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The institutional consequences of Sweden's feminist foreign policy

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Summary

This paper examines the impact of Sweden's feminist foreign policy (FFP), adopted in 2014, on its foreign ministry. The policy has been studied extensively but almost exclusively as part of diplomatic practice; this study expands the perspective by adding analytical and political dimensions relating to the ministry at home. The policy had political origins and, the paper argues, was maintained and instrumentalized as a lever to bring about internal change within the ministry. The policy was under political ownership and policy coordinators were under political patronage. FFP had institutional consequences for the ministry. It promoted more horizontal coordination and stronger functional and organizational synergies, not only between policy areas but also between staff categories. This meant that the work culture and how the ministry works changed. The study, which combines primary and secondary material, offers further insights into Sweden's FFP, but also into what happens within a foreign ministry. Overall, the paper provides lessons about how foreign policy can be understood as co-constructed by civil servants/diplomats and political appointees – including ministers and their political advisers.

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Introduction

On 3 October 2014, when Sweden had a new government in place – a coalition between the Social Democrats and the Green Party – the newly appointed foreign minister Margot Wallström told reporters about an important priority: a feminist foreign policy, here abbreviated as FFP.[1] Since then, it has been the subject of vigorous debate about success or failure, and the Swedish experience shows mixed results – "more than a label, less than a revolution" (Towns, Bjarnegård & Jezierska 2023), which prompts curiosity about sustainability or institutionalization. With structures and actors accustomed to it, and gender equality integrated into international treaties and soft law, a certain continuity can be expected. And in fact, the government may not be able to reverse the trend. Since taking office in October 2022, a center-right government has not used the "label" feminist at all for its foreign policy.[2] The government has set other goals but continues to pursue gender equality work also in foreign policy and international gender equality policy.[3] This points to a continued FFP trajectory and institutionalization where norms, principles and practices are integrated into organizational and administrative processes. In any case, as an absolute minimum, gender equality values and practices are encapsulated in such processes.

The obvious question then is: how did this happen? How was it possible for the new government to, step-by-step, gain acceptance within the organization for a new, feminist, foreign policy? And, as the overarching question of this paper: how did it ultimately affect the ministry? In addition to the initiative's obvious goal of helping to shape the global agenda, bilaterally and multilaterally, but also for use in domestic debates and politics, FFP would have consequences for what it is like to work and operate in the foreign ministry's internal world.

I argue that FFP provided leverage to effect internal change within the ministry. I highlight transformative forces and institutional implications. While existing research has documented effects on the

[1] At first it was overshadowed by the announcement that Sweden will recognize the State of Palestine. For a summary account of the Swedish experience, see Towns, Bjarnegård, and Jezierska (2023) or Towns, Jezierska, and Bjarnegård (2024). For a general research overview, see Achilleos-Sarll, Haastrup, and Thomson (2025).

[2] The newly appointed foreign minister explained that the government will no longer use of the concept feminist foreign policy because it has "obscured the contents of the policy", but "will always stand for gender equality" (Tobias Billström, quoted in Sveriges Television 2022). In contrast, in their party programme, adopted at its 2025 congress, the social democratic party re-committed itself to a feminist foreign policy "with a focus on women's rights, representation and resources (Socialdemokraterna 2025: 34). However, whether it means a return for FFP in Sweden's foreign policy if the Social Democrats return to power after the parliamentary elections in September 2026 remains to be seen. The draft programme, prepared for the congress, did not explicitly call for FFP but for a gender perspective in foreign policy.

[3] Gender equality is a core value in official foreign policy and development cooperation policy, and Sweden works to increasing women's and girls' empowerment and contributes to measures against all forms of sexual and gender-based violence. In 2025, Sweden held the Presidency of the UN Women.

Swedish foreign service and diplomatic work (more below), this paper examines what the policy meant specifically for culture and practice within the ministry at home. Generally, as Garritzmann and Siderius (2025), focusing on social policies, note, while scholars have studied the politics of policymaking for decades, we know surprisingly little about the role of individual ministries. They shape the content of policies; they have substantive policy impact. However, within ministries, which are complex organizations, tensions can arise.

This paper constitutes a form of institutional analysis. Arguably, despite the growth of a large theoretical literature about institutions and (new) institutionalism over the last three decades, the specific nature of political institutions has been relatively neglected (Bartolini 2022). Institutions – formal or informal "rules of the game" – shape conduct and political life, "ways of doing things". For example, in the sphere of diplomacy, "protocol", providing a system of rules for correct conduct and procedures to be followed, encompasses both formal and informal elements but is especially aimed at formal situations. Institutions contribute to the stability and functioning of a society and of organizations. In the words of Douglass North (1991: 97, see also North 1990): "Throughout history, institutions have been devised by human beings to create order and reduce uncertainty in exchange." Institutions point to stability, but change occurs. In my understanding of institutions and institutional development, institutions are not fixed or static; they evolve. They involve not only structures but also actors. Institutionalization can be treated as equivalent to normalization – the embedding of formal and informal institutions such as norms, rules, and procedures into evolving organizational practices. As a result, institutional change may contribute to reshaping not just routines, but also professional roles and relationships within organizations, with consequences for distribution of power. All of which may explain resistance to change, for instance, to gendered change, concerning gendered power inequalities in (political) institutions (e.g., Krook & Mackay 2010; Lowndes 2014; Thomson 2018).[4] In sum, institutions can serve as mechanisms of continuity, but can also enable, not only constrain, change.

In addition to institutional analysis, this paper speaks to debates especially in foreign policy analysis, including about sources of foreign policy change, and public policy analysis – policymaking from agenda setting to implementation (including top-down and bottom-up approaches) and eventually evaluation. Among other things, policy studies highlight linkages among policy areas and spillover effects that affect national administrations at different levels, including new dynamics and patterns of interaction among civil servants and between them and political staff. This implies different steps towards a coherent approach to policy. In other words, towards institutionalizing or normalizing policy (and practice), making it

[4] For overviews of feminist institutionalism, addressing pertinent research questions on the promise and limits of gendered change, see for example Mackay and Waylen (2009), Krook and Mackay (2010) or Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell (2011).

accepted, not questioned – "only game in town".

These bodies of literature share an interest in understanding the interplay between policy and context/environment, and between actors and structures. These literatures are vast and are not presented in more detail here.[5] However, my paper aligns with several research trends. One is studying policymaking in the "executive triangle" consisting of ministers, advisers and civil servants (Bach & Hustedt 2023). Recent research reports a strengthening of ministerial advisers and the offices in which they work in this triadic relationship (Gouglas 2025; see also, e.g., Ng 2018, 2020, Pickering, Craft & Brans 2024). Other relevant research trends include the so-called "practice turn" in international studies, including foreign policy, as well as a substantial and growing body of research examining "advocacy coalitions," focusing on policy advocacy across different contexts and constellations. In the same vein, the paper also says something about exchange (in political and social life), learning, and policy legitimation – processes and efforts to gain acceptance for and compliance with new policies that are brought forward in the system.

More specifically, this paper is associated with work on foreign ministries and the national diplomatic system/service (e.g., Hocking 1999, 2018). This research addresses questions about how foreign ministries and their diplomats face not only continuing pressures but also challenges to their significance in the management and direction of foreign policy, as well as questions that more directly target foreign ministries at work, including what diplomats actually do (e.g., Neumann 2012; Lequesne 2017).

My methodological approach is one of "analytic narrative" (Bates, Greif, Levi, Rosenthal & Weingast 1998). This means an attempt to uncover causal mechanisms, to draw broad applicable theoretical generalizations from specific case studies, using close analysis of cases to illuminate issues of general relevance both empirically and theoretically. My argument is examined empirically through a combination of primary and secondary sources, drawing on existing research and presenting new primary evidence derived mainly from my interviews with individuals with experience handling the FFP within the foreign ministry.[6] They include former foreign minister Margot Wallström and a range of interview subjects, all of whom were promised confidentiality, including former political staff members and nonpartisan civil servants. In the Swedish government, the staff category of "political appointees" includes ministers, state secretaries and political advisers, among them press secretaries.[7] The interviews have particularly focused on policy, organization

[5] Those who want to delve deeper can start with handbooks on the respective area, with introductions to different subfields.

[6] Translations from Swedish to English are mine, including interviews and documents. This study involved four interviews with Swedish foreign service officials and six interviews with political appointees: a foreign minister, a state secretary, and four political advisers including a press secretary. I have also drawn from interviews with other government press secretaries or media advisers.

[7] However, my research shows that press secretaries, or ministerial media advisers, have come to constitute a category of their own as they

and coordination – the link between the minister, the political staff and the officials' line in the organization.

The paper proceeds through three steps. First, I provide an update on the state of the art in Swedish FFP research, identifying gaps and what remains to be added. Second, I present my analysis of how FFP was handled within the foreign ministry internally and demonstrate its institutional effects. And finally, I conclude the paper by summarizing the results and outlining lessons from the Swedish experience for future analysis.

Discoveries and blind spots in existing research

Discussion of the promises and limitations of FFP has developed into an increasingly prominent theme of research. Existing research shows a professionalization of FFP as well as enthusiasm and willingness toward it, while also noting that it takes allies within the system to overcome resistance, affect real change and yield results. For example, Canada, the second country to have a version of FFP through its Feminist International Assistance Policy (e.g., Cadesky 2020; Parisi 2020), announced in 2015, and its feminist International Development Policy, announced in 2017 (e.g., Tiessen, Smith & Swiss 2020), which stalled on progress due to institutional inertia – meant that Canada did not develop a full FFP.[8] According to Leclerc (2025: 648): "A siloed department [ministry] responsible for overseeing foreign policy with constant internal restructuring and the growing threat of a changing political landscape made the hopes of a robust and transparent FFP quite grim." Critically examining the Canadian case, Beaulieu (2025) asks why states choose to explicitly label themselves as feminist.[9] Drawing on constructivist insights, she suggests that the answer lies in identity insecurity as a key contextual factor driving states' decision to adopt a feminist branding. It is an answer that highlights the strategic motivations behind the adoption of the feminist label, and that can be generalized at least to the Swedish FFP, in part a response to an indistinct foreign policy identity of the Social Democrats in government or opposition, until 2014. Given Sweden's tradition of activist foreign policy, the FFP, with its normative dimensions, can be seen as a likely foreign policy output. The initiative fit into this Swedish, not just social democratic, tradition and a favourable context (Aggestam & Bergman Rosamond 2016; Bergman Rosamond 2016, 2020; Egnell 2016; Nylund, Håkansson & Bjarnegård 2023; Bjereld & Ekengren 2024; Thomson & Wehner 2025).

Key to FFP adoptions has been the role of policy entrepreneurs and critical actors

have converged among themselves but diverged from policy advisers (Johansson 2024).

[8] The direction of FFP has also been shaped – or hampered – by institutional factors in the German case, leading Mühlenhoff, Popovic, and Welfens (2025: 610) to call for "addressing internal institutional cultures that marginalize minority positionalities and knowledge within the Foreign Office itself."

[9] For recent critical assessments of "feminist foreign policy", especially the "feminisms" of Canada's foreign policy, highlighting the superficiality and parochialism of states' incorporations of feminist and gender equality commitments into their international policies, see the International Journal's special issue edited by Sarson, Spanner, Eichler, and Smith (2025).

within national administrations, notably Margot Wallström in Sweden (Achilleos-Sarll, Haastrup & Thomson 2025: 561; Thomson & Wehner 2025: 578–579). Moreover, FFP has been adopted by governments in countries (like Sweden) with existing, long-standing commitments to gender equality and human rights in their international (and domestic) policies.

Tacking stock of the first decade of FFP scholarship and practice, Achilleos-Sarll, Haastrup, and Thomson (2025: 562–563) observe that work on FPP mostly emanates from scholars whose expertise has been situated within feminist international relations (e.g., Aggestam & Bergman Rosamond 2016; Aggestam, Bergman Rosamond & Kronsell 2019; Aggestam & True 2024). They note that this disproportionate focus on its normative elements has meant that "limited consideration has been paid to the *institutional implications* of FFP adoption; for example, in terms of what impact the creation of new Ambassadorial positions on FFP has had, or how the adoption of FFP changes *working cultures* within Foreign Ministries" (my emphases).[10] In addition, the authors state that we know "relatively little about FFP implementation, given minimal data about the outcomes of existing FFP policies..."[11]

After the Swedish government, in 2014, launched its FFP, a wave of research followed. Anyone interested in it knows Sweden's story: the initiative; the countries following; the reversal (at least in name) of the policy by the new center-right government in 2022. There have been many academic publications and media stories of the Swedish experience. Several of the publications focus on communications, particularly digital and public diplomacy (Jezierska & Towns 2018; Bergman Rosamond & Hedling 2022; Jezierska 2022; Aggestam, Bergman Rosamond & Hedling 2024; Karlsson 2024). Overall, this published literature addresses the ways in which foreign policy is *constructed* and the nation *branded*, through discourse or (digital) storytelling. At its core, most analyses focus on policy agendas, discourse and narrative content of policies, or how policy is framed (e.g., Thomson 2020; Brännström & Gunneflo 2021; Nylund, Håkansson & Bjarnegård 2023; Zhukova, Sundström & Elgström 2022; Zhukova 2023).

The Swedish FFP has thus been amply studied. Yet at the same time, existing research has left gaps. There are especially two blind spots in researchers' approach to the subject. The first is to overlook internal processes and relationships other than those involving diplomats and diplomatic practice. The most ambitious study so far of Sweden's FFP by Towns, Bjarnegård, and Jezierska (2023) has a focus on foreign policy operations and activities:

> This means that we largely leave aside the many internal organizational and staff

[10] However, detailing states' approach to FFP, it is misinterpreted to say that there was no new institutional mechanism in the Swedish case (Achilleos-Sarll, Haastrup & Thomson 2025: 559, Table 1). There was, as my paper shows.

[11] Reference to Towns, Bjarnegård, and Jezierska (2023); a rare contribution on FFP implementation but see also Rosén Sundström and Elgström (2025).

changes that the declaration of the FFP may have entailed for the Swedish foreign service. The creation of an ambassador for gender equality and FFP; FFP or gender units or Gender Focal Points; the hierarchical placement, staffing and budget of these units; training of staff and other staffing and organizational policies are clearly absolutely crucial for how FFP is implemented. However, while we do touch on some organizational factors, this is largely beyond the scope of this report. So is the internal politics of implementation – the report does not address how civil servants may maneuver to support or defy FFP goals and directives.

Their focus is on the formal domain of the FFP (i.e. policy conducted and implemented by the MFA and its agencies and embassies) and its three main policy areas: foreign and security, trade and aid policy. One finding was increased intensity of gender equality efforts across all three foreign policy domains areas, but particularly in trade, which had a limited focus on gender equality prior to the FFP. Overall, much more gender-focused foreign policy developed during this period than previously. Another finding was that implementation was incomplete and uneven across policy areas, public agencies and embassies due to loose vertical steering.

Drawing on their 2023 report and on feminist institutionalism, Towns, Jezierska, and Bjarnegård (2024: 1264) argue that the complex governance structure of the FFP may make the policy "sticky" and more difficult to reverse than many might expect. They highlight three aspects of FFP governance that have a constraining effect on the discretion of governments to pull back from commitments to gender equality in foreign policy: international law, including soft regulation; decentralized foreign policy implementation; and international role expectations. They show that the governance of foreign policy makes it difficult for a government to autonomously determine the contents of gender-sensitive foreign policy.

The combined evidence for inertia and weak steering, as well as guidance vis-à-vis the foreign service, might indicate that political and strategic aims would target the institutional dynamics of the ministry itself. Creating synergies between policy areas was linked to aims for synergy effects in the organization as such, reflecting long-standing efforts to improve coordination and work culture. In this vein, the policy served to foster a shared understanding and commitment, around which preferences and actions could converge. FFP was intended to permeate the entire ministry.

In any case, the foreign minister and her team's actions within the ministry to get the policy implemented has been unexplored in previous studies. Existing literature draws mainly on open-source material, such as policy documents, and statements or debates, along with interviews with public diplomacy practitioners. While it is entirely relevant to use such material, one might reasonably expect to find insights drawing on testimonies from well-placed political sources close to the minister rather than lower-level officials. A broader range of actors are involved in the processes of negotiating policy and producing communication. Overall, scholars have underappreciated the ministry's executive center. Structures, processes and relationships within the ministry constitute a

blind spot in previous studies of Sweden's FFP.

The other blind spot, therefore, is the assumption that diplomats and diplomatic practice are largely immune to political influence; in other words, to underappreciate political agency. This is understandable given the traditional diplomatic culture and entrenched practices, but nonetheless, such approaches underestimate political power, intentionality, and ability in these institutional settings. As I will show, there was tension, and even resistance, regarding FFP, manifested in diplomatic reservations and other measures that challenged the political leadership to act on policy implementation and enforcement. Temporal and interactive dynamics meant that opposition was subsequently and essentially overcome.

In summary, existing research is extensive and valuable but reductive and limited. Most importantly, research is lacking on the effects of the policy on the entire ministry, its culture and practice throughout the organization and not only in diplomatic work but in the interaction between the minister, her political team and line officials.

Into the foreign ministry's world: what sets it apart and how feminist foreign policy was treated

In this section, I present how Sweden's FFP was received and processed, highlighting organizational and relational dimensions. The section is divided into two subsections. The first concerns the foreign ministry's special organization and its responses to FFP. The second addresses political-administrative approaches – what was done to gain acceptance for the policy and enable its implementation. Launched by the new government in October 2014, in the months that followed it was for the ministry to turn that into action, to work out the details. I have traced the patterns, and my research reveals the temporal and interactive dynamics that shaped the FFP. The analytical narrative shows a movement from divergence to convergence in preferences and actions. Apart from the scale of the task, the greatest threat to its success was the internal resistance that stood in the way of implementing the policy.

Divisive policy: how and why

The FFP initiative was not uncontroversial. Inside the foreign ministry, many officials were taken by surprise. FFP meant something completely new, both in terms of the political direction and what the policy itself was or was expected to be, and in terms of the conditions on the ground; that is, for the diplomats at various foreign missions. The resistance that existed had, for some, to do with the word the foreign minister chose – "feminism." There was uncertainty about what the word, a narrative choice, would mean for diplomatic work on the ground and for the foreign missions as such. Whatever FFP meant, it was intentionally not clearly defined – it resonated as an identitarian lens

and communicative tool for ambassadors who saw the potential to create interest in Sweden and Swedish foreign policy. For some ambassadors, it was considered an easy "sell". Others needed more convincing. Against the backdrop of internal policy resistance, advocates felt it was key to set realistic goals that would stand the test of time and to have a participatory process involving many in the organization.

Early signals from the foreign minister Margot Wallström indicated a shift in how the foreign ministry would need to adapt to the FFP requirements. A clear expression of this was the government's decision to appoint Sweden's first ambassador-at-large for global women's issues and coordinator of FFP, from 1 January 2015.[12] When asked what the assignment entails and which issues she would prioritize, she said (Government Offices of Sweden 2015; my emphasis):

> My job is primarily to ensure that we now start taking action in the MFA's different areas of activity. This applies to security policy, human rights policy, development cooperation, promotion and trade. Very good work is already being done today, but *we need to review priorities as well as policies and working methods to move gender equality work forward*.

She further said that gender analyses were "crucial to the effective and relevant promotion of gender equality", that without such analyses "we cannot formulate relevant responses, and... *there is a major risk that implementation will be too weak*."

Interviewees did not deny the presence of resistance and offered explanations. Beyond beliefs, the explanations advanced to account for the tensions surrounding the FFP emphasize a range of practical and principled factors.

Principled explanations, either individual or institutional, relate to whether the policy benefited Sweden, was in the national interest, and, as more explicitly stated in interviews, to the MFA's constitutional standing and organizational distinctiveness. Foreign ministries are notably different from other ministries, and this leads to behavioral differences. Its special organization makes the MFA stand out in relation to all government departments, out of which the MFA is the largest in terms of staff. The ministry and Sweden's foreign representation, which includes more than 100 missions abroad – embassies, representations, delegations and consulates – together make up the Swedish foreign service. In a formal sense, foreign missions are largely autonomous. The instructions they receive from home are usually on a more general level. Diplomats have considerable freedom of action when operating in the field. Further, the internal rotation means that everyone is usually new to their posts every few years. While part of a diplomat's sense of identity and belonging, this also means a transition period of learning. When serving abroad, they may have more to do with international colleagues than with colleagues at home. Moreover, diplomats do not actually work with policy, but with various kinds of communication such as statements.

[12] Annika Molin Hellgren who already in September 2015 had a successor in the post: Ann Bernes, who became ambassador for gender equality and coordinator of FFP.

Practical explanations center on concerns about work overload and its impact on efficiency. From the ambassadors' perspective, FFP could be harmful by adding extra work or complicating relations with individual regimes. According to interviewees, practical concerns potentially threatened policy implementation and success, and risked confrontation between the foreign service abroad and the ministry at home. Sticking to entrenched practices clashed, in part, with the FFP-related new ways of doing things. When members of the political staff insisted on scheduling meetings with women during the foreign minister's visits abroad, it met with resistance, also from the ministry's HR department. Questions and discussions arose, often of a purely practical nature connected to work routines at embassies. That is understandable, given that the schedule is usually full when the foreign minister visits.

Taking both explanations together, and drawing on interviews, an underlying cause of the concerns from diplomats was what FFP would mean for activities and relationships in countries rejecting FFP. Diplomatic custom is to enable communication and interaction no matter the regime in which they are operating. With its universal nature, FFP was to be applied everywhere, but the application needed to consider local conditions; as interviewees mentioned, it was different to operate in a country like Saudi Arabia than, for example, Norway.

Given established standard operating procedures in diplomacy, diplomatic culture and practice, it should not have come as a surprise to the ministry's political leadership and their staff that they would encounter resistance. However, different logics are at play. In the words of a foreign minister adviser: "diplomats are diplomatic, politicians want to have an impact and be seen; it's a tug-of-war between the two." For diplomats, there is protocol, a crucial part of the craft. Politicians are more likely to act as if (some) things are bigger than protocol.

When interviewed, Margot Wallström, Sweden's foreign minister (2014–2019), and a former EU commissioner (1999–2009), hinted that there was resistance to her efforts (author interview, 19 November 2025). Specifically, she said that the ministry's communications department first tried to control what she communicated: "maybe they thought it [the policy] would be a liability, but it turned out to be the opposite". She argued that the policy aroused curiosity and made an impression. "It was my own idea", the concept of "feminist", she said, based on her experiences as the United Nations secretary-general's special representative on sexual violence in conflict (2010–2012).[13] Wallström (2018) wrote in a piece in *New York Times*:

> The resistance to gender equality can be surprising. When we began our feminist foreign policy, some Swedish commentators called it "empty words." In other parts of the world, it was not the words as much as the substance that seemed to terrify people.

[13] This role, Thomson and Wehner (2025: 579) note, also gave Wallström "key institutional experience in relation to gender equality within international affairs."

The resistance and some delay in the FFP-related work during the first year of its existence partly has to do with the formation of a new political leadership in the autumn of 2014. It takes some time to learn how to manage and govern a ministry. In the foreign minister's team, there were those who had little or no experience of working at the ministry. They did not know how to relate to the bureaucracy. A new leadership takes office and sets expectations for the organization but may perceive it as recalcitrant, which creates further suspicion and increases the risk of misinterpretation of what civil servants are thinking and doing. In the beginning, the political staff felt thwarted, as they were met with bureaucratic resistance, which may explain why the start was not as smooth as it otherwise could have been.

It can certainly be difficult to find your way in the environment that a foreign ministry constitutes. Professional diplomats may dislike political appointments of people from outside the organization and tend to dislike tendencies towards politicization, which is seen as a threat to professional integrity. For diplomats at home, or on missions abroad, additional authority conferred on the minister's political staff spells divided authority.

Nevertheless, over time, the FFP was gradually accepted. By autumn 2016, official communication argued that Sweden's FFP had been "integrated in all aspects of the Swedish foreign policy" (Government Offices of Sweden 2016). In 2017, FFP was in principle established – there was no longer clear institutional resistance, and few signs of active resistance where people worked against each other. Research conducted for this paper suggests that any remaining resistance was latent rather than overt. Diplomats had adapted to the demands created by FFP. The new normative direction in Swedish foreign policy was closely associated with foreign minister Margot Wallström and continued under her successor Ann Linde, previously trade minister. At the end of Wallström's term, in September 2019, support for FFP was, according to one interviewee, "uncontroversial throughout (well, almost) the entire foreign service. So, the anchoring that took place in the dialogue between civil servants and the political leadership worked, as time passed, and gained acceptance."

Overcoming institutional inertia: creating institutional mechanisms, finding allies

At the heart of the tension between politics and diplomacy in FFP was a set of differences concerning institutions in their various aspects, a division between old and new modes of practice. The Swedish foreign ministry, like those abroad, is sometimes associated with inertia (e.g., Berggren 2008; Åselius 2019). This poses a challenge for politicians with clear policy ambitions. Successfully introducing new policies and strategies, and taking control of them and their implementation, requires overcoming internal inertia. This, in turn, requires sufficient political pressure to effect change or to expedite processes.

Putting FFP into practice remained a challenge, in part because the FFP remained elusive, despite (or perhaps because of) the foreign minister's high-profile efforts. The

"feminist" element was never clearly defined, which led to some uncertainty about what FFP meant. Within the ministry, there was a knowledge gap and a need to learn more about feminist theory and methodology, to develop such skills in diplomatic practice, and to apply feminist principles and priorities in gender-based analysis. In the work on FFP, including the foreign service action plan and the national action plan, there was, at least in the first year, a sense of delay that was frustrating for the political leadership. For them, it was necessary to overcome institutional resistance and inertia through increased pressure and tighter control. The question, according to interviewees, was how this could be done. Evidence suggests several strategies.

First, within an organization with a distinct structure, including missions abroad, and among diplomats with their own cultures and practices, efforts were made to strengthen interactivity and reciprocity. Given internal resistance, it was necessary to set realistic goals that would gain broad internal acceptance and endure over time, and to implement a participatory process in which many in the organization would have influence on the design of the FFP. The whole-of-ministry, integrative approach involved virtually the entire organization, including ground-level officials. Measures were taken to keep them, especially the diplomats, in line with the ministry's position. Policy officials were tasked with coordinating across various ministry departments to achieve a unified message and approach. This was evident in the work of the FFP ambassador and coordinator of the policy, who worked to ensure the perspective across the MFA's policy areas, such as security, human rights, development and trade.

Second, the ministry's political leadership provided ownership of FFP. They, including the minister herself, were directly involved in producing policy content and understood the advantages of broad participation in terms of legitimizing and implementing FFP. They, and the minister's political staff, maintained close contact with the policy officials/coordinators, who internally pushed issues that required the political leadership's backing. As we have seen, the political leadership sent out clear signals from the very beginning. The foreign minister, who was the prime minister's deputy, along with the state secretary governed the ministry with a firm hand and were clear in their management approach that the FFP was a strong political priority. This was evident in internal management meetings, mailings, appointments, and so on. In other words, the impression sent was that it would be useless to protest. To balance the traditionally powerful civil service, the ministry's political management sought to strengthen the policy coordinators in the organization. Organizing the FFP, the policy unit was first located at the "Ministers Office", a clear sign of its political importance.[14] This was crucial because of the strategic location of the Ministers Office, a central part of decision-

[14] The Ministers Office consists of the political leadership, political advisers, press secretaries, officials and administrative assistants; its task is to assist the ministers, in part by acting as a link between the political leadership and the rest of the ministry's organization (Government Offices of Sweden 2024).

making with close access to the political leadership.

Crucially, the FFP was not just *initiated* at the political level; the leadership also consistently signaled deep commitment to the policy through to *implementation*. There was political ownership of the FFP, as emphasized by officials interviewed for this paper, which gave them political protection. The ministry's political leaders were very clear that the FFP should not be isolated to a specific unit, or to one person, but should rather include the entire organization – all departments, geographical or thematic, as well as those responsible for communication, personnel (HR), and even premises.

Interviews indicated that the ministry was transformed by the policy and the process initiated by the minister and her team. According to one official, by involving the organization broadly "it became more pervasive" than it otherwise would have been, promoted by all departmental heads and becoming part of their daily work. Interviewees further stated that work on documents and communications had a concrete impact on outcomes through the internal processes established for the FFP. But it also followed increased pressure on officials by imposing stricter coordination and a continuous "reality check": formal reviews of achievements against the objectives set out in the successive action plans from 2015 onward.

At the same time, the interactive dynamic outlined above demonstrated the instrumental role played by the administrative level, the civil service, in implementing the policy. The process can be conceived of as both "top down" and "bottom up". As Margot Wallström put it in the interview, "it can't just be from above". She further noted that the ambassador for gender equality and FFP coordinator, Ann Bernes, had the task, among others, of starting internal training as a step towards filling the policy with content: to be about "concrete things" and to be made "practical" rather than just a "headline" or about "identity politics". If the policy was initially controversial, it evolved into a "strong commitment" during implementation and ultimately across the organization.

Some of the key components of FFP implementation, many linked to the position of ambassador for gender equality and coordinator of FFP were, in the words of Towns, Jezierska, and Bjarnegård (2024: 1264), "developing FFP guidelines, providing the foreign service with FFP training, establishing gender focal points in all Swedish embassies, and—crucially—instructing the MFA's many public agencies and foreign missions to implement and thus concretize feminist foreign policy." Much of that work involved coordinating policy and producing policy framework documents within the foreign ministry.

To increase dynamism and intensify the effort, the political leadership's grip on the process tightened. They increased pressure by gradually demanding more feedback and coordination from policy officials, including requiring ongoing input on the policy's implementation. And when diplomats did not deliver on policy questions, the foreign minister could intervene. That usually happened, according to interviews, only after those civil servants had deliberated with the

minister's political staff. Political staff serve as gatekeepers between the minister and the rest of the organization, with opportunities to influence who and when civil servants gain access. The political staff assisted the foreign minister with preparations for foreign trips, among other tasks, and this was done together with the FFP ambassador and the coordination team around her. Someone in the political staff accompanied the foreign minister and fed back what they had learned to other officials. In that sense, there was interaction both up and down in the organization. FFP brought different employees into close contact during the policy process; closer than usual, judging from interviews.

The integrative approach was enhanced by intrinsic motivations that career diplomats have for demonstrating loyalty. Their regular job rotation, in particular, creates dependence on political management. In the case of FFP, which was so strongly politically prioritized, diplomats quickly became aware that it was a matter of "delivering". This incentive structure is a powerful, if underappreciated, weapon in the political leadership's efforts to control policy processes. They have, in other words, the power to reward or punish.

Compliance can thus be partly explained in terms of incentives, power and influence, whether manifest or implicit. Unlike manifest influence, which is exercised with the intention of causing an action, implicit influence arises from anticipations by someone (the "agent") about what someone else (the "principal") wants. Therefore, implicit influence is harder to detect than manifest influence, as discussed by political scientist Robert Dahl (1976). But anticipation refers to a situation in which actors shape their behavior to conform to what they believe are another actor's desires, even without explicit messages (like instructions) about intentions. An example is the influence of the foreign ministry leadership on diplomats. Regardless of their beliefs, they could be expected to act in anticipation of their principals' preferences regarding FFP, a government policy and a key priority for the foreign minister. A more likely response was loyalty rather than voice (stay but complain), or for that matter, exit – to borrow from economist Albert Hirschman (1970).

Another contributing factor behind the gradual overcoming of the resistance within the ministry was the international attention and inspiration drawn from Sweden's FFP. This contributed to increased motivation as others followed suit: countries such as Canada, France, Germany, Mexico. The fact that Sweden was the first to adopt a FFP "gave a huge tailwind", as one interviewee put it. The attention paid to FFP in general, and during various visits abroad, gave it a boost, helping to legitimize both the policy and the work on it. International impact was actively pursued, and the foreign minister and Sweden's FFP received considerable media attention, including in the *Financial Times* (2015), *New York Times* (2017) and *Washington Post* (2015) (more in Rosén Sundström 2022, 2023; Rosén Sundström, Zhukova & Elgström 2021). As Thomson and Wehner (2025: 579) observe: "Numerous international media articles clearly associated the advent of FFP with Wallström and her personal history..."

As communicators, the foreign minister's press secretaries contributed to her visibility. The foreign minister had a regular presence on social media and mostly from her personal accounts. She could also coordinate with her staff, especially her press secretaries, and with officials elsewhere in the ministry.[15] To promote the FFP, there was coordinated use of both traditional media and platforms like Twitter (now X), targeted platform strategies and cross-platform content use, linking social media posts to high-profile global coverage (e.g., *New York Times*). It appears to have been a carefully planned communications operation, using different media in a complementary fashion. The international attention partly explains why Sweden's FFP, initially controversial, eventually became more accepted.

A further driving factor, which provided an opportunity to entrench FFP in diplomatic practices, was Sweden's seat in the UN Security Council, 2017–2018. It was accompanied by ambitious plans to exert global influence. This attracted attention, including to foreign minister Wallström and Sweden's FFP and its set of values. Wallström (2017) wrote about what the government wanted to achieve in the Security Council, including working for gender mainstreaming and for women to be included in peace processes. She addressed the sexual violence committed by international troops against the civilian population in, among other places, the Central African Republic. During this period, there were daily briefings and coordination between the managers involved. The state secretary was in charge, and the foreign minister was often present at briefings. UN-linked processes and dynamics thus had an important impact on the implementation of the policy.

In summary, institutional resistance to Sweden's feminist foreign policy was overcome through strong political leadership, broad internal integration across the ministry, and external validation that reinforced the policy's legitimacy. The political leadership and the allied coordinators had faced such resistance, especially from diplomats. Efforts were made to shorten the distance and deepen ties between the two sides. This involved different forms of exchange, for example through training and communication. The minister and her team multi-aligned FFP within and outside the ministry. In doing so, they provided political cover for the policy coordinators/officials. Gradually, resistance subsided and there was a professionalization and normalization of FFP. It became standard practice – not something out of the ordinary.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have examined the institutional basis of Sweden's feminist foreign policy (FFP). I proceeded in two steps, outlining existing research's discoveries and blind spots, and tracing policy-related processes within the case. The latter offers important new insights into the institutional implications of FFP adoption, how it changed working cultures within the Swedish foreign ministry – and quite possibly other foreign ministries as well. The study also sheds light

[15] In a documentary on the foreign minister, Margot Wallström, her press secretaries seem omnipresent, whether they are with the minister in Stockholm or abroad (SVT 2018). There is a version in English: The Feminister (2018).

on the intricacies of FFP implementation. Overall, this paper helps to remedy a significant gap in the literature on FFP, particularly regarding the role of political staff and their actions and interactions.

The data and analysis bolster the claim that the policy was used as a lever, as a spearhead for overcoming resistance and inertia within the ministry, especially in the face of intransigence among diplomats, and ultimately achieved policy impact. The FFP was instrumentalized to influence previous norms around diplomacy – not to replace traditional diplomacy but rather to reconsider or renew and embed practices in organizational processes. It might be called "habitualization": the process by which shared practices and ways of doing things become stabilized and normalized. It follows from regularity in actions, which, in turn, influence patterns of interaction and future interactions.

This did not happen by itself. Momentum became self-reinforcing only when it was created and maintained. Progress resulted primarily from political commitment and ownership of the issue, which meant taking responsibility for policy, protecting policy officials, and aligning with them to build momentum step by step. The policy coordinators had the support of their leadership behind them.

The sustainability of the FFP trajectory depended on institutionalization, which could ensure that, even if FFP were rolled back as official policy, practices would remain informed by feminist, or at least gender-equality, aspirations. At the core of this effort was a long-term institutional commitment to doing things differently. My analysis shows institutionalization in practice; a fundamental institutional and cultural shift following from the dynamics involved in creating and implementing the FFP. It helped to reshape and intertwine "rules of the game" and "ways of doing things". It led to a new dynamic that changed how the ministry operates. A feminist perspective on all aspects of foreign policy was a new organizing principle. FFP spanned large parts of the ministry and created synergies. It seems like everyone learned something from the FPP – learning by doing. This, in turn, contributed to policy acceptance and compliance.

The FFP was crafted in collaboration between diplomats, at home or abroad, with their habitual routines, the policy coordination team, and the ministry's political leadership involving the ministerial office and political team. The results highlight the importance of a broader perspective when studying policy dynamics and cumulative effects. Foreign ministries are not composed solely of diplomats; they alone do not shape internal relations or influence policy direction. The literature on Sweden's FFP is asymmetrical, with scholarship attending more to permanent diplomats' views than perspectives from the side of politics. In contrast, through my focus on the policy-politics relationship, I identify a theme of institutional and policy change that merits greater attention.

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