

Foreign Policy and Diplomacy: Feminist Interventions

Abstract

In this chapter, we examine the contributions of feminist scholarship and activism to the discourses and practices of foreign policy and diplomacy. From the changes in the make of foreign policy actors to include more women, to the implications of the Women, Peace and Security agenda and the nascent adoption of Feminist Foreign Policy by some countries, we show how feminism has been fundamental to the evolution international politics' search for peace. We nevertheless highlight persistent blind spots and unintended consequences of the 'feminist' turn in foreign policy and diplomatic practice highlighting their challenges to credible ethical practices of states. As we argue, states located in the Global North are more predisposed to branding their foreign policy as 'feminist'. The implementation of feminist foreign policy for the distant other obscures domestic realities, while reinforcing colonial logics. We conclude that while this feminist turn has given more space for feminist interventions, the adoption of an ethical code is crucial when tackling tensions and contradictions between idealism and pragmatism in feminist foreign policy.

I. Unpacking Foreign Policy and Diplomacy in Practice

Until recently, foreign policy and diplomacy have been some of the most male-dominated fields of state and international policy (Towns and Niklasson, 2016, p. 521). In the last two decades, there has been a dramatic increase in the visibility of women in 'high politics' including foreign policy and defence portfolios. For example, in early 2014 a photo of four women Defence Ministers attending a security conference tweeted by then Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt and with the (somewhat problematic) caption 'True Power Girls' went viral (The Guardian, 2014). The recent entry of more women into traditionally male-dominated areas has major implications for how we perceive, study and practice foreign policy and diplomacy.

Transnational feminist movements have impacted the visibility of women in international politics through two key moments (True, 2003, p. 377). The first of these moments was the Fourth UN World Conference on Women in Beijing held in 1995 and the second the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 in 2000. These two events can be seen as catalysts for a greater inclusion of women in the field of foreign policy and diplomacy, and wider attention to questions of gender equality between women and men, girls and boys.

Despite increased visibility and feminist interventions, women remain significantly underrepresented. For example, in 2012, only 2.5 per cent of all chief mediators and 9 per cent of all negotiators were women (Aggestam et al., 2018, p. 8). While some countries like Bulgaria (1920), followed by the US (1922) and Chile (1927) were early to admit women into diplomatic posts, it is only in the last century that the majority of countries have allowed women

to serve as diplomats, and even more recently that we have seen women become ambassadors. Globally women make up just 15% of ambassadorial appointments, with significant regional variations. For example, the Nordic countries appoint the most women ambassadors (35%) compared to the Middle East (6%) and Asia (10%). And while there are some country level exceptions (18% of Israel's ambassadors are women and an impressive 41% of the Philippines) the picture, overall, is bleak (Towns and Niklasson, 2018, p. 29).

That women did not serve as diplomats does not signal their absence from diplomacy. As Enloe (1990, p. 96) notes, by the end of the 19th century wives had become integral to British diplomacy, providing support to their spouses in their role as hostesses. The "more male diplomats rely on informal relationships to accomplish their political tasks, the more formal the expectations are that their wives will come to the government's aid" (Enloe, 1990, p. 98). Wives also provided instrumental value. For example, in some countries, where women were excluded from public life, it was the wives of diplomats alone who could make contact with them (McCarthy 2014, p. 35). Today, diplomatic spouses (men and women) remain important for understanding the practice of diplomacy. Diplomacy remains a profession bound up in deeply gendered practices as feminist peace scholar Betty Reardon identified decades ago (Reardon, 1990).

The rest of this contribution reflects on developments in the last three decades. In particular, we discuss some of the implications of the changes in how gender is represented in foreign policy and diplomacy. Any changes to foreign policy and diplomacy – the strategies and tactics used in international relations between state, inter-state, supra-national, and non-state actors alike – has a major impact on how foreign policy practices are perceived, but also how they are analysed. The changing role and conduct of diplomatic actors on the international scene also change how treaties are negotiated, disputes resolved, and how more peaceful relations can be established and strengthened. We critically reflect on these possibilities by discussing feminist critiques of mainstream approaches to foreign policy and diplomacy as well as feminist interventions in foreign policy and diplomatic practices. At the same time, we point out enduring blind spots that remain, despite the increased visibility of feminism in foreign policy and diplomacy, which includes the elusive representation of women in key roles. We conclude with a discussion of the way forward for feminist practices of foreign policy and diplomacy particularly in the attempt to attain peace.

II. Feminist Critiques of Mainstream Approaches to Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

Feminist scholars have long demonstrated that an analysis of foreign policy which does not account for gender is deeply flawed. First, because it fails to reflect on the relationship between patriarchy and the war system (see Reardon and Snauwaert, 2015). Second, mainstream approaches which claim to be gender neutral are in fact deeply gendered (see Tickner 1992; Enloe, 1990; Ackerly, Stern, and True; 2006; Runyan and Peterson, 2010). Focusing explicitly on hegemonic masculinity, they demonstrate how the field silences and disregards women, and bereaves them of their agency (Cassidy and Althari, 2017, p. 3) As a result we are unlikely to be able to achieve a gender just and more peaceful world as long as gender hierarchies persist and are constituted through the study and practice of foreign policy.

As our focus here is on foreign policy and diplomacy as an area of state policy that is intensely hierarchical and concerned more with questions of security and war than peace, we draw primarily on feminist IR which has dealt more explicitly with this area of state policy. Yet, there are important insights to be drawn from feminist peace researchers, in particular when it comes to peace as the objective of foreign policy and diplomacy within international politics. Additionally, attention to feminist peace in understanding the gender dimensions of foreign policy and diplomacy is crucial since it is counterintuitive to silo feminist research as only belonging to one disciplinary tradition – feminism in the study of Global Politics is inherently interdisciplinary. As feminist scholars, we look beyond the constructs of disciplinary boundaries, which necessitates a challenge to the ‘boundaries within which the discipline of International Relations has sought to confine it’ (Weber, 1994: 338).

Fundamentally, feminist perspectives go beyond the numbers of women in foreign policy and diplomacy. Instead, there is an investment in analysing “how the world is constructed” (Tickner, 1992, p. 4). Understanding gender relations is thus the starting point to understand the underlying reasons for a persistent exclusion of women in foreign policy, the implications of including women as actors in the field, and what it means when gender issues are prioritised in policies.

Gendered dynamics are part of ongoing discourses on diplomacy. Men are often associated with the public sphere, while women are associated with the private sphere (Cassidy and Althari, 2017: 2). These same gendered ideas influence perceptions about people and structures, including in the diplomatic realm. Feminists claim it is important to expose and examine gendered dynamics of diplomatic practices, and to reveal how these in turn inform and shape policy-makers and decision-making in the international realm.

As an emerging field, feminist peace research (FPR) explicitly focuses on the gendered implications of war and peace, and the outcome of foreign policy making and diplomatic practice (cf. Wibben et al., 2019; Confortini, 2012). While foreign policy per se has not been the focus of FPR, unsurprisingly, there are important overlaps in the theoretical patterns that emerge within the different approaches to feminist IR (Blanchard, 2003, p. 1290; cf. Wibben et al., 2019). First, IR feminist theories question “the supposed nonexistence and irrelevance of women in international security politics” and expose the relevance of gender in connection to power and decision-making in IR. Second, feminist IR scholars also challenge the persistent claim the state can and does ensure women’s protection during war and peace. Third, feminist IR theories challenge essentialist notions of gender, that is the notion that women are inherently more peaceful than men, and men are more violent than women. And fourth, feminist IR theories have “started to develop a variegated concept of masculinity to help explain security” (Blanchard, 2003, p. 1290). Feminist IR as an approach owes a debt to feminist peace advocacy and education, which has long sought to broaden notions of security so that it has a grounding in human rights and anti-militarism. This work gave rise to concepts in foreign policy that we take for granted, such as the ‘human security’ with emphasis on the environment and the importance of economy and development for international peace (see Reardon, 2010).

III. Impact on Feminist Intervention on Foreign Policy and Diplomatic Practices

With the entry of feminist (peace) activism into state discourses and beyond, a range of states have engaged with integrating feminist initiatives into their approach to foreign policy and diplomacy. Aside from engagement with the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, these states have taken an explicit rebranding of their foreign policy as ‘feminist’, committed to feminist initiatives or integrated gender concerns without an explicit rebranding as feminist. It is worth noting that those states which have done this most vocally are located within the Global North although Parashar and D’Costa (2017) and Haastrup (2019b) draw attention to locations in the Global South embed feminist practices in the foreign policies. Yet, the dominance of the Global North is unquestionable and the implications of this are something we unpack here. We also see regional organisations such as the African Union (AU), European Union (EU), and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) integrating gender and WPS concerns into their diplomatic practices, even if they have not yet gone as far as to brand their policy practice ‘feminist’. Given Aggestam et al.’s (2018, p. 4) assertion that feminist foreign policy must as far as possible be ethical, it is questionable how many of these approaches and initiatives can truly live up to this aspiration.

Sweden has come to epitomise ‘Feminist Foreign Policy’ as it became the first country to adopt an explicitly feminist foreign policy in 2015. Since then, it has sought to place feminist concerns front and centre across its foreign policy portfolio. Swedish feminist foreign policy is informed by the WPS agenda and underpinned by three normative commitments: “(1) a commitment to feminist ethical principles of inclusion and human security, (2) gender cosmopolitanism, and (3) empathetic cooperation” (Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond, 2016, p. 326; Sylvester, 1994).

Canada has also sought to integrate feminist initiatives across a range of foreign policy issues including security and trade and development. In 2017, Canada rebranded its aid programme as a ‘Feminist International Assistance Policy’ with a specific focus on the empowerment of women and girls and the promotion of gender equality. Beyond development, Canada is working on the Elsie Initiative with partners across the UN, member states, NATO, think tanks and civil society (see Holvikivi, this volume). The premise rests on the assumption that increasing the participation of women in peace operations will contribute to making them “inclusive and more effective” (Government of Canada, 2017). Canada also pushed for the creation of a gender equality advisory council at the G7 during its presidency last year (Open Canada, 2018), and leads the Chief of Defence Network on WPS.

In the UK, former Foreign Secretary William Hague was instrumental, as a norm entrepreneur, in creating and leading the Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative (PSVI) which became a major focus of British foreign policy (Davies and True, 2017: 708). His leadership rested on two convictions. First, that women must be equal participants in supporting peace; and second, that the international community should prioritise the prevention of conflict (Davies and True, 2017, p. 708). This is especially important since organisations like WILPF who advocate feminist peace link its attainment specifically to prevention (see for example PeaceWomen, 2017). Among many tangible outcomes of PSVI worth noting here is the UN

Security Council Resolution 2106, that strengthens the prosecution mechanisms for perpetrators of sexual violence during conflict. Yet feminist critiques have demonstrated the failure to reconcile foreign and domestic policy (the UK government cut funding to women's refuges), the 'PR coup' PSVI has provided the UK (Myrtilinen and Swaine, 2015) and the disappearance of domestic violence from formal policy consideration under PSVI (Gray, 2019: 199).

There are also a number of countries who have not explicitly adopted feminist foreign policies, but who do support initiatives which could be viewed as such. Norway, Australia, India and the USA are three examples. Norway has integrated WPS into its foreign policy but resisted the use of the feminist label (Tryggestad, 2019) although its foreign policy approach is very similar to Sweden's. Australia's first women foreign minister, Julie Bishop, committed to making gender equality central to international peace and security (Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond, 2016, p. 324) but did not call this approach 'feminist'. Alongside Australia's NAP on WPS, there are practice-based examples of Australia's integration of gender concerns in its foreign policy (see Wright et al, 2019). Under the Obama administration, the USA did not pursue a specific 'feminist' foreign policy but did bring together a series of issue-specific foreign policies on gender, including the WPS NAP and a strategy on sexual and gender-based violence (Thompson and Asquith, 2018). For all these countries, feminist foreign policy whether named or otherwise, is deployed strategically, often focusing on foreign policy in the Global South.

Beyond states, international organisations increasingly play a role as a site for supporting feminist goals in foreign policy and diplomacy. They are after all key sites for diplomacy and diplomatic actors in their own right. The AU, EU, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), NATO have all engaged with and adopted policies on WPS. Yet, many of these organisations have treated WPS selectively as a 'diplomatic tool'. NATO fosters relations with partner states through its use of WPS (Wright, 2016) and has used its engagement with WPS as a "good news story to support the alliance's public diplomacy" (Wright, 2017). The EU has been selective in where it engages WPS in strategic partnerships, for example, in the EU's relationship with the AU (which is itself a strong advocate of WPS), WPS is rhetorically projected as an area of mutual interest; yet, in its strategic partnership with third states, such as South Africa, gender is barely visible (Haastrup, 2017, p. 208). This shows the selective use of WPS to support pre-existing institutional imperatives, and the failure to prioritise ethics and good international conduct as the bedrock of feminist foreign policy echoing developments at a state level (Aggestam et al, 2018, p. 4).

The AU is something of an exception. The AU has prioritised participation and representation in its engagement with the WPS agenda. In practice this has included the creation of the Office of the Special Envoy, but also the launch of the African Women's Leadership Network (AWLN) to address the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles on the continent and the Network of African Women in Conflict Prevention and Mediation (FemWise-Africa) (Haastrup, 2019a, p. 10-11). These initiatives suggest a holistic approach to WPS which moves

beyond rhetorical commitment to consider how localised frameworks can be leveraged to bolster the AU's impact in supporting WPS work in Africa (Haastrup, 2019a, p. 11).

Despite the centrality of the WPS to feminist foreign policy, the role of civil society as agents (as opposed to recipients) of feminist foreign policy is often neglected, even though they were central actors in supporting the adoption of UNSCR 1325 (see Basu and Nagar, this volume). Outside of states and governmental organisations, it is worth stressing that peace activism has been central to giving meaning to the development of feminist foreign policy. The WILPF has been at the forefront of WPS advocacy providing alternatives (see Confortini, 2012, p. 9) to state centric notions of security. This is fundamental to WILPF's promotion of feminist peace attainable through "strengthening women's meaningful participation, transforming gendered power, and bridging local gender conflict analysis with global efforts to implement a holistic WPS Agenda" (PeaceWomen, n.d). Indeed, part of WILPF's strategy dating back to its foundation in 1915 has been the meticulous collection of data with the aim of influencing global politics (Hellawell, 2018: 99ff.)

With feminist foreign policy increasingly being part of larger institutional endeavours, whether state or regional security institutions, the integration of gender perspectives in foreign policy is no longer just an issue for women in foreign policy. Indeed, the continued underrepresentation of women in key roles within foreign policy apparatuses globally suggests the increasing buy-in of men. At the same time, the heavy lifting to get gender issues represented in foreign policy beyond descriptive representations is still down to the few women in top jobs. For example, the Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the Commission Federica Mogherini hosted the first-ever meeting of women Foreign Ministers in September 2018 (Global Citizen, 2018). This gathering despite its ambitions to "hone, define, and refine the idea of a feminist foreign policy and articulate feminist foreign-policy goals that governments everywhere can strive toward" (Thompson and Asquith, 2018) actually highlighted the challenges still faced in attaining gender equality in the practice of international diplomacy.

IV. Blind Spots in Feminist approaches to Foreign Policy

As we see, the idea and practices of feminist foreign policy is one that has grown in popularity among certain countries in the Global North as a form of 'progressive' foreign policy and politics. In other words, many countries that situate their foreign policy and diplomatic practices within the contemporary feminist turn are typically self-identifying. The literature on this, outlined above, has taken this identity of feminist foreign policy for granted in the context of these countries.

Countries like Canada and Sweden have explicitly advocated women's rights and gender equality as fundamental to their governments' overall policies. Consequently, they have also justified their 'feminist' policies by drawing on their domestic credentials as reasons why this makes sense internationally. For example, under Justin Trudeau, the government achieved

gender parity in cabinet, and the federal government produced a gender responsive budget. Meanwhile Sweden has claimed having the first feminist government and has long enjoyed the image of being a very egalitarian society. Its main centre and left political parties champion women's rights and over 43% of its lawmakers are women. Yet, in taking a deeper look at these claims, and their potential implications for foreign policies geared towards the realisation of feminist peace, there is cause for pause.

Despite their feminist claims, these countries often fail to consider the power dynamics inherent within the international system of global politics and particularly the legacies of colonialism and persistence of coloniality in the implementation of so-called feminist foreign policies and the implications these have for a feminist peace. Domestically, in Canada activists have rightly questioned the government's feminist credentials. Despite its proclamations of a feminist foreign policy, at home the government legally discriminates against indigenous women. This is manifested through the colonial-era Indian Act. In the 1876 Act, an indigenous woman is only recognised as such if they are "the wife of a male Indian or the child of a male Indian". The implications of this Act have been devastating and efforts to address them are not treated as urgent. An indigenous woman who marries outside her community loses all rights and benefits awarded to First Nations people, including protection from gender-based discrimination and violence. According to a report published in 2015, the Indian Act has had a direct role in the continued marginalisation of indigenous women, noting that it continues "to place indigenous women at an increased risk for multiple forms of violence, and often results in impunity for crimes against indigenous women, which in turn perpetuates the violence" (InterAmerican Commission on Human Rights, 2015 p. 22)

In Sweden, activists note that the government caved into right-wing pressure, enacting immigration policies that negatively impact women. Specifically, a temporary asylum policy was adopted that significantly limited family reunification. In the context of this policy that clearly underlines the domestic links to foreign policy, it meant that many women who were still in conflict-torn countries had little recourse to reunite with male family members already in Sweden. Indeed, feminist scholars have argued that Sweden's projection of a feminist foreign policy serves to silence discord (Jeziarska and Towns, 2018). Moreover, the projection of 'feminism' as a bedrock of foreign policy serves to obscure domestic conditions, perpetuating the myth that 'feminism' is doing alright at home in Sweden, a message fundamental to the country's foreign policy brand.

Feminist foreign policy becomes something states do 'over there', rather than a starting point for reflecting inwards on the gendered and racialised inequalities and insecurities within their own borders which would support transformative change. This is contrary to a feminist peace that renders domestic insecurities particularly those faced by women as visible as 'foreign' ones (Shun-hing, 2011). This is perhaps clearest in the framing of the Canadian International Assistance Programme under Justin Trudeau. It is however also implicit in recent Swedish foreign policy discourse, advocated by former foreign minister Margot Wallström. One could infer then that the practice of feminist foreign policy is only possible in the context of wealthier

Northern countries' support for aid, development, peace and security to parts of the world that are less wealthy.

These countries point out their commitments to existing international frameworks as an additional justification for the pursuance of foreign policy. For example, Sweden claims: "our feminist foreign policy is based on international law and other agreements" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2015 p. 9). Canada similarly commits to "building on the existing global frameworks and guidelines for humanitarian action, [...] to invest in and report on gender data and analysis" as part of its gender responsive humanitarian action within its Feminist International Assistance Policy. The skew towards countries in the Global South is troubling especially where their feminist foreign policy is unevenly applied, often justified as diplomatic necessity but with the potential to lead to dangerous outcomes especially for women in the Global South (WILPF, 2018).

In 2015 Sweden's former foreign minister Margot Wallström denounced Saudi Arabia's repressive regime and the government proposed to sever military collaboration and weapons technology exchanges. This was viewed as a win for feminist foreign policy and feminist peace activism. Yet, Sweden continues to export weapons to Saudi Arabia despite Saudi Arabia's complicity in the war in Yemen. Similarly, Canada will do nothing to jeopardise its 14 billion dollars arms sales to Saudi Arabia even as it proclaims its feminist credentials. Unsurprisingly, both Canada and Sweden have been heavily criticised for their approach to Saudi Arabia which contribute to militarism and militarisation as the antithesis of feminist peace. These practices challenge the possibilities of feminist peace when they are seen to facilitate imperialist ambitions (Bacchetta et. al, 2002).

The potential of the liberal state to be a feminist agent of change raises the question of whether feminist foreign policy can overcome these blind spots, or whether it is too constrained that it can never be feminist. Duriesmith (2018) argues that despite the integration of feminist perspectives in foreign policies, the state "and other well-meaning agents" risk the reification of masculinist protector logic. We see this manifested in the uneven power dynamics between the North and the South, where brown and black bodies are inevitably the testing ground for policy priorities. On this, the racialised dimension of foreign practice is hardly ever interrogated even within feminist foreign policy studies, although it has long been a concern of transnational feminists. On the other hand, we see that a feminist ethos to foreign policy is not consistently applied. It might thus be observed that this new turn towards a discourse (and practice) of 'Feminist Foreign Policy' does not inevitably yield feminist outcomes, even when we acknowledge the greater possibilities for a feminist peace. These possibilities emerge when the impact of patriarchy is acknowledged as fundamental to the doing and studying of international peace and security. Ultimately, the colonial logics at play in the adoption and implementation of feminist foreign policies cannot be ignored as it is a barrier to the realisation of feminist peace.

V. Conclusion: Towards a Feminist Foreign Policy

Feminist scholars have important contributions to make to the study and practice of foreign policy and diplomacy. As we outline here, feminist perspectives draw our attention to the persistent gender inequities within diplomatic services and to potential solutions. Feminist practices in foreign policy and diplomacy play a crucial role in paving the way for a greater inclusion of women in diplomatic roles and tackling gender issues in international policies. We see this especially in the adoption of the WPS agenda. Despite evidence of positive changes over the last three decades, there remain blind spots even within feminist approaches to foreign policy. A truly feminist foreign policy needs to highlight these blind spots and look at intersections with other areas of injustice such as race, poverty, or ongoing violence. In effect, more attention to intersectional approaches to feminism and transnational feminist contributions are essential to achieving the emancipatory aims claimed by feminist foreign policy. This also entails a commitment to transformative change of global politics through the idea of international citizenship, which pays attention to “the needs and wants of ‘others’ in foreign policy practice” (Aggestam et al., 2018, p. 4).

Feminist foreign policy entails goals and expectations that necessarily lead to fundamental global resistance, but that could also bring about visible gender-sensitive results, and is essential to peace and demilitarisation (Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond, 2016, p. 328). Yet, feminist foreign policy practices must consider the gendered impact of ‘doing’ women’s rights or gender equality to avoid the unintended consequence of reproducing the power dynamics that re-entrench and reify gendered hierarchies in foreign policy. Importantly, the focus on the external dimensions of foreign policy and diplomacy, when feminist, cannot ignore the gendered practices within states, and international organisations. It is only in this way that a feminist foreign policy can be truly transformative. While blind spots continue to remain even when adopting a feminist foreign policy, it is crucial for actors of foreign policy and diplomacy to ensure working to an ethical code. Engaging local actors and supporting women in leadership roles builds a holistic understanding of the value of a gender perspective beyond supporting pre-existing institutional imperatives.

We contend that a feminist perspective can transform the global system of patriarchy based on two fundamental normative assertions: equal universal human dignity and moral inclusion (Reardon, 1990). Such an approach must remain ethical, tackling the tensions and contradictions between idealism and pragmatism when engaging with feminist foreign policy, and opening up opportunities for emancipatory social change (Confortini, 2012, p. 5).

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