

Influence of Choice roundtable (II)

The Concept of Feminist Foreign Policy as a Global Strategy (Sweden as an example)

Chair: LB – Dr. Luc Brunet (LSE IDEAS)

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PS: Peter Stadius (University of Helsinki) is a Professor of Nordic Studies and the Director of the Nordic Studies Institute at the University of Helsinki. He is a regular commentator on Sweden in the Swedish and Finnish Swedish language press.

LB: Hello everyone. Thank you very much for joining us for this *roundtable on the concept of feminist foreign policy as a global strategy or alternative*. I'm Luc Brunet, a lecturer on 20th century history at the Open University and I'm co-director of the peace and security project here at the LSE IDEAS where over the last two days we have been holding a *conference titled the Influence of Choice: Alternative histories of non-hegemonic foreign policy during the Cold War*. We kicked off things yesterday with a fascinating paper on Olof Palme so we are kind of coming full circle by concluding this conference with looking at different aspects of Swedish foreign policy.

Specifically, with this roundtable we are looking at the launch in 2014 by the Swedish government, of what it called the world's first feminist foreign policy. And this approach includes not only applying a systematic gender equality perspective to the country's foreign policy but is also closely tied with development and even security policies. And today we'll delve into the launch and the context, as well as the content, of Sweden's foreign policy advanced by the foreign minister Margot Wallström.

We're delighted to welcome two very well qualified speakers who will be exploring this topic with us today. Both *in terms on how this policy was actually developed and implemented in practice*, and from a longer term historical perspective. Before introducing our speakers I'd just like to quickly thank the organizers of this conference and of this round table, particularly Rinna Kullaa who really put this event together, and , thanks to all the hard work done by Eirini Karamouzi, Wolfgang Mueller, Dave Sutton, Max Hurri and others for making this possible today.

So, our first speaker is Katja Ahlfors who is a director of the Unit of Development Policy of the foreign ministry of Finland, and she was posted in Stockholm from 2013 to 2017 I believe, and reported on the 2014 launch of Sweden's foreign policy, so she's especially well placed to comment on this. And our second speaker is Professor Peter Stadius, who is the Professor of Nordic Studies at the University of Helsinki, where he's also the director of the Nordic Studies Institute. He also provides regular press commentary on Sweden. We are delighted to welcome you both, virtually at least, to be at LSE. I'll hand it over to our speakers now, I think you'll each speak for five minutes or so in the first instance and then we'll open things up and have a free ranging discussion. Please do write any questions to the Q&A box and I'll be happy to put those to our speakers. So without further ado, I'll hand things over to our first speaker, Katja.

KA: Thank you Luc and hello to everyone participating. I'm joining you from Helsinki, that's just been covered in the first snow of this winter. I'm delighted and honored, and maybe a little bit terrified, for

joining this conference. Thank you to Rinna for inviting me. As Luc said in his introduction, I'm a diplomat, a civil servant at the ministry of foreign affairs. So definitely I do not have any academic background apart from my masters, where I did major in political history, so I do have a soft spot and a keen interest in history. *As an introduction, let me say a few words on how I approach this topic of feminist foreign policy as a global strategy.* But first to further introduce myself I would like to say I'm a typical generalist diplomat. I have been working on security policy and development policy, mainly I've been working on African relations but also on Nordic co-operation, especially on Swedish and Finnish relations. So, quite a broad range of topics there. And then currently I am focusing very much on EU affairs, which forms the basis for our foreign and security policy.

When looking at the topic of feminist foreign policy my starting point would be, as was already told, that I was based in Stockholm in the embassy of Finland from 2013 to 2017. *I remember very clearly when the prime minister Stefan Löfven presented his government and his government program, stating that it is a feminist government.* And a few weeks, maybe a month later, foreign minister Margot Wallström presented the concept of a feminist foreign policy. And it was very interesting to follow that discussion in Sweden and also discuss it with Swedish colleagues: *what it meant and what the implications of it were.* It took a little while to understand what was meant with it, I know that the engagement with the services started immediately. What I would say about it looking at it from today, and this is my second point on my viewpoint of this topic, is that during these last ten years, maybe *especially during the last five, six years, unfortunately, there is even a bigger need for a feminist foreign policy I would say because of the global pushback on gender equality, on the liberal world order.* It's one of the phenomena of international relations today that you have quite of a mixed group of actors in the global sphere which are united in this pushback on liberal values, including gender equality.

My *third dimension* of my perspective of this question relates to the topic on what I deal with on daily basis today, and *that's development issues.* And here I would relate to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. As a historian it's of course something ongoing, we don't just have the historic perspective on it, but it's very clear that it is so revealing, it's revealing on an individual perspective, but it is also revealing when you look at societies more globally. *It reveals strengths and weaknesses and one of the very first alarming consequences of the pandemic, if we don't look at the pandemic itself, was that the consequences, more broad health consequences and the broader socioeconomic consequences are clearly hitting women and girls much more severely than men.* And unfortunately, it look like global development in this regard is taken several steps backwards.

So as we are here, towards the end of 2020, *I would say that it's very interesting to, still we have a bit of a perspective since the launch in 2014,* and I would argue that it's even more relevant than before. And it's important to look at the lessons learned so far. Some critics might say, *there's been different kinds of criticism, but actually if you look at the arguments there are so many arguments for having a human rights based approach or a feminist foreign policy, but I haven't really seen any convincing arguments against it.* And that's of course a good starting point on finding support for the need for looking at international relations through a gender lens. I'll stop here for now, thank you.

LB: Thank you very much Katja for the fascinating first comment, and now we'll hand it right over to our next speaker Peter.

PS: Thank you so much Luc and thank you also Katja for this view from a practitioner and a contemporary, diplomatic point of view. *I will take a little bit broader historical and Nordic take on this and concentrate on a few things.* First of all, the feminist foreign policy as was mentioned, is *not a new product* or whatever we could call it, tool, in soft power, in public diplomacy, and having been launched by the Swedish government in 2014, *it carries some reminiscences of typically Nordic processes. Feminism was not invented in the*

Nordic countries, as were not many other things, *but the Nordics are usually quite well with appropriating*, if you want to use that word, or of importing and developing ideas and making them their own. That is one point. *It is a typically Nordic process*, I would say.

Secondly, from a Nordic co-operation politics and public diplomacy perspective, this feminist foreign policy in my mind is a very interesting case because it could be one phenomenon that *could be seen as what can be called return of politics*. With this I mean the fact that the Nordic countries are well known, and especially Sweden, for being beacons for democracies, stable societies, the Nordic model, we all know about that, starting from the 1930s. And in the interwar years of the 20s and the 30s the region kind of profiled itself as an alternative for totalitarian societies, as an alternative for capitalism during the Great Depression in the US. Also in the Cold War as a middle way. And feminism, women's rights, gender equality, has been very much a part of this. In *Nordic countries, and especially Sweden, can be seen as a superpower in questions of gender equality*. If we look at the hard facts in history, how do we measure this? One obvious way is to look at the suffrage movements and the universal suffrage, in Finland we are usually pretty proud to announce that in 1906 a parliamentary reform was approved, and which gave women the right to vote and right to pose as candidates in parliamentary elections. If we look from a global perspective we have New Zealand as number one, already in the 1890s, Australia, there's some restrictions of course in what came to racial categories, and then in the Nordic countries we have Norway in 1913, Denmark in 1915 together with Iceland, and last Sweden in 1921. For various reasons, there was a conservative shift in Sweden due to the Union breakup, what could also make a small point out of the fact that Finland was not independent in 1906, it was actually a part of the autocratic Russian Empire. Even though these first suffrages were given in remote areas, in protestant countries like in New Zealand, Australia, some parts of the United States like Wyoming early in the 1870s, and in Finland. We also know that in some centric countries in the West like France did the same reforms in Europe after the Second World War, Switzerland a lot after the Second World War.

Okay, but *equality was in many ways a domestic project*. The fact that the legislative bodies, we had legislators who were women, so in the social reforms in Finland for example, late 70s, the amount of female MPs rise. And in the 80s we see some social reforms, for example in daycare, combining work and family, clearly correlating. So now the question is: what happened in the 90s? From a Nordic perspective, what happened in the 90s was that there was a crisis discussion about the Nordic model. Basically the breakdown of the communist bloc, *the kind of failure of socialism and communism also put a big shadow over the Nordic welfare state*. There was a lot of talk, that we had it during the Cold War, but now it's over. So, there was a neoliberal turn, *the conservative Prime Minister of Sweden then Carl Bildt said that: "Who wants to choose between a failure and a success? Who wants to choose something that is in between communism and capitalism?"* So that was kind of the 90s thing.

So what happens then? The Nordic "brand" becomes a brand. It becomes something that is kind of *culturally determined as a quality to producing safe, well educated, successful societies. The Nordic model is not a political program*, it is not a result of political struggles, *it is rather the result of some kind of Nordic way, Nordic sense of trust, cultural things. And the governments start branding themselves and make this a part of public diplomacy*. So now in a way having this new return of politics, basically in a way we are stating now that the neoliberal era has come to its end. These are the first research projects now, one in Sweden led by Jenny Andersson (SCPO) stating this. It seems that the politics are returning both for worse and for good one could say.

So, we have this *feminist foreign policy that is not just a moral imperative, it also uses these practical arguments like this boosts the economy*. It's not just because it's a human rights thing. In a way Sweden again takes the seat in this superpower of feminism. There are some questions that we could, and some observations, make on this. I'll try to be brief on these, we can go through on these more, but one thing is

of course *the question of universalism*. Human rights is included as an essential part of this. *Human rights is a very western concept, for example the World Social Forum is at times a little bit hesitant of using it*, would rather use *dignity*, because human rights is so connected to the French Enlightenment, for example Northern Africa in the French Napoleonic invasions and so on. And other stories of course when we speak about feminism is, if we could develop this to have some kind of intersectional critique. As many of you might know the US law scholar Kimberley Crenshaw, when she coined the notion of intersectionality as part of an internal critique of the feminist movement, she famously said that: “Black awareness movement was all male and women’s liberation movement was all white.” And these are maybe some questions that I think are worth taking up, that how does this relate to the new feminist foreign policy. To end this first presentation, one thing I would like to also talk about is what I call *the war of images or the war of stereotypes*. In this time that we are living right now, of *alternative facts*, in fact all this image tradition of Sweden as a feminist superpower has its own history. These utopian versus dystopian discourses, they are being relived again and again. We had in the 60s, for example a film from Sweden called Heaven and Hell, which basically is something you shouldn’t show your children but watch it with your friends and you will have a laugh. But it’s quite serious, *basically attacking Swedish social democratic politics as driving young people to premarital sex, drug abuse, lesbianism and suicide*. We know this suicide thing comes from the 50s, it was coined by President Eisenhower etcetera etcetera. Recently there was in Chinese news agencies circulating a fake news about a village in Sweden fully inhabited by women, that the men were excluded from. And also this alluded to homosexuality. So, the dystopia of female liberation as a part of an image war has been going on globally since way back, I did my PhD on Spanish travel logs in Nordic countries in the 1890s and this was going on in the same way, debating the characters in Henry Gibson’s dramas, a Scandinavian drama. The return of politics and a very strong statement in the war of images, yes, Sweden is still very much a beacon. Thank you.

LB: Thank you very much Peter, and to both of you, I think the different perspectives you bring to the question work very well together. I have a couple of questions to kick off the discussion, but I’ll also read questions from the audience in due course.

So, in this conference past the last couple of days we have been discussing the role played by smaller states in particular, so I suppose I would be curious to know whether you think that a feminist foreign policy is necessarily a policy better suited to smaller states? Is this an area where smaller states have an especially important role to play or an advantage, and if so why? Or is this in principle something that could be adapted by any and all countries, including large states or so called great powers? Katja, I’ll let you respond first.

KA: Thank you and thank you for a very interesting comment. I would maybe say yes and no. *Yes, in the sense that of course geopolitical realities play a part. So small states, and this is something that all of us Nordic states share, we are very aware of our size. And then even if it’s an outspoken goal also for the current Finnish government to play a significant global role, and in a way punch beyond our weight. There’s still an awareness of the limited state of influence. There’s less of power politics, I mean you don’t have that same role. On the other hand, I wouldn’t say there’s anything that excludes, why wouldn’t bigger states be able to also have a feminist foreign policy? And in fact, I think that France has also declared that they have a feminist foreign policy.*

If I may just very briefly comment on, I have lots of things I could comment on what Peter said, but this that bringing back the politics to the Nordic sphere, I think it’s an interesting view because yes, *I do think that this growth comes from a Nordic tradition. All of us have a very, and this is very true for Finland, that we have a value-based approach to foreign and security policy. And that goes for many consecutive*

governments, no matter by what coalition. Our current government is stating that it has a human rights-based approach to foreign and security policy, and especially highlighting women and girls. And we work on this together with our Nordic neighbors in different spheres, in global spheres and then in third world countries around the world. *The problem is that we are so well known to pursue this agenda, that we can easily fall into the trap of being the usual suspects. And so, we also have a need to co-operate, and which we do.* There are very interesting and growing alliances in that regard, which is of course necessary.

Then again *on the Nordics, I would say that when we are talking about whether human rights are western or universal, I would still argue, I do know the history and all this, I still argue that they are universal and global.* And I think, how the Nordics are placed in different kind of comparisons of well being of states and human beings from different angles, and you will almost always find all of the Nordic countries among the top ten. I think that speaks for itself. And that's probably one of the strongest arguments we have, *it's our own story.* Then of course you need to have content specific approaches and you have to find a balance, I mean we can tell how we have achieved things, that will not make us experts on other kinds of realities. Yeah, thank you.

PS: Thank you Luc, to your question about the small states, *of course it's obvious that small states do not engage that directly in very hardline security politics, or at least they kind of do not have that position that they need to be very cautious.* So maybe these other kind of soft power related, *I do not know if we should call feminist foreign policy soft power related, but that's probably how it is perceived,* at least in 2014 as a very very radical take. That in a way there is a more of a scene to be taken in those fields and exactly as Katja said, these are the ways they can punch above their weight and will do so in this tradition that we have both referred to now, in a way that it comes in a sense naturally.

If I may comment on these human rights, I think it was more of a conceptual approach that I had at that: What words are we using and what the associations may arise in other parts of the world. The Red Cross and the Red Half Moon, they do the same thing, so if we use dignity or something else, it is more likely to be aware of the concepts. But what I think what the substance of the phenomenon that we are talking about, I think it is universal, I agree with you on that. It's also a question of going outside of what is expected by the Nordics: Denmark joined the US led coalition on the War in Iraq in 2003, they sent a couple of cruisers over there, small ones that came behind the US and the British and so on. And that was really an anomaly, and in a way there are a lot of people, including me, who thought that we will not forget this.

LB: Thank you very much. Maybe just to pick up on that point to some extent, women's participation in public life seems to be very much part of the, what you call *the Nordic brands* in your earlier comments. I was wondering if you could say perhaps in a bit more detail, *how far back this goes historically,* you mentioned when they secured the right to vote between 1906 and 1921 in the different Nordic states. But in terms of other aspects and sort of in playing a leadership role domestically in politics in the Nordic states, so when this developed historically sort of compared to other countries.

And also, picking up on what you just mentioned about Denmark's involvement in Iraq: How significant are the differences between the different Nordic states in this respect, in the idea of autonomous foreign policy? *So, in other words is there something really specific about Sweden here that sets it apart from its neighbors, whether historically or at present. So how far can we speak of a Nordic feminist foreign policy as opposed to a Swedish feminist foreign policy?*

PS: Thank you for both questions. The first one, in the Finnish case and the Nordic in general, of course I mentioned *this suffrage issue and in 1907 it was then put in practice in an election and 14 women were elected into the Finnish Diet as it was called, it was not yet a national parliament, it was the diet of the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland. These 14 women, this became news also internationally, I have looked at some of these and how they were reported, and they were reported as extremely radical, feminist. And in fact most of them were conservative, centrist agrarians, deeply rooted in Lutheran protestant Christianity and all kind of bourgeois liberal decency, almost none of them were politically on the radical left side. But it was kind of presumed automatically that they were the kind of "amazons". And that was a part of creating this kind of dystopian and dangerous image.*

In general, why women in the Nordic countries are, income parity, I'm aware of my position here and I have a lot of colleagues and female friends saying that it is still a work unfinished and I can agree with that. So, we are talking comparatively here. I would say that one issue is that somehow to take in public life was to a certain extent accepted. I would imagine for example that however the foreign ministries were quite male dominated, it is not something that comes overnight. Female students were accepted into universities in the late 19th century, but very small amounts. So, I think there is not a very established in Finland or the other Nordic countries, but in comparison we also have the Anglo-Saxon world where the suffrage movement are strong, and Russia as well. Russia, a very social merit stratified with many kinds of worlds within one big empire. And part of this, we could call radical feminism, is to be founded in Russia. So maybe it's also a category that is easily seen in the Nordics from the outside. I will maybe leave it there, probably some other historians could give a better answer of this than me.

But then the question of differences with the Nordic countries. Iceland is a small island, a little bit like Malta what we talked about yesterday, they had their things, they think about fishery and they can use that as their capital in international relations, and without an army they can enlarge their territorial waters in the Cold War towards the UK because they are need as a strategic point, they use that. Norway and Finland, they have this small nation, newly independent, national thinking that is more in comparison to Denmark and Sweden, is more nationalistic and less universalistic in its tradition. Although these elements are both in the Finnish and the Norwegian case, but Norway in a way seeing itself as a small core nation up until recently having to think about themselves. And Finland of course, a strong national narrative of being a victim, of being a subject of hard times. And in a way to take the self-evident center stage globally, I think both Norway and Finland, we are looking at Sweden as a euphemism for the future in many ways, at least in Finland from a historical point of view. Now the situation is different, but there are these traditions. So I think for Sweden, it has not been threatened from the outside in 200 years basically. So it can take a more ideological stand and in a way feel that it has something to contribute, it's natural for them to contribute to the global order. This is the Nordic branch kind of delving into this. Denmark is the continental member of the Nordic Five and also likes to show Sweden that they are an older kingdom and sometimes they do things how they want without listening to Sweden.

LB: Great, thank you very much. Katja, did you have anything you want to comment on that question?

KA: Thank you, yes. Just a few points to add to what Peter just said. When it comes to the history of gender equality, and I don't have the full picture of all Nordic countries, something we often, when we are explaining the Finnish story, we emphasize the role of education. This goes for both Finland and Sweden, because already in 1680-something, we had a church law that dictated that before being allowed to getting married you needed to know some basics about the Lutheran dogmas. And this required mostly that you had to, at least to some extent, to read and write. You can say that this laid a basis that there was a view where everyone needed to get an education. Then at this time Sweden and Finland were one country. Then when you come into the 19th century when Finland belonged into Russia, we had several different reforms that quite early on, at least some some degree, opened up education for all people living in the country.

When it comes to the Nordics, I think this is one of the more interesting subjects, *is it that we share so much in common that, especially the further away we are from home that we feel kind of spontaneously united by our background and our approach of the world.* But then of course we have our differences, I mean one is as Peter explained *the difference in our history. That gives us a bit of a different historical identity on how we see ourselves and our place in the world. Another thing is, that if you look at the five countries, two of these countries are members of NATO, three of these countries are members of the European Union, only one belongs to the Eurozone.* So, we have bit of a different alliances, which of course plays a big part in today's policies and especially in international relations. Thanks.

LB: Thanks very much, some fascinating answers. I'd like to again pick up one of the themes of the conference and something we've been discussing earlier today. And that has been the role of non-state actors in international relations. And I wonder if you could say anything about *the role of non-state actors, whether NGOs or businesses or others, what role they either do play or could play in the pursuit of feminist foreign policy?*

KA: If I may start. *I think this is actually part of the Nordic identity, the really strong role that civil society has played in our societies.* Maybe partly due to the fact that we are comparatively geographically big countries, not too densely populated, small in numbers when it comes to population. *There's kind of an openness to using all of the resources, to use all the actors and co-operate. You cannot really exclude,* I am sure Peter can explain how far back in history this goes. But this is very typical, and therefore *I think in both Sweden and in Finland we have quite a lot of official and non-official platforms where civil society representatives are heard or even joining and commenting on policies that are being made.* And in implementation. So, they are often united efforts. One current example in Finland is, we are working on a Africa strategy to be launched in the beginning of next year, and that has involved both the private sector, the academia, civil society. I believe Sweden has had a lot of initiatives related to the feminist foreign policy but I wouldn't know about the details there. But it is typically Nordic to work very closely with the whole of society.

PS: I completely agree with Katja, but I would like to add a little bit of, both historical analysis and little bit describe the nature of NGOs in the Nordic countries. Somebody has said that the Nordic countries and China have in common that they have strong peasant farming cultural tradition combined with a very strong state, maybe an overstatement *but the state in the Nordic countries is very strong. That is our tradition, we believe in the good state.* People trust the state, so the whole basis for non-governmental private action can be different when seen from for example Anglo-Saxon perspective. *NGOs in Finland, in most Nordic countries I would claim, they are in an intricate relationship with authorities and state authorities and municipal authorities. Many associations, NGOs, receive direct funding from the state.* It goes to such lengths that people sometimes have difficulty in distinguishing between the civil society sphere and the sphere of state and authorities. *If we look at the Swedish language, how it's used in Sweden, they sometimes use the word *samhälle*, which means society. Sometimes people actually use it in everyday life when they mean authorities. If something is wrong in Sweden they say "*Samhällets måste göra någonting*", the society has do to something! But they actually mean that the state and the authorities have to do something.* Historian *Pauli Kettunen* in Finland has said this very nicely. But there is this, I do not know is it corporatist or what, *there is a very special symbiosis and trust, and through that also relationship between the civil society and the state.*

LB: Thank you very much. So, we have our *first question from the audience*, this one is from Hugh Dawson. He has a question for both speakers: *Do you see any prospect of the British government adopting a feminist foreign policy?*

PS: I do not know so much, the only thing I can say is that often, as English is the lingua franca of the world and it's very much present in the Nordic region, many people in some regard mistreat the Queen's

language. So we think we know the UK, but we don't realize how much of a class society it is. I do not know if this relates to feminism, but I think change is always possible. We don't really know how much can be done in the future, what we do know of history is there can be great changes, so it's not an impossible thing, I think.

KA: I wouldn't be able to say, I also think that changes are always possible. But I would just say that from my perspective, we normally work very closely with our British colleagues on these themes. And as I mentioned, education, that's one of the biggest priorities for Finland in development policy as are the rights of women and girls. *For our British colleagues girl's education is a strong priority as well, this is just one part of the whole picture, but as an example I would say that we do share very strongly the same values here.*

LB: Thank you very much. In the meantime, one of the questions I'll put to you, *that's ultimately how do we assess how effective Sweden's feminist foreign policy has been since 2014?* So I suppose I'm asking *first of all whether you think it has been a successful policy*, but also more broadly I would be interested to hear your thoughts on *how successful should be defined* and what kind of criteria we might look to use when discussing how effective feminist foreign policy has been?

KA: Well, my understand is *that part of the ambition with the whole agenda is that when it started they sent out questionnaires within their services, and asked for inputs and views on what this would mean and what could Sweden do. And really overall as far as I know, all over the world to embassies, all over to different departments at the ministry. And then they built on all this and made the first program of action. And at the same time working internally, with internal procedures, so it was really like putting on an agenda lens on absolutely everything. And to my understanding they have been regularly been evaluating it, I'm not working on this any more so I wouldn't be able to say that, but I just know that the way it all has been put up, with also the follow up and evaluation is very ambitious. Then I would say that one thing that speaks for itself is that when we started this discussion is that they have clearly created a concept. We go to 2013, you would have sent "feminist foreign policy" and people would have been asking, what? Now people who follow international relations, most know what it is, we've had France, Mexico and Canada also stating that they have a feminist foreign policy. So when international relations are also about making things known, so that is definitely a success story in that regard. But also, these evaluations show that, for example when Sweden had a rotating member of the UN security council, they very systematically worked on this agenda and did their best to influence the work of the council.*

PS: Just a couple of short things. It's kind of obvious, I think that it was a little part of Sweden's campaign to gain a seat in the security council. As Katja said, in conceptual history, changing the world, doing politics about changing language, just as Katja said in 2013 most would have seen this as something utopian or really as a joke or something like that. I think now to have Canada as the American Nordic country, somehow adapted. After all, most of the inhabitants of this globe are women, and the Swedes have noticed something there. I also think that the results are actually quite good.

::: The END:::