hierarchies**

It is not difficult to map the historical underrepresentation of women in science, specially taking it as a consequence of the gendered division between the public and private spheres that structured modern societies. Drawing on Carole Pateman's (1988) critique of contract theory, the modern social order institutionalized a separation in which the public sphere was constructed as the domain of universality, reason, and productive activity, while the private sphere was associated with reproduction, domestic labor, and personal dependency. Political and scientific activities—understood as socially valuable and knowledge-producing practices—were consolidated within the public realm, whereas women were historically confined to the private domain. This structural separation did not merely limit women's formal participation in scientific institutions; it also shaped the normative and epistemic boundaries of science itself. By aligning scientific authority with ideals historically coded as masculine—objectivity, rationality, impersonality—the scientific field became institutionally and

symbolically masculinized. Women's marginalization in science was thus not incidental, but embedded in the very political architecture that organized modern knowledge production.

In the current scenario, according to UNESCO (2024), women constitute approximately one third of scientific researchers globally, a proportion that has shown minimal variation over the past decade. This imbalance becomes more pronounced at higher levels of scientific hierarchies: women account for only a small fraction of members in national academies of science and remain significantly underrepresented in senior academic and leadership positions. Disparities are particularly acute in fields central to contemporary technological transformation, such as engineering, physics, artificial intelligence and computer science, where women often represent less than one third of graduates and professionals. These patterns cannot be explained solely by individual choice or economic development levels; rather, they reflect persistent institutional, cultural and structural barriers that shape access to resources, recognition and authority within STI systems.

In this sense, Jasanoff (2004) argues that knowledge production is inseparable from power, not because science is merely instrumentalized by political actors, but because scientific practices themselves are embedded in institutional arrangements, normative assumptions, and modes of governance that shape whose knowledge is recognized, whose interests are served, and which forms of authority are stabilized. Donna Haraway's (1988) intervention allows us to deepen this structural account by drawing an analogy between gender and science as mutually constitutive systems. Both operate as symbolic orders that produce meanings—gender through cultural interpretations of sexual difference, and science through representations of rationality, objectivity, and neutrality. Both organize a social division of labour structured by hierarchies—gendered in one case, disciplinary and epistemic in the other. Both define subject positions, determining who is recognized as a legitimate bearer of authority. Both are embedded in material cultures constituted by technologies, practices, and institutional routines. Finally, both involve a dialectic of construction and discovery, in which categories are presented as natural or objective despite being socially produced. From this perspective, science cannot be understood as external to gendered power relations. Rather, it is shaped by the same symbolic and institutional logics that organize differentiation, hierarchy, and authority in broader social life.

While Haraway's (1988) framework exposes the epistemological and symbolic dimensions through which science is gendered, it is within organizational structures that these dynamics become institutionalized and reproduced. Joan Acker (1990) demonstrates that modern organizations—including scientific institutions—are not gender-neutral arenas but deeply gendered structures. Built upon androcentric assumptions, they naturalize a supposedly universal and disembodied subject who, in practice, reflects hegemonic masculinity situated in the public sphere and freed from reproductive responsibilities. Organizational processes—such as recruitment, evaluation criteria, career progression, and the allocation of authority—thus operate as mechanisms through which gender hierarchies are continuously reproduced. As Kahlert (2020) notes, scientific organizations simultaneously reproduce and constrain gender inequality, frequently under the rhetoric of neutrality and excellence. In this sense, the underrepresentation of women in STI cannot be reduced to access deficits alone; it reflects institutional arrangements that define competence, authority, and legitimacy through implicitly gendered standards.

Taken together, these historical, epistemological, and organizational dimensions demonstrate that gender inequality in STI systems is neither incidental nor residual. It is embedded in the symbolic foundations of scientific authority, institutionalized in organizational practices, and reflected in the contemporary distribution of expertise and leadership. If access, recognition, and legitimacy are structured through gendered hierarchies at the national level, these hierarchies are unlikely to remain confined within domestic scientific institutions. Rather, they travel with the actors, networks, and forms of authority that constitute international scientific engagement. Understanding STI systems as gendered architectures therefore becomes essential for examining how scientific knowledge is mobilized beyond national borders. It is precisely at this transnational interface that science diplomacy emerges as a revealing arena in which these hierarchies may be reproduced, negotiated, or potentially contested.

### **3. Science Diplomacy: Where Science and Technology Meet International Relations**

Although the expression "science diplomacy" only gained prominence in the early twenty-first century, the entanglement between science and international politics is historically situated and far from novel. Practices that would today be categorized under the label of science diplomacy can be traced back to earlier periods. Eighteenth-century scientific expeditions undertaken by European powers, for instance, combined officially declared scientific aims—such as the exploration of territories and the collection of mineral and botanical specimens—with clear geopolitical and imperial objectives. During the Cold War, interactions between scientific

cooperation and foreign policy reached a new level of institutionalization and strategic importance, even if the term “science diplomacy” itself was not yet in use. As Ruffini (2017) notes, states have long incorporated scientific knowledge into their strategies of international projection, retrospectively revealing a continuity of practices that predate the formalization of the concept.

What distinguishes the contemporary moment, however, is the degree to which science, technology, and innovation (STI) have become structurally embedded in diplomatic practice. The consolidation of knowledge-based societies and economies has elevated scientific and technological capacity to a decisive factor in shaping relative power positions. In a context where economic growth, competitiveness, and global influence increasingly depend on the production, circulation, and analysis of information, knowledge itself has become a central strategic resource (Leijten, 2017). Scientific discoveries, technological infrastructures, and innovation networks are no longer peripheral to foreign policy; they constitute key instruments through which states pursue influence, secure access to critical resources, and position themselves within global hierarchies. Science diplomacy, in this sense, reflects the transformation of knowledge into a vector of geopolitical relevance.

In contemporary scholarship, science diplomacy is commonly understood as a broad and dynamic set of practices through which science and technology intersect with international engagement, reflecting the growing interdependence between scientific development and diplomatic action. Ruffini (2017; 2020a) revisits the typology proposed by the joint report of the Royal Society and the American Association for the Advancement of Science (2010), which identifies three main dimensions of this interaction. The first, *science in diplomacy*, refers to the use of scientific expertise in multilateral negotiations and decision-making processes on global issues such as climate change, food security, and public health. The second, *diplomacy for science*, highlights the role of diplomatic action in facilitating international scientific cooperation, supporting researcher mobility, network-building, and the development of shared research infrastructures. The third, *science for diplomacy*, emphasizes the use of scientific collaboration as a means of fostering dialogue and trust in politically sensitive contexts. Taken together, these dimensions illustrate how science and diplomacy mutually reinforce one another, positioning science diplomacy as an institutionalized feature of contemporary global governance.

Building upon this understanding, recent scholarship develops an important critique and suggests that science diplomacy operates through what Ruffini (2020b) describes as a “twofold logic,” structured by two simultaneous and often intertwined impulses: collaboration and competition. On the one hand, scientific exchange is framed as a pathway to trust-building, dialogue, and the provision of global public goods, particularly in areas such as climate change, public health, and environmental protection. On the other hand, science and technology are mobilized as strategic assets to enhance power, secure technological autonomy, and attain leadership positions within international regimes. By revealing how collaboration and competition coexist within the same practices, Ruffini demonstrates that science diplomacy cannot be understood as a neutral or purely altruistic domain of international engagement. Rather, it is embedded in strategic calculations, institutional hierarchies, and asymmetrical distributions of scientific and technological capacity.

However, when situated alongside the persistent underrepresentation of women in scientific (and also diplomatic) systems and the gendered standards that structure scientific authority, this twofold logic appears less neutral than it initially suggests. The ability to collaborate internationally and to compete for technological leadership presupposes access to resources, recognition, and epistemic legitimacy—assets unevenly distributed within scientific communities. By treating collaboration and competition as analytically given dynamics among states, the framework leaves underexplored how these dynamics are themselves shaped by historically masculinized notions of rationality, excellence, and strategic agency. Even when denouncing the strategic use of science by states, such analyses often leave intact the epistemological foundations that sustain the image of science as universal, meritocratic, and detached from social hierarchies—an image historically produced from the standpoint of a masculine, Western subject.

It is precisely this epistemic limitation that feminist scholarship seeks to address. As argued above, feminist approaches have long demonstrated that neither science nor diplomacy operates in a social vacuum; rather, both are historically constituted fields structured around particular ideals of rationality, autonomy, competition, and control that have been naturalized as universal and value-free. By exposing the androcentric foundations of these epistemic standards, feminist theories do not merely add gender as a variable to existing analyses, but offer an alternative way of understanding how knowledge, authority, and legitimacy are produced and stabilized within technoscientific governance. Feminist analysis thus involves a dual exercise: examining the place and role of women within cultural, social, and political contexts, while simultaneously doing so through gender as an analytical category.

#### **4. Gendering Science Diplomacy**

Rather than treating science and diplomacy as neutral arenas, this section argues that science diplomacy must be understood as an epistemically structured field shaped by gendered hierarchies rooted in the organization of STI systems. To make this visible, it mobilizes three core feminist concepts: (1) “strong objectivity” (Harding, 1986; 1995); (2) “situated knowledges” (Haraway, 1988); and (3) “reflexivity” (Ackerly and True, 2008). First, by challenging the notion of scientific neutrality, Sandra Harding advances a powerful critique of what she terms “weak objectivity”, namely the belief that science can be depoliticized through supposedly neutral and universal methodological procedures. According to Harding, this conception ultimately reinforces existing power structures and hierarchies by naturalizing the dominance of masculine perspectives within scientific practice. In contrast, Harding proposes “strong objectivity” as an epistemological approach that explicitly acknowledges the partiality and biases inherent in knowledge production. Scientific knowledge, therefore, must be understood as socially, politically, and culturally situated, shaped by values, emotions, and historical interests that inform its practices (Harding, 1986; 1995). Ultimately, her proposal seeks to dismantle the equation between objectivity and neutrality, thereby de-essentializing the androcentric standards that underpin modern epistemology.

Then, Donna Haraway (1988) further deepens the critique of scientific objectivity through her formulation of “situated knowledges.” For Haraway, all knowledge is produced from a specific body, position, and history, and is therefore always partial and located. This perspective rejects both relativism and the universalist pretensions of traditional science, affirming instead a feminist objectivity that recognizes science as a site of political contestation. Complementing these approaches, Ackerly and True (2008) propose feminist reflexivity as a methodological and ethical tool that renders explicit the researcher’s positionality and its implications for the production of knowledge. Reflexivity demands continuous attention throughout all stages of the research process—from the formulation of research questions to analysis and dissemination—seeking to avoid the naturalization of silences and the exclusion of marginalized groups. The authors identify four central commitments of feminist ethics: (1) attention to epistemology, which interrogates the criteria of knowledge validity and the role of power in its legitimation; (2) attention to boundaries, which problematizes disciplinary and social demarcations that produce exclusion; (3) attention to relationships, which treats power asymmetries between researcher and researched as matters of ethical responsibility; and (4) attention to positionality, which requires recognition of how one’s own trajectories and social locations shape knowledge production.

In sum, feminist theories destabilize the notion of a neutral and apolitical science by revealing that all scientific practice is embedded in relations of power and in specific historical and cultural contexts. By re-centering politics within epistemology, these approaches not only expand the scope of scientific reflection but also reaffirm the necessity of a science committed to critical responsibility and epistemic plurality. By explicitly bringing this feminist perspective into dialogue with debates on science diplomacy, this paper argues that incorporating gender perspectives into science diplomacy is essential to dismantling epistemological hierarchies that marginalize women and to genuinely promoting greater equity in international relations. From a feminist standpoint, it becomes possible to observe how the three dimensions of science diplomacy reproduce, reinforce, or render invisible gendered inequalities associated with the production and circulation of knowledge.

Within the “science in diplomacy” dimension—where scientific evidence informs multilateral political decision-making—the epistemic authority mobilized in these processes reflects a scientific field deeply marked by gender asymmetries. The persistent underrepresentation of women in scientific leadership and agenda-setting positions within STI systems—visible in authorship of major assessment reports, advisory panels, and global governance bodies—not only restricts women’s participation but structurally shapes which forms of expertise acquire international authority and circulate through diplomatic channels. While some of these exclusions intersect with racial and geopolitical inequalities, the central point remains that the scientific structures feeding into diplomacy are historically masculinized, conditioning which issues are recognized as priorities and which experiences are excluded from the definition of global problems.

Similarly, within the “diplomacy for science” dimension—aimed at expanding national scientific capacity through agreements and international cooperation—gender inequalities become even more directly observable. Academic mobility programs, international research grants, and global innovation networks often reproduce patterns of exclusion: women face barriers to entry, lower funding rates, greater precarity in careers within the “hard sciences,” and care-related inequalities that constrain their participation in extended international stays—an essential component of scientific internationalization strategies. As a result, science diplomacy, even when oriented toward strengthening national systems of science, technology, and innovation, reproduces the sexual division of scientific labor, reinforcing male trajectories as the international standard of excellence.

Finally, in the “science for diplomacy” dimension—where science functions as a tool of soft power and international projection—feminist critique highlights that a state’s ability to mobilize science as a diplomatic resource depends fundamentally on who occupies spaces of representation, leadership, and negotiation. Science diplomacy often reproduces historical patterns of traditional diplomacy, marked by strong masculinization and barriers to women’s access—particularly in strategic areas such as defense, energy, nuclear technology, and international security. Thus, even when scientific cooperation projects are presented as neutral or universal, their implementation takes place within diplomatic arenas where women’s voices remain marginal and where masculinized conceptions of rationality, expertise, and credibility shape expectations and practices. Here, feminist analysis reveals how science diplomacy can reinforce the figure of the “man of science” as its central actor, while critical female perspectives necessary for thinking science and politics in an integrated manner remain marginalized.

In this sense, feminist critique becomes indispensable for grasping the deeper layers of the relationship between science and international politics, particularly in a context marked by the growing centrality of science and technology in global debates. If women remain persistently underrepresented in senior scientific roles, high-prestige technological sectors, and international advisory bodies, this is not merely a question of descriptive imbalance. It reflects gendered hierarchies embedded in STI systems that shape whose expertise is recognized, whose research agendas are prioritized, and whose authority travels across borders. As Jasanoff (2004) compellingly argues, nothing of significance occurs in science without corresponding adjustments in social, political, and cultural arrangements, just as deeply entrenched social problems rarely yield to resolution without transformations in existing structures of knowledge. Feminist epistemologies bring this insight into sharp relief by demonstrating that the production, circulation, and legitimation of scientific knowledge are inseparable from institutionalized power relations—including those that marginalize women within scientific and diplomatic hierarchies.

## **5. Conclusion**

Science and technology occupy a central place in modernity and contemporary life in knowledge-based societies, not only as engines of economic development and innovation, but as constitutive elements of governance, authority, and collective imaginaries. As Jasanoff (2004) observes, sustained engagement with the natural and technological world plays a central role in defining citizenship, responsibility, and the boundaries between public and private life. What societies come to know about the world is inseparable from what they understand themselves capable of doing about it—and from which actors are recognized as legitimate bearers of authority. Science and technology are therefore not external to political life; they are integral to the organization of power and to the stabilization of social hierarchies.

Within this broader landscape, the persistent underrepresentation of women in STI systems reveals how scientific authority is structured through gendered hierarchies. As feminist scholars have shown, these hierarchies are not merely descriptive imbalances but institutionalized patterns embedded in organizational practices, epistemic standards, and definitions of excellence. The marginalization of women in leadership positions, agenda-setting roles, and high-prestige technological fields shapes not only access to resources but also the content, direction, and circulation of knowledge itself.

This paper has argued that such hierarchies do not remain confined within national scientific institutions. They travel with the actors, networks, and standards of legitimacy that constitute international engagement, directly shaping the field of science diplomacy. In the dimension of science in diplomacy, gendered asymmetries condition whose expertise informs multilateral negotiations and whose perspectives are institutionalized in global governance bodies. In diplomacy for science, existing inequalities in mobility, funding, and career progression are internationalized through cooperation frameworks that often reproduce the sexual division of scientific labor. In science for diplomacy, the capacity to mobilize science as a strategic resource depends on representation and authority structures historically marked by masculinization.

Gendered hierarchies within STI systems thus shape science diplomacy by structuring who participates, whose knowledge circulates, which agendas gain priority, and how authority is legitimized in international arenas. Rather than a neutral interface between science and foreign policy, science diplomacy emerges as an epistemically structured field embedded in broader social and institutional power relations.

By bringing feminist theories into dialogue with science diplomacy debates, this paper has demonstrated that gender is not an external normative add-on but a constitutive dimension of the field. Gendering science diplomacy, therefore, is not simply about increasing women’s participation within existing frameworks. It entails

interrogating the epistemological foundations that define credibility, neutrality, and excellence in global technoscientific governance. In a context marked by contested scientific authority and complex global crises, such interrogation becomes a structural condition for envisioning more legitimate, reflexive, and socially just forms of international cooperation.

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