



BRIEF

# What Would a Feminist Foreign Policy Mean for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights?

## INTRODUCTION

Since the debut of a Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) in 2014, there has been increasing global discourse on this approach. What is feminist foreign policy? How do the countries that claim to have such policies (now more than five as of December 2020) distinguish them from the status quo? Is it simply about having more women implementing a nation's foreign policy—as ambassadors, for instance—or does it entail specific policy commitments? And if so, what are they?

A group of more than 70 leading women's rights, human rights and foreign policy organizations has attempted to answer some of these questions by articulating what such an approach might look like for the United States. As defined in [our paper](#), a U.S. feminist foreign policy would recast global goods—

people, peace, planet—as in the national interest, taking an intersectional approach to advancing gender equity on the world stage and actively disrupting the colonial, racist and patriarchal antecedents of U.S. foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic recession and global racial justice movements, the case for such an approach is more imperative than ever. As part of its process to arrive at this conceptualization of a U.S. feminist foreign policy, the International Center for Research on Women undertook consultations with hundreds of feminists from more than 40 countries around the world. Time and again, we heard that a feminist foreign policy must defend the rights that are most politicized in international policy dialogues, chief among them, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).<sup>2</sup>

According to the Guttmacher Institute, SRHR describes a **“state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to all aspects of sexuality and reproduction, not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction, or infirmity.”**<sup>3</sup>

This brief examines linkages between feminist foreign policy and SRHR as expressed by countries that currently have feminist foreign policies, followed by specific recommendations for how the United States

could assert SRHR as a key tenet of its own feminist foreign policy in various arenas of global influence.

## SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS ARE AN ESSENTIAL INGREDIENT FOR FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY

Our definition of feminist foreign policy affirms the right to bodily autonomy for all genders and ages<sup>4</sup> in line with international human rights standards.<sup>5</sup> In its definition of bodily autonomy, The Blueprint for Sexual and Reproductive Health, Rights and Justice notes that “achieving the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health and rights is based on the fundamental human rights of all individuals to:



have their bodily integrity, privacy and personal autonomy respected;



have safe and pleasurable sexual experiences;



freely define their own sexuality;



decide whether, when and whom to marry;



decide whether and when to be sexually active;



decide whether, when and by what means to have a child or children and how many children to have;



choose their sexual partners;



and have access over their lifetimes to the information, resources, services and support.”<sup>6</sup>

Bodily autonomy is a fundamental human right, and its regulation and restriction has been used to oppress people of color, women, girls and gender-nonconforming individuals.<sup>7</sup> A feminist approach should model the inverse, beginning with the basic principle of bodily autonomy and freedom from discrimination and violence, including gender-based violence, coercion, exploitation and abuse, and embracing sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Without bodily autonomy, girls, women and gender-nonconforming people are unable to participate in the basic social, economic and political processes that define our societies. If the goals of foreign policy are to advance peace and security, sustainable development and healthy and equitable societies, bodily autonomy and the enjoyment of sexual and reproductive health and rights should be essential preconditions. When women meaningfully participate in peace processes,

peace agreements are 35 percent more likely to last;<sup>8</sup> however, without access to SRHR, women are not able to effectively participate.<sup>9</sup> Sexual and reproductive health and rights are also critical to girls and women's education, as access to contraceptives enables girls and women to stay in school and training programs longer.<sup>10</sup> Increased education then has ripple effects that can result in better health outcomes,<sup>11</sup> increased labor force participation and increased lifetime earnings.<sup>12</sup>

The McKinsey Global Institute estimates that gender equality could add \$28 trillion to the global gross domestic product—but according to their report, multiple SRHR issues must first be addressed.<sup>13</sup> Access to contraceptives between pregnancies makes it more likely that women will participate in the formal labor force<sup>14</sup> and access to contraceptives gives women more control over deciding when to re-enter the

workforce after giving birth.<sup>15</sup> Without comprehensive SRHR access and programs, women's economic empowerment efforts and general economic growth would be undermined.

COVID-19 has already exacerbated existing societal inequities, especially among women, girls, LGBTQIAP+ people and other marginalized communities. It also risks further hindering access to SRHR.

COVID-19 has also disrupted access to critical sexual and reproductive medications and health services, especially in some contexts where these services have not been deemed "essential." School closures due to the pandemic also reduce access for adolescents to comprehensive sexuality education and sexual and reproductive health supplies.<sup>17</sup>



The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) estimates that COVID-19 will result in over **47 million women** not being able to use modern contraceptives and predicts up to **seven million** new unplanned pregnancies around the globe.<sup>16</sup>

### EXISTING FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICIES AND SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS

Given the overwhelming linkages between SRHR and the goals of feminist foreign policy, it is not surprising that the countries that have adopted feminist foreign policies have included this area of rights as a priority in their efforts. In Sweden, France, Canada and Mexico, a variety of funding commitments and programs are articulated to work towards the Sustainable

Development Goals (SDG) Target 5.6. This target aims to ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action.<sup>18</sup> While each country's strategy on SRHR differs, there is a consistent baseline of affirming the right to bodily autonomy and preserving sexual and reproductive health and rights globally.



**Sweden's** feminist foreign policy lists SRHR as an external objective for 2019-2022. Sweden focuses on increasing access to comprehensive sexuality education, contraception, and safe abortion for women, girls and LGBTQ individuals.<sup>19</sup> A key aspect of the Swedish focus on SRHR is advocacy in foreign policy forums and using partnerships to build support to preserve and strengthen international SRHR standards. One such partnership is the SheDecides initiative, which Sweden launched alongside other countries and civil society organizations in 2017 in response to the expansion of the [Global Gag Rule](#) to affirm the right to abortion. In the face of growing resistance to SRHR, Sweden has continuously affirmed SRHR and increased funding commitments.



**Canada's** feminist international assistance policy also features SRHR as a part of its action areas. The goals of the SRHR action areas are to close gaps in health services for women and girls by increasing access to contraception, comprehensive sexuality education, safe and legal abortion and HIV/AIDS treatment.<sup>20</sup> In 2019, the Canadian government committed \$700 million Canadian dollars over the next 10 years for SRHR programming.<sup>21</sup> This programming is for both domestic and global efforts, an important embrace of the same rights and principles at home and abroad that should be the marker of any feminist foreign policy.



**France's** feminist diplomacy features SRHR and calls for universal access for sexual and reproductive health and rights, which are noted as a critical component of women's empowerment. Under the strategy, France focuses on priority areas of contraception, adolescents' access to SRHR, and early, child, and forced marriage.<sup>22</sup> Both France and Canada are also members of SheDecides.



Finally, **Mexico** launched a feminist foreign policy in January of 2020 that affirms SRHR even on areas that have not fully been enshrined in national law, such as marriage equality. It also is the first FFP to adopt an explicitly intersectional approach to feminism.<sup>23</sup>

Throughout the examples of existing feminist foreign policies, affirming the right to bodily autonomy and SRHR is a consistent priority. SRHR is seen as a key need to achieve the SDGs and achieve gender equality. Given that so many of these efforts have been undertaken in response to damaging actions by the United States to reverse progress on SRHR—including but not limited to the Global Gag Rule—it is particularly important that a U.S. feminist foreign policy prioritize this body of rights across a host of multilateral and bilateral strategic engagements.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO ADVANCE SRHR AS PART OF A U.S. FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY

Our review of the existing feminist foreign policies of a number of U.S. allies—as well as the overwhelming

feedback from feminist activists, academics and experts ICRW has consulted in its years of scholarship on this issue—together clearly indicate that sexual and reproductive rights is a must-have for a U.S. feminist foreign policy. This would have been true even before current events have made the case even more urgent. The proliferation of harmful U.S. policies and practices specifically tailored to reverse progress on these rights, from the dramatic expansion of the Global Gag Rule to the stripping of funding for UNFPA, combined with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, has disrupted and politicized access to sexual and reproductive health services. To undue this harm a full-throated embrace of sexual and reproductive health and rights is more essential than ever.<sup>24</sup> As such, the following steps are

recommended for the next U.S. Administration and Congress.

1. **The President should announce that the U.S. will adopt a feminist foreign policy**, to be co-created and implemented in consultation with feminists inside and outside of government. The U.S. should commit to ensuring cohesion across all levers of foreign policy by elevating an intersectional approach to gender equality throughout existing structures in the White House and executive agencies. This should incorporate SRHR across foreign policy tools/agencies and include training on gender, SRHR, anti-racism and implicit bias in both early-career and ongoing professional development. This should mirror the specific recommendation in [Towards a Feminist Foreign Policy in the United States](#).<sup>25</sup>
2. **Harmful policies should be removed and reversed by the Administration and Congress**, such as:
  - Revoking the January 23, 2017 Presidential Memorandum Regarding the Mexico City Policy and clarifying what is permitted under current law to ensure access to comprehensive reproductive health care, including abortion.
  - Removing restrictions on funding for abortion internationally and domestically, specifically by terminating the Helms and Hyde Amendments and committing to veto or not pass legislation that extends, reiterates or incorporates the Amendments or other harmful laws that restrict access to abortion and SRHR, including in annual appropriations bills.
  - Referencing and following the more comprehensive list of policies to be reversed and adhered to noted in the [Blueprint for Sexual and Reproductive Health, Rights, and Justice](#).<sup>26</sup>
3. **Comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights programs should be fully funded.** The budget request and appropriations should include at least \$1.66 billion for global family planning and reproductive health programs, including \$111 million for UNFPA and the removal of restrictions on the U.S. contribution to UNFPA.
4. **Individuals should be nominated and appointed for executive branch positions who are experts in their field and possess a positive record on reproductive health, rights, and justice.**
5. **Domestic and global COVID-19 response and recovery must ensure funding to address impacts on SRHR.** This includes:
  - Ensuring both access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services and that harmful restrictions on funding are removed.
  - Strengthening supply chains to make essential sexual and reproductive health medications and supplies available.
  - Making use of innovative digital health tools to offer alternatives to in-person sexual and reproductive healthcare. Telemedicine can provide access to medication abortion, contraception, and HIV/AIDS treatment.
6. **The Biden Administration should re-engage in multilateral leadership on sexual and reproductive health and rights.** As part of a feminist foreign policy, the United States should exercise global leadership in unequivocal support of sexual and reproductive health and rights. There are a number of immediate opportunities to do so in 2021, including most notably, the Generation Equality Forum (GEF). The Forum will be a gathering of champion governments with private sector and civil society partners to make game-changing commitments to advance gender equality and human rights. The United States should join the action coalition on bodily autonomy and sexual and reproductive health and rights, and make at least one commitment under its priority actions to increase access to safe and legal abortion, increase access to and uptake of modern contraceptives, strengthen comprehensive sexuality education and information, accelerate gendered norm change and eliminate harmful practices such as child marriage.

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*Brief designed by Brevity & Wit*