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Article in *Ethics & International Affairs* · October 2016

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Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy in the Making: Ethics, Politics, and Gender

Karin Aggestam and Annika Bergman-Rosamond

In 2015 the world's first self-defined feminist government was formed in Sweden. As part of that ambitious declaration, Sweden also became the first state ever to publicly adopt a feminist foreign policy, with a stated ambition to become the "strongest voice for gender equality and full employment of human rights for all women and girls."¹ To be sure, launching a feminist foreign policy is a radical policy change. At the same time, this policy is embedded in the broader global efforts to promote gender equality in the international arena, which we have seen evolving over the past few decades in the aftermath of the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. The resolution "reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction and stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security."

In this essay, we argue that the launching of a "feminist" foreign policy is distinct for two reasons. First, by adopting the "f-word" it elevates politics from a broadly consensual orientation of gender mainstreaming toward more controversial politics, and specifically toward those that explicitly seek to renegotiate and challenge power hierarchies and gendered institutions that hitherto defined global institutions and foreign and security policies.² As Swedish Foreign Minister Margot Wallström has noted, "It's time to become a little braver in foreign policy. I think feminism is a good term. It is about standing against the systematic and global subordination of women."³ Second, it contains a normative reorientation of foreign policy that is guided by an ethically informed framework based on broad cosmopolitan norms of global justice and peace. The content of Sweden's feminist foreign policy is still in the making, and is currently focused on

Ethics & International Affairs, 30, no. 3 (2016), pp. 323–334.
© 2016 Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs
doi:10.1017/S0892679416000241

incremental change in two areas: (1) international agenda-setting through a gender-sensitive lens that allows for the reframing and mobilization of international policy action; and (2) normative entrepreneurship, which is guided by an ethically informed framework of cosmopolitanism and human rights that seeks to shape global developments in a gender-sensitive direction.

This essay strives to examine and highlight some of the substance and plausible future directions of feminist foreign policy. Our overarching ambition is threefold. First, we aim to probe the normative contents of the Swedish feminist foreign policy in theory and in practice, and examine how feminist international relations (IR) theory may contribute to the widening and deepening of its normative and ethical contents. Second, we identify and analyze three potential challenges and ethical dilemmas that any feminist foreign policy is likely to confront: “headwind” politics; tension between idealism and pragmatism; and challenges posed by the use of soft and hard power. Third, we conclude the essay by advancing a research agenda that can deepen the normative and ethical notions of a feminist foreign policy. In this endeavor, we draw upon feminist IR theory⁴ and the solidarist branch of the English School of international theory,⁵ the latter of which puts emphasis on justice and cosmopolitanism. It is our hope that we will enhance the ethical and transformative contents of the English School by making it more gender-sensitive and appropriate for the study of feminist foreign policy.

THE QUEST FOR A FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY

Swedish foreign policy is strongly informed by the Security Council Resolution 1325 agenda on women, peace, and security (WPS) as a normative framework for foreign and security policies. This WPS normative commitment also exists within the foreign policy orientation of several other countries. Australia’s first-ever woman foreign minister, Julie Bishop, actively promoted and profiled WPS issues during her tenure, in particular by pushing for gender mainstreaming within various international forums. The former British foreign minister William Hague managed to galvanize international attention for his quest to end sexual violence in conflict.⁶ Hillary Clinton declared from the very start of her tenure as U.S. Secretary of State that U.S. international development policy needs to further the empowerment of women in developing countries. Moreover, Clinton

framed the status of women as a matter of national security, and she played a pivotal role in pushing for the unanimous endorsement of Security Council Resolution 1888 (2009) on sexual and gender-based violence in armed conflict.⁷

When the Swedish coalition government, composed of the Social Democratic Party and the Green Party, came to power in 2015 and declared a feminist foreign policy, it attracted international media attention. The new normative direction in Swedish foreign policy is closely associated with Foreign Minister Margot Wallström, who is an advocate of gender justice within the work of the United Nations, having held the position of the first-ever UN Special Representative on sexual violence in conflict. In responding to the frequently asked question of exactly what a feminist foreign policy entails, Wallström has referred to a feminist toolbox, which consists of three Rs: Representation, Rights, and Reallocation.⁸ In other words, Sweden seeks to promote women's representation and participation in politics in general and in peace processes in particular; to advocate women's rights as human rights, including women's protection from sexual and gender-based violence; and to work toward a more gender-sensitive and equitable distribution of global income and natural resources.

A potential fourth R in the toolbox may be "Reality check/Research"—that is, to draw upon empirical research and policy reports to formulate foreign policy practice.⁹ Foreign Minister Wallström frequently quotes research and various statistical reports that indicate a correlation between women's participation in peace processes and sustainable peace.¹⁰ This causal assumption is also reflected in a number of the slogans and campaigns that the Swedish government has launched in the last two years, such as "More Women, More Peace." The research of Valerie Hudson and others, which puts forth the claim that state security is intimately connected with the security of women, is frequently cited.¹¹ Further, the WomenStats Project database suggests that an increase in gender equality in society decreases the likelihood of violence, corruption, and militarism.¹² Hence, according to the Foreign Service Action Plan 2015–2018, the government's five prioritized areas for policy actions are (1) promoting the rule of law, (2) combating gender-based and sexual violence, (3) addressing sexual and reproductive health and rights, (4) the economic empowerment of women, and (5) advocating sustainable development.¹³ In sum, the framing of these foreign policy pillars

reflects, we argue, a range of underpinning normative positions that tend to inform Swedish feminist foreign policy in general. These are (1) a commitment to feminist ethical principles of inclusion and human security, (2) gender cosmopolitanism, and (3) empathetic cooperation. Let us illustrate how these normative positions unfold in practice.

First, the Swedish framing of a feminist foreign policy interacts with contemporary international discourses on human security by asking the question, security for whom? With a broader and more inclusive notion, the quest is to redefine security with a greater focus on women and girls.¹⁴ As such, it reflects a cosmopolitan ethics and “gender cosmopolitanism”¹⁵ that aims to ensure the security of all human beings and political communities by challenging embedded patriarchal power relations and practices beyond borders. This is also interwoven with Sweden’s sense of self-identity as a “humanitarian superpower,”¹⁶ which is intimately related to the history, evolution, and legacy of the Swedish welfare state. In practice, the cosmopolitan orientation of rights is combined with promoting gender-sensitive dialogues across national borders and between different social groups. For instance, the guidelines of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs state that one of the Ministry’s ambitions is to foster dialogues and to listen to stories of women and other marginalized groups subjected to violence and conflict.¹⁷ This is in line with the research conducted by feminist IR scholar Fiona Robinson on the act of listening.¹⁸ Through such action, an accumulation of knowledge is gained that can help redesign diplomatic practice. Christine Sylvester’s notion of “empathetic cooperation” also captures some of the underpinnings of feminist foreign policy with its emphasis on dialogues.¹⁹

Second, women’s inclusion and participation in peace processes are prioritized areas of Swedish foreign policy and of the government more broadly. Despite the significant inroads by women in recent decades into a number of public political spheres, the statistics still reveal a lack of inclusive political representation and gender equality: 78 percent of the world’s parliamentary seats are occupied by men; around 90 percent of heads of state and governments are men; and 83 percent of senior ministers are men.²⁰ Moreover, globally only 15 percent of all ambassadors are women,²¹ and international organizations and institutions continue to suffer from poor track records in appointing women to senior diplomatic

positions. For example, the United Nations appointed its first-ever female mediator, Mary Robinson, in 2013. The External Action Service of the European Union is headed by Federica Mogherini, but all nine Special EU Envoys are men.

However, the advocacy and active promotion of women's participation is mostly centered on peace processes, which is in line with Resolution 1325. Here the statistics reflect an even worse pattern of underrepresentation: only 2.5 percent of chief mediators are women, as are only 9 percent of peace negotiators and only 4 percent of signatories to peace accords.²² As the transitions from war to peace provide windows of opportunity to influence the long-term trajectory of peace and the structure of societies at large, the Swedish government has singled out peace mediation as the "weapon of inclusion," as chief mediators are centrally placed to secure women's participation and empowerment in peacemaking.²³ As part of that endeavor, the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs together with its Norwegian and Finnish counterparts launched a Nordic women mediation network in late 2015 in collaboration with women mediators in the Global South.²⁴ Furthermore, to gather momentum and international support, the positive interplay between women's participation and durable peace is strongly emphasized. In short, inclusion is framed as "smart" and "efficient" diplomacy.²⁵ As Hillary Clinton has said, "Including more women in peacemaking is not just the right thing to do, it's also the smart thing to do."²⁶

POLITICAL CHALLENGES AND ETHICAL DILEMMAS

The declaration of a distinct feminist foreign policy signals a departure from traditional elite-oriented foreign policy practices and discourses toward a policy framework that is guided by normative and ethical principles. Moreover, by widening and deepening their foreign policies, states adopting a feminist foreign policy are able to include broader engagements that take into account divergent narratives and the distinct needs of women and other marginalized groups in international society. While feminist foreign policy has been well received within and beyond Swedish borders it is not without challenges, such as the inconsistency between the promotion of gender, justice, and peace while exporting arms to authoritarian states. In what follows we seek to highlight some of the political

challenges, contradictions, and ethical dilemmas embedded in such foreign policy change.

Promoting a “Headwind” Agenda

A feminist foreign policy is distinct in the way it formulates goals that require the renegotiation of power hierarchies and gendered institutions as well as the reformulation of political practices, whereby powerful and privileged groups will lose some of their privileges. As mentioned, the “f-word” signals a strong political commitment to gender equality that is distinct from the one expressed in the more consensus-oriented international policy discourse on gender mainstreaming. Many international institutions pursue gender mainstreaming, and nearly sixty countries have adopted national action plans to implement Security Resolution 1325. But as Thania Paffenholz and others rightly note, a feminist foreign policy is not only a matter of counting women but also of making women count.²⁷ Such an ambition includes taking serious steps toward substantive representation whereby women’s political interests are integrated into policymaking and whereby outcomes matter.²⁸

Moreover, men must become more actively engaged in such feminist efforts. For example, this is the goal of the “HeForShe” solidarity campaign initiated by UN Women, which is actively supported by the Swedish government. With the UN Women’s appointment of Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven as an “Impact World Champion Leader,” Löfven has been engaged as an “ambassador” of the UN initiative. Since then all male Swedish ministers have joined in making the Swedish government the only one in the world united in its support for the “HeForShe” campaign.²⁹

A feminist foreign policy makes gendered conflicts of interests visible. In doing so, it also provides a platform from which to promote highly controversial political issues to national and global audiences. An example of such promotion by the Swedish government can be seen in its adoption of a “headwind” agenda in the area of sexual and reproductive health and rights.³⁰ Promoting such an agenda is considered sensitive not only in the Global South but also within the European Union, where major resistance is expected.³¹

Practicing What You Preach

There is an inherent tension between idealism and pragmatism in the practice of a feminist foreign policy. Situated within a feminist ethical framework, a feminist

foreign policy agenda aspires to goals and expectations that will bring about visible gender-sensitive results. However, trying to fundamentally change deeply ingrained patriarchal structures, gender bias, and international institutions are long-term goals that will certainly encounter considerable global resistance. Furthermore, the practice of foreign policy is often mediated through a variety of policy options and compromises, some of which might be inconsistent with the explicit ethical ideals and feminist principles that underpin feminist foreign policy. These tensions may result in a number of contradictions. For instance, several civil society organizations³² have already criticized the Swedish government for failing to live up to its feminist foreign policy during the recent migration crisis, when in 2015 the country received about 160,000 asylum seekers.³³ They noted that the imposition of heavy restrictions and border controls are likely to affect women and men differently, for example, because women often lack the identification documentation required to enter the country. What is more, stricter family reunification policies are detrimental to women's wellbeing, given that many women are stuck in refugee camps in the Middle East and elsewhere while their husbands have reached the Swedish shores. Moreover, nearly 30 percent of the government's development assistance budget to the Global South was redirected in order to manage the migration influx. As a consequence, several development programs specifically targeting women and children in the Global South are at risk of losing donor assistance from Sweden.³⁴

Another area of incongruous policy practice is Sweden's record on arms exporting.³⁵ On the one hand, Sweden has for many years been a strong advocate of preventive diplomacy in its support for international actions that seek to prevent and address root causes of conflict. On the other, it is one of the world's top ten leading arms exporters, allowing arms exports to repressive authoritarian regimes.³⁶ This has caused dissonance in terms of the international and self-perceived image of Sweden: the government sees itself as a humanitarian superpower pursuing a feminist-oriented foreign policy, and yet Swedish-made exported weapons are often fueling and enabling gender-based violence and the repression of women.³⁷ The recent diplomatic crisis between Sweden and Saudi Arabia illustrates well this policy dilemma. Sweden has long been exporting arms to Saudi Arabia. However, in early 2015 the Swedish foreign minister vented public criticism against the Saudi regime for its poor human rights record and the

harsh treatment and sentences of Saudi dissidents, including the sentence of a thousand lashes and ten years in prison for the Saudi blogger Raif Badawi. Wallström described the punishment as outrageous and “medieval,” which caused a major diplomatic row between the two countries.³⁸ Saudi Arabia swiftly responded by recalling its ambassador and accused the Swedish foreign minister of criticizing the religion of Islam. The Arab world (including the Palestinian Authority, which previously had expressed much appreciation for Sweden’s recognition of Palestine), the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation followed suit and responded with similar harsh statements against the Swedish government, including the cancellation of Wallström’s keynote speech at the Arab League summit in Cairo. At the same time, several EU member states kept a noticeably low diplomatic profile and distanced themselves from the Swedish position. Yet despite these diplomatic repercussions, the Swedish government decided to cancel the arms deal with Saudi Arabia, a decision that was severely criticized by many figures in the Swedish financial and diplomatic sectors. Furthermore, former foreign minister and top diplomat Carl Bildt argued that canceling the arms deal to Saudi Arabia had damaged Sweden’s international standing and reputation.³⁹

Between Soft and Hard Power

Another objection raised against a feminist foreign policy is its association with soft normative power⁴⁰ and its inability to confront aggression, hardcore security issues, and threats emanating from actors such as hostile states and transnational terror organizations.⁴¹ Advocates have responded by arguing that it is precisely the balance between traditional power politics and an ethically informed foreign policy that makes such diplomacy smart and effective.⁴² Hence, a feminist foreign policy is not as closely associated with pacifism as is often assumed, but encourages pragmatism in the alternation between the use of soft and hard power as the most appropriate diplomatic and military strategy to manage security threats. Still others raise concern and skepticism regarding liberal states’ pursuit of state-centric feminist foreign policies upheld by militarism.⁴³ They note that the use of such power to protect women may lead to their further victimization and may strengthen patriarchal views of protection, which would further inhibit the transformation of gendered power relations.⁴⁴ Feminist foreign policy, nonetheless,

does not rule out the use of force in very exceptional circumstances so as to ensure the rights and entitlements of women and men in war zones.

ADVANCING A RESEARCH AGENDA ON FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY

The quest for a distinct feminist foreign policy in theory and practice, we argue, lends itself well to thinking through ethical dilemmas on a global scale. Hence, such foreign policy orientation should be guided by concerns for justice, peace, and security. With this essay we want to contribute to the ongoing debates within the field of international relations, and in ethical theory in particular, by centering our ethical analysis on the broad cosmopolitan underpinnings of feminist foreign policy. As Anthony Burke, Katrina Lee-Koo, and Matt McDonald have noted, cosmopolitanism provides a productive platform for ensuring that everybody's security needs and wants will be considered. In their words, "a cosmopolitan ethics aims to ensure the security of all states and communities through time, by aiming for the elimination rather than just the management of grave insecurities."⁴⁵ Kim Hutchings points out that "in the case of feminist justice ethics, the response is not to abandon the universal terms of traditional moral theory, but to make them genuinely inclusive and universal."⁴⁶ Hence, advancing theory on feminist foreign policy can add rigor to scholarly debates on international ethics by adopting a pronounced gender-just position on a range of international moral dilemmas.

More specifically, such an approach, we argue, could be broadly situated within the solidarist branch of the English School in order to conceptualize states' international conduct and efforts to pursue an ethically informed feminist foreign policy. A number of studies that theorize the potential for the conduct of ethical foreign policy are situated within the solidarist branch of the English School, which tends to privilege justice over order as a key ethical imperative of global relations.⁴⁷ The English School provides a progressive account of global relations and for normative considerations in global politics. More specifically, it takes account of states' endeavors to overcome the constraints of anarchy in a fashion conducive to both international order and justice. Scholars such as Hedley Bull, Tim Dunne, Nicholas Wheeler, and Andrew Linklater, all of whom are broadly situated within the justice/solidarist branch of the English School, have endorsed the significance of considering the idea of solidarity in transforming international

society.⁴⁸ Hedley Bull posited that international solidarism “requires the Western countries to make adjustments that are unwelcome” since they have to “abandon privileges in the international order In some measure the loss of these privileges has been acceptable as inevitable . . . inasmuch as it represents the righting of . . . historic injustices.”⁴⁹

Yet the English School is entirely void of feminist insights about the gendered lives and stories of women in international society.⁵⁰ Hence, feminist foreign policy analysis could make a strong contribution to the field, offering the possibility to probe the ethical and feminist contents of states’ foreign and security policies. Moreover, such a research agenda can provide an incentive for thinking through existing justice-based notions of diplomacy, protection, and security in global politics. Specifically, we would like to suggest that feminist foreign policy in theory and practice provides a more rigorous ethical yardstick than is currently available, against which to evaluate the normative and feminist contents of states’ international orientations, identities, and concrete policies. Indeed, those ethical norms are at the heart of the conduct of feminist foreign policy. No foreign policy is ethical and coherent unless it takes account of women’s distinct needs, as well as the suffering of other subordinated groups exposed to war and conflict. These are, we suggest, some of the poignant and pressing issues at the center of a research agenda on feminist foreign policy.

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