

Feminist diplomacy

Moving from a slogan to rally support to true momentum for change

Report 2020-09-22 DIPLO-44 published 4 November 2020

Brigitte Grésy, President of the High Council on Gender Equality

Martine Storti, President of the European and International Issues Commission

Cléa Le Cardeur, International Affairs Commissioner, Rapporteur

Coline Real and **Anaëlle Schimberg**, Interns



SUMMARY

Since March 2018, France has employed the expression “feminist diplomacy” when referring to its foreign policy action. The High Council for Gender Equality (HCE), specifically tasked with evaluating France’s International Strategy for Gender Equality (2018-2022), France’s roadmap for foreign policy, therefore considered it necessary to begin by examining this strongly symbolic notion and France’s action concerning it. Is it merely an appealing expression, and therefore a communication tool, or is it truly an awareness at the highest level of the importance of including equality in France’s foreign policy and therefore a major step forward?

In its report, the HCE sets forth the elements for defining this innovative concept, establishes a first stock take of France’s feminist diplomacy and makes 19 recommendations to strengthen its framework and its implementation in its different areas of action.

Feminist diplomacy: an innovative expression and demanding notional guidelines

In using the expression “feminist diplomacy” in 2018, France has joined the small number of countries that practice feminist diplomacy or foreign feminist policy: Sweden since 2014 and Canada since 2017, joined by Mexico since January 2020.

No text has been adopted at an international level that defines this notion and the reference to feminism and its introduction into the area of foreign policy is new. Its understanding is at this stage flexible and varies according to States.

Unlike Sweden, France has not drafted theoretical guidelines and prefers a pragmatic and progressive approach. Supported by the President’s pledge to make gender equality the great cause of his five-year term, France has used the expression “feminist diplomacy” to rally support for defending women’s rights when these rights, particularly sexual and reproductive rights, are being challenged internationally.

Despite this global ambition, the scope for action of French feminist diplomacy is limited. Focused mainly on diplomacy in the strict sense and official development assistance, it does not cover, unlike in Sweden and Canada, all the areas of foreign policy, including defence and security policy and trade policy.

This innovative expression has come up against resistance among people working on French foreign policy to using the term “feminist”. The term should be clearly defined in order to receive broader acceptance and its expectations and requirements should continue to be explained.

Proposed guidelines and definition by the HCE targeting a transformative approach

Drawing on interviews with people working in institutional, organizational and research-related areas and on Swedish and Canadian experience, the HCE has two main goals: to promote universal feminism against all forms of relativism, be it religious, cultural or political and to transform power relations (abolish the patriarchal system). To this end, conducting feminist diplomacy requires adopting **a holistic approach to gender equality that is applied in all areas of foreign policy** – diplomacy in its strict sense, official development assistance, defence and security, trade, the environment, culture – and in all of its stages (preparation, implementation, evaluation).

The HCE believes that feminist diplomacy is based on **six fundamental principles**, endorsing three main principles laid down by Sweden:

- 1/ **Rights**: Putting freedom, women’s rights and gender equality at the core of external action;
- 2/ **The representation of women**: Ensuring full participation of women (government personnel and feminist movements) in the co-construction and implementation of feminist diplomacy;
- 3 / **Resources**: Mobilizing sizable and long-term resources that are commensurate with the challenge and ambitions.

The HCE also added the following three principles:

- 4/ **A transformative approach** that aims to make lasting change and abolish unequal structures of patriarchal power and that is followed over the long term;

5/ **Specific and long-term organization of institutions that ensures coordination and consistency of policies conducted including an accountability system;**

6/ **The affirmation of international solidarity with women in the fight for their rights and their freedoms.**

The HCE proposes the following definition of feminist diplomacy:

“Feminist diplomacy is a State’s policy that puts gender equality, women’s freedom and rights, and the fight to abolish patriarchy at the core of its external action, in all of its dimensions (official development assistance, diplomacy in the strict sense, trade and the economy, culture, education, influence, defence and security, climate and the environment).

To this end, it ensures participation, in equal proportions, of women and feminist movements (in and outside of the country) in its co-construction and its implementation. It allocates sizeable resources over the long term to the achievement of this objective and it establishes, within the State, specific and long-term organization of institutions and government which ensures the consistency of policies and that includes an accountability system. ”

The implementation of France’s feminist diplomacy: between progress and resistance

Two years after a feminist diplomacy was adopted, the implementation of this policy has been accompanied by support within the State and real progress. However, certain points need to be strengthened so that feminist diplomacy can become a transformative policy that is truly engrained in the French institutional system.

▸ Enhanced advocacy but insufficient infiltration in the various areas of France’s foreign policy.

Seen in enhanced advocacy for women’s rights in the multilateral framework and the organization of key diplomatic events (French Presidency of the G7, co-organization of the Generation Equality Forum), support for feminist diplomacy is still too weak in State-to-State bilateral exchanges and outside major events on gender equality. Moreover, as certain issues were not addressed such as sexual and reproductive rights during the French Presidency of the G7, questions could be raised regarding competition of issues and their hierarchy in French foreign policy. **The HCE, while understanding the necessary consideration of the various interests of the nation, supports the idea that feminist diplomacy can and must be better included in diplomatic exchanges and be applied to all areas of French foreign policy, including security and defence policy and economic and trade policy.**

▸ Organization of French government that must strengthen steering and accountability procedures

Although a first important step has been taken to include feminist diplomacy in how French government is organized, the strategy, which is limited in scope and only concerns the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs and its agencies, cannot, as is, be the roadmap for comprehensive and transformative feminist foreign policy. The HCE also notes a still unequal involvement of all public stakeholders. **Putting feminist diplomacy at the core of France’s external action means involving all of the ministries concerned by international action, rallying broader support of territorial communities and establishing a coordination body placed under the authority of the President of the Republic or the Prime Minister, as well as an accountability mechanism for all the institutions concerned.**

▸ Human and financial resources that are not commensurate with the challenges

The HCE also notes that unlike Sweden or Canada, there are no services or an ambassador assigned to feminist policy, that staff responsible for gender equality issues

often take on several roles and that the International Strategy for Gender Equality (2018-2022) was not accompanied by any specific funding.

If the cross-cutting policy document on gender equality seems to have generated an increase in funds for feminist diplomacy, the real impact of this mobilization is difficult to evaluate because there is a lack of clear information. Also, France’s contributions to international organizations (UN Women, UNFPA) still remain lower than those of other countries.

▸ Feminist diplomacy that is still designed largely without women

The HCE notes that despite progress, equality is still non-existent in posts of responsibility in diplomacy and in ministries with a strong international component (Ministry for the Armed Forces, Ministry of the Economy, Finance and the Recovery).

The involvement of national and international feminist associations in the design, implementation and evaluation of policies on gender equality in the international realm must still be strengthened.

An uneven stocktake depending on the areas of action

The HCE considers that feminist diplomacy, to achieve a truly transformative objective, must be present in all areas of foreign policy and proposes ideas for strengthening its implementation in the various areas of action.

▸ Making the feminist approach a structuring component of official development assistance (ODA)

The mainstreaming of the gender approach is clearly on the French ODA agenda. However, the HCE notes that:

○ **In France, the level of ODA targeting gender remains below the average of countries on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC)** (26% for France, of which 3% with a main objective of gender equality (marked 2 by the OECD) versus 42% of which 4% marked 2 for the average of OECD DAC countries in 2017-2018) and the objectives set by the International Strategy for Gender Equality (50% of projects in gender marked volume by 2022), which is much lower than European objectives (85%).

○ The figures communicated by the various institutions responsible for gender ODA (DG Trésor, Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Agence Française de Développement) are not very visible and are **difficult to compare**.

○ Efforts must still be made to **strengthen the truly transformative nature of ODA projects and improve the quality of marking assistance**.

France's ambitions in terms of feminist diplomacy and feminist ODA should be addressed in the programming act on solidarity-based development and combatting global inequalities, which is scheduled to be passed in the fourth quarter of 2020.

▸ For a feminist defence and security policy: achieve the Women, Peace and Security Agenda

The HCE commends the adoption of a gender equality plan at the Ministry for the Armed Forces. It however notes the sexism that is still present in military academies and schools. It notes that France has not yet published its 3rd National Women, Peace and Security Plan of Action and that it did not incorporate these issues in its roadmap for feminist diplomacy. In its report, the HCE makes five recommendations for initiating feminist defence and security policy, including to pursue efforts to ensure **women's access to posts of responsibility, the systematic incorporation of training programmes into the Women, Peace and Security issues in military schools and the strengthening of tools for fighting gender-based and sexual violence and discrimination in the armed forces**.

▸ For a feminist trade policy: mainstream gender

Unlike Sweden and Canada, France does not include trade policy in the scope of its feminist diplomacy. In this report, the HCE makes three recommendations to mainstream a gender perspective in trade policy. **Ensuring gender-balanced representation in negotiation teams, including a gender perspective in trade agreements, advocating these issues in economic forums**.