



# WHAT ABOUT SWEDEN'S FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY?

– VOICES FROM  
AROUND THE WORLD

A REPORT FROM  
OLOF PALME INTERNATIONAL CENTER  
BY ANNA-KARIN JOHANSSON



The Olof Palme International Center  
PO Box 836 / Sveavägen 68, 101 36 Stockholm, Sweden  
Telephone: +46 (0)8-677 57 70  
E-mail: [info@palmecenter.se](mailto:info@palmecenter.se)  
[www.palmecenter.se](http://www.palmecenter.se)

Production: The Palme Center and Global Reporting  
Editor: Dan Wergelius/The Palmecenter  
Text: Anna-Karin Johansson  
Layout: Lisa Jansson/Global Reporting  
Print: EMP, 2018

This report is edited by Olof Palme International Center  
with financial support from the Social Democratic Party of Sweden.

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# FOREWORD



as the purpose of introducing the feminist foreign policy just an opportunistic play by the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs? Besides to be preaching for the choirs – since the public opinion already agree with these ideas in Sweden – it would have been a failed attempt to gain popularity in the arenas Swedish foreign policy act upon. This due to the current state of feminist issues among the power players of the UN Security Council, the EU and other multilateral alliances. These issues are not, and have not been, agenda priorities in many countries foreign affairs, nor is feminism a monetary power house question such as trade or a hard topic such as security.

For the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, trade, security, development and foreign diplomatic relations is still at the core of the work. What the Swedish government, with Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs Ms. Margot Wallström in the forefront, are doing is to address that with a feminist filtered policy the creation of a better and more equal world, for the many, is possible. To underline that even though others might think this is unimportant questions to focus on, Sweden can take a stand and stress the importance of a feminist approach.

The same beliefs are shared by Olof Palme International Center, and in our work in many regions globally, equality and women empowering are key factors for a sustainable development, transitioning communities in democratic and inclusive direction.

What has the feminist foreign policy meant? Is it anything that we can learn from and is it room for improvement? We asked a few people for their views.

*Anna Sundström, Secretary General*  
**Olof Palme International Center**



# EREN KESKIN

## Vice-president of the Turkish Human Rights Association



### **What was your initial reaction when you learnt that Sweden had declared to pursue a feminist foreign policy?**

Male-dominated sense of politics is ruling all over the world. Also, international affairs are being shaped in the frame of that perspective. That's why, it is possible to see male-dominated mind into the international law as well. For example, sexual violence against women in war zones and conflict zones has not been described as 'crime against humanity' yet, in spite of the fact that millions of women were exposed to sexual torture during the first and second world wars. However, declaring that Sweden will pursue a feminist foreign policy and also taking considerable steps in that policy have been important and hopeful in terms of women movement.

### **Has your organization been affected by the Swedish feminist foreign policy so far?**

Our association, Free Legal Aid against Sexual Violence, primarily assists women and transsexual women who have been exposed to sexual violence by state security forces. We represent the victims of sexual violence in court for free and are funded by Olof Palme International Center for a long while. Because of Sweden's feminist foreign policy, financial support to our association has become more regular.

### **How has the Swedish feminist foreign policy been received in Turkey?**

The political system of Turkey is extremely feudal, male-dominated and sexist. That political attitude is reflected in legislation and its implementation. Sometimes, Sweden insisting on a feminist foreign policy has angered Turkish officials, for instance regarding a verdict of the Constitutional Court. Feminists were discussing sexual abuse of children and the Constitution Court gave a verdict which very much provoked feminists. It was related to the abrogation of one of the articles in the Turkish Penal Code, about "regarding as sexual abuse of sexual behaviours against children under 15-year-old." Right after that, Sweden's Prime Minister made a statement related to that unjust verdict of the Court. Stefan Löfven did not retract his statement afterwards, despite Turkish officials' negative reactions. That was a very meaningful achievement in terms of feminist movement.

**What would you say are the most important contributions and results of the Swedish feminist foreign policy since 2015?**

Sweden has been the first country in the world to pursue a feminist foreign policy. Sweden's Minister for Foreign Affairs Margot Wallström was rewarded by the United Nations. That reward meant a recognition of the perspective of women in national political systems. I consider that progress very remarkable for women and the feminist movement.

**Which areas do you think need more focus in the Swedish feminist foreign policy?**

Women are exposed to violence all over the world. There are international conventions on women's rights and women's protection. Most of the signatory countries do not obey to those conventions. One of them is Turkey. It violates the Conventions on Women's Rights. I believe it would be very effective, if Sweden could focus on observations of how the signatory countries implement the conventions.

**” I think it is very important that Sweden participates in the Security Council of the UN. I strongly believe that Sweden has an impact on feminist policies.**

**Sweden is now a member of the UN Security Council and is using its feminist policy as a basis for its actions – do you think Sweden has been able to influence the Security Council?**

I think it is very important that Sweden participates in the Security Council of the UN. I strongly believe that Sweden has an impact on feminist policies.

**Is it possible for a small country like Sweden to influence the policies on the EU/UN level through working in this way?**

Yes, Sweden is a very small country. However, Sweden follows a frame-breaking foreign policy. Of course, it is not possible to reach positive results all the time, since women's struggle is a long range struggle. Sometimes, awareness raising can make remarkable change for the right to remedy amongst women. I think that the continuation of Swedish foreign policy is important and that it will be more effective after some more time.



**If Sweden will pursue a feminist foreign policy for four more years, what is according to you the most important actions to take?**

If Sweden will pursue a feminist foreign policy for four more years, I suggest that Sweden should prepare reports about violations on women's rights especially in war zones and conflict zones and present reports at the UN and other international arenas.

**Who are the most important actors to partner with?**

The most important actors to partner with are women's organizations, LGBTI+ organisations and organisations for conscientious objectors.



# ELISABETH DAHLIN

Secretary General,  
Save the Children Sweden



**What was your initial reaction when you learnt that Sweden had declared to pursue a feminist foreign policy?**

I was very happy! I thought it was strategic, forward looking and that it could set an example for the rest of the world.

**Has your organization been affected by the Swedish feminist foreign policy so far?**

Globally, the fact that there is a feminist government with a strong policy and advocacy standpoint has been very helpful for us. Many non-governmental organizations have felt encouraged by the mere existence of a government that brings up the rights of women, and other groups, high on the international agenda, even if other influential actors do not like it.

For us in Save the Children Sweden, the Swedish criticism of the Mexico City Policy (which blocks US federal funding for NGOs that provide information on abortion) was very important. That Sweden initiated, together with other countries, the campaign SheDecides, was also extremely helpful for us who are working for the rights of girls.

We also saw a very strong standpoint from the Swedish government when the constitutional court in Turkey proposed that men who had violated young girls would not have to go to prison if they married the victim. This proposal, and the support it got from many sides, show how important it is to have a feminist approach and for other governments to raise their voices. The Swedish government got a lot of support from Turkish lawyers and academics doing this.

**What would you say are the most important contributions and results of the Swedish feminist foreign policy since 2015?**

To have a vocal voice regarding women, peace and security, and to have it in the UN Security Council has actually made other actors and countries to look at these issues in a different way. It has provoked some people, but it also encourages those who want a change.

Sweden also has invited and forced the members in the Security Council to

listen to new actors. By inviting women and civil society to talk in the Security Council Sweden has opened up for a more ample choir of voices, for new perspectives. Sweden has also asked questions that others have not been asking themselves, and by that opening up for new answers.

**Sweden is now a member of the Security Council at United Nations and is using its feminist policy as a basis for its actions – has Sweden been able to influence the Security Council do you think?**

I definitely think so. Sweden is a clear voice on human rights and women's rights and children's rights. Sweden has made this clear in the Security Council, and even though there are many obstacles they have influenced. It is also a matter of speed and resources to be channeled to these areas. I also want to stress that the accessibility of the Swedish representatives, in the UN but also in other international fora, has set a new standard for consultations with a broad range of actors. Again – new voices and new perspectives have been invited to take part in the discussions and influence them.

**” Feminism is not a foreign issue, it should penetrate the whole society, it should be strongly pushed in EU. Here more clarity is needed.**

**Is it possible for a small country like Sweden to influence the policies on the EU/UN level through working in this way?**

Yes, and it has been done before. I remember when at Anna Lindhs funeral someone said that “You may not always have agreed with her, but you could not ignore the questions”. Nobody can ignore the questions put forward by Sweden regarding women's situation and rights, and that has been very important. It is particularly important when we have big actors who do not want change, who want to keep status quo. A small actor with good knowledge and who is not afraid of putting the right questions can do a lot.

**If Sweden will pursue a feminist foreign policy for four more years, what is according to you the most important actions to take?**

I would wish a more unified and coherent approach from the Swedish government. How can we apply a feminist perspective on all aspects of the govern-

ment policies, all the different sectors in society – aid, social affairs, migration, economy, children rights etc. And how can we do it both in Sweden and globally? Feminism is not a foreign issue, it should penetrate the whole society, it should be strongly pushed in EU. Here more clarity is needed.

Even though it is difficult to see results after only four years, I would like to see a summary of what has been achieved, preferably also research about it, and that Sweden communicates the achievements – and challenges – in order for other countries to learn and follow, to be inspired.

I would also ask for a more strategic and clear results framework for the next period.

One big challenge today is that the UN conventions are not being adhered to, and this undermines the trust for the UN. I hope that the next Swedish cabinet will stand up for the standards of human rights within the UN, requesting answers to why the conventions are not followed, why they are violated, why countries do not respect the UN decisions. This would also strengthen the respect for the UN as an actor. Conventions are questioned even in Sweden, and the Swedish government need to stand up for them.

### **Who are the most important actors to partner with in the future?**

We have a lot of the new middle income countries, which are trying to find an identity, and they can be strategic and fruitful to partner with. Also through the EU Sweden can influence others who want to do something. The feminist foreign policy has been inspiring for human rights organizations and children organizations. Also within the UN there have been steps taken for a new standard and others can follow. I think Sweden can be a catalyst for others who want to take action but not really know how.





” Exporting war material to countries such as Saudi Arabia should not be a possibility if we are guided by a policy that gives value to feminist values and human rights.

# KAJSA JOHANSSON

Researcher in sociology at Linneaus University, member of the Board of Sida



**What was your initial reaction when you learnt that Sweden had declared to pursue a feminist foreign policy?**

I was happy and proud. Proud for having a courageous foreign policy, a courageous minister and a courageous government to declare such a thing. It also created some kind of hope. From a civil society perspective it gives a lot of possibility for influencing and holding the government accountable.

I also had some doubts regarding the implementation. Looking back we have seen challenges in the coherence of different policy areas. The more progressive values have sometimes stood back in favour of for example trade and other policy areas.

**How has the Swedish feminist foreign policy been received by stake holders in your network?**

My contacts in Mozambique are quite happy that the Swedish government has the courage to take such a stance and stick out, especially in a time when many feel that some governments are taking steps back in terms of human rights. Some things that were not so sensitive some years ago – like sexual and reproductive health and rights or defense of civic rights and action – are today questioned, and many donors do not stand up like they used to do. In this situation, Sweden is seen as courageous standing up for human rights and women's rights, daring to be different, daring to be political also in its foreign policy.

In Sweden one of the worries has been the reaction from other political parties. Even though many political parties in Sweden label themselves feminist, there is a risk for a kind of backlash, since it was a left wing government that introduced a feminist foreign policy as their policy. If we have a new government after the next elections, how will they react, will they still consider it their policy?

## **What would you say are the most important contributions/ results of the Swedish feminist foreign policy since 2015?**

It is a very strong signal, a strong message. To make this statement, in a time when more conservative values are gaining ground in the global discussion, is an important contribution. I also believe that Margot Wallström is a very credible person in the international community and in the EU, and that gives weight to the initiative.

I also think there are some important more concrete decisions that have been taken influenced by the policy – including when US president Donald Trump declared the Mexico City Policy, Sweden was very quick in responding and promised to step in and compensate when US Aid or United States withheld money. That is straight forward feminist policy.

If we look at the regulations on arms deals we can see some new stronger formulations on human rights in the buying countries – even if we could wish for more.

In the development cooperation overall I think that many policies and decisions have been influenced by, or are in line with, the feminist foreign policy.

## **How has you and your work been affected by the Swedish feminist foreign policy so far?**

The work of the Sida board is of course affected since we are working with a public authority. One concrete example was the discussion that followed the Swedish response to the Mexico City Policy.

I am also active in the board of the Swedish Peace and Arbitration Society, and the stronger writings regarding arms deals give possibility for us, and other organizations working for disarmament, to demand that the government live up to their promises.

From a general civil society perspective our demands can be more radical when the government has promised a feminist policy.

## **Which areas do you think need more focus in the Swedish feminist foreign policy?**

One of the questions that needs more attention is policy coherence and the hierarchy that we have seen between different policy areas. It is obvious that some policy areas have been more difficult to negotiate and adapt to a feminist policy. The feminist policy has guided decisions within some areas, much less in others. Sweden has been progressive when it comes to for example sexual and reproductive health and rights. Trade in general, and arms trade in particular, as well as security issues, have not been influenced by feminist values to the same degree – these areas need change if the government legitimately wants to state that they are leading a feminist foreign policy.

Exporting war material to countries such as Saudi Arabia should not be a possibility if we are guided by a policy that gives value to feminist values and human rights.

Regarding development cooperation, some areas are very obviously influenced by the policy – to support feminist organizations, safe abortions and so



forth. Other areas have not received equal attention, despite their importance for women, like social and economic welfare for women and the importance of the agricultural sector in developing countries, as the key economic sector of women living in poverty.

Migration policy is another area where I lack a feminist perspective. Today there are very few legal ways of entering Sweden, which creates difficulties for all asylum seekers, but particularly affects women and girls who are more vulnerable. For example, I have not seen any analysis on how Turkey, where many of the asylum seekers today end up, guarantee human rights for women and girls in the refugee camps. There is room for significant improvement also in many other questions regarding migration policy.

On a general level I think we can say that it is easier to try to influence others than changing at home.

### **Sweden is now a member of the Security Council at the United Nations and is using its feminist policy as a basis for its actions – do you think Sweden has been able to influence the Security Council?**

I think that putting the issue on the agenda is an important contribution, to bring in women's perspective when discussing conflict or peace building. Though I am not sure I have seen any concrete results – it might be too early, or I am not aware. One also has to recognize the challenge having this impact on the Security Council, considering that the five countries within the Security Council that have a veto are not all of them famous for having strong feminist policies.

### **Is it possible for a small country like Sweden to influence the policies on the EU/UN level?**

Sometimes I get the impression that we hide behind our littleness when we say that we can not influence in the UN and the EU.

Historically, we can refer to the foreign policy during the time of Olof Palme – a political and radical foreign policy. This is something that still is remembered in many countries; that Sweden stood up for developing countries and solidarity with poor and oppressed. During this time, we did have possibility to influence, despite our alleged littleness.

For a long time Sweden has been less unique in its foreign policy, but now there seems to be a willingness to step up and come back, at least in some questions. And I think that Sweden needs to take a responsibility for the policies in the fora where we are active. So yes, we can – and should – influence policies in the UN and the EU.

### **Who are the most important actors to partner with?**

I would like to say everybody. Feminist and radical civil society organizations. Men and boys, since changing the perception of masculinity in both Sweden and abroad is crucial. States, since social security redistribution is key for gender equality, and require strong institutions. I also believe that Sweden, as a large donor, can influence some of the key UN agencies.



PHOTO: PALMECENTRET

# RISA HONTIVEROS

Senator of the Philippines

**W**

**hat was your initial reaction when you learnt that Sweden had declared to pursue a feminist foreign policy?**

I really felt inspired that Sweden could conceptualize and then propose to the whole world such an innovative idea, that foreign policy could be not only about projecting strength or building solidarity, but could also advocate for a fundamental value such as feminism.

In my own work as head of the Philippine senates committee on women, children, family relations, and gender equality, I work to mainstream gender sensitivity, gender equality and gender justice, not only in the specific bills that are referred to the committee, but also in other legislative interventions, and I think we can learn from the Swedish policy – we can learn from each other in this field.

**How has the Swedish feminist foreign policy been received in the Philippines?**

The Philippine commission on women, a governmental agency, has actually taken action to educate Philippine women about the Swedish feminist policy – they uploaded the action plan on their website. They did this despite the very offensive and objectional anti-women pronouncements from our own president. We are many that fight for more awareness of feminist values among the public and among the government and their allies. From civil society and parts of the private sector there is a steady clamor for a more feminist policy to be adopted and anti-feminist, misogynous and sexist policies to be dismantled.

**What would you say are the most important contributions of the Swedish feminist foreign policy since 2015?**

One of the most important, as well as innovative and unexpected actions, is that Sweden has been advocating a feminist policy all the way up to the Security Council in the United Nations. The strategic importance of Sweden using its place and the space in the Security Council to mainstream women, gender and feminism cannot be underestimated. Given the comprehensive range of global issues that the UN takes a position on and tries to have a saying on, it is an extremely important fora to influence.

## **Is it possible for a country like Sweden to use opportunities like being a member of the Security Council and actually make real change?**

I think it is. Ability to influence is not all about size, it is about location and about leveraging your comparative advantages in a very smart way. When Sweden puts the idea of a feminist foreign policy on the global scene, inside the Security Council, it cannot fail to be noticed. Sweden comes from a long and recognized tradition of building international solidarity not only with governments but with people in their struggles around the world. Now you expand this with a feminist perspective, in the EU and in the UN. I think it will form a part of Sweden's legacy of our time.

**” I also believe that the UN should put more pressure on countries to act internally on a feminist policy, not only believe in it.**

## **Are there any areas that you believe should be pushed harder within the UN?**

When one first hears about a feminist foreign policy, one might only think about it in political and diplomatic terms. But if you look at how all-permeating globalization is right now, dimensions where Sweden might articulate even stronger and insist on a feminist perspective could be on the economic front as well as on environment.

I also believe that the UN should put more pressure on countries to act internally on a feminist policy, not only believe in it. To support and build capacity one could enter into regional and global partnerships with other countries, especially of similar development status or trajectories, to apply feminist perspectives. These partnerships could be defined not only by traditional political or administrative boundaries of nation states, but could be among likeminded sections of governments and social movements and also include some modernizing sectors within the private sector. The partnerships could also be formed within eco systems, like countries around a certain strategic water form or a continental mass – areas that are effected similarly by the climate change.

## **If Sweden will pursue a feminist foreign policy for four more years, what is according to you the most important actions to take and areas to focus on?**

There could be even more specific and concrete focus on investing in supporting women through infrastructure – roads, energy, water, including public utilities in those parts of the society that also globally should belong to or remain in the domain of the commons. Sweden already have taken a first important step when bringing the feminist foreign policy to bear on the ecological agenda globally.

## **Some critics argue that Sweden has included too many issues into the feminist foreign agenda, for example the perspective of environment. What is your reaction to this?**

I do not think that the Swedish feminist foreign policy is talking about too much – a feminist perspective actually brings an integrating dynamics into the understanding of what are our objectives as a country or as an international community. Everything is related in the concrete reality of being human, and policies should be integrated and comprehensive.

I actually laughed about critics claiming that there is no feminist perspective in environmental issues. Ecological issues affect women in different ways than men. We talk about feminization of poverty or migration, and I believe that in every human phenomenon there is a differential in impact on women because of the disadvantage that women and girls are in in most, if not all, human societies on the planet today. This also includes environment. This understanding is necessary when analyzing where the problems are emanating from and when searching for effective solutions.

## **Who are the most important actors to partner with?**

Governments are of course important, no matter what administration is in power in a specific country at a specific time. I think people in a country appreciate solidarity as well as fraternal correction and critique, depending on in what direction governments are moving regarding women's situation.

Civil society organizations are always an engine for critical thinking, mobilizing and action for change, and will be excited by the new and innovative combination of two old and familiar ideas such as foreign policy and feminism.

I also think there are parts of the private sector that would like to think beyond corporate social responsibility, and see the continuing concentration of the worlds resources as a warning. The poor, and among them women, are still the majority of the world. They are not only to be seen as a burden, they are an underutilized potential that can contribute to social, economic, political and cultural uplifting of their societies. They can contribute to more sustainable economies. Hopefully the private sector can see the potential in this and want to contribute to a redistribution of resources that would benefit women as well as men. But to come to this point we need to better formulate the arguments and initiate a closer dialogue with the private sector.





**” Women need to engage in issues like nuclear weapons, environment, economy – I see a lot of activism on local level, but I do not see influence of women on big issues globally.**

# MARGARETA WAHLSTRÖM

President, Swedish Red Cross



**What was your initial reaction when you learnt that Sweden had declared to pursue a feminist foreign policy?**

Curious! It sounded very unusual, and it raised a lot of interesting questions. Since I was not in Sweden at the time I wanted to know what it meant. In the beginning when I asked people at the Swedish embassies and missions “what is it, what does it mean”, they said that they did not really know yet. But a year later people had a much more solid understanding of the intention and policies, and I felt that people were very committed. I believe the feminist foreign policy touches something really important.

**How was the Swedish feminist foreign policy received in the United Nations, where you were working at the time?**

Most were probably impressed, more than I was. They were interested, curious and impressed. Impressed because it was the first time ever any government would declare that it had a feminist policy, let alone a feminist foreign policy. This evoked expectations – what would be its direction, what would be the impact?

**How has the organizations where you have worked the last years been affected by the Swedish feminist foreign policy?**

In the UN the Swedish policy supported long term work to push for more focus on women’s representation and engagement, it was very well aligned timewise. So within the UN it rung an important bell – we can make more progress. In the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement I would say that we are lagging behind on this agenda. We have all the policies, all the words, but they have not been put fully into practice. We are discussing this a lot right now, and hopefully the Swedish example can give guidance for the work to come. But the fact that Sweden has a feminist foreign policy is not as well known in the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement as it is in the UN.

### **Could Sweden do more to influence organizations like the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement to develop their own work to strengthen women's role and participation?**

Being one of the generous donors to the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement, and giving priority to these issues, Sweden definitely has a possibility to influence. But since the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement is an independent non governmental organization, you have to deal with it differently than in the UN, considering the autonomy of the organization. Putting it on the agenda is one thing, but you also have to follow up and ask for results. The International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent where the state parties to the Geneva convention participate, is another forum to push these issues.

### **What would you say are the most important contributions and results of the Swedish feminist foreign policy since 2015?**

The fact that the feminist foreign policy exists demonstrates the possibility to give top priority to these issues. One should always ask; where are the women, what is the impact on women? One should also have a checklist, an awareness – this changes and elevates the discussion and it expands the knowledge base.

Secondly, there are still a lot of power play mechanisms – people make jokes about women, treat women differently, even if they are in powerful positions. We have to make it unacceptable and the only way we can do that is that powerful women demonstrate that this is not accepted.

Thirdly, I believe the strong emphasis on women, peace and security is important. We have to admit that the work around the UN resolution 1325 became too bureaucratic. The ten-year review revealed that not very much had happened. So, we have to try harder and use different means. The Swedish decision to focus on this in the UN Security Council has led to a different kind of conversation. I have myself noticed a change when it comes to peace keeping missions. There has formerly been trainings on gender, on sexual harassment and other similar topics, but now we seem to have a strong push to really get women involved in the peace building processes. Questions are asked about the impact of women being involved in peace processes and research is being done. Formerly we had more myths and wishful thinking, now we are beginning to get facts, and that gives new possibilities to influence change.

In all these areas we have seen considerable progress. Once you sit in the UN Security Council and demand that every resolution, statement and report should take these perspectives into consideration, then you have results.

### **Which areas do you think need more focus in the Swedish feminist foreign policy?**

I think we need continued work on women in political positions, their influence reaching from local to global level. Women need to engage in issues like nuclear weapons, environment, economy – I see a lot of activism on local level, but I do not see influence of women on big ticket issues globally. When will we have



women leading the UN, IMF, the World Bank, OECD, the Regional Development Banks? It is a rough measurement, but these institutions make decisions that influence all of us. Women will broaden the understanding on how all these areas are integrated, and they have less traditional areas to protect – that is why I think we need women in key positions to contribute to the shaping of the future.

We also need to find ways to motivate world leaders to see the benefit of women's participation, that women engagement is a success factor for the leaders themselves.

### **Is it possible for a small country like Sweden to influence the policies on the EU/UN level through working in this way?**

You can influence, sometimes in surprising ways. You can use a mix of policies at the highest level with highly visible campaigns and initiatives, targeting many different audiences on different levels. One recent example is the WikiGap campaign, where the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs raised the issue of the underrepresentation of women on Wikipedia. 40–50 Swedish embassies around the world put the spotlight on this, and it generated a completely new discussion in many countries. It is an example of a very concrete initiative, that makes difference in its own way.

Sweden has already been pushing women's issues for a long time, but there is a big difference in running a policy direction, essentially ticking boxes and visiting conferences, and running a policy direction which you make a very high priority and talk about at every level. The fact that all ambassadors of Sweden that I have met know how to represent this policy, that is very different from before. In the UN everyone knew that Sweden was engaged in these issues, but did we do a serious push for change? There are many things that officials in UN know that they can do and they would like to do, but they do not get it done because it is not given priority by the member state. That leveraging is important. Particularly for an issue like this, which is not a real priority, no matter what people say in endless speeches.

### **If Sweden will pursue a feminist foreign policy for four more years, what is according to you the most important actions to take?**

I would definitely want continued work in the UN and in regional peace processes on women, peace and security and inclusive peace building.

I also think we need a deeper analysis into which areas women are represented and which they are not. In Sweden, women's representation is often better, compared to other countries, and we tend to forget the significance of women being in the room and at the table, in the decision making positions, visible, seen and heard. I also think it is important to continue to use a diverse means of influence. This will continue to build women confidence in their own role, And build the expectation of women's presence in broader role in leadership at all levels of society.



PHOTO: THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS

# THANDIKA MKANDAWIRE

Professor of African Development,  
The London School of Economics



**What was your initial reaction when you learnt that Sweden had declared to pursue a feminist foreign policy?**

I think it is very important that a country like Sweden takes the lead like this.

Though I also think there is an issue regarding who Sweden can and can not influence. Poor countries that are dependent on aid and support from Sweden will certainly listen, because they will start worrying about their aid. But in relation to countries like China or Saudi Arabia, what is Sweden's possibility to influence? Does Putin care? There might be a risk that you create double standards – that you put more pressure on countries that are not rich and not strong enough to ignore an initiative from Sweden. It is not symmetrical. But I also believe that the initiative gives hope and strength to those who fight for gender equality also in countries where Sweden does not have the possibility to influence the government.

Another question is why call it a feminist agenda and not a human rights agenda? These issues are connected, and if we put all focus on one issue, do we forget the others? Children rights? Gay rights? There is a risk, but there is also a possibility to push one area at a time, depending on what brings most change and strongest impact at the moment. Whatever the emphasis at any given moment it is important that the feminist agenda is firmly anchored to the human rights agenda.

The last question is what instruments can be used – what instrument do Sweden have to push the agenda? The UN is one instrument, diplomacy another, legal issues a third and aid a fourth – there are several more. All these need to work in the same direction to get full impact. I believe soft diplomacy is a very important tool for a country like Sweden.

## **Which areas do you think need more focus in the Swedish feminist foreign policy?**

Considering that Sweden is a rather small country with limited opportunity to put pressure on other countries through “hard” issues like economy or military interventions, I believe you have to use “soft diplomacy” to influence. Sweden has a reputation, a history and a position to share knowledge and experiences with actors like artists, opinion makers, journalists, civil society and in that way influence the public debate. To succeed with this you need to use all possible means, all diplomats, all foreign policy institutions.

I remember when the World Bank “trained” journalists from all over the world. After a while the economic development in the world and in specific countries was interpreted and described in media through a lense created by the World Bank, it was their criteria that were used. These kinds of activities can be very powerful.

**” I think it is important not to change stands, not to make women’s issues into party politics. If that happens Sweden will lose credibility.**

## **Is it possible for a small country like Sweden to influence the policies on the UN level through working in this way?**

Even though these issues have been brought up for a long time in the UN, I do think Sweden can play a role. The UN has been talking about women for many years, but we need more progress, more money! To go to the UN and make a lot of noise about it – I believe it can change.

The UN system is based on the universal declaration on human rights, that is the heart of the organisation. Every member state has signed the declaration, so you do not bring in a new doctrine when you bring in an issue on rights. Members might not implement, but they will not block initiatives either. The average UN bureaucrat believes in the declaration, and I believe there is more space than you think to make things happen if someone takes the lead.

## **If Sweden will pursue a feminist foreign policy for four more years, what is according to you the most important actions to take and areas to focus on?**

I think it is important not to change stance, not to make women’s issues into party politics. If that happens Sweden will lose credibility.

More research is also needed, research on who you can ally with, who you can trust, what resources are required to make impact, what measures are most effective, what doors are open, what are the reactions and measures taken from “the other side”.

### **Who are the most important actors to partner with?**

Feminist movements around the world as well as democracy and human rights movements.

In Africa we have a young population (50% are under the age of 15) and they are not happy with the performance of the continent. They are open to new ideas and influences that can make them improve. Here I see a possibility for change.





# PHUMZILE MLAMBO-NGCUKA

Executive Director, UN Women



**What was your initial reaction when you learnt that Sweden had declared to pursue a feminist foreign policy?**

I was very encouraged! It was the first of its kind and it meant that we could see Sweden take a stand that would not only be beneficial to Sweden but would potentially influence other countries as well. Overall the decision has had a positive impact on the momentum for gender equality.

**How have you and UN Women been affected by the Swedish feminist foreign policy so far?**

It has given us the possibility to work with Sweden around the specific emphasis of the Swedish feminist foreign policy in the areas of rights, representation and resources – all these three areas are critical for the advancement of our work and to bring about the necessary systemic changes.

**How have stakeholders received the Swedish feminist foreign policy?**

The Swedish policy has created momentum to move gender equality from the sidelines to center stage. Gender equality is not a special area for a few people; we need even more people working on the issue of gender equality. When we have been dealing with other governments that have not made gender equality a mainstream area, we have been able to show Sweden as an example of how change can be mainstreamed and implemented so as to make sure women are part of everything in society.

**Those who criticize the policy, what is their stand?**

They say that it is only symbolic, more of a PR-stance. Partly because of this we have been keen to look at the specific policy areas where Sweden has been active and is doing things differently, for example in gender responsive budgeting. In this way we are able to show others how Sweden has already been implementing gender-sensitive activities within the prioritized policy areas.

## **What would you say are the most important contributions and results of the Swedish feminist foreign policy since 2015?**

Far-reaching gender mainstreaming is the most important result, making gender equality central to foreign policy and not an add-on, and ensuring the response is comprehensive – because gender inequality is complex and occurs everywhere. In many countries, work on gender equality remains a special area, with the Ministry of Women being almost the only one dealing with it. It is very unusual for other ministries, like the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, to take responsibility and be engaged.

When the Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs engages her counterparts and reaches out to other countries regarding gender equality it requires them to take their own action. It opens new doors. Ministries for Foreign Affairs in other countries may never earlier have been confronted with these questions – but when Sweden reaches out it is very difficult for them not to respond on their own feminist policies. It puts the issue on the table.

I would also say that the mobilization of men, who are critical partners for advancing gender equality, has benefited from having a Swedish feminist foreign policy. A foreign policy is everybody's responsibility and making gender equality a foreign policy issue fosters men's familiarization with the issues and encourages them to take responsibility. UN Women is active in mobilizing men and we have found this very helpful as we are now able to bring these issues up with other Ministries for Foreign Affairs.

## **Sweden is now a member of the UN Security Council and is using its feminist policy as a basis for its actions – do you think Sweden has been able to influence the Security Council?**

Sweden has helped to increase the references to women in the debates in the security council, and to facilitate the participation of women in the Security Council debates. The Ambassador of Sweden has called for women to participate all the time and has been very supportive in having women and civil society come to the Security Council to speak for themselves. That has meant that women, who were not being heard and were not visible, have been given a platform, which has changed the understanding of the members of the Security Council. Formerly there were seldom any references to women in the briefings of the Security Council.

Sweden has also put gender equality on the agenda in the reports and investigations being conducted by the Security Council, which also influences the agenda and debates.

The Security Council has the responsibility to follow up and oversee the implementation of resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. Sweden has kept the focus of the member states on this resolution, and made the council keep its attention.



**” Sweden has also put gender equality on the agenda in the reports and investigations being conducted by the Security Council, which also influences the agenda and debates.**

**If Sweden will pursue a feminist foreign policy for four more years, what are according to you the most important actions to take and areas to focus on?**

The issue of violence against women is important to pay attention to, in Sweden itself, as well as in solidarity with women in other parts of the world. In this area Sweden can be more successful at home, and share whatever practices are developed with other countries. We need to share challenges and to learn from each other's success.

Another area where Sweden has a good opportunity to make progress is to increase the representation of women in managerial positions in the private sector. There is a very rich pipeline of talented women who are ready and very deserving to be in leadership of the institutions in the country. We hope the private sector addresses them and I encourage them to do so.

I would also wish that Sweden coordinates other countries to increase their investment in the agenda of women. The level of investment on gender equality is not proportionate to the need for interventions to bring about far-reaching changes. There are many opportunities to address gender inequality, but the lack of resources makes it impossible to have the impact that women deserve. In this way we are prolonging the suffering of women. We need coordination and we need a leader to make the women's agenda a top priority around the world. Sweden has a feminist government, and through its understanding of the importance of these issues it can help to convince and influence other actors to invest in women.

The MeToo-movement has created a tipping point and a higher level of awareness, and all stakeholders – perpetrators, lawyers, employers, human resource-units, public institutions – have to take a united stance to stop the abuses that have been normalized. We need to reorder the way society works and fight the tolerance of gender inequality as well as of violence against women. Violence against women is everybody's responsibility, and many world leaders have not shown a clear stance for zero tolerance against violence against women. We have not seen enough men saying that enough is enough and taking a strong stance. The silence is deafening.



# TON COENEN

Executive Director, Rutgers,  
the Netherlands



## **What was your initial reaction when you learnt that Sweden had declared to pursue a feminist foreign policy?**

I got to know about the Swedish policy in 2016, when my organization was doing an inventory of like-minded organizations and countries. We were very happy to learn about the policy and the support Sweden is giving to these issues, including SRHR where our organization has its focus. I think the Swedish policy is a broad framework, which integrate different aspects, and because of this can reach the more underlying issues and problems that connect questions like SHRH, LGTB and gender issues – dimensions that are fundamental. Here in Holland I would say that the government put SRHR high on the agenda, but it is dealt with more exclusively, which on the other hand gives a very clear priority.

## **Has your organization been effected by the Swedish feminist foreign policy so far?**

The Swedish feminist agenda became prominent when we started the SheDecides movement last year, as a response to the US president Donald Trump's decision to reinstate the Mexico City Policy. The policy prevents NGOs from receiving money from US government if they provide safe abortions or inform about abortions. SheDecides is a global movement to promote, provide, protects and enhance the fundamental rights of girls and women. Sweden was onboard as one of the first actors. That was the moment when we saw the feminist foreign policy being translated into practice, and it was done very effectively. For us Sweden's active engagement was very actual and very important.

## **How has the Swedish feminist foreign policy been received in Holland?**

Today we see a lot of push-back, both in the northern countries and in many other regions, when it comes to promoting women's rights and sexual and reproductive rights. In such a time it is important to find and build alliances of like-minded countries to be able to continue making change. Here Sweden plays an active role together with Canada, United Kingdom, Denmark and the Netherlands, and this is important when strategizing how to move forward.

## **What would you say are the most important contributions and results of the Swedish feminist foreign policy since 2015?**

It is really important that there is a country that has such a clear focus on these issues. Setting these priorities, setting these goals – it gives clear contributions to policy around the world. Especially at this time, in a world that has become more conservative, in a world where more women are denied safe abortions and access to contraceptives.

It encourages the civil society, women and men round the world trying to promote these issues in a more and more hostile environment. They feel encouraged and less alone. It also gives them legitimacy in the eyes of others, when they can show that there are governments and mechanisms active in supporting their work, that there is a broader international movement that they are part of. It might also affect their possibilities to get funding for their work. I think SheDecides is a beautiful example on cooperation between different actors – governments, individuals, private foundations, NGOs.

I also want to stress that a feminist foreign policy is well in line with the 2030-agenda.

**” I think there is more to gain from collaboration with like-minded countries. I also think that actors within the private sector can be interested to engage.**

## **Sweden is now a member of the UN Security Council and is using its feminist policy as a basis for its actions – do you think Sweden has been able to influence the Security Council?**

The Security Council is a very, very important platform when you want to integrate a perspective like a feminist policy to create change. Holland is also a member of the Security Council now, and being chair on the International Women's Day on March 8, the Dutch delegation asked all other countries to be represented only by women. Everyone did – except Russia. These actions send signals.

### **If Sweden will pursue a feminist foreign policy for four more years, what is according to you the most important actions to take?**

I believe it is important to continue having a broad and integrated agenda, including women's issues, SRHR, LGBT and migration. These issues are definitely connected, and problems are addressed more effectively if you can see the underlying structures. Even with an integrated and comprehensive policy, you can be specific on which areas you want to pinpoint for action, and I think that in the present feminist foreign policy the Swedish government has found a way to integrate different perspectives, and at the same time being specific on areas that they really invest in.

When it comes to SRHR the push-back during the last years has been so massive that it would really be a loss if Sweden would move out. We need all the support there is right now.

### **Who are the most important actors to partner with in the future?**

I think there is more to gain from collaboration with like-minded countries. I also think that actors within the private sector can be interested to engage. We know that women's involvement is important for economic development, and that there are gains to be made through including them better. If girls can go to school, they become mothers later, they can access higher education and gain more competence – which is needed for the private sector to develop. Here I think there is a potential that has not yet been explored.





OLOF PALME INTERNATIONAL CENTER is the umbrella organization for the Swedish labour movement and works in the spirit of Olof Palme for democracy, human rights and peace. The Swedish labour movement has a long tradition of solidarity and we are proud to keep this tradition alive. Together with our 27 member organizations we cooperate with people and organizations throughout the world, in countries such as Burma, South Africa, the Philippines, Zimbabwe and in regions such as the Western Balkans, the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

Through our development projects, we seek to empower people to change their societies and thereby their own lives. Women, youth, and grassroots activists are our main target groups. The Swedish labour movement's extensive international network enables cooperation with global partners who share our values.

ANNA-KARIN JOHANSSON were assigned as the independent rapporteur by the Palme Center to compile this report. Johansson have been Secretary General for the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (Svenska Afghanistan-kommittén), and has previously worked at Sida, the Swedish ombudsman against discrimination and The Government Offices. She has also worked as a journalist and published two books. She was the editor in charge of the book *Om detta må ni berätta*, a widely acclaimed project by the Living History Project (Levande historia) about the Holocaust.

For these interviews, Anna-Karin Johansson wrote the questionnaire, selected the persons to be interviewed in cooperation with the Palme Center and conducted the interviews between March and May 2018.



**THE OLOF PALME INTERNATIONAL CENTER**  
PO Box 836 / Sveavägen 68, 101 36 Stockholm, Sweden  
Telephone: +46 (0)8-677 57 70  
E-mail: [info@palmecenter.se](mailto:info@palmecenter.se)