

## Is there such a thing as feminist foreign policy?

By Melanne Vermeer

When Margot Wallström took office as Sweden's Foreign Minister in 2014, she adopted a 'feminist' foreign policy. For her, this meant three Rs: rights, applying equally to women; representation in decision-making; and resources being fairly allocated to women.

Wallström gave a name to an approach that had been undertaken by Hillary Clinton. She proclaimed the rights of women and girls as a cornerstone of the United States' foreign policy and vital to American national security interests when she became secretary of state in 2009.

Clinton's commitment to these issues has been a constant in her career. But her passion was sparked by her participation in the Fourth World Conference on Women, organised by the United Nations in 1995. There, as first lady of the United States, she made a keynote address that captured the world's attention. Clinton declared that "human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights" – no longer relegated to the margins, but enshrined in international human rights law.

The administration of President Barack Obama, with Clinton leading its foreign policy in the first term, promoted the integration of gender into US foreign policy as a matter of vital national interest. Investing in women and girls was considered to be one of the most powerful and positive forces for reshaping the globe.

Today there is a wealth of research and data to show that investing in women is critical for economic, social and political progress. Advancing equal rights is a moral imperative – but it's smart and strategic too. It helps tackle the most pressing global challenges, from jobs creation to peace and security.

To ensure the institutionalisation of women's global issues into US Foreign Policy, President Obama created the position of Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues. Gender policy guidelines were established for the State Department and the US Agency for International Development (USAID). The guidelines focused on coordination within the Department, gender responsive budgeting and planning, and the Foreign Service Institute's training programmes for diplomats.

### **"Countries where the gender parity gap is smaller are far more prosperous"**

Gender issues were also included in the first-ever 'Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review'. The study, set up by Clinton, proposed "integrating women and girls into everything we do in all our diplomacy with other governments (and) our work on conflicts and crisis." Clinton's successor, John Kerry, noted the example of gender integration as an excellent illustration of how key crosscutting issues should be mainstreamed across the Department.

Three issues were seen as vital gender priorities: the global economy; peace and security; and human development.

Economic growth, job creation and shared prosperity for all nations and people are formidable global challenges, and evidence points to women's economic participation as being vital to the achievement of these objectives.

The World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Report shows that those countries where the gender parity gap is smaller – where men and women are more equal – are far more prosperous. With women investing up to 90% of their incomes in their families and communities – on food, healthcare and education – female economic participation has a multiplier effect and constitutes an investment in a higher standard of living.

Studies also show that women-run small businesses are accelerators of gross domestic product. They lift incomes and create jobs. But laws, customs and discriminatory practices are often serious obstacles to women starting or growing a business. In some places women have no inheritance or property rights. They face violence, a global scourge. Women entrepreneurs often lack access to training, to mentors, to finance and to markets.

The effects are real. A UN report calculated that close to US\$90bn in GDP is lost each year in the Asia-Pacific region due to untapped potential and structural discrimination of women. That's why the State Department pushed the issue of women's economic participation in multilateral forums, including the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).

And the change is real, and global. APEC now holds programmes on women and the economy to address barriers to entrepreneurship. In Africa, the African Women's Entrepreneurship Program, promoted by the State Department, supports access to markets for women-run SMEs. In Latin America the Pathway to Prosperity initiative provided training and access to trade opportunities. And in Europe, through Invest in the Future, the Department brought together women entrepreneurs from the Balkans, the Caucasus and other areas to support each other. A concerted effort was made to support the economic potential of women.

Considerable efforts were also made to advance women's role in conflict resolution, negotiations and peace-building – notably through implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

At the end of 2011 the US launched a national action plan on women, peace and security, and as secretary of state Clinton took the lead abroad. During a trip to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, she addressed a range of issues relating to the country's violent conflict, from security sector reform and peacekeeping to transitional justice. She focused on the atrocities being perpetrated against women and girls, hearing first-hand accounts of mass rapes, used as a strategic weapon of war.

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Action followed. Clinton put forward UN Security Council Resolution 1888 to create greater accountability for sexual violence, to end impunity, and to improve the role of peacekeeping missions to protect women and children from sexual violence. The resolution also called on the UN Secretary-General to appoint a special representative on sexual violence in conflict.

But empowerment was also on the agenda. As a female activist said to me in a discussion in Kabul, “Stop looking at us as victims but as the leaders that we are.” Women have been greatly victimised in Afghanistan – but they are also critical agents of change.

The State Department and USAID also recognised gender as a key element in global development. Research shows that investment in women means poverty reduction and improved human development.

The Obama administration’s Feed the Future initiative – which aimed to strengthen the world’s food supply – recognises women farmers as vital to agriculture. In many places they form the majority of small farmers, but they are often disadvantaged when it comes to securing land tenure rights or owning land outright. Women farmers often get poorer access than men to training, credit and tools. But when they are treated the same, they can yield the same.

On climate change, women have a key role to play. Clinton led governments and the private sector in creating a Global Alliance for Clean Cookstoves – an example of how engaging women in developing, disseminating and maintaining clean technologies can have significant benefits to them and to society.

Technology was also recognised for its potential to transform women’s lives by providing critical access to information as well as opportunities for financial security. But there is still a gender gap in access to mobile technology, which is essential to enabling poor women to transform their lives. Investments in global development see women are not just beneficiaries but also drivers of social change.

Clinton succinctly described the stakes for all humankind: “Until women around the world are accorded their rights and afforded opportunities to participate fully in the lives of their societies, global progress and prosperity will have its own glass ceiling”.

A foreign policy that has women at its core – whether called ‘feminist’ or not – recognises that democracy, peace, prosperity and social progress need the full participation of women. No country can get ahead if it leaves half its people behind.