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Off the record: Margaret van Kleffens and the gendered history of Dutch World War II diplomacy

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ABSTRACT

This article makes the case for recovering women's roles from the forgotten corners of diplomatic history, and for considering the consequences of the gap between feminist and non-feminist research. It shows how ignorance of the gendered nature of diplomatic norms and practices impacts our understanding of diplomatic history, and how specific biographies are hampered by gender blindness in particular. Using the history of Margaret van Kleffens and Dutch World War II diplomacy as an example, the article demonstrates how historians' continued neglect of the role of women and gender norms has influenced representations of twentieth-century diplomacy. To dismiss the history of gender and of women as by definition irrelevant to the actions of states and of male statespersons is not simply part of a self-appointed focus on the political at the expense of the personal; rather, it omits much of the political history too, reproducing stereotypes and resulting in a skewed understanding of diplomatic history and foreign policy decisions. The article argues that both historians and feminist scholars need to historicize gender in order to recognize women's roles in diplomacy, and so gain a better understanding of the history of international politics as a whole.

KEYWORDS Diplomatic norms; diplomatic partnership; Margaret van Kleffens; gendering diplomatic history; historicizing gender

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a new school of feminist scholarship was inspired by the ground-breaking work by the historian Joan Scott (1988) and the political scientist Cynthia Enloe (2014 [1990]) on how gender and so-called high politics intermeshed, and its proponents have gone on to engage with an array of disciplines, methodological approaches and topics in international relations. However, these feminist studies seem to exist in a parallel universe to studies that persist in treating governments, states and (male) statespersons as if women and gender in international relations were

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irrelevant to their line of reasoning. If you are interested in the specific role of women or gender in international relations, it is easy enough to find a recent book on the topic. If your interest is instead the political history of international relations, chances are you will pass on *Women of the World* or *Women, Diplomacy and International Politics* or *Geschlechterrollen in den Aus-senbeziehungen vom Spätmittelalter bis zum 20. Jahrhundert* (Bastian et al. 2014; McCarthy 2014b; Sluga and James 2016). Pick up a recent account of the Cold War or the biography of a famous diplomat, and it is quite likely you will not find a single reference to the role of gender.

In spite of its successes, feminist international relations has remained “on the margins of the discipline,” in Ann Tickner’s words, and has failed to change much in the mainstream debates. Tickner puts her finger on the problem: “Citation of feminist work by non-feminists remains limited” (Tickner 2016, 6; also Sjöberg 2010). Others in the field have noted the determined gender blindness in the study of diplomacy and international relations, noting its poor track record compared with diplomatic history (Aggestam and Towns 2018), and it is true that the rise of new diplomatic history has led to a greater gender awareness in analyses of twentieth-century diplomacy, as is evident in the work of such historians as Frank Costigliola, Helen McCarthy, Kenneth Weisbrode, Molly Wood and Nevra Biltekin.

That said, new diplomatic history is no guarantee of gender awareness. In a recent book on the Cold War Atlantic community and the Dutch diplomat and businessman Ernst van der Beugel, Albertine Bloemendal makes the case for taking a new diplomatic history approach, including unofficial diplomatic actors. She stresses the “importance of personal relationships, of social bonds that blur the lines between the diplomat’s personal and professional life” (Bloemendal 2018, 48). However, the only personal relationships highlighted are those between men. The women, and most notably Van der Beugel’s wife, are all but invisible, and the author does not discuss the male networks in terms of gender. She thereby omits two of the main questions that feminist scholars prioritize: “Where are the women?” and “What work is masculinity doing?” (Zalewski 2015, 6). It would seem that even in new diplomatic history, non-feminist scholars do not read feminist work.

This article argues that feminist scholars and historians alike must historicize gender in order to avoid anachronistic assumptions about women’s roles in diplomacy, the better to understand the history of intergovernmental relations. It centers on a case study of a mid-twentieth-century Dutch diplomat’s wife and how she has since been treated by professional historians. The aim is to show how gender blindness leads to inaccurate history, and to point out how the failure to historicize gender can inadvertently fuel the assumption that research on women and gender are irrelevant to high politics.

The theoretical basis of the article is that individual state representatives are inextricably part of a web of relations. Norms, including gender norms,

and non-officials, including women, play an important role in maintaining, evaluating and (re)shaping those relations. To understand a country's policy, it cannot be isolated from these norms and networks. By shifting the focus from political results to diplomatic practices, this article builds on the claims of researchers who stress the importance of sociocultural aspects of diplomacy (Gram-Skjoldager 2011; Weisbrode 2016; Goedde 2017; see also Towns 2010.)

Empirically, Margaret van Kleffens's diaries and her husband's memoirs are the main sources for a description of her diplomatic work. Subsequent analysis of her representation in the biographical histories of diplomats and politicians uses Bert Zeeman's short biography of her husband (1999) and Cees Fasseur's biography of the Dutch wartime prime minister, Pieter Sjoerds Gerbrandy (2014). Since the concern is not merely women's absence, but how they are represented when they do appear in accounts of diplomatic history, the many historians who completely disregard Margaret van Kleffens, or perhaps manage to mention her name, have been excluded in favor of the two who at least say something about her.

Methodologically, the case study is inspired by Joan Scott's claim that "the evidence of experience ... reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems" (1991, 778). It uses individual experience to reveal the systemic patterns and underlying assumptions: in the Van Kleffenses' case, it exposes the gender roles in the diplomacy of the day, described first-hand; in the case of the historians Fasseur and Zeeman, it sets out their gendered assumptions about others' experience, described secondhand.

First, Margaret van Kleffens is introduced, contextualizing the case study with the existing literature on the history of gender and women in diplomacy. There then follows an account of her diplomatic work, and how she has been represented by Zeeman and Fasseur. The contrast between what emerges from the sources and the impression given in the literature is discussed in the light of feminist scholarship, showing the consequences of the historians' neglect of research on the gendered history of diplomatic norms and practices. The concluding remarks return to the problem of the separate spheres of feminist and non-feminist scholarship, and historians and feminist scholars alike are called on to historicize gender in order to bridge the divide, and so recover women's roles from the overlooked corners of diplomatic history.

The invisible diplomat

In the mid-twentieth century, Margaret van Kleffens was part of the web of diplomatic relations that determined crucial postwar issues: the design of the United Nations, attitudes toward decolonization and the establishment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). These were the defining

moments of Dutch postwar foreign policy, and Margaret van Kleffens was at the center of its making, for she was married to Foreign Minister Eelco van Kleffens (1939–1946), whose personal influence on Dutch foreign policy was unrivaled (Kersten 1981, 287–293).

Recent research on twentieth-century diplomacy suggests that Margaret van Kleffens had some influence herself. According to Frank Costigliola (2012, 761–762), “personal networks, the informal connections that diplomats cultivate for information and influence” are at the heart of diplomacy. Kenneth Weisbrode (2016, 245) talks of the diplomatic method in the mid-twentieth century as an art form of sorts, in which “the job and the entertainment were a composite and collective act” produced by the diplomat and his wife together in mutual co-dependence. Rogério de Souza Farias (2017, 46) has pointed out that home and work often shared the same space, as countries combined the diplomatic residence with the legation or embassy, so that “the dichotomy between home and work as gendered spaces was not as straightforward as in other areas. Important work activity occurred at diplomats’ homes – something that opened the gates for female influence in diplomacy.” Molly Wood (2007, 521–522) has shown that the unofficial spaces in the diplomat’s residence were “a primary locus of information gathering,” and points out that diplomats’ wives could interact with locals and collect information in a way their husbands could not (2005, 151–152).

It was known at the time that diplomats’ wives played a part in the political game. Nevra Biltekin (2016, 181) has found evidence of wives’ suitability being discussed when recruiting diplomats as late as the 1960s in Sweden. She has also shown that in their memoirs, twentieth-century male diplomats referred to marriage as an important asset and discussed the value of their wives to their careers (183–186). Diplomats’ wives were expected to act as hostesses and to socialize, contributing to a congenial environment in which men could build mutual trust and confidence. Whether this was marriage as “a tool for governments to wield,” as Enloe has it (2014, 181), or “a collegial partnership between wife and husband,” as per Biltekin (2012, 255), it is clear that both diplomats and their employers recognized that diplomats’ wives were important to the business of diplomacy.

Given this, it seems safe to assume that Margaret van Kleffens played a role in mid-twentieth-century Dutch diplomacy. Nevertheless, while her husband is omnipresent in histories of Dutch international relations in the period, Margaret is practically invisible. In the *Biografisch Woordenboek van Nederland*, the Dutch biographical dictionary, she appears in Eelco’s short biographical sketch, written by the same Kersten who emphasized his personal influence on policy, but only perfunctorily and in connection with her husband’s private life: “Married Margaret Helen Horstmann 4 April 1935. Their marriage was childless” (Kersten 2013).¹ The information about her is consistent with the dictionary’s standard format for spouses – maiden name, date of marriage,

children – and nothing more: the dictionary mentions spouses at any length only when she (or occasionally he) has some claim to fame of her (or his) own and/or is believed to have influenced the biographee's public life in some extraordinary way. Like most other diplomats' wives, Margaret van Kleffens did not attract further interest.

All historians select facts to suit their focus, and few can hope to be up-to-date on all the recent research. However, the findings about the diplomats' wives are hardly new. Fifty years ago, Arlie Hochschild (1969) was using the contemporary role of the ambassador's wife to provide concrete examples of how political messages were conveyed in social settings, explaining the diplomatic significance of seemingly private behavior – although to be fair the article was published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, probably not the diplomatic historians' first port of call.

Other researchers too have long challenged the idea of separate spheres that seems to set the standard pattern in the literature for diplomatic spouses. Hanna Papanek wrote of the "two-person single career" (1973); Hilary Callan, who later coined the expression the "incorporated wife," highlighted the unpaid work of diplomats' wives in particular (Callan 1975; Callan and Ardener 1984); and scholars from multiple disciplines have joined them in tackling the myth of the solitary male genius and exploring the ways in which partnerships challenge the division of research into the categories public–private and male–female (Pycior, Slack, and Abir-Am 1995; Chadwick and de Courtivron 1996; Reynolds 1998; Berg, Florin, and Wisselgren 2011; Charmley and Davey 2011; Mori 2015).

The history of mid-twentieth-century women without an official role in diplomacy is doubly vulnerable to political definitions that exclude women's unofficial work. The uphill task that faced women who applied for official positions as diplomats has tended to capture feminist scholars' imagination far more than the continuing relevance to diplomatic practices of women as spouses. Analyses of women in diplomacy tend to move from wives of diplomats to female diplomats, as Souza Farias notes (2017, 40). McCarthy's account (2014b) of the rise of the female diplomat describes women's positions as unofficial envoys for the years up to the early twentieth century, but then shifts focus entirely to the women who entered (or tried to enter) diplomatic and consular service.

McCarthy herself (McCarthy and Southern 2017) has stressed that women's agency in foreign policymaking is a story of continuity as well as change. She has also shown how diplomatic wives' roles (and the assumptions about them) influenced the room for maneuver of women who entered the British Diplomatic Service (McCarthy 2014a). The situation was similar in the Netherlands. One of the major arguments against admitting women to the Dutch Diplomatic Service was that it would be difficult for female diplomats to perform their duties without marital support. In 1957, a decade after

women formally had the right to join the Dutch Diplomatic Service, the head of examinations and committees was still using the same argument as a reason to discourage female applicants.² Diplomats needed wives. Like the British Foreign Office, the Dutch asked the heads of mission to comment on the performance of (female) spouses. A personnel assessment form based on the British model was introduced as late as in 1947. It included questions about officials' wives.³

Margaret van Kleffens and Dutch World War II diplomacy

Posterity may have consigned mid-twentieth-century diplomatic wives to the private sphere; their husbands' employers, however, considered them politically important. Having established the need to historicize the role of diplomats' wives, it is time to turn to the role played by Margaret van Kleffens in particular. The specific purpose here is to expose gender blindness in Dutch diplomatic history and discuss its consequences. The focus is thus on the discrepancies between Margaret's image in her own and her husband Eelco's writings and the way historians have depicted her.

A diplomatic partnership

Like all historical sources, ego documents require critical reading and contextual knowledge, taking into account why and for whom people write (Faassen 1991; Conway 2011, 17). Inherently subjective, life-writing is likely to reproduce the ideological system in which the narrator operates. Although the experiences depicted by an autobiographical writer seem personal, they are historical rather than individual, since our notion of meaningful experience is socially produced (Smith and Watson 2010, 31).

When Margaret began to keep a diary in London in 1942, she declared that it was to be "a record of small, often trivial things that make up the pattern of our daily life in exile, seen against a background, glimpsed now and then, of happenings that make history."⁴ She went on to refer to Samuel Pepys, which suggests great ambitions, since his seventeenth-century diaries, long known for their personal frankness and accuracy, are considered one of the most important primary sources for that period. Van Kleffens's instructions regarding the diaries show she did not want her contemporaries to read them – they were intended for future historians – and they are held in the private section of Eelco van Kleffens's archive at the National Archives in The Hague (and are still closed to the public).⁵

The diaries themselves played a part in the couple's diplomatic partnership: Eelco attached importance to his wife's writing. Margaret's account of their life in exile having escaped the occupation of the Netherlands in May 1940 reveals that Eelco had suggested she write "a sort of private sequel" to their

The Rape of the Netherlands, a widely circulated propaganda book (to which I will return shortly) in which the couple's flight to London was described (Van Kleffens 1940).⁶ Her account, as well as some entries in the first diary, which she dedicated to Eelco, has notes and corrections in the margins in his handwriting. In his memoirs, dedicated to Margaret, he quoted her diaries (Van Kleffens 1983, 166).

He also described how they met. As the genre of diplomatic memoirs gives authors the chance to express their opinions on diplomatic aptitude and present themselves as successful diplomats (Biltekin 2016, 166 ff.), the anecdote told his readers what made Margaret so suitable a wife not only for him, but for a diplomat in 1933. He describes how, assigned the urgent task to arrange a Dutch translation of a German trade protocol, he was desperate to find a good typist who had a good enough grasp of the nuances of economics in German to get the job done, and fast. His boss suggested asking Margaret Horstmann, daughter of the managing director of the American Petroleum Company in the Netherlands (later Esso). She did not want to cancel a golf match that afternoon, but arrived punctually the next morning. After a very long day working together the translation was ready, thanks to Margaret's "effective and generous help." She left, a "neat figure, but dressed without any exaggeration." Eelco sent her flowers and a book, and soon came to consider her as indispensable for his future happiness and prosperity. He was overjoyed to see how well she fitted into his circle, which was full of different nationalities, helped by the fact that her own and her parents' social circle in The Hague overlapped considerably with his. In April 1935 they married (Van Kleffens 1980, 267–273).

Besides her secretarial and language skills, Eelco talked of the attributes that were important in a world where appearance and a trustworthy impression counted a great deal – her generosity, efficiency and unflashy elegance. We are told she was reliable (refusing to abandon her golf partner), she was punctual and the Secretary-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs recommended her. Socially, Margaret was perfect for the job, with a background that made it easy for her to adjust to the rules of diplomatic culture.

Margaret's diaries largely confirm the image of the ideal diplomatic wife of the 1940s. She commended hard work and generosity (during the war she volunteered for the Red Cross and helped out at a factory), praised good looks and social skills, but condemned extravagance. She referred to one diplomat's wife as a "glamour girl", who had dressed in a way that might make people think she was there "for the benefit of the many Yankee officers present."⁷ Her disapproval did not extend to light flirting, though, which could be a diplomatic virtue: "For their delectation we both wore our newest bonnets (I my frothy black tulle), which was highly appreciated" by the two male officials she and another wife lunched with alone, without their husbands.⁸ She often invited her younger (married) sister along to

make up numbers and charm male guests. When describing a very successful evening, she noted approvingly how their weekend guest Prince Bernhard (married to Dutch Crown Princess Juliana) had flirted openly with her sister.⁹

Margaret frequently remarked on the importance of a light touch on social occasions, but other attributes are mentioned too. Looking back in March 1954, Margaret wrote:

I would have liked more of a sense of humour, and a less wry one, and a lighter touch in general, and a more optimistic outlook on life. Also a more gifted pen. These qualities in me would have pleased E.¹⁰

Her husband thought Margaret was already a skilled writer though. One of the couple's first projects in exile was to write the propaganda book *The Rape of the Netherlands* together. Faced with rumors that the Dutch had only themselves to blame for the German attack and victory, Eelco came up with the idea of writing a book – mainly with an eye on the US, according to Margaret. Besides taking dictation and typing up the manuscript, Margaret's contribution was to "touch it up." This was an important task. For the defense of the neutral Netherlands to be effective, it had to touch people and invoke sympathy, and that was not Eelco van Kleffens's strongest suit, for all his sharp wit and impeccable manners. Margaret took pride in helping her husband write, but always referred to the book as his, not hers; in testimony to his appreciation, Eelco corrected her notes, replacing her "his" with "our."¹¹

The Rape of the Netherlands was published in Eelco's name and Margaret's contribution went unremarked. That did not mean that it was a secret, however. Her contemporaries were probably aware of her work, but in accordance with the gender norms of the day she got no credit for it in public. It was thought self-evident that her work belonged to him, and that their joint efforts would be put out in his name. In his memoirs, Eelco mentions only in passing that he wrote the book with his wife, which suggests he did not consider it something that required explanation (Van Kleffens 1983, 48).

Although Eelco had a secretary, Margaret took down his diary in shorthand every day and typed it up weekly.¹² Margaret might perhaps have helped him when he worked at home, or with particularly confidential matters. Her own diaries show that she was certainly well-informed on a range of secret matters, from the Dutch prime minister's private money problems to the fact that the D-Day invasion was not going as well as its Allied ground forces commander General Montgomery said in public, and she sometimes noted whom her husband had met and what they had talked about.¹³ Eelco obviously confided in his wife. He even trusted her to go to lunch as his representative when he was not feeling well.¹⁴

Margaret seems happiest when able to join in discussions about politics – “Most of a very pleasant evening I spent in a huddle with Edgar, talking shop”¹⁵ – and once in a while she considered finding a job, but, as she wrote in March 1943, “I feel strongly that my first duty is to provide a well-run house for E., where we can have week-end guests, which is expected of us.”¹⁶ Her description of taking a Belgian representative and his wife to lunch as “a chore and a bore, but it has to be done about once every two months for good relationship’s sake” is typical of countless entries that show that entertaining was a political task.¹⁷

Socializing oiled the wheels of good diplomatic relations, but it could also serve specific political goals. In October 1943, the Dutch Queen heard Clementine Churchill (Winston Churchill’s wife) make light of the threat of starvation in the Netherlands because it was an agricultural country, and, fearing her opinion might negatively influence the chances of British aid, asked Margaret to speak to her. In her diary, Margaret described calling on Mrs Churchill, but did not enjoy the “non-austerity tea” because it took so much concentration to bring up the topic inconspicuously. This was an occasion, then, when the Dutch foreign minister’s wife was sent to influence the British prime minister’s wife, whose perception of things was expected to influence her husband’s.¹⁸ If nothing else, it shows how wives were used to run political errands when an official request might not be the best option.

Margaret’s diaries show that she played a diplomatic role that required she keep a low profile, placing others in the spotlight. She supported Eelco’s diplomatic position by making sure that the household functioned smoothly and made a good impression. She maintained a wide diplomatic network where people – especially men – felt comfortable and relaxed. She helped Eelco with work, filled in for him, and acted as his amanuensis and secretary. Crucially, she walked the fine line between unofficial and official, personal and political – her husband could trust her with classified information that he was not at liberty to share with anyone else, and because of his rank she could count on treatment as an official Dutch representative while ostensibly acting on a personal basis. The very significance of her work lay in it being off the record.

Margaret van Kleffens in diplomatic history

Against the background of her work, the manner in which Margaret van Kleffens is represented in two particular historical texts – the only ones describing her role at all – is revealing. By contextualizing a few examples of apparently insignificant details, it will become clear that she not only deserves more attention in Dutch diplomatic history, but that *a priori* assumptions of her irrelevance have also distorted the history of the people, policies and periods described.

In Bert Zeeman's thirteen-page biography of her husband – a chapter in a book about Dutch foreign ministers in the twentieth century – little is said about Margaret. A lifelong friend, his doctoral supervisor and a number of co-workers are highlighted as important to his life and career, but the presentation of Margaret is literally parenthetical. "In the first weekend of August 1939, Van Kleffens (with his wife Margaret Helen Horstmann, whom he had married in 1935; the marriage was childless) was about to leave for Bern" (Zeeman 1999, 142). The only other mention is to explain that Eelco asked for a quieter posting in 1950 because of his wife's poor health, and that in 1956 her health had improved sufficiently for him to accept a position as representative to NATO (149). Thus, the only time Margaret appears in her husband's story, beyond the aside about their (childless) marriage, is when she was an obstacle to his career. Instead of explaining that it was her assistance that made Eelco's extraordinary production of articles and letters possible, or that her efforts ensured he had close relations with important people, her presence is limited to not having children and suffering from unspecified health problems.

Like Kersten, it is genre that determines Zeeman's treatment of the Van Kleffenses – all the other biographees in the same book are handled in the same way. The entire focus is the political and public life of the ministers, and assuming that wives belonged to the personal sphere (and therefore are not political beings), they are largely left out of the picture. The authors show no knowledge of the ways couples worked together at the time, especially in the profession in question, and seem unaware of the scholarly debate about the public and private spheres, which long predated these biographies.

Ignorance of historical gender roles, as well as adherence to them, is also demonstrated by the way the private, personal and emotional facts selected are consistent with the symbolic use of women in twentieth-century international relations, as will be seen. This gender prejudice has led historians, presumably intent on objectivity, to make a choice that even by their own standards seems illogical: how is Eelco and Margaret's failure to produce children more relevant to a description of his work as foreign minister than his and his wife's co-authorship of *The Rape of the Netherlands*? Zeeman brings up its publication, but fails to mention that Eelco wrote it with his wife, despite the information being available in his memoirs (which Zeeman otherwise frequently refers to).

Unlike Zeeman, Fasseur does mention the Van Kleffenses' joint authorship of *The Rape of the Netherlands*, but he downplays its importance by first calling the book a pamphlet and then a brochure that the couple wrote in their spare time, and adding that the booklet went virtually unnoticed – "The British, wrapped up in a battle of life and death, surely had other things on their minds" (Fasseur 2014, 188). His dismissal might seem insignificant, were it

not for the fact that it is inaccurate. *The Rape of the Netherlands* was not a brochure, pamphlet or booklet. It was a hardcover book of about 250 pages. Neither was it true that there was no interest; on the contrary, all the indications are that it was a popular read. Margaret kept a record of its progress which shows that it was recommended by the Book Society, was widely and positively reviewed, and sold well. The *Daily Telegraph* serialized a substantial portion in September 1940, ensuring that it reached a wide public. In 1941, Margaret noted that the book had run to a third edition, with more than 10,000 copies sold in the UK, that translations were underway in several countries and that the American edition, published as *Juggernaut over Holland*, had just reached them.¹⁹

A digital library and archive search confirms her version. There are indeed translations of the book from the war years, and a Dutch translation of the German edition was secretly copied and spread by the Dutch Resistance (indeed, it is still in circulation second-hand). The book is also available in several editions and translations at the Dutch Royal Library. This picture of an influential piece of wartime propaganda stands in stark contrast to Fasseur's claims. He gives no reference for his assertions, but it seems possible he is repeating a story told by the Dutch journalist Meyer Sluyser, who spent the war years in London (Sluyser 1965, 15).

Did an *a priori* assumption about political work as something necessarily separate from the private sphere play tricks on Fasseur? Was he misled by the fact that the book was not written at the office, but at home after work? Whatever his reasons, he seems not to have considered the possibility that a public defense of foreign policy such as *The Rape of the Netherlands* could be important to a country's position. That means he was not familiar with the research on war rhetoric. Using reports of rape to rally support for the war effort was a successful tactic developed in World War I, when references to the violation of international law failed to upset people sufficiently to gain their support (Harris 1993; Gullace 1997). *The Rape of the Netherlands* followed the same pattern: the Van Kleffenses took a defense based on international law and framed it in a gendered narrative, no doubt familiar from the British World War I rhetoric about "the rape of Belgium."

Fasseur's silence about the literature on war rhetoric and gender affects his presentation of other facts too. For example, he describes the decision of the Dutch ministers to leave their wives and children behind when the government went into exile as a way to avoid giving the impression that they had fled to save their own skins. While not incorrect, Fasseur overlooks the gendered implications of that decision. As feminist researchers have pointed out, men tend to be presented as responsible for governing and protecting the nation, whereas women are depicted as symbols of the nation's territorial integrity and culture, responsible for reproducing the nation both biologically and culturally (Yuval-Davis 1997; Åse 2016). By this gendered logic, the Dutch

ministers' decision to leave their wives and families behind in the Netherlands was a highly symbolic act. It presented them as men with agency, going off to govern and protect, while proving their commitment to the cause by binding their wives' fate to the nation, as representatives of the national culture that they would not abandon (cf. Wadley 2010.)

The effects of gender blindness are equally evident when Fasseur describes the only exception to the rule that ministers left their wives at home – the Van Kleffenses. When Eelco went to Britain to ask for help on the day of the German attack, 10 May 1940, four days before the government decided to go into exile, Margaret went with him. Instead of noting the circumstances under which they had left, or the possibility that there were genuine work-related reasons for her to accompany him, Fasseur claims that “the childless Van Kleffens had ignored [the decision] and on 10 May took his (American) wife to England on the pretext that she was indispensable as his secretary” (2014, 165–166).

For Fasseur, it seems out of the question that a foreign minister's wife might actually be indispensable. Instead, he brings up their childlessness and Margaret's deviant national identity. A symbolic selection of facts, it testifies to Fasseur's susceptibility to the twentieth-century idea of women as responsible for reproducing the nation. Besides its doubtful relevance, the information is again misleading. Although it is true that Eelco and Margaret were not to have children, she was twenty-seven at the time – hardly an age to be making an issue of childlessness. As for her nationality, her mother was indeed American, but her father was Dutch of German descent and the family lived in the Netherlands.

Fasseur continues by describing how the decision to leave ministerial families at home almost caused a cabinet crisis when two ministers at first refused to leave without their families. Fasseur says that as the fathers of six and four respectively, it was understandable that they were unhappy with the cabinet decision; however, subsequently he says they had to stay behind to arrange the transfer of civil authority to the commander-in-chief, Henri Winkelman, a political reason which he does not dismiss as a pretext in their case. Fasseur's definition of politics does not extend to the foreign minister needing his wife to assist him in his work, though; the fact that she accompanied him to the UK is depicted as an emotional, personal choice, which, given her symbolic defects, better fits Fasseur's notion of women's historical role as being non-political (2014, 166–167).

It is disturbing to see historians' accounts so at odds with the sources. The full range of Margaret van Kleffens's contributions to the couple's diplomatic work is simply omitted. The distortion is the greater when it is suggested she had a negative impact on Eelco's political work: Zeeman tells us that her health problems caused him to accept a less-prestigious posting; Fasseur suggests that she caused her husband to ignore government policy for

personal reasons. Her co-authorship of *The Rape of the Netherlands* does little to improve her image, since the book is dismissed as having had no political impact. Indeed, presenting the book as a failure seems to confirm her lack of political agency.

More is lost by this than an understanding of the realities of women's unwaged work as unofficial diplomats. Blindness to the historical importance of women and gender norms is damaging to our understanding of diplomatic history, including the brand of male diplomatic history that interests the authors discussed here, for it blots out part of the history of male work – the part that took place in cooperation with women, often in semi-private arenas and off the record. The treatment of this particular Dutch foreign minister's wife in the recent literature contributes to a lopsided picture of the workings of diplomacy, demonstrating the unfortunate consequences of keeping the research fields of the feminists and the non-feminists separate.

Concluding remarks

Inadequate sources can go some way to explain the absence of women in empirical historical studies of diplomacy. However, it cannot explain the misrepresentation of women who do feature in diplomatic history, or the failure to present the relevant acts about their roles when the sources are available. As this case study has shown, unfamiliarity with the history of gender norms has led historians to underestimate the relevance of available sources and research, and to uncritically reproduce irrelevant and even inaccurate facts, treating women as having symbolic worth rather than real agency.

Zeeman and Fasseur might not be representative of Dutch historiography in all regards, but their gender blindness is shared by many diplomatic historians – even ones engaging with new diplomatic history. This is worrying. Diplomatic history is still being written in a way that rules out gender as a factor, not because of the historian's chosen perspective or for lack of evidence, but *a priori*. This leaves women not underrepresented so much as misrepresented. An emphasis on facts that confirm a separation between the political and the personal ultimately leads to a narrow and at times ahistorical definition of politics.

If the history of international relations has a point, it is to describe and explain international relations and politics in the past, and for that all its explanations must be truly historical. First, they must be based on empirical studies and a critical reading of the sources in their historical context, taking into account contemporary norms and beliefs – which would include gender norms and beliefs about the roles of men and women. Second, there must be a theoretical thrust to the argument, and a conscious effort to work with definitions of international relations and politics that are historically relevant.

Such an approach promises a more nuanced, complex and complete understanding of diplomatic history.

If historians need to include gender to understand history, feminist scholars for their part need to include history to understand gender. If the point of feminist international relations is to shed light on the role of gender and women in international politics, an awareness that gender is determined by its temporal context is as necessary for them as it is for historians, even when working with contemporary events. The risk otherwise is that feminist scholars spur on the historians to disregard women, and the disciplines remain as distinct as before.

As an illustration of my point, consider the opening of *Gender and Diplomacy* by Jennifer Cassidy and Sara Althari: "It is beyond dispute that various sociocultural, ideological, economic, and institutional barriers have historically ensured the exclusion of women from the political arena: the professional space in which the most consequential decisions are made" (2017, 1). Notwithstanding the nuances of the rest of the book, including a historical survey, a sentence such as this can be read as support for a definition of politics that has long proved unhelpful. It lumps together all of history as the period of women's exclusion from politics, inadvertently feeding a discourse that makes it possible for diplomatic historians to believe that if they are dealing with a political arena where decisions were made, there are simply no women to consider. Of course, this is just one example, but it shows that the risk is real.

Historicizing gender reveals a much more complex story in which women wielded political influence in many different ways. In both diplomatic history and feminist international relations there are indications that a conscious attempt to historicize gender can bridge the divide between the disciplines, broadening and deepening our understanding of the roles of women and gender in diplomacy both past and present. The historian Frank Costigliola (2012) has gone some way in gendering the question of how the Cold War started; the political scientist Ann Towns (2010) has historicized gender in her book on the norms and hierarchies of international society, pointing out that women's fight for inclusion in politics followed on their explicit exclusion, and that came first in the nineteenth century.

As Cynthia Enloe warned in her recent foreword to *Gender Matters in Global Politics*, "how much of the entire dynamics of international politics we all will miss if we do not take seriously the full range of international experiences of diverse women" (2015, xxi). Despite the growing weight of historical and contemporary research on the "international experiences of diverse women," much of this research still exists quite separate from the study of the "dynamics of international politics." Three decades after Enloe's *Bananas, Beaches and Bases* and Scott's *Gender and the Politics of History*, it is high time to close the gap.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are the author's own.
2. Nationaal Archief Den Haag, The Hague (NL-HaNA), 2.05.317, Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, Examencommissie tot onderzoek naar de geschiktheid en de bekwaamheid voor de Buitenlandse Dienst (Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Board of Examiners for investigation into the suitability and competence for the Foreign Service), inv. nr 7, Vrouwen (Women) 1946–1957, Letter by Mr B. W. N. Servatius, Head of Examinations and Committees, to Prof. L. J. C. Beaufort, The Hague, 19 February 1957.
3. NL-HaNA, 2.05.51, Directie Buitenlandse Dienst (Foreign Service Directorate) (1940) 1945–1954 (1955), inv. nr 624, Stukken betreffende de invoering van een beoordelingssysteem voor ambtenaren werkzaam voor de Buitenlandse Dienst (Documents concerning the introduction of an appraisal system for officials of the Foreign Service), 1945–1949.
4. NL-HaNA, 2.05.86, E.N. van Kleffens, Gedeponeerde archief van mevrouw M.H. van Kleffens-Horstmann (1912–1993) (Deposited archive of Mrs M.H. van Kleffens-Horstmann), inv. nr 391, account by Margaret van Kleffens of events since 10 May 1940 (account by MvK), January 1941; inv. nr 392, diary of Margaret van Kleffens (MvK diary), 31 December 1942.
5. The author is grateful to Eelco van Kleffens for permission to study the private papers of his great-aunt and great-uncle.
6. NL-HaNA, 2.05.86, inv. nr 391, account by MvK, January 1941.
7. NL-HaNA, 2.05.86, inv. nr 393, MvK diary, 22 May 1944 *et passim*.
8. NL-HaNA, 2.05.86, inv. nr 395, MvK diary, 19 June 1945.
9. NL-HaNA, 2.05.86, inv. nr 393, MvK diary, 27 September 1943.
10. NL-HaNA, 2.05.86, inv. nr 404, MvK diary, 4 March 1954.
11. NL-HaNA, 2.05.86, inv. nr 391, account by MvK, January 1941.
12. NL-HaNA, 2.05.86, inv. nr 392, MvK diary, 23 March 1943.
13. NL-HaNA, 2.05.86, inv. nr 393, MvK diary, 10 July 1943 & 8 June 1944; inv. nr 392, MvK diary, 18 January 1943.
14. NL-HaNA, 2.05.86, inv. nr 393, MvK diary, 13 March 1943.
15. “Edgar” was Edgar Michiels van Verduynen, Dutch envoy to London and Foreign Minister without portfolio 1942–1945; NL-HaNA, 2.05.86, inv. nr 392, MvK diary, 19/20 June 1943.
16. NL-HaNA, 2.05.86, inv. nr 392, MvK diary, 19 March 1943.
17. NL-HaNA, 2.05.86, inv. nr 393, MvK diary, 3 January 1944.
18. NL-HaNA, 2.05.86, inv. nr 393, MvK diary, 20 & 26 October 1943.
19. NL-HaNA, 2.05.86, inv. nr 391, account by MvK, January 1941.

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