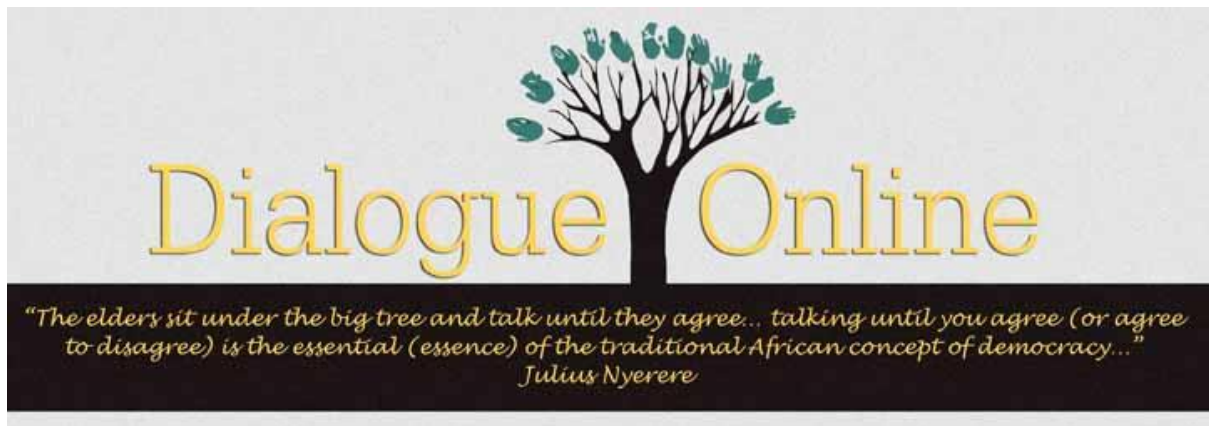




Brief | by Ineke Stemmet, SALO | February 2024

Feminist Foreign Policy: Merely a Label or Catalyst for Real Change?



Introduction

In 2014, Sweden implemented a feminist foreign policy – the first of its kind. Since then, several other countries have followed suit including France, Canada and Mexico.¹ The merits of such a policy have been debated, with Sweden backtracking on this commitment in 2022. In this changing international landscape, is there still a place for feminist foreign policies?

What is it?

Although there is no universal definition of a feminist foreign policy (FFP) it is widely regarded as an alternative approach to a foreign policy and based on a normative framework, thus placing ethical considerations at the centre. Within this framework, security pertains to more than the mere absence of war.² An FFP advocates for gender equality and the empowerment of women in external endeavours. Examples of this include placing a gender lens on all external government actions and providing gender-focused aid, development, and other related human security interventions.

Although many of the objectives of an FFP correlate with longstanding policies on women, peace, and security, FFPs have the potential to serve as a cohesive political framework for various gender-related strategies undertaken by governments, enhancing coordination and efficacy while engaging top-level leadership. Additionally, they can establish a distinct and recognisable brand, making it easier for civil society and journalists to keep governments accountable. According to the UN: *“in its most ambitious expression, this movement should aspire to transforming the practice of foreign policy to the greater benefit of women and girls everywhere, impacting a country’s diplomacy, defence and security cooperation, aid, trade, climate security, and even immigration policies.”*³

Gaps in FFPs

A closer look at FFPs in practice reveals that there remain several gaps that the policies implemented thus far do not address. This includes harmful economic practices, especially in extractive industries and trade. Many migration and asylum policies are yet to be gender mainstreamed. The spending on traditional security forces, such as the military, has resulted in the securitisation of foreign policy approaches, with little consideration for a more human security. This approach has been questioned by feminist scholars as to its place within FFP, as well as the export of weapons to countries with a poor record on women’s rights. Several arguments remain unaddressed, including the use of sanctions and the impact of developing technologies on women and girls.⁴

Sweden

Sweden pioneered the implementation and subsequent abandonment of an FFP. In 2022, Sweden’s foreign minister, Tobias Billström, announced that the label was “counter-productive” and that the new government, backed by the conservative Sweden Democrats,

¹ Walfridsson, H. 2022. Sweden’s New Government Abandons Feminist Foreign Policy. Available: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/10/31/swedens-new-government-abandons-feminist-foreign-policy>. 31 October. [9 February 2024].

² Walfridsson, H. 2023. The Rise and Fall of the First Feminist Foreign Policy. Available: <https://mau.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1764670/FULLTEXT01.pdf> [9 February 2024].

³ UN Women. Feminist foreign policies: an introduction. Available: https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/Brief-Feminist-foreign-policies-en_0.pdf [9 February 2024].

⁴ Ibid.

would leave the FFP behind. Billström claimed that *“gender equality is a fundamental value in Sweden and also a fundamental value for this government... But we’re not going to use the expression ‘feminist foreign policy’ because labels on things have a tendency to cover up the content.”*⁵

Although not explicitly mentioned by the Swedish government at the time, one reason for this fundamental change could be the friction it created between Sweden and its trade partners in the Middle East. In 2015, then foreign minister of Sweden, Margot Wallström (and the pioneer of its FFP) criticised Saudi Arabia while speaking before Sweden’s parliament. She stated that in Saudi Arabia, women were banned from driving, that their human rights were not being respected, and that the royal family governed the country as a dictatorship. She further criticised the public whipping of Raif Badawi and in a later statement called this tactic “medieval”.⁶

This sparked an outcry in Saudi Arabia which later withdrew its ambassador to Sweden, claiming that Wallström improperly intervened in the country’s internal affairs. The United Arab Emirates followed suit and the Gulf Cooperation Council (which comprises Bahrain, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the U.A.E.), the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Arab League condemned Wallström. Following this, Saudi Arabia accused Wallström of criticising Sharia law and Islam itself.⁷

This diplomatic crisis was overshadowed by an even stickier issue – the export of Swedish arms to Saudi Arabia. Stringent laws aimed at halting exports to nations embroiled in violent conflicts or suspected of perpetrating human rights violations were undermined by certain loopholes, allowing Sweden to maintain Saudi Arabia as a lucrative arms customer over an extended period. This episode upset some of Sweden’s powerful industrialists and showcased how the FFP could ruffle some feathers, potentially adding to the turnaround of the FFP of the subsequent government in Sweden.⁸

The Way Forward

The Swedish turnaround, as well as the gaps that exist within existing FFPs, showcases the limits to this type of policy as well as the consequences that may render it unpopular to certain powerful constituents. Despite this, the need for FFPs globally remains. In 2021, Sweden published a document on the achievements of its FFP at the time. This included contributing to policies on representation for women in politics in Moldova and Somalia, highlighting gender equality as an important consideration in Columbia’s 2016 peace deal, and helping create new legislation in 20 countries on gender-based violence, child marriage and female genital mutilation.⁹

⁵ The Guardian. 2018. Swedish government scraps country’s pioneering ‘feminist foreign policy’. 18 October. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/18/swedish-government-scraps-countrys-pioneering-feminist-foreign-policy> [9 February 2024].

⁶ Nordberg, J. 2015. Who’s Afraid of a Feminist Foreign Policy? 15 April. Available: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/swedens-feminist-foreign-minister> [9 February 2024].

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ The Guardian. 2018. Swedish government scraps country’s pioneering ‘feminist foreign policy’. 18 October. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/18/swedish-government-scraps-countrys-pioneering-feminist-foreign-policy> [9 February 2024].

Gender discrimination, violence against women and infringements against women's human rights around the world remain a massive problem. According to the World Bank, on a global scale, women are still granted only three-quarters of the legal rights that men enjoy, hindering their economic participation.¹⁰ Around 13 million girls, equating to approximately 1 in 20 between the ages of 15 and 19, have endured forced sexual encounters. Adolescent girls encounter the greatest threat of gender-based violence during periods of peace as well as conflict. Despite international recognition of child marriage and female genital mutilation as human rights violations, hundreds of millions of girls worldwide continue to suffer from these practices.¹¹ In the United States and Poland, women's reproductive rights are being clamped down on. The longstanding Israel-Palestine conflict has historically and currently had a massive impact on women and children. According to the Ministry of Health in Gaza, the death toll of civilians for the current outbreak of violence has surpassed 25 000, with 70% of these being women and children, as of January 2024.¹²

As such, FFPs around the world remain relevant and necessary forms of policy that will contribute to gender equality worldwide. The securitised response that the Western world has taken towards the atrocities committed against civilians in Gaza highlights this. An FFP approach to this conflict, as well as to peace and security in general, will centre human security above all, and will inevitably result in fewer civilians being killed worldwide.

¹⁰ World Bank. 2022. Nearly 2.4 Billion Women Globally Don't Have Same Economic Rights as Men. 1 March. Available: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/03/01/nearly-2-4-billion-women-globally-don-t-have-same-economic-rights-as-men> [9 February 2024].

¹¹ UNICEF. Gender Equality. Available: <https://www.unicef.org/gender-equality> [9 February 2024].

¹² Associated Press. 2024. Women and children are the main victims of the Israel-Hamas war, U.N. says. 20 January. Available: <https://www.npr.org/2024/01/20/1225790904/women-and-children-are-the-main-victims-of-the-israel-hamas-war-un-says> [14 February 2024].

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