

Feminist Foreign Policy: A Comparative Analysis Of The Swedish And The Indian Foreign Policies

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Abstract

The traditional feminist outlook was ineffective in stimulating the de-masculinization of the political frameworks of States. Power structures founded on patriarchal normativism conventionally systematise “Othering” in policy making. Such exclusionary susceptibilities gave rise to a paradigmatic shift. Informed by feminist voices and global civil society actors, gender mainstreaming gained traction in the 20th century. ‘Women, Peace, Security’ Agenda, engendered by the United Nations Security Council Resolution, invigorated progressive governments to incorporate a feminist facet to their foreign policies. What compelled the feminists to deconstruct this structural isolation of women? What are the factors that led to the substantial reorientation of foreign policies? In fact, in a major first move, the Swedish coalition government initiated a radical policy change by incorporating a feminist agenda which addressed the gendered problems of inequality, discrimination and violence. Contrarily, to date, statistics on India’s diplomatic cadre highlight a problematic masculine alignment. It becomes imperative, here, to examine the vulnerabilities that obstruct India from institutionalising a comprehensive gender-sensitive policy structure despite being a rising geopolitical force. Alongside, it also becomes a matter of inquiry whether the Indian scenario narrates a ‘masculine’ problem of the Third-world countries or is it

just a country-specific issue? A qualitative content analysis highlights that Swedish foreign policy discourse has taken great strides to transform the 'male' institutionalised structures, taking intersectionality into account. Conversely, in the Indian context, gender parity has been restricted to only numerical connotations instead of a strong rhetorical framework and institutional modifications. Moreover, in India, there is a wide gap between planning and execution, which makes it difficult to enhance the prominence of women in the international domain. Therefore, it can be concluded that access and influence in global decision-making spaces are yet a yearning for Indian women, whereas Sweden has already achieved it.

Keywords: *Feminist foreign policy, power structures, security, political participation, Swedish foreign policy, Indian policy*

A Gender-(Ed) Lens on Foreign Policy

The lack of women in international politics showed that many groups and feminists were aware of how gender-based violence was a major problem. Violence was no longer viewed as merely individual acts but as a broader issue called "structural violence," rooted in unfair systems and unequal power and resources (Adebahr, 2022). Institutional biases and the struggle for power between groups have inevitably created an "Othering" effect in policymaking. Intersectional identity has further accentuated the division by bringing into prominence the domain of "us" and "them." Such divisions have ineluctably embedded the notions of domination and the dominated, leaving no space for negotiation, understanding, rethinking, or restructuring. Globally, this systemic exclusion of women from domestic political processes, rooted in postcolonial ideas of staying at home, garnered acceptance and was considered normal. Eventually, this 'accepted' exclusion

became the functional norm of international organisations as well.

The women's movement of the twentieth century initiated its march for justice by critiquing the gender-blindness of foreign policy. It became the primary agenda of the feminists to condemn and unravel the deep-rooted gender disparities in institutional set-ups and temperament. They began seeking answers to the questions: "Who holds the power?" "Why are they unwilling to give it up?" They questioned the traditional perception of peace and security, which discerned security as something that only men can enforce. They also rejected the notion that peace is inherently feminine and weak, requiring protection from men. These entrenched patriarchal conventions and practices were covertly implicated in attitudes, behaviour, language and policy. The society and the leaders, in turn, overtly constructed the hegemonic masculine conception of security. This affected what was considered "normal" security and whose insecurity was seen as a problem (Adebahr, 2022). It came to be reckoned that women, as one of the core marginalised communities, had little control over themselves and their surroundings due to this norm-based patriarchal regime. As per the data available, out of all the neglected groups, women turned out to be the most vulnerable on all fronts. Consequently, there was heightened awareness that groups facing multiple forms of discrimination need attention not only on humanitarian grounds but also because more egalitarian societies fare better on both humanitarian and economic fronts.

By the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the feminist movement gained considerable momentum. Feminist scholars and practitioners nobly enhanced the ideations of peace and security in international relations. They advocated for the alteration of the trajectory by decisively moving beyond mere

inclusion of women to voicing their empowerment as active participants in peacebuilding and negotiation. By challenging the widely accepted idea of portraying women as only victims, they stressed the importance of gender equality. Feminists ardently urged a reframing of foreign policies to make them inclusive in nature and orientation, so that the diplomatic domain no longer remains confined to men. They called for reforming the diplomatic domain so that they no longer so that women's perspectives and problems are not only heard but acknowledged, so that diplomacy no longer remains male-dominated. It was strongly reasoned by the feminists that the involvement of women in peace negotiations and diplomatic discussions can generate greater durability and effectiveness in peace agreements (Adebahr, 2022). They highlighted that the incorporation of women in central roles for persuading peace talks, drifts focus towards political, social, and economic reforms that support sustainable peace rather than relying on military solutions. Scholars like Cynthia Enloe and J. Ann Tickner have explored how gendered perspectives shape international relations by emphasising that traditional approaches often reinforce inequality and patriarchy (Saikia). Enloe's conceptualisation of "Feminist curiosity" encourages scholars and policymakers to examine gendered dimensions of global issues such as conflict, security, and economic development (Saikia).

On account of a growing global emphasis on women's rights, Feminist Foreign Policy emerged as a diplomatic approach grounded in values of equality, justice and respect for women's rights in international relations. A Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) elucidates a bottom-up re-thinking of traditional power structures and encapsulates an intersectional ideology to broaden the understanding of the term 'Feminist' (Parekh et al., 2022). Such accommodative policies enable vulnerable

groups to make their stance more affirmative, alongside ensuring that policies formulated accommodate these demands holistically. Feminist Foreign Policy underscores the importance of integrating gendered perspectives into foreign policy decisions to address constructively the inequalities and challenges faced by women worldwide. It aims to transform the power structures and norms that perpetuate gender inequality in international affairs by embarking upon shared understanding and collaborative policies among nations. And at the crux of every such policy, core feminist values are emphasised. This approach rests on two important pillars: (I) Enhancing not only numerical representation in decision-making, but also creating conducive environments that encourage innovative thinking and diverse participation, (II) Aiming at policy outcomes that take into account the lived experiences of women and other marginalised groups.

The international agenda of the 1970s and 1980s was heavily influenced by the women's liberation movement and feminist activism. With the United Nations declaring 1975 as the International Women's Year, the groundwork was laid for subsequent global conferences and initiatives focused on women's rights and gender equality (Saikia). The Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979, built upon it by promising a global commitment to combating gender-based discrimination. The declaration of the United Nations Decade (1976-1985) was a major icebreaker. This significant declaration foregrounded the international community's honest recognition of the importance of women's rights and gender equality. The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 further emphasised the need of integrating a gender perspective into all aspects of policymaking, including foreign policy (Bergman-Rosamond et al., 2022). The United

Nations Security Council Resolution 1325¹ on Women, Peace and Security in 2000 was another landmark moment. It reaffirmed the essentiality of incorporating women in preventing and resolving conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and post-conflict reconstruction (United Nations Security Council, n.d.).

Recent years have witnessed an increasing number of “women-friendly states” taking the lead in promoting gender equality in geopolitics. A visible perceptual change has enabled the advancement of women’s issues, thereby allowing the domains of representation, gender equality, empowerment, and leadership to be incorporated within the arena of “smart diplomacy” and economics. Gender parity has thus been labelled as a primordial Sustainable Development Goal (SDG). Foreign aid given by economically powerful countries specifically aimed at gender equality has “quadrupled. . . to \$10 billion in the past decade” (Aggestam & True, 2020).

A small group of countries, starting with Sweden in 2014 and followed by Canada, France and Mexico, have espoused a feminist approach as a core element of their foreign policies, to varying degrees. Other countries, like Spain, are following this trend or at least considering the inclusion of feminist elements in their foreign policy agendas. However, India portrays a different picture. While there

¹ The Security Council adopted resolution(S/RES/1325) on women, peace, security on 31st October 2000. It stressed the equal participation of women and their full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security. Resolution 1325 urges all the actors to incorporate gender perspectives in all United Nations peace and security efforts. It also calls on parties to conflict to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse, in situations of armed conflict. The Resolution provides a number of important operational mandates, with implications for Member States and the entities of United Nations System. United Nations Security Council. (n.d.). *S/RES/1325 (2000) - Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) [on women and peace and security]* - UN Documents: Gathering a body of global agreements. <http://un-documents.net/sr1325.htm>

are increasing public discussions and debates focused on eliminating discriminatory practices and socio-cultural barriers that contribute to inequality, concrete society-level transformation is far from being achieved. The Indian society continues, and in states rigidly explicates patriarchy-based discrimination, the caste-class discrepancies and religious prejudices. The formulation and the effective implementation of a comprehensive feminist foreign policy, therefore, stand as one of the major hurdles for India in its goal to become panoramically developed. Accordingly, while Sweden has firmly translated into reality its normative commitment of promoting gender equality, human rights and the “3Rs” framework, Indian foreign policy is yet to comprehensively accommodate a gender-sensitive dimension within the realms of development partnerships, peacekeeping contributions, and South-South cooperation. In fact, India’s foreign policy does not explicitly carry the tag and to a great extent, the baggage of ‘feminist’, unlike Sweden. This contrast provides a productive basis for examining how feminist principles travel across diverse political, cultural, and geopolitical contexts.

Investigating the trajectories and orientations of the foreign policies of India and Sweden on the basis of their feminist tendencies and policies stands valuable as it juxtaposes a Global North normative with a Global South emerging power. Sweden’s gains from its strong institutional mechanisms and political consensus on gender equality in contrast to India’s internal diversity and uneven gender outcomes, influence the scope and articulation of their respective international commitments. A critical comparative examination of the varying foreign policy scenarios of Sweden and India, thus, allows for a nuanced understanding of the interaction between gender politics and foreign policy behaviour. Moreover, it would also make a significant

contribution to broadening the conceptual boundaries of feminist foreign policy beyond Eurocentric frameworks, offering insights into plural pathways of integrating gender into global governance.

Ideation Of A Feminist Foreign Policy In Sweden And India

A comparison of Swedish and Indian Foreign Policies constructs the colonial 'Self-Other' image by creating a binary division between the North and the South. Sweden's stature as a developed welfare state with a good enough gender equality index stands in high contrast to India's developing country status. Moreover, the Indian scenario is wrought with more complex socio-economic constraints and diverse cultural contexts compared to Sweden. Such differences pivotally influence the shaping of a country's foreign policy. Thus, the contrast between India and Sweden paves the way for a broader understanding of how feminist principles are negotiated, adapted, or constrained across multiple developmental trajectories. This process of contrasting and "othering" holds similarity in the way gender roles and differences between men and women are described (Wallström et al., n.d.).

Sweden, as the proud champion of gender equality in its foreign policy, has won in terms of mastering its 'Self-image'. Swedish official documents highlight that the foreign policy of Sweden has systematically integrated a gender perspective (Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2019, 4). By becoming the first country to adopt a feminist agenda in its foreign policy, Sweden has become a leading force in the struggle for attaining gender equality. Swedish feminist foreign policy's working method is based on three Rs- Rights, Representation and Resources- and is grounded on the fourth R, which is Reality. This implies that the Swedish Foreign Service not

only aims to strengthen the rights and representation of women in foreign policy but also strives to make resources available to all women and girls, based on their lived realities. Sweden's FFP is transformative and not rigid in nature. It aims at change for the good- it thrives on the core agenda of fostering changes in structures and decisions to increase the visibility of women and girls as active participants. Margot Wallstrom, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Sweden's claim, "Throughout the world, women are neglected in terms of resources, representation and rights. This is the simple reason why we are pursuing a feminist foreign policy - with full force, all around the world" holds in this context (Wallström et al., n.d.).

Sweden's commitment to gender equality, anti-racism and anti-colonialism essentially hints at its internal self-identity and external branding as a progressive "humanitarian superpower" (Nylund et al., 2022). The FFP has contributed significantly in this respect. It has traced the path for Sweden to erase its historical guilt of colonialism by counteracting discrimination within the framework of intersectionality.

India's position as a key global player has been gradually affirmed with its increasing regional and global influence, ambitions of great power status, and the development of a strong affirmative voice on some of the most pressing global challenges. To a great extent, in the political, economic and cultural spheres, India has been able to zealously deconstruct its 'Other' image as was constructed by the Global North. Nonetheless, India's Third World imagery has not subsided entirely, especially when it comes to overcoming discrimination internally, and substantially assimilating an inclusionary lens in policies and institutional structures. As a result, discourse on FFP in India has, largely, remained a far-fetched aim.

In 2021, India's External Affairs Minister, Dr S Jaishankar, acknowledged the need for a "gender-balanced" foreign policy by stating that India needs to look at the world from the perspective of women because a gender balanced foreign policy is the need of the hour (Australian Institute of International Affairs, 2024). India has, since then, adopted a more proactive approach to amalgamating a feminist perspective in international development projects. A prominent example of this initiative was particularly visible during India's G20 presidency in 2023. During the conference, India decisively vouched for women-led development by highlighting the underlying aim to harness the potential of women to actively contribute to economic, social and political progress at all levels of governance. This was definitely a paradigmatic shift and a significant contribution on the part of India in the realm of gender- based policymaking.

• **The environmental domain**

In the environmental domain, the disproportionate effects of climate change on women and the lack of women's representation of women in climate-related decision-making processes are increasingly being recognised. This form of climate injustice goes against the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capacities (CBDR-RC), which is central to climate diplomacy.

Sweden's policy for Global Development (the Policy Coherence for Development from 2003), its climate policy framework and its feminist foreign policy have remained important areas for creating a holistic view that integrates a feminist perspective into climate-related policies and actions. However, Sweden's action plan for FFP until 2018 had largely ignored climate issues. In the context of women's and girls' political participation and influence, it emphasised

the importance of strengthening gender perspectives in global climate funds and adaptation measures supporting agricultural programmes (CONCORD Sweden et al., 2020). It was the 2020 action that paid attention to the rights of women and girls in all climate-related issues, the protection of female environmental activists and the strengthening of support for promoting gender equality. Examples include the preservation of biodiversity, renewable energy and the sustainable use of natural resources. Definitely, Sweden has made significant progress in developing a gender-climate nexus.

Disaggregating the 2025 data on representation shows that Swedish climate institutions are over-represented by women both at employee and leadership levels. The only exception is the Swedish Energy Agency (SEA), wherein men hold 40% of the leadership positions.²

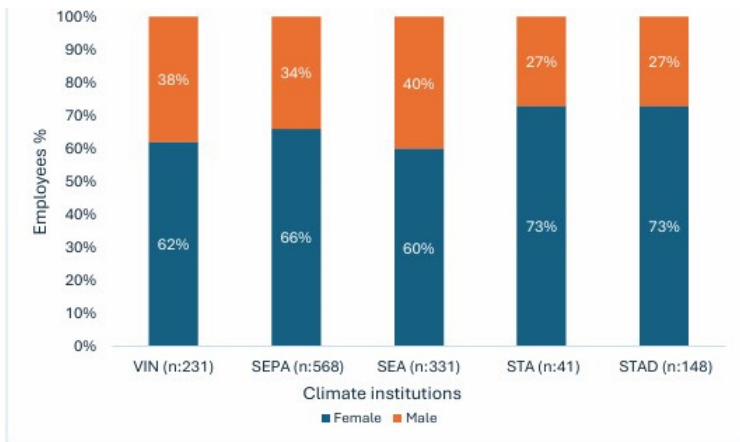


Figure – Gender distribution in % in the climate institutions of Sweden.

²Henning, W., Šatienė, V., Lahtinen, V., Saviolidis, N. M., Magnúsdóttir, G. L., & NORDFORSK. (2025).

Gender representation in climate institutions in Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, Finland and Lithuania. In *Research Brief in the NORDFORSK Project: Gendered Norms and Practices in Nordic and Baltic Climate Policy Institutions: Implications for the Climate Transition* (Report No. 180198). <https://www.divaportal.org/smash/get/diva2:1964739/FULLTEXT01.pdf> The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA)

The Swedish Transport Administration (STAD)³

In India, there has been a noticeable change in the frequency and nature of extreme weather events which has increased the country's vulnerability. Women, in particular have been affected in the most harmful ways. Moreover, due to absence of clear guidelines for initiating integration of gender considerations into climate policies, it becomes quite arduous to evaluate the effectiveness of India's inclusive climate diplomacy efforts (Parekh et al., 2022). One major achievement in India's aims of gender sensitive climate diplomacy is the creation of the International Solar Alliance (ISA) in 2015. It is focused at promoting clean, affordable solar energy. Although the ISA does not explicitly state measures to address gender issues, it has substantially contributed to the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment in several ways. For example, it supports the "Solar Mamas" initiative by Barefoot College in Ajmer, Rajasthan. Under this initiative, women from countries with high solar potential, such as India, are trained to make and maintain solar panels (Parekh et al., 2022). These initiatives draw a connection between climate action and gender parity.

³Henning, W., Štatiénė, V., Lahtinen, V., Saviolidis, N. M., Magnusdottir, G. L., & NORDFORSK. (2025). Gender representation in climate institutions in Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, Finland and Lithuania. In *Research Brief in the NORDFORSK Project: Gendered Norms and Practices in Nordic and Baltic Climate Policy Institutions: Implications for the Climate Transition* (Report No. 180198). <https://www.divaportal.org/smash/get/diva2:1964739/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

India has also tried to integrate the interconnected Sustainable Development Goals through its 2008 National Action Plan for Climate Change (NAPCC). The NAPCC has overtly conceded the disproportionate effects of climate change on women, especially their health, and has pointed out the urgency to acknowledge gendered problems in climate policy. For example, NAPCC claims that more women should be employed as Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) and Anganwadi workers as they can play a key role in voicing the difficulties faced by local-level women. This can in turn, emphatically reorient the formulation and implementation climate and health policies at the local level, making it more gender balanced. Additionally, coupled with its own experiences and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, India has included provisions to systematically reduce discrimination on all grounds and delineate special attention to the needs of women and children. These policies also focus on protecting women and girls from sexual violence and offering psychological and physical support. However, many scholars have claimed that the Sendai Framework is a missed opportunity given that it has failed to outline concrete strategies for implementation at different levels of governance (Parekh et al., 2022). The efforts taken by India so far are appreciative since all of them individually as well as collectively aim at bringing about change. Yet, Indian diplomats need to engender the simplistic or infantilising approach of treating all vulnerable groups as one and instead harbour on the distinct roles of women in foreign policy domain. (Parekh et al., 2022).

Gender-related concerns are explicitly included in India's subnational climate policies such as the SAPCCs⁴, although their implementation is far from satisfactory⁵. India is trying to make its policies more gender sensitive by raising awareness about gender issues within the policy field, rather than through gender mainstreaming. Thus, a major requirement to make it successful is to integrate women as active participants. Also, eradicating male-dominated traditional and cultural attitudes should be emphasised to prevent them from negatively influencing international diplomacy practices.

• Gender-security Nexus

Sweden's adoption of a unique feminist foreign policy in 2014 can be seen as an attempt to repoliticise the connection between gender and security. The policy emphasises that gender equality is essential for achieving peaceful and politically meaningful changes in international security structures. Sweden employs a critical approach to dismantle existing gender-based power structures in global politics. This policy shift is defined by concepts such as 'gender cosmopolitanism' and the protection of women and other marginalised groups across borders. The undoing of depoliticisation of the gender security connection was clearly witnessed as Sweden got involved in the ISAF-led mission in Afghanistan (Aggestam & Rosamond, 2018). Sweden's

⁴ State Action Plans on Climate Change.

⁵ Most SAPCCs still frame women as vulnerable and not as actors and/or stakeholders in decision-making. Other reasons for the slow progress in gender mainstreaming within climate policy in India include: equating gender with women, without paying much heed to men's vulnerabilities; the lack of gender-disaggregated data on gender-based vulnerabilities; and lack of consideration of gender throughout the policy process. Parekh, N., Bokaap Design, Kubernein Initiative, The Asia Foundation, Jayaram, D., Prabhu, S., Xavier, C., Sinha, R., Yadavar, S., Taneja, N., Joshi, S., Prakash, S., Mattoo, A., Deb, D., Baruah, N., & Bhide, P. (2022). *Applying a Feminist Lens to India's Foreign Policy*. Kubernein Initiative and The Asia Foundation. <https://kuberininitiative.com>

military involvement in Afghanistan was driven by a desire to build relationships with local women to expand their legal, economic and political rights and ensure their bodily integrity (Aggestam & Rosamond, 2018). The Swedish armed forces, for that purpose, employed women in dialogical roles in Afghanistan.

Sweden's FFP and the Women, Peace, Security (WPS) agenda is reflective of a normative ideal of gender-just inclusion. Sweden's development of a feminist foreign policy has been gradual but meaningful – it has shaped international agendas, mobilised support and promoted gender sensitive initiatives (Aggestam & Rosamond, 2018). For instance, during the elections of 2014-2018, a team assigned at the Swedish Foreign Ministry, led by Anne Bernes, played a pivotal role in reframing foreign policy along feminist lines. Again, the Stockholm Forum on Gender Equality, established to enhance global commitment to gender equality, peace and security, also added momentum to strengthening Sweden's commitment to the WPS Agenda. The conference also adhered to the ethical values and practices of Sweden's FFP, as noted by the Swedish government:

'...more rights, representation, and resources for women and girls' means more peace, security, and prosperity for the world. A feminist foreign policy is the way forward. With this conference, we create a possibility for grassroots and high-level participants from all over the globe to meet, share knowledge, and inspire political leaders (Aggestam & Rosamond, 2018).

There fore, the government of Sweden has been an active player in promoting women's participation alongside their inclusion in peace processes. Accordingly, it has initiated several proposals to reframe and restructure the nature of local and global peace negotiations. Sweden has also ramped

up its efforts to increase women's involvement in discussions, negotiations, drafting, interpreting and implementing of resolutions and key documents related to disarmament and non-proliferation (Aggestam & Rosamond, 2018). For the purpose, Sweden launched a mediation network⁶ in 2015. The network seeks to address the lack of women's representation in peace-making processes (Aggestam & Rosamond, 2018). The Swedish Government is also working on the perception front aimed at increasing awareness of the different intersecting factors which shaping gender issues. Sweden's diplomatic endeavours have, in addition blatantly challenged destructive traditional male norms by promising to encourage men to play an optimistic role in promoting gender equality⁷.

Swedish self-narrative is rooted in a sense of shared responsibility for the well-being of both, its own citizens and those of other nations. This encapsulates addressing of detrimental impacts that patriarchal structures and militarised masculinity have on women's safety and their bodily integrity (Aggestam & Rosamond, 2018). Sweden's National Action Plan on FFP for the period 2015-2018 is supportive of this stance as it emphasises the country's commitment to protect women migrants, refugees and survivors of sexual violence in conflict (Aggestam & Rosamond, 2018). The leadership of Margot Wallstrom has enabled Sweden to adopt an activist political position on women's human rights and the elimination of sexual violence in conflict. Sweden has also pitched to safeguard women and girls (in particular) from the harmful effects of gender-based violence, as women often

⁶ This network coordinates its activities with the Nordic and Global South networks of women mediators. The Swedish network is politically committed to women's meaningful participation in peace processes and seeks to embed it within international law, human rights and the rule of law more broadly. The network also builds on the assumption that women's participation in peace processes will increase the likelihood that peace agreements will be reached and sustained.

⁷ The #HeForShe campaign pursued by Sweden in tandem with the UN Women is an illustration of how men in Sweden adopted non-conventional role of demanding gender equality.

viewed as weapons of power and are inevitably considered as objects upon whom power can be asserted. (Aggestam & Rosamond, 2018). This approach has legitimised Sweden's efforts to promote and re-politicise gender just protection and security on a global scale. In consequence, Sweden has been politically active to include more women in its national armed forces and in international operations. This inclusion is based on the belief that the presence and communication skills of women are central to ensuring the protection of women in conflict-prone zones and poverty-ridden areas (Aggestam & Rosamond, 2018).

South Asia as a region itself posits great difficulty for India in the context of implementation of a more inclusive and gender-sensitive foreign policy. The South Asian region is characterised by perpetual conflicts, border disputes and militarisation, giving rise to hard security strategies driven by threat perceptions. Although traditional and non-traditional security challenges are often viewed as separate, there is an overlapping area where both dimensions intersect. These rigid distinctions, which are very much a part of South Asian states have led to a neglect of other important perspectives, like gender. Studies have pointed out that this neglect has resulted isolation rather than inclusion of gender rights as human rights into the peace and security discourse of India. Given India's big brother attitude and considerable sway in South Asia, the South Asian problems have inevitably become India's problems. Moreover, India's domestic political, religious, economic, cultural and social complications have been pretty overwhelming throughout history. Collectively, these have pushed the issue of gender parity in Indian foreign policy on the fringes.

Therefore, as stated by the former Foreign Secretary, Nirupama Rao, India's South Asia policy has so far adopted a hard security approach featuring the use of military, police, intelligence, and other political tools (Parekh et al., 2022). Nevertheless, its global diplomatic initiatives have been more progressive and flexible in nature. For example, India has earnestly supported the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, which aims to develop sustainable peace and security efforts. Recently, India also participated in the sixth IndiaBrazil-South Africa (IBSA) Women's Forum meeting, which was a three-track dialogue platform among democracies on gender equity and equality. Although the Indian Foreign Policy establishment has multiple opportunities to fathom a feminist approach at multilateral forums or in distant regions like Latin America and Africa, the real test lies in its own neighbourhood. Furthermore, the initiation of a Feminist Foreign Policy in India faces hurdles from its own conservative population, where intersectional dynamics are intertwined with gender considerations. Two additional factors constrain India's regional cooperation policies. Firstly, the male-dominated diplomatic, military and security institutions that restrain the implementation of a more robust feminist foreign policy. Secondly, India's aspirations to become a leader in regional cooperation efforts create anxiety among its South Asian neighbours.

Eventually, conflicting power politics and inevitable security concerns have always taken precedence, thereby pushing India towards a hard security approach, especially in the South Asian case. The reinvigoration of women's roles in varied spheres, including foreign policy, has been sidelined throughout history. Since its inception, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has played a pioneering role in providing opportunities to women to not

only shape regional development but also engage in security discussions. The SAARC Decade of the Girl Child (1991) and the SAARC ministerial conferences on women are a testament to this fact. However, the marginalisation of SAARC since 2016 has stagnated the organisation's efforts to enforce these women-centred initiatives to empower women, thus creating an institutional void. (Parekh et al., 2022).

India has always been a haven for refugees from almost all its neighbouring countries, particularly Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. And a significant number of these refugees are/have been women. Hence, the Indian policy towards these refugees has since time immemorial, been addressing the two-fold problems of refugee influx and rehabilitation of women refugees. Women refugees in India often find themselves "alone in a foreign land without a voice" facing isolation, discrimination, exploitation and violence in patriarchal societies (Parekh et al., 2022).

Tamil, Tibetan and Burmese women exiled in India often face isolation and ignorance. Ministries often withdraw their support or neglect these communities, leading to marginalisation. Although India does not have an asylum law of its own, it has signed the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) in 2018, pledging to "implement policies and programmes to empower women and girls in refugee and host communities, and to promote full enjoyment of their human rights, as well as equality of access to services and opportunities" (Parekh et al., 2022). However, India's approach towards these refugees, especially women refugees, still contains several loopholes. As feminists point out, India needs to address the numerous genderblind aspects in its dealings with the women refugees.

In situations of active conflict or emergency, India employs medical personnel and field hospitals overseas, but

the number of female nurses and staff is relatively low. India has also remained on the edges when it comes to the adjustment of its post-disaster rehabilitation and reconstruction policies to address the needs of women specifically. India has expanded the scope of its development cooperation so that the inclusion of small-scale development projects (High Impact Community Development Programme, HICDP), humanitarian aid, cultural and heritage conservation, and new guidelines for its lines of credit becomes possible (Parekh et al., 2022). Nonetheless, there remains a void in all of these initiatives as each one of them fails to highlight a comprehensive feminist approach towards solving the issues in question. Moreover, these initiatives are clearly devoid of contributing a fair share of seats to women in the forefront in the context of decision-making and policy framing. A feminist focus, thus, remains far off the core priorities of India's broader development cooperation, unlike Sweden, which has decisively injected a feminist approach into its national development policy.

To date, women represent only 37.8% of the Indian Foreign Service (IFS) and hold just 20% of senior diplomatic positions globally. These figures are reflective of the limited presence of Indian women in policy-making roles. These numbers emphasise the deprivation that Indian women still face in the 21st century in the foreign policy context and thus indicate the strong need to integrate feminist perspectives in the diverse socioeconomic and cultural background of India (*Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP): The Scope of Integrating Gender Sensitivity into Indian Foreign Policies* | *Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict*, n.d.). Only upon implementation of such behavioural and attitudinal changes can strong feminist policies be implemented at the foreign policy level. According to the official data of 2024, only 13.5 per cent of women are a part of the Ministry of External Affairs. At

the Under Secretary level, it is only 29 per cent, and at the heads of divisions and the head of mission level, it is only around 13-15 per cent (Australian Institute of International Affairs, 2024). These percentages are enough to prove that the domain of foreign policy is still heavy on the side of the male population. It is because of a multitude of factors at play, and not only due to constricted space for women in foreign policy. Coming to India's international gender commitments, they appear to be quite impressive on paper, but upon closer investigation, critical policy as well as implementation level shortcomings can be traced. For instance, India repeatedly made commitments verbally to promote the WPS agenda, yet a National Action Plan is lacking for implementing the agenda domestically. (Australian Institute of International Affairs, 2024). Similarly, despite the ratification of the CEDAW in 1993, the Optional Protocol of CEDAW has failed to receive ratification yet. The Optional Protocol allows individuals to directly approach the CEDAW committee if national systems fail to uphold the principles of the agreement (Australian Institute of International Affairs, 2024). Hence, it goes without saying that efforts have been made, but they have not been fully materialised. And in most of the scenarios, core problem areas have not been addressed; as a result, policies and decisions formulated have been superficial in nature. And in selected contexts, perceptual change and, therefore, policy/provision-centric changes are yet to be made.

The Reality and Way Forward

Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy has pioneered a new, novel trajectory and is moving towards a more transformative and intersectional discourse. Nonetheless, its tendency to essentialize women's desires and concerns overlooks the historical and political context. In consequence, Sweden's FFP fails to provide accurate accounts of actors and events

responsible for perpetuating unequal power relations, sustained by essentialism. While the initiatives of Swedish embassies and public authorities to promote equality between the sexes have been enhanced with the formulation of FFP, strong vertical guidance and additional funding constrain its comprehensive implementation. Unfortunately, the feminist 'label' has become majorly politicised. Yet, at the same time, government efforts to acknowledge gender concerns have heightened the ambition and amplified Sweden's international leadership in promoting gender equality within the foreign policy context. On one hand, thus, Swedish FFP demonstrates optimism by transforming gender-blind areas of foreign policy. On the other hand, questions concerning the consistency of the Swedish government in upholding progender norms in the coming decades linger strongly among the feminists and the Swedish population.

India, comparatively, is positioned at the confluence of significant contextual challenges and intersectional dynamics that restrain its movement from a 'feminist fatigueness' to a comprehensive feminist agenda in its foreign policy. India's colonial past has further reinforced patriarchal divisions, thereby hindering the de-masculinization of structures. Although current domestic and international initiatives, such as the women's reservation bill and the G20 Working Group on Empowerment of women, respectively imply increasing attempts at promoting inclusivity in foreign policy. India's geographical position and growing geopolitical influence hinder the adoption of a transformative foreign policy with noteworthy attention to women and their needs. It may not be explicitly labelled as feminist, but it definitely should look into what women need, what women think about global issues, and how they can be inducted into core foreign policy domains.

It is also important to note that the barrier called colonialism in the formulation of a Feminist Foreign Policy is purely country-specific. On one hand, India is still grappling with the effects of its colonial past, while on the other hand, some nations in the Global South with postcolonial histories have adopted or are actively pursuing feminist foreign policies, including Mexico, Chile, Colombia, Vietnam and Libya. This challenges the notion that pursuing a feminist foreign policy is exclusively a concern of the Global North.

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