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## Sweden: gender equality and feminist foreign policy

**Gender equality policy has been developed for many years in Sweden and is now one of the cornerstones of the country's international activities. It is visible especially in the course of Sweden's activities on the forum of international organizations: the United Nations (UN) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). It is also the basis for feminist foreign policy (FFP), officially pursued by Sweden since 2014.**

**Genesis: from electoral law to an equality policy.** In 1919, the Swedish Parliament (Riksdag) passed universal and equal suffrage for women and men. On this basis, elections to the parliament were held in 1921 in which women could cast their votes for the first time. After one hundred years, Sweden is regularly named as at the forefront of states in terms of gender equality. The Gender Equality Index score for Sweden in 2020, developed by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), was 83.8 and was the highest in the European Union (average – 67.9)<sup>1</sup>. The latest Global Gender Gap Report published in 2021 by the World Economic Forum ranks Sweden fifth (out of 156 countries). This synthetic index, which was introduced to benchmark progress towards gender parity and compare countries' gender gaps across four dimensions, was 82.3% (the global gender gap score is 67.7%)<sup>2</sup>. Sweden is also characterized by a very low Gender Inequality Index, which allowed it to take third place (out of 162 countries) in this ranking (in 2019, the indicator was 0.039 point)<sup>3</sup>. This index, run by the United Nations Development Program, serves to illustrate the loss of achievement in a country due to gender inequalities in three important aspects of human development.

These high rankings are a consequence of a long, progressive policy of gender equality initiated in the 1970s with a package of tax reforms (compulsory separate taxation of spouses was introduced) and social reforms (parental leave replaced maternity leave). Their culmination was a gender equality law, which entered into force in 1979 (currently in force since 2009: the Discrimination Act) and contributed to the creation of a non-discriminatory and equal labour market for women and men. Political decisions were accompanied by a strong social movement, and gender mainstreaming<sup>4</sup> became a widespread political strategy and the primary way of thinking.

Women won 164 seats in the 349-member Riksdag after the 2014 parliamentary elections, and gender equality became a cornerstone not only of domestic but also international politics. Although the prime minister is Stefan Löfven (the Social Democratic Workers' Party of Sweden – SAP), it is women who lead 12 ministries in his 23-member minority Social Democrat-Green government. This is not a question of novelty – even during the campaign before the 1994 parliamentary elections, Ingvar Carlsson, then leader of the SAP, had announced that after the victory of the SAP, half of the government would be women (and he kept his word). Also, during the subsequent rule of Fredrik Reinfeldt (Moderate Coalition Party), women made up almost 50% of the cabinet. Currently, women are leaders of five parties in the Riksdag: the Green Party (Märta Stenevi is one spokesperson), the Center Party (Annie Lööf), the Left Party (Nooshi Dadgostar), the Christian Democrats (Ebba Busch) and the Liberals (Nyamko Sabuni).

<sup>1</sup> European Institute for Gender Equality, Gender Equality Index 2020, <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2020> [access date: 21.03.2021].

<sup>2</sup> World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report 2021*, [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2021.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf) [access date: 02.04.2021].

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Development Programme, *Gender Inequality Index 2020*, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/composite/GII> [access date: 21.03.2021].

<sup>4</sup> According to the Council of Europe, *gender mainstreaming* is defined as „the (re)organisation, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy-making”, Council of Europe, *What is gender mainstreaming?*, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/genderequality/what-is-gender-mainstreaming> [access date: 21.03.2021].

**Gender equality is crucial at a global scale...** In 2014, Margot Wallström, then minister for foreign affairs, announced that Sweden would be the first state in the world to pursue a feminist foreign policy. It is holistic and covers all main areas, i.e. foreign and security policy, international development cooperation, and trade policy. Feminism in Sweden's foreign policy is part of a broader vision stemming from its equality policy. Similar to other Nordic countries, gender equality policy in Sweden is firmly embedded in human rights. It is also one of the most important features of the Nordic welfare state model, based on the significant role of the state as an employer and provider of public services, guaranteeing their universal access to civil society.

Sweden's FFP is based on the premise that peace, security, and development will never be achieved if women, who make up half of the world's population, are excluded. This is indicated by many studies, reports, and international agreements. In the 1995 Beijing Declaration and action plan that were adopted at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, representatives of 189 countries stated that a gender perspective must be incorporated into international, national, and regional policies and programs. On the other hand, in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development launched by a UN Summit in 2015, gender equality is both a goal and a measure of building sustainable societies in relation to poverty eradication, ensuring high-quality education, and promoting stable, sustainable, and inclusive economic growth.

For these reasons, efforts to strengthen the rights and representation of women and the resources available to them have been one of the priorities of Sweden's foreign policy for many years. Its activities as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC) in 2017-2018 were based on respect for international law, human rights, and belief in the importance of the issue of equality. Feminist foreign policy was reflected in Sweden's continued efforts to integrate gender equality into the UNSC's work and activities. They mainly focused on enhancing the women's influence on peace and security issues by increasing their participation at the decision-making levels in the prevention and resolution of conflicts. Sweden also paid attention to the protection of women living in areas affected by armed conflicts or being under occupation and addressed the topic of sexual violence against women and girls raised during the work of the UNSC and the challenges that derive from incidents of sexual abuse committed by United Nations deployed personnel.

**...and complements "traditional" foreign and security policy interests.** On 24 February 2021, the Riksdag hosted its annual debate on Sweden's foreign policy, during which the Minister for Foreign Affairs Ann Linde presented the main tasks and challenges facing Sweden. She devoted much of her speech to the FFP while confirming current directions of Sweden's foreign and security policy. Sweden's FFP is complemented by cooperation in the field of security policy with the Nordic and Baltic states, along with the US and the UK. Moreover, it is a constant element of Sweden's activity in the EU and the UN. It is worth noting that the foreign minister referred more often to gender equality than to cooperation with NATO – the so-called "NATO option", which was voted on December 15, 2020 (["IEŚ Commentaries", no. 300](#)), was not even mentioned.

Minister A. Linde, when presenting Sweden's chairmanship of the OSCE, emphasized the link between respect for democracy, human rights, and rule of law with security among states (["IEŚ Commentaries", no. 252](#)). She also noted that achieving security in the region requires significant empowerment of women, and that a women, peace, and security agenda is one of Sweden's priorities for action. Upon her initiative, at the end of February 2021 an advisory group of experts was launched in the OSCE to support the organization's activities in this field.

Related to feminist foreign policy, Minister A. Linde emphasized that currently promoting the rights of women and girls is particularly important due to the emergence of opposing and disturbing trends in some countries. In addition, the pandemic significantly affected the lives of women, who were much more affected by the crisis than men, as was shown by the report of the European Commission (March 5, 2021)<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, the Swedish

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<sup>5</sup> European Commission, 2021 Report on Gender Equality in the EU, [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/aid\\_development\\_cooperation\\_fundamental\\_rights/annual\\_report\\_ge\\_2021\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/aid_development_cooperation_fundamental_rights/annual_report_ge_2021_en.pdf) [access date: 22.03.2021].



government has decided to donate an additional SEK 260 million (just over EUR 25.5 million) to global activities related to sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Sweden is one of the leaders in the global action coalition for economic justice and women's rights. Gender equality is one of the most important thematic areas of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), and its individual strategies assume the achievement of gender-related outcomes. Moreover, according to the latest data from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Sweden is at the forefront of donors who supply the LDCs with development assistance for increasing gender equality and women's empowerment.

**Conclusions.** Steadily implemented gender equality policy in Sweden has brought visible results at the national level. They include, among others, apparent reduction of gender discrimination in the labour market and ensuring equal employment opportunities at decision-making positions in the economic sector, as well as in politics.

Sweden regularly belongs to the group of countries implementing actions for gender equality and increasing representation of women and girls. The inclusion of a women, peace, and security agenda is very highly prioritised in its activities within international organizations, both global (UN) and regional (EU and OSCE). Sweden is traditionally supported by the Nordic countries in its efforts to empower women, but Central European countries also joined recently, including Slovakia (["IEŚ Commentaries", no. 327](#)). In addition, in recent years, more countries have implemented FFP (or announced their intention to do so): Canada (2017), France and Luxembourg (2019), and Mexico (2020).