

Women in foreign affairs and international security

Contours of a timely debate

SUMMARY

The debate on the participation and role of women in foreign affairs and international security is a timely and relevant one, and is being raised with increasing frequency at both national and international levels. In particular, there is growing attention to the imbalances in the representation of women in leadership and other key positions in the area of foreign and security policy, as well as to the growing body of evidence regarding the positive effect of including women in several key areas of foreign and security policy.

Among these issues, women's role in peacekeeping receives particular attention, as research has repeatedly shown that gender equality contributes to peace, and that peace negotiations involving women have a better chance of being sustainable and effective. Gender-equal societies enjoy better health, stronger economic growth and higher security. The United Nations and the EU have put pronounced emphasis on the issue in the past two decades. UN Security Council Resolution 1325 established the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda in 2000. Since then, more WPS-related resolutions have been adopted, widening the scope and breadth of gendered peace and security. These resolutions have been instrumental in changing the philosophy and rhetoric focused on conflict and gender equality, thereby challenging the international community to do more. Several initiatives are also being implemented at EU level, including through the 2018 EU Strategic Approach to WPS. However, critics posit that a lot remains to be done, as women continue to be under-represented in the field of foreign and security policy across the world.



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Introduction

The topic of women in foreign affairs and international security is becoming increasingly relevant in the context of new paradigms and approaches to global affairs. Scholars, policy-makers and civil society are engaging in innovative ways to promote the participation of women in these domains of policy-making and on all levels on the ground, ranging from conceptualisation to implementation.

The debate on women and foreign policy is not new. As early as the 1980s, [scholars](#) working on public opinion and foreign policy pointed to a gender gap on foreign policy issues and put forward the idea that the increased participation of women in foreign policy would lead to new and innovative paradigms, particularly with regard to peace and security. Yet, almost 40 years later the [debate](#) 'on the extent to which foreign policy can be substantially transformed by the increase of women's presence in the relevant government structures is an ongoing one, not least because of the continued inequality of representation in the area'. Today, this debate has expanded to a number of inter-related issues, including but not limited to:

- the representation of women, including at the top level of policy-making; the armed forces; diplomacy; and foreign policy analysis (think-tank communities and other experts).
- the content and approach of foreign policy and how this is affected by women's participation, including by the emergence of a 'feminist foreign policy' agenda;
- the research agenda on women in peacekeeping and crisis management, which focuses on the policies enabling women's participation in such activities, and on the impact that women's participation in the armed forces (especially in peacekeeping operations) can have on local societies and on the effectiveness of peace-building and reconciliation.

Key issues

The representation gap: numbers speak for themselves

A growing body of evidence points to the beneficial effects of having women represented in social, political and economic life on an equal footing with men, and of fostering gender diversity. Research has [shown](#), for example, that gender diversity, 'when supported by gender-supportive norms and regulations within an industry, leads to better productivity and better exchange of diverse viewpoints'. There is, in addition, solid [evidence](#) that women's status, including their representation in decision-making, is an important predictive factor of [state peacefulness](#).

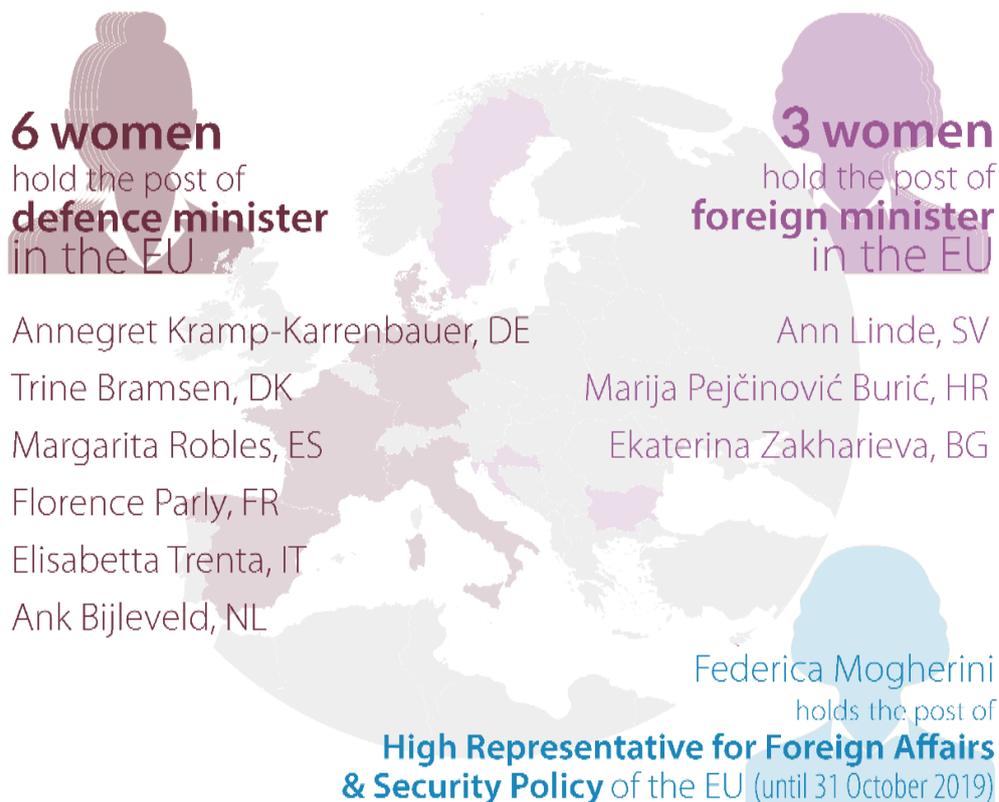
Public opinion is also shifting in favour of more representation of women in politics and leadership roles. According to the 2017 special [Eurobarometer](#) survey on gender equality, 61 % of EU citizens believe that 'politics is dominated by men who do not have sufficient confidence in women'. The majority of respondents (54 %) think there should be more women in political decision-making. A 2018 Pew Research Center [survey](#) in the United States revealed that a majority of respondents would like to see more women in leadership roles. Interestingly, 22 % of respondents believe that women 'have a better approach to leadership', while 15 % say that men do. At the same time, a majority of respondents believe that gender discrimination is a major obstacle in the professional arena and that men have an easier path to leadership positions, in both business and politics.

In spite of these findings and of relative progress made in several countries and multilateral organisations across the world in recent years, women remain largely under-represented in politics, particularly in the area of foreign policy and international security. In the US, the [gap](#) between female representation in foreign policy, particularly defence policy, and other areas of the public sector is striking. For example, while women constitute approximately half or over half of senior executives in departments dealing with issues, such as health and human services or housing and

urban development, they only account for 39 % of senior executives at the State Department, and even less in the Pentagon and intelligence communities.

Globally, numbers speak for themselves. For instance, only 15 % of the world's ambassadors are [women](#). As late as 2017, there were only 15 [female defence ministers](#) in the world. Out of the 47 [Council of Europe](#) member states, only five have women as foreign ministers. Among the 29 [NATO](#) members, there are only eight female defence ministers (a large percentage however, compared to the 2018 [estimate](#) of there being only 17 women defence ministers in the world). Within the EU-28, there are currently six female defence ministers and only three female foreign ministers (Figure 1). Within the [United Nations](#), up to March 2018 no woman had ever headed the Department of Political Affairs, which has existed under different names/formats since 1952.

Figure 1 – Women in foreign and defence ministerial positions in the EU, 2019



Source: EPRS, September 2019.

The lack of balanced representation across political professions has also been identified in data regarding the make-up of the scientific community in the field of foreign affairs. The [Gender Scorecard of Washington DC Think Tanks 2018](#), produced by [Women in International Security](#), a global non-governmental organisation dedicated to advancing the leadership and professional development of women in the field of international security, illustrates that the gap goes well beyond the government sector. According to the scorecard, 68 % of the heads of top Washington think-tanks and 73 % of experts in the same organisations are male. Only one of the 22 think-tanks reviewed had a significant gender programming component. There are, so far, no comprehensive data on this same issue in the EU. In addition, according to a [report](#) by the Carnegie Endowment, only 30 % of scholars in the domain of international relations are women.

[Concerns](#) about [work-life balance](#) and lack of the right administrative infrastructure to enable women to pursue high-level careers while building a family, have been highlighted as factors which contribute significantly to the problem. Anne Marie Slaughter, a prominent figure in the debate, [emphasised](#) in 2012 the importance of creating the right social policies, but also of closing the

leadership gap by ensuring that women are equally represented in the ranks of politics, corporate executives and judicial leaders. While representation alone will not solve gender-based foreign policy issues, it is perceived as one of the many necessary steps in that direction.

The feminist foreign policy agenda

In 2014, Sweden became the first country to present the concept and implementation plan for a [feminist foreign policy](#) under former Swedish Foreign Minister, Margot Wallström. This concept, which subsequently gained momentum, places women's rights, human security and equal representation at the centre of diplomatic action. It is based on the premise that gender-equal societies enjoy better health, stronger economic growth and higher security as well as on the evidence that gender equality contributes to peace. A concern for the individual and human security instead of state security is a defining aspect of this policy agenda.

The three starting points for feminist foreign policy are:

Rights: The Swedish Foreign Service shall promote all women's and girls' full enjoyment of human rights, including by combating all forms of violence and discrimination that restrict their freedom of action.

Representation: The Swedish Foreign Service shall promote women's participation and influence in decision-making processes at all levels and in all areas, and shall seek dialogue with women representatives at all levels, including in civil society.

Resources: The Swedish Foreign Service shall work to ensure that resources are allocated to promote gender equality and equal opportunities for all women and girls to enjoy human rights. The service shall also promote targeted measures for different target groups.¹

Sweden's feminist foreign policy also [supports](#) the establishment of peace ministries, demonstrating that peace is as important to foreign policy as is national defence. Since 2014, 79 [other states](#) have created national plans of action to better include women in foreign policy and in peace and security processes. In that context, interesting developments continue to take place in the EU and in countries as diverse as [Australia](#), [Brazil](#), [Canada](#), [Norway](#) and the [United Arab Emirates](#). Most recently, in June 2019 the United States administration released its [Strategy on Women, Peace and Security](#), the first such strategy under President Donald Trump.

Women in international security

Including women in international security-related processes and high-level peace negotiations, as well as offering them senior diplomatic posts means more than just equal representation. There is, in fact, an increasing body of evidence illustrating that women's [participation](#) in peace and security processes can play a significant role in determining the success and sustainability of [peace agreements](#), as well as the durability and quality of peace. Studies also show that peace agreements signed by female delegates have a higher implementation rate.

Data show that women are often perceived as 'honest brokers' during peace negotiations and therefore are able to achieve more sustainable and equitable peace as seen, for example, in the conflict resolution in Northern Ireland in the years up to 1998. Furthermore, thanks to their societal roles and responsibilities, women also have access to critical information. For instance, women in [Afghanistan](#) and [Northern Ireland](#) have been able to access networks of data through talking with members of the community. According to a [study](#) by the US think-tank Council on Foreign Relations, substantial inclusion of women and civil society groups in a peace negotiation makes the resulting agreement 64 % less likely to fail and, according to [another study](#), 35 % more likely to last at least 15 years. These, among other statistics clearly show that gender diversity and women's inclusion in peace negotiations produce longer-lasting and better results.²

Longer-lasting peace agreements, improved human security and equal representation are just a few of the results of feminist foreign policy and the inclusion of women in the security field. Women

often take a collaborative approach to peace-making and organise themselves across cultural and sectarian divides. It has been [argued](#) that such an approach – which incorporates the concerns of diverse demographic groups (for instance, religious, ethnic and cultural ones) affected by a conflict and having an interest in its resolution – increases the prospects of long-term stability and reduces the likelihood of state failure, conflict onset and poverty.

Scientific inquiry regarding the impact of women's participation in international security is expanding. Recent [research](#) has also shown that women's participation in the resolution of nuclear issues is beneficial, in that it reduces the potential for risk-taking behaviour and increases the likelihood that negotiated agreements would hold, while also contributing innovative ideas. Yet women represent only about [a quarter](#) of delegates to international non-proliferation talks, less than the threshold indicated for group dynamics to change enough so as to lead to better outcomes.

Beyond emphasising the role that women can play in decision-making, peace negotiations and peacekeeping, the WPS agenda also focuses strongly on the protection of women and their rights in situations of conflict. In societies facing conflict, women and girls are exposed to heightened [risks of violations of their human rights](#), as discrimination tends to become more acute. Conflicts can result in higher levels of violence against women and girls, including arbitrary killings, torture, sexual violence and forced marriage. The necessity for gender-sensitive language and gender provisions (and their implementation) within peace agreements is a key challenge. [Experts](#) have shown that 'the presence of gender provisions in peace agreements affects women's participation in post-conflict societies as well as the chances that a post-conflict society will move towards gender equality' and that 'peace agreements are significantly more likely to have gender provisions when women participate in elite peace processes' and are better represented in national parliaments and civil society.

The importance of women's participation in civil society is illustrated by several examples in the Middle East. [Israeli and Palestinian](#) women have long built coalitions across national, ethnic, and religious lines in order to lead non-violent efforts to promote security and access to basic services. In Syria, the [Women's Advisory Board](#) to Syrian negotiations, a group of independent civil society representatives, has raised matters missing from the agenda and helped develop policy positions, made recommendations to assist the peace talks, and proposed gender-responsive perspectives. Successful local [efforts](#) led by Syrian women include monitoring and documenting human rights abuses, establishing ceasefires, creating local political councils and distributing humanitarian aid. Similar [observations](#) about the role of women's civil society organisations have been made in conflicts in Colombia, Liberia and Tunisia. The Council on Foreign Relations has put together a [database](#) on the inclusion of women in peace negotiations across the globe, and on the role their contribution (or lack thereof) has played. Despite the evidence that women's participation is

Women, peace and security agenda

UN Security Council [Resolution \(UNSCR\) 1325](#) was unanimously adopted on 31 October 2000 and established the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda. The resolution reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, and equally in peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and post-conflict reconstruction. Furthermore, it stresses the importance of women's equal participation and full involvement in all efforts related to the maintenance and promotion of peace and security. It urges all players to increase the participation of women and to incorporate gender perspectives in all UN peace and security efforts. It also calls on all parties to conflict to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse, in situations of armed conflict. [As of August 2019](#), 81 UN member states (42 % of all UN member states) have UNSCR 1325 national action plans (NAPs).

Since 2000, seven additional resolutions related to the WPS agenda have been adopted, widening its scope. The resolutions on WPS aim to change the philosophy and rhetoric around conflict and gender equality and to challenge the international community to do more.

beneficial, there are still glaring inequalities both in representation in international peace negotiations, and in aid and development policies for women in fragile states. Between 1990 and 2017, women [constituted](#) only 2 % of mediators, 8 % of negotiators and 5 % of witnesses and signatories in all major peace process. Most strikingly, only [two women](#) have ever served as chief peace negotiators. Similarly, despite the role that local women's groups could play in preventing and resolving conflicts, such groups receive only a small percentage of the aid allocated to fragile states by major donors. A 2017 OECD [study](#) attributed this to significant 'blind spots in donors' understanding of the links between gender equality, conflict and fragility'.

The EU perspective

The topic of women in foreign affairs and international security has gained increased visibility across EU institutions in recent years. In 2008, the Council adopted the [Comprehensive Approach](#) to the EU implementation of UN Security Council resolutions 1325 and 1820 on women, peace and security; in 2010 it adopted a [set of indicators](#) to monitor the implementation of the comprehensive approach in the areas of prevention, participation, protection, relief and recovery. Among others, the indicators include the number and percentage of women mediators and negotiators as well as the number of women's civil society groups involved in peace negotiations supported by the EU. The indicators have been reviewed and revised since, most notably in 2016.

In 2018, the Council [welcomed](#) the new EU strategic approach to WPS. In its conclusions, it recalled the commitments of the EU and its Member States to the full implementation of the WPS agenda, ensuring that 'it is fully integrated into all EU policies and efforts in promoting the important role of women's engagement in support of sustainable peace, security, human rights, justice and development'. The new approach places particular emphasis on the need to 'engage, empower, protect, and support women and girls in order to help all countries achieving sustainable and lasting peace and security as intrinsic components of human rights and sustainable development'. The promotion of the women, peace and security agenda is also a priority of the [Joint Declaration](#) on EU-NATO Cooperation.

In September 2018, the EU and Canada [hosted](#) the first ever Women Foreign Ministers conference, at which 17 countries were represented. The meeting [focused](#) on topics such as women's empowerment and leadership, conflict prevention, democratic growth and the elimination of gender-based violence. Participants pledged to work together and with partners to build a network of governments and civil society organisations to advance gender equality and women's rights, and to work towards implementing existing commitments. The EU promotes these goals through its [Framework](#) for gender equality and women's empowerment through EU external relations (2016-2020), adopted in 2015. According to High Representative/Vice-President, Federica Mogherini, as of 1 February 2019, [women represented 39.6 %](#) of all managers in the European Commission. The European External Action Service (EEAS) is in the process of implementing its gender and equal opportunity strategy 2018-2023 (endorsed in November 2017), which aims to achieve sustainable gender balance at all levels in all functions and all job categories in the EEAS, both in the Brussels headquarters and in EU delegations. Based on a 2019 Commission [report](#) on equality between women and men in the EU, the overall gender representation in the EEAS is close to equal. However, [criticism](#) has pointed to areas that could be improved. For example, only one of the eight [EU special](#)

Combatting violence against women

In 2008, the EU adopted [guidelines](#) on violence against women committing 'to promote and protect the rights of women in third countries'. Violence against women is also addressed in the EU's specific dialogues on human rights and through projects under the [European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights](#). Combatting violence against women and girls is a priority in the gender action plan for external relations. In 2017, the EU and the UN launched the [Spotlight Initiative](#) delivered through a UN multi-stakeholder trust fund, to support measures to eliminate violence against women and girls, in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Source: [Violence against women in the EU](#), Briefing, EPRS, 2019.

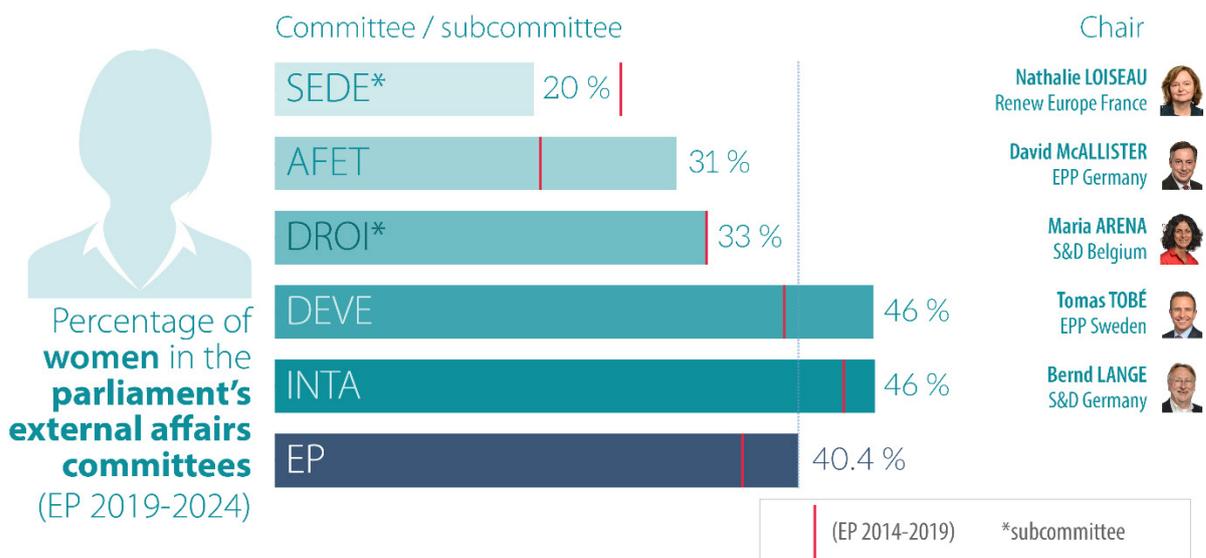
[representatives](#) for troubled regions and countries is a woman, in spite of the aforementioned evidence of the beneficial effects of women in mediation.

According to a [study](#) commissioned by the European Parliament and carried out by Women in International Security (WIIS), women's participation in EU civilian crisis management missions has increased by approximately 10 % in the past decade, reaching around 30 % of personnel. In addition, the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions currently include gender advisors who provide strategic advice on gender mainstreaming. The study identifies several ways in which the EU and its Member States, as well as the Parliament, can make EU crisis management more gender-sensitive and simultaneously more effective and efficient.

The Parliament has been an ardent supporter of the WPS agenda in its annual resolutions on the CSDP. Most recently, on 12 March 2019, it adopted a [resolution](#) on building EU capacity on conflict prevention and mediation, with a strong emphasis on women, peace and security and particularly on enhancing gender capacities in the EU in this area. Among other things, the Parliament called for the EU to lead the efforts in the implementation of the relevant UN Security Council resolutions and for the incorporation of the principles contained therein at all stages of EU conflict prevention and mediation activities; for full gender equality and participation of women across the conflict cycle; and for gender sensitivity in training and intervention.

With regard to representation and leadership posts, women make up 40.4 % of members within the [current Parliament](#) (2019-2024). When looking at the five committees and sub-committees that deal with external affairs, their number drops to 35.2 % (see Figure 2). This is largely due to the low representation of women in the Subcommittee on Security and Defence (in spite of the subcommittee being chaired by a woman), an observation that is consistent with the research findings presented in previous sections. With regard to delegations for relations with third countries, which numbered 39 during the previous legislature (2014-2019), 10 of the 39 delegation chairs were women.³ Rule 15(2) of the Parliament's Rules of Procedure [establishes](#) the 'need to ensure an overall fair representation of political views, as well as gender and geographical balance' in leadership positions; this also [applies](#) to the distribution of the posts of committee chairs and vice-chairs by virtue of Rule 213(3) of the Rules of Procedure.

Figure 2 – Women in external affairs in the European Parliament, (%) beginning of the 2019-2024 term



Source: EPRS, 2019.

Criticism and challenges

Experts have [strongly criticised](#) the fact that commitments and declarations about promoting the WPS agenda and equal representation of women in foreign and security policy often amount to rhetoric more than actual implementation, leading to [limited progress](#) on the agenda's goals worldwide. While, as mentioned above, a high number of states have adopted national action plans for WPS, [only 43 %](#) of those include an allocated budget for implementation. This is exacerbated by the observed general [decline](#) in global foreign aid.

With regard to gender balance, while administrative, institutional and training structures may have evolved, they are [far](#) from being able to act as true enablers of a balanced gender equation in leadership positions. Moreover, some experts [posit](#) that equality among the genders has yet to be considered a top priority, a prerequisite for it to become a leading aspect of foreign policy.

A big challenge is reconfiguring public perceptions. While the WPS agenda is focused on human security and civil society roles, traditional security is linked primarily to military action and economic stability. A shift in the public's thinking about what truly is the meaning of security, with a strong emphasis on human security, could be the key to a more inclusive and well-rounded security agenda. Raising more awareness of gender imbalances, including through the way in which women are portrayed in the public space; addressing institutional culture and underlying sexism; and encouraging mentorship and role models for women, are some of the main [challenges](#) ahead.

MAIN REFERENCES

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Williams K., [Feminism in Foreign Policy](#), Oxford Research Encyclopaedias, September 2017.

ENDNOTES

¹ See [Handbook on Sweden's Feminist Foreign Policy](#), Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Government Offices of Sweden.

² See '[How Women's Participation in Conflict Prevention and Resolution Advances U.S. Interests](#)', by Jamille Bigio, Council on Foreign Relations, October 2016.

³ Data taken from Women in the European Parliament, [report](#), European Parliament, March 2018.

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