

SWEDEN'S FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY ILLUSTRATED

Sweden's feminist foreign policy is turning five years old. Launched against a backdrop of discrimination and violence against women globally, its purpose remains today. The Feminist Foreign Policy is built on three R's. It aims to strengthen women's and girl's Rights, Representation, and Resources based on the reality in which they live. This means that women should be able to fully enjoy their human rights, that women should be represented at decision-making tables, and that they should have access to resources. Gender equality is a foundation for economic growth, sustainable development, peace, and security. Involving men and boys is vital to achieving a change in gender norms. Today, Sweden is joined by around 80 countries which have adopted their own policies on gender equality.

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The world's first feminist foreign policy was born five years ago. The brain-child of Sweden's then and current Minister for Foreign Affairs, Margot Wallström, the feminist foreign policy was announced immediately at the newly appointed Minister's first meeting with the diplomatic staff at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs.¹ I was one of the persons in that audience. In the room, there was curiosity and caution at the same time. The acknowledgment of gender equality was familiar, but the policy was new and bold. Shortly thereafter, the Feminist Foreign Policy was formally launched, and it is still very much operating.



As with all new policy initiatives, the Feminist Foreign Policy created interest abroad, but also some skepticism. What were the Swedes up to? Sweden was already famous for its persistent mentions of gender equality. But a Feminist Foreign Policy? Why would a regular foreign policy not be good enough for Sweden and, for that matter, the rest of the world?

The Feminist Foreign Policy is not a replacement or an addition to foreign policy. It is about applying a gender equality perspective across all foreign policy matters. It rests on a simple rationale: men and women together make up the population of the world and to achieve sustainable peace, security, development, and economic growth, both men and women must take part in shaping the world we share.

Gender equality is both an objective in itself and a means to reach other overarching goals, such as peace, security, and sustainable development. Unfortunately, today there is systematic discrimination and subordination against women on different levels in all countries around the world. This includes Sweden, which is why the feminist foreign policy also has domestic sister policies. These emanate from the fact that the Swedish government is also a feminist government, based on the objective that both men and women should have the same possibilities to shape their own lives as well as their societies.

¹ To learn more, refer to the Handbook on Sweden's Feminist Foreign Policy: https://www.government.se/4a4752/contentassets/fc115607a4ad4bca913cd8d11c2339dc/handbook_swedens-feminist-foreign-policy.pdf

What is the Feminist Foreign Policy?

The Feminist foreign policy is a perspective and a method resting on three pillars, beginning with the letter R:

Rights: The Swedish Foreign Service shall promote all women's and girls' full enjoyment of human rights by combating all forms of violence and discrimination that restrict their freedom of action.

Representation: The Swedish Foreign service shall promote women's participation and influence in decision-making processes at all levels and in all areas and shall seek dialogue with women representatives at all levels including in civil society.

Resources: The Swedish Foreign Service shall work to ensure that resources are allocated to promote gender equality and equal opportunities for all women and girls to enjoy human rights.

There is also a fourth R, which denotes that action must be based on the Reality.

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The reality is that despite countless agreements, resolutions and action plans over the past decades, women's equality has not been achieved. To illustrate, it has been 70 years since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 40 years since the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), almost 25 years since the adoption of the Action Plan from the World Conference on Women in Beijing, and almost 20 years since the adoption of the first United Nations Security Council resolution on Women, Peace and Security, and women still do not enjoy equal rights to men. Women are not allowed to represent themselves or their countries' future in places where such decisions are being taken and, finally, resources are not being allocated so as to ensure the progress of women and girls. This is to the detriment of sustainable peace, security, and development. Therefore, a feminist foreign policy is key for a more inclusive and gender-equal future.

Rights

The full enjoyment of human rights for women and girls is far from reality. In fact, more than 50 percent of the countries in the world legally restrict women from certain jobs. In some 18 countries, men can legally restrict their wives from working. Although compared to the past more girls go to school today, there are still at least 63 million who do not. Some 47,000 girls under the age of 18 are married off every day.

Violence is a barrier to progress and development. Particularly, violence against women carries even further consequences. Freedom from physical, psychological and sexual violence is, therefore, a major issue. Worldwide, one in three women has experienced physical or sexual violence. Discrimination and violence, in the hands of the state or at home, will prevent women and girls from their right to education, thereby inhibiting them from becoming social, political, and economic actors for themselves and for their communities. Around 60 percent of the countries in the world have legislated against domestic violence. Despite such efforts, domestic violence where the partner is the perpetrator is the leading cause of injuries to women globally.

On a strategic level, Sweden has raised awareness of the state of women's rights through its reports on the human rights situation covering all regions of the world. Sweden has been the largest donor to UN Women and to UN Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict. We have contributed to awareness raising regarding the link between the uncontrolled spread of weapons and violence against women, and we continue to support civil society organizations that give legal and other forms of support to vulnerable women.

Representation

Why does inclusion matter? By excluding women, half of the population is left out of most peace processes, which means they cannot contribute to solving conflict nor shaping the future of the society of which they are part. From 1992 to 2011, less than four percent of signatories to peace agreements were women. Studies have shown that when women participate in resolving conflict, as well as in post-conflict peacebuilding, a more sustainable result is achieved. It should be a basic rule that discussions about women should not take place without women. If women are not allowed to make their concerns known, the underlying causes of conflict risk being repeated.

Sweden has worked actively to increase the involvement of women in peace efforts in Colombia, Mali, Syria, Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Somalia through political,

technical, and financial support. Sweden has also assisted several countries in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East to draw up national action plans on women, peace, and security. As a response to the fact that there is less than 10 percent female peace mediators and negotiators worldwide, networks of women mediators have been set up in Sweden, in the Nordic countries, in Indonesia, and in the African Union (Femwise), to name a few. Sweden will also continue to push for a gender perspective in both civilian and military crisis management activities and missions in the EU, UN, NATO, and the OSCE.

Other examples of activities pushing for broader representation is SheDecides, an initiative to unlock and unblock resources for women; and WikiGap, which aims at creating more content on Wikipedia by women and about women—against the backdrop that around 90 percent of Wikipedia authors are men and that there are four times more articles about men than about women.

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Resources

More equal participation between men and women in decision making—be it in the local community, the parliament or on a company board—will contribute to a fairer distribution of funds. This will benefit more broadly the needs of the community, the country, or the company. Inheritance laws, women’s access to education, and participation in the labor force have shown to be vital for a country’s economic growth. An increase in women’s participation in the job market has been calculated to boost a country’s GNP growth over 50 percent. Recent studies have been able to put the price tag to 12 trillion USD to the global GDP if gender equality were advanced. For example, private companies that are led by a diverse management team that includes women usually perform better. Economic empowerment often goes hand in hand with increased social and political empowerment. Academic work has also shown that there is a link between the level of equality in society and the level of violence and corruption. In short, more equality means less violence and corruption.

Separate the Data

Women, men, girls, and boys are affected differently by the same events. Grasping that people can be affected differently by similar situations is necessary in finding the best solution to address a problem—benefiting not only those affected, but society as a whole.

Generally, women and girls are disproportionately affected by conflicts and climate change. More than 40,000 people every day are forced to flee due to conflict and persecution but the response is still gender blind. Responses to migration and humanitarian emergencies should always take into account and act upon the different challenges and situations for women, men, girls, and boys. Gender disaggregated data and statistics are, therefore, important to understanding what a country looks like and how to create a better basis for decision making.

There are simple strategic tools and methods that help shed light on gender-related effects when creating budgets and analyzing proposals. By asking and answering a few basic questions, such as in what way gender equality is relevant to the proposal, which gender patterns emerge and what significance the proposal has for gender equality and what alternative proposals there might be that could promote more gender equality, a much more informed view will emerge of the implications of the proposal for men and women, boys and girls.

A Continued Action Plan for the Feminist Foreign Policy

Following the formation of Sweden's new government in early 2019, a new action plan for the coming four years has been drawn up. It builds on the work of previous years and puts the focus on three main areas:

- Promoting women's economic and social conditions, including combatting child marriages and all forms of gender-related violence. Women's representation and participation will remain a key theme.
- Strengthening work on sexual and reproductive health and rights.
- Strengthening work on the women, peace and security agenda.

A continued initiative is the Forum on Gender Equality, first held in Stockholm in 2018 and again in Tunis in April 2019—which gathered 600 participants from 80 countries to address the role of women in local spaces and government. This initiative will continue in France and will prepare for the 25th anniversary of the Beijing platform in 2020.

Highlighting the 20th anniversary of the first Security Council Resolution on Women, Peace and Security in 2020, Sweden will encourage women to take part in elections worldwide, both to vote and run for office. Women's entrepreneurship will receive support and Sweden will work towards ensuring that international trade will be beneficial for women as producers, entrepreneurs, workers, and consumers the same way as men. At the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs and in the Government Offices, guidelines for gender equality also apply. Everything from reporting to recruiting must take gender equality into consideration. As a result, Sweden today has more than 40 percent woman Heads of Missions abroad, a number that was 10 percent 20 years ago.

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Achieving Change by Involving Men and Boys

Legislation and policy measures may bring us closer to achieving gender equality. Ultimately, however, a change of mindset is necessary for gender equality to be fully realized. To achieve a change of norms, the participation of men and boys is absolutely vital. Gender equality is not a women's issue nor does it concern only women. The role and actions of men and boys in making gender equality work must be further encouraged, for the benefit of men themselves and their role in the family as well as in society. This entails everything from men taking part in unpaid household work and caring for the children to a male company board appointing a female CEO to run the business. In Turkey and across the world, Sweden has initiated discussions regarding the role of men in the family through a photo exhibition called Swedish Dads.

Beyond Foreign Policy: Who and What is Shaping our Future and What Does it Mean for Gender Equality?

Who and what is shaping our future? Who will be holding power and making decisions in the future? Artificial intelligence and digitalization are examples of areas that are already shaping our future. What may seem as neutral and unbiased technological and digital development is created by human beings who are governed by our current gender stereotypes, thus likely to reproduce the inequalities that we have today. A gender-sensitive approach is needed in these strategic spheres.

Foreign Minister Wallström often uses a quote attributed to Mahatma Gandhi when explaining the continuation of the feminist foreign policy: “First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win.” Gender equality remains an uphill battle, but feminist foreign policy is no longer ignored nor something to laugh at. Sweden is not alone but has in fact been joined by some 80 countries that have developed their own policies and national action plans on gender equality. Gender equality is about hardcore economic growth, development, and security. Without gender equality, there will only be flawed security, unsustainable development, and stunted growth.