

# DEFINING FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY

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In 2014, Sweden’s Foreign Minister Margot Wallström announced the world’s first—and to date, only—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). Indeed, it would be four years until the next 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 2018. Following suit, France updated their Gender and International Assistance Policy in 2018, and while it is not explicitly feminist in title, it is often referred to in shorthand as part of a “feminist diplomacy,” which we will attempt to unpack. France is also a country of particular interest as it takes the Presidency of the G7, where they have announced a special focus on gender and campaigning organizations are pushing for it to place feminist foreign policy squarely on its agenda. (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).

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 in our review. In addition, many organizations are pushing for France to not only tackle gender inequality while they hold the Presidency of the G7, but to place feminist foreign policy squarely on the agenda.

For the present, however, a review of existing feminist foreign policies is limited to an exceedingly small sample, within which, surprisingly, there is nary a definition to be found. When pressed about this, officials from these countries have deflected: why expect governments to define FFP 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 and instead focus on challenging and changing the existing paradigms to simply include women and gender in their theory and practice. Our goal in this paper is to pull from resources put forward by feminist thinkers and attempt to contribute our own undoubtedly insufficient definition 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) November, the 1995 Beijing Platform for Women in September, the 2000 United Nations Security Resolution 1325 (UNSCR) on Women, Peace and Security in October and a milestone year for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). 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.

## The Current State of Affairs for Feminist Foreign Policy

There are currently three countries whose foreign policies are feminist in name or practice: Sweden, Canada, and France. Sweden's is both the oldest and the most comprehensive, although all have roots in ICPD, Beijing, UNSCR 1325 and other development theories that focus on raising the status of women and mainstreaming gender. 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 aid, trade, defense, development and diplomacy, the focus of which has been telegraphed as "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. Sweden consistently ranks in the top five for countries for gender equality in domestic practice in the areas of economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and political empowerment (World Economic Forum, 2017). The Swedish Embassy has said of this grounding of foreign policy in domestic practice: "This has provided us with sharper tools for pursuing gender equality issues in various forms for dialogue" (Government of Sweden, 2018). It is worth noting that Sweden is the only country to have harmonization on gender equality in domestic and foreign policy and is an important principle that merits deeper exploration than we have scope to do in this review, but one that we hope to explore in future publications.

Within its feminist foreign policy framework, the Swedish policy covers three domains: 1) foreign and security policy; 2) development cooperation; and 3) trade and promotion policy<sup>1</sup>. With regard to gender, the policy sees gender equality as both a priority objective as well as a tool to advance other foreign policy priorities. The Swedish FFP seeks to apply "a systematic gender equality perspective throughout foreign policy...gender

equality is an objective in itself, but it is also essential for achieving the Government's other overall objectives, such as peace, security, and sustainable development" (Government of Sweden, 2018).

The degree to which Sweden's practice lives up to its policy has been critiqued. On rights, it has been criticized for a binary focus on *women* rather than *gender*. The policy largely ignores the rights and needs of LGBTQ individuals, with the exception of LGBTQ sexual reproductive health and rights being noted in the health component of the agenda. Positioning LGBTQ people as a key population in health interventions, rather than as part of their broad rights-based agenda is overly limiting and a missed opportunity for a feminist approach. And on issues of women's rights, here too Sweden has come under fire for conducting 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, which "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 rose two percent in 2018 over the previous year on sales to Saudi Arabia alone (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: Sweden leads the world in levels of ODA earmarked for gender equality as a primary or significant objective, at close to 90%, although the precise dollar amount invested in implementing the agenda is unclear. Apart from 200 million Krona that were committed towards the "She Decides" initiative, no clear documentation appears to have been made public outlining the amount of funding that has gone towards implementing the feminist foreign policy between 2014-2018 (Government of Sweden, 2018).

It's not just the money that's hard to follow: there is no overarching mechanism to monitor the implementation of the policy's goals, objectives and activities. While

<sup>1</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.

there are specific metrics to track progress against many of the goals in the Feminist Foreign Policy under other strategies, such as Sweden’s “National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security or the Strategy for 2016-2020” or Sweden’s “Development Cooperation for Global Gender Equality and Women’s and Girls’ Rights for 2018-2022,” for example, the policy itself lacks a monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. The four-year report on progress appears to have been voluntary, rather than mandated, reporting. One recent publication, their 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, in diplomacy, defense and development, and was disseminated just prior to presidential elections in 2018. The lack of clear and consistent metrics against which to monitor progress against the policy’s goals is an issue, but there is at least an effort to publicly document impact, a key standard to model the feminist principles of transparency and accountability. Nonetheless, “research” emerges as a fourth “R” we would like to see more robustly affixed to this approach.

Fast forward to June 2018, 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 what a feminist approach to development would be. Like Sweden before it, the policy couched itself in a commitment to rights, and married its launch with 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 of 95% of spending of its foreign assistance budget for gender equality as a primary or secondary goal, (as tracked by OECD data). This is a significant hike from just 2.4% from 2015-2016 and 6.5% from 2016-2017 on the gender primary marker<sup>2</sup>, and 68% and 75% on gender secondary for the same years.

Prime Minister Trudeau, 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 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 International Strategy on Gender Equality. Like that of Canada, the French policy deals only with foreign assistance. Unlike both Sweden and Canada, it does not define the approach as explicitly 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. Rather, it is referred to by French officials as France’s “feminist diplomacy,” an approach which is similarly undefined. The policy itself— (first promulgated in 2007, the current version was launched last year and covers 2018-2022)— 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 principal and cross-cutting theme; it will underpin all of

<sup>2</sup>To qualify as gender primary, 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).

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

The Strategy contains five thematic pillars and three guiding principles. Thematically, 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 enable 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).

Unlike Sweden and Canada, it is not the policy itself that France considers feminist, but the approach, citing a prioritization process that France will undertake to undertake global efforts that fall under three principles that are: 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." Like Sweden, the French approach is meant to cover all externally-facing actions, including

diplomacy with all countries France engages with—not just emerging economies or aid recipients. This is an interesting differentiation that feminists might emphasize insofar as it 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 concept that feminist diplomacy is an approach that applies to all countries opens opportunities for this not to be purely an exercise of Northern governments; rather all global cooperation could be feminist: North-North, North-South, South-North, and South-South alike.

The "comprehensive approach," one of the three guiding principles, is the closest France 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 and 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."

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 is an imperfect metric for the resourcing element of feminist foreign policy, but it is the one most readily available. Most analysis focuses on the overall spending for gender equality as either a primary or significant objective. In looking at spending where gender equality is the principle or significant objective, Sweden leads the world, just shy of 90%, with Canada just behind at over 70%, while France was just over 30% (OECD, 2017). Canada is pledging to reach 95% and France to reach 50%, both by the year 2022. However, we propose that moving forward, a better indicator might be countries' spending on gender equality as a *primary* objective, which is considerably lower. Sweden comes in at just north of 20%, Canada less than ten and France less than 5%. The average hovers at only 4% globally, while 62% of aid globally remains gender blind (OECD DAC Network on Gender Equality, 2019).

## 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 two: pushing countries to increase their commitments to gender equality as a principle and funded goal and adopting a more rigorous and independent practice for monitoring, evaluation, research and learning tied to policies' intended outcomes.

As an intersectional movement, certainly one of the most readily apparent is the tendency of governments to use the word feminist when they mean "women and girls." This reinforces the binary and undermines work to overcome white, ethnocentric and western-centric, cis feminism's historical (and current) sins. Even when policies focus on gender equality, and not simply women's empowerment, much of the literature critiquing existing feminist foreign policies points to a lack of attention to intersectional forms of discrimination and marginalization such as race, ethnicity, disability, class, or refugee status, among others. Taken with historical issues such as the legacy of military intervention and colonization, the intersectional lens becomes more important. Sweden and France were both colonizers, each with brutal legacies across the globe, while Canada was colonized and some

of the practices from the 19th and 20th centuries to "assimilate" native populations have been described as "cultural genocide" by modern indigenous groups (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. According to watchdog groups, Canada supported over \$24 billion Canadian dollars in the extractive business sector in 2017 via Export Development Canada, their export credit agency, which seeks to reduce risks for Canadian businesses looking to grow globally (Oxfam Canada, 2018).

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 voices and 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). "Nothing about us, without us," as the adage holds, is often 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 both Sweden's and Canada's 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 counties accused of extensive human rights abuses (Nordström, 2018). These countries include the United Arab Emirates (141 million kronor) and Saudi



Arabia (7 million kronor), 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 (Vučetić, 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 draw some key principles and propose definitions that speak to these critiques. The goal of our critique 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 future. 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 it 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

As such, it falls to us to place a stake in the ground and attempt to contribute some useful thinking toward what a definition of feminist foreign policy might be. Although this is treacherous ground to trod, we will attempt it here, if only for the sake and spirit of trying. We hope this effort is only the beginning of a discussion that will be tested, interrogated, explored and revised in the course of global consultation and dialogue in the weeks and months 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

that, hence, existing definitions are unlikely to be well-suited to this exercise, nonetheless, we 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—women's, or otherwise—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. Indeed, in 2017 Merriam-Webster declared its word of the year to be “feminism,” owing to the largest spike in searches of that word following the Women's March on Washington. Its definition: “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.”

As such, we look to the woman who coined the term, Kimberle Crenshaw. Crenshaw has defined 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 and plundering the women and riches they found there, typically in communities of color, and also because it allows a broader focus on *power* as it manifests between and among any number of groups, as feminist analysis does.

Finally, we acknowledge that Sweden’s “rights, resources and representation” framework is, both as a first and as the most ambitious example to date, often regarded as definitional. We consider the 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 to build upon. As such, 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, for us 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.



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