

SWEDEN'S FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY: A NEW APPROACH TO INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS?

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Abstract: *the article introduces the main ideological premises and objectives of Swedish Foreign Service action plan for feminist foreign policy 2015-2018, establishes its ideological origins in feminist theory of international relations and discusses its revolutionary potential towards the current model of states' foreign policy and international affairs.*

Keywords: *gender and international relations, feminism in IR, Sweden's foreign policy.*

For a long time Sweden has been proclaiming itself a moral superpower of the world: staying neutral during the Cold War era, supporting the decolonisation process in the 20th century and still avoiding strong political and military commitments to NATO or any other alliances in the new millennium. Today it also became the first voice of feminism in international politics with the introduction of the feminist foreign policy. Introduced in 2015, Swedish Foreign Service action plan for feminist foreign policy states that gender equality is not only a goal in itself but «is also essential for the achievement of the Government's other overall objectives, such as peace, security and sustainable development» [1, 1]. The idea to base the whole foreign policy strategy upon norms and ethics of feminism is certainly something no other country has ever done before. However, the core principles and ideas of Sweden's foreign policy doctrine are not innovative themselves: they were inherited from the feminist theory of international relations, a theoretic tradition in IR that first got its development in 1980s.

While works of feminist IR theorists are versatile and at times controversial, there is a number of standpoints that are universal for the feminist scholarship in international relations. Making its entrance into the discipline in 1980s, feminism accused conventional IR theory of being androcentric and based on the experiences of a Western white man [2, 76]. For the first time the question about woman's place in international relations was asked. As Cynthia Enloe showed in her *Bananas, Beaches and Bases* (1989), women in international relations are invisible but not non-existent. Subjugated to the roles of factory workers, military wives, sex labourers etc. they in their own way underpin the existent world order as consumers, underpaid or unpaid labour, emotional comforters and objects of sexualisation [3, 8-13]. Another classic example of feminist literature on international affairs is Jean Elshtain's *Women and War* (1987), where she examines the way collective masculinity and femininity are constructed through mythification of war history, drawing the classic dichotomy just warrior/beautiful soul [4, 3-8]. Elshtain shows how the protector/protected relationships between men and women help to justify man's entitlement to engage in wars, valorise militarised masculinity and explain women's exclusion from the realm of military and international affairs [4, 247-258].

Later in 1990s and early 2000s scholars like Ann Tickner and Christine Sylvester would further develop the feminist thought in IR and formed the main points of critique towards the conventional international theory. From simply focusing on women's place in world politics feminist IR theory then turned to examining gendered nature of contemporary political processes and the way male dominance has predefined not only the biased standpoints of the discipline itself but the masculine logic of the actors of the international system [5, 94-95]. According to feminists, international political discourse is set in the framework of such masculine values as power, sovereignty and competition, as well as binary oppositions like foreign/domestic, centre/periphery or developed/underdeveloped which could be transformed by including women and alternative values into public life [6, 18-19]. Summarised, feminist theory of IR could be described as one advocating for new theoretical and practical approaches to international relations based on broader cosmopolitan values instead of competitive determination, and urging for greater inclusiveness for women of different cultural backgrounds in public sphere and academic field of IR [2, 87].

The feminist foreign policy action plan, introduced by Sweden's Foreign Affairs office, is two-dimensional in its interpretation of feminism. The first and foremost objective of the plan is to provide equal rights, fair political representation and open access to resources for women all over the world – the so called 3Rs of the feminist foreign policy [1, 13]. On the other hand, gender equality is not simply seen as a goal in itself, but understood as a prerequisite to standing peace, sustainable development, further democratisation and economic growth [1, 1]. That is where the influence of feminist theory of IR is especially evident – whereas women's subordination and gender prejudice are seen as an underlying cause of power struggle, wars, Western dominance and anarchy, the deconstruction of unfair gender structure is believed to have a revolutionary potential against the current system of international relations. Closer examination of the key objectives of Sweden's foreign policy doctrine in conjunction with ideas of feminist scholarship would allow to draw a number of new principles and approaches to international affairs.

First and foremost, Sweden's feminist foreign policy implies a more cosmopolitan approach to international affairs and shifts state's priorities from narrow national interests towards global prosperity and justice. Feminist theory is committed to universal values and finds the binary division domestic/foreign problematic, as it perceives national borders as a mere social construct. Such an understanding of national borders is closely tied with feminist ethics of care and makes it possible to set state boundaries aside in consideration of the needs of the distant other [7, 319-321].

In this regard, Sweden puts special emphasis on international institutionalism and cooperation and sees peaceful conflict resolution, strong humanitarian aid to crisis zones, sustainable development, assistance to developing countries and fight against climate change and terrorism as the main objectives of its foreign policy [8].

Simultaneously, human rights and individual safety get on the forefront of the state's agenda. Sweden places a special value on sexual and reproductive health and rights of women living in developing countries, conflict zones and refugee camps and sets an objective to guarantee decent medical assistance and hygiene, ensure legal response to sexual harassment of children, forced marriage and hate-crimes against LGBTQ people as well as to provide easy access to contraception, comprehensive sexual education and legal and safe abortions [1, 10-11].

The special focus is also set on the issue of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in conflict settings. Feminists were first to point out the special position of women in conflict as well as to critically rethink the assumption that state can be a firm guarantee of security. By pointing out that in the last century the number of civilian casualties rose from 10 to 90% of all deaths in wars [9, 45], feminist scholars once again proved the existent protector/protected dichotomy wrong. They established a connection between women's vulnerability to violence in conflicts and the symbolic meaning woman bears to a nation. Perceived as so-called borders of the nation who bear cultural traditions and are responsible for reproduction of a new generation, women constitute a target for hostile party to the conflict [10, 32-37]. The issue received attention of the international community in 1990s which led to the adoption of several UN Security Council resolutions on the matter with UNSCR 1325 (2000) being the first. Resolution 1325 did not only acknowledge the special position of women in conflict and their vulnerability to SGBV but viewed it as a reason for fair inclusion of women into peacekeeping operations, conflict settlement process and state building in transition period [11].

Swedish efforts are aimed to end impunity for wartime crimes against women via special training of Swedish and international peacekeeping forces on gender-sensitive issues, support and protection of local human rights defenders and female activists, stronger cooperation with the UN and its Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict on further implementation of UNSC Resolution 1325 [1, 5-7] as well as establishing greater participation of men in counteracting gender-based violence [12, 13-14].

Swedish foreign policy plan puts emphasis on the importance of the reformed peacekeeping and negotiation processes, i.e. higher representation of women among peacekeeping forces, mediator groups and peace talk delegations [1, 8]. In this regard, Sweden proposes gender-sensitive demobilisation and reintegration programmes for former soldiers and provides training on gender-related issues in conflicts not only for the Swedish military personnel but also military experts of other national armies [12, 10-11]. As for higher women's representation in peace talks and peace building, Sweden together with its northern neighbours has established the Nordic Women Mediators Network, and advocates for increases participation of women as representatives of civil population and war victims when peace agreement conditions are discussed, as well as for implementation of social and democratic reforms favouring women's standing in post-conflict societies [12, 10].

Full task reorientation of Swedish Armed Forces allows to talk about the postnational army that is trained in accordance with broader international values, serves to protect the civilians across Swedish borders rather than pursue national interests and has a broader set of tasks, such as interaction with civilians and assistance to victims of sexual violence [13]. Such evolution of the army's nature entails changes in the type of masculinity Swedish soldier bears, as well as creates a more welcoming environment for female soldiers.

Finally, feminist foreign policy strives to challenge existing world hierarchies underpinned by unequal gender structures. Inspired by the postcolonial critique of Western feminism, feminist IR theory finds the world's division into First World nations and Third World nations highly problematic and of a gendered nature. According to feminists, by being portrayed as underdeveloped and unstable developing nations of the Southern Hemisphere are feminised and perceived as needing Western patronage and protection [14, 215-217]. In this regard, the development aid or the export of Western ideas even as benevolent as gender equality need to be sensitive to the cultural context of each particular state.

In this sense, Sweden's efforts can be considered a sincere attempt to stimulate sustainable development and to reduce the North/South inequality. The Swedish development agency Sida operates solely on a grassroots level and pays special attention to culture differences through comprehensive data collection and research. Instead of promoting exported ideas and mechanisms Swedish agencies provide legal protection and aid to local civil society organizations and human rights defenders [15]. Global development is therefore seen as progress benefitting international community as a whole, rather than a motive for intervention.

Although both dimensions of Sweden's feminist foreign policy, promotion of gender equality and transformation of current world order, serve as an example of state's commitment to solve present global challenges with an innovative approach, they are still somewhat problematic even in the terms of feminist scholarship. Firstly, the Swedish concept is based on a simplistic liberal add-and-stir approach, that puts hope for positive changes on inclusion of women. Such method is based on the universalistic assumption that all women share similar traits, interests and values, i.e. are more peaceful, empathetic and oriented towards solution and cooperations rather than confrontation. Not only does such approach contradict the presumptions of contemporary feminist theory but it is also purely instrumental as it treats women as a tool of more efficient problem-solving. At the same time it overlooks the fact that being integrated into such spheres as military or foreign affairs, women often face the need to adjust themselves to existing masculine norms and traditions [16, 462-463].

Secondly, feminist scholars are in general skeptical of the idea of integration of feminism into foreign policy of a state or work of international institutes. According to them, this way feminism risks to lose its revolutionary potential when faced with restrictions of the current system of international relations [17, 99-104]. Swedish experience serves as an example when the Swedish government had to compromise its values when dealing with Arabic countries [18], refusing to cut volumes of its arms export to conflict zones and authoritarian states [19] and making a decision to impose passport control on its southern border in light of the refugee crisis [20, 19]. Being a small state with limited sources of international influence Sweden inevitably faces the need to seek compromise with its international partners and choose between the proclaimed principles and its economic and diplomatic interests.

However, Swedish efforts should not be deemed futile or naïve. In the international system, characterized by a lack of a set of binding rules or a supreme arbiter, certain models of behavior eventually get adhered by all state-actors who base their action on expectations of the others. For this reason, steps undertaken by the Swedish government do not only bring about changes for the communities where women still face subordination, but also set an example of norm-oriented cosmopolitan foreign policy.

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