

The Growth of Feminist (?) Foreign Policy

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Discussion of gender equality within international organisations and foreign policy is longstanding. States have long paid attention to gender within foreign and development policy, from National Action Plans on Women, Peace and Security to work on Sustainable Development Goal 5, and reaching even further back to the Beijing principles and the UN Conferences on women. Yet this action has all largely focused on the concept of gender (and, preceding this, women). There has been little employment of the notion of feminism within the work of states' foreign policy or the language of international institutions.

This is beginning to change, in part through the advent of feminist foreign policy. Feminist foreign policy is increasingly growing traction within national and international discourse and policy-making. Sweden were the first country to launch a feminist foreign policy, back in 2014. Canada adopted a feminist international assistance policy in 2017 and France followed in 2019. In early 2020, Mexico launched their new feminist foreign policy. Furthermore, key international and national NGOs are promoting discussion and uptake of the agenda – Oxfam is encouraging a conversation around feminist foreign policy in the United States. The International Centre for Research on Women have been working to formulate a draft feminist foreign policy for the USA, which may influence discussion around foreign policy in the run-up to the 2020 elections. In the United Kingdom, the newly formed Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy is encouraging similar conversations about the future of British foreign policy. This turn towards a distinctly feminist foreign policy signals the potential for a more radical position for states to take in relation to their international role (Achilleos-Sarl, 2018; Aggestam and Bergman Rosamond, 2016; Robinson, 2019).

But what does such a policy mean? What is it that makes these states' policies particularly feminist? How do the different countries understand the term? Feminist foreign policy is clearly linked to the decades long work of states and civil society around Women, Peace and Security (Aggestam and Bergman Rosamond, 2019) and, indeed, it is no surprise that it originated in Sweden, given the country's longstanding commitment to and championing of that agenda. But, unlike, the Women, Peace and Security agenda, there is no particular agreed upon text, resolution or treaty that different countries are relying on as a basis from which to craft their policies. Instead, the adoption of the term feminist to describe their foreign policy allows for a great deal of flexibility in terms of how these states understand the word, and what they choose to emphasise by using it.

This uptake is happening at such a time when feminist theorists and academics are often critical of the ways feminism is employed by states and private interests. Contemporary feminism has long been critiqued for being the so-called 'handmaid of capitalism' (Fraser, 2013), in the sense that its focus on the individual woman's wage-earning capacity has robbed feminism of its power for collective thinking and action. This emphasis on the individual comes at the expense of the ability to see gender equality as structural in its causes. Work within feminist political economy and development studies has likewise critiqued a model of 'feminist' policy making overly aligned with neoliberal business interests which often work to reinforce inequalities for women and girls (Calkin, 2015; Moeller, 2018; Prügl, 2015; Prügl and True, 2014). Development narratives in particular have been critiqued for what Calkin calls the "empowerment-as-efficiency" (2015, 665) argument – women and girls are to be empowered, not because this is a good in itself but rather because it helps countries to become more economically efficient. This renders development and policy work along the lines of capitalist business logic, rather than an understanding of rights, equality and structural problems.

Sweden and Canada's Feminist Foreign Policy

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The above critiques of feminism therefore suggest that an analysis of nascent feminist foreign policy is necessary. How do these states understand feminism? What is it adding to or changing about their foreign policy? As outlined in my recent article, “What’s feminist about feminist foreign policy?”, I explore the initial documents related to the first two states to adopt such policies. I analyse Sweden’s feminist foreign policy and Canada’s feminist international assistance policy to ask whether this potential for a more radical policy direction is bearing fruit.

Sweden’s policy places gender equality at its heart – “gender equality [as] an objective in itself” (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2014, 1, 13, 15, 22). The document stresses that the feminist foreign policy is a continuation, not only of Sweden’s domestic feminist policy making but also of its wider commitments to treaties, institutions and the international liberal order more broadly – including the WPS resolutions, the EU, and international legal agreements such as CEDAW. The document specifies (albeit fairly widely) financial and structural commitments that Sweden will put in place for its policy. As such, it echoes a more positive strain of feminist thinking than that seen above – the policy appears to be working within the remit of the international liberal order to orient it in a direction more clearly focussed on women and girls.

The remit of Canada’s policy is far broader. It “seeks to eradicate poverty and build a more peaceful, more inclusive and more prosperous world” and “believes that promoting gender equality and empowering women and girls is the most effective approach to achieving this goal” (Global Affairs Canada, 2017, ii). The Canadian document also stresses that “women and girls can be powerful agents of change and improve their own lives and those of their families, communities and countries” (Ibid, vi) and that “...when women and girls are given equal opportunities to succeed, they can transform their *local economies* and generate growth that benefits their *entire communities and countries*.” (Ibid, 8, emphasis added). As such, it aligns with Calkin’s understanding of “empowerment-as-efficiency” (2015, 665) – the policy is seen as a means to encourage and sustain economic development first and foremost.

Furthermore, the main novelty of the Canadian document appears to be an increased role for the private sector. The policy aims to “increase and diversify the range of mechanisms for working with the private sector ... transforming the private sector’s current service-provider role into that of a partner investing in the achievement of development results” (Global Affairs Canada, 2017, 65). However, there is no clear explanation as to how this increased role for the private sector will help to achieve the goals around gender equality. The involvement of the private sector creates issues around accountability (Brown and Swiss, 2018, 126) and a danger that the policy simply acts to “provide a convenient fig leaf for the lack of political will to expand aid funding” (Ibid, 119).

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It is clear from policy documents produced so far by Sweden and Canada that feminism can mean very different things to different states. For Sweden, a feminist foreign policy acts as a means to signal the country’s commitment to the laws and institutions that make up the international liberal order; for Canada, the policy appears more a means through which private interests can be incorporated into the country’s development policy.

These are still early days for the advent of feminist foreign policy. Its uptake so far has been restricted to middle powers, and, although it appears to be spreading, it will be interesting to see whether or not more powerful states start to adopt it as well. There is a danger that feminist foreign policy’s current popularity might wane, or that current illiberal trends in global politics will make any policy goals difficult to achieve on the international stage.

Regardless, the present moment offers a clear opportunity for civil society to be involved in the shaping of this agenda as it moves forward. As discussed above, key civil society bodies are eager to promote a feminist foreign policy, and are uniquely placed to influence growing government discussion and conversations at international gatherings such as the G7. Furthermore, civil society can work within what is currently still an ambiguous policy remit to orient it in a direction which more clearly tackles global injustices. Doing so, especially in the current political climate will not be easy. As such, feminist foreign policy’s continued spread should not necessarily be celebrated, but carefully judged at every turn to assess what changes are really being implemented.

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