

Reconciling Two Key Frameworks: Feminist Foreign Policy and Women, Peace & Security

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Introduction

There are currently two main frameworks regarding gender equality and women's participation in international policy and conflict resolution: the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) framework, codified in the landmark United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 in 2000, and the feminist foreign policy framework (FFP) that became prominent in 2014 when Sweden became the first government to formally adopt a feminist foreign policy. Over the past decade, tension has existed between the civil society advocates who were/are involved in the development, passage, and implementation of UNSCR 1325 and those academics and practitioners who favor the newer feminist framework. Surprisingly (or not), an unpublished mapping exercise in 2019 between the two groups found very few people who worked on both frameworks or who were using the WPS framework as a foundation for the newer FFP. We argue here that the goals of both frameworks—gender equality and peace—are the same and that the tension largely rests on differences in approach. This piece provides background on both frameworks, what they have in common, some critiques, how they might approach current events, and recommendations on the way forward. We suggest that while these differences in approach are not insignificant, both frameworks would benefit from the greater acknowledgment of and closer coordination with each other so that more progress can be made within the gender equality movement.

Background

Women, Peace and Security

The opening for ratification of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Political Rights (ICESCR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), both in 1966, represented the heyday of human rights activity at the United Nations. Unfortunately, however, it was quickly realized that many of the countries that voted for those treaties had not assumed and did not recognize that the treaty provisions would also apply to women. Human rights were not inherently considered women's rights. The United Nations subsequently followed up with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979. Though, as of 2015, 189 countries have signed and ratified CEDAW (the United States signed but never ratified), many have done so with qualifications that render their commitments toothless. Hence, when First Lady Hillary Clinton declared, "human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights" at the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women, she stated what many had thought decades ago but had since come to understand as a continuing battle.

Civil society groups continued to carry on the battle for gender equality through the United Nations, doing so not "just" as a matter of social justice but as a security issue. An increasing amount of case studies and empirically-based research demonstrated women's multiple roles in security-related affairs, the gendered differentiated effects of conflict on men, women, boys, and girls, and the linkage between gender equality, stability, and good governance. Regrettably, social justice issues are often considered "desirable" though

expendable issues on governmental agendas or “just too hard.” Security issues, however, tend to resonate more strongly with decision-makers. Ultimately, through the efforts of civil society groups, UNSCR 1325 was unanimously passed in 2000.

Implementation of UNSCR 1325 was left to states through National Action Plans (NAPs). As of 2021, 98 countries have adopted NAPs. Many of the early countries to adopt NAPs were Scandinavian countries already strong in gender equality. It took the United States 11 years to do so, finally accomplished while Hillary Clinton was Secretary of State. Of those countries with NAPs, only 36 percent have budgets attached, evidencing that the Women, Peace and Security framework has seen much more rhetorical than actual support in many countries.

The first iteration of the Women, Peace and Security Act in the United States was introduced in 2012. It was again initiated by a coalition of civil society organizations that championed the cause to bi-partisan congressional members and staffers. The Act was revised and reintroduced in both the 2013-2014 and 2015-2016 sessions of Congress, eventually gaining bi-partisan sponsorship in both the House and the Senate. In 2017, the U.S. Congress passed the Women, Peace and Security Act. It was signed by President Donald Trump, making it the law of the land. Passage of the Act in 2017 was symbolically important as it provided support for those in government seeking to take action regarding gender equality. It gave them a “hook” on which to hang actions. The Act also required the president to submit a government-wide implementation strategy to Congress. Initially, however, the Act was passed without funding attached. For a president who was confronted at the White House in 2017 by a crowd of protesting women estimated at three times the number who attended his inauguration, signing the Women, Peace and Security Act was a no-cost act of support for women.

After an implementation strategy for the Women, Peace and Security Act was delivered to Congress in 2019, the federal agencies charged with its execution (the Department of Defense, the Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the Department of Homeland Security) began working on their own implementation strategies. The Defense Department, for example, outlined three objectives: 1) to exemplify a diverse organization that allows for women’s meaningful participation across the development, management, and employment of the Joint Force; 2) that women in partner nations meaningfully participate and serve at all ranks and in all occupations in defense and security sectors; and 3) that partner nation defense and security sectors ensure women and girls are safe and secure and that their human rights are protected, especially during conflict and crisis.¹ Regrettably, in many instances support has been slow and often more rhetorical and performative than actual, as indicated by budgets, policies, and women’s representation

in decision-making roles. In performative allyship, those with privilege and position profess solidarity with a cause or policy, often to distance themselves from potential scrutiny or position themselves for praise. This vocalized support is disingenuous and potentially harmful to marginalized groups by signaling to subordinates that real action is neither needed nor sought and that no one will be held accountable for inaction. That makes active oversight by Congress imperative.

Feminist Foreign Policy

Feminist foreign policy theory was born of the theoretical ideas of ethical foreign policy and feminist international relations. It gained prominence in 2014 when the Swedish coalition government, led by Sweden’s Foreign Minister Margot Wallström, adopted a feminist foreign policy.² In this first practical application, feminist foreign policy is posited on the conviction that sustainable peace, security, and development cannot be achieved if women, who comprise half the world’s population, are excluded. As the Swedish Foreign Ministry’s website states, “The policy is a response to the discrimination and systematic subordination that still characterizes everyday life for countless women and girls all over the world. Feminist foreign policy is an agenda for change to strengthen the rights, representation and resources of all women and girls.”³ Regarding **rights**, the Swedish Foreign Service promotes all women’s and girls’ full enjoyment of human rights, which includes combating all forms of violence and discrimination that restrict freedom of action. Regarding **representation**, the Swedish Foreign Service promotes women’s participation and influence in decision-making processes at all levels and in all areas, and seeks dialogue with women representatives at all levels, including in civil society. With respect to **resources**, the Swedish Foreign Service works to ensure that government resources are allocated to promote gender equality and equal opportunities for all.⁴ In the first three years of implementation, Sweden worked to raise the visibility of and combat destructive masculine norms and to strengthen countries’ capacities to prosecute perpetrators, assist crime victims, and reintegrate soldiers. Sweden also contributed to a growing body of knowledge about the link between the uncontrolled spread of weapons and sexual violence against women.⁵

Since 2014, several countries have announced different versions of a feminist foreign policy. Norway has developed both an *Action Plan for Women’s Rights and Gender Equality in Foreign and Development Policy 2016-2020* and a *National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security*.⁶ Canada’s feminist International Assistance Policy, announced in 2017, targets gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls at its core: “This is a matter of basic justice and also basic economics. We know that empowering women, overseas and here at home, makes families and countries more prosperous.”⁷ The French government’s feminist foreign policy, adopted in 2019, says that gender equality should be considered in all issues, from poverty reduction to sustainable development,

peace and security, defense and promotion of fundamental rights, and climate and economic issues.⁸ Other countries have followed suit (Mexico in 2020, Luxembourg in 2021, Spain in 2021, and Germany in 2022).

In addition, there are discussions about incorporating a feminist approach to foreign policy taking place in the European Union, Chile, Denmark, Malaysia, Norway, New Zealand, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States.⁹ Governments, however, are many-armed creatures, sometimes with activities of one arm having no relation to another. Interest in or adoption of a feminist foreign policy does not inherently mean a gender-equal society or even full government support of women. Mexico, for example, has expressed interest in a feminist foreign policy, though it has one of the highest global rates of violence against women.

The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), a non-profit center headquartered in Washington, D.C., hosts both the Coalition for a Feminist Foreign Policy in the United States and the Global Partner Network, which consists of more than 30 governments and leading civil society groups who are working to advance the field of feminist foreign policy. The working definition the Coalition for a Feminist Foreign Policy in the United States uses for feminist foreign policy: “Feminist foreign policy is the policy of a state that defines its interactions with other states, as well as movements and other non-state actors, in a manner that prioritizes peace, gender equality, and environmental integrity; enshrines, promotes, and protects the human rights of all; seeks to disrupt colonial, racist, patriarchal and male-dominated power structures; and allocates significant resources, including research, to achieve that vision. Feminist foreign policy is coherent in its approach across all its levers of influence, anchored by the exercise of those values at home and co-created with feminist activists, groups, and movements, at home and abroad.”¹⁰

In 2020, ICRW separately released a global framework for feminist foreign policy that was developed following more than a year of research and global consultations with over 100 organizations in more than 40 countries. In order to inform the fledgling field of feminist foreign policy, this framework attempts to provide an outline, including five key ingredients necessary for countries considering a feminist foreign policy: the purpose of the policy within the government’s specific context; the definition of feminist foreign policy for the government; the scope or reach of the policy (what parts of the government will be impacted?); the intended outcomes of the policy and benchmarks to achieve over time; and a government plan to operationalize it.¹¹

Commonalities and Critiques

While there are differences in the WPS and FFP frameworks, both seek to expand global peace and security, increase women’s participation and leadership, integrate gender into humanitarian responses, and change the political and governance structures that reinforce gender inequality.

Peace and Security

One significant commonality between the WPS and FFP frameworks is a redefinition of the concepts of peace and security. Norwegian peace activist Johan Galtung first differentiated negative peace and positive peace in the 1960s. Negative peace is defined as the absence of violence without a society’s tendencies toward harmony and stability, whereas positive peace is more lasting and built on sustainable investments in economic development and institutions and characterized by societal attitudes that foster peace.¹² WPS exemplifies positive peace through inclusiveness and consideration of gendered perspectives of policies and programs that lead to increased stability of all political orders. Yet a critique of the WPS framework is its focus on the *protection* of women and girls. The argument is that the WPS framework not only solidifies the militarized state but, in some cases, provides justification for conflict. The U.S.-led War on Terror, for example, was at least in part framed as a “fight for the rights and dignity of women.”¹³ University of Sydney Professor Laura Shepherd argues that multiple logics behind the “prevention” pillar—a logic of peace, a logic of militarism, and a logic of security—creates a paradox that “collapses back into a logic of security”¹⁴ contrary to the ultimate goal of peace. That is, in order to have peace, security must be obtained and retained through a heavy military presence and potentially military action, thus justifying such.

In a similar vein, feminist foreign policy seeks to change the very definition of “security” to go beyond the absence of armed conflict to include economic and political security, freedom from a fear of a global pandemic and climate change, and the feeling of safety within one’s community and home. The “security” issues discussed in FFP would be broadened to include access to drinkable water, the ability to walk home at night safely, the number of weapons in a country outside of the military, and many others. Likewise, the solutions considered would be more diverse. Data used to make those decisions would include information about human rights abuses, rates of child marriage, levels of gender-based violence, and other issues that Texas A&M Professor Valerie Hudson and other scholars have pointed to in several publications that show the connection between gender equality and state stability.¹⁵ Decisions made to protect the interests of a country would cover not only military personnel but civilians on all sides. The voices of those impacted by military activities, sanctions, or other actions would be included. In response, WPS advocates argue that working first on the protection of women, girls,

and other vulnerable groups is a necessary precondition to inclusive gender equality and diversity. Women's safety—the goal of protection—is necessary to ensure that women and girls have the ability to work toward other goals of economic and political power and can use their agency to shape their lives.

Women's Representation

To reach the goals of gender equality and peace, both the WPS and FFP frameworks aim to increase the representation of women in country and global policy-making processes and activities. One of the four core pillars of the Women, Peace and Security framework focuses on the increased participation of women at all levels of decision-making in conflict prevention, management, and resolution, and in post-conflict relief and recovery efforts. But the WPS framework works within conventional peacemaking and post-conflict governance structures that accept conflict as inevitable. Subsequently, this framework has been criticized by Melbourne Law School Professor Dianne Otto, who argues that “the WPS agenda has served to refocus feminist attention from ... making armed conflict impossible, to making armed conflict safer for women ... as an end in itself.”¹⁶ Thereby, WPS can be perceived as a more incremental approach to positive peace, whereas FFP is more transformational.

Like WPS, the goal of FFP is to increase the number of women serving in elected and non-elected political and government positions, in peace processes, in military and peacekeeping missions, and in development and humanitarian activities. FFP seeks to increase the number of feminist voices that will advocate for gender equality in all sectors, beyond peace and security, such as in the economy and climate adaptation, including a country's own government as well as its government partners. A critique of this approach is that feminist foreign policy is too broad; it can't just add more women and change everything all at one time—change requires incrementalism. The real-world implications of executing a feminist foreign policy are complicated. For instance, in Sweden, even with female leadership and a feminist foreign policy, the government has struggled to find a balance between human rights and its own arms industry.¹⁷

Post-conflict and Humanitarian Settings

UNSCR 1325 urges local actors, Member States, and UN agencies to adopt gendered perspectives in peace operations, negotiations, and agreements, in acknowledgement that policies and programs affect men, women, boys and girls differently, and to include women in the resolution and recovery phase of conflict. It identifies women as active agents rather than passive recipients. This is important because it identifies women's participation as a right, not something that men are giving women out of goodwill, and as a post-conflict benefit to all parties. Research has shown that including women in peace negotiations increases the potential of peace

agreement lasting two or more years by 20 percent, and increases by 35 percent the probability of peace agreements lasting 15 years or longer.¹⁸ Additionally, including women starts to erode the idea of women as weak, meaning that the feminine will no longer be synonymous with weakness and fragility. The resolution empowers women and allows them to demand that they are heard and incorporated into processes at all levels.¹⁹ The critique here is that the considerations of women and girls are rarely included in peace negotiations and simply haven't been taken into account, and that there is no mechanism for holding countries or other implementing organizations accountable for including women and gendered perspectives in peace negotiations.

Similarly, the FFP framework calls for a feminist approach to humanitarian response that at its core centers the experience of women and people subjected to multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. This focus highlights a wider array of concerns than considered in traditional paradigms, including the threat of gender-based violence, access to sexual and reproductive health, access to education, and the burden of unpaid care responsibilities in times of crisis. It urges the U.S. government to take steps to change its humanitarian approach and push for change throughout the global humanitarian system.

Institutional Change

Both frameworks agree that reframing the discussion of peace and security involves shaking the very foundations of the patriarchy, a system that until recently was the exclusive purview of men and that deploys decision-making power through warlords, political elites, government, security communities, and the intricately linked military-industrial machine. Within the WPS framework, *protection* does not inherently or exclusively refer to women being physically (or in any other way) protected by men. It does, however, recognize that there are individuals made vulnerable through cultural, political, legal, economic, gender-related, and sexual orientation structures. It creates agency because it is only through agency that women will have the opportunity to participate in the kind of preventive actions that can lead to positive peace.

In response, FFP advocates would argue that this approach is too focused on the individual rather than the system. The FFP framework seeks to change the institutions and processes themselves. It wants to diversify more than just the voices in the room; it wants to expand the information collected, analysis conducted, and solutions considered to go beyond the traditional decision-making process. This strategy covers defense, development, and diplomacy programs conducted in other countries and how governments operate internally. Resources, both in terms of budget allocations and human investments, would be redistributed to reflect governments' different priorities. Less would be spent on weapons and more

would be spent on human infrastructure; more would go to multilateral organizations and those focused on global goals. WPS critics would say that even with provisions for structural agency, the entrenched nature of those in power through cultural norms and expectations forces a process of slower, more incremental change.

Applying WPS and FFP to Current Challenges

Democracy

In 2021, the annual Democracy Index found that less than ten percent of countries worldwide were considered “full democracies” and rated the United States a “flawed democracy” for the fifth year in a row. Though countries leaning toward populism and authoritarianism vary in many aspects, what they share are leaders who identify as rebels, bullies, and tough guys who flaunt authority, disregard civility, and encourage others to do so as well, such as Presidents Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil, and Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines. Further, as American journalist Peter Beinart pointed out, authoritarian leaders “use gender to discredit one political order and validate another.”²⁰ Many have targeted women, individually or as a group, as their evil-elite punching bags.

To address this issue, the WPS framework would return to concepts within UNSCR 1325 that have been fleshed out through nine additional security council resolutions: **participation** of women in all levels of decision-making, **protection** from sexual and gender-based violence, **prevention** of violence, and advancement of **relief and recovery** measures. Within this context, FFP would go beyond a focus on increasing individual women’s political participation to disrupt the colonial, racist, patriarchal, and male-dominated power structures. It would support human rights activists and civil society organizations engaged in women’s rights movements globally, alter patriarchal political institutions, including parties and parliaments, and address issues such as violence against women in politics that serve as barriers to women serving in public life.

Reproductive Rights

Five years ago, the United States was considered a global leader in women’s reproductive rights, considered a critical aspect of women’s agency, but during the Trump administration became a global outlier with deep regression in that area.²¹ The Biden-Harris administration took several key actions to advance sexual and reproductive health and rights in its first year, trying to reverse the Trump administration rollback. In his second week in office, President Biden issued an executive memorandum on women’s health at home and abroad which stated that it is the policy of the U.S. government to support sexual and reproductive health and rights. It rescinded the global gag rule, withdrew the United States from the so-called Geneva Consensus Declaration, and directed the

U.S. Secretary of State to restore funding for United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).²² But, based on the leaked Alito-authored draft court decision, Trump-appointed conservative Supreme Court justices appear ready to take American women’s reproductive rights back to the 1970s by overturning *Roe v Wade* (1973). The implications are staggering, not just regarding reproductive rights but further indicating the U.S. is moving away from democratic rule to populist authoritarianism.²³

The WPS framework does not address reproductive rights or abortion in UNSCR 1325 or in any of the subsequent resolutions or in the U.S. Women, Peace and Security Act. Feminist Foreign Policy, on the other hand, includes bodily autonomy and freedom from discrimination, violence, coercion, exploitation, and abuse as a key tenet. And while the current U.S. administration has taken steps to stop or reverse U.S. government backsliding on the issue, including potentially after the judicial demise of *Roe v Wade*, FFP advocates continue to push for more, such as a permanent repeal of the global gag rule, also known as the Mexico City Policy.²⁴

Conclusion

While differences in approach for WPS and FFP are not insignificant, both frameworks would benefit from closer coordination with the other.

Five years after the passage of the WPS Act in the United States, with the subsequent government-wide 2019 strategy and departmental strategies now in place, incremental progress in implementing the WPS framework is evident. Funding is being approved and allocated, for example, to offer meetings, workshops, and courses on Women, Peace and Security to members of security communities from many other countries, both in the U.S. and abroad. Those who participate in these events (men and women) say that attendance, and the gender push for gender empowerment from U.S. organizations, including the military, are making a slow but positive difference in their militaries and countries. A Women, Peace and Security Congressional Caucus was formed in 2020. Its focus is “to ensure that progress towards women’s empowerment and inclusion is a strong priority of U.S. foreign policy.”²⁵ Efforts of the Caucus have included receiving briefs from various departments on their efforts to implement the Women, Peace and Security framework and expressing support for women in Afghanistan during the evacuation operations in 2021. Ensuring progress of the WPS Act, at home and abroad, requires proactive measures and holding those responsible for implementation accountable.

As this work continues, those pressing the U.S. government to adopt a feminist foreign policy need to acknowledge the work

of those who developed and implemented the WPS Act. That legislation took more than a decade to be created and passed in a bipartisan fashion. Newer actors in this space might benefit by engaging with the activists who started their work around the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing and then focused on the UN Security Council before turning to country-specific NAPs and legislation. There must be lessons learned about Hill staff and member relationships, allies in non-traditional departments and offices, effective messages, and budget strategies that have worked.

Moreover, the combined community can work together to increase women's representation in U.S. foreign policy through the Leadership Council for Women in National Security (LCWINS), WIIS, the Civil Society Working Group on Women, Peace and Security, or the Coalition for a Feminist Foreign Policy in the United States. Research and advocacy must continue to make the link between both frameworks and the promotion of democracy. And both WPS and FFP advocates can continue to push for the integration of the needs of women and girls in humanitarian and post-conflict settings and programs.

So far, however, Women, Peace and Security framework implementation seems to have remained focused on work done or to be done “over there,” wherever outside of the United States that happens to be, neglecting the important point that there are internal as well as external components to WPS. Similarly, one of the core principles of FFP is that there is coherence across all aspects of foreign policy that extends across domestic and foreign policy, with both realms embracing the same feminist values. That means structural and cultural constraints to gender empowerment within U.S. institutions must also be addressed. For example, while women in the military are no longer denied access to combat positions, they still do not receive the same encouragement and support necessary for success to join those previously prohibited positions as men do.

While differences in approach for WPS and FFP are not insignificant, both frameworks would benefit from closer coordination with the other. There are many opportunities to support the work of the other, as much progress is still needed in the United States and globally to reach gender equality, women's empowerment, and a safer world.

This policy brief was prepared by the authors in their personal capacity. The opinions expressed here are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the official views or policy of WIIS or the Embassy of Liechtenstein.

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Women In International Security (WIIS—pronounced WISE) is a non-governmental organization that champions gender equality by helping women advance as leaders in the international peace and security sector. We've been promoting an inclusive and intersectional approach to the Women, Peace & Security agenda for 35 years by providing professional growth opportunities for women, leading gender equality research projects and policy engagement initiatives, and nurturing a community of mentors, advocates, experts, and leaders. The WIIS network spans nearly 50 countries across six continents and includes 15,000 members who are committed to closing the gender equality gap worldwide.

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