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Feminism as Signifier: Norm Hierarchies and the Evolution of Feminist Foreign Policy

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Abstract:

Gender equality has long been adopted by states to indicate liberal values and respect for international norms. Feminist thought argues that the gendered hierarchies created by these norms underpin and sustain international relations. This article contributes to this literature on gendered norms and hierarchies through the case study of feminist foreign policy (FFP). It addresses four case study countries who adopt FFP – Sweden, Canada, France and Mexico - arguing that the developing norm of FFP acts as a signifier of liberal modernity and adherence to the international liberal order when deployed by states. It further argues that this deployment of FFP contributes to existing gendered global hierarchies, and these states' positions on the world stage. As such, it contributes to the developing literature on FFP, and to wider work on norms and hierarchies around gender in global politics.

Keywords:

Feminist foreign policy; foreign policy; gender; norms; hierarchies; feminist international relations

Key messages:

- provides a detailed comparative study of FFP and its development in Sweden, Canada, France and Mexico

- situates FFP within the literature on global norms and hierarches, arguing that FFP is as much about states' positions on the world stage as it is its policy content

- argues that FFP acts to signify these states' adherence to the liberal world order and institutions, and their role as 'good' international actors

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Feminism and feminist identities are increasingly accepted within international politics and society. Social movement activism around feminism and gender equality, such as the #metoo protests, and global campaigns like the UN's #HeforShe have ignited public debate and awareness. Notable individuals and organisations in international politics are happy to identify as feminist (including Canadian Prime Minster Justin Trudeau and French President Emmanuel Macron) and to use the word to define their work. A growing group of states now also use the term feminist to refer to their foreign policy. Starting with Sweden in 2014, Canada, France, Mexico, Luxembourg, and Spain are now implementing or developing feminist foreign policies (FFP). Such policies aim to reorient these states' external relations to place gender equality at the heart of their actions. This move has largely been applauded by civil society and academia, and key NGOs are increasingly engaging with the agenda (Clement and Thompson, 2019; Thompson, 2020).

Existing research on FFP has so far largely been concerned with the policy content of FFP and the ethical implications it carries (Achilleos-Sarll, 2018; Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond, 2016, 2019a, 2019b; Aggestam, Bergman-Rosamond and Kronsell, 2019; Bergman-Rosamond, 2020; Robinson, 2019). There has also been much individual or comparative work on specific countries' policies (in addition to the above, see also - Brown and Swiss, 2017; Mason, 2019; Parisi, 2020; Thomson, 2020; Tiessen, 2019) as well as to countries that adopt strong normative stances towards gender in their foreign policies but do not (yet) use the word feminist to refer to them (Haastrup, 2020; Lee-Koo, 2020; Skjelsbæk and Tryggestad, 2020). There has been less attention paid to the broader roots of this developing pivot to FFP, or how its advent relates to wider norms around gender equality in international politics (although there is developing work on the external perception of FFP – Sundström and Elgström, 2020; Sundström, Zhukova and Elgström, 2021). There is thus a gap in our knowledge around the wider origins, influences and international context for FFP, in addition to what it acts to signify for these states on the global stage.

In this article, the feminist foreign policies of four of these states (Sweden, Canada, France and Mexico) are analysed in context, with particular reference to the literature on gender and international norms and hierarchies. This article is underpinned by two overarching questions– a) *How did FFP become an increasingly accepted discourse in international society?* and b) *What does its uptake signify on states' behalf?* In response to these questions, this article makes two main arguments. Firstly, it argues that the emerging norm of FFP is still vague and is defined differently by the various states that adopt it. Because there is no accepted definition across different states, its deployment is more important for what it *acts* to signal as for what it *is* in terms of policy content. As such, it acts not as a specific set of practices but rather as a broader signal that the state is committed to international liberal norms and institutions. Secondly, the article argues that this deployment of

FFP contributes to existing gendered global hierarchies. As is shown below, the states that are adopting FFP are all distinctly middle powers. Their "norm entrepreneurship" (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; also Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond, 2016) with regards to FFP is thus a consciously tactical move on their part, designed to improve their position and "relevance" (Anholt, 2009) on the world stage and differentiate them from similar states.

The article proceeds as follows. Firstly, FFP is described in greater detail in terms of both its policy background and the academic literature produced on it so far. Next, the literature on gendered norms and hierarchies is introduced. The article then turns to consider the findings from the documentary evidence collated across the four case study states.

Feminist Foreign Policy: Background and context

FFP originated in Sweden in 2014. The choice of the 'f-word' (Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond, 2016, 323) represented a clear new direction for Swedish foreign policy but also a continuation of the state's existing international commitments on women's rights and Sweden's ongoing understanding of itself as a moral voice in the international sphere (Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond, 2019a, 41). In 2017 Canada adopted a Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP), which focussed mainly on development, and the country pushed feminist policy making when they chaired the G7 in 2018. Also in 2018, France and Luxembourg announced their intention to adopt FFP, with Mexico following in early 2020. Together, France and Mexico lead on the UN Women initiative, the Gender Equality Forum, which took place in spring and summer of 2021. Most recently, Spain has announced that it would adopt an FFP in early 2021.

Civil society is also taking up the mantle of advocacy for FFP. The Women 7 lobbied the G7 in the run-up to the 2019 meeting in France on various issues, one of which was FFP. Key international and national NGOs are promoting the agenda, including Oxfam in North America.[i] The International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) have been working to formulate a draft FFP for the USA (Clement and Thompson, 2019) and a framework for the development of FFP in different states (Thompson, 2020). They are also leading a 'Global Partner Network to Advance Feminist Foreign Policy' with NGOs from around the globe. In the United Kingdom, the newly formed Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy is encouraging similar conversations.[ii]

What does FFP aim to do in relation to other approaches to foreign policy? As existing work has shown (Thomson, 2020), the aims of FFP across the states which have adopted it so far are not uniform. However, several key trends emerge – a focus on SRHR and women's leadership; a clear commitment to existing international and human rights treaties and agencies; and, especially from civil society, an urge that policymakers address the intersectional nature of gender (in)equality. In some ways therefore, FFP is not a new or original policy, but rather a repackaged commitment to a liberal policy agenda, with feminism and gender equality more clearly anchored as its central defining mission.

Placing feminism at the centre in this way may have a revolutionary impact. As ICRW write, the branding of policy as feminist may be "an important signal that a government is ready to pursue a more transformative approach to the advancement of gender equality and inclusion, in a manner that is intersectional and that focuses at its core on transforming power relations" (Thompson, 2020). Yet the states which have adopted FFP have all faced significant criticism for doing so due to their alleged hypocrisy. These countries, critics argue, are advocating FFP when their domestic circumstances, and other branches of their foreign policy, are acting against any feminist intentions. Critics point to various examples of this, such as arms sales (Vucetic, 2017); high rates of femicide within Mexico and Canada, particularly amongst indigenous communities; and the neoliberal economic underpinnings of the Canadian FIAP and the difficulties that this may create for any structural attempts to tackle gender equality (Brown and Swiss, 2017; Mason, 2019; Parisi, 2020; Thomson, 2020; Tiessen, 2019) as proof that there is a disconnect between these state's supposedly feminist aims and their wider actions.

Whether or not FFP is truly feminist, or what this might mean, is not a subject of analysis for this article. Much existing work on FFP has already spoken to its normative dimensions (Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond, 2016, 2019a, 2019b; Aggestam, Bergman-Rosamond and Kronsell, 2019, Bergman-Rosamond, 2020, Robinson, 2019) as well as to other states which adopt strong gender norms but do not use the term feminist (Haastrup, 2020; Lee-Koo, 2020; Skjelsbæk and Tryggestad, 2020). However, this is not to deny that the tensions between branding a country's foreign policy as feminist, and other (in)actions which may appear to directly contradict this assertion are unimportant. In particular, the desire to affix this descriptor to *foreign* policy suggest that states understand feminism as representing something which is needed in the international (and especially the developing) world, and which their own countries embody (Achilleos-Sarll, 2018). This tension is explored further in the below.

Gender Norms and Global Hierarchies

This article explores FFP in the context of academic literature on gendered norms and hierarchies. Finnemore and Sikkink's pathbreaking work defines a norm as "a standard of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity" (1998, 891). Their influential model (1998; 2001, 405-407) argues that norms go through a life cycle, in which they emerge, then 'cascade' to other organisations and situations, and are finally internalised by states, bodies and individuals, so as to no longer require specific elucidation. Norms around gender and gender equality have long standing in international relations. Within the gender and IR literature, there is substantial consideration of how norms around gender equality are 'translated' or 'diffused' from transnational work, to domestic states and bodies (Engberg-Pedersen *et al*, 2019; Zwingel, 2012, 2016). Norms around suffrage (Towns, 2012), violence against women, and sexual violence in conflict (Davies and True, 2017) have now all worked through Finnemore and Sikkink's three-part model and are clearly established and often reinforced through international treaties and law (True, 2016).

Equally, international norms around gender can also be more general and less concretely enacted. Having significant numbers of women in key positions in governments and political parties can be used to symbolise a modern nation, often whilst obscuring political division or undemocratic practices (Berry and Lake, 2017, 345-346; Reyntjens, 2011, 17; see also Berry, 2015). Gender equality can be a 'floating signifier', acting to indicate both liberal openness or racist and xenophobic politics (Towns, Karlsson and Eyre, 2014; Farris, 2017). Within development and security discourse, the evocation of 'women and girls' often indicates that gender equal inclusion will magically transform conflict or catapult economic growth (Calkin, 2015; Chant, 2016; Shepherd, 2011). Such norms around gender are not as easily demarcated as suffrage or legal rights around violence. Instead, they act as a more general signal that the states who deploy them are 'good' (Lawler, 2013; also Towns, 2012, 185). These gendered norms are thus important less on their own terms, but rather on the grounds of what states that use them wish to signify.

This development of "shared abstract understandings" (Towns, 2010, 185) around women's rights in the global sphere is closely related to hierarchies. Feminist thought has long argued that the gendered hierarchies created by these norms underpin and sustain international relations (Sjoberg, 2017; Towns, 2010, 2012; Towns and Rumelili, 2017; Zarakol, 2017). Gender scholars view these hierarchies less as formal or visible institutions, but rather "deep structures" (Zarakol, 2017, 7) that form an implicit part of global politics. The adoption of gendered norms occurs, this literature argues, not in isolation but instead acts to "generate comparative judgement" (Towns, 2012, 203) between states who are adopting them, states who are not, and the relative level of importance states accord to meeting them. 'Good' states (Lawler, 2013) are those which more clearly signpost their commitment and adherence to these norms; 'bad' states do not.

The ranking of 'good' and 'bad' states in this way has links to postcolonial understandings of international relations. In postcolonial feminist and international development literature, scholars have long argued that there is a division between 'good' Western (neo-)colonial states who act to further gender equality and 'bad' Other states who require educating on such matters (Clisby and Enderstein, 2017; Mohanty, 1988). Gender, and the supposedly correct attitudes towards it, thus act to differentiate the West from 'the Rest' (Clisby and Enderstein, 2017). Such sentiment is captured in Spivak's now famous stipulation that British resistance to the practice of *sati* in India was "White men saving Brown women from Brown men" (Spivak, 1988). Scholarship argues that such a framing of international state hierarchies continues into the present day, including in relation to the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in the early 2000s (Butler, 2009; Khalid, 2011; Stabile and Kumar, 2005) and in contemporary development and foreign policy work (Clisby and Enderstein, 2017). In the emerging literature on FFP, some scholars have argued that it can contain this type of (neo-)colonial overtones in its aims and discourse towards non-Western countries (Sundström et al, 2021; see also Achilleos-Sarll, 2018)

Framework for Analysis

As the above has shown, the majority of academic interest in FFP thus far has been oriented towards either the ethical implications of it as a policy, or individual or comparative empirical work on specific countries' policy documents. This article adopts a different approach to address the same topic, employing a comparative genealogical analysis of FFP policy and discourse. It takes its cue from the above literature on norms and hierarchies, which questions the symbolic role of key gendered issues.

In her analysis of global norms around women's rights, Ann Towns argues for the need to understand what broader ideas are being constructed in the creation of new policy platforms around gender: "The main issue … is not simply determining ***which*** state policy is appropriate, but also ***what*** a particular policy is a case of" (Towns, 2010, 185). In a similar vein, albeit in a different disciplinary context, Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) looks beyond the content of popular feminism within media and advertising to ask what it tells us about the broader sociological context of its occurrence: "Why has popular feminism become popular now, in the twenty-first century? What are the various conditions that produce it in the current moment, that authorize its circulation?" (18) This article is also concerned with the "current moment" that is "producing" FFP and adopts a similar genealogical framework as employed by both Towns and Banet-Weiser. It is less interested in what FFP can or should be, but rather, restating the questions already framed above: *where has FFP come from*? *Why is it emerging now, in this particular historical moment?* And, *what does the uptake of this policy platform do for states?*

In relation to these questions the article discusses four of the six countries who have so far adopted a feminist approach to their foreign policy – Sweden, Canada, France and Mexico.[iii] As such, this article focusses only on states that have explicitly used the term feminist to refer to their foreign policy. There are doubtlessly other states with clear commitments to gender equality in their foreign policy (see Haastrup, 2020, Lee-Koo, 2020, Skjelsbæk and Tryggestad, 2020). This article is interested, however, in the conscious inclusion of the term 'feminist' to describe foreign policy. It provides an analysis of documents from these four states that have the "formal authority to define a political position" (Hansen, 2006, 85) – primarily the official policies, speeches by key critical actors, and other official written documentation produced so far on FFP. It also anchors this in broader secondary literature on these countries in order to contextualise them and their positions. Given the longer history of FFP within Swedish and Canadian politics, and the large number of documents produced by them, it addresses these countries in greater depth than France and Mexico. It explores the above questions firstly through a consideration of three macro, international level trends, and secondly through three micro, state-level trends.

Macro/international level

- *Development of profile of gender in policy*

There has been growing consciousness around gender equality as a policy concern within the international community for decades. The United Nations Decade for Women and its conferences in Mexico City (1975), Nairobi (1980) and Copenhagen (1985), saw the signing of the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women in 1979. The successive 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 was hugely influential on a generation of women's rights activists, and the Beijing Platform for Action included key commitments around health, human rights and violence against women. Its influence can be seen in the Millennium and Sustainable Development Goals which both contain key references to women and girls. The advent of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security continued this international focus on women's rights, bringing attention to the particular harms incurred by women during war and conflict . The successive 8 resolutions have seen this cemented as part of the work of the UN, member states (through National Action Plans, which 83 states have adopted) and international civil society organisations.

In many ways, the advent and growth of FFP is the logical end to this thirty-plus year trajectory. Women's rights have moved from the focus on development seen in the early UN conferences, to the conflict and security sphere in the WPS resolutions, and are now seen by states adopting FFP as fundamental to foreign policy more generally. Many of the FFP policies produced so far reflect this narrative. The French International Strategy on Gender Equality (Ministre de l'Europe et des Affaires Ètrangères, 2018) reproduces the above picture, citing CEDAW, the various international conferences, and the Millennium and Sustainable Development Goals (Ibid, 10) as background to the country's policy. Reflecting the country's greater focus on development within its Feminist International Assistance Policy, Canada's document makes detailed reference to the SDGs (Global Affairs Canada, 2017). Similarly, the Swedish documents reference a wide range of existing international commitments, including the UN Declaration on Human Rights, the Beijing conference and the EU's external action plans around gender equality, amongst others (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2015, 2018). The WPS agenda in particular has been a clear precursor to FFP in Sweden and elsewhere (Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond, 2016, 324; 2019, 38; Gill-Atkinson et al, 2021), given the focus both obviously carry on security, peacebuilding and post-conflict development. Sweden's entrepreneurial role vis-à-vis FFP is reflected in a longstanding commitment to WPS in the international sphere: it was one of the earliest countries to adopt a National Action Plan on 1325, back in 2006. Situated against this backdrop, FFP is less a drastic reimagining of foreign policy and more a continuation of long existent trends around women's rights and inclusion in the international sphere.

- *Reaction to global growth of illiberalism*

The above narrative of the international community's commitment to women's rights – starting in Mexico, with Beijing and 1325 being key touchstones – presents a positive vision of the liberal international community, and its relative successes vis-a-vis gender equality. Yet the moment in which FFP is emerging sees a resurgence of right-wing and populist politics, which decries international institutions and their liberal norms. Furthermore, the growth of this politics is entangled with a backlash against gender equality, and sometimes the very concept of gender itself (Korolczuk and Graff, 2018, Kovats, 2017).

The proponents of these type of politics often evince a 'strong man' persona (Vladimir Putin in Russia; Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines; Donald Trump in the USA; Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil) and espouse discourse which is misogynistic and homophobic. Policies in these right-wing nationalist governments have seen attempts to roll back reproductive rights (Poland and the USA); natalist policies which encourage women into childbearing and caring roles (Hungary); attacks on 'gender ideology' and a strengthened conservative Christian position in politics (Brazil and the USA). These countries are also increasingly exerting their international influence in an attempt to inhibit movement around women's rights – most notably in the Trump administration's reinstatement of the Global Gag Rule and the proposed veto of UNSCR 2467 on WPS in 2019.

Set against this backdrop, the advent of FFP appears in some ways a response to this growing illiberalism and its anti-gender equality discourse (Aggestam and True, 2020). The work of the

French government clearly references this context. The French document notes that "France's overseas action is taking place within a context of rising conservatism where women's basic rights are being undermined" (Ministre de l'Europe et des Affaires Ètrangères, 2018, 9) and that "Attempts are being made to contest equal rights and the equal sharing of resources and responsibilities among women and men" particularly in the case of reproductive rights (Ibid). On International Women's Day 2017, the French government presented the *Serment de Paris* (Paris Pledge), calling on the international community to step up to the global challenge of gender equality. It declared that:

> The fear of regression has never been so strong at a time when the most reactionary ideologies and the most dangerous forms of extremism, particularly of a religious nature, are re-emerging. More than ever, women and their rights are in danger. … *Even in Europe*, some governments intend to reassign women the role of procreating and working in the household, and are seeking to limit and even prevent all access to abortion. (emphasis added)[iv]

The idea that this is happening "Even in Europe" acts to reinforce the idea that Europe is largely a place of gender equality, and that European nations with FFPs are particularly well situated to work in this area.

Similarly, in her statement of government policy to the Swedish Parliament in 2019, Wallström said that:

> democracy is in decline. Today, more people are living in countries with authoritarian tendencies than in countries making democratic progress.Journalists, elected representatives and human rights defenders are being harassed, persecuted and killed.[v]

The updated Swedish FFP action plan for 2019-2022 also beings by acknowledging that "The rights of women and girls are under intense pressure" in the context of "shrinking democratic space" (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2019, 2). Later the plan says that "Although progress has been significant, efforts to promote the rights of women, girls and LGBTI people often meet with resistance" and that "the Foreign Service will respond to this resistance by standing up for Sweden's values" (Ibid, 25).

The advent of FFP is therefore linked to a growing global illiberalism, and acts in part as a response to it. Governments adopting it are displaying an open commitment not only to gender equality, but to the underpinning norms and values of the liberal international system. Furthermore, this is at times presented as something which European nations are naturally disposed to do, reiterating the sense that gender inequality happens over 'there' and should thus form a natural component of foreign policy.

- Global surge in feminist identity and activism

The development of FFP reflects the growth of feminism more generally in international popular discourse. Feminism has become sociably acceptable in ways that appeared unthinkable less than a generation before (Rottenberg, 2018). It has become commonplace for key public figures and celebrities to identify as feminist. Despite this, criticisms of this sudden visibility abound. For Nancy Fraser second-wave feminism has "unwittingly" been adopted into neoliberal economic policymaking (Fraser, 2009, 110). Rottenberg argues that neoliberal feminism has transformed gender inequality "from a structural problem into an individual affair" (2018, 55). Sarah Banet-Weiser argues that "purchasing feminism" has become a substitute for action (2018, 4).

Following the logic of these thinkers, there is thus a danger to this uptake of the term 'feminist' by states – it may serve to continue certain types of depoliticised understandings of feminism into policy making. In this view, the addition of 'feminist' as a descriptor will do little to tackle gender inequalities on a global level. Indeed, it may in fact reinforce existing inequalities. Furthermore, the depoliticised nature of much contemporary feminism gives it a mutability for states, who can use it without reference to any other ideologies or histories to which it may be associated. Its inclusion in externally facing political discourse – especially in a way which feeds into colonialist narratives of women over 'there' needing help, as opposed to the enlightened gender norms which exist 'here' – is thus easier to accept.

Micro/state level

- Reaction to states' international position/ranking

FFP has so far been adopted only by 'middle' powers. All are invested in using their influence within key international institutions and are "neither objectively great nor small" (Chapnick, 1999, 73). Canada has a long tradition of so-called 'middlepowermanship' (Parisi, 2020). It was a key player in the early years of the UN and in the 1990s its "niche diplomacy" (Welsh, 2010, 365) focussed on progressive international policies (including work on the land mine ban treaty, and preparations for the ICC and R2P (Ibid)). Canada's strong commitment to international institutions also acts in part as a buttress to its superpower southern neighbour (Brooks, 2010, 387). An adherence to the novelty of FFP for Canada (and Mexico) is therefore both a means to distinguish themselves from the US and to reinforce commitment to multilateralism at the same time.

Sweden has moved in recent decades to a 'postneutral' international positioning (Bjereld and Möller, 2015) through action via the UN and EU. It has negotiated a difficult position of non-NATO membership but remains committed to multilateralism, international legal agreements and global governance, which is reflected in the Swedish FFP documents (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2015, 2018). Similarly, France has seen a recommitment to the EU under Macron and via the electoral rejection of Le Pen and the Rassemblement National.

Furthermore, FFP is also linked to a desire on the part of middle powers to have more clout and relevancy on world stage. As Anholt writes, for middle powers the question is often not "what can we say to make ourselves more famous?" but rather *"what can we do to make ourselves more relevant?"* (2009, quoted in Nimijean 2018; emphasis added). Linked to the growth of popular feminism discussed above, FFP acts to make states more relevant on the international stage. Its focus taps into the zeitgeist moment that feminism is currently experiencing and gives these states greater importance through their association with it.

- Reaction to domestic and regional politics

The growth of FFP can also be understood as a reaction to particular domestic and regional politics (Haastrup, 2020). An adoption of FFP can be seen in many of these states as a means to distinguish themselves as new administrations. The Trudeau government's stance is in part a desire to break from the past Harper administration's position on gender equality (Parisi, 2020; Tiessen and Carrier, 2015). On the day after his victory, new Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said: "Many of you have worried that Canada has lost its compassionate and constructive voice in the world over the past 10 years….Well, I have a simple message for you: on behalf of 35 million Canadians, we're back" (quoted in Nimijean, 2018, 128). FFP, as well as Trudeau's professed feminism, his participation in Pride parades, and his adoption of a gender equal Cabinet (including key ethnic minority members), can be seen as a means to signify distance from the choices of the previous Conservative administration.

Furthermore, as touched on above, Canada's foreign policy decisions have to be read in the context of its relations with its superpower neighbour (Brooks, 2010; Welsh, 2010). Indeed, it has often struggled to differentiate itself from the US on the global stage (Welsh, 2010, 366) and there is an asymmetrical relationship in terms of economies, trade and military might (Brooks, 2010). The uptake of FFP and feminist discourse more broadly can be seen as a desire to position the country, both domestically and internationally, as in contrast to politics in the USA during the Trump Presidency.

Similar reasoning can be related to Mexico. The election of Andrés Manuel López Obrador represented a clear break with past electoral politics in Mexico - specifically from the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* who have been dominant since independence, and the preceding twelve years (2000-2012) of the centre-right *Partido Acción Nacional* holding the Mexican presidency. As with Canada, FFP also acts to distinguish the country's foreign policy from that of Trump's. The adoption of FFP in France has happened under similar circumstances. The Election of President Emmanuel Macron in 2017, as leader of a party (*La République En Marche!)* founded only in 2016, represented a sharp change in electoral French politics. It acts to give a new political party and President a distinctive identity and policies that they can claim ownership of.

Across these states, the uptake of FFP can be seen in relation to parties and political figures coming to power after long periods of opposition rule, or as representatives of new political entities which are seeking to distinguish themselves. Furthermore, as discussed above on the global level, these four countries' domestic policies represent core liberal values in a world moving to the right. This is particularly the case in France, where Macron's election saw off Marine Le Pen, but also Canada and Mexico where the election of Trudeau and López Obrador were seen as liberal rejoinders to the neighbouring Trump Presidency.

- *Localised 'critical actors'*

Finally, the development of FFP is clearly anchored to key "critical actors" (Childs and Krook, 2008, 2009) working within these states (Englehart and Miller, 2020; Haastrup, 2020). In Sweden, FFP has become almost synonymous with former Foreign Minister Margot Wallström. Indeed, much of the expansive international media coverage of Sweden's FFP centred on Wallström individually, in terms of both her role in implementing the policy and the specifics of her background that lead her to encourage its adoption (Barry, 2017). Whilst Sweden's FFP clearly goes beyond Wallström, and is being carried on in the work of the current Minister for Foreign Affairs who replaced Wallström in late 2019, Ann Linde, as well as Sweden's broader 'feminist government', much of the drive behind the policy shift can clearly be linked to Wallström's tenure. The Swedish Handbook also cites 'clear leadership' as part of FFP's success (Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018, 35).

Similarly, in Canada, the introduction of FIAP appears concurrent with Trudeau's premiership. Trudeau has developed a liberal feminist persona in national and international media. Yet, as Adam Chapnick argues, this has been a slow development and one that has largely happened following his election and not prior to it. He argues that there was little to suggest that the Liberals would adopt a feminist agenda before the election in 2015 (2019, 193) and that "the relationship between the prime minster and the feminist foreign policy agenda does not appear to have been causal". Chapnick argues that the move towards FIAP emerged more from ongoing parliamentary work around the international response to the WPS agenda (Ibid, 200-201), which was then followed by the actions and support of Marie-Claude Bibeau and Chrystia Freeland, Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs from 2017-2019, who were both "personally invested in the both the brand and the ideas behind" FIAP (Ibid, 2019, 204). Whilst therefore not as clearly anchored to a specific individual as in the Swedish case, the combination of two prominent Ministers, coupled with a Prime Minister who became increasingly comfortable with feminist language, shows that the influence of key individuals has been equally key in Canada's uptake of FFP.

Discussion

The above has reiterated that there is no accepted standard for what FFP is – no international treaty, law, definition or overseeing institution.[vi] As a result, different ideas can be poured by different states into their respective FFPs. It has been shown here that FFP is often associated with support for liberal ideals and institutions. Sweden places huge emphasis on their FFP's connections to international bodies such as the UN and the EU, and international legal treaties; in the *Serment de Paris* the French government describe their nascent FFP as a bulwark against growing illiberalism, echoed in recent Swedish comments and documents; and in the case of Mexico and Canada in particular, the adoption of FFP acts to differentiate them from their US neighbour. The FFP policy documents across these four states often stress the long history of women's rights in the international sphere, and the links this has to international organisations, treaties and governance. Equally, in all four countries, FFP has emerged in the context of new, liberal administrations, keen to distinguish themselves from former governments. As such, and like other norms related to women (Towns, 2009), FFP is more than just a policy agenda, but acts to signify support for liberal values and institutions on the part of these states. FFP needs to be understood not just in terms of its content, but in what states use it to signal to the world about themselves.

This is connected in turn to states' positions in international hierarchies. Advocacy around FFP helps to distinguish the states that follow it from states that don't. In adopting FFP, states are signalling that they are 'good' actors on the liberal international stage. These four states are, as described, 'middle' powers. The adoption of FFP thus helps them to gain 'relevancy' (Anholt, 2009), particularly in the context of the current zeitgeist moment that feminism is experiencing. In deploying FFP, these states differentiate themselves from countries who do not adopt similar positions and cast themselves as more clearly committed to liberal internationalism. In doing so, states are acting in the way that the literature on norms might presume – they are enacting norm entrepreneurship - but are also doing so in tandem with an understanding of the hierarchy around these norms. Again, the content of the norm is less important than what it gives to states on the world stage – relevancy, and a means to distinguish themselves from other, similarly ranked states.

That FFP might work in this way – that it is as much about signals and relevance as it is about creating concrete change – is problematic for gender equality actors. Echoing lessons from the critical feminist IPE and security literature (Calkin, 2015; Chant, 2016; Shepherd, 2011), this role as a signifier of liberal intent is potentially dangerous. FFP (and, by extension, women and girls) is at risk of being seen not on its own terms, but rather only in what it acts to signal in international discourse, creating a proxy debate. Furthermore, that this attempt at ranking and relevance is coming from, so far, six states who are predominantly located in the Global North is also important. A full postcolonial analysis of FFP is beyond the remit of this article, but even this brief genealogical analysis has highlighted points of note – France's worry that 'even in Europe' illiberalism is on the rise; the fact that these states appear comfortable with the suggestion that they have the feminist answers to give to the rest of the world, indicating a blindness to their own gendered problems at home; and the little reference there is in the policy documents to these states' colonial pasts or indigenous communities. At some level FFP is reiterating a neo-colonial picture of international rankings, where 'good' Western states know how to treat women, and the rest of the world needs to learn.

Finally, in the genealogical analysis provided, the article has contributed important detail to the developing academic consideration of FFP, arguing that the feminist descriptor being adopted by states needs to be interrogated. FFP must be understood as part of a longer continuum of international norms and trends than have hitherto been apportioned to it. The advent of FFP is part of a decades long evolution of gendered policy making within international politics. As illustrated above, gender equality has moved from the sphere of development, to rights, to security. Situated in this long-term picture, FFP appears in many ways a logical next step. Furthermore, as detailed here, FFP is intimately linked to states' domestic and regional politics, and is connected across the four countries with changes in government, new leading figures and political parties, and key 'critical actors' within these administrations. The advent of FFP needs to be contextually situated (Haastrup, 2020), linked more fully to broader trends in global politics and policy, and analysed beyond the ethical implications of its content.

Conclusion

Feminist foreign policy is gaining traction in international discourse. Yet, in the absence of a clear definition, its power in international politics largely acts as a signifier of liberal identity rather than a clear policy agenda, giving the states that adopt it 'relevance' (Anholt, 2009) on the international stage. This is not to argue that FFP, in the iterations that exist of it so far, will not ensure an increased attentiveness to gendered issues in foreign policy making. FFP may ensure a clearer role for gender equality on both the world stage and within individual states' foreign policy. Yet, given the early stage of this policy evolution, the implementation and impact of FFP is yet to be fully seen.

Furthermore, at the same time that FFP is emerging, the vehicles that might be most directly related to its success (international institutions, global alliances, international legal treaties.) are retreating from view. This is happening not only in states which show little inkling of adopting FFP (Russia, the United States, India, Brazil) but also in states that are at its forefronts (the growth of anti-immigrant politics in Sweden; the continued threat of the far right at the ballot box in France). Given this global environment, the possibility of any adoption of FFP implementing radical change is slim, as the international organisations, ideals and norms that would underpin it are under attack (Baldwin and Taylor, 2019; Goetz, 2019, 2020; Korolczuk and Graff, 2018;). This is perhaps another example of what Nancy Fraser has termed 'the cunning of history' (2009) – only when there is little hope of success is feminism allowed to step forth onto the main stage.

As Ann Marie Goetz notes, part of the fightback against this global resurgence of misogyny involves "grounding public efforts to promote women's rights and inclusion in *legal and institutional changes that are hard to reverse*" (Goetz, 2019, 13, emphasis added). If FFP is not anchored in law, institutions and funding, it is easy to knock down. As shown above, it is often connected with new politicians and parties, whose longevity is not yet clear. Women's rights need substantial commitment in mechanisms that are difficult to reverse. It remains too soon to know whether or not FFP provides this.

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[vi] Although work by the ICRW has attempted to do this (Thompson, 2020).