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Feminist Foreign Policy and the War in Ukraine: Hollow Framework or Rallying Force?

By Sara J. Chehab¹

Abstract

This article examines the applicability of Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) frameworks following the 2022 Russia-Ukraine War. By looking at how Sweden, France, Canada, and Mexico responded to the war in the February 2022 to January 2023 period, the paper seeks to examine whether states' reactions were in line with their FFP commitments or whether FFP was placed on the backburner in the face of a major threat. While there has not been a common feminist response to the war in Ukraine because states have responded through different means without consistently employing their FFP principles, the article argues that a clear conceptual framework that marries Feminist Foreign Policy with conflict-related considerations is important if FFP is to survive.

Keywords: Feminist foreign policy, Gender, Security, Ukraine, Russia-Ukraine War

Introduction

Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) as a concept and framework gained traction in 2014 when Sweden announced that it would be following a Feminist Foreign Policy when conducting its external relations. As of 2022, a small group of countries followed, including Canada (2017), France (2019), Mexico (2020), Spain, Libya, and Luxembourg (all in 2021), and Germany and Chile (in 2022). Despite Sweden abandoning its FFP position in October 2022 following the formation of a new government (Thomas 2022), a few countries are still exploring the possibility of adopting a feminist framework such as the United Kingdom, the United States, the Netherlands, and Belgium (UN Women, 2022). Despite the recent setback, FFP is still considered a guiding framework for many states that champion gender equality and women empowerment either through the adoption of an all-encompassing foreign policy strategy or through more targeted feminist foreign aid frameworks.

Proponents of FFP point to the growing number of states that have adopted it in recent years as a sign of the framework's importance and innovation in approaching foreign relations (Zilla, 2022). While many have still not defined exactly how they would practice a FFP beyond foreign aid measures (such as France), others like Mexico have declared their intentions to do so as a way to commit themselves to gender equality both at home and abroad. With the United Nations (UN)'s push to entrench the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda globally through

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UN Security Council resolution 1325 (2000), FFP has become one of the vehicles through which to support WPS-related initiatives in particular and gender equality in general.

With the onset of the war in Ukraine in 2022 and Sweden's decision to abandon its feminist approach, a need to re-think FFP is in order. With a multitude of political, security, and economic interests and a plethora of actors involved in global politics, can states be limited to one guiding framework in their approach to foreign policy? How does one reconcile FFP's commitment to non-violence with the reality of a devastating and ongoing war? Can foreign policy be driven by a value-based and norm-based strategy? While FFP is an intersectional approach that prioritizes peace, human security over state security, and echoes the voices of marginalized groups that are affected by conflict, what happens when a state's security and military interests are at odds with its feminist agenda and values? If a state is faced with a direct, existential security threat, can FFP still offer the necessary tools and principles they need to deal with security risks? Following Sweden's reversal on its FFP commitment, will other states follow suit and does that move endanger the future of the framework?

With these questions in mind, this article attempts to examine the resilience and viability of FFP as a framework following the 2022 Russia-Ukraine War. By looking at how Sweden, France, Canada, and Mexico reacted and responded to the war, the paper seeks to examine whether states' reactions were in line with their FFP commitments or whether FFP was placed on the backburner in the face of a major threat. Did states continue to push for gender equality when responding to the war in Ukraine? Did FFP guide their actions towards women and vulnerable groups or did other considerations take precedence? This article finds that there has not been a common feminist response to the war in Ukraine, and that when faced with acts of aggression, states will respond through different means and channels without following their FFP frameworks and adopted principles. The article offers a conceptual response to conflict and a set of policy recommendations rooted in FFP principles as a way to advance the debate on what a FFP framework under duress might look like.

The four states under study were selected for various reasons. At the time of writing, only a small sample of countries have officially adopted a feminist foreign policy and/or a feminist development strategy, thereby making case selection quite limited to begin with. An important factor to consider was longevity. To test whether a FFP framework mattered or was used in response to the Russia-Ukraine War, it was important to examine one that had been in practice for a while, which is the case of Sweden, Canada, and France. The Swedish case is especially significant because it reversed course in the fall of 2022, becoming the first country to abandon its Feminist Foreign Policy only eight years after adopting it. Nonetheless, because Sweden was the first state to adopt its FFP in 2014, by the time the war broke out in February 2022, the policy had already been in place for a long-enough time that a study of its impacts and resilience could be made. Furthermore, the Swedish framework serves as a benchmark for many other states and civil society organizations (CSOs) on how to frame FFP (International Center for Research on Women, 2021). The same can be said of Canada, which first adopted its feminist development assistance strategy in 2017, becoming the second country after Sweden to do so. The choice of Mexico is also significant because it was the first country in the Global South to adopt FFP, so looking at its response and position towards the war from a non-European perspective is key.

Another factor is comprehensiveness and the availability of a plan or handbook. While some states adopted all-encompassing FFPs in terms of where their FFPs would apply (such as Sweden and Mexico), thereby extending their FFPs to trade, diplomacy, aid and human rights, others defined it in more limited terms (such as Canada and France). Would an all-encompassing

FFP framework have the tools to respond to conflict better than a more limited one? Lastly, it was important to look at countries that had a published plan or strategy which would make a comparison between rhetoric and action possible and informative. While some states recently committed themselves to FFP, such as Germany and Chile in 2022, a concrete strategy was not available to look at, thereby making the more recent adherents to FFP more difficult to study.

The paper starts by defining FFP and outlining its conceptual and practical evolution from 2014 until today. It then examines how four states (Sweden, Canada, France, and Mexico) have outlined and exercised their FFP since declaring them and what the diversity of approaches means for the framework's viability. The article then looks closely at how each of the four states responded to the war and compares whether their actions were in line with FFP or disconnected from it. By doing so, the article offers a recommendation on what responding to war and conflict would look like within a FFP strategy – which is still an undefined and understudied question. The paper then ends with an in-depth evaluation of FFP as a guiding framework for bilateral relations and reflects on its viability and future.

Feminist Foreign Policy: An Overview

Defining FFP: What's in a Name?

The definition of Feminist Foreign Policy is an ever developing one that is closely linked to and inspired by how various states came to practice it. Various definitions exist, ranging from policy-oriented ones to definitions that are more in line with how feminist international relations theorists understand and view foreign policy. Several commonalities exist across the board, with practitioners and scholars agreeing on the fact that FFP is more inclusive (in terms of the actors it involves and represents), intersectional (in terms of understanding gender's interrelationship with race, class, and ethnicity), illustrative of the challenges it seeks to address (such as human rights, climate change, etc.), and innovative (in its emphasis on a non-military understanding of security that focuses on people and vulnerable, under-represented communities).

From a strict policy-making perspective, Bernarding & Lunz have posited a more practical definition in their advocacy of a FFP for the European Union (EU), with FFP being a set of “external action[s] [...] that define [states'] interactions vis-a-vis [other] states, supranational organisations, multilateral forums, civil society, and movements in a manner that prioritises gender equality, enshrines the human rights of women and other politically marginalised groups and wholeheartedly pursues feminist peace” (Bernarding & Lunz, 2020). In line with this practical approach, the focus of FFP is on “a country's international engagements on gender issues through rhetoric, diplomacy, and development aid, among other vehicles” (George, 2022), to ensure consistency between what a state promises and what it delivers. However, what is lacking from these perspectives is how states translate and understand feminism and who they include in this definition.

Feminist IR theory helps to elucidate and unpack some of these lacunae. Indeed, the study of FFP is closely linked with feminist IR theory, a body of work that problematizes the absence of gender and women in foreign policy, critically addresses the notions of power, hierarchy, and inequality within global politics, and emphasizes the need for more inclusivity within all global institutions and the global order in general (Enloe, 2014; Tickner, 1992; MacKinnon, 1989; Kantola, 2006; Petersen & Runyan, 2014; Shepherd, 2015; Aggestam & Towns, 2018; Aggestam et. al., 2019). A cornerstone of feminist IR theory is the critique of mainstream IR theory as being blind to gendered realities and needing to re-examine existing power structures where foreign policy is designed. This inspired one of the first definitions of FFP as a practice that “critically

reflects international power structures, focuses on the needs of all groups of people, and puts human security and human rights at the center of the discussion” (Adebahr & Mittelhammer, 2020). While traditional IR theory places states at the center of international politics where individuals’ agency does not matter as much, feminist foreign policy echoes what feminist IR scholars have long posited: that policymaking in general—and by extension, foreign policy—are areas that are associated with men and masculinity where women’s and other groups’ contributions, experiences, and voices are excluded and absent.

The idea of Feminist Foreign Policy brings an ethical consideration to international relations, one that is based on including the voices and lived experiences of groups that had been typically left behind in the conduct of foreign policy, most notably those of women (Aggestam, Bergman-Rosamond & Kronsell, 2019). Drawing on the Swedish FFP framework where rights and representation constitute the two cornerstones of their FFP, a more comprehensive definition of Feminist Foreign Policy was put forward by researchers at the International Center for Research on Women. They defined FFP as: “the policy of a state that defines its interactions with other states and movements in a manner that prioritizes gender equality and enshrines the human rights of women and other traditionally marginalized groups, allocates significant resources to achieve that vision, and seeks through its implementation to disrupt patriarchal and male-dominated power structures across all of its levers of influence (aid, trade, defense and diplomacy), informed by the voices of feminist activists, groups and movements” (Thompson & Clement, 2019).

The idea of FFP being a “disruptive” force in global politics (Thompson & Clement, 2019; Thompson et al., 2020) is rooted more in feminist IR theory than in current FFP practices as put forward by states. For instance, the Swedish framework (now defunct but still the inspiration behind various handbooks and trajectories) defined gender in a binary way, thus excluding various other groups and ignoring the need to consider other elements, such as class, race, and ethnicity—all of which intertwine with gender and give a more precise and intersectionally gendered view (Lykke, 2010). Furthermore, with their focus on gender-inclusive development and foreign aid as opposed to a more holistic understanding of foreign policy, states such as Canada and France have in effect limited the scope of their FFP, thereby putting a brake on the disruption that some scholars have called for.

By addressing the question of intersectionality and including various other states’ and CSOs’ contributions and beliefs, a more nuanced and inclusive definition of FFP was put forward in 2022. Similar to the previous one, it defined it as:

The policy of a state that defines its interactions with other states, as well as movements and other non-state actors, in a manner that prioritizes peace, gender equality and environmental integrity; enshrines, promotes, and protects the human rights of all; seeks to disrupt colonial, racist, patriarchal, and male-dominated power structures; and allocates significant resources, including research, to achieve that vision. Feminist foreign policy is coherent in its approach across all of its levers of influence, anchored by the exercise of those values at home and co-created with feminist activists, groups and movements, at home and abroad. (Thompson et al., 2022, p. 23)

That FFP is a value-driven and ethical approach to foreign policy is still clear here, with an open-ended understanding of “levers of influence” that did not limit them to aid, defense, diplomacy, and trade—as the first definition did.

In addition to including more diverse groups and communities in the definition, the view of FFP as being a bottom-up approach, one that is generated through civil society and various movements, is more in line with feminist scholars' skepticism of state-centric feminist practices and the ability of male-dominated governments to maintain feminist approaches (MacKinnon, 1989; Kantola, 2006, Thomson 2020). By involving and requiring that a wider range of national and transnational actors be involved in the development, understanding, and practice of FFP, the framework thus redresses one of the most fundamental flaws of the foreign policy-making process by making it more inclusive and democratic. Foreign policy is thus understood as a participatory process where a more intersectional understanding of its subjects and issues is done, and where the representation of women and other groups, both as agents and subjects previously absent from the world of diplomacy (Chehab, 2022; Aggestam & Towns, 2018), is ensured.

With time, the understanding of FFP from both policy-oriented and conceptual perspectives evolved to include more actors, more processes, and more issues that FFP should cover (such as environmental integrity). It understood feminism as being a framework that is not only limited to women and girls, but inclusive of all communities and groups who were previously left out. By linking security to peace, human rights and environmental integrity, and making representation both an end goal and a vehicle through which to achieve other objectives, FFP left out an essential issue to consider—state security. Did this omission happen because FFP was developing at a time when state security was being redefined in non-military ways, by considering human security and environmental security, for instance? Or is the omission there because FFP evolved within the confines of initiatives related to equality and representation, and not necessarily security?

The Evolution of FFP

The evolution of FFP has happened within a multilateral global environment where women and girls' rights, women empowerment efforts, and gender equality are taking center stage, and where an increased focus on representation and inclusion permeates various initiatives and resolutions. In effect, FFP could be construed as the next step in global gender equality efforts, efforts that started with the first United Nations (UN) World Conference on Women in 1975 and culminated in more than thirty governments, think tanks, CSOs and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working closely to place gender at the center of foreign policy and diplomacy (ICRW 2021).

Throughout the past decades, several milestones driven by the UN have helped to place gender and women's rights as key priority areas: the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the UN "Decade for Women" (1975–1985), the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing, UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, the Millennium Development Goals (2000–2015), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with SDG5 on gender equality, and a slew of resolutions pertaining to WPS and women empowerment in the 2000–2022 period have together set the stage for the inclusion of gender in all policy areas.

In addition, the EU through various initiatives and institutions has also ensured that gender remains central to its member states' policies. The Council of Europe in 1998 defined gender mainstreaming as the "(re)organisation, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy-making" (Council of Europe, 2018). It subsequently developed various strategies to ensure that gender mainstreaming standards are

adopted and applied throughout various agencies. The EU also adopted various other initiatives since 2015 to ensure that gender equality remains at the core of its engagements, an important one being the EU External Action Service's Gender Action Plan III (GAP III of 2021–2025), a framework that places women empowerment and equality at the center of all external relations with states (European Union External Action Service, 2020).

Within an ever-growing number of resolutions, initiatives, and plans both at the global and regional levels, Sweden announced in 2014 that it would be pursuing a feminist foreign policy, a move that signaled a clear “normative re-orientation of foreign policy” (Aggestam & Bergman-Rosamond, 2016). Canada followed in 2017 with the announcement of its Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP). In March 2018, France announced that it would be pursuing feminist diplomacy through its updated International Strategy on Gender Equality (2018–2022) and, in 2019, began using the term Feminist Foreign Policy in several news outlets. In 2019, Luxembourg announced that it would also pursue a Feminist Foreign Policy (Asselborn, 2019) and in January 2020, Mexico released its own plan to pursue its FFP, becoming the first country in the Global South to do so. Other countries followed suit, namely Spain, Chile, and Libya. In the Libyan case, however, pursuing FFP was simply an announcement with no concrete framework put in place. In July 2021, the Global Partner Network for Feminist Foreign Policy was launched at the Generation Equality Forum of 2021, a joint effort between various governments and a dozen CSOs committed to promoting the implementation of FFP globally, monitoring FFPs' impact, and enhancing stakeholders' understanding of the matter (Paris Peace Forum, 2022). Chile and Germany both announced their plans to develop a FFP framework in 2022 with the participation of various CSOs and scholars, thereby signaling that a feminist approach is still in favor.

With a flourishing network of governments and organizations dedicated to FFP, multiple definitions at hand, and various other overlapping commitments and plans—the most notable of which being states' National Action Plans (NAPs) for WPS and initiatives to achieve SDG5—the definition of “feminist” has also differed from one state to the next. This has led some to adopt a more intersectional and inclusive understanding of the term (for instance, including minority groups and other marginalized communities) while others understood the term as relating to the well-being, representation, and rights of women and girls only, thus understanding gender in a strict binary form. There also exist different variations in terms of the areas where FFP applies. In the cases of Sweden and Luxembourg for example, FFP applies in trade, aid, development, whereas, in the cases of Canada and France, the cornerstone of their FFP lies mostly in development assistance. As such, the evolution of FFP is still in progress with different frameworks and policy areas at work.

FFP in Practice: The Cases of Sweden, Canada, France and Mexico

How did Sweden, Canada, France, and Mexico define and practice their respective FFP? And did their frameworks take into account security-related and conflict-based considerations? The following section details each country's FFP framework and offers a comparative summary at the end.

Sweden

Despite Sweden's reversal of its Feminist Foreign Policy in October 2022 following the election of a new government (Thomas 2022), the framework that was developed under the previous foreign affairs minister, Margot Wallstrom, remains fundamental and the most comprehensive one to date. The framework, adopted in 2014, and published in 2015, emphasizes

a 3 “Rs” approach to FFP: women’s *rights*, the allocation of enough *resources* to ensure the preservation of women’s rights, and women’s *representation* (Government of Sweden, n.d.). Sweden not only views gender equality as a goal to be pursued both at home and abroad but considers this as a vehicle through which to promote various other foreign policy matters. Sweden’s contributions to the FFP debate are closely linked to how scholars have defined FFP (Thompson et al., 2020) and is the inspiration behind various NGOs’ frameworks and handbooks on FFP. This has led some to dub the country as “the mother of feminist foreign policy” (Thompson, Ahmed & Khokhar, 2022).

Indeed, Sweden identified three policy areas where its FFP would apply: 1) foreign and security policy, 2) international development cooperation and foreign aid, and 3) trade (Claesson, 2018). In a subsequent action plan for the 2019–2022 period, the Swedish Foreign Ministry identified six goals that it would pursue globally in relation to women and girls. These include the full protection of human rights; freedom from violence (physical, sexual, and psychological); women’s participation in conflict prevention, resolution and peacebuilding; political participation; economic empowerment; and sexual and reproductive health (Government of Sweden, Action Plan, 2021). As the first FFP framework with an accompanying handbook, Sweden became a trailblazer in that domain, with a comprehensive FFP and a view that foreign policy, as we know it, must be disrupted and changed.

The criticism of Sweden’s FFP revolves around two areas: 1) Sweden adopted a binary understanding of gender and their focus on women and girls did not include other marginalized groups (Thompson, Ahmed & Khokhar, 2022), and 2) their defense policy, especially when related to arms exports, ignored women’s rights despite legislative changes that prioritized human rights (Vucetic, 2018). Nonetheless, foreign aid geared towards gender equality increased to \$2.7 billion in 2019, up from \$2 billion in 2016 (George, 2022). According to the 2022 OECD report on Aid for Gender Equality, 73 percent of the aid that Sweden allocates globally goes to gender-focused programs (OECD, 2022). Another strength behind Sweden’s FFP is their emphasis on representation of women in government and in diplomacy, both of which they achieved with half their ambassadors in 2022 being women (Chehab, 2022).

Canada

Canada was the second country to declare a Feminist Foreign Policy in 2017, the cornerstone of which has been its Feminist International Assistance Policy or FIAP. While initially limited in scope, to make their approach more comprehensive, the government defined their feminist approach as applying “a feminist lens to all of Canada’s international engagements,” which includes their assistance policy, their National Action Plan for WPS, and a more inclusive approach to trade and defense (Government of Canada, 2017). Nonetheless, the FIAP is still Canada’s main document and vehicle through which their FFP is defined and applied. It does so across six inclusive priority areas: gender equality and women empowerment, human dignity, inclusive growth, environment and climate action, inclusive governance, and peace and security (Government of Canada, 2017). Through their development-focused strategy, Canada links well-being, the eradication of poverty, and growth together and considers them the basis to achieving gender equality and the full promotion of human rights.

Similar to Sweden, Canada does very well when it comes to the representation of women across government and the allocation of funds to gender-focused initiatives globally. The 2022 OECD report found that 82 percent of the aid that Canada gives is gender-focused and goes to organizations and groups that promote equality and empowerment (OECD, 2022). In addition,

Canada committed itself to ensuring that 15 percent of all bilateral assistance investments target gender equality (Donor Tracker, 2023). The Canadian approach to FFP, while targeted to development and assistance efforts and, as a result, less encompassing and ambitious than the Swedish one, does embed concrete targets, measurements, and evaluation tools to ensure accountability and transparency.

France

France defines its Feminist Foreign Policy through its International Strategy for Gender Equality (2018-2022) (France International Strategy, 2018). The strategy focuses on five related objectives: promote an institutional culture at the French ministry of foreign affairs that is focused on gender equality; increase France's advocacy for gender; increase gender-focused development assistance; strengthen accountability measures for actions taken on gender equality; and adopt a multi-stakeholder approach and engage CSOs, the private sector, and others to achieve equality (France International Strategy, 2018). The strategy also includes an evaluation and accountability framework to track progress.

In addition to the strategy document, various French outlets and decision-makers started to refer to a "feminist diplomacy" when discussing France's approach to foreign policy. Beyond that, France announced its intention to develop a separate and independent FFP framework in March 2021, but that has so far not been done. France also identified representation (the third "R" in Sweden's FFP framework) as an essential part of France's commitment to equality. Indeed, half of France's ambassadors to other European countries are women. And while its total share of women ambassadors is close to 26 percent (2022), the number of women ambassadors has been "multiplied by 2.5 times in 10 years" (Ministere de l'Europe, 2022). France's commitment to a feminist diplomacy, while comprehensive and broader than development assistance, promises to include gender and women "in all French diplomatic priorities and all political, economic, soft diplomacy, cultural, educational and development cooperation actions" (Thompson, 2019). This push has manifested itself with a commitment to ensure that 75 percent of all French development assistance go to gender-focused projects worldwide. According to the OECD 2022 report on aid and gender, France's gender equality focused aid has been increasing and reached 44 percent in 2020. Other projects include the allocation of €97 million to sexual and reproductive health rights and projects, increased financial contributions to UN Women, and the launching of the "Support Fund for Feminist Organizations," which will oversee the disbursement of more than €120 million to feminist organizations in countries receiving Official Development Assistance (ODA) (France Diplomacy, 2020).

In addition, France set up an independent High Council for Gender Equality to track progress, make recommendations regarding feminist diplomacy, and streamline the feminist strategy to all areas of government. The Council found that the French approach was not enough and did not tackle important areas of external actions, most notably defense and security. By limiting itself to diplomacy and development assistance, the French strategy fell behind Sweden's approach – which is why the Council recommended to adopt a 3 "Rs" approach similar to Sweden's (France Diplomacy, 2020). The Council found that France had made progress in many areas but that there was "insufficient infiltration [of feminism and a gender focus] in various areas of France's foreign policy" (France Diplomacy, 2020).

Mexico

Mexico announced its Feminist Foreign Policy in January 2020, becoming the first non-European country in South America to do so. The Mexican strategy has five main objectives

(Delgado, 2020; Centro de Investigacion Internacional, 2020), making it one of the most comprehensive FFP frameworks that not only incorporates under-represented groups but also acknowledges the various challenges that are at the nexus of gender inequality, such as climate change. The five objectives of the Mexican FFP are:

1. A Feminist Foreign Policy based on a strong feminist agenda, with the goal of mainstreaming women and human rights and intersectionality in all areas of foreign policy
2. Gender equality within the Mexican ministry of foreign affairs through structural and organizational reforms
3. Combating and eradicating violence in all its forms, starting at the Mexican foreign ministry and abroad
4. Increasing the visibility of women and other under-represented groups in the making of Mexican foreign policy and at all events, conferences, and initiatives
5. Adopting an intersectional approach to all actions, both at the ministry and globally.

Despite the fact that Mexico's domestic records on women's rights still lags behind other countries, with an average of 11 women killed every day by male family members for gender-related reasons and state-sponsored violence against women being common (Deslandes, 2020), Mexico has pioneered several global initiatives, such as the Generation Equality Forum with France and the Spotlight Initiative in 2019, to pave the way for domestic and global reforms. The Mexican FFP strategy also specifies targets and benchmarks to achieve by 2024, with regular monitoring and evaluation practices put in place. The Mexican approach to FFP is also inclusive of other marginalized and vulnerable groups and focuses on the sexual and reproductive health and rights of all, not just women and girls.

While there are clear differences with how each state defines and undertakes FFP, some commonalities can be found across all four cases. As Table 1 illustrates, while the goals and objectives of all FFP approaches are similar, the scope and reach of each differ, with Sweden and Mexico adopting comprehensive frameworks that have a clear domestic and internal MFA focus while Canada and France focus more on development-related goals with clear gender-focused Official Development Assistance (annual targets). Across the board, these four states place their FFP approaches within a broader human rights and SDGs spectrum.

Table 1: Summary of Sweden, Canada, France, and Mexico's FFP Frameworks

| Country | Year FFP was launched | Objectives & Goals | Reach | Monitoring & Evaluation Mechanisms |
|----------------|------------------------------|---|--|---|
| Sweden | 2014 | Six goals under the banner of the 3 "Rs" (rights, representation, resources): 1) human rights, 2) freedom from violence, 3) participation in conflict resolution, 4) political participation, 5) economic | Global—covers all external relations. Internal—gender mainstreaming mechanisms & gender equality at | Three-year cycle of implementation & evaluation (2019-2022) |

| | | | | |
|---------------|------|--|--|---|
| | | rights, 6) sexual/reproductive health & rights | MFA and across missions | |
| Canada | 2017 | Six goals under a development & foreign aid strategy that focuses on fighting poverty & achieving the SDGs through women empowerment: 1) gender equality & women empowerment, 2) human dignity, 3) inclusive growth, 4) environment & climate action, 5) inclusive governance, & 6) peace and security | Global—covers development assistance efforts & all SDGs linked to National Action Plan (NAP) for WPS. | Specific targets for gender-focused ODA projects (95% by 2022) |
| France | 2019 | Five goals under a global strategy for gender equality: 1) an institutional culture of gender equality, 2) global advocacy for gender, 3) gender-focused development assistance, 4) strengthen accountability measures, 5) engage various stakeholders (civil society & private sector) | Global—covers development related efforts Internal—covers MFA practices & linked with domestic bodies | Five-year cycle (until 2022), with specific targets & evaluation criteria |
| Mexico | 2020 | Five goals under a broad FFP strategy: 1) feminism across all areas of foreign policy, 2) gender equality at MFA, 3) combating gender-based violence within MFA & abroad, 4) increase visibility of women, 5) intersectionality | Global—covers all areas of foreign policy Internal—covers practices within Mexican MFA | Set targets until 2024 |

Feminist Foreign Policy & the Russia-Ukraine War

In all four cases, whether focused or comprehensive, it is unclear how the FFP frameworks outlined by Sweden, Canada, France, and Mexico would be carried out in times of conflict and if/how objectives and goals would change if faced with a direct threat. While scholars would argue that FFP exists to prevent conflict by disrupting the existing military-industrial-patriarchal practices, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the regional and global consequences of that war, a different reality has taken shape. Preventing war, from a FFP perspective, would be the only way to go, especially when considering the huge toll that conflict leaves on women and girls. Nonetheless, in light of recent events, a broader foreign policy strategy rooted in feminist and humanitarian values should be able to speak to various challenges.

Feminist Foreign Policy or the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Agenda?

When looking at the nexus between women and conflict, the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda offers a clear framework to follow. The WPS view of conflict is clear both in its focus and recommendations. Indeed, through its four pillars, WPS—and not FFP—is usually considered the common lens through which to analyze conflicts and their impact on women. Indeed, UNSC resolution 1325 of 2000 was a seminal push by multiple civil society groups to include a gender perspective to conflict. The resolution urged all UN member states to adopt a different approach to war, one that is based on women’s full participation and representation in conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts, conflict prevention on the basis of human rights and human security, protection of women and girls from all forms of violence during and after conflict, and relief and recovery for survivors (UNSCR 1325, 2000). States are encouraged to develop their individual action plans to address these four pillars and carry UNSCR1325 forward. The WPS agenda—through the nine resolutions that address it since 2000 and the inclusion of CSOs in its design and undertaking—not only recognizes the devastating and disproportionate impact that conflict can have on women but also emphasizes the important role that women can play in preventing and ending wars.

Both the WPS agenda and FFP have similar overarching goals: promoting peace, gender equality, women’s full and equal participation in political processes, and gender mainstreaming in humanitarian responses. Where they diverge is in their respective scope and approach and in their understanding of security. Indeed, regarding their scope, the WPS agenda seems to work within the confines of conflict and considers war as inevitable—a condition that requires a gender-balanced response and the protection of women and girls when war erupts. It understands security through the traditional, military lens (Otto, 2018). FFP, on the other hand, takes a wider and broader understanding of security and brings economic security, conflict-related fragility, health, and education into view. FFP is thus broader and more “disruptive” (Thompson & Clement, 2019) in that it includes more issues related to human security that states need to consider. With its emphasis on conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding, a critique of the WPS agenda is that it takes conflict as a given and offers solutions (such as security sector reform) within the confines of conventional peacemaking mechanisms (Shepherd, 2016). In addition, the view that one would advocate for women’s empowerment and women’s rights in the midst of wars that were neither started nor caused by gender imbalances can lead to a misrepresentation of the conflict’s causes and a delay in its resolution (Moaveni, 2022). FFP does acknowledge the importance of women’s inclusion and representation at all times but goes a step farther to emphasize women’s economic inclusion and the importance of development assistance in guaranteeing gender equality in times of peace. By being more intersectional, FFP recognizes the various other forms of discrimination and inequality that women can experience, with and without war.

While FFP would apply at all times, for all external relations, and across several areas (including security), the WPS agenda focuses on finding an inclusive response to conflict where women are fully protected and represented. WPS could thus be construed as a subset of FFP despite the fact that, in essence, militarization is anti-feminist (Vucetic, 2018).

A Feminist Foreign Policy Response to Conflict

What does FFP say about how to respond to war that the WPS agenda does not? Based on the available definitions and existing state frameworks, a response to conflict based on FFP principles would emphasize and ensure that:

- Humanitarian assistance and foreign aid be the first and main response, as opposed to military assistance
- Foreign aid is disbursed to organizations helping women, children, and other marginalized and vulnerable communities
- Gender-based violence occurring as a result of conflict be eliminated
- Refugees are treated humanely and fairly, especially women, children, and other vulnerable groups
- Women are represented in negotiations and conflict-resolution processes, and that the interests of all marginalized groups are considered
- Various CSOs, NGOs and other stakeholders are engaged in assistance and that their voices are heard during conflict resolution processes
- Commitments to international conventions and treaties on the rights of women and children be upheld
- Other impacts of war – including but not limited to climate-related, economic, and social impacts – be responded to adequately

An examination of how the four states responded to the ongoing war from a FFP perspective yielded mixed results. Support for women is there, especially in the cases of Canada and France, and is in line with both countries' FFP frameworks. They have also offered humanitarian assistance and aid to various CSOs in Ukraine and to Ukrainian refugees, in line with their FFP promise to focus on human security. However, Sweden, Canada, and France offered significant military and defense-related support to Ukraine since the onset of the war, a move that goes against the tenets of FFP, and also supported sanctions against Russia. These two moves are seen as perpetuating conflict when analyzed under the FFP lens.

Indeed, Sweden, Canada, and France gave considerably more financial and military support to Ukraine than humanitarian aid in the January to November 2022 period (Antezza et al., 2022). As shown in Table 2, the amount of money pledged to Ukraine has mostly been channeled through military aid or through financial support given to the Ukrainian government and less so to humanitarian projects, with Canada pledging the highest sums of money across all three categories and as a percentage share of their GDP. While Sweden gave more military support to Ukraine than France, the latter channeled more funds to the government of Ukraine through financial aid and humanitarian support. Compared to other countries, Canada is the fifth largest donor in terms of military support (with the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and Poland in the lead), and the third largest in terms of financial aid, preceded by the US and the UK (Antezza et al., 2022). As a percentage share of GDP, France committed the least amount of support to Ukraine out of the three.

Table 2: Bilateral Support to Ukraine in USD billions (bn), USD millions (m) and Aid as percentage share of GDP; January–November 2022

| | Military | Financial | Humanitarian | % Share of GDP |
|---------------|-----------------|------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| Canada | USD 1.45 bn | USD 2.14 bn | USD 31m | 0.2% |
| France | USD 50m | USD 86m | USD 15m | 0.05% |
| Sweden | USD 59m | USD 16m | USD 14m | 0.1% |

Source: Antezza et al., 2022

In addition to receiving more than 51,000 Ukrainian refugees and supporting Ukraine through all UN and EU institutions, Sweden also committed USD 48 million to civilian crisis management and USD 33.5 million to reconstruction efforts in Ukraine (Government Offices of Sweden, 2023). On January 19, 2023, Sweden also approved a larger military aid package to Ukraine consisting of the largest defense equipment and heavy advanced weapons given to date (Government of Sweden, 2023). As a consequence of Russia's invasion, Sweden, along with Finland, applied for NATO membership in May 2022 and proceeded to scrap its feminist foreign policy framework in October 2022, claiming that the framework could be "counter-productive" for Sweden's international engagements and current foreign policy agenda and priorities (AFP in Stockholm, 2022).

Across the Atlantic, Canada's commitment to a feminist development assistance program to Ukraine was in full swing before 2021, and since the onset of the 2022 war, its support to Ukraine changed to become more military in nature. Indeed, Canada contributed \$24 million in December 2018 to electoral reforms in Ukraine emphasizing the participation of women. It then announced a \$25 million package in December 2020 to support Ukrainian rural women, internally displaced persons, and people with disabilities' economic empowerment efforts. That same month, Canada gave \$7 million to various women-led organizations to support the protection of women against gender-based violence (Government of Canada, 2022a). Since February 2022, Canada has intensified and expanded its military training program to Ukrainian troops through Operation UNIFIER and has facilitated the delivery of military donations from Canada and other countries (Government of Canada, 2023). As shown in Table 2, it has also given the largest amount of military aid to Ukraine compared to the other countries under study. In line with their FFP development framework, Canada committed \$35 million to various government institutions and CSOs to help meet the needs of Ukrainians, especially women and girls, and has given \$7 million to the UN Population Fund to help victims of sexual and gender-based violence (Government of Canada, 2023).

Similar to Sweden and Canada, France was quick to condemn Russia's invasion and agreed to a package of sanctions against Russia through the EU. Despite the fact that France has not offered the same level of military support as the United States, Canada, or Germany, it has convened donor conferences to raise funds for Ukraine. Through the "Standing with the Ukrainian People" conference, held in Paris in December 2022, France helped to raise more than \$1 billion for energy, food security and other socio-economic projects (France Diplomacy, 2022). France has focused on humanitarian support throughout the war and has delivered more than 1400 tons of aid to Ukraine and the neighboring countries affected by the war. Women-focused aid is also notable, with 58 percent of France's humanitarian projects in Ukraine fully or partly targeting Ukrainian women. Through various UN and other international agencies, France is also funding projects to protect women and girls from gender-based and sexual violence and as of mid-May 2022, had managed to reach around 4,051 women and children through various prevention programs (France Diplomacy, 2022).

Mexico, on the other hand, condemned Russia's invasion both rhetorically and through its support of UN resolutions. In line with its neutral foreign policy, it has refrained from offering military support to Ukraine or to impose sanctions on Russia (AP News, June 2022; Stevenson, 2022; Reuters, 2022). In fact, with the exception of Costa Rica, Mexico has remained consistent with most Latin American countries by not joining the sanctions regime against Russia (Harrison, 2023). Its position towards the war was not always clear-cut, however, as a dozen lawmakers from the president's Morena party formed a Mexico-Russia friendship committee in the Mexican

congress in March 2022, one month after the beginning of the war (Stevenson, 2022). That same month, Mexico co-authored a UN General Assembly resolution. Titled “Humanitarian Consequences of the Aggression Against Ukraine,” the resolution called for continuous negotiations between the two parties, political dialogue, and for ending the conflict through peaceful means. It was adopted with overwhelming support at the General Assembly and was followed by a proposal to establish the High-Level Caucus for Dialogue and Peace in September 2022 (De La Fuente & Olabuenaga, 2022). Through the UN system, Mexico has made it clear that it rejects all forms of aggression and war and calls for a peaceful resolution of the conflict but has not done so through the Organization of American States (OAS). Indeed, it declined to condemn Russia at the OAS’ general assembly meeting in October 2022, joining Brazil and Argentina in refusing to adopt the OAS official position on the war (MercoPress, 2022).

Of note is the absence of comments on the importance of including women in negotiations. While women make up anywhere between 8 and 17 percent of the Ukrainian armed forces (Oliker, 2022), they have not been present in the negotiation rounds that have been held between the two sides in 2022 (Nordas et al., 2022). While Canada has called for and funded various initiatives to ensure women’s political representation, this has not trickled over to 2022. With the war still raging on, the space for women to be included in future peace talks is there but has so far not been done.

Feminist Foreign Policy and War: An Uncertain Response

By looking at Sweden, Canada, France, and Mexico’s responses to the Russia–Ukraine war, as shown in Table 3, it becomes clear that there has not been a uniform and common position across the countries that adopted FFP. The variation in approaches existed before the war began in February 2022 and continues to this day, with different degrees of consistency. Sweden, once hailed as the mother of Feminist Foreign Policy because of the comprehensive stance it took, has completely abandoned the framework, owing to a mix of internal politics (the election of a new, right-wing government in 2022) and to the onset of a war on its doorstep. The first country to adopt a Feminist Foreign Policy in 2014 was the first to abandon it following Russia’s invasion. The war also pushed Sweden to officially apply for NATO membership and to offer significant military support to Ukraine.

France and Canada’s responses were mixed, with Canada opting for more military aid and France opting for more humanitarian and diplomatic support through the EU and other multilateral channels. In both instances, funding for gender-focused projects and organizations was present but was dwarfed by the money allocated to military support. Lastly, Mexico’s non-response was perhaps consistent with its neutral and pacifist foreign policy position but not so with its FFP framework. Indeed, it condemned the war on some occasions but not others, offered diplomatic ways to achieve peace, did not adopt sanctions against Russia, but did not offer humanitarian support to Ukraine. As such, Mexico was partly, and the least, consistent with its FFP principles: it advocated for peace and called for a quick and diplomatic resolution to the conflict through negotiation, two positions that are in line with FFP. However, the fact that Mexico has shied away from making financial and humanitarian contributions to help vulnerable groups impacted by the war in Ukraine goes against its FFP framework.

When compared, the four cases present an interesting dilemma: the two states with the most comprehensive FFP frameworks (Sweden and Mexico) either abandoned their FFP stance altogether (Sweden) or did not significantly use or refer to it (Mexico) following the war. The countries with the more limited and targeted FFPs (Canada and France) were more consistent in sticking to some of their FFP principles when humanitarian aid was disbursed. While one would

assume that a more comprehensive and far-reaching FFP would dictate a more consistent response, the opposite happened in 2022. Both Canada and France defined their feminist positions through development assistance and foreign aid and were the two countries that followed their proclaimed FFP principles.

Table 3: Summary Table Comparing States' Responses with FFP Recommendations

| FFP Response | Sweden | Canada | France | Mexico |
|---|--|--|---|---------------|
| Humanitarian assistance and foreign aid be the first and main response, as opposed to military assistance | No – considerable military assistance | No – considerable military assistance | Unclear – both humanitarian and military assistance given | None given |
| Foreign aid is disbursed to organizations helping women, children, and other marginalized and vulnerable communities | Unclear – data not found | Some aid was channeled to gender-focused organizations | Some aid was channeled to gender-focused organizations | None given |
| Gender-based violence occurring as a result of conflict be eliminated | Unclear – data not found | Some aid was channeled to gender-focused organizations | Some aid was channeled to gender-focused organizations | None given |
| Refugees are treated humanely and fairly, especially women, children, and other vulnerable groups | Yes – Sweden welcomed around 51,000 refugees in 2022 (UNHCR Data Portal) | Unclear – data not found | Yes – France welcomed around 118,000 refugees in 2022 (UNHCR Data Portal) | No refugees |
| Women are represented in negotiations and conflict-resolution processes, and that the interests of all marginalized groups are considered | Not achieved | Not achieved | Not achieved | Not achieved |
| Various CSOs, NGOs and other stakeholders are engaged in assistance and that their voices are heard during | Not achieved | Not achieved | Not achieved | Not achieved |

| | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|------------|
| conflict resolution processes | | | | |
| Other impacts of war (including but not limited to climate-related, economic, and social impacts) be responded to adequately | Financial and humanitarian support given to socio-economic causes | Financial and humanitarian support given to socio-economic causes | Financial and humanitarian support given to socio-economic causes | None given |

Conclusion

The essence or goal of FFP is to rethink and recreate systems and institutions where inequality exists and to avoid wars in the pursuit of peace. By testing a developing framework in the midst of an ongoing war, it becomes clear that states have framed their feminist responses in a traditional sense: through gender-focused foreign aid aimed at the protection of women and girls against all forms of violence. The “disruption” that FFP scholars have called for (Thompson et al., 2022) has not materialized during times of conflict. In fact, the opposite is happening: what we have witnessed thus far from states’ responses to the war is a reconfirmation of non-feminist principles, that women and girls are viewed as victims in need of protection while military support and funding continue apace. Whereas FFP scholars have criticized the WPS agenda because it takes conflict as a given, states’ responses to the war indicate that they, too, have taken the war as a given and they have worked to respond through the usual channels of military and defense.

In the midst of the ongoing Russia–Ukraine War, there is a chance to rethink and redevelop FFP, not only to advance a more comprehensive understanding of it, especially in light of Sweden’s reversal, but also to develop a conceptual approach for what a FFP under duress and war would look like. Sweden, Canada, France, and Mexico’s responses to the war have not been framed under FFP principles nor have their FFP frameworks taken full effect. Their responses also show that their WPS practices were also placed on the back burner. What does this tell us about the resilience and future of FFP as a guiding framework for conducting foreign policy? With its primary focus on development and aid, FFP in the context of war is not the all-encompassing framework that its many advocates want it to be. It has thrived during times of peace with many states adopting it, either fully or partly. Nonetheless, during war time, a very narrow aspect of it has remained in practice.

What is clear today is that FFP still does not have the comprehensiveness to address serious threats to a state’s security. Its focus on inclusivity, equality, intersectionality, and peace is to be commended. But how value-driven and ethical principles can effectively be translated into state responses during times of war is at best unclear and at worst incompatible with the approach. These difficulties partly stem from the novelty of the approach as it has only existed since 2014, partly from the fact that the Russia-Ukraine War is still happening and more importantly, because we had not yet devised a security approach rooted in FFP principles. There is still room to redefine and reshape state responses to the war in light of feminist ideas. When wars so deeply impact the lives, well-being, and future of women and girls, it remains important that we continue to devise (and revise) conceptual tools to address conflict through a feminist lens.

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