

Leading a Feminist Foreign Policy

AN INTERVIEW BJÖRN LYRVALL, AMBASSADOR OF SWEDEN TO THE UNITED STATES

FLETCHER FORUM: *In 2015, Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs Margot Wallström and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs launched Sweden's feminist foreign policy action plan. At a lecture in Brussels she stated that, "What is important is that the realization is growing that gender equality is not a women's issue, but rather a make-or-break issue. It is a make-or-break issue in itself, and it is an issue for peace, security, and sustainable development as a whole." How would you describe feminist foreign policy and its main objectives?*

BJÖRN LYRVALL: I would say that it is an agenda for change. It is a policy that aims to increase rights, representation, and resources for all women and girls, regardless of where they live. We know for sure that the rights of women and girls are not fulfilled. It is an ongoing issue, a big issue of the 21st Century, as former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said some time ago. It is not a thematic issue or an add-on issue; it is an issue of profound importance that needs to be part of all policies that we are formulating. So we are looking at our feminist foreign policy as an approach to foreign policy issues through the lens of gender equality. That has been translated into an action

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BJÖRN LYRVALL currently serves as Ambassador of Sweden to the United States. From 2007 to September 2013, Ambassador Lyrvall was Director General for Political Affairs at Sweden's Ministry for Foreign Affairs in Stockholm, after which he took up his current position. His previous diplomatic stations include Brussels, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Leningrad, Moscow, and London. Ambassador Lyrvall holds a degree in Political Science, Eastern European Affairs, and Russian from Stockholm University.

plan for the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. It encompasses tasks for all of our embassies and our departments at the Foreign Ministry. It is translated into actions that we try to implement, including at my embassy. It is a major task; we are still at the initial stages of it. We are learning how we can successfully track the attention and interest of other players. I think the mere fact that we launched something called a “feminist foreign policy” has already had some impact. It has attracted attention from the outside world and given us the space and the opportunity to talk about these important issues.

FLETCHER FORUM: *As Sweden’s ambassador to the United States, you are at the forefront of promoting and implementing Sweden’s foreign policy abroad. What has your experience been in implementing a feminist foreign policy? What does it entail?*

LYRVALL: We try to put a gender perspective on our analyses of various foreign policy issues and challenges. We are certainly in the business of advocacy, and we raise issues of gender equality when we are organizing our events at my embassy or around the country. We have organized an exhibition there on gender equality, which is open to the American public on the weekends. Giving Americans access to our building sort of showcases our country’s transparency and at the same time allows them to learn and have conversations on gender issues. We have organized a number of events with representatives of the U.S. administration, Congress, and with the NGO community. In the past three months I can think of three or four events that we have done—including on topics such as Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) and Zika. We had one event on the Day of the Child, which focused on girls’ rights, and—together with our business community—we hosted another event on women in technology at an annual meeting with the Swedish-American Chamber of Commerce. In Hollywood we—along with our film industry—co-sponsored a large event on women in film called *50-50 in 2020*, to help increase the presence and activity of female filmmakers. So it is broad.

FLETCHER FORUM: *What advantages or disadvantages have you encountered as a man while promoting feminist foreign policy? How have you been able to bring more men and others into the discussion as a whole?*

LYRVALL: To be honest with you, I am a diplomat. I have 30 years of experience in this business. I have been active primarily in serious crisis management and security policy around the world—in Russia, in the Balkans, in

Brussels, and elsewhere. For me, like many of my colleagues, engaging in this extremely important topic, and mainstreaming gender and equality issues into whatever we do is new. It is a very welcome challenge, and I have personally come to realize the profound importance of this policy statement and why it is a priority for my government. But it is not always easy to know exactly how to proceed, what to do, and how to contribute. Of course, we are guided by our action plan and by what we are discussing within my government's framework. Predominantly, it is something we are learning on the job.

I also think it is key that men engage. This is not an issue that is not only right at its core; it is very much an issue that we should deal with because it is important for creating a more equal world. But it is also smart. It is economically smart and it is something that creates a more stable and democratic world. It also improves the lives of men and boys. So I think these are all reasons for engaging with this issue. I think men could contribute a lot and make it into the global issue that it really is. There is this effect that Margot Wallström keeps referring to—The Giggle Effect. In Gandhi's words, "First they giggle, then they ignore you, then they fight you, and then you win." I think this is something I experience when I reach out to people to talk about gender equality or feminist foreign policy. There is a certain giggle, but I think we are getting past the giggle period to a more important period of slowly achieving a greater recognition of the importance of these issues.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Sweden is really defining itself as a leader in this field. Have others followed Sweden's lead and distinguished themselves as leaders in the field?*

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LYRVALL: There are many countries that I feel are increasingly engaged. Many of our Nordic friends and Canada are very active. We worked very closely with the former U.S. administration under Obama as well. Other Europeans are active, too, but this is still not enough. This is not something that just one country can achieve. We try to reach out. We can try to be in the vanguard of it and put our money where our mouth is by using our very substantial development funding for

activities in the area of SRHR, for instance. But of course, others are needed and we need to create a stronger global commitment to gender equality. The mere fact that we have brought so much attention to the issue by launching a feminist foreign policy is a positive sign, and this could potentially have the effect of engaging the world and getting others involved.

FLETCHER FORUM: *In Sweden's and your personal efforts to promote feminist foreign policy, what approaches have been most successful in engaging groups on the periphery of this issue that might not otherwise be involved?*

LYRVALL: That is a very good question. We constantly think about how we can not only inspire those who are already engaged but also reach out beyond that. In order to do that, we have to think about the arguments we could use to make the case—for instance, a business case—for gender equality. There are some very important studies out there. I am sure you have heard of McKinsey's Global Gender Gap Report 2015 that illustrates that if women were to play an identical role in the labor markets as men, as much as \$28 trillion, or 26 percent, could be added to global annual GDP by 2025.

These are figures that are sometimes very hard to confirm, but most statistics of that kind show how economically smart it is to strive towards greater gender equality. Those are arguments that work when we reach out to the periphery.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Your other diplomatic stations have included Moscow and London, as well as the United Nations and the European Union (EU). In your experience as a diplomat and as an ambassador, how has the role of diplomacy—either its significance or responsibilities—changed over the years?*

LYRVALL: The role of diplomacy, at its core, is probably not changing. We still need contacts at a government-to-government level—to resolve conflict, to conduct a conversation that could prevent deterioration of important relations, and ultimately to avoid conflict. Those kinds of conversations remain a core diplomatic task. That has been the case over the years, and it will remain that way. Then you have all the other aspects of diplomacy—in business or in culture—which are also conducted in order to spin this web of relations between countries. Of course, in my lifetime, those areas of diplomacy have grown tremendously. I recall when I was a diplomat in the 80s in the Soviet Union. The focuses were on security issues and diplomatic reporting, the military-to-military contacts, and these kinds of things. Now

engagements within a country like Russia, in my job in Washington, DC, and also of course around the globe, have grown tremendously. I spend a lot of time promoting Swedish business contacts with American companies and establishing Swedish companies here in the United States. The same goes for contacts in the cultural field or human rights issues. And it is for sure something I encourage and welcome as well. There is still a focus on the core security issues, but the relative weight of the other roles that you play as a diplomat has certainly increased.

FLETCHER FORUM: *You spent a lot of time at the European Union, both as Sweden's permanent representation and as a delegate to the enlargement negotiations between 2002 and 2003. How do you see the role of the EU now? Specifically, after events such as Brexit, do you think it is possible to heal the current divisions? What role do you think Sweden will play in such a process?*

LYRVALL: I think that the European Union remains a crucial collaboration. Recently, it has been put under very severe stress by the refugee crisis, which has affected Europe greatly. What happened there was a disappointment. We expected more solidarity and more engagement on the part of our EU colleagues. Sweden and Germany took in a very large number of refugees. We expected more distribution and sharing of the challenge to help these people. I think that the response should not be to lessen collaboration. On the contrary, more collaboration in the EU is needed. We would not in any way advocate for a shrinking EU. We are very concerned about the decision by the United Kingdom to leave the EU, but we will have to manage that situation as well as possible. It is the reflection of popular will, but of course we did not wish to see that happen. I think it is possible to find a way back, but the EU is really shaken by what is happening right now. We would be amongst those who would put more effort on our part in helping the EU to get back together again and be a functioning collaboration with open borders, as the biggest internal trade market in the world.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Some have cited the U.S. Presidential election and the developments in Europe as reflecting a growing populist sentiment. To what extent has Sweden felt this change in public attitudes and how has Swedish leadership handled this shift?*

LYRVALL: Well, we are, like everybody else, affected by this trend. We have seen it in the growth of an anti-immigration party, the Sweden Democrats, which has in the past elections gained some 13 percent in the Parliament,

making this party the third largest party in Sweden. Subsequently— at least, if you can believe the opinion polls—they have grown even more. I think it is perhaps a reflection of some people’s sense that the world is changing very rapidly. They feel a sense of insecurity. Perhaps there is nostalgia setting in for a past that is no longer there. Maybe they even have a very romanticized view of that past. These are the kinds of things I think have fed this kind of populism that you see. There have been swift global changes. You have seen waves of refugees moving as a result of terrible

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conflicts, as a result of climate change, and for other reasons. These are things I think that have caused some people to resort to populist sentiment and perhaps fall prey to easy solutions that are certainly not the best way to address the complex global problems of today. As far as a government, we should not become populist ourselves. Some issues

are not possible to answer with very simple replies; you have to have a more complex approach to deal with them. We will have to try to do that and to perhaps increase the level of complexity of the discourse.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Building on that, it is clear that the debate has become increasingly divisive not only in Sweden but in Europe as a whole. How does Sweden maintain a unified message abroad even with these political divisions at home? What lessons, if any, are applicable for the United States?*

LYRVALL: If you look at foreign policy issues, it is clearly an area where we have traditionally, as a country, tried to consult across the aisle. There has been a very determined effort by consecutive governments—be they center right or center left—to consult the opposition on major or important decisions that could affect the security of the country. This is a good tradition. This is something that we should try to defend and continue. In the case we are facing right now, this has largely meant that established parties, both on the left and the right, have conducted these conversations while the populists have been out of it. That is just something I note. We will see how things evolve.

I don’t think we are in a position to give recommendations to the U.S. administration. The situations are very different. But I take note of the polarization in American politics, which I think is extremely unfortunate and I am concerned about it when I see it. The “art of the deal”—the

art of making decisions—is usually done through some kind of an attempt to also reach out to the other side and to forge a compromise. That is not a reflection of weakness, but a reflection of strength. If you can get the message across to people that it is in the interest of the country as a whole to have a greater spectrum of society involved in decision-making, then I think that is something we will all benefit from—both my country, this country, and any country.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Earlier this year Sweden was elected into the UN Security Council and will take up its seat in January 2017. How will Sweden define its role in the Security Council? What are its key issues?*

LYRVALL: Well, we are extremely pleased to be getting back into the UN Security Council after twenty years. It was a successful campaign, especially when we—as a country conducting a feminist foreign policy—were very soundly elected to the Security Council in the first round. We see that as a confirmation and validation of our choice and respect for our policies. We will conduct and try to put as much of a gender issue perspective on the issues as we can during this time in the Security Council. We know it is going to be very hard, but it is certainly one of the ambitions that we will spend time on. We will try to be engaged and be a very active player in the Council. We start off our tenure as the Chair—the President of the Council—in the first month, so there is a lot of preparatory work going on right now.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Based on the U.S. President's stated views on women's rights in the United States, how does Sweden plan to work with a new administration that holds contradicting views to Sweden's values on this issue? What are Sweden's priorities in engaging the new administration?*

LYRVALL: As we speak, we are still waiting for some important appointments. When we get those, we will wait for policies to be presented by the new administration. That will take some time. We have obviously noted with concern some of the statements made during the campaign. It was a very tough and at times an unpleasant campaign. We also know that sometimes in electoral campaigns things are said that won't necessarily be implemented after the elections. So, I think it is prudent for us to wait and see what policies will be put on the table before drawing any definite conclusions of how to react. We will certainly have great interest in continuing to promote a very close Swedish-U.S. relationship. We have had many years of close relations—both as a result of, and contributing to, some

very important results in international politics. We have been working very closely on issues such as climate change, on trade issues, on human rights issues—including gender equality—and on international development issues. Clearly, these are all issues that we wish to continue to work on. We will try to define what will be the best way and the best path ahead to promote these issues. We might have to adapt the line of arguments, but that remains to be seen. And it's better not to speculate too much on that. But clearly we are interested in a very good and close relationship with the new U.S. administration.

FLETCHER FORUM: *On a more practical level, how does a change in the administration affect your role as an Ambassador, if at all? How do you think the new President's policies will impact relations with other countries, at a more general level?*

LYRVALL: There are clearly going to be changes when you have a new administration coming in. You change 4,000 people in the administration who are politically appointed. You have to build up new networks with people. You will also see a period of adaptation in the new U.S. administration as policies are being formulated. There is going to be an effect on the dynamism of the relationship, at least initially. But the facts remain: Sweden is the tenth largest investor in the United States. For a country with ten million people, that's not so bad. We could argue that we are the biggest investor per capita. Swedish companies here have created some 330,000 American jobs. We are a security provider, not a security taker, so to speak, when you look at it on a global scale. These are arguments that will be taken into account. And we will try to do what we can to put forward these arguments to policymakers in the new administration. I think a lot of positions are still being hammered out in the new administration. So I think we are now in a sort of mode of informing, educating, and discussing with whoever we can in the transition team about what we can contribute and that hopefully will be taken into account.

And things are changing—clearly they are. And the second part of your question relates to the international aspect?

FLETCHER FORUM: *Yes on a general level, how do a President's new policies impact relations with other countries [from Sweden's perspective]?*

LYRVALL: There is no denying the United States is the only superpower and is of profound importance on what happens here politically. I can just

mention that at the time of the electoral campaign we had greater interest in the U.S. election in Sweden than we have had in any Swedish political process. I had an open house at my embassy on election night and no less than 300 Swedes came to that. People came to Washington, DC just to be present for the U.S. election. It shows the enormous interest. There are blogs, books, and endless newspaper articles written about the U.S. election. It shows that there is recognition back in my country that these elections count and are very important to the world as well as to the agenda we will be able to pursue at the global level. We should be very well aware of that; it makes it even more important to try to forge close relations with the new administration. *f*