DEFINITIONS
A Monthly Look at
UN Terms and Ideas

June 15, 2019 | Issue 14

What is feminist foreign policy?

By Rebecca Oas, Ph.D.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, several countries have announced their intention to pursue a feminist foreign policy. Feminist groups are lobbying other countries—including the United States—to do the same. But what exactly does that mean, and could it in any way be compatible with a foreign policy strategy that seeks to protect human life at all stages, including before birth? This issue of *Definitions* explores the way feminist foreign policy has been conducted thus far, examines how it has been framed by its creators and proponents, and considers the impact it has already had thus far.

The emergence of a concept

The phrase “feminist foreign policy” first gained international prominence in October 2014, when Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Margot Wallström, announced a new policy, *feministisk utrikespolitik* (FUP). While Sweden, like many Nordic countries, had long prioritized gender equality in its foreign policy, this new approach was explicitly branded as “feminist,” which raised concerns among some of Wallström’s own colleagues, as well as other international relations experts. As Jenny Nordberg wrote in *The New Yorker* in an article about Sweden’s new strategy, “Within the diplomatic community, where words are carefully chosen so as not to offend, ‘feminism’ is usually avoided, as it risks being perceived as inflammatory and indicative of a stand against men.”[1]

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NEW YORK · WASHINGTON, DC

In 2018, Sweden launched its feminist foreign policy handbook, in which Wallström's successor, Ann Linde, briefly defined the concept as "a working method and a perspective that takes three Rs as its starting point [women's and girls' rights, representation, and resources] and is based on a fourth R [the reality in which they live]."[2]

Since then, Canada adopted a feminist international assistance policy in 2017, France announced its own feminist foreign policy in 2019, and Mexico in 2020. Norway is also frequently cited as a country promoting a feminist foreign policy, although it has been less explicit in terms of using the label "feminist."[3] But as comparative politics lecturer Jennifer Thomson of the University of Bath points out, the definition of feminist foreign policy remains contested, and the countries that have been first to champion such an approach differ in their strategies. According to Thomson, "Sweden understands feminist foreign policy as a goal in and of itself, which it consciously links to both its domestic policy and international obligations. By contrast, Canada's commitment to feminist foreign policy appears more focused on an economic argument regarding women's empowerment."[4]

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One aspect that Sweden and Canada agree upon is the promotion of abortion around the world. The Swedish government named "sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)" as one of the top six priorities of the Swedish Foreign Service in their plan for 2019-2022, and their feminist foreign policy handbook declares, "It is essential to invest in maternal health, with the right and access to safe and legal abortions, in order to reduce maternal mortality and to fulfil the right to the best possible health." In 2017, as Canada launched its own feminist platform, Minister of Foreign Affairs Chrystia Freeland said, "It is important, and historic, that we have a prime minister and a government proud to proclaim ourselves feminists. Women's rights are human rights. That includes sexual reproductive rights and the right to safe and accessible abortions. These rights are at the core of our foreign policy."[5]

France's feminist foreign policy, laid out in its "International Strategy on Gender Equality (2018–2022),"[6] is aligned with its 2016 strategy on population and SRHR, which states, "respecting women's rights requires access to a full range of high-quality reproductive health services, including safe abortion services for unwanted pregnancies."[7]

Mexico is a notable new entrant on the "feminist foreign policy" scene, the first in the global South to explicitly adopt such a policy. Its announcement coincided with its bid to host the 25th anniversary events celebrating the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women. While Mexico has not directly committed to promoting abortion, as Amy Mackinnon writes at *Foreign Policy,* "quoting work by the International Center for Research on Women [ICRW], the policy explicitly obligates Mexican leadership to advance 'issues that others are not prioritizing,' including sexual and reproductive health and rights as well as climate change."[8]

Certainly, ICRW has been working to create a comprehensive framework for what feminist foreign policy might entail, including "advancement of rights most under attack (sexual and reproductive health and rights including LGBTQI+ and safe abortion; environmental and climate commitments)."[9] Whether the Mexican government interprets its new policy according to ICRW's standards remains a question to be answered when Mexico's official strategy documents are launched.

Feminist foreign policy as defined by feminist organizations

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In seeking to craft a working definition of feminist foreign policy, ICRW authors Lyric Thompson and Rachel Clement take issue with Merriam-Webster's 2018 dictionary regarding both "foreign policy," which states, "The policy of a sovereign state in its interaction with other sovereign states," and its definition of "feminism" as "the theory of the political, economic and social equality of the sexes," and "organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests." First, the concept of sovereignty is immediately distasteful to them as it "has been a challenge for the concept of universal human rights from the very beginning."[10] Second, they regard "equality of the sexes" to be an outdated concept.

While ICRW applauded Sweden for being the first to claim the name "feminist" in its foreign policy, it also criticized the country for "a binary focus on women rather than the more inclusive *gender*," and having a policy that "largely ignores the rights and needs of LGBTQ individuals." They go on to recommend that governments "correct the tendency to use the word "feminist" when they refer to a policy that focuses overwhelmingly on "women and girls."[11]

ICRW defines feminist foreign policy thusly:

> Feminist foreign policy is the policy of a state that defines its interactions with other states, as well as movements and

> other non-state actors, in a manner that prioritizes peace, gender equality and environmental integrity, enshrines the human rights of all, seeks to disrupt colonial, racist, patriarchal and male-dominated power structures, and allocates significant resources, including research, to achieve that vision. Feminist foreign policy is coherent in its approach across all of its levers of influence (e.g. defense, diplomacy, trade, immigration, aid (if applicable)), anchored by the exercise of those values at home, and is co-created with feminist activists, groups and movements, at home and abroad.[12]

In practice, ICRW's framework, which has been endorsed by various feminist organizations, expands on Sweden's three R's of rights, resources, and representation, and adds "research & reporting" and "reach" to its list. While its focus on abortion and LGBTQI+ issues falls under "rights," it also calls for "increasing support for feminist organizations" and "increasing control of funds by feminist funders" as "resources."

Requests by feminist groups for multilateral agreements obligating governments to fund feminist groups are nothing new. Indeed, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action called on governments to partner with non-governmental organizations to implement the Platform, saying "governments should create a supportive environment for the mobilization of resources by non-governmental organizations, particularly women's organizations and networks, feminist groups, the private sector and other actors of civil society, to enable them to contribute towards this end."[13]

Throughout the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, references to "feminist groups" are always paired with "women's organizations," as if to stress that the two are not necessarily interchangeable. A quarter century later, that bifurcation has only widened, as conservative women's organizations have continued to increase in prominence, both nationally and internationally, and feminist groups have increasingly lost interest in promoting women's interests per se in favor of a nonbinary understanding of gender.

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Increased pressure on the United States

As of the spring of 2020, the United States' neighbors to the north and south have endorsed some formulation of a "feminist foreign policy," and pressure is heating up for the U.S. to do the same. On May 21, 2020, ICRW launched a framework for a putative feminist foreign policy for the U.S. during a webinar hosted by the organization New America.[14] The framework was a collaborative effort that had been underway since August 2018, involving consultation with more than 100 feminists.[15]

In presenting the framework, lead author Thompson of ICRW said that in order for a U.S. feminist foreign policy to be coherent, the Senate would first have to ratify the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). "Past U.S. ambassadors of gender equality have indicated that the hardest conversations they have to have about women's rights in other countries was answering the question why the United States hasn't ratified CEDAW," Thompson said.

According to the proposed framework, "U.S. foreign policy must respect the rights recognized by international institutions and agreements. […] This also means walking the talk at home, through the ratification of [CEDAW] and other human rights conventions."[16]

Other elements called for in the framework include the need for presidential leadership, including a formal announcement of the adoption of a feminist foreign policy, a commitment to a whole-of-government, intersectional approach to gender equality, and a unified vision set forth in the executive branch but involving specific commitments articulated by relevant agencies. Each agency would appoint a high-level position, all of whom would work under a senior leadership role for coordination—a feminist foreign policy inspector general with a presidential mandate and a "robust budget" for its implementation. Part of that mandate would be to interact with the people seen as most effective by the policy—women, LGBTQI+ persons, and "sex workers." According to Thompson, the policy "must be actively and collaboratively shaped by feminists both inside and outside government."

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Other demands in the framework include the removal of conditions on foreign assistance, including the "prioritization of U.S. private sector entities and faith-based organizations through foreign assistance," as well as the repeal of President Trump's expanded Mexico City Policy and the repeal of the Helms Amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act by Congress, both of which prohibit U.S. funding from going to abortion and groups that promote it.

The framework calls for "full funding for comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights programs," including abortion, and promotes a definition of "bodily autonomy" that was set forth in a 2019 document called the "Blueprint for Sexual and Reproductive Health, Rights, and Justice," endorsed by Planned Parenthood and multiple other radical pro-abortion groups:

> Bodily autonomy "achieving the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health and rights is based on the fundamental human rights of all individuals to: have their bodily integrity, privacy and personal autonomy respected; freely define their own sexuality; decide whether and when to be sexually active; choose their sexual partners; have safe and pleasurable sexual experiences; decide whether, when and whom to marry; decide whether, when and by what means to have a child or children and how many children to have; and have access over their lifetimes to the information, resources, services and support necessary to achieve all the above, free from discrimination, coercion, exploitation and violence."[17]

This definition is particularly radical in that its inclusion of the phrase "when and *by what means* to have a child or children" implies the use of assisted reproductive technologies including surrogacy, in vitro fertilization, or sperm donation. This would seem to oppose Article 7 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which asserts that a child has, "as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents."[18] Admittedly, the U.S. remains the last UN member country not to have ratified that treaty, but given the feminist foreign policy framework's apparent blanket endorsement of UN human rights treaties, the apparent disconnect here is noteworthy.

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While participants in the webinar expressed the hope that their framework would end up being "more than just a paper," its participants acknowledged the political challenges in bringing such a strategy to fruition. One participant, Susan Markham of the group Our Secure Future, had published a set of recommendations for a U.S. feminist foreign policy in fall of 2019. In its introduction, the policy brief says, "a feminist foreign policy framework should acknowledge the connections between domestic and foreign policy and the need to integrate these policy strands. U.S. values at home must match the values we promote across the globe, whether it is preventing gender-based violence or providing access to comprehensive reproductive health care or economic opportunity."[19] Yet when Our Secure Future conducted its own poll of 1,500 registered U.S. voters, 59% of respondents refused to self-identify as feminists, raising questions as to whether a feminist foreign policy of any kind would be in line with "U.S. values at home."[20] Markham was the senior advisor for USAID's Gender Equality and Women Empowerment policy under President Barack Obama and previously worked for EMILY's List, an organization dedicated to putting abortion proponents into the U.S. Congress.

An uphill climb

Although it is tempting to dismiss the proposed “feminist foreign policy” framework as a feminist and pro-abortion wish list, there is cause to examine it in light of several bills that are related to feminist foreign policy, which are now pending in the U.S. Congress.[21] That fact demonstrates that while there might not be an explicit movement by U.S. lawmakers to adopt a feminist foreign policy, they could be adopting some of its tenets, many of which are not popular with voters or supported by the evidence.

First, there is a marked disconnect between the state of discourse between its feminist authors and the American people on fundamentals, including the definitions of foreign policy and of sex and gender. This variance is wider between the proponents of a feminist foreign policy and the rest of the world, particularly more traditional societies in the developing world that U.S. foreign policy seeks to help.

Second, proponents of feminist foreign policy treat as authoritative international human rights treaties that the U.S. has not ratified, making their ratification a prerequisite of to having a coherent feminist foreign policy. Yet the texts of all the UN human rights treaties—those ratified by the U.S. and those not—fall far short of endorsing the notions of “gender,” much less “sexual and reproductive health and rights,” that the frameworks regards as essential. Indeed, rather than urging the U.S. to adopt a set of human rights norms widely accepted by the global community, the feminist activists hope the U.S. will use its outsized influence on the global stage to push for human rights standards that do not exist, and never have existed, including an international right to abortion.

This proposal for a U.S. feminist foreign policy is out of touch with global consensus, with the attitudes and values of U.S. citizens, and even the English dictionary. It is nevertheless an useful document to make note of, inasmuch as efforts are already underway to implement components of it in a piecemeal manner, both domestically and abroad.

Endnotes

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DEFINITIONS is published monthly by the Center for Family & Human Rights (C-Fam).

205 E 42nd Street, 20th Floor,
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New York, New York 20017

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