In February 2015, not long after declaring that Sweden was practicing feminist foreign policy (FFP)—making it the first country explicitly to do so—Foreign Minister Margot Wallstrom, in a speech to the Swedish parliament, detailed religiously sanctioned abuses of women’s rights in Saudi Arabia, and described the sentence of a thousand lashes for a blogger who had criticized Islam as ‘medieval’. A month later she was blocked at the last minute from delivering a long-planned speech on women’s rights to the Arab League. The next day Sweden canceled an agreement on arms sales to Saudi. Saudi immediately recalled its ambassador and temporarily suspended business visas for Swedes. Arab commentators condemned Wallstrom’s use of the word ‘medieval’ as a slur reflecting deeper Islamophobia.

The move also triggered a united howl of protest from the Swedish business establishment. Thirty CEOs signed a letter claiming that her move jeopardized Sweden’s standing as a trade partner. The Swedish
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king—a symbol of traditional patriarchy—hauled Wallstrom in for a scolding and sent an mollifying letter to Riyadh. The feminist IR theorist Jacqui True described this ‘spontaneous solidarity’ as a strong example of ‘patriarchy at work’ or: ‘regimes of masculine hegemonies and the unequal entitlements that hold such hierarchical political economic orders together at every level.’ No solidarity was offered by any of the countries that claim to foreground human rights, particularly those in the EU, whose diplomats avoided commenting until the spat blew over. An adjective dreaded in the world of foreign policy started to be applied to Wallstrom: ‘undiplomatic’.

This episode exposes tensions in the pursuit of feminist objectives via the state. Voicing an inconvenient truth about Saudi human rights abuses, Wallstrom revealed how routinely ethics are sacrificed for superficial international harmony and substantial domestic profit—the unsavory trade-offs that are the stuff of foreign policy. The incident also exposed the enormous foreign policy power of the private sector and the limits it puts on the pursuit of social justice (notwithstanding the potential of enlightened capitalism, discussed in Christian Busch’s chapter in this volume). Wallstrom’s feminist foreign policy was by definition not just ‘undiplomatic’; it disrupted assumptions about what is in the ‘national interest’, exposing the gendered and racial harms caused overseas by domestic businesses, including Sweden’s arms trade.

Feminist approaches to International Relations (IR) theory and to the practice of global affairs have problematized the core focus of IR analysis: the construction of national interest and the way states navigate the tensions between the benefits of cooperation beyond borders and the protections afforded by the defense of national sovereignty. The continued centrality of the state in global affairs is discussed in Ankersen’s chapter in this volume, and this chapter shows how feminists are seeking to repurpose state-to-state relationships to advance gender equality in international space. The uneasy fit between feminist foreign policy (FFP) and conventional approaches to national security and economic growth, however, exposes some of the limitations of pursuing a feminist project with the tools of patriarchal national institutions, even in a context as ‘woke’ as postindustrial welfare state Sweden.

Feminists have registered impressive successes in international space. There are women in leadership positions in institutions of global governance today, and in national and regional security institutions. Most multilateral governance and security institutions have included the promotion of gender equality in their core missions. In 2010 the UN
created UN Women, an agency with a significant operational and normative mandate to advance gender equality; in 2015 the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals included a stand-alone goal on gender equality, and in 2017 the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres committed to achieving gender parity across the UN by 2026. The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, produced at the UN’s Fourth World Conference on women, is a wide-ranging progressive global political settlement on the imperative of achieving gender equality. UN Security Council resolution 1325 (passed in 2000) and nine subsequent resolutions establish the need to build women’s participation in conflict resolution and peacekeeping. By 2020, four countries—Canada, France, Mexico, and Sweden—declared themselves to be practicing FFP. Two of them, France and Mexico, set themselves the task of hosting, in 2020, a 25 years-on reboot of Beijing, what in effect have been a Fifth World Conference on Women, had the COVID-19 pandemic not scuppered that plan.

But in the everyday practice of diplomacy, development, and trade, and in the crisis-driven practices of security, conflict resolution, and humanitarian response, gender equality issues are still often treated as an afterthought or optional extra. This has consequences. While near-parity has been achieved in education, the rate of women’s engagement in the market economy has slowed since 2000 and reversed in some contexts, the gender pay gap remains significant, women hold just a quarter of positions in representative politics, women continue to do the bulk of unpaid care work, and gender-based violence continues at a high level, affecting one in three women. Gender-based discrimination and injustice continues to be treated as a matter of cultural preference, protected by notions of national sovereignty, and thus not meant for comment or action across borders; any such engagement would be ‘undiplomatic’.

The fact of ongoing discrimination indicates that feminist principles and approaches have not been institutionalized securely. Lately, gains in women’s rights have been reversed by conservative governments in some countries that, for instance, challenge women’s reproductive autonomy (for instance the Trump administration’s prohibition on funding overseas reproductive health efforts that include abortion referrals) or that relax the policing of domestic violence (for instance the 2012 legislation in Russia decriminalizing the first few instances of spousal battery). In some contexts, conservative and populist leaders have mobilized misogyny along with xenophobia to construct atavistic patriarchal notions of nation,
and are converting national women’s rights bureaucracies into institutions to promote traditional families and to boost population growth. Although global commitments to women’s rights—such as the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action—have been historically recent and unevenly implemented, a determined effort to dismantle them has been mounted by a growing collection of states that are hostile to women’s sexual and reproductive freedoms, and that forbid expression of nonconforming sexual orientation or gender identity. Does the recent emergence of FFP, and the fact that France and Mexico sponsored a Beijing+25 debate in 2020, suggest a more robust global institutionalization of feminist principles? I argue that is not the case so far, nor will it be until state and multilateral sponsors of gender equality are willing to risk diplomatic embarrassment and isolation by refusing to sideline women’s rights.

**THE CORE FEMINIST DILEMMA: LIMITED LEVERAGE**

Feminist IR theorists differ in their perspectives on whether patriarchal states, products of political settlements that have excluded women, can be vehicles for the advancement of women’s rights. Liberal theorists identify feminist outcomes in democratic welfare states. Socialist feminists are more skeptical, given the privileging of private property and profit over equality in the context of hegemonic neoliberal economic policy. Post-structural and queer theorists suggest that ‘state feminism’ may be a fantasy in which, to quote Connell, feminists are merely: ‘Appealing from Caesar unto Caesar’, a self-defeating effort to repurpose hostile institutions. Feminists from the Global South focus on the racist dynamics embedded in western states and doubt their capacity to escape the reproduction of imperialist social relations. Most feminist IR theorists agree however that because states—the core institutions of international politics—are gendered masculine, the outcomes of international processes reflect and perpetuate stereotypes about gender roles and relations, and the injustices these engender.

Yet international institutions are also more than the sum of their nation-state parts. They can take on agendas of their own, particularly when animated by universal principles on human rights. This is why feminists have put considerable stock in the capacity of international organizations to override domestic patriarchies via exposure of national-level abuses.
Even though accountability systems in international institutions are weak, they have provided intellectual and normative support for the demands of domestic feminist movements, for instance in relation to criminalizing violence against women. The (belated) global recognition that violence against women, including in intimate relationships, is a crime, represents one of the most significant revolutions in human relationships of the past century. While laws against domestic violence had been passed in some countries by the 1970s, it was global campaigning by feminist movements in the 1980s and 90s that elevated the issue to a matter for international attention. The global shift from seeing domestic violence as a private disciplinary matter to a crime is held up by constructivist IR theorists as a paradigmatic example of normative change that can only be explained by international principled cooperation, since it was not driven by, nor did it benefit, any particular global power or alliance.

To be realized, however, such normative shifts require conversion into national law. States are thus the main obstacle to, and at the same time vehicle for, progress in women’s rights. In this regard the main constraint to the feminist social transformation project is a simple matter of political leverage. There are few countries in which the majority commits to redistribute power and resources between women and men. Sometimes there is not even a majority among women for this change. Women’s race, class, ethnicity, sexuality affect the degree to which they mobilize on the basis of shared interests as a gender. Some women may not perceive gender-based justice to be intolerable, particularly where they have bought into the ‘patriarchal bargain’ where rights are traded for protection. Divisions in the constituency of women weaken the political pressure on public authorities to take action.

So, to be blunt: gender equality policy benefits a collectivity that may not necessarily act collectively. Further, what feminists want—criminalization of abuses of women’s rights, reproductive autonomy, an end of the gender division of labor, men’s engagement in care and domestic work—triggers intense resistance from individual patriarchs and the private sector. This combination of resistance and limited leverage significantly heightens the level of contestation or antagonism around women’s rights and weakens incentives for powerful actors to defend women’s rights in public policymaking forums.

Strong states are needed to sustain feminist policy efforts when they so significantly challenge not only the organization of work and family life
but also the authority of religious establishments and the social construction of sexuality and gender identity. Feminist social change projects can be costly too. Economic systems built on women’s unpaid care work need to be restructured so that the costs of childcare and eldercare are more equally shared.

Because of limited political leverage, feminists have simultaneously sought to institutionalize or mainstream gender equality within public policy institutions, and to sustain external pressure through lobbying and critique—working ‘in and against’ public authority.\textsuperscript{20}

\section*{Compartamental Institutionalization}

The practical project of making gender equality a core consideration, and ideally an objective of the way states interact internationally, has involved diluting the striking male dominance of public decision-making, and bringing feminist principles to bear in problem identification, analysis, resource allocation, and operations. At the national level, feminists have pursued a long-term project of ‘state feminism’,\textsuperscript{21} with the intention of constitutionalizing laws and establishing social practices that punish outright abuses of women’s rights, that create incentives for men to engage in care work (for instance, through paid paternity leave), that erode heteronormativity (for instance, through marriage equality), and that do not force women to pay for childbearing (for instance, through paid maternity leave or pensions for mothers).

State-level gender mainstreaming efforts have encountered plenty of direct resistance, and are often characterized by the ghettoization of the gender equality effort into an underfunded stand-alone government unit like a small ministry (often connected to children’s issues, sports, culture). To deflect resistance, gender mainstreaming is presented as a ‘win-win’ proposition, not a significant challenge to established politics and resource allocation.

Ghettoization has also characterized the institutionalization of gender equality in international institutions. At the UN, the Commission on the Status of Women (1946) tended to address social, not security or political matters, following a long-established tradition of leaving the ‘low’ politics of social matters to women and elevating the ‘high’ politics of diplomacy and security to male-dominated arenas such as the UN Security Council.\textsuperscript{22} The eventual creation of four tiny and competing gender equality promotion offices at the UN with overlapping mandates seemed
designed to fail, pitting feminist leaders against each other, rather than against the patriarchy of the UN system.

The creation in 2010 of the UN Entity for Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment (UN Women) brought all four gender offices under one umbrella, with responsibilities to coordinate gender equality initiatives across the UN system. It was also awarded the same rank for its chief—Under-Secretary-General—as enjoyed by other UN agencies, and in a helpful move, the US, at the time of negotiating the details, provided that the head of UN Women should also have a stand-alone seat in the Secretary-General’s senior management team (in other words, UN Women would not be cluster-represented, as are some other agencies, by another, larger agency). The sting was that UN Women was to have virtually no core budget derived from mandatory member state payments—it would have to generate its own operating budget from voluntary contributions. It was not until 2019 that UN Women finally reached its initial estimated annual budget target of $500 million.

Ironically—or providentially—UN Women was created at the very moment that the extent of the backlash against women’s rights made itself more apparent. In the 2012 meeting of the CSW, for instance, conservative states from Russia to Egypt to Indonesia worked together to prevent consensus on the topic of violence against women. A few years later, Belarus announced the creation of ‘The Group of Friends of the Family’, about 25 former Soviet states, Muslim and Catholic-dominated states, plus the Vatican, that coordinate to halt normative progress on reproductive rights and sexual orientation and gender identity. Attacks on women’s rights agreements intensified after the Trump victory in the US, when US representatives at UN forums began systematically objecting to references to reproductive health, even contraceptive supply, started to request deletion of the word ‘gender’ from UN documents, and even references to former agreements such as the Beijing Platform for Action.

UN Women’s appearance is providential only, however, if it sustains a defense of feminist policies within and beyond the UN. Observers have raised concerns that becoming mainstream has brought a shift from the antagonistic politics of monitoring the UN’s performance to a conformist project of cooperation. For instance, UN Women took no significant action between 2010 and 2017 on the long-neglected goal (set in 1994) of gender parity in UN staffing. That had to wait until the new Secretary-General began his tenure in 2017 and personally accelerated the gender parity effort. His efforts stalled in 2018 when the male-dominated field
staff unions objected to preferential hiring of women, and since then neither he nor UN Women have confronted staff unions. UN Women’s capacity to insist on feminist objectives in international relations will be shaped by the degree to which important feminist leading states at the UN move beyond the cooperative convention in gender equality debates. Whether and how this will happen might be extrapolated from how some pioneer states are experimenting with feminist foreign policy.

Emergence and Definitions of Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP)

Margot Wallstrom announced out of the gate on her appointment as foreign minister in October 2014 that she would practice feminist foreign policy, though she did not immediately define what she meant. On International Women’s Day 2019, before hosting a G7 meeting in which, building on the example set by Canada the previous year of holding a parallel meeting of feminist leaders, France announced that it was also practicing ‘feminist foreign policy’. Its press release was scant on details save for the promise to release more funds to support feminist movements, and to produce a policy paper eventually on what it understands by FFP. Mexico declared itself to be practicing FFP in December 2019. Announcing the policy, Foreign Secretary Casaubón added that the whole government was feminist, and said the objective of the policy was: ‘to reduce and eliminate structural differences, gender gaps and inequalities, in order to build a more just and prosperous society’.

Canada formally declared itself to be practicing FFP in a sweeping agenda-defining speech to the Montreal Council on Foreign Relations on February 21, 2020 by its new Minister of Foreign Affairs, François-Philippe Champagne. The groundwork for the announcement had been laid by the Trudeau government which assembled the building blocks of feminist foreign policy since 2015. It had committed to ensure that bulk of its foreign aid (95 percent) would go to gender equality by 2021–2022. It had spearheaded initiatives to increase numbers of women in multilateral peacekeeping, and was joining with other OECD donors such as the Netherlands, the Nordic countries, to provide substitute financing for the loss of US funds for organizations around the world providing contraception and abortion services.

There is no common definition of FFP among these pioneer practitioners. In 2015, Wallstrom defined FFP as ‘standing against the systematic and global subordination of women’—a pithy definition that
incorporates the contentious nature of the feminist project (‘standing against’) and indicated that Sweden seeks to challenge patriarchies beyond its borders. In her speeches on the topic, she fleshed out what this means with her ‘3 R’s’ ‘toolbox’: ‘Representation, Rights and Reallocation’: the promotion of women’s leadership in public decision-making in politics and peace processes, advocacy for women’s rights particularly in relation to ending gender-based violence, and a gender-equal allocation of global income and natural resources.  

Canada produced a white paper on its feminist foreign policy as part of its bid for Security Council membership in 2020, and linked FFP to its efforts defend human rights in multilateral security policy.

Sweden, France, and Canada are wealthy welfare states with significant foreign aid programs, giving the impression that feminist foreign policy—and perhaps the costs associated with criticizing abuses of women’s rights elsewhere—is a risk wealthy states can take. Mexico disrupts that impression. As one observer noted at the time of Mexico’s announcement: ‘For an Indian feminist who has been watching, reading and writing about this new kind of foreign policy for a decade, wistfully and enviously from a distance, this opens the possibility that wealth and prosperity are not prerequisites’.

Mexico’s feminist foreign policy announcement appeared timed to ensure consistency in its approach to hosting, along with France and UN Women, a series of global feminist consultations in 2020 designed to update the Beijing settlement. Its FFP declaration may also be intended to highlight its liberal credentials in contrast with the US’s revivalist patriarchy. It is also presented as part of its leftist President Obrador’s focus on tackling violence and inequality domestically, backed by women in the legislature (Mexico ranks above the other FFP countries with almost half of seats in Congress won by women in the 2018 election) most of whom support scaling up the national response to violence against women.

According to Martha Delgado, undersecretary for Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights in the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the policy has five principles: foreign policy with a gender perspective, gender parity within the Foreign Ministry, a Foreign Ministry free of violence that is safe for all (this refers to sexual harassment and other abuses in the ministry), visible equality, feminism in all areas of the Foreign Ministry. It is notable that four of these five principles focus on building women’s presence and feminist objectives within the ministry itself. A Mexican blogger has pointed out that the ministry has plenty to do on that score:
Delgado is the spokesperson for the foreign policy because she is the only woman among the Ministry’s top 11 positions. It is clear that its FFP starting points will be a recruitment and promotion drive, an effort to address sexual harassment, and of course its outward-facing commitment to amplifying feminist civil society voices in global priority-setting, even given the postponement of the 2020 Beijing+25 meetings.

Some observers suggest that it is ironic that Mexico, among the 25 countries with the highest rates of gender-based violence, is asserting feminist global leadership. Excellent domestic performance on women’s rights should not, however, be a requirement for the feminist foreign policy effort—if it were, few countries would even contemplate it, and practitioners of FFP would be held to impossible standards. Mexico is not expected to boast success on the issue of violence against women, but to approach it rather as the significant shared global emergency that it is.

Mexico in fact was listed second to last on a list of 25 OECD countries (Turkey came last) in a 2017 initial attempt to develop an index of FFP by Christine Alwan and S. Laurel Weldon. Alwan and Welden assess the relative degree of feminism in a country’s foreign policy by analyzing indicators regarding the size of the armed forces and the importance of the arms trade, national ratification of global treaties on women’s rights and race equality, the proportion of development assistance dedicated to promoting gender equality, the proportion of defense, trade, and aid leadership positions held by women, etc. While these are sensible measures, they may not apply to countries without a significant aid program (such as Mexico). They also do not include assessments of potentially meaningful signals of feminist foreign policy such as the relative power of military leaders in national decision-making, or the extent to which national foreign policy representatives defend women’s rights in international spaces, such as multilateral negotiations.

An alternative approach is to assess FFP against a set of feminist standards. Lyric Thompson has extended Wallstrom’s ‘3 R’s’ framework, adding ‘research and reporting’, and ‘reach’ to the promotion of equality in *rights*, increases in *resources* for gender equality, and efforts to ensure women’s *representation*—in internal processes and external outcomes. She lists expectations such as increased funding for women’s organizations domestically and overseas, use of gender-responsive budgeting methods, design of trading relationships to support industries that employ
women and have a climate-neutral impact, engagement of conflict-affected women in conflict resolution, and attention to the intersections of race, class, sexuality, etc., with gender as vectors of discrimination. ‘Reach’ means ‘Horizontal integration of gender-responsive measures by applying a gender lens to all policies and programs’, including ‘Coherence across aid, trade, defense, diplomacy’.42

Critics have been quick to point out contradictions in feminist foreign policy, particularly on the matter of horizontal integration. These contradictions are inevitable to any human rights-based approaches in a field where calculations of national security and economic interests can over-ride the ethical treatment of other people and nations. Three specific issues—security, arms trade, and migration—have posed challenges to FFP principles and are discussed next.

Security and the Use of ‘Hard’ Power

High degrees of militarization (a large standing army, military tactics in law enforcement) are linked to higher levels of violence against women and a valorization of force-based solutions by the almost exclusively male leadership of conventional armies.43 Mexico and France both figure in the list of the top 30 standing armies. Mexico ranks 17th with 336,000 personnel in 2019 (0.26 percent of the population). France also has a large army with 307,000 active military personnel (0.46 percent of the population).44 There is no requirement that feminists be pacifists though it is common to assume that feminists value non-violent and persuasion-based methods of conflict resolution.45 Whether this is true or not, feminist foreign policy has to address the fact that violations of international law might require ‘hard’ security responses to establish ‘red lines’ on international crimes, or to address threats to national security (for instance from domestic or foreign terrorists).

Of the four FFP countries, France deploys its military capabilities most kinetically in international affairs. It is a permanent member of the UN Security Council and a nuclear-weapons state, and has been active in controversial and costly (in terms of civilian lives lost and economic and social damage) overseas military engagements including providing support for international efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, leading the UN-sanctioned NATO 2011 air strikes that triggered regime change in Libya. At about the same time that France declared its FFP, news broke France had covertly supplied weaponry, training, and special forces to Libyan strongman, Khalifa Haftar, who was undermining UN efforts to mediate
differences between the loose alliance of militias in the ‘Government of National Accord’, efforts that included a ceasefire agreement and peace talks in Palermo in November 2019. For the French, direct national security and economic calculations justified disrupting this international effort. France seeks to limit the flow of migrants from North Africa and the Middle East, and any extremist mobilization that could generate a repeat of the 2015 terrorist attacks on Paris. According to one report: ‘the dominant view in government circles in Paris is that strongman solutions are the only way to keep a lid on Islamist militancy and mass migration, and *tant pis* (tough luck) for human rights and democracy’. The contradictions between outsourcing counterterrorism to ‘strongmen’, and feminist foreign policy are yet to be addressed.

So far the practitioners of feminist foreign policy have largely dodged the issue of the conceivability of a hawkish FFP. Some versions of feminist practice in relation to national and international security prioritize the feminization of armies through increased recruitment of women to combat roles. A focus on women in national and international forces is anathema to some feminist IR theorists and activists in the ‘women, peace and security’ field, as it validates militarism as an expression of sovereignty, and ‘pinkwashes’ violence as a valid response to crises. Militarism—even with a feminized military, can limit the pursuit of women’s rights to a project of protection, where women are seen primarily as victims in need of rescue. The easy fit of a gendered ‘protection’ approach in security frameworks explains the significantly greater alacrity with which institutions such as the UN Security Council have responded to feminist campaigns for policy attention to sexual violence in conflict, compared to the demand for women’s participation in peace processes. The ‘protection’ framing inevitably reinforces conventional gender role assumptions.

**Arms Industry and Trade**

France is among the world’s top three weapons exporters, behind the US and Russia; Sweden ranks 15th and Canada 19th. Alliances with unsavory actors are the stuff of strategic calculations and in the case of France that extends to an alignment with Emirati, Saudi, and Egyptian regimes, who top the charts for France’s weapons sales, while Canada and Sweden both resumed arms sales to Saudi after briefly suspending them over the diplomatic incidents described earlier. Weapons provision to authoritarian regimes is simply incompatible with the project of
promoting gender equality. International law can now be invoked by practitioners of FFP to support the ending of arms deals—the 2013 UN Arms Trade Treaty requires states to stop exporting weapons to parties credibly suspected of using them in acts of gender-based violence. But only 97 states have ratified the treaty, and Wallstrom may have been the very first to take relevant action when she ended Sweden’s agreement to sell arms to Saudi on human rights grounds, showing the monumental difficulty of challenging such a lucrative industry. The unified protest across the wide range of Swedish industry (mentioned earlier) also shows how connected arms sales are to other bilateral trade deals. It is not immaterial to France’s calculations about supporting Haftar in Libya, for instance, that the French oil company Total stands to gain from access to oil fields he controls.

Migration
Three of the countries practicing FFP have experienced destabilizing effects from recent episodes of mass migration. Sweden and France were destination countries for refugees from Syria and other conflicts in the Europe’s 2015–2016 refugee crisis. Mexico is a transit country for migrants fleeing criminal violence in Central America and heading for the US. In the 2015–2016 European refugee crisis Sweden received 163,000 asylum seekers, an influx so significant that it changed gendered demographics (70 percent of these migrants were men). Several incidents of violence against women triggered anti-Muslim sentiment, a tightening of border controls and restrictions in family reunification provisions in order to keep numbers of immigrants down. Restrictions on family reunification had a negative impact on women, since female relatives were stranded either in camps in the Mediterranean, or in dangerous situations in home countries, notably Syria.

Some countries with conservative governments have, in the context of increased migration pressure in recent years, restricted gender-based persecution asylum claims—as the Trump administration’s first Attorney General Jeff Sessions did in 2018. All four of the countries practicing FFP recognize gender (and sexuality)-based persecution as a valid basis for refugee status. However, gender-specific asylum claims are dwarfed by claims triggered by poverty, conflict, and climate change. Significant increases in immigrant numbers raise domestic tensions between popular expectations about the bounded character of the state, and in particular
notions of national identity and culture, and the inclusiveness and openness—and also costs—that a feminist migration and refugee policy could entail.

**Feminist Foreign Policy Is, by Definition, Undiplomatic**

In mid-2018, Sweden’s 2015 diplomatic spat with Saudi saw a new iteration when Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Freeland tweeted objections to the jailing of feminist activists in Saudi Arabia. Saudi retaliated by expelling Canada’s ambassador and other diplomats. It announced it would sell off Canadian assets, cease flights to Canada, and recall Saudi students from Canadian universities. Hunkering down to weather this reaction over several days in August immediately after Freeland’s tweets, officials of the foreign ministry anxiously surveyed social media in the hopes of support from Canada’s ‘like-minded’ partners. On August 6, in an email titled ‘Int. reactions and media roll-up’ one official reported ‘Very little. Only UN Human Rights has tweeted on the issue. I added other countries as fyi’s but they don’t discuss human rights/detained women’.55 A former policy director under a previous Canadian Prime minister lamented in an article in *The Guardian*: ‘we don’t have a single friend’.56 Freeland reached out to her US counterpart Michael Pompeo for support but the US instead urged Canada to swallow its objections, a response that observers felt emboldened Saudi in its human rights abuses.57 It was not until the exceptionally grisly murder of government critic Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul a few months later that a number of governments risked their trade and other relationships with Saudi Arabia to condemn its blatant abuse of human rights, and even then, there was little mention of what some have called its ‘gender apartheid’.58

That the Swedish and Canadian foreign ministers found themselves so significantly isolated for their temerity in calling out Saudi attacks on feminists is no surprise given that it is an informal international norm to excuse abuses of women’s rights as expressions of national culture. However, the jailing of Saudi feminists for no reason other than their ideology equates the defense of gender equality with a threat to the state and is an indicator of a serious backlash targeting feminism. This was indicated in a Freudian slip in late 2019 when the Saudi state security agency listed feminism, along with atheism and homosexuality, as an extremist ideology.59 In this hostility specifically to the feminist notion that gendered roles
and behaviors are learned and not innate, conservative regimes across the ideological spectrum are moving toward outlawing feminist thinking itself, for instance in the 2018 banning of gender studies in Hungary. Such moves will more deeply entrench masculinized notions of what is in the ‘national interest’. This makes international solidarity on gender equality more urgent, and will require willingness from the defenders of women’s rights to be more ‘undiplomatic’ and break international silence about abuses.

Domestic solidarity is also needed, and is not a given. A feature of foreign policy establishments, particularly those concerned with national security, is that they are often somewhat isolated from, and even at odds with, domestic decision-making bodies such as the legislature. This distancing provides a degree of autonomy to foreign policy establishments that can enable them to pursue policies that are not fully reflective of national preferences, but it can also mean that other parts of government will not meet feminist foreign policy objectives. This is clear from challenges in ensuring women’s participation in peace negotiations. In late 2018 Sweden hosted ceasefire and humanitarian access talks for Yemen. France participated in ceasefire and conflict mitigation talks on the Libya situation in November 2019 in Palermo. In both cases, negotiating parties did not include women, and in both cases, only a last-minute scramble generated tokenistic participation of several women who, added as an afterthought, were not in a position to influence discussions. The sustained participation of women in Track I and Track II conflict resolution efforts remains the least well-implemented feature of international commitments to the Security Council’s ‘Women Peace and Security’ agenda. That two self-declared practitioners of FFP could engineer no more than a token representation of women in Stockholm and Palermo reduces FFP to superficial virtue signaling, of no use to women’s peace and survival struggles.

**Weak States Cannot Govern for Equality: Good Governance and Effective States as a Feminist Priority**

In one of the most thoughtful early reflections on the emerging practice of FFP, Jacqui True notes: ‘To stop wars, we need to hold to account transnational business power, because it increasingly shapes state policies
more than it is shaped by them’, and she adds: ‘And we need to refocus our advocacy for international peace and security on state power’ because the ‘growth in arms expenditures and tax breaks for multinational business relative to austerity in state budgets for public health and education’ are indicative of the prioritization of private profit at home over welfare and justice. She does not link this observation to the neoliberal economic frameworks that now govern markets and distort state power, though elsewhere she and other feminists have exposed the socially destructive consequences of the hegemony of neoliberalism. The point is that FFP must address economic and financial frameworks that have curbed state capacities for constructive social engineering while expanding the coercive capacities of the state—deployed increasingly in defense of capital, not people.

This is a paradox for feminists who have long been profoundly ambivalent about state power in international space, seeking to limit the issues over which states can claim sovereignty in order to expand the scope of civil society and multilateral institutions to hold states to international standards on women’s rights. States continue to protect patriarchal privileges, to reproduce gender inequality through policies promoting heteronormativity or normalizing women’s relegation to unpaid care work. But states have also provided feminists with opportunities to make social and economic policy to engineer changes in families and markets. As such, states strong enough to promote social change can be allies for the feminist project.

There is another reason why support for state social engineering capacity is increasingly seen as a feminist priority: the hollowing out of state welfare resources has contributed to the lurch toward illiberalism in a number of developed and emerging economies including some of the world’s largest democracies (USA, India, Brazil). In these contexts, heightened economic inequality has ushered in right wing or market populists with affinities for military leadership and violent responses to social protest and dissent. These illiberal regimes scapegoat feminists, immigrants, and homosexuals as causes of social ills. Feminist IR theorists are reassessing former ambivalence about the state, considering the progressive policies that have been possible through the liberal state with social protection duties, and considering its enormous significance as a political community that is accessible and meaningful to ordinary people seeking accountability.
Support for state capacities to govern for equality must therefore be a central objective of FFP. States require high revenue generation and policy execution capacity to implement feminist policies in order to survive the political costs of pursuing sometimes unpopular social equality actions.\textsuperscript{64} States are also vital buffers between citizens and the negative effects of global capitalism and neoliberalism as they can regulate business practices and provide a social safety net for workers, including unpaid ones. Few feminist IR theorists have been comfortable suggesting that building state power should be a feminist responsibility, although in an early feminist IR initiative to ‘rethink the state’, Mona Harrington argued that feminists should build liberal welfare states that protect the vulnerable and that prevent subordination on the basis of ‘unchosen group identity’.\textsuperscript{65} Women have been able to access more power through states than markets, and securing political power for women (e.g., through gender quotas) and institutionalized policymaking (through national women’s bureaucracies) is another means of challenging patriarchy beyond civil society action.

**Conclusion: Feminism in Global Affairs Involve Contentious Politics**

For FFP to deliver the resources, rights, and representations that Wallstrom said it should, it will have to both build and confront state power: build state capacities to govern for equality, and confront domestic patriarchies, including military establishments, and transnational business, including arms industries. Strategic collaboration is needed between FFP establishments and the gendered bureaucracies in global and regional multilateral institutions. Since the driving energy behind gender equality projects, and the credibility of FFP, resides in the size and strength of domestic women’s movements, increased funding for women’s organizations and the protection of civil and political space for the pursuit of feminist social change objectives must be core objectives of FFP. FFP establishments must also examine the varieties of feminism they export and the degree to which these reflect the ambitions of the imagined beneficiaries of aid, trade, and security actions. Abortion is still illegal in most of Mexico\textsuperscript{66}—this presumably is not a position it plans to export. Sweden and France pursue a strategy of criminalizing sex work, arresting clients (not providers), a strategy that is opposed by sex workers’ organizations around the world and that drives sex work further into underground.\textsuperscript{67}
Analyzing Swedish feminist foreign policy in 2016, Karin Aggestam and Annika Bergman-Rosamond note that the ‘f-word’ ‘elevates politics from a broadly consensual orientation of gender mainstreaming toward more controversial politics, and specifically toward those that explicitly seek to negotiate and challenge power hierarchies and gendered institutions that hitherto defined global institutions and foreign and security policies’. The pursuit of feminist objectives in international space has entered a new phase, exposing the gendered biases embedded in political settlements and business deals. Confronting these biases at home and abroad cannot be avoided for the sake of diplomatic harmony. As FFP leaders are discovering when they find themselves isolated diplomatically, solidarity is a valuable resource. The COVID-19 pandemic appears to have triggered a setback for women’s rights, particularly in terms of labor force participation, and it has at the same time empowered some misogynistic authoritarians. This creates an imperative for the formation of new political alliances to hold the line on women’s rights—an important project for states professing FFP. Anything less reduces feminist foreign policy to toothless virtue signaling to an empty house, or, as noted by Mexican cultural theorist Sarai Aguilar Arriozola, to ‘politica exterior feminista de juguete’: toy feminist foreign policy.

Questions for Discussion

1. How is gender equality institutionalized in your country—what official bureaucracies review legislation and policies to ensure that they advance equal rights?
2. What are the major abuses of women’s rights in your country and who in government, civil society, private sector, etc., is trying to mitigate them?
3. What would be good indicators of feminist foreign policy?
4. What are your country’s priorities on gender equality in international policy debates for example at the UN Commission on the Status of Women, or in regional institutions, and do these priorities reflect the concerns of domestic women’s rights groups?
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