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The making of feminist foreign policy

Sweden's foreign minister Margot Wallström has resigned. With her feminist foreign policy, she will leave a lasting legacy

Margot Wallström, the Swedish foreign minister who launched the concept of feminist foreign policy (FFP), has resigned. The reason? Well, people looking for juicy details, scandals and conflicts will have to seek elsewhere. Simply age – she will be 65 later this month – and a wish to spend more time with her family seems to have prompted her to quit her job.

But will her successor follow her path and run the same feminist foreign policy agenda? And what, in terms of concrete policymaking, was the FFP in the first place?

To answer the latter question, one has to begin with Wallström´s political background. She started her career the 1970s in the Social democratic youth organisation. It was a time of great turbulence in the Swedish labour movement. The party had been in power for 44 consecutive years (still a world record in the democratic world) but lost the election in 1976 to the Centre Party.

Urbanisation and higher education for more people had changed the demography and fewer people seemed to identify with the traditional class conflict. The Vietnam war and modern information technology had opened up the world. New social movements, like environmental groups and the environmental and feminist movements, entered the stage. In this changing political landscape, social democracy struggled to find a new direction.

For a lot of activists in the youth organisation, the answer was to learn from the new social movements. Work with them. Talk to them. Learn their methods – meaning more work outside the parliament. Learn their thinking and their way of approaching younger people, meaning higher priority to 'new' policy fields like environment and gender issues.

Margot Wallström's political career

1979, at the age of 25, Margot Wallström was elected to parliament and remained there until 1985, when she surprisingly decided to quit to work in a local bank in her hometown Karlstad. That was a highly unusual move for a young politician with a supposedly brilliant career ahead of her. But, as the Swedish voters was to learn, a very Wallström-like move.

She made a come back in 1988 when then prime minister Ingvar Carlsson appointed her to the government, left in 1991, when the Social Democrats lost power, to work for a local tv station, made a come back in government in 1994, left again in 1998 and worked for a year with a media project in Sri Lanka. There was a third come back in 1999 when she was appointed EU Commissioner responsible for the environment and a fourth when she became Swedish foreign minister in 2014.

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No matter the position, Margot Wallström has always made an attempt to connect to social movements. During her second term in parliament in the 80s, she went to the Mururoa atoll on board of the Greenpeace fleet's flagship, Rainbow Warrior, which was sunk by the French military security shortly after the trip. As Commissioner, she had a prolific dialogue with environmental organisations and many of their representatives praised her efforts to get all the EU member states to sign the Kyoto protocol.

As foreign minister, one of Wallström first priorities was to establish a dialogue with the Swedish civil society, in this case meaning all the organisations active in foreign aid and foreign policy issues, many of them stemming from the rise of new movements in the 60s and 70s.

What is a feminist foreign policy?

The idea to carve out the world's first feminist foreign policy is a logical result of Walllström's political background and ambition. So, what did it mean? Was there anything concrete to it or was it mere branding?

The latter, critics would say. Even after her resignation, many people asked for more concrete answers. On the other hand, many of the critics were people who would be suspicious of any kind of feminist policies, especially the ones that are concrete.

The first real answer would be that it was not so new. Sweden has for a long time prioritised women's rights and gender issues in its foreign aid and policy. This time, however, the policy was codified around four pillars, all starting with the letter R. The first three were policy-focused, aiming to strengthen women's Rights, Representation and Resources. Asked to analyse it in 2016, Robert Egnell, professor at the Swedish defence university, said that it's a 'method which systematically focuses on girls and women's perspective on all levels of foreign policy.' Feminism and gender equality is a basic foundation for peace, human security and reduced poverty in the world. The fourth pillar, Reality, was about the tools and a pragmatic point of view.

Wallström's lasting legacy

So what has she done concretely? Sweden has initiated a network for more female mediators prepared to act in conflicts. It has supported international research on norms of masculinity in DR Congo, negotiated on behalf of female rights in the EU and the UN and worked to promote women's voices in conflict resolution.

A lot of the foreign aid has been directed to sexual and reproductive rights for women. When Sweden had a seat in the Security Council of the UN, the country invited women's rights groups from countries like Somalia and Nigeria to speak before the Council.

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All Swedish ambassadors and other foreign ministry staff have been instructed to push the same agenda in all contacts with representatives from other countries, and also – as an echo of Wallström's old credo – to stay in touch with civil society on these issues.

Having said that, it´s also a fact that even supporters of FFP have been critical. Wallström set a high bar when she stated that one perspective will be considered across all policy areas. Two years ago, a number of organisations active in foreign aid wrote a report in which they questioned whether the extensive Swedish export of weapons and the fact that Sweden today has a restrictive migration policy really is feminist. The organisations wrote: 'The inconsequences between the various policy areas make us wonder if the whole government really is taking the full responsibility for the feminist policy.'

The same critique has been heard in relation to trade. Did Sweden really

have women's rights in mind in every deal with another country?

The new Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ann Linde, talked about feminist foreign policy in her first comments after the appointment. She assured a continuation of the policies. It will not be exactly the same. It ′s hard to see any active Swedish politician with the same deep understanding of the broad social movements as Margot Wallström. But business as usual? No, probably not.



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