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Study on Feminist Approach on Security Governance: Case Studies on Sweden and India

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ABSTRACT

This research seeks to examine the theoretical foundations of the feminist approach to security and explore the articulation and implementation of feminist norms within modern frameworks of security governance. The emphasis is placed on critically assessing the integration of feminist norms within the Swedish framework of security governance, exploring the Indian engagement with feminist approaches to security, and comparatively assessing the impact of varying political, institutional, and socio-cultural contexts on the implementation of gender-sensitive approaches to security. The nature of the research in this study is qualitative, as it uses interpretations of policy documents, parliamentary debates, strategic plans, international agreements, and literature. In using qualitative research methods, this study is able to examine the normative narratives, power dynamics, and institutional aspects that shape security governance, which cannot be done using numbers alone. The research puts forward three related arguments: first, the feminist approach to security theory challenges the focus of security from the state to individuals and communities by prioritising gender power relations; second, Sweden has a well-established integration of feminist norms through gender mainstreaming and rights-based foreign and security policies; third, India's engagement with feminist approaches to security is driven by its specific context and shaped by constitutional commitments, development priorities, and complex internal and regional security dynamics. The importance of this research is underscored by the many conflicts, the lack of consensus on important issues through a passionate debate in democracy, and the growing discontent with economics and societies that exist today. A gender-sensitive and inclusive concept of governance in security is necessary to achieve long-term peace and a valuable democracy. The relevance of this study is also evident in the context of the current debates on security governance and normative change.

Keywords: Feminist Security Theory; Security Governance; Human Security; Sweden; India

Introduction

Security governance has been a traditional area of interest for International Relations as a discipline, but its prevailing assumptions have been Western-centric, state-centric, and androcentric. Until recently, security was equated with state survival against military threats from outside its territory. The gendered aspects of insecurity experienced by individuals, groups, or marginalized sections of society were invisible to these dominant theories. The incorporation of feminist theories into the field was not merely an addition to the discipline but a fundamental challenge to its very foundations. J. Ann Tickner proved that Realist security theories of rationality, power, deterrence, etc., were based on a masculine epistemology. Cynthia Enloe revealed how women, as military wives, domestic workers, or refugees, were not marginal to world security but essential to its operation. The postcolonial feminists then pointed to a further problem with

mainstream feminist IR theories. The attempt to represent all women had led to a repetition of colonialism. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's challenge to "Western eyes" had revealed how a monolithic "Third World woman" had been created on the basis of her victimhood. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question Can the subaltern speak? raised further issues about whether women from the Third World had a voice to express their security concerns or if it was always mediated by more powerful actors.

This research employs those critical perspectives to explore feminist security governance in two starkly different political worlds: Sweden, which officially adopted a Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) in 2014 as the pathfinder, and India, a postcolonial democracy whose feminist security policy is an integral component of its colonial legacy and its complex hierarchies of caste and class, and its current conflicts. The comparison is deliberate and is couched in terms of a meeting between unequal knowledge producers from which one projects feminist norms and the other receives them and creates its own unique version of them. The research methodology is qualitative, combining a comparative case analysis with a critical discourse analysis of policy papers, action plans, UN documents, and feminist literature. The choice of qualitative research methods assists us in exploring the issue of meanings, power relations, and the production of knowledge, which cannot be achieved through quantitative methods. A major paradigm shift was achieved through the publication of the UNDP's 1994 Human Development Report, which constructed the notion of human security in seven dimensions: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security. This provided a fertile terrain for feminist readings, where the focus shifted from the state to the individual as the security actor. The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 was then adopted in 2000 to codify the Women Peace and Security agenda, and since then, 108 countries have adopted their National Action Plans. Sweden was the first to launch its first NAP in 2006, while India's first NAP was adopted in 2021, a gap of fifteen years that becomes a critical juncture for analysis.

Theoretical Framework: Postcolonial Feminism and Security

The theoretical underpinnings of the study are embedded in postcolonial feminism, a critical perspective that is distinct from liberal and radical approaches. Liberal feminist theory seeks to answer the question: who's in the room? Postcolonial feminist theory seeks to answer the follow-up question: who built the room, who designed it, and whose ground does it sit on? It privileges the following: security is always a gendered concept, gender is always a concept that intersects with others, and knowledge about security is never neutral. The feminist base of International Relations was secured by Tickner and Enloe in the early 1990s, by V. Spike Peterson, who revealed the forging of the modern state through the lens of the masculine binaries of public/private, protector/protected, and by Laura Sjoberg, who brought feminist security studies into focus as a study of war, terrorism, and the state through personal, institutional, structural, and symbolic lenses.

Postcolonial feminism further refines this toolset. Mohanty's critique in 1988 contested the Western feminist IR tradition of constructing the 'Third World woman' as poor and culturally backward, and using this as a means of justifying liberatory strategies that reproduce the colonial power relationships of the past. The subaltern studies project initiated by Spivak asks: can the 'Third World woman' whose lives span the crossroads of colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism ever be heard in the mainstream IR discourse, or will her voice always be filtered through the mediator of the elite? Uma Narayan identifies the common problem in both the Western feminist and the postcolonial nationalist traditions: the 'Third World woman' becomes the metaphor for cultural authenticity through the exploitation of her body. This

influences the way this research engages the feminist security governance in Sweden and India: as two separate paths that have been shaped by very different historical experiences of state-building, colonialism, and feminist politics. The analysis occurs at the macro-level (the global WPS norm), the meso-level (national-level governance and military structures), and the micro-level (the lives of the marginalized women: the Dalit in conflict zones, the Sami in Sweden, and the half-widow in Kashmir).

Sweden's Feminist Foreign Policy: Achievements and Contradictions

Sweden has been the most comprehensive practitioner of feminist security governance to date, with the ambition of weaving gender as an essential hinge of its foreign and security policy. The Feminist Foreign Policy, launched by Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs Margot Wallström in 2014, has three main goals: rights, representation, and resources, often referred to by the acronym 3Rs. A reality check was later added to the 3Rs to ensure the continued relevance of the goals. The rights component of the 3Rs aims to protect women and girls in conflict zones. The representation component of the 3Rs advocates for the inclusion of women at the table for peace and security processes. The resources component of the 3Rs provides actual financial support to gender equality projects. Sweden has allocated over 1.8 billion SEK to gender focused international projects by 2019. The feminist security governance of Sweden also aims to include gender within the machinery of security governance. This includes mandatory gender analysis of Swedish foreign operations, trade agreements, gender impact assessments of budget processes, and the placement of Gender Field Advisors (GENADs) with the United Nations and NATO peacekeeping forces deployed to Afghanistan, Mali, and the Central African Republic. Sweden has long been at the forefront of the implementation of UNSCR 1325, launching its first NAP on the resolution in 2006. Sweden has used its 2017-2018 stint on the United Nations Security Council to push the Women, Peace, and Security agenda forward and to block attempts to undermine gender commitments to peacekeeping. By 2021, the WPS Index ranked Sweden fourth globally. In 2022, the World Economic Forum ranked Sweden fifth globally on the Gender Gap Index.

The postcolonial feminist perspective strips bare the inherent structural tensions. The 3Rs framework was developed by the FFP in Stockholm and then imposed on the world as a universal benchmark. However, as described by Mohanty, this process tends to homogenize the security concerns of women in the receiving countries into a general deficit that Sweden has to address. The first tension is revealed when we look at military exports. The FFP promised to address gender-based violence linked to conflict, yet Sweden has been supplying military hardware to countries that have been guilty of human rights abuses, including those in the Middle East, North Africa, until a partial review was undertaken in 2019. The structural approach of Jacqui True highlights the inherent tension between feminist security policy and a capitalistic defence industry. The latter is bound to fail because of its inherent structural contradictions. The decision to join NATO in 2022 further exacerbated tensions between military deterrence and human security. The risk of gender mainstreaming being reduced to a technocratic exercise was highlighted by Hilary Charlesworth. Subsequent research has borne her out. The culture of sexual harassment remains a feature of the Swedish military despite eight years of gender mainstreaming. The most significant consequence of gender mainstreaming was revealed when there was a change of government in October 2022. The weakness of the FFP was laid bare. Feminism based on a commitment by ministers is easily reversed. The FFP was good at marketing a brand of feminism but failed to deliver. The universality of "Swedish women" hides a multitude of sins regarding Afro-Swedish women, Sami indigenous women, and migrant women. The intersection is ignored by a Western-centric approach to universality. The

postcolonial feminist approach would highlight these omissions as constitutive of a framework based on Western universalism.

India's Security Governance: Paradox and Postcolonial Complexity

The security architecture is structured around the idea of the state, with an emphasis on territorial sovereignty, military deterrence, and security against external threats. A postcolonial feminist perspective on gender relations can provide some insights into the operation of security architecture. The violence of the Partition of 1947, the 1962 Sino-Indian War, and the Kashmir-Pakistan conflict has created a security state with an emphasis on military strength and masculinity. Women are represented as a marker of national honour rather than as actors of governance. This is a structure that is layered over a colonial legacy of a 'martial race' that privileged certain masculinities, such as Sikh, Gurkha, and Rajput, in military recruitment and ignored others, such as Dalits, Adivasis, and Southerners. These hierarchies inform contemporary security structures in India. In 2025, India's defence budget rose to 81 billion dollars. It prioritises spending on Rafale jets, S-400s, and Integrated Battle Groups. However, the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act gives security forces powers to arrest and kill in 'disturbed areas' and gives them immunity from civilian law. The ethnic violence in the state of Manipur between 2023 and 2025 is an example of the symbiosis between AFSPA and patriarchal violence. The Kuki-Zo women were subject to gang rape and humiliation as the government failed to respond to the violence. In such a context, it is interesting to note that 30% of women in India and 45% in Manipur experience spousal violence, according to NFHS-5 data. These are figures that a self-proclaimed leader in international feminism cannot ignore.

Gender inclusion within the Indian military has been advanced by the courts rather than an inherent commitment to gender inclusion. The Supreme Court judgment in 2020 in Secretary, Ministry of Defence v. Babita Puniya was a game-changer that allowed permanent commissions to women officers in eight arms and services. The military has maintained that women lacked the physical prowess and leadership abilities necessary for command. Currently, there are 8,000 women officers, only 3-4% of the overall strength of officers by 2026. Infantry recruitment is on hold to await "societal readiness," a euphemism for the colonial-era justification of cultural and traditional impediments to women's equality. The Indian contribution to UN peacekeeping has been much better. The first all-women Formed Police Unit was deployed to Liberia in 2007. In 2019, female engagement teams were deployed to the DRC. By 2026, there are over 150 women deployed to six UN peacekeeping missions. The security forces who receive gender sensitivity training for the UN mission revert to AFSPA-governed counter-insurgency roles at home, where gender norms are irrelevant. Nicola Pratt's interpretation of UNSCR 1325 is relevant here: "The international visibility of women is promoted by UNSCR 1325, but the domestic structure of patriarchal violence remains intact." As of 2025, India had not framed a Women Peace and Security National Action Plan, and regions such as Kashmir and Northeast do not qualify as conflict zones where Women Peace and Security is applicable. The feminist peace movements of the era include the Meira Paibi protests by women in Manipur who staged a nude protest against AFSPA and Irom Sharmila's hunger strike, but both of these do not fit into the Women Peace and Security framework and hence do not find a mention in the Indian context because the Indian state is more concerned about its international feminist credentials than its internal dissent and its attempts to silence it. The situation is further complicated by the presence of other vulnerable groups such as Dalit and Adivasi women in Maoist zones

who are targeted by both parties and the Kashmiri "half-widows" who are not recognized as either widows or wives because their husbands are missing.

Comparative Analysis: Convergences, Divergences and Power

To look at the two countries through the lens of postcolonial feminism is to realize that feminist security governance isn't something that some countries achieve and others wander towards as a goal. It's something that both countries have formally endorsed and helped propel forward in the world stage: Women, Peace, and Security and the more sensitive peacekeeping forces that have come as a result of such agendas. But both countries have also demonstrated the ability to talk feminist while remaining patriarchal and militaristic in the ways in which they secure themselves as nation-states. One can look at Sweden as the example of the former, feminist ideas can be worked into the process but not the law or the culture, and as such can easily be undone if the political winds change. India can be seen as the example of the latter, change happens at a glacial pace if there isn't support for such change in the ways in which institutions are structured. The Supreme Court can make permanent commissions, but it can't make the culture that greets the woman officer as she enters the service.

The power relations between the two countries are also worthy of analysis. Sweden was quite eager to export its feminist security agenda to the rest of the world and had already influenced the security debate in Canada (2017), France (2019), and Mexico (2020), and had initiated a dialogue on security issues to be held in 2025 in India through its Sweden India WPS program run by the Institute for Security and Development Policy. This is not just the sharing of good practices but the export of norms that carry the epistemic weight of the Global North. As Narayan points out, when the North seeks to export its ideas on good governance to the South, it is likely to result in the marginalization of the rich and varied feminist knowledge that Indian women's movements have been able to develop through their struggles and activism over the decades. The feminist security agenda that Indian women have been able to develop through the struggles of groups such as Meira Paibi, APDP, WISCOMP, and Rita Manchanda's work on the agency of women in South Asia's conflict zones is a rich epistemological resource for feminist security governance that the WPS framework has failed to factor into its framework. Both countries also failed on the question of intersectionality. Sweden's FFP ignored the security concerns of its indigenous and Afro-Swedish populations by universalizing gender security concerns, while India's security agenda also fails to address the complex security situation of Dalit and Adivasi women in conflict zones by obscuring the impact of caste and ethnicity on their security situation. The combined epistemological power of Patricia Hill Collins' matrix of domination and Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality also reveal what is missing from both countries' security agendas: a security agenda that fails to address issues of gender without also addressing those of race, caste, class, and colonialism is bound to reproduce the exclusions that the security system is supposed to address.

Findings, Policy Implications and the Way Forward

The study concludes with three key takeaways. First, postcolonial feminism is the most promising approach to analysing the effectiveness of feminist security governance. This is because it challenges the universalism of Western feminist norms by focusing on the specific historical context of security governance. Second, the top-down institutionalisation of security governance in Sweden and the litigation-led incremental approach of India highlights the disconnect between the inclusion of women in security governance roles and the actual transformation of gender relations underlying security governance. While

the Swedish WPS Index ranks it fourth globally, and more than 150 women peacekeepers of India are a notable achievement, the reality is that it is still insufficient to address the root causes of patriarchal security governance. Third, feminist security epistemologies of the grassroots level of India are an untapped potential for feminist security governance globally. The security governance epistemology of Meira Paibi, the APDP, and feminist legal activists who secured the Babita Puniya judgment should be recognized as authoritative security governance knowledge rather than an indicator of developmental failure to be assisted by the Global North.

The way forward in terms of policy for Sweden would involve the integration of feminist discourse with the actual practice of arms exports. This would require the establishment of a separate, codified, gender-informed, human security mechanism to cover all defence export licenses. The existing FFP GENADS system, the NAP reporting mechanism, and gender impact assessments need to be codified into legislation, not just ministerial policy, to prevent the rolling back of such mechanisms in the future. It would be necessary to rethink the 2025 ISDP talks between Sweden and India as a two-way conversation rather than a one-way exchange of information. Instead of viewing India's current grassroots feminist knowledge as a weakness that needs to be corrected, Sweden would need to consider it as a strength. For India, the first step would be to codify a National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325, which would involve the involvement of civil society to ensure the voices of Dalit women, Adivasi women, and women from areas of conflict are prioritized. Any attempt to reform the AFSPA or to put in place a robust, independent, civilian-led mechanism to oversee security operations in disturbed areas would need to form a part of any feminist security dialogue aimed at protecting women instead of putting them at even greater risk. Gender sensitivity training would need to move beyond mere procedure to a more feminist pedagogy to question the existing hierarchies of caste, class, and ethnicity in the military and the police forces.

The path forward for feminist security governance globally depends on three changes. First, WPS has to become a framework that fully incorporates non-Western feminist knowledges as sources to inform norms, not merely evidence of what is to be fixed. Second, feminist security governance research has to move beyond merely including women to include an examination of whether or not it makes a difference for security outcomes for the most marginalized what Heidi Hudson calls substantive representation, not merely descriptive. Third, the relationship between Global North and Global South feminist security governance has to become an equally coproduced relationship, not merely a flow of norms from North to South. These are timely demands because of a number of developments. The decline of feminist foreign policy by Sweden after 2022 is occurring during a period when nationalist, militaristic politics is on the rise around the world, threatening gender equality principles in many democracies. The absence of a WPS National Action Plan in India continues to persist, which means that the women who need feminist security governance most are still waiting. Nisha Yuval-Davis' body of research on gender and nation has demonstrated how postcolonial countries place women both as symbols of national honour and as those who need to be protected by the state. The security of Dalit women in Chhattisgarh, half-widows in Kashmir, Sami women in Sweden, or Afro-Swedish women in Malmö is not a secondary issue to be worked around once the basic framework is built. The security of these women is how we should measure if that framework is sufficient.

Conclusion

The argument of the present study is that you cannot measure feminist security governance with a single universal yardstick to mark the advanced and the laggard. Security is a product of the colonial legacy, the

gender-class-ethnicity intersections, and the various knowledge systems created by the various feminist movements in response to their specific insecurities. FFP in Sweden is a tangible reality, but it was a structurally vulnerable, internally contradictory, and universally restricted phenomenon. The feminist security governance scenario in India may seem contradictory on the global stage, but it is partial, fragmented, and replete with feminist knowledge systems on the ground, which the global governance community has not learned to listen to. What the two scenarios add to the literature on security governance is the argument that the only way to a transformative, universally inclusive form of feminist security governance is through the experiences of the most marginalized women, not through the declarations of the most powerful states. A gender-sensitive, inclusive approach to security governance is not only a nice idea to sustain peace in the long run; it is the only way to tackle the complexity of the security problems states face. In a moment of democratic backsliding, militarization, and climate insecurity, the argument of the present study is not only relevant but also a matter of urgency.

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