


## ***Habitus* and Contract: Behind Gender Inequality in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs**

### ***Habitus* e Contrato: por trás da Desigualdade de Gênero no Ministério das Relações Exteriores**

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#### **Abstract**

Who can speak for the state? Although the noun ‘diplomat’ includes both genders, diplomacy is not attributed to what is considered as ‘feminine’ characteristics, nor even with the figure of a woman herself. This article aims to contribute to the discussion in the field of women’s participation in public service, focusing on high-level bureaucracy – more precisely, the diplomatic career. The main question here concerns what lies behind the structural and structuring inequalities in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MRE) and the Rio Branco Institute (Itamaraty), using gender as an analytical lens – but, of course, without disregarding issues of race and sexuality. To this end, we observed (i) the history of women entering the career since the beginning of the Brazilian republic; (ii) the practices that constitute the diplomatic *habitus* and ethos, from initial training at Itamaraty to the arrival at the MRE; and (iii) the racial-sexual contract that circumscribes the practices of domination in the institution.

**Keywords:** Gender; Itamaraty; Ministry of Foreign Affairs; *habitus*; racial-sexual contract.

#### **Resumo**

Quem pode falar pelo Estado? Apesar de o substantivo diplomata ser comum a dois gêneros, não se atribui à diplomacia características consideradas “femininas”, tampouco a própria figura de uma mulher. O presente artigo tem como objetivo contribuir com a discussão no campo da participação das mulheres no funcionalismo público, no âmbito da burocracia de alto escalão, mais especificamente a carreira diplomática. A principal questão diz respeito ao que está por trás das desigualdades estruturais e estruturantes no Ministério das Relações Exteriores (MRE) e no Instituto Rio Branco (Itamaraty), partindo do gênero como lente

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analítica – mas sem desconsiderar questões de raça e sexualidade. Para tanto, observamos (i) o histórico do ingresso de mulheres na carreira desde o Brasil republicano; (ii) as práticas que constituem o *habitus* e o *ethos* diplomático desde a formação no Itamaraty até a chegada ao MRE; e (iii) o contrato racial-sexual que circunscreve as práticas de dominação na instituição.

**Palavras-chave:** gênero; Itamaraty; Ministério das Relações Exteriores; *habitus*; contrato racial-sexual.

## Introduction

Brazilian diplomacy is yet to shed its defining characteristic: being aristocratic. The influence of the Baron of Rio Branco, the original patron of Brazilian diplomacy, has perpetuated itself in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)<sup>4</sup> beyond his own excellence in the role. It invades the rooms, selects the bodies it wants and, in so doing, excludes others. The meritocratic liberal discourse is reflected in the selection criteria used during the admission process for entry to the career, typical of Brazil's elites. In this way, an ideal type of candidate is created: male, white, preferably from the south-east of the country, from a family with a tradition in state affairs and a graduate from one of a handful of universities.

This 'sifting,' as the popular jargon puts it, is highly exclusionary. While true that part of the MFA's diplomatic corps does not possess this profile, it is equally true that this group is a minority. A survey conducted by the Association of Brazilian Diplomats (2023) revealed that, as of August 2023, among the 1,888 qualified diplomats, 1535 were active (81.3%) and 353 retired (18.7%). From this total (active + retired), just 417 (22%) were women. Although this is a low percentage and does not reflect the reality in Brazil, it is a much better expression than it was in the past, since the possibility of entering a diplomatic career was once a major obstacle for any interested women.

In this sense, the twentieth century saw diverse changes to the diplomatic career itself, unified through the Oswaldo Aranha Reform of 1931 – more specifically through Decree-Law 791 (DL-791) (Brazil, 1938), which repealed the Organic Law of Diplomatic and Consular Services in order to create a new legal framework for the MFA; this decree bureaucratized and established clear rules for selecting candidates with a certain cultural capital (Azambuja, 2011). According to Tomas (2020, p. 29), this reform was part of a wider social phenomenon, which simultaneously blocked women from public service positions for which they were considered 'naturally unsuitable' and established sexual divisions of labour. Furthermore, the expression 'all Brazilians' (*todos os brasileiros*) used in the notices and calls for public entrance competitions referred only to white Brazilian men who were considered citizens (Balbino, 2011). Only they would be able to apply for a diplomatic career, therefore, since DL-791 meant that 16 years passed without women being able to enter the diplomatic career, with only the Group of 20, which we discuss below, managing to enter the MFA (Friaça, 2018).

A second essential characteristic, once the person had passed through the 'sieve,' was the candidate's willingness to 'sacrifice' their family (or any desire to have one) in the name of the work, the fatherland (*a pátria*) and the nation. This characteristic was strongly present as a limiting factor to the entry of women into the career during

<sup>4</sup> In Portuguese, *Ministério das Relações Exteriores*, MRE.

the selection process at the interview stage, abolished in 1984, and also during their time working for the MFA, limiting their career progression (Cockles & Steiner, 2017; Gobo, 2017). On the subject of interviews, one practice was very common: the harassment of female candidates. It was no different within the MFA – which is what mobilised the Group of Women Diplomats to denounce cases of sexism in the MFA in 2013 (Cockles & Steiner, 2017).

The ‘sieve,’ the cost in terms of family life and the practice of harassment prompt us to evoke Bourdieu’s (1990) concept of *habitus* and its constitution within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (and likewise the Rio Branco Institute, also known simply as Itamaraty). This *habitus* comes to monopolise both the selection and the training of Brazilian diplomats insofar as it embodies the structures of domination over dissimilar bodies, consigning women and other groups (black and disabled people, the LGBT+ population) to the margins, as well as promoting a constant (dialectical) interaction between bodies and fields (Standfield, 2020), diplomats and the institution (MFA/Itamaraty). Consequently, we argue that the notions of the sexual contract (Pateman, 1988) and the racial contract (Mills, 1997) are important categories that allow us to understand the relations of domination and subordination inherent to the diplomatic career, reflected in the high selectivity and low representativity of marginalised groups, as well as the difficulty of career progression for women.

This leads us to some questions: who can speak for the state – and why not women? What factors have historically prevented women from accessing and ascending the diplomatic career ladder? Under what conditions do other marginalised groups – black people and LGBTQIA+, for example – inhabit high-ranking institutions of Brazil’s state bureaucracy? In short, what lies behind the structural inequalities (of gender, race, class and sexual orientation) in the MFA?

To address these questions, our article adopts a critical-analytical approach, which integrates a series of theoretical concepts with the purpose of describing and analysing in detail the propositions advanced. In the first section, we present a general survey of the process of accessing, gaining admission and progressing in the diplomatic career, taking women as the main group under study – but not restricted to just them. In the second section, we develop the concept of *habitus* constituted within the Rio Branco Institute (Itamaraty), considering its socializing capacity in relation to structures of domination. Finally, in the last section, we discuss how the racial-sexual contract is found at the roots of the relations of subordination in the Brazil’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, comprehended in its three phases: patrimonialist, charismatic and bureaucratic-rational.

## 1 A Brief Analysis of Gender Barriers in the Diplomatic Career

From the outset, it should be observed that access, entry and progression are three phases inherent to professional life as a whole. In general terms, access refers to the qualifications required and the availability of information on employment opportunities. Entry, in turn, relates to entering a particular area through an employment opportunity. And finally progression simply refers to moving up the career ladder to more senior positions. With regard to the diplomatic career, we consider here that social limitations exist that have undergone changes over the years for women interested in this work. These mutations have migrated from one phase to the next, respectively, as described above. To observe them carefully, therefore, we need to think in terms of a timeline.

Firstly, the history of women's access to the diplomatic career is not uniform. With the advent of the Republic in 1889, public competitions were launched (in 1891) calling for 'all Brazilians' to apply (Balbino, 2011). What we recognize today as the diplomatic career was subdivided at the time into three distinct careers: consular, diplomatic and a career in the ministry (Friaça, 2018). However, Decree-Law 791 (Brazil, 1938), which created a new legal framework for the MFA, unified the three careers into one. It also blocked women's access to the career, allowing only male candidates to apply. However, the consolidation of these three different careers occurred holistically. In other words, all the people who had already entered the foreign service through other entrance competitions – for the career in a consulate or the MFA – effectively became diplomats (Friaça, 2018).

There was a tiny but legitimate number of women who managed to enter the MFA until 1938: 19 were admitted, along with Maria José Monteiro de Carvalho, who joined the diplomatic career after the first reform. This situation was only reversed in 1954, with Law 2,171 (Brazil, 1954), which ended the 16-year ban on women entering the career. Adopting the label proposed by Friaça (2018), these first female diplomats are known as the Group of 20, while those who emerged between 1955 and 1988 are the 'second generation' of female diplomats. The author argues that the latter had limitations imposed on them along with the reforms and were thus unable to carry out what he calls *atos célebres* or 'notorious actions' (Friaça, 2018).

Two of the limitations cited by Friaça were (i) the ban on marriage, repealed in 1966; (ii) and Decree-Law 69, which stipulated that diplomatic couples, when they were active civil servants, would be 'aggregated' when posted abroad (Cockles & Steiner, 2017; Friaça, 2018). In other words, one of the couple could choose to stay and serve in Brazil or accompany their partner abroad, in which case their time of employment would be frozen. Thus, if 12 years of service were required for a particular promotion, a woman who had worked alongside her husband for 2 years would only have 10 years of service and would therefore not be able to apply for the more senior position.

Although 'aggregation' did not stipulate which gender should be aggregated, women generally made this choice. This is related to two aspects that, in reality, constitute two sides of the same coin: on one hand, the place of care that is socially attributed to women, and, on the other, the 'diplomat identity.' Both aspects relate to a kind of family cost, which refers to how much one was willing to sacrifice the desire to have a family in favour of work (Cockles & Steiner, 2017).

Considering the gender roles present in society, which identify men as rational, professional beings with the capacity to be impersonal and women as more emotional, impulsive and sentimental, there is a type of subject who is expected to be working in this public sphere. Of course, these notions do not manifest themselves, necessarily, in concrete obstacles, but they do permeate our imagination and sustain our perceptions of reality. These constructs leave women and wives with the work of meeting the family's basic needs, child rearing and domestic administration. Men, the 'heads of the family,' would be responsible for dealing with business, organising the finances, providing resources, and managing and expanding their assets, but also possessing the time and freedom to meet with other men and discuss matters of state (Delamonica, 2014).

The ‘family cost’ also infiltrated the admissions process itself, impacting on the entry of women into the diplomatic career. At the end of the military dictatorship, while Brazil was returning to democracy between 1985 and 1988, the competition was democratised to include applications in all Brazil’s state capitals and attempt to represent the country’s diversity (Gobo, 2017). Amid the many different phases and evaluations, the interview became a stage that stood out due to its usually uncomfortable nature for women. The authors Cockles and Steiner (2017) set out to talk to women who had passed through the selection process. Their accounts revealed the harassment of female candidates by their interviewers (career diplomats). The questions asked during the interview revolved around the wish to get married, the choice between family and work, and even the hypothesis of ‘aggregation’ – questions like “were you to marry a diplomat, who do you think should suspend their career?”

Karla Gobo (Chutando [...], 2018) also described reports of harassment during the selection process. One case that stands out is that of a candidate who was asked to lift up her blouse during the interview by one member of the panel – notably entirely made up of white men. The interviewee asked if any medical procedures would be necessary during the selection process and the response she received was: “Consider the answer yes and no (sic).” It becomes clear, therefore that embarrassment and exclusion are two practices already legitimised within the MFA, which not only confer authority on the dominant male group, but also perpetuate male domination (Bourdieu, 2002) within the institution as a whole.

Excluding the interviews in the selection process in 1984 – and the oral exams in 2005 – the focus shifts to the career progression phase, which was strongly addressed during Celso Amorim’s period as foreign minister under the Lula government (2003-2011). The minister mobilised what became known in the MFA as ‘informal quotas’ to enable both the appointment of female diplomats to the Access Board (*Quadro de Acesso: AQ*) and their promotion. It should be emphasised, however, that Amorim’s actions were independent and autonomous. Thus, gender equality or parity specifically within the MFA was not a platform of the government – or of the Workers’ Party (PT) to which the minister belonged – but there was interest on the part of the minister himself (Cockles & Steiner, 2017; Gobo, 2017).

As well as trying to achieve compensatory measures, such as reinstating the length of service of women who had suspended their career time – which he achieved, albeit partially – Amorim tried to establish affirmative measures by persuading his advisors. In addition, the minister asked for “at least one [woman](sic)”<sup>5</sup> to be appointed to the aforementioned Access Board, which decides on the names eligible for promotion every semester (Cockles & Steiner, 2017). The authors also point out that between 2003 and 2009 there was a leap in the participation of women on the Access Board, rising from 10% to 29% of those appointed and from 16% to 29% of those promoted over the period. Thus, the informal quotas (as they came to be known) established by former minister Celso Amorim were consolidated at the time as an informal and direct strategy, and were not sustained as a practice or habit of the MFA (Cockles & Steiner, 2017). Nevertheless, the informal quotas shook the stability of the institution insofar as they challenged male domination. Male domination is a specific form of violence expressed through symbolic means, whose historical structures allow

<sup>5</sup> Except taken from the interview with Karla Gobo on the podcast “Elas: Chutando a Escada” (Women Kicking away the Ladder) (Chutando [...], 2018).

male domination over women to be recognised (Bourdieu, 2002). Positive discrimination, on the other hand, is the legal definition of quotas in favour of providing access to minority groups (Azevedo, 2004).

As a result, there was something of a rejection of informal quotas by male diplomats: in their view, there was no sexism (*machismo*) in Itamaraty. In response to a newspaper column published on the same issue – asserting that there was no sexism in Itamaraty – female diplomats raised around 100 denunciations of sexism in the MFA, which led to the creation of the Gender and Race Steering Committee (GRSC-MFA) in 2014. While, on the one hand, the mobilisation to open up opportunities to a particular group (as undertaken by Celso Amorim) was an act implicitly recognizing gender inequalities in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on the other hand, the very creation of the GRSC-MFA was also based on the recognition of such differences – even though the aim was to obtain the seal of Pro-Gender and Race Equality from the United Nations (Azevedo, 2004; Bourdieu, 2002; Cockles; Steiner, 2017). After the GRSC-MFA was set up, complaints were sent to the Internal Affairs Department and the Ethics Commission, and a mechanism for preventing and mitigating related issues within the MFA became formalised (Cockles & Steiner, 2017; Gobo, 2017).

Also in 2013, the group of women who submitted the complaints organised themselves informally to act on their demands internally within the MFA: this was the Group of Women Diplomats. Thereafter, a number of actions were established to attract women to the diplomatic career, such as the “More Women Diplomats” campaign (2018), which featured videos of diplomats recounting their experiences of entering the career and inviting more women to join the service – and also their subsequent struggle. Ten years later, in 2023, the Group of Women Diplomats became institutionalised and incorporated active and retired diplomats to launch the Association of Women Diplomats of Brazil (*Associação de Mulheres Diplomatas do Brasil*: AMDB, or simply *Mulheres Diplomatas*, Women Diplomats), under the presidency of Irene Vida Gala, an ambassador and career diplomat. According to the AMDB, this movement is part of “an international phenomenon of women organising in diplomacy.”<sup>6</sup>

Speaking at the first face-to-face meeting of the Latin American Network of Women Researchers in International Relations (MulheRIs/MujeRIs) on 24 July 2023 in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Vida Gala observed that the AMDB is the first organisation of female civil servants working in the foreign service in Brazil. Currently, the AMDB works to mobilise public debate through the dissemination of press releases and participation in events, as well as collecting and compiling socio-economic data on female diplomats in the MFA. The AMDB also performs a social role in the selection process by supporting the preparation of female candidates for the exams. The association also has an Inclusive Foreign Policy Observatory, which is supported by researchers from civil society and women from other countries (Gala, 2023). More recently, in an attempt to broaden the debate on foreign policy and public policies generally, as well as on a feminist/inclusive foreign policy, the organisation launched a podcast called “Mulheres no Mapa” (Women on the Map).

At the end of 2023, the lack of transparency in Itamaraty’s promotions aroused controversy. Dissatisfaction among diplomats reached the point of threatening a strike, and the president of the Association of Brazilian Diplomats (ADB), Maria Celina de Azevedo Rodrigues, resigned after denouncing, in a document approved by the

<sup>6</sup> Excerpt taken from the institution’s presentation (AMDB, 2023a).

Association's General Assembly, the "existence of almost insurmountable obstruction to the promotion of secretaries and counsellors to the most senior levels of the diplomatic career" (Lopes, 2023). In an interview, Ambassador Irene Vida Gala stated that these happenings match what has been articulated by the AMDB in its search for transparency and objective criteria for promotions (Gala, 2023). Also in December 2023, the diplomat Isabel Heyvaert filed a writ of mandamus with the Superior Court of Justice alleging racial and gender discrimination in promotions to the post of ambassador. The diplomat argued that she had fulfilled all the requirements for promotion, but that lower-ranking colleagues had been promoted before her.

The work of Women Diplomats is in line, therefore, with what Marielle Franco (2018) identified with regard to compensatory policies for the under-representation of different social groups in decision-making spaces or any other spaces within the public sphere. After all, as Franco (2018, p. 120) writes, "we need to cultivate common sense to build a new political aesthetic from the viewpoint of articulating gender, race, class and popular territories so that people's lives are placed above profit." Hence, the issue of female participation in high-ranking positions in the state, such as the diplomatic career, is related to the context of greater concern over the adequate political representation of distinct social groups, and not just a question of the presence of women in institutions (Balbino, 2011). All ethnic-racial groups and socio-economic classes are included, aiming to ensure that real democracy is achieved.

## 2 "Form the environment and make the school"

In the Brazilian case, unlike other nation states that have become benchmarks in terms of implementing policies to promote gender equality and allegedly feminist foreign policies, the gender issue cannot be separated from issues of race and class and, consequently, from the way in which these categories work to organise society hierarchically. As of August 2023, as we stated in the introduction to this article, women represent around 22% of the diplomats in Itamaraty (ADB, 2023), while the percentage of black people, regardless of gender, is just 5% (even after the implementation of racial quotas in the competition for admission to the diplomatic career). In terms of geographical distribution, 62% of diplomats come from the Southeast, the most economically privileged region. The other regions are the South (14%), Northeast (11%), Central West (7%) and North (1%), as well as Abroad (5%), according to an ADB survey (2023).

The same research shows that the distribution of positions at the top of the diplomatic hierarchy tends to be lower for women. Between 1985 and 2022, the diplomatic ranks recorded 353 retirements, 59 (17%) of whom were women and 294 (83%) men. At the top of the career, as 1st Class Ministers, only 8% (15 cases) of retirees were women, while 92% (182) were men. As 2nd Class Ministers, the proportion was 13% (8 cases) women and 87% (55) men; and as Councillors, 38% (33 cases) were women and 62% (54) were men. In a preliminary survey of women active in senior positions abroad, conducted by the AMDB in 2023, it was found that, as of 31 January the same year, only 30 women held such positions (around 13.82%). Men, on the other hand, occupied 171 posts; 14 posts were not identified and 2 were unfilled (AMDB, 2023b).

The representativity of the diplomatic corps, seen from a Bourdieusian perspective, mainly proves to be a question of the construction of a white, masculinised and elitist diplomatic *habitus*. The notion of *habitus* is defined by Bourdieu (1990, p. 53) as “systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes.” As a product of history, *habitus* regulates, produces and reactivates meanings objectified in institutions, based on formal rules and explicit norms, as well as “schemes of perception, thought and action” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 54) that guarantee the conformity and constancy of practices over time.

Applying this perspective thus requires questioning social structures and transcending subjectivist approaches in which the dominant practices and ways of thinking that constitute a field can be reproduced.<sup>7</sup> In this way, Bourdieu (1990, p. 52) invites us to analyse practices, “the site of the dialectic [...] of the objectified products and the incorporated products of historical practice; of structures and *habitus*.” In other words, social practices emerge from the interaction between bodies and fields. They are not alien to power structures, but actively reproduce or break with them (Standfield, 2020).

While the diplomatic *habitus* has similar characteristics to other international institutions and foreign affairs ministries, in Brazil, we argue, its construction is mainly due to two variables: (i) the process of re-socialising new diplomats through the Rio Branco Institute, which is responsible for the education and training of those entering the career; and (ii) the influence and actions of the patron of Itamaraty, the Baron of Rio Branco, and his tendencies to homogenise the diplomatic corps in order to perform aristocratic ideals. The construction of the Brazilian diplomatic *habitus* makes clear that privileges and hierarchical relations within the MFA go beyond posts and promotions to incorporate aspects of very specific social groups. It is important to note that when Bourdieu emphasises that practices emerge from the interaction between bodies and fields, these bodies come to embody structures of domination (Standfield, 2020), which in turn reproduces socially constructed differentiations (such as race and gender distinctions) that become inscribed in bodies and expressed through behaviour, dress, discourse and spaces of use (Standfield, 2020).

The homogeneity of Itamaraty’s social organisation only persists due to its social practices and the process of embodying structures of domination in bodies that differ from those that participated in the construction of the *habitus*, which results in the subordination of groups seeking greater participation and political representativity. While feminist studies have already demonstrated how women are relegated to the private sphere and face difficulties inserting themselves into political environments and the public sphere, understanding a social field through its *habitus* and the practices that compose it shows that, in addition to women, other social groups are consigned to the margins because they carry markers of difference from the dominant group inscribed on their bodies. Thus, Azambuja (2011, n.p) writes:

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<sup>7</sup> “Áreas da vida social nas quais os indivíduos reconhecem ter certos ‘*stakes at stake*’ [certos interesses em jogo]” (Leander, 2008, p. 16).



Not only were Brazilian diplomats similar to each other, but we were also similar to all other diplomats across the world – but a world that consisted of some forty countries, perhaps a dozen or so of which actually counted. We were part of an elite, a global community that shared styles and practices.

In the 1930s, with the process of bureaucratisation of Itamaraty's administration, the MFA began to recruit and hire its employees through public entrance competitions and established rules for selection. Nonetheless, the objective of selecting candidates with greater cultural capital remained effectively the same. "It ceased to be a house of the elite by aristocratic selection to become a house of the elite by intellectual selection. The concept of the elite not only remained but became strengthened" (Azambuja, 2011, n.p). At this point, entrance competitions began to be organised by the Administrative Department of the Public Service, which established anonymous exams as a way of selecting candidates on the basis of merit, and no longer on the basis of the personalist criteria employed previously.

However, the adoption of exams as a selection criterion, contrary to what may be presumed, has not democratised access to the MFA, nor has it made its officials representative of the population they are supposed to represent abroad. This is a problem that persists to this day. According to survey by the ADB (2023), between 2003 and 2022, of the 1,199 individuals who passed the Diplomatic Career Admission Exam (*Concurso de Admissão à Carreira de Diplomata: CACD*), 880 were men (around 73%), while 319 were women (27%). At the same time, even though the competitions prioritise candidates capable of passing extensive knowledge and foreign language exams, the very content of these tests makes it clear that candidates are expected to have a high level of cultural capital (Gobo, 2016). Association with the national elite is no longer a prerequisite based on personalist principles, but admission to the career is still linked to access to a high level of formal education:

[...] women were systematically excluded, while various men were passed over as a consequence of the extremely subjective criteria used by the selection board, such as 'moral qualities and firmness of character,' as well as 'intellectual capacity and spiritual formation' [...] Effectively there was no competition, just a farce to accommodate political appointments. The first recruitment process conducted by Itamaraty after the creation of the IRBr and the end of the Estado Novo thus led to poor results and was far from breaking with past practices and ushering in a new era. (Farias & Carmo, 2016, p. 53)

The Rio Branco Institute (IRBr), although initially designed with other objectives in mind, soon became the institution with the functions that it still performs today: training newcomers in the knowledge required to represent the Brazilian state abroad and, above all, in the institutional culture of the institution. The idea that new actors would join the MFA once they were selected according to criteria based on merit made it necessary to provide further training later. According to Secretary Jorge Latour (1934 quoted in Cheibub, 1985, p. 127): "To this end, we need to form an environment and make a school." Thus, the creators of the IRBr saw the institute as

fulfilling a role similar to the War College for military personnel, while also accumulating professional functions, as in the Military Academies and Officer Schools. In practice, what happened was that the institute simply monopolised the selection and training of Brazilian diplomats. This monopoly was effectively the MFA's response to recruitment via competitive examination by the Administrative Department of the Public Service and a way to maintain control over members of Itamaraty (Moura, 2007).

However, the IRB's importance goes beyond simply teaching and training new diplomats in foreign policy issues. Its importance resides largely in its socialising capacity. Far beyond the content of the subjects studied at the Rio Branco Institute, 'form' is the main object of learning. "There is something more important for new diplomats than studying the course material: learning the ethos of the institute" (Moura, 2007, p. 85). Over time, the IRBr has reaffirmed and reproduced the diplomatic *habitus* that has succeeded in

[...] establishing itself as a 'caste' characterised by a particular worldview and lifestyle that constitute an ethos that bears certain similarities to the courtly ethos [...]. the adjective 'noble' or 'aristocratic' is used by candidates and their family members to designate the 'diplomat.' (Moura, 2007, p. 48)

The Rio Branco Institute became not only a centre for the education and specialisation of diplomats in foreign policy affairs, but above all a socialising environment in which the diplomatic *habitus* would be reinforced and passed on to mitigate possible differences in the origins of the new diplomats, since selection would now take place through public competitions. The strength of the 'new identity' received at the inauguration ceremony at the institute is reflected in the belief that, from this moment on, the new students "cease to be who they are to transform into diplomats" (Moura, 2007, p. 95).

The diplomatic *habitus*, then, can be defined as an apparently naturalised embodiment of a set of codes, which in the diplomatic career are translated as a 'vocation.' According to Gobo (2016, p. 154), "this idea, by making it seem that these codes are individual personality traits, ends up camouflaging the fact that they are actually learnt and internalised." To the extent that the entry of new candidates sets the precedent for a heterogenization of the members of the MFA, the actors who lack mastery over these codes will end up wishing to internalise them. This is because once the *habitus* is assimilated and transmitted, even at a late stage, its structure also acts in a structuring way. Put otherwise, *habitus* as a structure, once established, can shape the behaviour of actors (Bourdieu, 2009). In the words of Gobo (2019, p. 2): "Itamaraty is not just another working environment for a bureaucracy. It carries a series of signs that are the materialised representation itself of its agents."

The idea of a vocation to a career, which ignores the learnt nature of the diplomatic *habitus*, also counter-creates the idea of a non-vocation. From the MFA's creation until the end of the interview stage in 1984, groups that personified and embodied characteristics that 'deviated' from the expected pattern were disqualified. Until 2005, however, while the oral exams continued, it could not be said that any

candidate had been disqualified for this characteristic. Among the considered unsuitable candidates were women, black people, LGBTQIA+ people and any candidate who failed to present the expected levels of cultural capital.

If the creation of margins is intimately related to the accumulation of symbolic capital and, consequently, power, in its multiple manifestations, on the part of a dominant group that constitutes and creates a centre, the daily maintenance of relations between margins and centres also requires constant actions by this dominant group. Consequently, it becomes much more unlikely that the so-called centres can effectively hear and understand the margins, which are always depicted as voices impossible to be heard from so far away, or represented as lacking the language or articulation needed to be understood (Enloe, 2014). Similarly, if truly listening to the margins in their daily practices and discourses means understanding how power acts in the world, understanding the construction of fields and *habitus* in which these practices are reproduced is also connected to understanding how power operates in relationships of domination.

The construction of the field in which Brazil's diplomatic *habitus* developed was, first and foremost, an exclusionary process, which reinforced differentiations of gender, class and race. Revisionist views of the social contract, such as those of Pateman (1988) and Mills (1997), suggest a new way of looking at the genesis of a society, based not on an egalitarian contract between the parties, but on an agreement between dominant groups to legitimise subordinations that sustain the social structure – and that are, at the same time, reproduced by it. Although we are not dealing here with a national society, we propose translating notions such as racial contract and sexual contract into the formation of the field under analysis in order to better understand how the resulting *habitus* is also based on the exclusion of social groups.

### 3 The Genesis of the Field as a Racial-Sexual Contract

According to Charles Mills (1997), the racial contract is a set of normative provisions, formal or informal, of a political, moral and epistemological kind, whose signatories are designated on the basis of racial criteria. Thus, while some human groups, corresponding to white people, are classified as full persons, other non-white human groups are categorised as sub-persons and ascribed a different, 'inferior' status. In effect, this second group received civil positions subordinate to the white groups or policies controlled by white people. For Mills (1997), therefore, the racial contract is a contract of exploitation, which both founds and sustains a racial political regime, while it morally regulates the behaviour of citizens, prescribes cognitive norms and determines who receives what through the establishment of limits.

Carole Pateman's (1988) notion of the sexual contract, meanwhile, consists of the idea that men's political right over women derives from an original social-sexual pact that establishes civil liberty as a male attribute dependent on patriarchal law, while simultaneously imposing the domination and subjection of women and their bodies at men's disposal. With this, the sexual contract establishes the terms of relations of subordination through the creation of a private sphere that is destined for women in the transition from the state of nature to the state, as they are allocated a position outside the public sphere of civil society and subordinate to the men who

make up this sphere. According to Pateman (1988), while patriarchal civil society privileges only the public sphere, directed towards men, the private sphere is characterised as politically irrelevant and directed towards women.

On this point, we emphasise the importance of looking at the racial-sexual contract through a logic of imbrication (Gill & Pires, 2019) that articulates gender, race, class and sexuality as structuring principles of contemporary society that overlap in power relations. Exploring the imbrication of categories thus allows us to understand gender transversally, not as a mere object, but “as an analytic lens that dimensions the power structures that shape the modern/colonial global system in an imbricated way” (Gill & Pires, 2019, p. 48).

Even today, we can observe the effects of a patriarchal and racial hierarchy in the difficulty of having a Ministry of Foreign Affairs truly representative of Brazilian society, in the name of which it speaks abroad and in international organisations. The low representativity of women and black people in the MFA, as well as their difficulties in accessing and progressing in the diplomatic career, can be understood by observing the process through which these groups accumulate social and cultural capital in relation to Itamaraty’s *habitus*. Before analysing the relationship between *habitus* and the insertion of social groups, though, we need to understand the formation of the field in which this *habitus* develops. In Bourdieu’s words (1989, p. 69):

To understand the social genesis of a field, and to apprehend what makes the specific necessity of the belief that sustains it, of the language game that is played in it, of the material and symbolic things in play that are generated in it, is to explain, to make necessary, to subtract from the absurdity of the arbitrary and the unmotivated the acts of the producers and the works produced by them and not, as is generally thought, to reduce or destroy.

In view of this, the MFA was one of the first bureaucratic apparatuses in newly independent Brazil. The country had an important advantage in terms of international recognition. Following the arrival of the Portuguese Court in 1808, Rio de Janeiro was equipped with a small foreign service and a foreign diplomatic corp. The country thus acquired a precious diplomatic activity. “On the other hand, the adoption of the monarchy as the new nation’s form of government facilitated the country’s entry into the international ‘club’” (Cheibub, 1985, p. 115), since it brought Brazil closer to Europe, which was still strongly monarchical, and allowed ties to be forged between the continents.

Cheibub (1985) divides the MFA’s institutional history into three main periods: patrimonial, charismatic and bureaucratic-rational. The patrimonialist period dates from the institution’s creation in 1822 to the end of the nineteenth century; the charismatic period includes the administration of José Maria da Silva Paranhos Júnior, the Baron of Rio Branco; while the bureaucratic-rational period spans from the 1910s to the author’s time of writing in the 1980s. In more recent works, Souza (2018) also adds the period of redemocratisation, from the end of the military dictatorship to the present day. Although pioneering, Cheibub’s work was

criticised, mainly by Estre (2022).<sup>8</sup> Criticism has focused on three points: the supposed isolation and autonomy of the MFA, the modernisation processes of Itamaraty and the role of diplomats in the formulation of international thinking (Estre, 2022).

The main characteristic of the patrimonialist period was a lack of separation of the public and the private spheres for the MFA's actors and the treatment of the public administration as a manorial property. Moreover, Brazilian diplomacy enjoyed a particularly good relationship with Europe, compared to representatives of republics, and a relative continuity in terms of style and diplomatic practices inherited from the period when the country was the seat of the Portuguese Court.

Rio de Janeiro had been the seat of a European monarchy from 1808 to 1821 and, following independence, Dom Pedro sought to preserve the familiar monarchical style in all aspects of his regime, including diplomacy. The emperor emulated the European courts and proclaimed Brazil's importance by maintaining a large diplomatic corps. (Seckinger quoted in Cheibub, 1985, p. 115)

Patrimonialism also included the lack of any separation between personal assets and fortunes and those of the state in diplomatic missions. Very often, Brazil's missions abroad could only be maintained thanks to the personal wealth of the country's representatives, as in the classic case of the Baron of Penedo. The need for personal wealth for the job, combined with the patrimonial nature of the period, meant that the selection process mainly took into account the following: candidates whose families were close to the affairs of state (despite the fact that representatives enjoyed free choice over who would be part of the diplomatic corps) and who were also still very young, so that they could be initiated into diplomatic practices and grow up familiarised with the demands of foreign service (Cheibub, 1985).

The charismatic period, especially relevant to the construction of the diplomatic *habitus* of Itamaraty, can be seen as a transitory and unstable period in the evolution of Itamaraty as an institution. During this period, the administration of the Baron of Rio Branco symbolises a benchmark in the institutional life of Itamaraty (Cheibub, 1985), since the dynamics and work routine of the Secretariat of State were completely modified. The baron's personalist model of running the MFA centralised the administration around him and led to a strengthening of the Minister's Office, which became Itamaraty's main entity (Cheibub, 1985).

The Baron of Rio Branco's proximity to Europe shaped his ideal of diplomatic standards, such that all his officials and their wives had to be immersed in the aristocratic ethos. The Baron personally involved himself with the selection of candidates – in the traditional Tea with the Baron – most of whom came from families of the political elite and had already been brought up within this ethos. According to Souza (2018, p. 51), “the Baron was concerned with projecting a certain

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<sup>8</sup> In his thesis, Felipe Estre discusses the founding myths of the study of International Relations in Brazil and situates Cheibub's work as a contribution that is highly disseminated, but little reflected upon in terms of its inconsistencies (Estre, 2022).

image of Brazil abroad. This image was that of the white, intellectualised Brazilian aristocracy, where its diplomats were well married to beautiful, educated girls.”

The homogeneity of Itamaraty was based, therefore, on the administration of the Baron of Rio Branco, who with his personalistic and charismatic centrality was able to exert his will not only in matters of foreign policy, but also in the running of the MFA itself. The selection of candidates with similar origins, education and training, no to mention the same interests, aspirations and ideals, created a sense of commonality of feeling, which would become the source for the bonds and spirit of collegiality that united the MFA’s officials. It was not uncommon for privileges and advantages to be bestowed to his favourite officials, referred to as the ‘golden boys’ or ‘the Baron’s boys’ (Cheibub, 1985; Moura, 2007; Souza, 2018). Along these lines, as Moura (2007, p. 47-48) tells us:

[The Baron’s charisma] by itself promoted a certain *esprit de corps* among Itamaraty’s members [...] The recruitment mechanism tended to standardise the members of the career in terms of their social origin, since they were recruited predominantly from the oligarchic and ‘aristocratic’ sectors of the Old Republic. This process involved a reinforcement of the elements that favoured the development of an *esprit de corps* and, consequently, a certain cohesion and homogeneity among diplomats.

During these two periods of Brazilian diplomacy, patrimonialist and charismatic, wealth and symbolic capital (cultural and/or social) were fundamental to becoming a diplomat. “The functions of representation demanded wealth and legitimised and naturalised aspects of sophistication from these state officials in order to represent Brazil” (Gobo, 2019, p. 601), which meant that the MFA’s officials were known as the elite of the elite. During both these periods, social capital was materialised mainly through relationships with the political and diplomatic elite, often in the form of the inclusion of diplomats’ children in their own careers or in other political careers, following the customs of European diplomacy (Gobo, 2019).

However, the culmination of the MFA’s rationalisation and bureaucratisation process in the form of the creation of the Rio Branco Institute diminished the importance of accumulating social capital and valuing cultural capital for recruitment, which then began to follow clear and specific rules. The mastery of rules and symbols such as etiquette, the art of ceremony and protocols are not parallel or ancillary practices, but comprise the very heart of diplomatic knowledge. They are an important part of the *habitus* of diplomacy and help reaffirm the prestige and position of power of its actors in relation to others. This ‘relational game’ (Gobo, 2019, p. 603), in which the honour and grandeur of an individual or a state are issues resolved within the institutional game, has persisted since the customs of the aristocratic nobility. The rules of protocol need to be materialised or personified since in these contexts a mistake does not just affect the individual, but the very state that the individual represents. Personification refers to rules that are embodied in the bodies of diplomats. When the rules of protocol and the legitimate culture that is expected to be mastered are aspects derived from the practices of

European court societies, how can a black person, a woman or a gender non-conforming person embody these traits? And when protocols are based on the relationship with the subordinate 'other' in order to create the idea of superiority? How can a marginalised body embody rules that reinforce its false inferiority?

The need for mastery and naturalness as traits of the culture taken to be legitimate, aligned with European and aristocratic standards, established a highly exclusive model that continues to this day. The field in which Brazilian diplomacy is developed is conceived as a space for stylising diplomatic life and the country's representatives abroad to the maximum, which still reproduces a certain *modus operandi* first instigated by the Baron (Gobo, 2016). Still today, the concepts of merit and deservedness remain crucial both as a criterion for promotions and as a criterion for recognising a good professional in Itamaraty. Vague notions of what merit signifies mean that minority groups and those with less symbolic capital not only fail to have their contributions recognised, but they also promote notions of the naturalisation of racial and gender homogeneity, an aspect predominant in the institution (Corá et al., 2018; Matsuoka & Silva, 2022).

According to research (Matsuoka & Silva, 2022; Oliveira, 2011) on the affirmative action programme for black candidates, successful candidates who have benefited from the Diplomacy Scholarship Programme or who have used the quota system reserved for black and brown candidates tend to fear having their merit questioned after approval. Even after the adoption of affirmative action policies, therefore, the MFA still tends to treat low racial diversity as a product of the socioeconomic profile of successful candidates, rather than as a problem of inequality (Matsuoka & Silva, 2022; Oliveira, 2011). Similarly, studies (Corá et al., 2018; Delamonica, 2014; Farias & Carmo, 2016) on female participation in Itamaraty have shown how gender is treated as unimportant or something already resolved in the institution's internal environment. Furthermore, a process of naturalisation of male domination is observable within the MFA, based on meritocratic notions. Valuing merit and entering the career through public competition are seen as factors that have solved the gender issue. According to Corá et al. (2018), it is symptomatic that the issue of gender inequality in Itamaraty has gained impetus and an agenda in the form of works produced by diplomats who have identified obstacles in their careers because they are women, while many other women claim never to have been treated differently on the basis of their gender.

The centrality of merit as a principle that neutralises accusations of subjective choices and discrimination in Itamaraty, combined with an organisational culture that advocates merit as the institution's fundamental and structuring basis (Farias & Carmo, 2016), still cannot hide the fact that some sectors of the diplomatic corps continue to be favoured over others, leading to a paradox of meritocracy. As a result, women continue to be seen to belong to a private sphere with priorities that conflict with a career in diplomacy, such as dedication and care for family and children, because they are supposedly more sensitive or unstable than men. Black people, on the other hand, continue to be read within a logic of subordination and 'inferior' moral status. Both groups are jeopardised, therefore, in the subjective logic of meritocratic promotion.

It is worth highlighting what Enloe (2014) calls the feminisation and masculinisation of different sectors of society. According to the author, the maintenance of a patriarchal order involves constant processes of creating a masculinised order of

notions of credibility, which determines which actors are trustworthy and which are not, always in an imbricated logic. Enloe (2014) proposes that we observe the microprocesses through which someone or some group is declared or presumed to be credible. Who is being taken seriously? By whom? Why? To what effect? In view of this, it should be observed that the processes of credibility and masculinity in Itamaraty allow us to identify which groups have faced processes of feminisation and discredibility. It also helps us identify which groups have been kept out of the public sphere, the political sphere and the possibility of representing and speaking for the Brazilian state. That said, based on the racial-sexual contract, Itamaraty maintains its *habitus* through the constant exclusion and subordination of those who do not perform the elitist, masculinised and white notions of diplomatic merit.

### Final Remarks

This discussion here has sought to contribute to the debate on the participation of women in the senior bureaucracy of Brazil's civil service, taking the diplomatic career as an object of study and using gender as an analytic lens. In the process, we have noted that the problem of the low presence of women is bifocal. At the same time as it is linked to the order of *habitus* and practices, it is also connected to issues that go beyond gender – such as race and sexuality, and the marginalisation of such bodies, along with the processes of domination inherent to the MFA and Itamaraty.

Hence, the presence of women in the civil service goes beyond the phases of access, admission and career progression. The republican period, spanning from the end of the nineteenth century to the present day, the twenty-first century, is full of obstacles and hostility to the participation of women in the state bureaucracy. These obstacles, however, are not limited to this process. Once in Itamaraty and the MFA, the troubles change colour and shape due to the practices and *habitus* disseminated and learnt by all diplomats who come to act as a state aristocracy (with high standards of a white, elitist culture) in order, finally, to be able to speak for the state. And for all those who deviate from this ethos, exclusion from the table is their main course.

We conclude, therefore, that the bureaucratisation of the MFA (via Itamaraty) achieved through the institutionalisation of the selection process, as well as the training of diplomats, has not added impartiality to the selection process, nor has it democratised the Foreign Ministry. On the contrary: bureaucratisation and monopolisation have homogenised its structure and thus concealed the relations of domination inherent to the institution. They have also blocked wider society from participating in these public institutions. Moreover, once it has been defined who can effectively speak for the state, it is also defined, by exclusion, who cannot. This definition of who can and cannot appear in the sphere of Brazilian foreign policy and international politics is linked to the status of social groups seen as 'inferior' or restricted to the private sphere, which represents an allegory of the country's racial and sexual contracts. These contracts not only structure society in its relations, but also the institution itself and its foundations.

Using gender as an analytical lens, therefore, and not just as a category of identity, allows us to go beyond mere exclusion and the obstacles faced by women in the diplomatic career and in Itamaraty. It also invites us to remain attentive to the processes of feminisation and masculinisation of credibility and merit. In this work,



we have shown that the processes that separate actors from the highest spheres of politics and the private sphere comprise much more than just the group of people who are socially read as women. They are, however, closely imbricated with racial, sexual and social class categories. In the MFA's processes of hierarchisation, the symbolic capital given credibility continues to be the kind that performs elitism, but also whiteness and masculinity.

At the same time, we recognise the existence of the AMDB, an important organisation that has fought for institutional changes in Itamaraty. As Irene Vida Gala relates, the AMDB has been active in proposing formal measures, literacy, information and publicity, as well as collecting and compiling data, with the aim of ending gender inequality (Gala, 2023). We also recognise other initiatives and measures that demonstrate the leading role played by women in diplomacy, such as the threat of a diplomats' strike (Junqueira, 2023). In September 2023, the MFA held a seminar entitled "International relations, foreign policy and gender: reflections in honour of Maria José de Castro Rebello Mendes" (Brazil, 2023). The event was attended by many female diplomats and intellectuals, who had a leading role and voice on the different panels. Still, though, the hierarchy of the MFA and the processes of feminisation and masculinisation present in the institution represent challenges to be overcome if the Foreign Ministry is to truly aspire to speak on behalf of the Brazilian people.

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