

## HIDING BEHIND THE F-WORD: THE FAILURES OF SWEDEN'S FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY



In the autumn of 2014, the Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs Margot Wallström presented the world's first self-defined feminist foreign policy. This bold choice of language suggested radical policy change, where an explicitly feminist perspective would become integral to all areas of Sweden's foreign policy. This declaration not only welcomed the idea of a normative reorientation of foreign policy but made it explicit that foreign policy should be ethically guided, even at the risk of political controversy.

In its first feminist foreign policy action plan, finalized in 2015, Sweden set out to become the "strongest voice for gender equality and full employment of human rights for all women and girls", particularly emphasising the importance of a feminist perspective in peace and security efforts. Wallström painted feminist action as not just a single issue within a

13, in prioritising a gender perspective on international security and development.

## “SWEDEN HAS NOT NECESSARILY LIVED UP TO THE HIGH EXPECTATIONS IT HAS SET OUT FOR ITSELF.”

The bar has thus been set high - but Sweden has not necessarily lived up to the high expectations it has set out for itself. While the Swedish feminist foreign policy has seen several successes since its implementation (such as [the recent counteraction against Trump’s global gag rule](#)), the Swedish government has also exhibited certain blind spots that undermine the ambitious commitments made through the adoption of its feminist foreign policy. Considering Sweden’s tendency to use feminist language and ideas as part of its “brand”, its feminist foreign policy runs the risk of becoming a convenient smoke screen to hide the more unsavory parts of the country’s foreign policy agenda.

For two years in a row, the umbrella organisation [Concord](#) has produced reports evaluating the implemented foreign policies of Sweden measured against its broader feminist aims. Both the [2016](#) and the [2017](#) reports emphasize two major areas where Sweden directly contradicts the goals stated in the action plan for a feminist foreign policy: arms exports and migration policy.

Sweden continues to export arms to authoritarian regimes which consistently commit human rights infractions. The list includes countries such as Saudi Arabia who have launched attacks against Yemen; these attacks that have been declared [as war crimes](#) by Human Rights Watch. In addition to exporting arms to countries that explicitly violate women’s human rights, Sweden is in result also supporting said countries' military operations, the consequences of which often [hit women and girls hardest](#).



However, the Swedish government agency that controls exports of military equipment has professed that they have not received any political signals that a feminist foreign policy should be incorporated into their operations.

Concord also exposes Sweden's 180-degree policy change in its asylum and migration policy - closing its previously open borders - negatively impacting the human rights of women and girls. In particular, the temporary asylum legislation implemented in 2016 renders family reunification practically impossible for most people claiming asylum in Sweden. This means that mainly women and girls are forced to stay in conflict areas, refugee camps, or are stuck in limbo on various transit routes. This change in asylum and migration policy is directly contradicts the goals laid out in Sweden's 2017 action plan ("strengthening the human rights of women and girls who are refugees or migrants").

These contradictions present serious obstacles to the credibility of Sweden's feminist foreign policy, and illustrate the difficulty in asserting (and defining) a truly ethically guided foreign policy. Margot Wallström herself joins many of her global counterparts in defining her foreign policy as neither "soft" (coded feminine) or "hard" (coded masculine), but "smart". A certain pragmatism is therefore implied, building on similar policy recommendations laid out by Hillary Clinton.

This is not to say that Wallström completely ignores the glaring incongruences in her foreign policy agenda. In March 2015, she declined to sign a cooperation agreement on arms exports to Saudi Arabia. Wallström wished to implement Article 7 of the UN Arms Trade Treaty ratified in 2013, which requires state parties to prohibit the export of arms if they will be used to commit or facilitate a serious violation of international humanitarian or human rights law. However, Wallström soon met heavy resistance from Saudi, Swedish, and EU business actors concerned about the impact on their exports.



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This tug-of-war has proved to be an oft-repeated trend. It is also a remarkably gendered one: a feminist foreign policy, pursued by a feminine-coded “soft power”, is stifled by neoliberal and patriarchal hegemonies in the form of the global arms trade, run by a nearly exclusively male cohort of business and state power leaders. While Sweden may stand up to Trump’s heavily masculine-coded foreign policy, the government also effectively chooses to “pragmatically” turn a blind eye to other human right violations concerning women and girls worldwide when it concerns Sweden’s own interests.

Sweden's apparent inaction concerning serious human rights infractions leaves a bitter aftertaste for the successes that Sweden’s feminist foreign policy nevertheless has achieved. Effectively, Sweden is still not so different from other so-called liberal states who pursue state-centric “feminist” foreign policies upheld by militarism. It may be tempting to celebrate Sweden’s foreign policy as unique simply because it uses the word feminist, but this runs the risk of neglecting the gaping holes in its substance.

At the very least, despite the inclusion of the F-word, Sweden’s failures to fulfill its high ambitions means that its feminist foreign policy initiative cannot yet be considered radical.

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