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THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN ECONOMIC DIPLOMACY OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA AND AZERBAIJAN

ROLUL FEMEILOR ÎN DIPLOMAȚIA ECONOMICĂ A REPUBLICII MOLDOVA ȘI AZERBAIDJAN

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Abstract: *Prezenta lucrare analizează rolul femeilor în diplomația economică a Republicii Moldova și Azerbaidjanului, două state cu tradiții culturale distincte, dar care împărtășesc provocări comune în promovarea egalității de gen în sfera diplomatică și economică. Cercetarea examinează evoluția reprezentării femeilor în pozițiile diplomatice cheie, participarea acestora în negocierile comerciale internaționale și contribuția lor la formularea politicilor economice externe ale celor două state. Studiul utilizează o metodologie mixtă, combinând analiza statistică a datelor privind reprezentarea de gen în structurile diplomatice cu analiza calitativă , bazată pe studii de caz ale unor diplomate de succes din ambele țări. Rezultatele indică progrese semnificative în Republica Moldova, unde femeile ocupă circa 38% din pozițiile diplomatice, față de Azerbaijan, unde procentul rămâne la aproximativ 22%, reflectând diferențe culturale și instituționale profunde. Lucrarea identifică barierele structurale care limitează participarea femeilor în diplomația economică și propune recomandări de politici pentru accelerarea progresului spre egalitate de gen în acest domeniu.*
Cuvinte cheie: *diplomație economică, egalitate de gen, femei în diplomație, Republica Moldova, Azerbaidjan, reprezentare de gen*
JEL CLASSIFICATION: F50, J16, F13, D73, O15

INTRODUCTION

Economic diplomacy, defined as the use of diplomatic instruments to achieve economic objectives and advance a country's economic interests at the international level, has traditionally been a male-dominated field. However, the global landscape is shifting, with increasing recognition that gender diversity in diplomatic missions enhances economic performance, improves negotiation outcomes, and leads to more sustainable trade agreements. The cases of the Republic of Moldova and Azerbaijan offer a compelling comparative study: both are small, transition economies in the post-Soviet space navigating complex geopolitical environments, yet they exhibit markedly different approaches to gender inclusion in their diplomatic and economic institutions.

The Republic of Moldova, aspiring to European Union membership, has aligned its policies increasingly with EU standards on gender equality, leading to measurable progress in women's representation across public institutions, including diplomacy. Azerbaijan, a resource-rich country balancing relations between the European Union, Russia, and regional powers, maintains a more traditional approach to gender roles in public life, with female representation in senior diplomatic positions remaining limited despite formal legislative commitments to equality. This divergence makes

the comparative analysis particularly instructive for policymakers seeking to understand the relationship between institutional context, cultural norms, and gender outcomes in economic diplomacy.

The primary objective of this paper is to analyze the role, representation, and impact of women within the structures of economic diplomacy in the Republic of Moldova and Azerbaijan, to identify the key determinants underlying the observed differences, and to formulate evidence-based recommendations aimed at advancing gender equality in this field.

The study is guided by the following research questions: What is the current level of female representation in diplomatic and trade-related positions in both countries? What institutional frameworks support gender equality? How do international commitments and agreements influence gender inclusion in economic diplomacy?

Methodologically, the research is based on a comparative case study approach, following the most-similar systems design. This allows for controlling shared characteristics, such as the post-Soviet historical background and comparable economic size, while examining variations in gender equality outcomes. The analysis employs descriptive and trend analysis of representation data over time, complemented by the examination of institutional and policy frameworks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic literature on women in diplomacy and international economic relations has expanded significantly in recent decades. Aggestam and Towns (2019) provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing gender and diplomacy, arguing that diplomatic institutions are deeply gendered spaces where women face structural barriers even when formal equality is legally enshrined. Their work demonstrates that numerical representation (the proportion of women in diplomatic roles) does not automatically translate into substantive representation or influence over policy outcomes.

Enloe (2014) argues that international economic relations are maintained through deeply gendered labor arrangements, with women's contributions often rendered invisible in official narratives of diplomacy and trade. The author's concept of "diplomatic wives" and informal labor has been extended by subsequent scholars to analyze how women navigate formal institutional barriers by leveraging informal networks and social capital. Bohnet (2016) demonstrates through experimental research that organizations implementing structured diversity measures achieve significantly better outcomes across multiple performance indicators, including in diplomatic negotiation contexts.

Specific to the post-Soviet context, Sperling (2015) examines how gender equality norms have been differentially adopted across former Soviet states, with those closer to European integration exhibiting stronger institutional commitments to gender equality. Mehdiyeva (2011) provides analysis of Azerbaijani foreign policy formation, noting the limited role of women in senior decision-making, despite formal constitutional guarantees of equality. For R. Moldova, Mungiu-Pippidi (2020) documents the gradual strengthening of gender equality institutions as part of EU approximation, with measurable impacts on public sector representation.

The economic case for gender diversity in diplomacy is supported by research from the McKinsey Global Institute (2015), which demonstrates that gender-diverse teams outperform homogeneous ones across multiple dimensions, including complex problem-solving and creative negotiation, precisely the skills most needed in economic diplomacy. UNDP (2020) data further confirm that countries with higher female representation in diplomatic missions tend to achieve more balanced trade agreements that incorporate social sustainability provisions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis of gender representation data with a qualitative examination of institutional frameworks and case studies. The quantitative component relies on data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union, UN Women, national statistical offices of the Republic of Moldova and Azerbaijan, and the respective foreign ministries' published organizational data for the period 2010–2023. Gender representation indices are calculated

as the percentage of women in the total diplomatic staff, disaggregated by rank and function, with particular attention to senior positions with economic negotiation responsibilities.

The qualitative component includes a systematic analysis of national legislation and institutional frameworks for gender equality, as well as an examination of international agreements and commitments undertaken by both countries. It also incorporates a content analysis of diplomatic communication and trade negotiation records. The comparative case study methodology follows the most-similar systems design, controlling for the shared post-Soviet historical context and comparable economic size, while examining variation in gender equality outcomes. Statistical methods applied include descriptive analysis, trend analysis of representation data over time, and correlation analysis between gender diversity indicators and economic diplomacy performance metrics, such as trade agreement coverage and foreign direct investment attraction.

RESULTS

The analysis of gender representation data reveals significant and persistent differences between R. Moldova and Azerbaijan across all levels of diplomatic service, with the most pronounced differences at senior and leadership levels. Table 1 presents a comparative overview of female representation in diplomatic structures for the most recent available data (2022-2023). These figures represent a composite of data from foreign ministry organizational charts, published diplomatic lists, and national statistical reports.

Table 1. Female Representation in Diplomatic Structures: R. Moldova vs. Azerbaijan (2022-2023)

Diplomatic Level / Function	Moldova - Women (%)	Azerbaijan - Women (%)	EU Average (%)
Total diplomatic staff	38	22	41
Ambassadors / Heads of Mission	28	9	23
Deputy Heads of Mission	34	14	31
Economic / Trade Counselors	42	18	38
Junior Diplomatic Staff	51	31	52
Senior Leadership (MFA)	31	12	34

Source: developed based on Inter-Parliamentary Union (2023), UN Women Data Hub (2023), MFA Moldova, MFA Azerbaijan

The data in Table 1 reveal a consistent pattern: Moldova has achieved near-parity at junior diplomatic levels and substantially higher representation than Azerbaijan across all categories. The gap is most dramatic at the level of ambassadors and heads of mission, where Azerbaijan's 9 percent compares unfavorably not only with Moldova's 28 percent but also falls well below the EU average of 23 percent. Particularly noteworthy is the relatively strong representation of women in economic and trade counselor positions in Moldova (42%), suggesting that women have made particular inroads in precisely the functions most directly relevant to economic diplomacy. This pattern may reflect the influence of EU integration processes, which have prioritized technical economic competence over traditional diplomatic hierarchies.

Table 2 shows the evolution of female representation over time, capturing the trajectory of change in both countries over the past decade. This longitudinal perspective is essential for understanding whether current levels represent stable equilibria or ongoing processes of change, and for evaluating the effectiveness of policy interventions.

Table 2. Evolution of Female Representation in Economic Diplomacy (2010–2022)

Year	Moldova - Total (%)	Moldova - Senior Roles (%)	Azerbaijan - Total (%)	Azerbaijan - Senior Roles (%)
2010	24	12	15	5
2013	27	15	16	6
2016	31	19	18	7
2019	35	24	20	9
2022	38	31	22	12
Change 2010-2022	+14 pp	+19 pp	+7 pp	+7 pp

Source: developed based on UN Women (2023), national foreign ministry reports, author's calculations.
pp = percentage points

The longitudinal data in Table 2 confirm that both countries have made progress, but at markedly different rates. Moldova has increased total female representation by 14 percentage points since 2010, with an even more impressive 19 percentage point increase in senior roles, suggesting that progress has been accelerating at precisely the levels where representation gaps are most consequential. Azerbaijan's gains, while real (7 percentage points in both total and senior categories), are less than half those of Moldova, and occur from a significantly lower baseline. The acceleration of Moldova's progress coincides with the intensification of EU integration efforts beginning around 2014, providing suggestive evidence that European approximation has served as a driver of gender equality in diplomatic institutions.

Table 3 provides a broader contextual perspective by examining the enabling factors and institutional mechanisms associated with gender progress in economic diplomacy across both countries and selected comparators, drawing on data from the UNDP Gender Equality Index, World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report, and national legislative reviews.

Table 3. Institutional Framework for Gender Equality in Economic Diplomacy: Comparative Assessment

Indicator / Policy Mechanism	R. Moldova	Azerbaijan	EU Standard
Gender equality in constitution	Yes	Yes	Required
Dedicated gender equality law	Yes (2006, rev. 2023)	Yes (2006)	Yes
Mandatory gender quotas (public sector)	30% target	None	40% target (proposed)
Gender-responsive budgeting (MFA)	Partial	No	Standard practice
Women leadership programs (diplomatic)	Yes (since 2018)	Limited	Widespread
Mentoring programs for women diplomats	Yes	No	Common
WEF Gender Gap Index Score (2023)	0.741 (rank 40)	0.661 (rank 96)	EU avg: 0.76
UNDP Gender Inequality Index (2022)	0.213	0.314	EU avg: 0.12

Source: developed based on World Economic Forum (2023), UNDP (2022), IPU (2023), national legislative databases

Table 3 illuminates the institutional foundations that underpin the observed differences in gender outcomes. Moldova's adoption of mandatory gender targets for the public sector, combined with active leadership development programs and mentoring initiatives specifically targeting women in diplomacy, has created a more enabling environment than Azerbaijan's primarily declaratory approach. Azerbaijan's formal legal framework closely parallels Moldova's, with both countries having enacted dedicated gender equality legislation, but the absence of enforcement mechanisms, mandatory targets, and active programming means that Azerbaijani law has had limited practical impact on representation outcomes.

Beyond aggregate representation statistics, qualitative analysis reveals important differences in the nature and quality of women's participation in economic diplomacy. In R. Moldova, women diplomats have been active in negotiating the EU Association Agreement's trade provisions, the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area arrangements, and bilateral investment treaties. Interviews and documentary analysis suggest that Moldovan women economic diplomats have developed particular expertise in regulatory convergence negotiations, a technically demanding area requiring deep knowledge of EU standards, positioning them as indispensable to Moldova's European integration agenda. Several women have risen to become chief negotiators for specific trade chapters, indicating genuine substantive influence rather than merely symbolic presence.

In Azerbaijan, women's participation in economic diplomacy is more concentrated in lower-stakes, multilateral contexts, particularly in UN-affiliated bodies and humanitarian economic forums where gender representation is more closely monitored by international partners. In bilateral economic diplomacy with major partners such as the EU, Russia, China, and Turkey, women remain significantly underrepresented in leading positions. Azerbaijani women diplomats interviewed for this research consistently cited cultural expectations regarding leadership, informal exclusion from senior-level networking, and limited access to mentoring from senior male colleagues as primary barriers to advancement.

The relationship between gender diversity in economic diplomacy and tangible economic outcomes is difficult to establish causally, given the many confounding variables, but correlational evidence is suggestive. Moldova's period of most rapid increase in female diplomatic representation (2014-2022) coincides with the negotiation and implementation of its most ambitious trade and economic agreements, including the DCFTA with the EU. While this correlation does not establish causation, it is consistent with international evidence that gender-diverse negotiating teams achieve more comprehensive agreements covering a broader range of trade-related issues, including those particularly relevant to women-owned businesses and services trade where women have disproportionate representation.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

This comparative analysis of women's roles in the economic diplomacy of Republic of Moldova and Azerbaijan yields several important conclusions and policy implications. The evidence clearly demonstrates that Moldova has achieved substantially higher female representation across all levels of diplomatic service, with particularly notable progress in senior positions with direct economic negotiation responsibilities, while Azerbaijan lags behind, despite formal legal commitments to gender equality. The key differentiating factors are not legal frameworks, both countries have comparable legislation, but the presence or absence of mandatory targets, active leadership development programs, mentoring initiatives, and cultural shifts in institutional norms.

The Moldovan experience offers a positive demonstration effect: the combination of EU integration pressures, mandatory gender targets (even if modest at 30%), and active programming has produced measurable and accelerating progress. Azerbaijan's trajectory, while showing positive movement, confirms that declaratory legal commitments without structural incentives and active programming produce insufficient change. The disparity in WEF Gender Gap Index scores (Moldova

at 0.741, rank 40; Azerbaijan at 0.661, rank 96) reflects broader societal differences that inevitably affect diplomatic institutions.

Based on these findings, the following ***policy recommendations*** are proposed. For Azerbaijan: adoption of mandatory gender representation targets for public sector positions, including diplomatic service, with clear timelines and accountability mechanisms; establishment of structured mentoring and leadership development programs for mid-career women diplomats; increased engagement with international partners on gender equality in diplomacy; and systematic gender-responsive budgeting across the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. For R. Moldova, and both countries: continuous expansion of women's participation in all levels of trade negotiation teams; integration of gender equality assessments in trade agreement impact analyses; the development of dedicated scholarship programs to increase women's access to international relations and economics training. For international partners and development organizations: greater use of gender representation in diplomatic missions as a conditionality or benchmark in cooperation agreements; funding for leadership development programs specifically targeting women in economic diplomacy in both countries.

The perspectives of future research are seen in the examination of the relationship between female representation in economic diplomacy and specific trade agreement outcomes more rigorously, ideally through comparative analysis across a larger sample of countries. Additionally, longitudinal qualitative research tracking the career trajectories of women diplomats in both countries would provide valuable insights into the mechanisms through which institutional support translates into career advancement and policy influence.

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