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# A Challenging Agenda for Troubled Times: The Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy

Sari Kouvo\*

**Abstract:** *In 2014, the Swedish Government declared that it was a feminist government. Foreign Minister Margot Wallström also took the opportunity to announce that Sweden would become the first country in the world to adopt a feminist foreign policy. The feminist banner was raised at a time when Europe, including Sweden, was grappling with what has come to be called the migration crisis and a rise in violent extremism across ideological, political and religious boundaries, and when the world seemed to be shifting further into conflict mode. This is also a time when notions of feminism and gender equality are as furiously promoted as they are contested.*

*The aim of this article is first, to situate the Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy in the broader context of Swedish equality politics and foreign policy. Second, to discuss how the term feminism used in the policy and what the overall contents of the policy are. Third, to problematize the policy through two examples focusing on the one hand on the challenge of a braver politics and on the other hand on the in-built tension between Sweden's Feminist Foreign Policy and the Swedish trade and defence interests and in particular Swedish arms trade. The article focuses on developments during the first government term, 2014–2018, but it will also touch upon the developments during the second government term, 2019–2022.*

*The article shows that the Policy has made a difference. It has raised awareness and built knowledge of women's rights and equality within the Ministry and helped ensure that these issues are systematically integrated into much of foreign policy. The fact that the Policy has continued after the elections and is*

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I wish to dedicate this article to my father, Heimo Kouvo, who died on 1 May 2018. Much of the reading and writing of this article was done while sitting by his side in hospital. Heimo described himself as a 'news geek', following the news and wanting to discuss politics until the last weeks of his life. His opinions were often stark, but always modestly articulated and with an underlying note of kindness. A modesty and kindness that we need much more of.

*now being taken forward for another government term has helped institutionalise the policy and may also have increased international interest.*

**Key words:** *Feminist foreign policy, Nordic state feminism, Nordic legal studies, Sweden, human rights, gender equality, equal representation, participation, defence industry*

## 1. Introduction

‘Equality is core business. The benefits of equality for social and economic development cannot be disputed’ (Anonymous 2017. Interview with former Swedish diplomat by author, 8 May)

‘We should never simplify. Refusing to tackle the complexities will only hurt women’ (Anonymous 2017. Swedish diplomat interviewed by the author, 10 May).

In 2014, the incoming Swedish Foreign Minister, Margot Wallström (Social Democratic Party), announced that Sweden would be the first country in the world to have a feminist foreign policy. Her announcement was in line with the overall commitment by the coalition government between the Swedish social democratic and green parties to be a feminist government.

Wallström’s announcement was met with shrugs, praise and dismay. For some, the announcement was just business as usual in a time when if not feminism, then at least women’s rights and equality had been mainstreamed into law and politics at national and international levels. It was, as a former Swedish diplomat noted, already ‘core business’ (Anonymous 2017. Interview with former Swedish diplomat by author, 8 May). For others, the use of the word feminism held the promise of a foreign policy that, building on an intersectional feminist agenda, would challenge global inequalities and seek to tackle the war mongering, predatory and profit-driven politics currently fueling conflicts around the world and pushing the planet towards ecological catastrophe. That is, a feminist foreign policy held the promise of a different politics that, as a Swedish diplo-

mat noted would defy simplification and tackle complexities (Anonymous 2017. Swedish diplomat interviewed by the author, 10 May). For yet others, the announcement seemed to suggest trading careful steering through increasingly tense international relations for a bombastic, single-issue politics. Internationally, the Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy was met with curiosity: Wallström has been invited to explain her politics in many international forums. The policy has also had ripple effects on other governments and on international civil society organisations and think tanks.

These are challenging times for launching and implementing a feminist foreign policy. First, such a policy needs to deal with the shifting meanings evoked by the term feminism in scholarly, activist and policy-centred arenas. Most feminists may still agree that feminism is a perspective focused on promoting equality between women and men, but there will be less agreement on what the key gendered inequalities are, how they are manifested and interact with other mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion at national and international levels and what strategies should be deployed to promote equality. These differences and dividing lines between feminisms are extensively debated in feminist scholarship, but they are often toned down when feminism is turned into government gender equality policies or when guiding international civil society engagements in the field of development or conflict resolution and peace-building (for discussion, see Charlesworth 2008; Halley 2006; Otto 2009; O’Rourke 2014). Second, the policy needs to navigate decades’ worth of gender equality language and the layers of meaning and compromises and instances of co-option built into terms such

as gender equality, women's human rights, women, peace and security, sexual and gender-based violence and women's representation, participation and empowerment (Charlesworth 2008; Kouvo 2004; O'Rourke 2014; Otto 2010; Squires 2007). Third, it needs to tackle the ongoing attacks on feminisms and even basic notions of equality by reactionary forces across the political and ideological spectrum. Finally, it needs to provide concrete policy alternatives for these times marked by a decreased commitment to multilateralism from major European and world powers and increased global scale turbulence due to, *inter alia*, environmental disasters and climate change, the negative effects of neo-liberal globalisation and a rise in nationalism and violent extremisms. This is obviously an overwhelming task for one government to address, but one government – particularly if prioritising alliance building and multilateralism – can sow the seeds for change and ensure that these can grow.

In light of the above, the aim of this article is first to situate the Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy in the broader context of Swedish equality politics and foreign policy. Second, to discuss how the term feminism is used in the policy and what the overall content of the policy is. Third, to problematize the policy through two examples focusing on the one hand on the challenge of a braver politics and on the other hand on the in-built tension between Sweden's Feminist Foreign Policy and Swedish defence industry and in particular Swedish arms trade. That is, the article aims to answer the questions: Why did *Sweden* adopt a feminist foreign policy in 2014? What was *feminist* about this policy, and what content was given to the policy? What were the results of the policy – what could it and what could it not do? The last question will be studied through the two examples.

There are two main motives behind this article. First, there has been limited academic research about the Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy (Egnell 2016; Aggestam and Berg-

man-Rosamond 2016; Lackenbauer 2016; Rosén Sundström and Elgström 2018). This author wishes to contribute to further academic discussion about the Policy. Second, it is a bold move to call a foreign policy 'feminist', and it is bold in a different way from the fear mongering, populist nationalism that currently seems to be high on the agenda for world leaders on both side of the Atlantic and beyond. This author considers it useful to show the Swedish Policy as an alternative, without shying away from its challenges and shortcomings.

The second motive evokes a fundamental tension or dilemma relevant to much of the feminist scholarship on international law and politics. This tension or dilemma was already articulated by Hilary Charlesworth and Christine Chinkin in their landmark publication *The Boundaries of International Law* (Charlesworth and Chinkin 2000): feminist scholars criticise international law and its institutions for their gender biases, blind spots and exclusions, while at the same time not wanting to undermine the potential of international law for promoting women's rights and gender equality. They do so, not naïve about biases in international law or the male dominance of international politics and law, but because the violations suffered by and the challenges faced by women across the globe make discarding any possible tool for change seem a luxury (for discussion, see Kouvo and Pearson, eds. 2011). The complex exercise of deconstructing-while-reconstructing, criticising-while-saving and challenging-while-defending has been a recurring theme in feminist scholarship throughout recent decades (Charlesworth and Chinkin 2000, Buss and Manji, eds. 2005, Otto 2009 and 2010 and O'Rourke 2014). The relative responsiveness of international law and politics to feminist demands for women's rights and gender policies has resulted in a new stream of critical scholarship about the allure of internationalism, the risks of co-optation and the costs of compromises (Buchanan and Pahuja 2002, Otto 2009 and 2010, O'Rourke

2014), as well as about the biases and exclusionary effects of these compromises (Charlesworth 2008, Kapur 2018 and Otto 2017). Contemporary international law and politics have largely integrated the language of feminists and women's rights advocates, but they have not necessarily integrated the aims of women's rights advocates or feminist methods (Kouvo 2004 and Charlesworth 2011).

Theoretically and methodologically the article draws on the author's previous research that has focused on the interaction between law, policy and politics for promoting gender equality in Sweden and internationally (Kouvo 2004; Kouvo 2005). It draws on the theoretical and methodological insights of Nordic and international feminist legal scholarship that analyse international law in context making use of its explicit expressions, but also being attentive to its built-in compromises and hidden biases.<sup>1</sup> The empirical material used in this article includes mainly Swedish, EU and UN policy and legal documents, previous research about the Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy (Egnell 2016; Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond 2016; Lackenbaur 2016; Rosén Sundström and Elgström; CONCORD 2016, 2017 and 2018) and newspaper and other media reports about the policy (Maccoby Berglof 2015; Nordberg 2015).<sup>2</sup> The

1. For an introduction to Nordic gender legal studies, see the edited volumes published by Ashgate Nousiainen et al. 2001, Svensson et al., 2004 and Gunnarsson et al. 2007. For an introduction to feminist critical scholarship on international law in particular, see Charlesworth and Chinkin 2000, Buss and Manji, eds, 2005, Kouvo and Pearson, eds. 2011 and Kouvo and Pearson, eds. 2014. For an introduction to feminist perspectives on international relations and politics, see Enloe 2013 and Sjöberg 2013. For an introduction to the more operationally or empirically oriented scholarship on women, peace and security, see Boyd, ed. 2014 and Gizelis and Olsson, ed. 2015.
2. Newspaper articles and events relating to the feminist foreign policy are collected on the

author also conducted interviews with Swedish diplomats, civil servants and representatives of advocacy-oriented civil society organisations. Eleven interviews in the form of semi-structured conversations were conducted in Brussels and Stockholm in May 2017, two interviews in May and June 2018 in Brussels and by telephone and video link, and one additional interview was conducted in November 2019 by telephone. The last interview was an update interview with a person already interviewed in 2017. The interviews aimed mainly to provide background to the development of the Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy and to unpack it in relation to international law and current global affairs. The results of the interviews are mainly used in the sections focusing on the development and results of the Feminist Foreign Policy. Illustrative quotes from the interviews also introduce the different sections of the article.

## **2. From the Vision of a Feminist State to a Feminist Foreign Policy**

'Gender equality issues are not yet at the point where they will stay on the agenda without a fight' (Anonymous 2018. Swedish civil servant interviewed by the author, 7 June).

'There is always a gap between policy and practice, but when that gap becomes too big, we are in trouble' (Anonymous 2017. Swedish civil servant interviewed by the author, 10 May).

### *Situating the Policy: Nordic State Feminism and Swedish Neutrality Politics*

This section situates the Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy within the tradition of Nordic State Feminism, but also within the balancing act of Swedish foreign policy between commitments

Swedish international development website [www.bistandsdebatten.se](http://www.bistandsdebatten.se) Accessed 2 June 2017.

to equality, human rights and global solidarity and Sweden's role in arms' trade.

The Nordic model of democratic welfare states that developed in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century included a strong focus on equality between women and men. This model has included not only a focus on formal equality and equal rights, but systematic efforts to promote equal opportunities and social equality. The Nordic model has received considerable international attention (see further Kvist et al. 2012; Melby et al. 2009), and has led to the Nordic states being considered frontrunners in equality between women and men (Alter 2015, World Economic Forum 2017). For example, Sweden led the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index in 2006 and was in fourth place in 2016 (World Economic Forum 2017), and it has ranked top in the EU's Gender Equality Index since 2005. Finland, Norway and Iceland were also highly placed in the rankings (European Institute for Gender Equality 2017).<sup>3</sup>

The Nordic model's strong focus on equal opportunities and social equality was enabled by strategic partnerships between the Nordic governments and the Nordic women's movement. The term 'state feminism' coined by Helga Hernes is often used to describe this partnership between the state and the women's movements in the Nordic countries. Nordic state feminism had both a practical and a visionary dimension (Hernes 1987). In practice, the Nordic welfare

states relied heavily on women entering the labor force, not least to serve as the primary workforce of the expanding public care sector. For the states, creating the opportunities for women to work was a cheaper option than relying on migrant labor, and for the women's movement promoting women's economic independence was an evident next step from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century's civil and political rights' struggles. The states' responsiveness to the demands of the women's movements contributed to the visionary – or possibly utopian – dimension of Nordic state feminism. That is, Nordic state feminisms – whether activist or academic – have been convinced that the woman-friendly state is possible (Norborg et al. 1995; Gunnarsson and Svensson 2012). Feminist scholars of international law, as was noted in the introduction, have been less optimistic about the promise of (international) law (Charlesworth and Chinkin 2000; Enloe 2013; Sjoberg 2013; Stewart 2011). While occasionally overtaken by the potential of international law and the allure of having a global audience, feminist international legal scholarship has consistently focused on the challenges of international law and organisations: their level of abstraction, male dominance and distance from the diverse experiences and realities of women across the globe (Charlesworth and Chinkin 2000; Kouvo 2004).

The close connection between the late 20<sup>th</sup> century Nordic welfare state and the struggles for equality between women and men was possibly most pronounced in Swedish politics (see further Griffin 2016; Svensson et al. 2004). In 1990, a government study on the state of Swedish democracy was published. It included a chapter by Yvonne Hirdman outlining a theory about the Swedish gender system (SOU 1990:44). According to Hirdman, the Swedish gender system continued to be based on two logics: separation of the sexes and male supremacy. Hirdman's study, together with important political mobilisation from women's rights activists, contributed to convincing major political

3. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report and the European Union's Gender Equality Index measure progress on equality in different fields, including politics, economy, health, education and family. The fact that states rank slightly differently on the different indexes is due to the different scale and methodologies used. For further analysis, see the description of the methodologies used here <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2016/measuring-the-global-gender-gap/> and <http://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/about> Accessed 10 January 2018.

parties to increase the representation of women in their candidate lists. There was then a steady rise in female parliamentarians from 1994 to 2006 (40 per cent of Swedish parliamentarians were women in 1994 and 47 per cent in 2006). In the 2010 and 2014 elections, there was a moderate decline, and following the 2018 elections 46 per cent of parliamentarians are women. Not all women politicians are, of course, defenders of women's rights, and increased representation of women does not necessarily contribute to increased equality between women and men. However, the combination of decades of equality work and a critical mass of women in Swedish politics has contributed to the adoption of a number of laws that sought to challenge existing gender relations, including the law on prohibiting buying but not selling of sexual services (Törnqvist 2007; Dahlerup 2012). It is in the above context that the Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson (Social Democratic Party) in 2002 declared that he was a 'feminist', but qualified it by saying that he did not want to push equality issues so hard that they would create hostilities in society.

Sweden has also been a strong defender of women's rights and gender equality internationally. Swedish post-World War II foreign policy has sought to balance a commitment to international solidarity and multilateralism with a strong defence industry with important trade and defence interests in arms' and war material exports. Sweden has sought to be a normative foreign policy actor emphasising solidarity, human rights and international cooperation (Bjereld and Carmesund 2016). It has been a strong supporter of the UN since its establishment, and among the five largest donors of humanitarian aid relative to national income (OECD 2016; Parker 2016). At the same time, Sweden's post-war foreign policy relied heavily on the doctrine 'Freedom from alliances in peacetime with a view to neutrality in wartime' (Olsson 1977, 183). A strong defence industry was seen as an important element in Swedish

neutrality, and the close ties forged between government and the private sector during the years of war helped ensure the promotion of one vision of neutrality, while promoting the interests of Swedish business and defence industry (Olsson 1977). Today Sweden remains an important arms exporter in Europe and globally.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Sweden's neutrality has been gradually dismantled over recent decades, as Sweden has joined the EU and has built closer – though still heavily debated – ties with the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO). In these latter fora, Sweden has also committed to work strands for peace, rights and equality. It is in the above – admittedly sketchily outlined – context that the Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy was developed. On the one hand, it was enabled by a strong tradition to use state-centred politics and law to promote equality and, on the other, its conception fed into the existing tension in Swedish foreign policy between equality and human rights and Sweden's economic and defence interests.

Before shifting the focus to the launch and content of the Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy, it is important to note that although equality between women and men has held a relatively prominent position in Swedish law and politics, equality has never been a neutral topic. In Sweden, state feminism is increasingly seen as appropriated by the political forces left of centre and as seeking to govern peoples' private lives with one-size-fits-all approaches to equality. The criticism ranges from cautionary voices noting that equality is important but not the only priority to angry rants complaining about

4. Statistical and comparative data about Sweden's weapons exports can be found on the website of Svenska Freds- och Skiljedomsnämnden, <http://www.svenskafreds.se/snabba-fakta-om-vapenexporten> Accessed 20 October 2017. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute also has a comprehensive database of arms exports, <https://www.sipri.org/databases>. Accessed 20 October 2017.

women's power and men's lack of it in Swedish society.<sup>5</sup> The social media boom of recent decades has brought the tensions out into the open, making it very clear that there are many angry young and old men and some women out there who feel that they have lost out both to Swedish feminists and to immigrants.<sup>6</sup> The Feminist Foreign Policy survived the 2018 parliamentary elections, as the new Swedish coalition government between the Social Democratic Party and the Green Party affirmed that Sweden again has a feminist government and that the Feminist Foreign Policy will be continued.<sup>7</sup> However, the 2018 parliamentary elections showed that Swedes were divided on what politics they wanted, shown by the fact that the three leading parties in the elections were the Social Democratic Party (100 seats), the Moderate Party (70 seats) and the Swedish Democrats (62 seats). There is then no shared commitment for all

aspects of Swedish national or international equality politics and certainly not for the level of political emphasis given to equality within the current Swedish Parliament. The Feminist Foreign Policy – because of its high profile and symbolic importance – may be one of the areas where political compromises are made. The risk of having aimed too high and possibly falling a long way if the policy fails or is deemed to have failed was already noted in several of the background interviews done for this article in 2017.

#### *Unpacking the Policy: From Launch to Action Plan*

The aim of this section is to discuss how the term feminism is used in the policy and what the overall content of the policy was when the policy was launched and how it has developed over the years.

When the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Margot Wallström, announced that Sweden would have a Feminist Foreign Policy, she did not define what she meant by the term feminism (Dagens Nyheter 2014).<sup>8</sup> However, when asked about it in an interview she noted that it was time to become 'braver in politics', and that the term simply meant equality between women and men (Nordberg 2015). Her announcement resonated with the Swedish Government's overall commitment to be a feminist government, i.e. that it would work to ensure that women and men, girls and boys have equal power and opportunity to influence society and their own lives (Jämställdhet, 2017).<sup>9</sup> The term feminism

5. An interesting example of this is the debate in the Swedish media about whether gender studies are a legitimate academic discipline, the critical voices on the one hand challenging, gender studies at an ontological level and, on the other, viewing gender mainstreaming as an ideological tool and as a threat to academic independence. For the debate and responses to it, see for example Ivar Arpi's four part critique of gender studies in Svenska Dagbladet, one of Sweden's main daily newspapers, <https://www.svd.se/sa-blev-genusvetenskap-overkyrka-i-lund> Accessed 7 July 2018 and Ulf Mellerström's responses to it, <https://www.genus.se/notis/professor-bemoter-kritik-mot-genusvetenskap/> Accessed 7 June 2018.
6. For a discussion of the legal responses, see Bladini, Moa. Hat och hot på nätet. En kartläggning av den rättsliga regleringen i Norden från ett jämställdhetsperspektiv. NIKK. Göteborg, 2017, <http://www.nikk.no/en/publications/online-hate-speech/> Accessed 8 June 2018.
7. <https://www.regeringen.se/tal/20192/01/regeringsforklaringen-den-21-januari-2019/> Accessed 11 November 2019 and <https://www.regeringen.se/regeringens-politik/en-feministisk-utrikespolitik/> Accessed 11 November 2019.
8. For an overview of the Swedish Government's overall feminist policies, see <http://www.government.se/government-policy/a-feminist-government/> Accessed 17 January 2018, its Feminist Foreign policy <http://www.government.se/government-policy/feminist-foreign-policy/> Accessed 17 January 2018.
9. The Swedish government's six equality targets were identified as: equal division of power and influence; financial gender equality; gender-equitable education; an even division of



was then framed within the commitments already enshrined in the Swedish Constitution and international law.<sup>10</sup> The policy resonated with other international initiatives, including that of the UK Foreign Secretary William Hague to end sexual violence in conflict,<sup>11</sup> the UN's high-level review of 15 years of implementation of UNSC Resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security and adoption of new action plans for gender and women, peace and security in the EU (Preventing Conflict 2015).<sup>12</sup> Although the terminology is different, it also resonated with the foreign policy vision articulated by Hilary Clinton during the years when she was Secretary of State under President Barack Obama. Clinton did not call her policy feminist; her focus on women's representation, rights and

resources was framed in terms of 'smart power' (Lackenbauer 2016).<sup>13</sup>

Wallström and the government seemed to use the term feminism mainly to signal a shift in degree and possibly branding rather than content: the feminist foreign policy was about making the notion of equality between women and men recognised in the Swedish Constitution and international treaties reality. It is also about focusing on issues that are deemed particularly important for women or devastating for women's lives (for example, violence against women) within the framework of rights, representation and resources. That is, the term feminism was used to move away from what a civil servant interviewed for this article called 'gender integration policies that mainly skim the surface' and it aims, as another one noted, 'to bridge the gap between gender policies and practice' (Anonymous 2018. Swedish civil servant interviewed by the author, 7 June and Anonymous 2017 Swedish civil servant interviewed by the author, 10 May). Helena Lackenbauer argues that Wallström's feminist policy was largely inspired by Clinton's notion of 'smart power' (Lackenbauer 2016). This policy '...made the status of women a central concern of Clinton's tenure. She sought to transcend the simple-minded distinction between "hard" and "soft" power by adopting the term "smart power," to describe a form of statecraft that combined development, diplomacy, public-private partnerships and, yes, military power' (Traub 2011). In order to manage the shift from either hard or soft to smart, equality needed to be rebranded as a win-win situation for all (or at least for most). This strategic task was underpinned by seeking to make sure

unpaid housework and care work; gender equal health; and men's violence against women must end. <https://www.government.se/government-policy/gender-equality/goals-and-visions/> Accessed 6 September 2018.

10. This is also a framework that Wallström is familiar with from her previous positions as Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict and Vice President of the European Commission. The existing legal and policy frameworks would include the key UN and Council of Europe treaties for human rights, thematic treaties on women's rights and UN Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security and all the related Security Council resolutions. It would also include the various policy platforms developed through, for example, the EU Gender Action Plan or the UN 21 Sustainable Development Goals one of which is focused entirely on gender equality.
11. See the website of the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict, <https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/sexual-violence-in-conflict> Accessed 6 September 2018.
12. [http://peaceoperationsreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/HIPPO\\_Report\\_1\\_June\\_2015.pdf](http://peaceoperationsreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/HIPPO_Report_1_June_2015.pdf) and [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/28969/report-baseline-study-integration-human-rights-and-gender-csdp\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/28969/report-baseline-study-integration-human-rights-and-gender-csdp_en) Accessed 16 November 2017.
13. Clinton's strategy is best outlined in the First Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (2010) entitled *Leading Through Civilian Power*, see <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/153108.pdf> Accessed 13 June 2018.

that new knowledge and alternative analysis is moved centre stage.

The announcement of the feminist foreign policy seemed to have taken both the Ministry and civil society colleagues by surprise. One former diplomat noted that ‘When I heard this [that a feminist foreign policy had been launched], I wrote to Stockholm: So, how should I implement this policy? A bit later, we all received instructions from the Ministry to describe what meaning and content we would give to this policy, and what it meant for us’ (Anonymous 2017. Interview with former Swedish diplomat by author, 8 May). This was the beginning of the Action Plan for the Feminist Foreign Policy. The fact that the policy was launched without its content or direction having been clearly mapped out seemed to have taken some of the interviewees by surprise, but the fact that the Action Plan was developed in consultation with staff from the Ministry and Sweden’s diplomatic missions across the globe was also highlighted by several interviewees as a strength of the policy. A civil servant in the Ministry noted ‘[the Ministry in Stockholm] could never have produced such a comprehensive Action Plan for the Feminist Foreign Policy if we had not been able to draw on the wealth of experience, and the creativity and continued engagement, of our missions: we now have an action plan that spans from gender perspectives in conflict resolution to gender perspectives in [embassy] logistics [services]’ (Anonymous 2017. Interview with civil servant at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by author 8 May). The result of the consultative process was a brief and clear Action Plan that provides a frame for the policy, sets out its basic principles and perspectives, outlines its priorities and identifies tools. The Action Plan was adopted in 2015, and has been updated annually (2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019, the last update was done under the new government).<sup>14</sup>

14. For an overview of the action plan, see here <https://www.government.se/government-pol->

The matrix below provides a schematic overview of the Action Plan.

The Action Plan states that the ‘... feminist foreign policy means applying a systematic gender perspective throughout foreign policy. We will act to promote girls’ and women’s representation, rights and resources in all parts of this policy’ (Action Plan 2015, p. 3). The Action Plan clearly framed the Feminist Foreign Policy within existing national, regional and international legal and policy-based commitments for gender equality and women’s rights (Feminist Foreign Policy Action Plan 2015, 9–10). This includes commitments to equal rights and non-discrimination and women’s human rights articulated in regional and international human rights treaties and national and international policies focused on gender mainstreaming or on the implementation of the women, peace and security agenda. The core of the legal and policy-based commitments is reproduced in the Action Plan’s perspectives that focus on rights-based approaches and participation. The perspective focused on resources also reproduces the rights-based approach by emphasising that resource allocation should help ensure women’s and girls’ enjoyment of human rights (Action Plan 2015, 10). The Action Plan places strong emphasis on analysis and information gathering, on occasion defined as a fourth perspective focused on reality checks. All the Ministry’s policy-making, programming, reporting and monitoring should also be informed by intersectional gender analysis that takes into account that

‘...women and girls, just like men and boys, are not homogeneous groups – their identities, needs, participation and living con-

ity/feminist-foreign-policy/ Accessed 12 November 2019. The Feminist Foreign Policy is discussed and framed in Wallström’s annual foreign policy declarations to the Swedish Parliament. See, Utrikespolitisk declaration 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019.

*A Challenging Agenda for Troubled Times: The Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy*

Frame	Perspective	Priorities	Tools
<p>1. <b>National policies</b>, including the National Gender Policy and the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security;</p> <p>2. <b>Regional treaties and policies</b>, including the EU Treaty, EU gender policies, the European Convention on Human Rights and Istanbul Convention on combating violence against women;</p> <p>3. <b>International treaties and policies</b>, including all relevant human rights and humanitarian law treaties and the UNSCRs on women, peace and security and all relevant UN action plans and programs.</p>	<p>1. A <b>rights’ perspective</b> focused on the full enjoyment of human rights by all women and girls, and combating all forms of violence and discrimination;</p> <p>2. A <b>representation perspective</b> focused on women’s participation and influence in decision-making, as well as <i>dialogue with women representatives at all levels, including in civil society</i></p> <p>3. A <b>resource perspective</b> ensuring that resources are allocated to promote gender equality;</p> <p>4. All action should be guided by <b>reality checks and analysis</b> (note, the focus on reality checks is not consistently included as a perspective, it is sometimes included as a tool).</p>	<p>1. Human rights;</p> <p>2. Freedom from violence</p> <p>3. Conflict-resolution and peace-building;</p> <p>4. Political participation;</p> <p>5. Economic rights and empowerment;</p> <p>6. Sexual and reproductive health and rights;</p> <p>7. Intensifying of institutionalisation of the policy within the Swedish foreign service (added 2017)</p>	<p>1. Data and analysis;</p> <p>2. Accountability;</p> <p>3. Agenda-setting;</p> <p>4. Alliance-building;</p> <p>5. Dialogue for influence and data collection;</p> <p>6. Promotion and skills development;</p> <p>7. Negotiations, monitoring and review;</p> <p>8. Routines for grant management, meetings and reporting;</p> <p>9. Positions in international institutions and peace operations.</p>

*Image: Overview of the Action Plan for the Feminist Foreign Policy 2015–2018, the same format is chosen for the Action Plan 2019–2022, adopted under the new government.*

ditions differ. The analysis must therefore consider other factors besides sex, such as age, place of residence, socioeconomic status, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, ethnicity, disability, level of education, belief and religion. To be complete, the analysis must also be accompanied by an assessment of the power relations that exist for different groups in the specific context.’ (Action Plan 2015:16).

The six first priorities of the Action Plan reproduce the emphasis on rights, representation and resources, i.e., (1) Women’s human rights; (2) Freedom from physical, psychological and sexual violence; (3) Participation in prevention and resolution of conflicts (Women, Peace and Security); (4) Political participation; (5) Economic empowerment; and (6) Sexual and reproductive rights and health for all. The idea behind the priorities of the Action Plan was that while the priorities should stay basically the same

throughout the lifespan of the policy, the priorities should be updated and fine-tuned on an annual basis. For example, the 2019 update of the action plan emphasised that:

‘While the overall direction and methods of Sweden’s feminist foreign policy remain unchanged, in 2019 the Foreign Service will step up its work in three areas:

(1) Promote women’s and girls’ economic and social empowerment. This requires work with legal and normative frameworks; against child marriage and gender-based violence; and for gender equality in trade and businesses.

(2) Increase efforts for sexual and reproductive health and rights. The right of women and girls to decide freely over their own bodies is being challenged. We respond with an active policy and broad support.

(3) Enhance action on the Women, Peace and Security agenda. This involves

promoting women's participation in peace processes, not least through work in the UN, the EU and the OSCE.' (Feminist Foreign Policy 2019)

The Action Plan's combination of perspectives and priority areas was highlighted in one of the interviews as a key strength also contributing to the longevity of the Action Plan. The interviewee noted that 'the perspectives – rights, representation and resources – are useful for explaining the policy. The priority areas as they relate to already established working strands within the foreign ministry and in international organisations are crucial for ensuring implementation' (Anonymous 2019. Interview with civil servant by the author, 12 November). Several of the interviewees highlighted the importance of having an accessible, easy-to-use Action Plan that was annually updated as important for keeping the policy up to date and concrete.

The fact that the Action Plan framed the Ministry's feminist struggle within the existing legal and policy-based commitments to equal participation and rights was most likely a strategic choice, it allows the Ministry, both when institutionalising the policy within its own ranks and when promoting it internationally, to draw on recognised and widely respected legal and policy commitments. For example, one of the criticisms of the fore-mentioned UK initiative to end ending sexual violence in conflict voiced to this author is that it cut across existing legal and policy commitments on women, peace and security and gender-based and sexual violence, thereby creating a new policy strand instead of strengthening the existing ones. However, placing the feminist policy firmly within the existing legal and policy commitments, as Dianne Otto had noted in her discussion about gender mainstreaming in the UN, can be 'double-edged' (Otto 2009, 347). The use of existing legal and policy frameworks contributing to nudging equal rights and women's participation forward and these frameworks remain empowering in

many respects. However, relying primarily on the existing frameworks may contribute to a selective engagement with feminist ideas and risks reproducing stereotypical ideas about women (Otto 2009, Otto 2010, Kouvo 2004).

The policy was initially resourced by an ambassador-level position and, at the time when this author conducted her interviews in Stockholm in spring 2017, the ambassador was aided by two advisers. Focal points for the policy were established in all the departments of the Ministry and in all diplomatic missions. All departments and diplomatic missions were encouraged to have two focal points, one focused on political affairs and one focused on development, in order to make it easier to gender-mainstream systematically in all policy areas in line with the fundamental aims of the policy. The managers were also encouraged to identify a man and a woman as the two focal points in order to emphasise that gender equality is not a 'women's issue', but everybody's concern (Anonymous 2017. Interview with civil servant at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by author 8 May). This institutional setup has continued under the new government and action plan. As one interviewee noted, 'the fact that the same institutional setup is being continued under the new government has contributed to institutionalising the policy' (Anonymous 2019. Interview with civil servant at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by author 12 November). The institutionalisation of the Policy then follows the schema of best practice developed for gender mainstreaming and in different degrees already implemented in international forums to which Sweden has contributed, including the UN, the EU and, to a lesser extent, NATO.<sup>15</sup>

15. The EU Baseline Study on Integrating Human Rights and Gender into CSDP and the UN Peacekeeping review are instructive readings in this regard, see [http://peaceoperationsreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/HIPPO\\_Report\\_1\\_June\\_2015.pdf](http://peaceoperationsreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/HIPPO_Report_1_June_2015.pdf) and <https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headQuar->

That is, high-level political commitment is coupled with expert advisers, focal points and the encouragement for all staff to use gender analysis and reflect on both women's and men's experiences and needs when developing and implementing policies.

Implementation of the policy was facilitated by the development of a training package for Ministry personnel. A Handbook for the Feminist Foreign Policy that describes the policy, including its implementation was also adopted.<sup>16</sup> The Handbook is a hands-on tool that can be used by Swedish policy-makers when they implement the policy and in their interactions with other governments. The Handbook is coupled with a report that focuses on showcasing the implementation of the policy with examples from the three first years of its implementation,<sup>17</sup> and a list of what the policy has contributed to.<sup>18</sup> Taken together the action plan, the Handbook and the examples of implementation show that the Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy show that by placing equality centre stage and emphasising gender analysis, the Ministry managed to ensure progress in both multilateral and bilateral forums. The assessments done by the Ministry itself and the few external assessments done, show that progress – or at least some level of implementation – has been done in all ar-

reas of the policy.<sup>19</sup> There have been activities undertaken in all areas of the policy ranging from branding and visibility kind of activities, such as the tour of the 'Swedish Dads' photo exhibition that includes photos and stories from fathers on parental leave with babies and toddlers to the systematic highlighting of women throughout the Swedish membership in the UN Security Council. The policy has, as was noted by one of the interviewees contributed to a 'cultural shift' within the Ministry and this shift has had a ripple off effect bilaterally and multilaterally (Anonymous 2019. Interview with civil servant at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by author 12 November). It is slowly becoming recognised that 'gender equality' or 'women's rights' should not be the responsibility of one adviser or focal point, but these are issues that demand engagement both from experts and across an institution. The fact that the policy has continued under the new government and that there is now an action plan 2.0 has, according to one of the interviewees, resulted in 'further institutionalisation of the policy and increasing international attention: the fact that we have continued the policy has showed that we are taking this seriously both internally and internationally' (Anonymous 2019. Interview with civil servant at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by author 12 November).

The Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy has then already gone further than Clinton's smart power doctrine and Hague's engagement for ending sexual violence in conflict that did not survive the changes of government. This relative success is most likely due to the combination of

ters-homepage/28969/report-baseline-study-integration-human-rights-and-gender-csdpen Accessed 16 November 2017.

16. <https://www.government.se/4a7853/content-assets/fc115607a4ad4bca913cd8d11c2339dc/handbook---swedens-feminist-foreign-policy> Accessed 11 November 2019.
17. <https://www.government.se/4ab455/content-assets/654bcc72d8f44da087386b4906043521/swedens-feminist-foreign-policy--examples-from-three-years-of-implementation.pdf> Accessed 11 November 2019.
18. <https://www.government.se/articles/2018/03/examples-of-what-swedens-feminist-foreign-policy-has-contributed-to/> Accessed 11 November 2019.

19. Besides the assessments done by the ministry itself, the policy has been assessed in annual studies done by CONCORD (Sweden), a network of Swedish and European civil society organisations for global development (CONCORD 2016 and 2017 and 2018) and a conference paper that pulls together opinions of other EU countries about the Policy (Rosén Sundström and Elgström 2018).

factors discussed above: high-level support for the Policy, consultative and participatory processes for developing the Action Plan, institutional support through both expertise, training and operational guidance and a rather ‘smart’ balancing of upping existing commitments and nudging the Policy into new areas. However, it is important to stress that the UN and EU assessments made about the implementation of international commitments to gender equality and to women, peace and security have highlighted the continued gap between rhetoric and reality in the implementation of these commitments. Or, as noted in the UN Global Study on 1325, progress in this area continues to be ‘measured in “firsts”, rather than as standard practice’ (United Nations 2015). The fact that gender equality work remained a struggle and that gender equality would not stay on the agenda ‘without a fight’ was also highlighted in several of the interviews. The challenges are particularly prominent, as shall be shown in the section below, in situations where the Feminist Foreign Policy uncomfortably crosses over with and sometimes conflicts with other interests and other policies.

### 3. Successes and Challenges for a Braver Feminist Foreign Policy

‘It’s the Minister’s Policy. So, everybody’s doing gender’ (Anonymous 2017. Interview with Swedish civil servant by the author, 10 May).

‘Your question is, will “equality” survive this political backlash? Well, if we’ve built the house on sand – and we may have done so – it will easily fall’ (Anonymous 2017. Interview with Swedish official by author, 2 May).

#### *A Snapshot of a Braver Politics*

This section focuses on the notion of a feminist foreign policy as a ‘braver’ policy and the crossroads – and occasional conflicts – between

the Feminist Foreign Policy and other national interests and policy areas. This will be done through focusing on two examples. The first example is a snapshot of an early attempt by Wallström to be braver in politics by standing up for human rights and openly criticising Saudi Arabia for its court decision to sentence Raif Badawi, a Saudi blogger, to ten years in prison and 1,000 lashes for blogging about free speech. While this may not be an evident example of the Feminist Foreign Policy, it is an interesting example of a braver politics and the challenges of such politics in the face of diplomatic relations and competing national interests.<sup>20</sup>

In 2012, Raif Badawi, a Saudi writer was arrested for blogging about freedom of speech in Saudi Arabia. A few years later, after a lengthy legal process, he was convicted on several charges and sentenced to ten years in prison and 1,000 lashes. The flogging was to be carried out over 20 weeks. The first 50 lashes were administered on 9 January 2015. There had been a major international mobilisation for Badawi ever since his arrest, and the news about his first flogging resulted in considerable international media attention and condemnation by human rights organisations.<sup>21</sup>

20. It can also be noted that several of the interviewees referred to the Badawi case as an illustration of the Feminist Foreign Policy, also as an attempt to revive the foreign policy legacy of Olof Palme, leader of the Social Democratic Party 1969–1986, Swedish Prime Minister on two occasions, who was assassinated in 1986. Palme was also active on foreign policy issues, emphasising the opportunity of small nations (Sweden) to promote an independent foreign policy based on solidarity and social justice.

21. See, for example, <https://www.raifbadawi.org/>, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/05/09/raif-badawi-just-latest-victim-saudi-arabia-as-remorseless-assault-free-expression>, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/01/10/saudi-arabia-free-blogger-publicly-flogged>, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/06/saudi-arabia-release-blogger-raif-badawi-still-behind-bars-after-five-years/>, <http://>

Immediately after the first flogging of Badawi, Margot Wallström tweeted 'Blogger Raif Badawi was flogged today in Saudi Arabia. This cruel attempt to silence modern forms of expression has to be stopped'.<sup>22</sup> Wallström also publicly called Saudi Arabia a 'dictatorship' and its punishments "medieval" (Crouch 2015). Wallström's statements were not taken lightly by her Saudi Arabian counterparts, who called them 'flagrant interference in internal affairs, which is not accepted in international conventions' (Crouch 2015). The diplomatic crisis between Sweden and Saudi Arabia escalated in February and March. Saudi Arabia blocked Wallström's speech at a meeting of the Arab League, to which she had been invited as an honorary guest after Sweden had become the first country in the EU to recognise the state of Palestine in October 2014. The majority of the Arab League countries also joined Saudi Arabia in condemning Sweden's interference in Saudi internal politics and insulting Islam.

At the time of the debacle, Saudi Arabia and Sweden were negotiating an extension of a decade-long defence sector trade agreement. The defence agreement had been initially signed in 2005 and extended in 2010, and involved Sweden agreeing, *inter alia*, to build a weapons factory in Saudi Arabia and Saudi Arabia agreeing to place a sizable defence sector contract with Saab, one of the leading Swedish defence sector companies.<sup>23</sup> There had been considerable civil

society mobilisation against Swedish defence sector cooperation and weapons exports to what Frida Blom of Svenska Freds- and Skiljedomsnämnden (hereafter, Svenska Freds), one of Sweden's oldest peace organisations, as long ago as 2005 called 'one of the world's worst dictatorships' (Svenska Freds 2015). Re-extending the agreement after the diplomatic crisis and media storm following the Badawi incident became politically impossible for the Swedish Government. Saudi Arabia reciprocated by recalling its Ambassador to Sweden and cancelling Swedish business visas to Saudi Arabia, which again led to harsh criticism of the government from the Swedish business community.

After a series of crisis meetings, involving the government, the Swedish King and business leaders, Sweden sent a senior government envoy, Björn von Sydow, to Saudi Arabia. Von Sydow carried with him a letter from the Swedish King and the government. While von Sydow's mission was not officially to apologise, his visit was framed as an apology. For example, the Saudi newspaper Arab News showed a picture from the visit with the Swedish envoy bowing his head and the caption 'Sweden says Sorry' (Arab News 2015). Wallström, however, maintained that she had not apologised (Eriksson 2015). Von Sydow's mission and the diplomatic face-saving exercise for both countries – apology and non-apology – contributed to normalising diplomatic relations between the two countries.

The diplomatic crisis between Sweden and Saudi Arabia is interesting as an example of the diplomatic consequences of a braver politics that conflicts with rather than is done in cooperation with bilateral partners.<sup>24</sup> In speaking up

business elites, clear attempts to circumvent existing legislation to make the defence sector contract with the Saudis possible. <https://www.storajournalistpriset.se/> Accessed 19 June 2018.

24. The Foreign Minister's overview of examples of best practice and the Handbook for a Feminist Foreign Policy include several bilateral

[www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/06/saudi-arabia-upholds-sentence-blogger-badawi-150607101956747.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/06/saudi-arabia-upholds-sentence-blogger-badawi-150607101956747.html), <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jun/18/raif-badawi-saudi-arabia-blogger> All accessed 24 October 2017.

22. <https://twitter.com/margotwallstrom/status/553557951659933697?lang=en> Accessed 24 October 2017.

23. In 2012, two Swedish investigative journalists received the Swedish journalism prize for their reporting on the so-called Saudi Affair. The investigation showed the close ties and shared interests between the Swedish political and

for Badawi, Wallström stood up for if not a Feminist Foreign Policy then an integral part of it, human rights. Wallström did not say anything that many European and international leaders would not agree with: freedom of expression and prohibition of torture are basic human rights recognised in most regional and international human rights treaties. Supporting human rights in general is, of course, easier than one government publicly criticising another government's human rights record. It is not surprising then that the result was a diplomatic crisis where arguments about national sovereignty, as well as culture and religion were evoked. However, the diplomatic crisis also illustrates the challenge of pushing for a 'braver' politics in situations where there are other pressing interests at stake. Wallström's criticism might have gone relatively unnoticed had it not become entangled with the already contentious extension of the defence contract between Sweden and Saudi Arabia.<sup>25</sup> That is, the criticism had a ripple effect

engagements that have had a positive effect. Engaging bilaterally is also a priority and key method for the policy. The examples of engagement include working with men on issues of gender-based and sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo, support on drafting legislation on gender-based violence in Georgia, writing workshops to encourage increased representation of Indian women researchers on Wikipedia published in local languages, and working on projects focused on fatherhood in Thailand, Uganda and Switzerland. The Swedish development agency SIDA has focused on women's and girls' human rights and especially on integrating a gender perspective in all its programming in recent decades. This author was, for example, part of an early external gender task force at SIDA in the early 2000s.

25. As a side note, it can be added that a year later, Saudi Arabia was elected to become one of the new members of the UN Commission on the Status of Women. Sweden as a member of the UN Economic and Social Council was one of the countries that was eligible to vote or abstain from voting for Saudi Arabia's membership.

on broader relations between the two countries and in a highly medialised way made 'human rights' a consideration for trade and defence relations between the two countries. By doing this, Wallström from her position as Minister, put her weight behind ongoing questioning by Swedish civil society organisations and investigative journalists of whether Sweden should have defence contracts with a country known not to respect human rights and that continues to systematically discriminate against women.<sup>26</sup> Wallström did rock the boat, and nudged the Feminist Foreign Policy out of its terrain framed by already existing Swedish and international laws and policies. This may have had some effects for Badawi, as his subsequent floggings were delayed although he when this article was written continued to serve his prison sentence. It did have an effect on the Swedish and Saudi Arabia trade defence sector trade agreement, as it was not at the moment extended. It also, as shall be discussed in the next example, opened up for broader debates about democracy, human rights and arms' exports.

#### *Making War Safer for Women*

The second example juxtaposes one of the key priorities of the Feminist Foreign Policy, conflict prevention and in particular commitment to women, peace and security, with Swedish trade and defence interests and in particular Swedish arms sales. It also deals with the limits of this agenda, not the least in relation to Swedish trade and defence interests.

Sweden has not disclosed how it voted, except to say that it followed routine elections rather than political protocol. It is therefore unclear if the Swedish vote was another way of saying 'Sweden is sorry'. <https://www.facebook.com/margot.wallstrom/posts/1311753158873744> Accessed 24 October 2017.

26. [https://www.svenskafreds.se/upptack\\_tag/saudiarabien/page/2/](https://www.svenskafreds.se/upptack_tag/saudiarabien/page/2/) Accessed 14 November 2019.



The choice of conflict resolution and women, peace and security as a priority was most likely obvious as the Feminist Foreign Policy coincided with several high-level initiatives aimed at advancing and assessing the women, peace and security agenda and because of the Swedish membership of the UN Security Council in 2017–2018. The priority area was broadly defined and included sub-priorities focused on the promotion of the women, peace and security agenda in Sweden's multilateral engagements through UNSC membership and in other international and regional organisations and systematic attention given to women's representation and a gender equality perspective in early warning and conflict analysis and in peace processes. The Foreign Service was also to work on including a gender equality perspective in the area of disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control (Action Plan 2015). This priority area overlaps with and supports commitments that Sweden has made in its Action Plan for Women, Peace and Security 2016–2020, as well as under international and regional treaties and policies.

Sweden's work in the area of conflict resolution and peace-building has therefore largely focused on supporting and consolidating existing processes, at the same time as gender analysis and attention to women's representation has been used to further develop and expand processes and issues. The Foreign Ministry's own reporting on examples of best practice in implementation of the Feminist Foreign Policy includes a long list of examples of successful implementation in the area of conflict resolution and peace-building (Sweden's Feminist Foreign Policy. Examples of Three Years of Implementation 2017), as does the recent Handbook on Feminist Foreign Policy (Handbook. Sweden's Feminist Foreign Policy 2018). Several of the interviewees also highlighted Sweden's systematic work on women, peace and security as one of the clear examples of success. Examples include Sweden's work in the UN Security Council that has included efforts to build the Security

Council's knowledge by making sure women's advocates address the Security Council and working with informal working groups to promote the implementation of the women, peace and security agenda in UN peacekeeping missions. It is important to note that 2017 was the first year when all resolutions adopted by the UN Security Council made some reference to women's representation and the integration of a gender perspective. In the EU, Sweden spearheaded the Member States' efforts to ensure that the EU establish the position of the Senior Advisor on Gender Equality and Women, Peace and Security and the first systematic assessment of the inclusion of human rights and gender into EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Sweden has also established a network for women peace mediators that together with other similar networks should work for women's representation and the inclusion of women's concerns in peace processes.

It is relevant to contrast the successes with Swedish arms exports.<sup>27</sup> As noted earlier, the development of Swedish neutrality politics was closely linked to the development of a Swedish defence industry. The balancing between Sweden's interest in a normative, democracy and human rights centred foreign policy and Swedish defence sector contracting to countries like, for example, Saudi Arabia has as was shown in the previous example, not always been smooth. Not surprisingly, the Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy has been rather cautious in making the connection between conflict prevention and militarisation, although disarmament is part of the Policy. Svenska Freds and other Swedish civil society organisations have consistently sought to make the connection between the Feminist Foreign Policy and Swedish weapons exports

27. For a substantive overview of global weapons' exports, see <https://www.sipri.org/> Accessed 7 September 2018. And for a discussion see <https://www.svenskafreds.se> Accessed 7 September 2018.

and to raise awareness of and lobby against Swedish arms exports to non-democratic states, to conflict situations and to developing countries.<sup>28</sup>

As noted above, the Swedish plans to build an arms factory in Saudi Arabia led to a media storm. It subsequently also resulted in the appointment of an inquiry into arms export controls with a view to investigating how Sweden could tighten arms export controls to non-democratic regimes (SOU 2015:72, 99). The basic rule set forth in the Swedish Military Equipment Act has been that arms exports are prohibited unless specifically approved by the Inspectorate of Strategic Products (ISP). Exports can only be approved if in the interest of Swedish security and defence and if *not* in conflict with Sweden's foreign policy (Section 1). The parliamentary committee presented the final report of its inquiry in 2015 and recommended the strengthening of a 'democracy criterion' in Sweden's arms exports legislation, in order to more clearly express a state's democratic status as being an important foreign policy factor in the overall assessment of whether to authorise arms exports (SOU 2015:72, 34). The report mentioned in particular that women's and children's rights were factors to take into account in the assessment of a state's democratic status (SOU 2015:72, 354–355). Referring to the multilateral Arms Trade Treaty, to which Sweden has been

a party since 2014, the report also highlighted the obligation to take into account the risk of the exported arms being used to commit or facilitate serious acts of gender-based violence or serious acts of violence against women and children (SOU 2015:72, 163).

The proposal was criticised by consulted bodies for failing to formulate an unconditional ban on arms exports to states that seriously violate human rights or to non-democratic states. The consulted bodies, including Svenska Freds, questioned whether a vague democracy criterion would have any impact on arms exports in practice (Svenska Freds et al. 2015, 13–14). After several delays, the legislative amendments came into force on 15 April 2018 (Government Bill 2017/18:23, 2).<sup>29</sup> While the legislative amendments were limited, a democracy criterion and a strengthened language on human rights was included in the regulation governing weapons exports. The entry into force of the amendments creates an increasing urgency to ensure through political guidance, policies and capacity-building that the ISP can make the most of the new democracy criterion and strengthened human rights criterion. Much of this work remains to be done.

An interview conducted with Wallström after the entry into force of the amendments to the Military Equipment Act and related regulations exemplified the continued tensions between the Feminist Foreign Policy and Sweden's business interests and arms trade. In mid-April 2018, Wallström was asked whether her Ministry would use the reformed legislation to push for more emphasis on women's and human rights in decisions on arms exports, and whether it could be used to prohibit Sweden's recent exports to the Philippines and the United Arab Emirates. She was reported saying that she did

28. According to estimates by Svenska Freds, 17% of Swedish arms exports over the past five years have gone to non-democratic states, including to Saudi Arabia, Thailand, the United Arab Emirates and Pakistan. In 2016, 51% of Swedish arms exports went to countries in conflict, including the United States, India and Saudi Arabia. <https://www.svenskafreds.se/vad-vi-gor/vapenexport/snabba-fakta-om-vapenexport/> Accessed 8 June 2018. Similar advocacy and policy initiatives have been undertaken by several other organisations, including IKFF (WILPF Sweden), Diakonia, the Church of Sweden and the Swedish Fellowship of Reconciliation (Kristna Fredsrörelsen).

29. Government Bill. 2017/18:23 p. 2, <http://www.regeringen.se/4aa7ef/contentassets/fb5a7177e-b9c4be2ac8ba998f32c67bd/Prop-2017-18-23.pdf> Accessed 7 November 2017.

not see what difference a Feminist Foreign Policy would make to the decisions about weapons exports and that one should not presume that all women are against weapons exports (Reuterskiöld 2018, see also Jonsson 2018). Now, there is no doubt that Wallström understood the question, as the Foreign Ministry has been consistently pushed by civil society and others to speak out on the conflict of norms between feminist foreign policy – focused on representation, respect (including human rights) and resources – and the Swedish and global arms trade. However, the interview also took place at a time when Wallström was hosting the Stockholm Gender Forum and the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was also visiting Sweden with a view to further promoting trade and security cooperation between Sweden and India.<sup>30</sup> The Gender Forum with the subtitle ‘Shaping New Realities’ drew together gender experts and activists from around the world to create new partnerships and document best practices. Prime Minister Modi’s visit was the first bilateral meeting with an Indian Prime Minister in Sweden in 30 years and was focused mainly on building economic ties between India and Sweden.<sup>31</sup> According to Svenska Freds, Saab, one of Sweden’s leading weapons manufacturers, was hoping that the visit would also result in India choosing to make an order for 110 new fighter aircrafts worth close to ten billion euros.<sup>32</sup>

30. <http://genderequalworld.com/> Accessed 11 June 2018 and <https://www.regeringen.se/pressmeddelanden/2018/04/statsminister-tar-emot-indiens-premiarminister/> Accessed 11 June 2018.

31. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/pm-modi-in-sweden-live-updates-bilateral-summit-round-table-on-agenda-1838482> Accessed 7 September 2018.

32. <https://www.svenskafreds.se/upptack/vapenexport/6-skal-till-att-inte-exportera-vapen-till-indien/> Accessed 11 June 2018. See also <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-04-17/sweden-india-work-on-security>

This example shows that the policy has been successful in upping engagement on issues where there are already policies or legal frameworks focused on women’s rights and equality. That is, the Feminist Foreign Policy has contributed to turning policy into practice where policy already exists. The Feminist Foreign Policy has also nudged its way slightly outside the comfort zone of existing policies and thereby encroached on other policy spheres and interests. This is not, as already shown in the example above, easy or always well received. Although brief, both examples show the challenge of attempting a braver feminist foreign policy and how such a policy will inevitably conflict with other interests and priorities, nationally and internationally. This is of course also largely the meaning of integration and/or mainstreaming. Integration of women’s rights and gender equality is often strategically framed as a win-win situation which demands framing women’s rights and gender equality issues as non-confrontational and beneficial for all (Kouvo 2004). This strategy may be costly, as it risks hiding conflicting interests and resistance.

#### 4. Conclusions

‘What will happen if the next government says “no”, we won’t continue the Feminist Foreign Policy?’ (Anonymous 2017. Former Swedish diplomat interviewed by author, 8 May).

‘It is important to remember that very few countries are – or even want to be – where Sweden is when it comes to equality, so when we promote these questions we need to be subtle and ready to adapt’ (Anonymous 2017. Former Swedish diplomat interviewed by author, 8 May).

[ty-accord-that-may-open-for-jet-deal](#) Accessed 7 September 2018.

'The policy has resulted in a cultural shift. We've gone from having one woman responsible for women's issues at a department or embassy to Feminist Foreign Policy being everybody's issue. /.../ There is no turning back' (Anonymous 2019. Swedish civil servant interviewed by author, 12 November).

In the introduction, this author noted that these are challenging times for launching a Feminist Foreign Policy. The policy needs to navigate the changing meanings of the term feminism in theory, policy and practice; situate itself in relation to decades' worth of successes, failures, and compromises relating to women's rights and gender equality policies; tackle ongoing attacks on feminisms and even basic notions of women's rights and gender equality from populist and reactionary forces; and propose actual solutions to manifold global challenges. Taking these challenges into account, this article aimed at situating the Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy, analysing the policy's notion of feminism and the content of the policy and problematising the policy through two examples.

The article has shown that Feminist Foreign Policy was enabled by the long tradition of state-centred and law-based equality strategies in the Nordic countries, but that the policy itself – in its content – seems largely inspired by the liberal and individual rights-based equality strategies developed in international policies and law. This is also the frame that is very clearly given to the policy in the Action Plan adopted in 2015: the policy takes its starting point in international human rights treaties, the women, peace and security resolutions and other established international legal and policy frameworks. The term feminism is not used to indicate a shift in Sweden's current international commitments for women's rights and gender equality. Rather the term feminism is used to indicate that Sweden would increase its engagement on women's rights and gender

issues, and that it would use a more systematic approach. The implementation of the policy has been ensured by the fact that the policy had high-level support, it was the Minister's policy. However, it was also important for implementation that the Action Plan for Feminist Foreign Policy was developed through a participatory process: all departments and embassies were asked to contribute to its development. The Action Plan itself is a fairly short and neat document with perspectives and priority areas that provide clear direction for the policy implementation, and that can be adapted and updated on an annual basis. The Action Plan has been continued for the 2019–2022 government term with only a few changes.

The fact that the policy was called 'feminist', had high-level support and that the Action Plan and later Handbook are quite accessible documents have most likely contributed to the international interest for the Swedish policy. For example, EU Member State diplomats who responded to a survey on Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy by Malena Rosén Sundström and Ole Elgström considered that Sweden was a leader in the struggle for women's rights (Rosén Sundström and Elgström 2018). Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy has also inspired similar policies beyond Europe. For example, the current Canadian government's Feminist International Assistance Policy adopted in 2017 is framed in largely similar terms and has similar priorities to the Swedish Policy.<sup>33</sup> However, the Rosén Sundström and Elgström study also showed that although EU Member States seemed to admire the policy choices made by Sweden, they were not eager to adopt similar policies. Or, as one of the interviewees noted, few countries

33. [https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues\\_development-enjeux\\_developpement/priorities-priorites/policy-politique.aspx?lang=eng](https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/priorities-priorites/policy-politique.aspx?lang=eng) (last visited 24 March 2020). For a discussion of the link between the Swedish and Canadian policies, see Fillion 2018.

are or might even want to be where Sweden is when it comes to women's rights and gender equality (Anonymous 2017. Former Swedish diplomat interviewed by author, 8 May). One of the reasons that other EU countries put forward against adopting a feminist policy was that it would be constraining (Rosén Sundström and Elgström 2018). The examples used in this article also show that the Policy is not always easy to implement and that there will be resistance and sometimes open conflicts when the Policy encroaches on other interests or on other policy areas. This is not a problem. It is an inevitable component of a policy that wants to change what is seen as business as usual inside an institution and internationally. However, it is important to reflect on how this relates to the work with the Policy within Swedish institutions and in international relations. Looking forward, lessons from adopting and institutionalising the Women, Peace and Security agenda can be instructive in analysing the strategic wins but also challenges of Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy that has now entered its sixth year.

The UN Security Council resolution 1325(2000) on women, peace and security and all its follow-ups have been strategic wins for the international women's movement (Gizelis and Olsson, eds. 2015). Felicity Ruby, Director of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) at the time when the first UN Security Council resolution was adopted has argued that the resolution and its follow-up resolutions have served as key tools, action tools, education tools and shaming tools: That is, they have successfully been used to 'force' women's issues onto the international security agenda; they have inspired resulted in unprecedented government and civil society action in this area; they have helped educate national defence and military actors about women's and gender perspectives; and they have been used to shame national and international actors when they have failed – as many have – to consider women's and gender perspectives. The

existence of the resolutions have also, as has been shown in this article, served to frame the Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy.

The successes of the resolutions have also involved sacrifices. Hilary Charlesworth argues that the women, peace and security agenda is based on a number of assumptions about women that may have helped smooth the way for the acceptance of the resolutions, but are not necessarily helpful to the gender, peace and conflict agenda in the long-term. The assumptions include that women are more peaceful than men, that women are more vulnerable than men and that gender is mainly about women (Charlesworth 2008). Catharine O'Rourke in her analysis of the different meanings given to women's participation in the UNSCRs on women, peace and security makes similar references to compromises. She argues that as there is little general agreement on what matters for women in conflict, what the priorities are and what the best strategies for change should be, a language of participation is used to iron out or hide the differences (O'Rourke 2014). In a similar vein, Dianne Otto has highlighted one of the key challenges as '...how to continue to inject progressive politics into (originally) feminist ideas, once they have been turned to the service of the international institutions that have embraced them'. (Otto 2008: 99). Ruby has argued that one of the areas where the resolutions have failed is to serve as conflict prevention tools: The resolutions have become tools for making wars safer for women, instead of being tools for questioning the root causes of conflict, including militarisation and military spending. She notes in passing that 'just six states export 74 per cent of the world's weapons – United States, Russia, Germany, United Kingdom, China and France – and of these states, all but Germany hold permanent seats on the Security Council' (Ruby 2014, 178). A feminist agenda for women, peace and security should then not only be about getting women's and gender issues onto the agenda at the UN Security Council, but also

critically engaging with questions about how conceptions of international security and defence are affected by the interest of militarisation and the defence industry (Ruby 2014; Enloe 2013). The Feminist Foreign Policy is trying to do both, but as this article has tried to show, progress is easier in the area of 'making wars safer for women' than challenging contemporary conceptions of security and defence and the economic interests linked to these. An interesting task for both policy makers and researchers is to map and constructively address the areas where the feminist policy meets – and possibly conflicts with – other policies and interests.

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