



# BCIS COMMENTARY

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## Gender Equality and Foreign Policy

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Very often, the conversation around gender equality in foreign policy focuses on the equal representation of women in the foreign service, and in the military. I have heard the CEDAW Committee often question state parties about how many ambassadors or how many high ranking military and police officers are women, and I have always felt that this is not the right question. I am not saying women's representation is not important, but we in South Asia especially know that having women as heads of state isn't sufficient to challenge the patriarchy or do a lot for gender equality. In Sri Lanka, we have had many women in high offices - Presidents, Prime Ministers, Chief Justices, Attorney Generals - but I am not sure any of that has done much for gender equality in Sri Lanka, at least not until now. Let's hope our new Prime Minister, a feminist and women's rights activist will indeed make a difference!

We recently heard also US Vice President Kamala Harris in her nomination acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention, talk about her own immigrant mother's experience and focus on justice, non-discrimination, human rights, anti-gun violence, pro-sexual reproductive health and rights - highlighting all the issues that as feminists and as women we see as important. She also proudly declared that she was "Kamala Harris for the People", **but then** she vowed that as Commander-in-Chief of the US Military, she would "ensure America always has the strongest, most **lethal fighting force in the world**".

As a feminist and as an advocate for peace, I found this part of Harris' speech quite disturbing – I see that her ambition reflects the understanding of foreign policy in terms of military strength, economic capabilities, and geopolitical influence. It prioritises the security nation states and national interests. I see it as a very masculine and male-

dominated perspective. I would argue that that kind of foreign policy cannot deliver gender equality, and for at least three reasons.

Firstly, it obscures the impact of inter-state relations on all people - including women and other vulnerable groups who remain invisible in the international relations/foreign policy praxis, and who are inevitably the people who suffer most the consequences of aggressive international relations whether it is conflict or debt or environmental destruction.

Secondly, it disregards the historicity of the international institutions and normative frameworks that configure foreign policy. It falls short of recognising them as neo-colonial constructs with all the discriminations that entails – the collapse of the “rule-based international order” and the failures of the international financial architecture

Thirdly, this approach to foreign policy adopts a very narrow concept of ‘security’ - one that is embedded in the national security of sovereign nation-states, and which is usually secured by military means. But suppose we see national security more broadly as the protection of women, children, ethnic and sexual minorities, people with disabilities, migrants, and other marginalised groups in times of conflict and in times of peace - then strategic military response makes little sense. The violence of food insecurity, the violence of rampant disease, the violence of pandemics, the violence of austerity measures, or gender-based violence cannot be prevented through greater investments in military hardware - tanks, fighter jets, - or military bases.

For a foreign policy to address gender inequality this very male and masculine perspective will need to be discarded, and the men AND women forming and implementing foreign policy will need to:

- adopt **a different approach to security** - and not see it as the containment of violence but as the promotion of the foundations of peace. This would mean favouring disarmament over militarisation; and ‘interdependence’ over competition
- **change the political dialogue** of conflict resolution diplomacy and trade **to be more inclusive**
- build alliances and **create communities of states** based on empathy, trust, transparency, **respect for global justice beyond borders, and shared responsibilities;**
- ensure **that trade agreements** are mutually beneficial and that they **do not negatively impact marginalised groups**, and
- agree on issues such as **climate change and disarmament** based on mutual respect and **a recognition of interdependence.**

I would argue that in a global context where sustainability of the planet is a common challenge, where the effects of conflict in one continent has ramifications in another,

where refugees and statelessness strain governance, the importance of **interdependence** cannot be underscored enough.

Without transforming the patriarchal, neo-colonial frameworks and structures through which we construct foreign policy, achieving gender equality in foreign policy would be quite meaningless.

One could ask the question then, whether the current interest in forming Feminist Foreign Policies (FFPs) reflects such a transformation. I am afraid the scorecard for FFPs is not very encouraging.

Many critics see FFP as a global north phenomenon that reproduces the colonial discourse. African Feminists especially have been very vocal in pointing out the exclusion of global south feminist voices in the conversations around feminist foreign policies, their formulation and implementation.

The focus of many FFPs on women's economic empowerment in the global south is a definite red flag. It is merely about bringing women's labour as an untapped resource for economic growth and capitalist wealth creation

We cannot forget that the arms trade and mining of conflict minerals are a major source of income for many states in the global north, including some of the permanent members of the UN Security Council and others such as Canada, Australia, and Sweden who profess to be at the forefront of leadership in human rights, gender equality, inclusive development, and environmentalism

There are also contradictions between Feminist Foreign Policy of governments and what happens at home. In 2020 Mexico became the first global south country to adopt a feminist foreign policy, which is consistent with Mexico's commitments and progress on gender equality internationally - (ratification of CEDAW, Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women, co-hosting the Gender Equality Forum and taking a strong gender stance during its two-year tenure as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council). Mexico elected a woman president earlier this year. But Mexico also has the highest rate of femicide and gender-based violence in the world - much of the latter a result of increased militarisation at home

There is evidence that maybe we may have been on the brink of a different kind of foreign policy engagement in the 1960 and 1970s when Mme Sirimavo Bandaranaike emerged as the world's first woman prime minister, and as some have remarked, Sri Lanka's most effective minister of foreign affairs.

As an architect of the Non-Aligned Movement, she displayed a recognition of the value of interdependence. She said: "Underlying the policy of non-alignment is the belief that independent nations, although small and militarily weak, have a positive role to play in the world today" (*Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike on Sri Lanka's Non-aligned Foreign Policy, speech given to the Senate on 23 January 1964*). She also

equated 'national interest' with the interest of the people of Sri Lanka/Ceylon, particularly the women: "... [as a] representative of my country but also as a woman and a mother who can understand the thoughts and feelings of the millions of women, the mothers of this world, who are deeply concerned with the preservation of the human race" (*Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike Summit meeting of the Movement of Non-aligned Countries, Belgrade 1961*) She engaged in a kind of diplomacy that mixed the personal with the professional (personal friendships with heads of state, but independence in political demands)

All this is manifested in Mrs. Bandaranaike's leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM); her bold identification with the economic diplomacy of the Group of 77 which led to the creation of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD); her understanding of the geopolitical importance of good relations with both India and China reflected in her skilful use of personal diplomacy in negotiating agreements of longstanding bilateral issues between Sri Lanka and India, while also securing foreign aid from China and other countries. Her policies of nationalisation led to collision with Western states but she also received considerable support from the international community. Her commitment to disarmament and peace were reflected in her (unsuccessful) move to make the Indian Ocean a zone of peace as well as her steadfast stand on nuclear disarmament. [However, her response to the youth insurgency of 1971 was admittedly quite brutal]

But neither Sri Lanka's experience of Mrs Bandaranaike's foreign policies nor the spate of current feminist foreign policies have been able to address **the structural issues** that need to be changed if *feminist thinking and gender equality are to be integrated into foreign policy*.

So I need to conclude by reiterating what I alluded to before - integrating gender equality into foreign policy requires a paradigm shift. This paradigm shift will comprise a reconceptualisation of 'security'; favour 'disarmament' and 'interdependence' as strategies; emphasise inclusive political dialogue; create communities of states with shared responsibilities, and respect for global justice; enter into mutually beneficial trade agreements that do not exploit the poor and disenfranchised and make a commitment to act on climate change

*"Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing."* — Arundhati Roy.

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