

Can a feminist foreign policy be undone?

Reflections from Sweden

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In October 2022, the Swedish government retracted its feminist foreign policy (FFP). The same day the newly elected liberal-right coalition government took office, its new Foreign Minister Tobias Billström announced that the Swedish FFP would end. He explained that:

The use of the label feminist foreign policy has obscured the contents of our policy. This is why the government will discard its use. But we will always support gender equality.¹

Since then, Swedish diplomats and other foreign policy actors have been instructed not to make reference to any ‘feminist’ foreign policy. Descriptions of the FFP and feminist terminology were quickly removed from government websites, and the position that was formerly called the ‘ambassador for gender equality and coordinator of feminist foreign policy’ is now simply styled as the ‘ambassador for gender equality’. Sweden has also withdrawn from the informal FFP+ group at the United Nations.²

The retraction of the Swedish FFP put an end to the world’s first expressly ‘feminist’ foreign policy. Eight years earlier, the FFP had been launched by the Social Democrats under foreign minister Margot Wallström. The initial surprise was followed by a mix of curiosity, ridicule and fanfare, domestically and internationally. The Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) subsequently got to work, creating the position of ambassador for gender equality and coordinator of FFP, developing FFP guidelines, providing the foreign service with FFP training, establishing gender focal points³ in all Swedish embassies, and—crucially— instructing the MFA’s many public agencies and foreign missions to implement and thus concretize feminist foreign policy. Much more gender-focused foreign

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¹ Foreign Minister of Sweden Tobias Billström, quoted in Johan Juhlin, ‘Tobias Billström: regeringen överger benämningen feministisk utrikespolitik’ [Tobias Billström: the government is abandoning the label ‘feminist foreign policy’], *SVT*, 19 Oct. 2022, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/nye-utrikesministern-tobias-billstrom-intervjuas-i-aktuellt> (our translation). (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 1 March 2024.)

² Personal email from Sofia Calltorp, Swedish ambassador for gender equality, 20 Nov. 2023.

³ Gender focal points are positions tasked with monitoring and stimulating more and better gender equality work.

policy developed during this period than previously, both in Sweden's bilateral policy-making and in its multilateral interactions.⁴

A dozen countries or so, in different parts of the world, have declared FFPs of their own since 2014.⁵ However, given the contention around gender equality measures, it would not be surprising if some of these FFPs were also retracted. This raises a fundamental question regarding control over foreign policy: can a FFP simply be undone by a new government intent on reversing such a policy? Doing so may be more difficult than opponents to FFPs may expect. As we will show in this policy paper, the governance of foreign policy makes it difficult for a government to autonomously determine the contents of gender-sensitive foreign policy. As the first country in the world not just to declare but to retract a FFP, Sweden's case is thus instructive. It is instructive both about how FFP can actually be conducted and governed, and also about what might potentially remain of the FFP after its retraction.

To reflect upon this question, we draw out new insights from data we gathered for writing a recent and massive report on the implementation of the Swedish FFP.⁶ The report compares the implementation of Swedish foreign policy on gender equality during the period preceding the implementation of the FFP (2008–2013) and the period of the FFP (2014–2022). The data consists of 30+ interviews with key Swedish foreign policy officials and embassy staff (conducted in 2021–2023, including after the FFP was retracted) and hundreds of appropriation directions, operational plans, annual reports and other documents produced by and for the Swedish MFA, its foreign policy agencies and embassies.⁷ For this article, we implicitly rely on a feminist institutionalist approach to examine the ways in which foreign policy is institutionalized and governed.⁸ We argue that the complex governance structure of the FFP may make the policy 'sticky' and more difficult to reverse than many might expect. We highlight three aspects of FFP governance that have a constraining effect on the discretion of governments to pull back from commitments to gender equality in foreign policy: international law, including soft regulation; decentralized foreign policy implementation; and international role expectations.

⁴ Ann E. Towns, Elin Bjarnegård and Katarzyna Jezierska, *More than a label, less than a revolution: Sweden's feminist foreign policy* (Stockholm: Expert Group for Aid Studies, 2023), <https://eba.se/en/reports/more-than-a-label-less-than-a-revolution-swedens-feminist-foreign-policy/20636>.

⁵ Sweden (2014), Canada (2017), France (2018), Luxembourg (2018), Mexico (2020), Spain (2021), Libya (2021), the Netherlands (2022), Liberia (2022), Chile (2023), Argentina (2023), Colombia (2023), Germany (2023), Slovenia (2023) and Mongolia (2023).

⁶ Towns, Bjarnegård and Jezierska, *More than a label, less than a revolution*.

⁷ For the report, we also conducted a survey about FFP and gender equality activities that went out to all 1,100+ Swedish diplomats. We do not rely on the findings of that survey for this article.

⁸ For excellent overviews of feminist institutionalism, see for example Fiona Mackay and Georgina Waylen, eds, 'Feminist institutionalism', *Politics & Gender* 5: 2, 2009, pp. 237–80, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X09000178>; and Mona Lena Krook and Fiona Mackay, eds, *Gender, politics and institutions: towards a feminist institutionalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

Governance: a fresh perspective on FFP

With a focus on the governance of the FFP, we provide a fresh perspective on the burgeoning policy debates and academic literature on FFPs. Academics and policy pundits have focused primarily on the contents of FFP policy declarations, speeches and documents produced by governments.⁹ What the term ‘feminist’ means in these government statements, what ‘feminist’ *should* mean in foreign policy, the transformative potential of FFP and whether it should be understood as an ethical alternative to *realpolitik* have been questions of particular interest. Reports from civil society organizations have also provided important feedback on the focus of the FFP from civil society perspectives, not least on the question of its implications for arms trade and militarism.¹⁰

However, crucial questions about how the FFP is institutionalized and governed have thus far received very little attention. Furthermore, the retraction of the Swedish FFP is so recent that its implications—for Swedish foreign policy and for FFPs more generally—have been subject to very few written analyses. In an insightful intervention in *Foreign Policy*, Rachel George suggests that the new Swedish government’s ‘hands may be tied when it comes to reversing many of its feminist policies in practice’.¹¹ More specifically, George argues that the government is trapped by its own public claims to uphold Swedish support for gender equality despite the removal of the feminist label. In order not to risk a backlash from voters, she contends, the government might at most cut funding for gender equality in ways that are proportionate to other reductions.

George’s assessment might prove to be correct. However, to stay in power, the new liberal-right government depends on support from the largest right-wing party in Sweden, the far-right populist Sweden Democrats (SD). And the SD is vocal in its opposition to the FFP and many other gender equality policies. What is more, with the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine and Sweden’s accession to NATO in early 2024, many principles that seemed to be stable in Swedish foreign policy have proven to be quick to change. There are thus reasons to believe that

⁹ For example, see Karin Aggestam and Annika Bergman-Rosamond, ‘Swedish feminist foreign policy in the making: ethics, politics, and gender’, *Ethics & International Affairs* 30: 3, 2016, pp. 323–34, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679416000241>; Jennifer Thomson, ‘What’s feminist about feminist foreign policy? Sweden’s and Canada’s foreign policy agendas’, *International Studies Perspectives* 21: 4, 2020, pp. 424–47, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekzo32>; Martha Delgado, ‘Mexico’s feminist foreign policy’, *Transatlantic Policy Quarterly (TPQ)* 19: 1, 2020, pp. 3–9, <http://transatlanticpolicy.com/article/1007/mexicos-feminist-foreign-policy>; Vania Ramfres Camacho and Ximena Mejía Gutiérrez, ‘Mexico’s feminist foreign policy: a preliminary assessment’, *Revista Mexicana de Política Exterior*, vol. 120, 2021, pp. 77–98; Khushi Singh Rathore, ‘A feminist foreign policy for India: where to turn?’, *E-IR*, 6 Aug. 2021, <https://www.e-ir.info/2021/08/06/opinion-a-feminist-foreign-policy-for-india-where-to-turn/>; Vanessa Dolce de Faria and Viviane Riold Balbino, ‘A feminist foreign policy for Brazil: challenges and possibilities’, *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* 66: 1, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1590/0034-7329202300108>; Ekatherina Zhukova, Malena Rosén Sundström and Ole Elgström, ‘Feminist foreign policies (FFPs) as strategic narratives: norm translation in Sweden, Canada, France, and Mexico’, *Review of International Studies* 48: 1, 2022, pp. 195–216, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210521000516>.

¹⁰ For example Concord, *Hur feministisk är Sveriges utrikespolitik?* [How feminist is Sweden’s foreign policy?] (Stockholm, 2017), <https://concord.se/rapporter/granskning-feministisk-utrikespolitik>; Gabriella Irsten, ‘How feminist is the feminist foreign policy?’, Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung/International Women’s Federation for Peace and Freedom, 5 Sept. 2019, <https://ikff.se/hur-feministisk-ar-den-feministiska-utrikespolitiken>.

¹¹ Rachel A. George, ‘Sweden’s feminist foreign policy can’t be undone’, *Foreign Policy*, 18 Nov. 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/11/18/sweden-feminist-foreign-policy-billstrom-gender-equality>.

the government will attempt to scale back Swedish international support for gender equality in the period which lies ahead.

Advocates for a drastic reorientation of Swedish gender equality commitments are likely to be disappointed, however. Such attempts may be thwarted, not primarily by voter backlash but by a number of factors that relate to how FFP and pro-gender foreign policy are now institutionalized and governed. Governments are not autonomous agents in full control of the gender-related contents of their foreign policies. Instead, their autonomy is constrained by at least three broad governance features: 1) international agreements and soft law on women's rights that place demands on the contents of foreign policy; and 2) the complex and geographically dispersed organization of the foreign service, that allows implementers of foreign policy a great deal of autonomy. Not least in the case of Sweden, we also believe 3) expectations by the international community to perform the role of gender equality leader to be a third constraining feature. Inspired by feminist institutionalism, we develop and substantiate this argument by discussing the three constraining features in the governance of FFPs below.

The Swedish FFP in brief

Under the leadership of then-Minister for Foreign Affairs Wallström, the former Swedish government set out to develop the contents of the FFP that it had declared in late 2014. Doing so entailed building on several decades of integrating women's rights into Swedish foreign policy—what Karin Aggestam and Jacqui True have termed a pro-gender foreign policy.¹² The gender content of Swedish development cooperation was already particularly well developed. According to data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD DAC), 79 per cent of Swedish bilateral aid was devoted to activities that had gender equality as a 'significant' or 'principal' objective just prior to the launch of the FFP, during 2009–2014.¹³ However, other foreign policy areas were much less marked by gender concerns. To be sure, the Swedish government had pursued and supported multilateral gender equality initiatives in a range of international institutions, not least the UN and the European Union. But its trade and promotion policy had hardly been touched by gender equality goals, nor had such concerns been extended to the regulation of the sale of military equipment and dual-use products by the large Swedish defence industry. Much work also remained to be done to align Swedish policy with the UN's Women, Peace and Security agenda, even if some of this work fell outside the jurisdiction of the MFA.

Wallström and the rest of the MFA leadership developed the FFP as a broad approach to shape all three of the MFA's policy areas: foreign and security policy, trade and promotion policy, and development cooperation policy. The FFP was

¹² Karin Aggestam and Jacqui True, 'Gendering foreign policy: a comparative framework for analysis', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 16: 2, 2020, pp. 143–62, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orz026>.

¹³ Towns, Bjarnegård and Jezierska, *More than a label, less than a revolution*.

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guided by one main question: ‘are there gender-based inequalities that [Sweden] can affect?’.¹⁴ To give that work greater substance, Wallström coined ‘the three Rs’, asking Swedish foreign policy actors to devise and implement policy so as to promote equal *rights*, equal *representation* and an equal distribution of *resources* between men and women, boys and girls. The FFP was to be pursued within existing budgets—very little additional or earmarked funding was provided.¹⁵ By design, it was then up to implementing actors in the foreign service and foreign policy agencies to fill the FFP with content and to concretize the policy contextually. In the words of Ann Bernes, the second Swedish ambassador for gender equality and coordinator of FFP (2015–2021), the FFP ‘can take very different expressions since it is always to be based in the contextual reality where it is pursued’.¹⁶

As a result of the FFP, activities to advance gender equality increased significantly.¹⁷ While already quite gender sensitive, Swedish development cooperation saw the largest increase in activities. Swedish trade policy saw the largest change in a different sense. Having paid no attention whatsoever to gender issues prior to 2014, agencies, missions and embassy sections involved in trade had to embark on a journey of figuring out what a FFP entailed for Swedish trade policy. While Swedish trade actors never caught up with those involved in development cooperation, their grappling with gender issues was a significant change. Swedish security policy, finally, presented a mixed picture. Besides creating heated criticism from civil society, the FFP had no impact at all on Swedish trade in arms—the government did not even instruct the Inspectorate of Strategic Products (the agency charged with controlling and monitoring defence and dual-use products) to integrate gender equality goals. However, there was a significant expansion of gender training activities among actors in the Swedish security sector, under the auspices of the Folke Bernadotte Academy.

The governance of FFP—what *can* a government retract?

The launch of the FFP resulted in a considerable increase in gender equality-related activities among Swedish foreign policy actors. One might thus assume that the retraction of the FFP would result in the abandonment of these activities. However, because of how gender-related foreign policy has come to be governed, there are reasons to believe that many of these activities will remain, even if they will be practised less extensively than during the FFP.

¹⁴ Interview with Annika Söder, former state secretary for foreign affairs (2014–19), 1 Feb. 2022.

¹⁵ Towns, Bjarnegård and Jezierska, *More than a label, less than a revolution*.

¹⁶ Ann Bernes, quoted in Gunhild Wallin, ‘Feministisk svensk utrikespolitik—fnissfaktorn är borta’ [Feminist Swedish foreign policy—snigger factor is gone], *I Fokus*, newsletter from Arbetidsliv i Norden [Worklife in the Nordics], Tema: Jämställdhet i krig och fred [Theme: Equality in war and peace], publ. online Mar. 2016 (our translation), <http://www.arbetidslivinorden.org/i-fokus/i-fokus-2016/jaemstaellldhet-i-krig-och-fred/article.2016-03-03.2922520639>.

¹⁷ Towns, Bjarnegård and Jezierska, *More than a label, less than a revolution*.

The constraining force of international law

A first reason why many gender equality features of foreign policy may endure is that international law and soft regulation now require states to take gender equality into consideration when conducting foreign policy. Indeed, the FFP was never a strictly Swedish pursuit. Instead, it was embedded in a web of international norms, institutions and agreements on women's rights and gender equality, hosted by regional and global organizations. This web has developed over more than a century, intensifying since the 1970s, and it has more recently come to place demands on the gender equality content of foreign policy. Much of it consists of 'soft regulation', non-compliance with which might involve disapproval and stigma but does not result in legal sanctions.¹⁸ Soft regulation includes the many benchmarks, handbooks, codes of conduct, gender toolkits and other instructional guides that shape foreign policy by setting standards for what policy ought to look like in practice and putting social pressure on states to live up to these standards. Such standard-setting can be quite influential, shaping policy content in different foreign policy areas.¹⁹

The development cooperation policy of donor countries such as Sweden is shaped by a great deal of international soft regulation on gender equality. One crucial example is the *Guidelines for gender equality and women's empowerment in development cooperation*, first formulated by the OECD DAC in 1983 to provide instructions for donors to integrate gender equality goals. The DAC uses a gender equality policy marker to track financial flows, identifying and publicizing gaps between donor policy statements and actual financial commitments to put pressure on donors. The UN is another important forum for soft regulation of development cooperation policy. The UN Decade for Women (1975–1985) and the UN Beijing Conference in 1995 were pivotal for formulating ideas and goals for gender and development, culminating with the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action—arguably the most progressive blueprint ever to advance women's rights²⁰—and its calls on donor states to adopt gender-sensitive policies in their development cooperation programmes. Since then, the UN General Assembly has adopted the influential resolution Agenda 2030 with its sustainable development goals (SDGs). SDG 5, 'Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls', delineates nine separate specific gender-related development targets. Numerous other institutions, including among others the EU, the World Bank and regional development banks, have also set and disseminated gender equality standards for states' donor policy. It would be very difficult for a donor state, including Sweden,

¹⁸ Marian Sawer, Lee Ann Banaszak, Jacqui True and Johanna Kantola, 'Introduction to the handbook of feminist governance', in Marian Sawer, Lee Ann Banaszak, Jacqui True and Johanna Kantola, eds, *Handbook of feminist governance* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), pp 1–13 at p. 4.

¹⁹ For example, Ann E. Towns and Bahar Rumelili, 'Taking the pressure: unpacking the relation between norms, social hierarchies and social pressures on states', *European Journal of International Relations* 23: 4, 2017, pp. 756–79, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066116682070>.

²⁰ UN Women, *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Beijing +5 political declaration and outcome* (New York: UN Women, 2015), <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2015/01/beijing-declaration>.

to radically depart from these transnational norms and the development policies of other OECD members.

Soft regulation of gender equality in trade and security policy is not nearly as highly developed. Nonetheless, it does exist. The international institutions that help govern trade have recently turned their attention to the differential impact of trade on men and women, including policy suggestions to make trade practices compatible with gender equality. In 2017, 118 members and observers of the World Trade Organization (WTO), including Sweden, adopted a joint declaration on trade and women's economic empowerment on the margins of the WTO ministerial conference in Buenos Aires.²¹ Signatories recognize that trade may have a differential impact on women and men and that trade policies need to be formulated to reduce rather than exacerbate gender inequalities. A 2020 report by the WTO called on states to pay attention to gender in trade, to then develop policies to increase women's market access, increase women's capacity to engage in international trade, and ensure that vulnerable groups of women are not left out of the gains from trade.²² The OECD has provided a framework that states can use to better understand the gender impacts of their trade policies on men and women as consumers, entrepreneurs and workers.²³ Similar policy briefs and policy recommendations have been developed by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the EU and other institutions where Sweden is an active member. What is more, non-binding gender-related recommendations have been included in many trade agreements, including in around one-third of the 353 regional trade agreements in force in 2022.²⁴ In 2020, a Global Trade and Gender Arrangement was announced, promoted by Canada, Chile and New Zealand.²⁵ This encouraged mutually supportive gender and trade actions among state parties.

Since soft regulation is not binding, it can be disregarded by governments, even when doing so risks a loss of status. However, there is also an existing and growing body of international regulations that place binding gender demands on foreign policy. One of these is the 1979 Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW), which all but a handful of UN member states have signed or ratified. The CEDAW provides a legally binding framework that extends to trade.²⁶ Since the 2010s, new trade agreements regularly include gender provisions, calling on states to take various gender-related factors

²¹ For example, World Trade Organization, 'Buenos Aires Declaration on trade and women's economic empowerment', 2017, https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/womenandtrade_e/buenos_aires_declaration_e.htm.

²² World Trade Organization and World Bank, *Women and trade: the role of trade in promoting gender equality* (Washington DC: WTO and World Bank, 2020), https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/publications_e/women_trade_pub2807_e.htm.

²³ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Trade and gender* (Paris: OECD, 2021), <https://www.oecd.org/trade/topics/trade-and-gender/documents/oecd-trade-and-gender.pdf>, p. 4.

²⁴ World Trade Organization Informal Working Group on Trade and Gender, 'Trade and gender-related provisions in regional trade agreements', 19 Sept. 2022, https://docs.wto.org/dol2fe/Pages/SS/directdoc.aspx?filename=q:/INF/TGE/COM_4.pdf, p. 2.

²⁵ See Government of Canada, 'Global trade and gender arrangement', n.d., https://www.international.gc.ca/trade-commerce/inclusive_trade-commerce_inclusif/itag-gaci/arrangement.aspx?lang=eng.

²⁶ Caroline Dommen, 'Gender provisions in trade: opportunities for few or protection for many?', International Institute for Sustainable Development, 7 June 2021, <https://www.iisd.org/articles/gender-provisions-trade>.

into account.²⁷ International treaties regulating the arms trade now also include language on taking human rights and gender-based violence into account when making decisions about exports of strategic products. For instance, article 7.4 of the 2014 UN Arms Trade Treaty requires of state parties that they assess the risk that exports will be ‘used to commit or facilitate serious acts of gender-based violence or serious acts of violence against women and children’ before allowing trade.²⁸

As a result of developments in international law, state signatories are not free to pick and choose whether to consider gender equality in foreign policy. They are bound to do so, whether they have declared (or retracted) a feminist foreign policy. The mushrooming body of handbooks, toolkits and other forms of soft regulation adds further inspiration, as well as social pressure, to do so. In the Swedish case, to fully step back from a FFP would entail initiating withdrawal processes from treaties in which Sweden—and a large number of other like-minded states—participate. It would also entail ignoring international soft regulation on gender equality and active measures to no longer participate in the forums where such norms are developed.

The constraining force of decentralized foreign policy implementation

A second reason why many gender-equality features of foreign policy may endure can be found in the way the steering and implementation of foreign policy are organized. Policy is never self-executing—government policy needs to be interpreted and concretized by civil servants in bureaucratic agencies and embassies. While the steering and implementation of all policy is complex, foreign policy is often particularly complicated, since it covers so many topics and since a country’s foreign policy is executed through embassies, delegations and agencies located all over the world. Implementing actors are often quite distant from foreign policy-makers, not least geographically, which often gives them quite a lot of leeway. Without contradicting government policy, they may execute foreign policy in ways they see fit, including continuing their concrete work with gender equality despite the changes in more abstract government policy.

Let us use the Swedish Foreign Service as an illustration. This consists of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and 138 foreign missions (91 embassies located abroad, 30 ambassadors located in Stockholm, nine consulates general and eight multilateral missions).²⁹ The MFA is at the core of the policy complex, but each mission is also a formally autonomous authority, mostly operating at a distance from Stockholm. Each mission needs to concretize the government’s abstract principles and foreign policy directives as it sees fit. In addition, around ten public agencies are governed by the Swedish MFA, and these are also autonomous organizations, tasked with independently implementing foreign policy. Of these, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) is probably the best known.

²⁷ Dommen, ‘Gender provisions in trade’.

²⁸ See the Arms Trade Treaty website, <https://thearmstradetreaty.org/>.

²⁹ Towns, Bjarnegård and Jezierska, *More than a label, less than a revolution*.

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These relatively autonomous foreign policy actors received considerable training and sensitizing on gender issues during the eight years of FFP. The MFA not only instructed them to conduct FFP: it also involved the entire foreign service in the development of the FFP, provided gender training and created institutional infrastructure for implementing the policy.³⁰ A few months after the launch of the FFP, MFA leadership asked all MFA staff to contribute to the development of the FFP, resulting in the submission of over 100 reflective reports. The investment in innovative thinking around gender equality in foreign policy was thus considerable. What is more, by 2022 some 55 per cent of embassy staff had received training in gender equality and/or FFP.³¹ This is a very large proportion, particularly given that mandatory training is not used in the Swedish foreign service.

A majority of Swedish foreign policy staff have thus been made more aware of gender inequalities and have learned more about their causes and effects, and they have been trained to gear concrete Swedish policy interventions towards alleviating gender inequalities. Conducting such work only partially hinges on valuing gender equality as an end in itself—there is also overwhelming evidence that gender inequalities hinder economic growth and help produce violent conflicts. Having learned about the ways in which gender equality and the empowerment of women promote economic growth and social stability, diplomats may continue to pursue gender equality as an effective means to these other foreign policy ends. The decentralized nature of foreign policy implementation, coupled with the formal autonomy of embassies and agencies in the case of Sweden, thus leads to a certain path dependence in foreign policy, as diplomats and other foreign policy staff are able to continue working in ways they choose to reach the overarching goals of their government.

The constraining force of international role expectations

A third and final reason many gender equality features of foreign policy may endure can be found in international role expectations. Attentiveness to role expectations emerged among foreign policy scholars in the 1970s and has informed analyses of foreign policy ever since. The importance of international expectations on a state and its role on the world stage for foreign policy behaviour is now well recognized. Diplomats and other foreign policy actors respond to requests and expectations by their foreign colleagues, including international organizations, foreign publics, civil society organizations and more. These expectations do not suddenly and dramatically change with a shift in a government's foreign policy declarations, unless new policy is consistently and meticulously implemented over a sustained period of time.

Sweden has felt expectations as a gender equality champion for at least two and a half decades, since the mid-1990s, when—at a historical juncture—several processes converged that highlighted Swedish gender equality. One of these was

³⁰ Towns, Bjarnegård and Jeziarska, *More than a label, less than a revolution*.

³¹ Towns, Bjarnegård and Jeziarska, *More than a label, less than a revolution*, p. 14.

the introduction of two new gender equality indices by the UN Development Programme in 1995. At the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, Sweden was declared to be the world's most gender-equal state.³² Furthermore, in the early 1990s Sweden was preparing for potential membership of the EU. The government commissioned an official investigation of the consequences of membership for social welfare and gender equality in Sweden. The final report concluded that Sweden was 'ahead' of Europe with regard to gender equality and that other countries had 'high expectations' for an active Swedish role on gender equality.³³ These developments led to expectations of Swedish international leadership on gender issues. In subsequent government reports, we can read that many countries 'inquire for Swedish experiences in the area of gender equality and Sweden is often considered a model country'.³⁴ In 1996, gender equality became a stated aim of all Swedish international development cooperation for the first time, and Sweden has since increased its gender equality activities in a range of foreign policy domains. Such a pro-gender policy only augmented international expectations that Sweden act on gender issues.

After the launch of the FFP these expectations intensified. In the course of interviewing Swedish embassy and foreign policy agency staff, we have heard the expression 'a FFP carries obligations' countless times, from staff in different positions and in different parts of the world. Even after the FFP was retracted in 2022, our interviewees reported that they continued to be asked to participate in and contribute to gender equality events. These role expectations have a much longer history than the FFP and it is unlikely that they will cease simply because the FFP was retracted. We thus expect that Sweden's role as gender equality promoter, which was intensified but did not originate with the FFP, will continue to exert force on Swedish foreign policy, contributing to the endurance of gender equality activities among Swedish foreign policy actors.

Concluding thoughts: the 'stickiness' of the Swedish FFP

The retraction of the Swedish FFP in 2022 has undoubtedly been a blow to efforts to promote gender equality, and these efforts are bound to be scaled back to some extent. Removing the feminist label is a powerful signal that the new government has downgraded work with gender equality, and we are hearing from Swedish diplomats that this is having effects in the MFA and its agencies and embassies. The retraction also reverberates internationally. To give one example, with the original

³² Ann Towns, 'Paradoxes of (in)equality: something is rotten in the gender equal state of Sweden', *Cooperation and Conflict* 37: 2, 2002, pp. 157–79, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836702037002975>.

³³ Government of Sweden, 'EG, kvinnorna och välfärden: social välfärd och jämställdhet mellan kvinnor och män i ett europeiskt perspektiv. Betänkande av EG-konsekvensutredningarna: social välfärd och jämställdhet' [The EC, women and welfare: social welfare and equality between women and men from a European perspective. Report of the consequences of membership of the EC: social welfare and equality], SOU 1993:117, <https://lagen.nu/sou/1993:117>.

³⁴ Parliament of Sweden, 'Jämställdhetspolitiken (Regeringens skrivelse)' [Equality policy (Parliament's report)], Skr 1996/97:41, p. 73, https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-och-lagar/dokument/skrivelse/jamstalldhet-spolitiken_GK0341/html.

FFP retracted, more recent (and more powerful) ‘FFP states’ such as Germany may take the lead, directing role expectations away from Sweden. The retraction also demonstrates that even Sweden—the pioneer of the FFP, with a long record of pro-gender foreign policy—may backtrack. In a global context of backlash against gender issues, this may be of symbolic value and a source of inspiration for those in opposition to women’s rights, including within Sweden.

That said, there are good reasons to expect that the retraction of the FFP will not result in the undoing of all the gender equality activities that the FFP entailed. As we have detailed above, the ways in which the gender equality content of foreign policy is governed may indeed ensure a certain continuity. The institutionalization of gender equality into international treaties and soft law, the decentralized character of foreign policy implementation—which leaves the concretization of policy in the hands of a large number of officials and staff dispersed across the world—and international role expectations are all governance features that remove control from particular governments. Thus, even though the new government places much less emphasis on gender equality, the consequences for the actual execution of foreign policy may be less dramatic than one may expect.

The Swedish FFP may prove to be sticky in an additional sense: it has inspired roughly a dozen other governments in different parts of the world to follow suit, declaring FFPs of their own. Major states such as Germany have now adopted FFP, and the FFP has been picked up by agenda-setting states such as Mexico and Colombia in Latin America. What is more, a number of additional states are joining forces under the FFP umbrella without having declared an FFP as such: in January 2022, Sweden’s incumbent foreign minister, Ann Linde, announced a Feminist Foreign Policy Plus (FFP+) group which at that time included 16 states.³⁵ The FFP thus continues to have a life of its own, beyond the original policy declared by Margot Wallström in 2014.

³⁵ By late 2023 the FFP+ group had grown in number and included Albania, Argentina, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Luxembourg, Mexico, Mongolia, the Netherlands, Rwanda, Spain and Tunisia.