

# DEFINING FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY

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In 2014, Sweden's Foreign Minister Margot Wallström announced the world's first explicitly "feminist" foreign policy (FFP). It was an effort that, by Wallström's own admission, was met with "giggles" and suspicion at the time (Wallström, 2016). It would be three years before another country would be brave enough to dip a toe in this water, with a considerably more narrowly-focused *Feminist International Assistance Policy* put forward by Canada in 2017. France updated their *International Strategy on Gender Equality* in 2018, referring to their approach as "feminist diplomacy," and a year later, shifted their messaging in an op-ed penned on International Women's Day of 2019, explicitly declaring their *feminist* foreign policy (Schiappa, 2018). The reason for the shift in title if not substance has not been explained, but presumably is linked to pressure from advocates as France takes the helm of the G7 in 2019 and prepares to host the Beijing+25 celebrations next year (Government of France, 2018).

Iceland, who is ranked at the top of gender equality lists, is also rumored to be considering something that may be feminist in nature, if not in name (World Economic Forum, 2017), as is Mexico. It is worth noting that in the United Kingdom, one of the political parties has pledged to adopt a feminist foreign policy (Osamor, 2018) and a political party in Australia is rumored to be considering the same. Depending on the outcome of those elections, we may soon have additional policies to examine.

But what makes a foreign policy feminist? In this paper, we will analyze the policies that countries have put forward up until this point and then attempt to distill a draft definition of what constitutes feminist foreign policy, since that work has not yet been done.

A review of existing feminist foreign policies is limited to an exceedingly small sample, none of which explicitly defines what makes a foreign policy "feminist." When pressed about this, officials from these countries have deflected: why expect governments to define the term if feminists haven't? We take issue with this position, as an increasing number of feminist thinkers are trying to do just that. Perhaps it is fair to say that many of the policy proposals put forward by feminist theorists and feminist movements lack a single, cohesive, definition of what would constitute a feminist foreign policy. So instead, countries have focused on changing the existing paradigms to simply include women and gender in their theory and practice. Our goal in this paper is to pull from works by feminist thinkers and attempt to construct a definition to serve as a starting point for further dialogue.

With important anniversaries of hallmark women's rights and gender equality frameworks on the horizon, such as the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in November 2019, the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in September 2020 and the 2000 United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR) on Women, Peace and Security in October 2020. 2020 is also a milestone year for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). At a moment when governments cannot be trusted to defend rights enshrined a quarter of a century ago<sup>1</sup>, the moment is ripe for global feminist movement(s) to define our priorities rather than ceding the space to governments to do it for us.

<sup>1</sup>There will be no intergovernmental process for the Beijing+25 celebration in 2020.

## The Current State of Affairs for Feminist Foreign Policy

There are currently three countries whose foreign policies are explicitly feminist: Sweden, Canada and, as of March of 2019, France. Sweden's is both the oldest and the most comprehensive, although all have roots in ICPD, Beijing, UNSCR 1325 and other international agreements that focus on raising the status of women and mainstreaming gender.<sup>2</sup> The Swedish approach is the most comprehensive, extending to all domains of foreign policy and seeking to advance gender equality for its own sake, as well as in service to other foreign policy priorities. The Swedish framework encompasses "the three Rs": women's *Rights*, backed with *Resources* and supporting increased female *Representation*.

It bears noting that Sweden's feminist approach to policy is not limited to its foreign policy and includes a domestic arm as well, which distinguishes it from the other countries. No surprise there: domestically, Sweden consistently ranks in the top five countries for gender equality in the areas of economic opportunity and participation, educational attainment, health and political empowerment (World Economic Forum, 2017). According to Sweden's Feminist Foreign Policy handbook: "In pursuing foreign policy, it is reassuring with a solid ideological foundation for gender equality at home, as well as the full support of the political leadership. This has provided us with sharper tools for pursuing gender equality issues in various forms for dialogue." (Government of Sweden, 2018) This is an important approach that merits deeper exploration than we have scope to do in this review, but is a concept that we hope to explore further in future publications.

The Swedish feminist foreign policy framework covers three domains: 1) foreign and national security policies, 2) development cooperation and 3) trade and promotion policy.<sup>3</sup> The policy sees gender equality as both a priority objective in its own right as well as a tool to advance other foreign policy priorities (Government of Sweden, 2018).

<sup>2</sup>The Council of Europe defines gender mainstreaming as: "The (re)organization, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy-making." (Council of Europe, 1998) Sweden's definition of trade promotion includes the promotion of both Swedish economic

<sup>3</sup>Sweden's definition of trade promotion includes the promotion of both Swedish economic interests and Sweden's image abroad, which they state that they hope will increase both exports and imports.

To what extent does Sweden's practice live up to its policy? Under the rights heading, they have been criticized for a binary focus on women rather than the more inclusive *gender*. The policy largely ignores the rights and needs of LGBTQ individuals, with the exception of LGBTQ sexual and reproductive health and rights being noted in the health component of the agenda. Relegating LGBTQ people to be a special population in health interventions but not part of their broad rights-based agenda is overly limiting and a missed opportunity for a feminist approach. Sweden has also come under fire for their arms trade with Saudi Arabia, whose record on human rights generally, and women's rights in particular, is notoriously poor (Vucetic, 2018). In light of this critique, Sweden did make a legislative change to arms' sales regulations in 2017 to "imply that the democratic status of the receiving country shall be a central condition for assessing whether or not to grant permission." (Government of Sweden, 2018) And yet arms sales to Saudi Arabia still rose two percent in 2018 over the previous year (Nordström, 2018).

On representation, Sweden fares quite well: Sweden has a long history of female foreign ministers and robust representation in parliament, a value it also appears to model in its diplomatic engagements and foreign assistance priorities. On resources, too, the story is a good one: 90 percent for Sweden's overseas development assistance (ODA) is earmarked for gender equality, either as a principal or significant objective, although the precise dollar amount invested is unclear. Apart from 200 million krona that were committed towards the "She Decides" initiative, no clear documentation of the amount of funding that has gone towards implementing the feminist foreign policy between 2014-2018 has been made public (Government of Sweden, 2018).

And it's not just the money that's hard to follow: we found no overarching mechanism to monitor the implementation of the policy's goals, objectives or activities. While there are specific metrics to track progress against many of the goals in the Feminist Foreign Policy under other instruments, such as its National Action

Plan on Women, Peace and Security for 2016-2020 or the Development Cooperation for Global Gender Equality and Women's and Girls' Rights for 2018-2022, the policy itself lacks a monitoring and evaluation mechanism. The four-year report on progress appears to have been voluntary self-reporting, rather than mandated or independent evaluation. One recent publication, the *Feminist Foreign Policy Handbook*, highlights examples of the policy's accomplishments. The document was a voluntary and self-reported review of progress in the first three years and was disseminated just prior to presidential elections in 2018. The lack of clear and consistent metrics against which to monitor progress is an issue, but there is at least an effort to publicly document impact, an important action to embody the feminist principles of transparency and accountability. Nonetheless, "research" emerges as a fourth "R" we would like to see more regularly, robustly and independently affixed to this approach.

Fast forward to June 2017, when Canada launched the world's first Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP). Neglecting to include broader foreign policy domains of diplomacy, defense and trade, the FIAP outlines Canada's thinking for a feminist approach to development assistance. Like Sweden, the policy couched itself in a commitment to rights and married its launch to a budget proposal that put new resources on the table for ODA, passing the resources test by bringing overall aid levels up from a 50-year low — albeit not by much — and embracing a benchmark committing 95 percent of its foreign assistance to gender equality as a principal or significant goal (as tracked by OECD data). This is a significant hike from just 2.4 percent from 2015-2016 and 6.5 percent from 2016-2017 on the gender as principal marker<sup>4</sup> and 68 percent and 75 percent on gender significant for the same years.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau — himself a self-proclaimed feminist — has modeled representation by appointing a female foreign minister, a female development minister and the most diverse cabinet in Canadian history. The Canadian policy does not, however, promise to "disrupt"

patriarchal power structures in its assistance as the Swedish one does, although it does include women's political participation as a thematic priority area. For the most part, the Canadian approach couches its prioritization of gender equality as primarily in the service of broader economic and security goals. According to the Government of Canada, their policy "seeks to eradicate poverty and build a more peaceful, more inclusive and more prosperous world. Canada firmly believes that promoting gender equality and empowering women and girls is the most effective approach to achieving this goal." (Government of Canada, 2018)

The FIAP is organized thematically and includes six priority areas: 1) Gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment; 2) "human dignity," which is an umbrella term that includes access to health care, education, nutrition and the timely delivery of humanitarian assistance; 3) women's economic empowerment, including access to and control over resources and services; 4) climate action; 5) women's political participation and 6) women, peace and security. Like Sweden, Canada does not have an accountability framework or a mandate to evaluate progress annually, underscoring once again the need for more emphasis on monitoring, evaluation and research learning in its effort.

Finally, there is France's newly-dubbed feminist foreign policy. Like Canada, the 2018 International Strategy on Gender Equality deals only with foreign assistance. Until the March 2019 op-ed, the French policy was not explicitly defined as feminist, although the word is used once, in reference to a French mandate to support women's rights and feminist civil societies as a way of defending France's values. However, the French approach has consistently been referred to by French officials as France's "feminist diplomacy," and after the March 8<sup>th</sup> op-ed, as feminist foreign policy, all of which is similarly undefined. The implications of the op-ed's recasting of the 2018 policy as a feminist foreign policy seemingly without having altered either policy or practice are unclear and merit further discussion.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>To qualify assistance as advancing gender equality as a principal or significant objective as per the OECD-DAC gender marker, countries self-report on whether individual aid activities targets gender equality as one of its policy objectives. A full definition and eligibility criteria is available at: [www.oecd.org/dac/stats/gender](http://www.oecd.org/dac/stats/gender).

<sup>5</sup>On March 8, International Women's Day, Jean-Yves Le Drian, the Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs and Marlène Schiappa, the Minister of State for Gender Equality and the Fight against Discrimination, wrote an op-ed published in *Libération* declaring France to have a "genuine feminist foreign policy. They also committed 120 million euros to the effort (Schiappa, 2018).

As for the content of the policy itself (first promulgated in 2007, the current version was launched last year and covers 2018-2022), it articulates a number of gender-related priorities for the French government to address through its foreign assistance. According to the Strategy, "... gender equality is a top priority of the president's mandate. It will be a principle and cross-cutting theme; it will underpin all of France's external action and specific measures will be undertaken to promote it." (Directorate-General for Global Affairs, 2018)

Unlike the other policies, France's strategy is accompanied by an accountability framework against which to track progress. Not only does it have stated objectives and metrics, but France goes one step further and mandates annual evaluation of progress against the strategy (although our conversations with French civil society indicate that this may be adjusted to a biannual reporting timeline).

For example, the strategy sets out to increase bilateral and programmable ODA that contributes to gender equality from a baseline of 30 percent in 2018 to a total of 50 percent in 2022, with benchmark targets for each year. While their goals and metrics for measurement could be more ambitious, it is notable that the French alone have embraced the concept of transparency and accountability with a regular, public reporting requirement.

The Strategy contains five thematic pillars and three guiding principles. The pillars are similar to Canada's, with a special emphasis on sexual and reproductive health. They include: 1) healthcare for women and girls, including comprehensive family planning, access to sexual and reproductive health and reduced maternal mortality rates; 2) access to education, including access to and improvement of comprehensive sexuality education; 3) raising the legal age of marriage to age 18; 4) vocational training and employment opportunities and 5) improvements to infrastructure that enhance access to remote rural areas. The stated aim is to mainstream gender in all external actions and to place women's empowerment and gender equality at the heart of their international agenda (French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2018).

As for the idea of "feminist diplomacy," the French policy describes an approach that identifies French priorities according to three principles: 1) comprehensive, 2) rights-based and 3) gender-based, pledging to include gender "in all French diplomatic priorities and all political, economic, soft diplomacy, cultural, educational and development cooperation actions." France's "comprehensive approach" is the closest the country comes to extending the scope of its policy to apply more broadly than to development. Here, they explicitly highlight that gender should be included in diplomatic priorities, including a commitment to gender parity within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development. The rights-based approach, their second principle, ensures that human rights principles, norms and rules are integrated into humanitarian and development policies and processes on policies regarding violence against women. The gender-based approach, their third principle (also referred to as gender mainstreaming), attempts to ensure that "a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy making." (French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2018). This, in sum, is France's "feminist diplomacy."

So, for both France and Sweden, a feminist foreign policy that is not limited in scope to international assistance liberates governments' feminist actions on the global stage from traditional aid or assistance relationships, which have their own issues tied to postcolonialism and political economy interests. The application of a feminist approach to all of foreign policy — not simply to development assistance — opens important opportunities for it to not be purely an exercise of Northern governments; rather, all global cooperation could be feminist: North-North, North-South, South-North and South-South alike. Indeed, our conversations with U.N. officials indicate that Mexico may be developing a feminist foreign policy, which would be an important model to emerge from a Southern country, particularly for one that is reportedly vying to host the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of Beijing.

This of course is not to suggest that the French policy doesn't center on development assistance; all three policies do. Nor do we suggest that foreign assistance

can't take a feminist approach; indeed, donors can and should make important contributions to combat climate change, to support movements for women's and LGBTQ people's rights, to prevent violence and promote peace and to improve sexual and reproductive health and rights, to name a few pressing issues.

Further, foreign assistance spending is one of the few indicators we have for evaluating the degree to which countries are committing resources to their feminist foreign and/or feminist foreign assistance policies. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) analysis of gender spending — the “gender marker” — is an imperfect metric for the resourcing element of feminist foreign policy, but it is the one most readily available. Most analysis focuses on countries' spending on gender equality as either a principal or significant objective. In looking at spending where gender equality is the principal or significant objective, Sweden leads the world, just shy of 90 percent, with Canada just behind at over 70 percent, while France was just over 30 percent (OECD, 2017). (Canada is pledging to reach 95 percent and France to reach 50 percent, both by the year 2022.) However, we propose that moving forward, a better indicator might be countries' spending on gender equality as a *principal* objective, which is considerably lower. Sweden comes in at just north of 20 percent, Canada less than 10 and France less than 5 percent. The average hovers at only 4 percent globally, while 62 percent of aid globally remains completely gender blind (OECD DAC Network on Gender Equality, 2019).

## Toward FFP 2.0

Our initial analysis of the world's few existing “feminist” approaches to foreign policy and assistance indicate that there is room for improvement as we seek to influence the second wave of emerging policies. We have already pointed to three: pushing countries to apply a feminist approach across all elements of foreign policy (aid, trade, defense and diplomacy); to increase their investments in gender equality as a principal and funded goal; and to adopt a more rigorous and independent practice for monitoring, evaluation, research and learning tied to policies' intended outcomes.

One improvement governments could make as they refine or embrace feminist foreign policies is to correct the tendency to use the word “feminist” when they refer to a policy that focuses overwhelmingly on “women and girls.” This practice reinforces the binary and undermines work to overcome white, ethnocentric/western-centric and cisgender presentations of feminism. Even when policies focus on gender equality, and not simply women's empowerment, critiques point to a lack of attention to intersecting forms of discrimination and marginalization based on race, ethnicity, disability, class or refugee status, among others. Historical legacies of military intervention and colonization cannot be ignored either: Sweden and France were both colonizers, and in Canada, indigenous groups have described efforts to “assimilate” native populations in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as “cultural genocide” (Zalcman, 2015). Canada has also come under fire for its financial support for Canadian private-sector extractives companies, whose work has decimated local ecosystems and indigenous populations, including reports of targeting women's rights defenders.

To put it more directly: some question whether feminist foreign policies are just the latest postcolonial export of northern countries, well-intentioned perhaps but ultimately equally uninformed by the perspectives of those on the receiving end and removed even from the realities of their own domestic policies.

This is particularly true for development assistance. “Postcolonial feminists are also cautious in their interpretation of feminist universalisms because they argue that such accounts of moral duty undermine the distinct experiences and stories told by non-western women,” argues Rosamond, a Docent at Lund University in Sweden (Rosamond, 2013). In other words, “Nothing about us, without us,” as the adage holds — a sentiment not implemented in practice. Often, even in progressive human rights discussions, women and particularly women of multiply-marginalized identities have not been included in the discourse that developed and shaped policies about them. While well-intentioned, such approaches can perpetuate, rather than dismantle, inequalities and systems of oppression.

For both Sweden and Canada, one of the loudest critiques of efforts to promulgate feminist foreign policies has been their simultaneous arms trade with non-democratic countries famous for the promotion of women's human rights abuses. In 2018, Sweden's military exports rose by two percent and many of those exports included military exports to non-democratic countries accused of extensive human rights abuses (Nordström, 2018). These countries include the United Arab Emirates (141 million krona) and Saudi Arabia (7 million krona), as well as the Philippines and Brazil. Canada weathered the same criticism for its arms deals with Saudi Arabia following the publication of its Feminist International Assistance Policy (Vucetic, 2018) and in France, parliamentarians and feminists alike are questioning President Macron's military support for a dictator in Chad.

As such, feminists seeking to distill an improved, 2.0 version of feminist foreign policies might articulate a few key principles and propose definitions that speak to these critiques. The goal of this exercise is not to shame those governments that have been brave enough to try something that is truly innovative and intended to make positive change toward a more equal, peaceful world. Instead, we offer a few ideas with an eye toward strengthening — and sustaining — the overall approach. Otherwise the very idea may become extinct: Canadian officials admit they have confronted backlash and are moderating the use of the word "feminist" ahead of the country's elections later this year (Thompson and Asquith, 2018). Similarly, the survival of Sweden's policy was anything but assured, as the country negotiated for months to form a new (more conservative) government following elections last year. This is a political reality that must be addressed head-on, or there will be little incentive for these governments to endure and improve or new governments to step up to the plate if the very concept is pilloried by the left and the right.

## Defining feminist foreign policy: a first attempt

Against this backdrop we will attempt to contribute some thinking about what a definition of feminist foreign policy might be. We intend this effort to be only the beginning of a discussion that will be tested, interrogated, explored and

revised in the course of global consultation and dialogue in the months and years to come.

Acknowledging that foreign policy has largely been written and executed by male-dominated structures that perpetuate traditional, patriarchal systems of power — especially when it comes to defense and diplomacy — and therefore that existing definitions are unlikely to be well-suited to this exercise, we nonetheless started with the dictionary.

According to Merriam-Webster, foreign policy is: "The policy of a sovereign state in its interaction with other sovereign states." (Merriam Webster's Dictionary, 2018) The concept of sovereignty is central in this definition, which has been a challenge for the concept of universal human rights from the very beginning. The United States, for instance, has consistently refused to ratify the international women's rights treaty, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), citing sovereignty concerns, putting it in an ignominious minority of only six other holdouts, such as Iran, Somalia and Sudan.

That's *foreign policy*. Surprisingly, the dictionary also had something to say about *feminist*: "the theory of the political, economic and social equality of the sexes," and "organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests." As such, a composite definition of the two concepts taken together could be: "*Feminist foreign policy: The policy of a sovereign state in its interaction with other sovereign states based on the theory of political, economic and social equality of the sexes, delivered to advance women's rights and interests.*"

That's a starting point for debate, but hardly responsive to our interests in anchoring our definition in a focus not just on women, but on power relations and gender equality more broadly, and utilizing an explicitly rights-based and intersectional understanding of feminism. This construction also affirms an outdated concept of a global order that is explicitly state-based, in an era where a growing number of state interactions now contend not just with other governments, but also with movements, multinational companies and other non-state actors.

In our consultations to date, the number-one term that has emerged as an essential ingredient to any definition of feminist foreign policy has been “intersectional.”

Kimberle Crenshaw has described intersectionality as “a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects;” the paper she wrote nearly thirty years ago used this lens to expose the intersecting thrusts of discrimination and marginalization that black women face as both female and as people of color (Crenshaw, 1989). This is a particularly appropriate concept to include in our definition, both because foreign policy has so often throughout history been manifested by men inserting themselves in other lands, typically in communities of color, and plundering the women and riches they found there. It allows a broader focus on *power* as it manifests between and among any number of groups, as feminist analysis does.

We also acknowledge that Sweden’s “rights, resources and representation” framework is, both as the first and most ambitious example to date, often regarded as definitional. We consider the 3 Rs framework useful, although not necessarily radical — reducing a policy to these three, vague components says nothing that is explicitly feminist and does not assert the commitment to intersectionality that we seek. It is, nonetheless, important to include and a useful framework upon which to build.

**With this in mind, we offer the following draft definition for discussion:** *“Feminist Foreign Policy is the policy of a state that defines its interactions with other states and movements in a manner that prioritizes gender equality and enshrines the*

*human rights of women and other traditionally marginalized groups, allocates significant resources to achieve that vision and seeks through its implementation to disrupt patriarchal and male-dominated power structures across all of its levers of influence (aid, trade, defense and diplomacy), informed by the voices of feminist activists, groups and movements.”*

This means foreign policy that is not only by women or for women, but goes further, taking a nonbinary, gendered lens that recognizes and seeks to correct for historical patriarchal and often racist and/or neocolonialist imbalances of power as they play out on the world stage. Further, our vision of feminist foreign policy is not limited to a single lever of international relations — “feminist diplomacy” or “feminist international assistance” or the like — nor, certainly, is any single assistance program or initiative a feminist foreign policy. *Rather*, feminist foreign policy is a *complete, consistent and coherent approach to a body of work encompassing all auspices of foreign policy and international relations. If done right*, the approach will include aid, trade and defense, in addition to diplomacy, using all the tools in the foreign policy tool box to advance a more equitable world. And most importantly, it will be informed by and amplifying the voices of the rights-holders it seeks to celebrate and support.

This is good news for people of all genders: feminism is an agenda everyone can promote, an agenda that seeks equity for all, not the dominance of one over another.



*“Feminist Foreign Policy is the policy of a state that defines its interactions with other states and movements in a manner that prioritizes gender equality and enshrines the human rights of women and other traditionally marginalized groups, allocates significant resources to achieve that vision and seeks through its implementation to disrupt patriarchal and male-dominated power structures across all of its levers of influence (aid, trade, defense and diplomacy), informed by the voices of feminist activists, groups and movements.”*

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