

The Value of a Feminist Foreign Policy

By Shannon Zimmerman

The majority of countries have gender-blind foreign policies. While this may seem like a good thing, such policies fail to acknowledge and address existing gendered discrimination, inequalities, and violence. They also fail to take active steps to include women and other marginalized groups. Feminist foreign policy, in contrast, is designed to take into account and address these existing imbalances. On September 12, 2019, Women In International Security (WIIS)–Australia and the Asia-Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (APR2P) convened a workshop to assess whether Australia has a feminist foreign policy and, if not, what steps could be taken to advance such a policy.

A feminist foreign policy, while more difficult to implement, is a smart strategic move. Greater gender equality promotes both a nation's relative state of peace and healthier, more resilient domestic security environments. Most important for foreign policy, states with more gender equality are more stable. These states have higher gross domestic products and economic growth rates, higher levels of health and lower levels of corruption. They also exhibit less aggression toward other states. Recognition of the interconnection of gender equality and national security has led to the emergence of feminist foreign policies that push against the systematic, global subordination of women. Sweden's Foreign Minister Margot Wallström explained her pursuit of a feminist foreign policy by noting that, "Striving toward gender equality is not only a goal in itself but also a precondition for achieving our wider foreign, development, and security-policy objectives." Promoting true gender equality abroad, while cultivating it at home, is a win/win policy move.

Four countries currently have explicitly feminist foreign policies: Sweden, Canada, France, and Mexico. Sweden first unveiled its policy in 2014. It encompassed all domains—foreign and national security, development, and trade—and emphasized promoting gender equality in its own right as well as to further other foreign policy priorities. In 2017, Canada launched a more limited Feminist International Assistance Policy focused on development assistance, but it eschewed the broader realms of diplomacy, defense and trade. France followed suit with its 2018 International Strategy on Gender Equality, which also focuses on foreign assistance including some diplomatic aspects. Mexico has the latest feminist foreign policy, announced in January 2020. Each of these policies has strengths and weaknesses but are notable for explicitly acknowledging gender equality as a core component for achieving foreign policy goals.

What Does a Feminist Foreign Policy Look Like?

What makes a foreign policy 'feminist' is contingent on a country's specific conditions and environment. Sweden, for example, has crafted its policy around the "three Rs": women's and girl's **Rights**, women's **Representation** in the decision-making process, and the necessary **Resources** to promote gender equality and equal opportunities. Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy focuses on addressing barriers to success for women and girls, such as poverty, education and economic opportunities. These policies are solid starts, but they are state-centric, promote Western ideals, and assume a cis-gender binary. They do not address power

relations, a core cause of inequality. Nor do they encompass those with intersectional identities.

Embracing the full complexity of a feminist approach can result in policies that address some of the most systemic foreign policy challenges. Lyric Thompson and Rachel Clement argue that a feminist foreign policy should seek to address patriarchal, racist, and neo-colonial imbalances of power. To this end, Thompson and Clement offer up a more inclusive definition of feminist foreign policy that goes beyond the dominant gender-binary, ethnocentric, Western-centric conceptions: “A Feminist Foreign Policy is 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.”

A feminist foreign policy implies a collaborative effort between the state that develops the policy and the states with which it engages. Scholars Karin Aggestam, Annika Bergman Rosamond, and Annica Kronsell further this idea by arguing that a feminist foreign policy is an ethical commitment to the care and support of distant others. In this view, a feminist foreign policy is concerned not only with achieving state objectives but also with the impact of its policies on recipient communities, with special consideration given to marginalized groups. This approach can result in divergences between countries national interests and those of the recipient country. For example, Saudi Arabia, a country known for its oppressive treatment of women, cut ties with Sweden and refused to issue visas to Swedish business travelers after remarks made by Sweden’s feminist foreign minister Margot Wallström. Inversely, countries which adhere to a feminist foreign policy gain political legitimacy because they are seen as actors who are willing to pursue the values they espouse.

These two conceptions can be combined to identify characteristics of a feminist foreign policy:

- created in consultation with a diverse group of domestic actors;
- a collaborative effort between the policy-making state and other states;
- an emphasis on equal rights that is backed up with representation and resources;
- inclusive of LGBTQ identities;
- implemented across all levels of influence (aid, trade, defense and diplomacy); and
- addresses structural power imbalances.

How Does Australia Measure Up?

Australia has a mixed record of promoting feminist ideals, both domestically and through its foreign policy. The administration of Australia’s first female prime minister, Julia Gillard, received praise for supporting inclusion and equality “at the very highest political level.” Additionally, Julie Bishop, Australia’s first female foreign minister, may have eschewed the feminist label but nonetheless spoke of making gender equality central to global peace and security. In pursuit of this goal, Australia released a Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Strategy in 2016. Successive governments made commitments to gender equality as a foreign policy goal. It is clear that Australia recognizes the utility of gender equality but, compared against the criteria cited above, there is a way to go before Australia can claim to have a feminist foreign policy.

Perhaps the first challenge is the limited inclusion of diverse domestic actors in Australia’s policymaking process and the lack of female representation within Australia’s policymaking apparatuses. In a July 2019 report, the Lowy Institute found a continued gender imbalance within Australian government departments and organizations responsible for international relations. The report noted that not a single one of the 33 white papers, reviews, and other major foreign and security policy-shaping documents produced by the Australian government in the last 50 years has been led by a woman. Australia’s most recent foreign policy document, the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, was exclusively written and formally reviewed by men. The lack of female representation in policymaking raises questions as to Australia’s ability to “practice what it preaches” in its foreign policy.

Second, Australia has a strongly self-centered foreign policy, with only passing reference to the impact of these policies outside its borders. The 2017 White Paper lists five objectives:

- “the promotion of an open, inclusive, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region in which the rights of all states are respected;
- the delivery of more opportunities for our businesses globally and stand against protectionism;
- ensuring Australians remain safe, secure, and free in the face of threats such as terrorism;
- the promotion and protection of international rules that support stability and prosperity and enable cooperation to tackle global challenges, and;
- increased support for a more resilient Pacific and Timor-Leste.”

Except for the first objective of an inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific region, the priorities listed by the Foreign Policy White Paper present policy options as a choice between Australia's national interest and the interests of distant others. Even efforts to promote a more resilient Pacific and Timor-Leste are pursued to ensure that instability in those states does not impact Australia. While a self-interested approach to foreign policy is to be expected, too much emphasis on one-sided relationships to promote Australian economic growth and state security can create “winners” and “losers” in foreign policy. The needs of recipient communities are not explored and addressed, nor are the potential negative impacts of such policies on particular communities considered. This limits more collaborative opportunities that could be mutually beneficial to all actors involved.

These opportunities are even more limited because Australia—like Canada and France—appears to limit the gendered aspects of their policy to development and aid. This excludes gender considerations from the key spheres of trade, defense, and diplomacy. For Australia, this means that gender overall is downplayed as militarised understandings of security guide most policy actions, particularly in the Indo-pacific. More inclusive or ‘feminine’ ideals such as aid and poverty eradication appear secondary to the main agenda despite the fact that some of Australia's most pressing challenges are related to issues of development.

Third, in the context of Australian policy, gender is understood and applied narrowly as a synonym for women and girls. There is no reference to the rights of LGBTQ individuals or those with intersectional identities. Although Australian policy does mention the importance of supporting indigenous peoples and those with disabilities, it fails to make key intersections with gender. Most importantly for achieving any policy objective, Australia does not yet have clear indicators of how increased representation of women will be achieved and where resources for gender programming will come from. Guaranteed resources are the basis upon which all effective policies are built.

Lastly, Australia's core foreign policy objectives promote the continuation of the Western-dominated rules-based global order. The current order was fashioned after World War II and based upon ideas of liberal democracy, particularly the freedom of trade and the promotion of commerce. These core values were powerfully influenced by the interests and values of Western countries at the time and reflect their racial, religious, gendered, and economic biases. This order has been contested for decades by Russia and, more recently, by emerging powers such as China. The United States has also become an unexpected source of contention as the Trump administration has begun to distance itself from liberal democratic ideals. A feminist foreign policy has the potential to help Australia redirect policies from a

competitive and expansive realist focus on relative power between states to one of mutual gains in an increasingly interconnected region. In order to do so, foreign policy must promote a global order based upon rules that strive to achieve equality between countries and individuals. It can be argued that the current world order is simply not structured to do that.

In light of these critiques, workshop participants provided several recommendations for how Australia might approach its foreign policy in a more inclusive, equality-focused manner, thus generating a better policy and potentially attracting and retaining more women to work in international relations.

Recommendations

Include Women at All Levels. It is difficult for any nation to promote a feminist policy if it does not itself model feminist ideals. In comparison with many other countries, Australia has remarkably inclusive foreign policy consultation. In preparation for the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, a task force held roundtable discussions across Australia, interviewed over 60 prominent Australians and subject-matter experts, and received over 9,000 written submissions. However, it is unclear who these experts were and how many of them were women or held feminist viewpoints. The Lowy report noted that women play almost no role in the actual drafting of key Australian foreign policy documents. Women and non-gender-binary participants need to be an equal part of policymaking at all levels, not just as advisors but as leaders and substantive content contributors.

Address Structural Power Imbalances. Australia needs to recognize and reject outdated policies and engage with its foreign partners on equal footing to ensure mutual benefits. Australia is in a privileged position in the Asia Pacific. Since its founding as a state, it has been supported by strong allies that have helped it become and remain a major player in the region. Historically, this power was not always used for the betterment of those with whom Australia came into contact. To construct a foreign policy focused on equality, Australia needs to first take ownership of the negative impact that its foreign policy actions have had on its neighboring states. It also needs to reconsider relationships that have at times prevented—or been used as an excuse to avoid—relationship building with regional neighbors. Policymakers should strive to ensure that these biased, dated policies are not used as precedent for current policies and instead actively work toward crafting new policies that address these imbalances and strengthen collaborative relationships.

Foster Cooperative Policies and Structures. Australia should engage in “smart” power relationships with its regional neighbors and move beyond security collaboration to address broader issues. Drawing on feminist conceptions of ethics of care, Australia can promote cooperative rather than competitive relationships with its neighbors. This necessitates looking beyond the needs of states to address the needs of individuals, particularly marginalized groups. Policies that focus on state needs often overlook those most in need. While this might be a contentious approach to making decisions on engagement and aid delivery, it would show that Australia is willing to put its money where it claims its values lie, encouraging recipient states to ensure their priorities also focus on equality. An inclusive foreign policy—and one that will attract a diverse array of civil servants who want to help implement such policy—should adopt inclusive language that reflects a wider set of skills, including cultural credentials in the exercise of diplomacy and interpersonal skills.

A Comprehensive Approach to Foreign Policy. The world in which Australian foreign policy is seen to operate is referred to as “contested,” “competitive,” “uncertain,” and even “dangerous.” References to national security, found 62 times, overshadow the phrase foreign policy, which is found 22 times. A strong feminist foreign policy would eschew policy built on a nationalized military-based security premised on states’ rights and a patriarchal, rules-based order. Australia can draw upon new relationships and resources to craft a comprehensive approach to foreign policy. Such an approach would embrace human security, which encompasses economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security, and political security. Human security is feminist in that it is people-centered, universal, and tries to prevent suffering, particularly through early prevention. It also acknowledges the interdependent nature of all aspects of security, which extend far beyond protection of physical borders. As security clearly motivates Australia’s foreign policy, embracing a broader understanding of security can address some of the most gendered oversights of existing policy. In particular, it will encourage policymakers to draw equally on all types of foreign influence, balancing military options with trade, aid, and diplomacy.

Conclusion

Genuine pursuit of a feminist foreign policy will not be easy. The structures of government are designed to promote and support masculine ideas of security. Crafting an effective, inclusive, and enduring feminist foreign policy would require substantial resources and overturning male-dominated power structures. Additionally, countries with particularly gendered approaches to governance may push back against Australian efforts to implement feminist policy. However, the current realpolitik approach to Australia’s foreign policy may not be addressing key causes of instability, which are often rooted in gendered relations. A foreign policy that moves beyond the realist emphasis on hard power to foster inclusive, collaborative relationships with other countries and that emphasizes gender equality is the smartest choice for Australia and would be well worth the effort.

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