



# Feminist Foreign Policy: Contributions and lessons

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## Question

*Which countries currently have a Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) and how is it contributing to enhancing the status of women and girls globally? What are the lessons learned from the implementation of feminist foreign policy, and the mainstreaming of gender into foreign policy?*

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## 1. Summary

A relatively **small number of countries** have an explicit “Feminist Foreign Policy” (FFP). Those most often cited are Sweden, Canada, France, Mexico, and Spain.

**In theory**, an FFP moves beyond gender mainstreaming in foreign development assistance to include: (1) a wider range of external actions, including defence, trade and diplomacy (2) a wider range of marginalised people, not just women. Within foreign development assistance, it implies a more coherent and systematically institutionalised approach to gender mainstreaming.

**In practice**, those countries with an explicit FFP implement it in different ways. Canada currently focuses on development assistance, France on development assistance and formal diplomacy, Sweden more comprehensively covers the trade and defence policy arenas. Mexico and Spain are yet to produce detailed implementation plans.

### Contributions

- In the seven years since Sweden became the first country to adopt an FFP, evaluations show **evidence of positive gender policy influence** within multi-lateral settings, relatively high levels of gender-earmarked spending, and a relatively large programme of development projects. However, there is no systematic comparison of the country’s gender work before and after adoption of the FFP.
- Other EU diplomats believe that **Sweden’s FFP has helped to spread norms** around the importance of gender work.
- Beyond development assistance, FFP provides **an opportunity for civil society organisations to hold governments to account in foreign policy**. This has materialised to some extent in asylum and human rights policies.

### Lessons learned

- FFP advocacy organisations note the importance of detailing an FFP within **one cohesive policy document**, definitional clarity, an overarching monitoring framework, realistic resourcing, and including women as participants, not targets, of interventions.
- Because branding a policy as “feminist” is potentially more controversial than gender mainstreaming, **governments need to be mindful of their own domestic contexts**.
- **Embedding FFP and/or gender mainstreaming within the government** through strong leadership, and wide consultations with staff at all levels is key to successful delivery.
- **Gender programming and policy must be context-specific** to ensure it is not counterproductive.

**Evidence Base:** There is increasing academic interest in FFP, but most analyses found during the course of this rapid review focus on narrative content of policies rather than impact. Policy advocacy and advice is provided by several high-profile advocacy organisations. National government agencies in Sweden, France and Canada have produced some evaluations of their FFP, but the evidence is weak. There are many international institution evaluations of gender mainstreaming for many different sectors that are context-specific.

## 2. What is ‘Feminist Foreign Policy’ and why do countries pursue it?

There are inevitably multiple written definitions for Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP), some common definitional values are:

- It contrasts with **traditional foreign policy focus on military force**, violence, and domination (CFFP, 2020).
- It puts **human security and human rights** at the center of foreign policy (Adebahr & Mittelhammer, 2020), focusing on the needs of “vulnerable” (Conway, 2020), and “marginalised” (CFFP, 2020).
- It is informed by the **voices of feminist activists**, groups and movements (Thompson & Clement, 2019).
- It is not only by women or for women, but recognises and seeks to correct “**intersectional**” overlapping discriminations associated with patriarchal, racist, and/or neo-colonialist imbalances of power on the world stage (CFFP, 2020; Thompson & Clement, 2019).

### Feminist Foreign Policy

**Aims:** to elevate and coordinate efforts to institutionalize gender equality and women’s empowerment as a foreign policy priority in the areas of diplomacy, defense, aid, and trade.

**Means:** By adopting action plans, creating funds, appointing envoys, and setting aid targets to advance gender equality through development cooperation, training, and diplomatic activities.

(Bigio J. & Vogelstein R., 2020, p.2)

Zhukova et al (2021) note some internal tensions within the various definitions between what may be termed “liberal feminism” and “intersectional feminism.”

- **Liberal feminist narratives** advocate an increased presence and promotion of women in existing institutions, supporting legal reform for gender equality, women's human rights, and the success of individual women.
- **Intersectional feminist narratives** stand for gender equality between women, men, and non-binary persons and social justice among people of different race, ethnicity, class, and other social markers.

There can also be some tension between policies that treat gender equality as a priority objective (“**rights-based**”), and policies that treat gender equality as a tool to advance other foreign policy priorities (“**instrumental**”) (IOB, 2015a, p.9). For example, Brown & Swiss (2017, p.118) critique Canada’s “instrumentalizing” of women and girls to achieve other foreign policy aims.

Section 3 below gives some indication of how FFP is defined in practice by different countries.

## Feminist Foreign Policy “elevates” gender mainstreaming

Many governments have gender equality as a foreign policy priority, and FFP builds on these efforts (Vogelstein et al, 2020). However, using the word “feminist” is “an important signal that a government is ready to pursue a **more transformative** approach to the advancement of gender equality and inclusion, in a manner that is intersectional and that focuses at its core on **transforming power relations, not just lifting up some women**” (Thompson, 2020, p.4).

It implies an “**increase in ambitions**” (Government of Sweden, 2018), with greater coherence across a wider scope of foreign policy objectives.

Several authors also note the influence of Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Agenda on the development of FFP (Aggestam et al, 2018; Peacewomen, undated; Thomson, 2020). This is a United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) that provides a normative framework for foreign and security policies, connecting women’s issues to national and international security.

## There is a compelling evidence base to justify a feminist or gendered foreign policy

A growing body of quantitative research has established a link between gender equality and global prosperity and security. The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR, undated) summarises multiple research articles on how gender equality advances a country’s security interests:

- **Parties are more likely to reach sustainable peace agreements with the involvement of women and women’s groups.**
  - Parties are more likely to agree to talks (Paffenholz et al, 2016); peace agreements are less likely to fail (O’Reilly et al, 2015); and are more durable (Krause et al, 2018).
- **Gender equality decreases conflict between and within states.**
  - States with higher levels of gender equality are less likely to use military force to settle disputes (Caprioli, 2005); there is a statistically significant relationship between the percentage of female leaders and the level of violence in a crisis (Caprioli & Boyer, 2001).
- **Countries are more prosperous and stable as the gender gap closes.**
  - When at least 35 percent of a country’s legislature are women, the risk of conflict relapse is close to zero (Demeritt et al, 2015); states with inequitable family law also exhibit higher levels of state fragility (Bowen et al, 2015); the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) estimates that equalizing access to agricultural resources for women could reduce global hunger for up to 150 million people (FAO, 2011).

**“The bottom line: nations seeking to advance national security, maximize the utility of foreign aid, and bolster stable and democratic partners should prioritize women’s advancement.”**

(Bigio & Vogelstein, 2020, Council on Foreign Relations, 2020, p.1)

### 3. Countries with feminist and gendered foreign policy

A limited number of countries have explicitly declared a “feminist foreign policy”, but the number is growing. Those countries which are commonly presented in the literature as having an explicit FFP are: Sweden, Canada, France (Tiessen et al, 2020; Thompson, 2020; Grésy et al, 2020). More recently, Mexico (2020) and Spain (2021) announced and published their “feminist foreign policy” – “*Política Exterior Feminista*.” In July 2021, Libya announced its commitment to an FFP.

Table 1: Selected countries with official Feminist Foreign Policies

Country	Details	Resources
Sweden (2014) <i>“Feminist Foreign Policy”</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scope: Aid, trade, defense, development and diplomacy.</li> <li>• Most comprehensive of all FFP. Unlike other countries, promises to “disrupt” patriarchal power structures.</li> <li>• Integrated with domestic gender equality agenda.</li> <li>• Current overseas development assistance (ODA) earmarked for gender equality (primary or significant objective): 90%.</li> <li>• No mandated overarching monitoring/evaluation mechanism.</li> </ul>	Official policy 2021 Action Plan Monitoring
Canada (2017) <i>“Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP)”</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scope: International development only. 2020 consultation aims towards a more comprehensive scope.</li> <li>• Overseas development assistance (ODA) earmarked for gender equality (primary or significant objective): pledged 95% by 2021-2, up from 70% in 2017.</li> <li>• No mandated overarching monitoring/evaluation mechanism.</li> </ul>	Official policy Feedback from 2020 consultation
France (2019) <i>“Diplomatie Féministe”</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scope: International development only. 2020 mid-term review recommends a wider, more integrated scope.</li> <li>• Styled not as a feminist policy, but a feminist diplomatic approach towards all countries, not just aid recipients.</li> <li>• Mandates annual evaluation of progress against the strategy.</li> <li>• Overseas development assistance (ODA) earmarked for gender equality (primary or significant objective): pledged 50% by 2022, up from 30% in 2017.</li> </ul>	Official Policy Mid-term review
Mexico (2020) <i>“Política Exterior Feminista”</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First country in the global South to require that “gender equality be at the core” of all foreign policy decisions.</li> <li>• Compared to other countries, focuses more on internal representation of women within the country’s foreign ministry (Welsh, 2020).</li> <li>• Explicitly refers to intersectional feminism as being at the heart of its FFP (Bedersdorfer et al, 2021).</li> </ul>	Official Announcement

Sources: Based mostly on Thompson & Clement, 2019. Cited in table where other sources used.

**Many other countries practice gender mainstreaming in their foreign policy** without calling it an FFP. For example, Sharma (2021) notes:

- Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) launched the Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Strategy in 2016.
- Germany’s Federal Foreign Office published a document on gender equality through foreign policy in 2020.
- The European Commission Released an Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment in External Action 2021–2025 (GAP III) in 2020.

## 4. Contribution of FFP to enhancing the status of women and girls globally

This section focuses on the contribution of Sweden’s FFP to the status of women. As the oldest and most comprehensive FFP, it is the one most likely to generate findings.

### Sweden’s Foreign Service records some of its FFP achievements, but recognises more evaluation is needed

In 2017, Sweden’s Foreign Service conducted a review where **overseas missions submitted the most significant results of the feminist foreign policy** from the country where they are based (MFA, 2017).

Some of the many achievements noted include:

- The largest donor to both UN Women and UN Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict, which develops gender-responsive early warning systems.
- Actively pushed to ensure that a gender perspective is incorporated into the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development and the 2030 Agenda.
- Worked to mainstream gender equality in the new Paris climate agreement (COP21).
- Contributed to other countries national action plans for women, peace and security in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iraq, Canada, Myanmar, the Czech Republic and Sudan.
- Contributed to the EU driving enhanced gender equality perspective in negotiations, statistics and analysis of trade policy at the World Trade Organization (WTO) and in EU free trade agreements with third countries.

In 2019, a Government Communication to the Swedish parliament on the FFP noted that it “has created a cohesive platform and direction for Sweden’s international gender equality work” (MFA, 2019, p. 55), among many other claims.

It is **not clear from these documents what the difference is between Sweden’s previous commitments to gender mainstreaming and its FFP**. At the time of writing this rapid review (August 2021), the evaluation arm of Sweden’s official development assistance was in the process of tendering a “Study of the Implementation of Sweden’s Feminist Foreign Policy in Partner Countries” to be undertaken in 2022 (EBA, 2021). A central goal of this study will be to compare the current FFP with Sweden’s pre-2014 gender policy.

## An OECD peer review of Sweden's development policy and implementation highlights some of its FFP achievements

The review (OECD, 2019) notes:

- The EU's free trade agreement with Chile has an entire chapter on gender equality for the first time, thanks in part to Sweden.
- Sweden was a founding member of the SheDecides global movement that supports the rights of girls and women to decide freely about their sexual and reproductive lives.
- Sweden introduced the #WikiGap campaign to enhance the information about women on Wikipedia around the world.
- One reason for the success of Sweden's Feminist Foreign Policy is its full integration in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

## Civil society organisations also note Sweden's FFP achievements

In 2017, a group of 19 civil society organisations reviewed Sweden's FFP (Concord, 2017). An English summary reports some of the achievements, including:

- Sweden using its chairmanship of the UN Security Council to invite women's rights defenders from Somalia and Nigeria to speak before the Council.
- Increased allocation of resources to support social security systems with a focus on women's economic empowerment.
- Setting up a network for women peace mediators, including supporting training for women's representatives in conflict areas.

However, this report also contains some criticisms of Sweden's FFP, included in Section 4 below.

## Other EU diplomats believe the Swedish FFP has had some limited positive effects on policies, but are unsure about its effects on the ground

Academic researchers surveyed 31 diplomatic representatives from other European Union (EU) member states on their perceptions of the impact of Sweden's FFP, with ten additional in-depth interviews (Sundström & Elgström, 2019). They found that **three-quarters of the respondents believe Sweden's FFP to have had a positive substantive effect on EU policies**, with the majority stating that the impact was limited. When asked whether the FFP has had any positive substantive effects on the ground, the majority of survey respondents and interviewees stated that they did not know.

## Academic research does not support Sweden's claims of normative change through public diplomacy

Aggestam & Bergman-Rosamond (2019, p.37) note that "Sweden's feminist foreign policy is distinguished by its working method pertaining to norm change whereby gendered practices and structures in global politics are challenged." The Swedish Foreign Service has a stated ambition



of influencing norms through “strategic communication and public diplomacy,” and details several successful examples of its public information campaigns (MFA, 2019, p.40).

Given the importance attributed to wider norm change, one study analyses Sweden’s FFP coverage in 34 major national newspapers, which the authors consider to be critical intervening actors for international norm diffusion (Sundström et al, 2021). It finds that (1) **visibility of the FFP is limited in international newspapers, especially in non-Western countries**, (2) reports on the FFP do not focus on the substance of the policy, and (3) most news outlets in the non-Western world profess negative attitudes towards the FFP.

Another study does a content analysis of Swedish embassy tweets on its FFP towards two countries where feminism is highly contested – Poland and Hungary, and the responding comments. The findings “demonstrate that the **FFP has not set any significant mark on digital diplomacy in the analyzed cases**. The launching of the FFP went completely unnoticed and posts related to gender equality have actually decreased since 2014” (Jeziarska, 2021, p.1).

## **Experts note that introducing feminist rhetoric into foreign policy creates “openings”**

Writing on Canada’s FFP, Tiessen & Smith (2021, p.133) say that “adopting the label of feminist matters because it creates openings”, adding that “the Trudeau government’s proclamation of a feminist foreign policy also **provides space for feminist bureaucrats** to advocate for transformative feminist programming.”

Aggestam & Bergman-Rosamond (2016, p.323) say that “by adopting the “F-word” it elevates politics from a broadly consensual orientation of gender mainstreaming towards more controversial politics, which explicitly seeks to renegotiate and challenge power hierarchies and gendered institutions that hitherto defined global institutions and foreign and security policies.”

Gill-Atkinson et al (2021, p.5) say that “on its own, labelling a policy feminist is not sufficient to make it so, but having this standard in place provides **a hook for civil society to hold governments to account** for the full scope of their commitments.”

## **5. Lessons Learned**

### **Some research and advocacy organisations provide comprehensive advice on the steps needed to introduce an FFP**

The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) has produced a framework document to support the introduction of an FFP based on more than one year of research and global consultations with more than 100 organizations in more than 40 countries (Thompson, 2020). Noting that their framework should not be viewed as an exhaustive list, but rather a living document designed to engage an ongoing process of learning and adaptation, they recommend that governments:

- Articulate the purpose of adopting an FFP for their **specific context**, integrating similar principles in domestic policies to ensure balance and coherence at home and abroad.



- Set out a definition of what FFP means for their government, and **how it is different from “business as usual”** foreign policy.
- Detail the **scope of the policy in one document**, including clear lines of reporting and coordination across different agencies and divisions.
- Include explicit **outcome targets**, developed in consultation with the people they are intended to help.
- Develop a detailed **implementation plan** with resourcing, diversity within government human resources and gender training, conversation with civil society, and public reporting.

The Council of Foreign Relations in the US has produced guidance encouraging the US government to adopt an FFP, setting out a similar list of issues to consider, including on: leadership, policy definition, resourcing, accountability and research (Bigio & Vogelstein, 2020). The guidance is based on several months of inputs from a group of experts from the government, multilateral organizations, academia, and the private and public sectors.

## **Taking steps to ensure domestic buy-in is an important part of the process for governments wishing to introduce an FFP**

Several authors note the political reality that **using the word “feminist” in a policy is potentially controversial**.

Thompson & Clement (2019, p.6) cite Thompson & Asquith (2018) that “Canadian officials admit they have confronted backlash and are moderating the use of the word “feminist” ahead of the country’s elections.”

Sundström & Elgström (2019) report that interviewed EU diplomats representing Eastern-Central and Southern member states, “pointed out that the concept of ‘feminism’ tends to create resistance and negative reactions among large sections of their populations.”

Thompson (2020) recognises that **an FFP may not be appropriate for all contexts**, and that governments must have the flexibility to find their own way to describe their commitment to the core ingredients of an FFP in a language and manner that is most helpful in their unique context.

Irwin (2019) says that governments should aim to construct domestic environments in which gender issues are debated regularly and openly, and that there was initial scepticism of the policy in Sweden because the government declared the policy before fully formulating it.

By contrast, Bigio & Vogelstein (2020) reports that “our findings suggest that making a bold announcement and then establishing processes to institutionalise it across the foreign policy bureaucracy, and at the political level, can be effective.”

In 2020, Canada’s foreign ministry undertook a major consultation with national and international stakeholders in preparation for pursuing a more comprehensive FFP (see FFPWG, 2020).

## **Embedding an FFP within foreign ministries is key**

Some note the **danger of “gender policy evaporation”** in which gender policies are likely to evaporate within the internal patriarchal traditions of government bureaucracies (Longwe, 1997), and never reach the implementation stage. In this regard, Sweden has received particular praise for its efforts to integrate FFP within its civil service.

The OECD (undated) notes that key factors for the success of Sweden's FFP implementation are:

- (1) **Full integration in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs:** the policy benefitted from strong leadership and deep ownership through a bottom-up approach that has involved consultation with all ministry staff.
- (2) Support and mechanisms for roll-out: involving a comprehensive set of guidance and support mechanisms for implementation. These include the introduction of gender budgeting and working to ensure that staff diversity in the ministry reflects its commitment to gender equality.

Some methods include: frequent and clear political messages by leaders; consultations with staff and other stakeholders; and the integration of gender equality into operational planning and budgeting, guidance and political analysis, requiring every department and mission abroad to explain how the feminist foreign policy is applied in practice (OECD, undated).

## Some common criticisms of current FFP practice

Bigio & Vogelstein (2020, p.15) report that “skeptics argue that increasing the focus on women’s rights and gender equality detracts from advancing other national interests abroad. Even those who believe gender equality is a worthwhile goal do not always agree that it should be institutionalized as a foreign policy priority.”

They also note the criticisms from those who think that FFP has not gone far enough. Some say that gender equality frequently remains siloed in dedicated offices rather than integrated as a priority across departments, and that government commitments toward gender equality are rarely accompanied by sufficient resources and metrics to ensure success and accountability. More broadly, “critics maintain that feminist policies advanced by Canada, France, Sweden, and other governments do not do enough to reshape aid infrastructure, decrease militarism, address the root causes of inequality, or incorporate the lived experiences of women” (p.15).

A report from the International Centre for Research on Women (Thompson & Clement, 2019) summarises some **criticisms of Sweden’s FFP**, including:

- Continuing arms trade with countries with poor human and women’s rights records such as Saudi Arabia.
- A binary focus on women rather than gender.
- Not enough attention on the rights of LGBTQ individuals beyond health-related sexual reproductive rights.
- No overarching monitoring of the FFP or clear documentation on the amount of funding given to the FFP.

A report from a group of 19 civil society organisations reviewing Sweden’s FFP (Concord, 2017) notes “room for improvement,” including:

- On economic empowerment for women, more needs to be done for retired women, women in rural areas who depend on farming and food production, and to strengthen women’s rights in the workplace including those who work in the informal economy.
- On humanitarian aid, strategies to integrate sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) are missing.

- Recently passed Swedish legislation on asylum rules, and approval of EU migration cooperation with Libya contradicts the countries FFP commitments to “strengthening the human rights for women and girls who are refugees and migrants” as a prioritized area.

A collection of academic essays on the lessons learned from Canada’s FFP (Tiessen et al, 2020) cite criticisms including:

- Inconsistent messaging about the transformative nature of Canada’s feminist foreign policy, the translation of policy to practice, and coherence across departments.
- Hypocrisy of Canada selling military weapons to Saudi Arabia.
- Narrative analyses of Canada’s Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) show the conflation of gender and a lack of intersectionality.

## Some general lessons can also be learned from countries which practice ‘gender mainstreaming’ in ‘external actions’ without calling it FFP

There is a very large literature on gender mainstreaming, mostly relating to development aid, and often relating to specific sectors or programmes, such as health, education, environment.

At the most general level, there are some “**meta-evaluations**” of **gender mainstreaming in development cooperation**. For example, in a report by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD, 2006, p.5-6), the author detects that “recommendations from the evaluations reviewed all point in the same direction”: organisations must ensure stronger leadership of work on women and gender equality, must invest more resources and must organise their work better and more systematically. The evaluations recommend clarifying concepts and terminology, providing clearer mandates and improving training...several suggest (re)introducing earmarked funds for innovative measures...and mechanisms for making management accountable.

As a country which does not explicitly define its gender work in foreign policy as FFP, the Netherlands has produced two overview reports of its gender mainstreaming work.

One report (IOB, 2015a) makes conclusions about “what works” in development cooperation on violence against women, women’s education, women and economic development, women’s right to land, women and water and sanitation, and women’s political voice.

Another broadens out to wider foreign policy issues (IOB, 2015b). It lists lessons (p.21-22) as:

- **Accountability:** for gender mainstreaming should be assigned not only within the Ministry but also in partner organisations.
- Gender equality is not just about women; it is about the power dimensions between women and men. These dimensions can differ per culture, thematic area, or social group.
- **Context matters:** There is no ‘one size fits all’, what works in one setting can be counterproductive in another.
- **What gets measured, gets done:** There is a need to support quantitative, evidenced-based methods to account for what is happening, but also longer-term research collaborations.
- **Build local capacity** of women’s organisations to participate in lobbying and advocacy.
- **Strengthen the Ministry’s own capacity.**

- **Be realistic, be patient and stay committed:** increasing gender equality is a long-term (multi-generational) and multi-dimensional process that requires persistent commitment.

At the time of writing (August 2021), the Netherlands evaluation unit is due to publish a new report on “gender mainstreaming in foreign and development cooperation policy” in the coming months (IOB, undated).

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