

**Jan Henrik Amberg**

---

## **A Feminist Foreign Policy: The Background to a Swedish Concept**

### **ABSTRACT**

Women's rights are an inseparable part of the human rights, and human rights are an integrated part of women's rights. The Swedish Government has adopted a concept of feminist foreign policy, aiming at strengthening these rights on a global level. Women's rights are continued to be violated as much as ever, hindering democracy, peace, rule of law, sustainable development and economic growth – the overarching aims of international policy. Women's rights to education, financial resources and access to the labour market are crucial in defending human rights and having a policy for 100 per cent of the world's population. A priority task of the feminist foreign policy is supporting women's inclusion in all decision-making structures, both on national and multilateral level. This in order to achieve wider foreign, development and security policy objectives through a new approach, different way of thinking and different solutions.

**Keywords:** feminist foreign policy, human rights, gender equality, decision-making, gender-based violence, international diplomacy, peace processes, smart power



**Jan Henrik Amberg**

---

## **Feministyczna polityka zagraniczna: szwedzka koncepcja**

### **STRESZCZENIE**

Prawa kobiet są nieodłączną częścią praw człowieka, tak jak prawa człowieka są integralną częścią praw kobiet. Koncepcja feministycznej polityki zagranicznej, przyjętej przez szwedzki rząd ma na celu wzmocnienie tych praw na poziomie globalnym. Ciągłe łamanie praw kobiet narusza demokrację, porządek prawny, utrudnia zrównoważony rozwój i wzrost gospodarczy – podstawowe cele polityki międzynarodowej. Prawo kobiet do edukacji, środków finansowych i dostępu do rynku pracy jest kluczowe w zakresie ochrony praw człowieka oraz prowadzenia polityki dotyczącej 100 % światowej populacji. Kluczowym zadaniem feministycznej polityki zagranicznej jest wspieranie integracji kobiet we wszystkich strukturach decyzyjnych, zarówno na poziomie krajowym, jak i wielostronnym w celu przyjęcia szerszych założeń polityki zagranicznej, rozwoju i bezpieczeństwa – przez nowe podejście, inny sposób myślenia i różne rozwiązania.

**Słowa kluczowe:** feministyczna polityka zagraniczna, prawa człowieka, równość płci, przemoc uwarunkowana płcią, dyplomacja międzynarodowa, procesy pokojowe



The former Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Anna Lindh, once said that “human rights are praised more than ever, and violated as much as ever”.

The current Minister, Margot Wallström, opened her speech at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) session in March this year by stating the important fact that „all human rights are indivisible and mutually reinforcing. It is through cooperation, dialogue and with mutual respect that we can ensure compliance with human rights law”<sup>1</sup>. She then continued stressing that “women’s rights are human rights, and human rights are women’s rights. These rights can never be set aside with reference to culture, tradition or religion”<sup>2</sup>.

Never in the course of history has there been so many people engaged in the world fighting for gender equality, combating discriminatory barriers to women’s economic empowerment, their equal rights to education, financial resources, access to the labour market and an inclusion in all decision-making structures – both on national and multilateral level. And still, these rights are „violated as much as ever”.

We live in a watershed, where political and social changes – largely due to the increasing globalisation – slowly begin to challenge the persisting negative cultural norms which in consequence marginalise women and restrict their right position in the society, eliminating them in decision-making processes, subordinating women under male dominance and denying girls’ right to education.

It is imperative to support these changes and in particular increase the efforts to take preventive measures and to combat impunity for gender-based violence. This is important both in times of peace and especially in connection with armed conflicts, such as those in Syria and Iraq. We have to remember the ever-present gender-based violence as part of atrocity crimes.

When the Prime Minister of Sweden, Stefan Löfven, took office in October 2014, he defined his new government as a “feminist government”. As new Minister for Foreign Affairs was appointed Margot Wallström, former Environment Commissioner and First Vice-President of the European Commission in Brussels, Chair of the Council of Women World Leaders Ministerial Initiative as well as Special Representative on Sexual Violence

---

<sup>1</sup> Speech by the Minister for Foreign Affairs Margot Wallström at the UN Human Rights Council 28<sup>th</sup> Regular Session, Geneva, on March 2, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

in Conflict of the United Nation Secretary General. Upon taking her new governmental responsibilities, she declared that she will be pursuing a “feminist foreign policy” – as the first government in the world to do so.

Swedish experience in gender equality is rich and goes a long way. Today, there is a fundamental consensus in the Swedish society with regard to gender equality. There is a conviction that the policy regarding women’s rights is not an additional option but an integrated and inseparable part of human rights.

One of the main pathways to progress in Sweden has been the economic empowerment of women. There was a clear and huge shift in the 1970s and 1980s, when the share of women in the Swedish labour market increased from 59 per cent to 84 per cent<sup>3</sup>. An important factor behind this development was the emerging of child care and parental leave for both parents. Although the fact is that women still work part-time far more often than men do and also tend to take more parental leave, the economic empowerment of women, coupled with important welfare measures, has had a tremendous impact on the perceived gender roles and consequently on the Swedish society and the Swedish economy at large.

These changes have subsequently shaped underlying social norms, values and outlooks, leading to even further progress towards gender equality, and creating a virtuous circle of conviction and support. It is a well-known fact that empowering women needs a transforming of traditional gender roles of both men and women, boys and girls, since ultimately it is all about changing entrenched power relations and social structures.

Although the younger generation of men is today beginning to realise that it is not a zero-sum game but rather more of a win-win equation, change remains often very slow and uncertain in many parts of the world. Traditional masculine norms are still being upheld and protected and subsequently inculcated into the next generation. This to the detriment of women, men and societies at large. It is a heavy heritage that will require considerable political will to shake off. In fact, against the backdrop of globalisation and social change, women’s growing independence is often seen by men as a threat, paradoxically leading to increased gender-based violence and sexual harassment.

---

<sup>3</sup> The Swedish government agency Statistics Sweden (Statistiska centralbyrån, SCB): <http://www.scb.se/sv/Hitta-statistik/Artiklar/Gapet-mellan-kvinnors-och-mans-arbetstid-bestar>.

Challenges clearly remain in Sweden as well. However, Sweden has taken important steps towards gender equality over the past thirty to fifty years, enabling men and women to resist narrow gender norms and benefiting the whole of society over time.

There is a fundamental conviction in Sweden that it is not possible to build a democratic society with a functioning rule of law without maintaining equality between women and men and between human beings disregard of ethnicity, religious belief or sexual orientation. Gender equality, as understood by the majority of Swedes, is therefore something which is being carried on disregarding of political colour of the ruling government.

It is with this background that it should be understood the reasons why the current Swedish government defines its foreign policy as feminist. It is not only a wish to share the experience in the area and the convictions coming out from it, but also to stress that there is a need for an entirely new and different way of thinking within foreign policy and with regard to the multitude of problems around the world.

Nonetheless, the definition “feminist foreign policy” is not entirely unproblematic. The word “feminist” is often interpreted in different ways – positive or negative. Also in Sweden, despite the broad consensus around the principle of equal rights between the sexes. Although the declaration was met with much enthusiasm, the expression “feminist foreign policy” was sometimes met with irony and scepticism, to put it mildly, and questions how feminism can contribute to diplomatic solutions or how global challenges as security policy can be dealt with through feminism. Is this not an unnecessary novelty, sprung from idiosyncratic Western ideologies in a situation when there are more urgent and continuously burning calls in conflict-ridden parts of the world for serious, hard armament measures and traditional security policy solutions? War needs an army, an armed conflict has to be dealt with through necessary violence. Or does it not?

With this background, it seems necessary to explain not only what the Swedish concept of “feminist foreign policy” is, but also to lay out the thinking behind it and on what ideas it is built on.

A “feminist foreign policy” essentially seeks to address what former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has so aptly described as “the great unfinished business of the 21<sup>st</sup> century”<sup>4</sup>. The feminist foreign policy of Sweden is first

---

<sup>4</sup> Speech at the United Nations’ conference in New York marking International Women’s Day on March 7, 2014.

of all an expression of the fundamental importance that the Swedish government attaches to human rights. The violation of women's rights are today not only a huge problem on a global scale, but also a problem which lies behind many other social and political problems. To quote Margot Wallström, "many countries, including my own, are still characterised by the systematic subordination of women. In many parts of the world, the fact that women and girls continue to be denied their human rights constitutes a growing threat to peace and security. Women are also increasingly becoming the target of violence as a means of control to prevent them from exercising their rights"<sup>5</sup>.

It is important in this context to stress that striving towards gender equality is not only a goal in itself, but also a precondition for achieving wider foreign, development and security policy objectives. The reason for shaping foreign policies built on the idea of gender equality is because it is all about having a foreign policy for 100 per cent of the world's population.

At the same time it is not only a question of representation, even if this aspect is vital. An authentic foreign policy can never accept a world in which violence against women is the prime cause of death and disability among women. Actually, no country in the world can afford gender-based discrimination, which is also a major obstacle to real, sustainable development.

In carrying out a feminist foreign policy, the efforts must follow two different paths in the context of women's human rights. There are areas calling for prohibition, as with regard to e.g. gender-based discrimination, forced marriages and female genital mutilation. Secondly, there are areas where the main goal is progress, as to equal rights to inheritance, access to education and health. These aspects are key to women's empowerment.

Behind these priorities of the Swedish foreign policy, stressing the situation of women around the world, lies also a conviction that current diplomatic instruments are not sufficient to solve many of the burning global issues. They need to be augmented by a new approach and a different way of thinking on the level of decision-making in international policy. This in particular when it comes to the issue of conflicts. It is therefore not only about ideology, but in many ways about practicality.

---

<sup>5</sup> Speech by the Minister for Foreign Affairs Margot Wallström at the United States Institute for Peace, Washington D.C., on January 29, 2015.

Rule of law and human rights are crucial elements and constitute both the means and the end. Delivering on binding commitments and developing central aspects of international law in a gender-sensitive manner are of paramount importance.

Combating gender-based and sexual violence in peace time and in conflict remains a core priority. Violence against women and girls remains a global epidemic. Women in particular are vulnerable in conflict. Gender discrimination and deep inequalities are at the heart of this issue.

Respect for human rights and the rule of law is an essential point of departure for every gender equality discussion. Ensuring women's rights and access to justice must be seen as crucial when it comes to the overall human rights agenda, something which is far from the reality today. Women's rights are often seen as a separate and specific issue with no particular bearing on more fundamental issues. Only through women's active participation at different levels of decision making is it possible to change agendas in order to fulfill the needs and interests of all women.

The Swedish Government is convinced that without the participation of women in decision-making structures, the overarching aims of international policy cannot be fulfilled. It is not only a question of equal rights for all human beings, but also a fundamental precondition for reaching these goals. Hence, gender equality is not just a luxurious Western ideology, but a necessity in order to achieve global respect for basic human rights. At the same time, this is a prerequisite if we want success when promoting sustainable economic and social development around the world, a goal which is one of foreign policy's prime tasks.

The participation of women in the society is today marginalised on a global scale. This is clearly shown by current statistics. The reality shows that a huge part of the society is principally excluded from even basic decision-making, concluding the decisions not only biased but also not adapted to the whole of the society's reality, where women continue to constitute half of its population. It is therefore not only a question of unfair treatment, but of a fundamental flaw in the functioning of the society with consequences for not only the discriminated women, but for all humans beings. This question is a crucial aspect of the aims behind the feminist foreign policy.

Women remain also a largely unused human resource when it comes to the political as well as the economic sphere. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that the average loss of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a consequence of the marginalisation of women in labour markets

amounts up to 27 per cent in some parts of the world<sup>6</sup>. Other statistical analysis indicates that an opening up of the labour market for women in Egypt would lead to an increase of the GDP of more than 34 per cent<sup>7</sup>. Even in a developed country as USA, efforts to increase the participation of women in the labour market would increase the American GDP with 5 per cent<sup>8</sup>. Still other studies suggest that if women were to receive equal pay with regard to the same type of jobs that men perform, many developed countries would experience ever more significant GDP growth. In 15 major developing economies, the *per capita* income would rise by 14 per cent by 2020 and 20 per cent by 2030<sup>9</sup>.

Estimates show also that the amount of marginalised women in the world is about 1 billion<sup>10</sup>. These are women who are not present in the labour market but who have the potential to enter the market and to contribute substantially to their country's social and political development and its economic growth. Many of these women are to be found in developing countries and in emerging markets.

But women rights are not only about economic rights and about opportunity to share the labour market with men, as well as the right to financial resources and personal independence. A World Bank report shows that in most parts of the world, there is no place which is less safe for a woman than her own home. Data shows that more than 700 million women globally are subject to physical or sexual violence at the hands of their husbands, boyfriends or partners<sup>11</sup>. Not only is impunity widespread, in many countries intimate partner violence remains outside the law, in some cases even allowed by law.

It is obvious that the extent of the problem is dramatic. Violence against women and girls is in many places seen as the norm even by women themselves. In another recent World Bank report, covering the situation in 52

---

<sup>6</sup> International Monetary Fund report *Women, Work, and the Economy: Macroeconomic Gains from Gender Equity* (2013).

<sup>7</sup> The World Bank report *Gender at Work – A Companion to the World Development Report on Jobs*.

<sup>8</sup> International Monetary Fund report *Women, Work, and the Economy: Macroeconomic Gains from Gender Equity* (2013).

<sup>9</sup> The World Bank report *World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development* (2012).

<sup>10</sup> The International Labour Organisation report *Women in labour markets: Measuring progress and identifying challenges* (2010).

<sup>11</sup> The World Bank: *Voice and Agency – Empowering Women and Girls for Shared Prosperity* (2014).



developing countries, one in three women agree that wife beating is justified, for example when a woman leaves the home without explicit permission.

As a consequence of the marginalisation of women, they are strongly underrepresented in decision-making structures – both on national levels and in international fora, where decisions are being made with regard to the societies where these women live. According to estimates made by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), women representation accounts to 22 per cent in average. This undermines the basis of the democracy, while preventing at the same time the rule of law to function.

Much has been done multilaterally to improve the situation of women in the world, but there is still lot to do on a global scale. The highly important UN resolution 1325 was adopted in 2000, stressing that women's participation in conflict prevention and conflict management is of central importance for the promotion of international peace, security, development and human rights.

In spite of this important step forward and other international efforts, there is a continuing and sometimes growing gap between commitments and the situation on the ground. Women's rights are being violated on a daily basis and practically in all countries in the world. This happens both in peace time and in democratic countries, as well as in totalitarian societies and not the least in conflict-laden parts of the world.

Statistics published by the World Health Organization (WHO), as well as reports from the World Bank, testifies that every third women in the world experience violation in their closest environment; in their family, among friends and with close relatives. In Africa, this share amounts to 40 per cent, in Southwest Asia as much as 44 per cent. The current situation in the Middle East shows in a most horrific way how violation against women is systematically carried out as a strategic and calculated weapon in order to disseminate fear and terror – in practice as part of war strategy<sup>12</sup>.

It is of profound importance to take into account how the reality looks like around the world, in particular where women are being violated. Without solving the issue of violating women's rights, many of the remaining global problems will not be solved. This includes armed conflicts. The marginalisation of women is not a problem which can be dealt with in a later stage, after solving what is sometimes being considered as more burning issues.

---

<sup>12</sup> The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation report *Violence against women as a weapon* (2012).

The question of involving women in peace processes, in decision-making and in public affairs is often an important part of the solution of these “burning issues” – in order to obtain lasting peace, social and economic stability, security (in particular with regard to civilian population) and sustainable development.

A vital aspect in the global peace work is to shift the political perspective from what is at core of traditional security policy to primarily human perspective. Security is about national and state security, but it is above all about security for human beings. The shift is therefore about a different mental perspective, a perspective which is often more of a woman’s perspective and where women can decisively contribute in e.g. peace processes, where the armament and hard security dimension often dominate. This in addition to the obvious right to participate in decision-making processes.

Security policy cannot be exclusively about national and state security – in particular not in a globalising world. The necessary point of departure must in an increasingly way be the point of the civilian population, the point of the defenceless human being. This is therefore the main point of departure for the feminist foreign policy. This point is in particular about women, since they are often more defenceless, more exposed to violence, more excluded, more marginalised than men and in large extent eliminated from peace processes, which in fact decide their fate.

The discussion about *hard power* versus *soft power* is not a new one. However, these expressions are often wrongly interpreted and confused. Soft power, as exercised by e.g. the European Union, has been said to be more and more in demand today than hard power. This because it is often claimed that soft power can better solve complicated and complex conflicts, but also because conflicts today are increasingly about civilians. Another, perhaps more adequate expression of what is needed today, has been launched as *smart power*. We need sanctions, but also dialogue. Smart power is surely needed but difficult, particularly since international policy operates today in a dynamic environment of asymmetric threats. War today is not necessarily in the first place a marching army, but rather a wide scope of threats ranging from cybersecurity to terrorism, from destabilisation of societies to violating the civilian population – particularly women and girls.

To bring gender aspects and priorities to the heart of peacebuilding and peacekeeping should be a priority. It is important to ensure women’s full inclusion in all phases of formal and informal processes. Women’s representation remains today marginal and gender aspects tend to be seen as com-

plementary, rather than central to the successful outcome of the operations. Sustainable peace and security can never be achieved if half the population is basically excluded.

Without establishing complete civilian security, security for all civilians – in particular women – there cannot be any prospect of a lasting peace. This is why it is absolutely necessary that women participate in the decision-making, in peace processes and in the rebuilding of a post-conflict society. Women have a different view and proposes often different solutions, which can turn up to be vital.

As the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, the Swedish diplomat Staffan de Mistura, often repeats that peace is being built bottom-up and not top-down. Without the participation of women, it is difficult to talk about a bottom-up approach and consequently a lasting peace for the whole of the society.

As Margot Wallström once said – women are not necessarily better, but they are different from men and think differently and can therefore often offer a different perspective. Women can point out other aspects, equally important to those prioritised by men, with regard to security and development – for instance education and health service<sup>13</sup>.

Combined views and combined efforts can hopefully lead to more successful solutions and a better prospect for the security of all human beings and the sustainable development of all societies.

Sweden's feminist foreign policy is rooted in the same analysis and convictions. Gender equality is a must if we are to meet the major challenges the world faces today. Attempts to achieve peace, security and development without addressing the needs of whole populations will just not work, while responding to both men and women offers potential for sustainable progress. To quote Hillary Clinton once more, "when women and girls thrive, entire societies thrive. Just as women's rights are human rights, women's progress is human progress"<sup>14</sup>.

This sounds perhaps all easy and all logical, yet it is the deeply rooted norms and values which are among the hardest to overcome and at the same time often found at the heart of the problems.

---

<sup>13</sup> *Vad är feministisk utrikespolitik?* – radio debate programme on Swedish P1, aired on December 20, 2014 (<http://sverigesradio.se/sida/avsnitt/475259?programid=1300>).

<sup>14</sup> Speech at the United Nations' conference in New York marking International Women's Day on March 7, 2014.

It will take political will, global leadership and considerable resources to move forward. Sweden's feminist foreign policy seeks to contribute to this end.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Clinton H., Speech at the United Nations' conference in New York marking International Women's Day on March 7, 2014.
- International Monetary Fund report *Women, Work, and the Economy: Macroeconomic Gains from Gender Equity* (2013).
- The International Labour Organisation report *Women in labour markets: Measuring progress and identifying challenges* (2010).
- The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation report *Violence against women as a weapon* (2012).
- The World Bank report *Gender at Work – A Companion to the World Development Report on Jobs*.
- The World Bank report *World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development* (2012).
- The World Bank: *Voice and Agency – Empowering Women and Girls for Shared Prosperity* (2014).
- Wallström M., Speech at the United States Institute for Peace, Washington D.C., on January 29, 2015.
- Wallström M., Speech at the UN Human Rights Council 28<sup>th</sup> Regular Session, Geneva, on March 2, 2015.