



## **Master Project**

**Sweden's Feminist Foreign Policy. A Case of Reproducing Colonial and Imperial Structures in ECOWAS Member States**

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### Project Summary:

In 2014 Sweden announced that it would pursue a feminist foreign policy from now on (cf. Kouvo 2019: 66). The back then new established government was the first country in the world to base its foreign policy onto feminism (cf. *ibid.*). Sweden, thereby, has a long history with being a feminist government. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Swedish government constantly increased the representation and participation of women in its political environment by adapting structures that challenged existing gender constructions. With the feminist foreign policy Sweden aimed at pushing the feminist practices of the government over the domestic realm into the international arena. Feminism in international relations, thereby, is not a new angle and was long before Sweden's decision demanded by various scholars to break up various power structures. Feminist scholars started to challenge the construction of international politics during the late 1980s and 90s. The concept of feminism itself, with women's oppression and subordination as basis, is thereby differently understood and laid out by the various scholars committed to the field of international politics (cf. Enyew&Mihrete 2018: 59). Those feminist concepts are embedded in various social theories, philosophies and movements, such as marxist or socialislist, liberal, or postcolonial and originated in different places around the world. The liberal feminist concept is thereby the most dominant in international relations. Liberal feminist, for example, are John Stuart Mill, Susan Moller Okin or Marhta C. Nussbaum, (cf. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). However, liberal feminism applied internationally has a somewhat controversial stand. In recent years liberal feminism, also recognised as Western feminism, was associated with a universal approach towards feminism that includes an un-acknowledgment of the contribution of Western women to colonial oppression (cf. Chaudhuri&Strobel 1992), the justification of colonial intervention 'by arguing for the saving of "brown women from brown men" (Spivak 2008: 78 ) or the conviction that local women are a valuable tool to change the culture and social structures in the global south (cf. Vergès 2021: 35). These characteristics themselves validated development involvement of the Global North in countries of the Global South. Containing and applying a curriculum based on western values and understandings. A critical voice against the most dominant concept of feminism in international relations is postcolonial feminism. Postcolonial feminism "is concerned with the position and representation of women and other marginalized groups in the discursive formations and power structures put into place by Western colonialism and their lingering effect." (Bartels et al. 2019: 158). Postcolonialism thereby seeks to disrupt power structures that oppress by examine "the intersections of (neo)colonialism with gender, race, nation, class and sexualities,..., with the ultimate aim to change oppressive power structures enacted in the name of race, nation and empire." (*ibid.*). With Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2008) or Chandra Mohanty

(1988), the postcolonial theory was combined with a feminist angle, concerned with the state of women from the global south as colonising or colonised subjects (Bartels et al. 2019: 158).

Based on the critique made towards western/liberal feminism a critical reflection of Sweden's feminist foreign policy might be in order to reflect on possible colonial and imperial effects Sweden feminist foreign policy might be entail due to its globally origin.

#### Research Approach:

The subject of interest of this research project is the feminist concept itself imbedded within Sweden's feminist approach. Since the controversial stance of liberal feminism as a western dominated construct that prevails development approaches in the Global South a critical lens was integrated into the research subject. In order to gain disclosure about the interested subject Sweden's development cooperation with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was considered as suitable research framework. Not only because the cooperation lasted for several years, or the given place of the cooperation but also because the cooperation resulted in ECOWAS publishing guidelines on gender and feminism as a foundation for the institutions work. The fact of the publication made it possible to analyse, reflect and evaluate Sweden's concept of feminism in context of its cooperation with countries in the Global South on the hand of ECOWAS member states. The leading research question therefore is whether Sweden does reproduce imperial and colonial structures with its feminist foreign policy in ECOWAS member states. Imperialism and colonialism are thereby understood as a foremost discursive practice nowadays, consisting of ideological projects and cultural representations which are expressed in the production of knowledge and the promotion of seemingly value neutral hegemonic discourses.

Firstly, literature with the headwords feminism, western feminism, colonialism, postcolonialism, Eurocentrism as well as development was achieved through a review. That literature review, not only clarified that the interested research subject marks a gap in research onto feminist foreign policy, but also provided the theoretical basis for the qualitative research approach, which was separated into two analysis sets. The first set was based on specific literature on liberal feminism and was used to carry out a deductive document analysis of primary sources to classify Sweden's feminist concept. The decision to base the first set onto liberal feminism was legitimised by the reality that this concept is the one mostly used in development strategies by states in the global North as mentioned above. The theoretical assumptions of Susan Moller Okin, Amy Baehr, Martha Nussbaum, Ruth Abbey, and Patricia Smith cumulated in the used categories of: equality, participation, justice, democracy, human rights, empowerment, male authority and the

corresponding violence towards women, domestic private divide and individuality. These codes were applied onto Sweden's handbook on feminist foreign policy. The analysis showed that Sweden's feminist concept can indeed be considered as liberal feminism, specifically as egalitarian liberal feminism. The categories were then also applied on the already mentioned ECOWAS gender guidelines to comprehend if the feminist concepts are concurrent. This step was considered as necessary since Sweden's cooperation with ECOWAS looked foremost as Sweden teaching the staff of the ECOWAS PAPS department on feminist issues in the form of gender trainings. The analysis showed that the gender guidelines can also be considered as egalitarian feminism.

By showing that the same approach of feminism was found within these guidelines the possibility opens up of Sweden affecting feminist and gender knowledge in the ECOWAS institution. Considering that, and the definition of colonialism and imperialism used within this research project, Sweden's feminist discourse in the form of its official documents on feminist foreign policy were analysed under a postcolonial feminist lens. That marks the second analysis set. The second analysis set was based on Sandra Mohanty's, Rajan's & Parks's as well as Cheryl McEwan's postcolonial feminist assumptions on foreign policy and development and applied on documents that Sweden published and used as basis for its development cooperation between 2017 and 2021 under the headwords of foreign policy, development and West Africa to provide disclosure if Sweden does reproduce imperial and colonial structures in ECOWAS member states. That timeframe was chosen since it reflects the beginning of Sweden's development cooperation with ECOWAS and ended with the publication of their gender guidelines. This document analysis set entailed the codes: Agency, Knowledge Construction, Experts, Binary Oppositions, Binary Model of Gender, Women as Constitutes Group, Partnership, Standard Policies, The Hegemony of Neoliberalism, Definition of Poverty and History of Colonialism. The analysis showed that Sweden's feminist concept indeed entails several severe characteristics critiqued by postcolonial feminist scholars. That includes that Sweden puts its own agency first, defines how the agency of the people in the global South should look like, constructs knowledge and presents itself as an expert, states what should be the norm as well as constructs women in binary terms and as oppressed. Admittedly Sweden acknowledges ownership of partner countries and actors. However, it still states what is essential within these partnerships and subjects its partnerships to conditions stated by the Swedish state in order to function. Next to that, the Swedish state works with standard policies, argues for a capitalist economic system and defines what poverty is and furthermore neglects any historical past and contribution to colonialism and imperialism at the same time. In order to broaden these findings secondary data was reviewed and gathered to put the discoveries

in the context of the ECOWAS member states so as to give answer to the interested research question of Sweden reproducing colonial and imperial structures.

To mention at that point is the flaw of putting the Swedish state at the centre of the postcolonial feminist analysis. Usually postcolonial approaches urge the researcher to gather, receive, observe and analyse knowledge by putting the postcolonial subject itself at the centre of the research approach and not a Northern nation-state. However, the definition and understanding of Chun (cf. 2012) who shows the interchange of the state and colonialism made it possible. He explains that the state can initiate ideological projects by stating interpretations, shaping discourses, and exerting legitimation via them. By seeing the state as the initiator of ideology projects, its ability to name, define and construct the identity of itself and others as well as to state cultural, political, and institutional aspects, it is possible, argues Chun (cf. *ibid.*), to see the nation-state "as a signifying apparatus" of domination (679). Understanding liberal feminism as cultural articulation installed in and practiced by Sweden's foreign policy and development discourse towards non-Western countries, it is possible to put the Swedish state at the centre of the postcolonial feminist critique within this thesis. Alining the document analysis findings with secondary data provided insights into Sweden's feminist concept.

Does Sweden Reproduce Colonial and Imperial Structures in ECOWAS member states with its feminist concept?

Next to the analysis findings, the secondary data, that was retrieved from research that examined a combination of the postcolonial feminist findings and the place of the research object, provided discourse about the possible effects, in the form of reproduction of colonial and imperial structures, in ECOWAS member states. So, it shows that in terms of the domination of agency and the construction of knowledge Sweden has the upper hand in its development cooperation. Agency is hereby understood as the ability to state, satisfy needs, whose voices are heard and whose are excluded, in other words, what power relations are played out (McEwan 2001: 95). Sweden legitimises that by establishing itself as a frontrunner, voice and therefore expert for global gender equality. That assumption is based on Sweden's long history of being a gender concerned government. Via dialogue, publications and education Sweden spreads its egalitarian liberal feminist understanding. In the case of this research project that cumulated in ECOWAS publishing its gender guidelines after Sweden's teaching on gender issues. In development cooperation and especially in collaborations where gender was instrumentalised it was observed that gender training is a vital method for institutions of the Global North to construct knowledge in the Global South. The supremacy of agency and the construction of knowledge enforces an asymmetrical relationship

where local means and knowledge is marginalised. Sweden indeed stresses the need for local knowledge and agency but only as mechanism to realise their liberal feminist understanding. That included Sweden's usage of internationally recognised gender agreements, such as UNSCR 1325 or the WPS Agenda as frameworks for local agency. Both agendas played a significant role within the cooperation with ECOWAS. That both agreements were criticised for its whiteness, as it will be shown later, underlines Sweden's non-consideration for local considerations.

In order for agency and the construction of knowledge to function binary oppositions have to be made. Binary oppositions construct the normal, acknowledged, and desired by marking what can be seen as abnormal or deviant. Postcolonial feminist scholars have shown that often western values, ideals, and ideas are believed to be advanced, modern, and developed, while Southern objectives are backward, traditional, and developing. Binary oppositions thereby establish a state of othering that generates hierarchies between the Global North and the Global South. For Sweden these modern, advanced and developed characteristics are gender equality, a judicial and educational system, the individual as rights holder, as well as an economic system with equal opportunities, employment, and access to resources and technology. They all reflect the liberal feminist understanding. Of course, these modern characteristics played a role within the cooperation between Sweden and ECOWAS and dominated the development discourse. Concerning the judicial system, for example, postcolonial scholars have shown that it is still the liberal branding of the judicial system and rule of law that dominates development attempts towards Africa until today. By Sweden stating that the judicial system and the rule of law shall be based on an international understanding, a tendency is given that again Western and liberal-dominated knowledge is applied which automatically neglects the local circumstances and realities of the people living in the ECOWAS member states.

Dominant for liberal/western feminist attempts in international politics is the construction of gender in binary terms as female and male. Sweden's feminist understanding goes in line with that, as the analysis has shown. In all considered documents Sweden speaks of men and women and the domination of the former over the latter gender. By understanding the binary construction of gender as part of colonial history itself, it can be said that "in many non-European societies, colonization has had the effect of structuring the difference between men and women and establishing male hegemony and the subordination of women in all aspects of life" (Lugones 2007 in Bertolt 2018: 11). So it shows that patriarchal structures were not the predominantly political and social organisation of people in African societies before colonisation (cf. *ibid.*). A person was instead defined by their status, role, or authority in society than over their anatomy-based gender (cf. *ibid.*). Women were categorised as daughters, mothers, grandmothers, mothers-in-law, or sisters rather

than wives, whereby identity was based on and determined through either the father's or mother's lineage. Conversely to the western gender construction, the majority of African societies prior to colonialism viewed gender equilibrium as an ideal to achieve, supported a more heterarchical distribution of resources and status, and left room for such social constructions of a female husband or female sons. (ibid.). With constructing a binary understanding of gender that does not necessary reflect the gender concepts in ECOWAS member states Sweden again puts western values and knowledge in the centre of its foreign policy and development cooperation.

Further, the binary construction of gender allows to see women from the Global South as oppressed and victims of male power structures that legitimises development cooperation in the first place by arguing to ‚save‘ these women. If we look at the analysis, it shows that Sweden strongly constructs women as victims of violence and oppression due to masculine power structures. By seeing and constructing women as helpless victims, the silencing and the taking of their voices is pre-programmed (cf. ibid.). Sweden further urges other international actors and institutions to recognise this oppressed state of women as well. This reinforces a concept that is highly criticised by postcolonial feminist scholar's who urge development practitioners to base their work on the conceptions of the women in the global South in order to give them back their agency. At some point, Sweden seemed to break open the victim-dominated picture of women by referring to the need of local women and their agency in order to change the state of women. On that occasion, however, a further issue is at hand. Constructing women as agents for change implies seeing them as political, articulate, active, and willing for change, towards values that Sweden sees as essential for women's improvement in society. Here Sweden runs the risk of leaving firstly women behind who may be 'uneducated, traditional or irrational' speaking in Western terms, and what in turn leads to the fact that Spivak calls into question by asking: 'Can the subaltern speak?'. Secondly, it leaves out the possibility of resisting these liberal feminist values by these women who can choose non-compliance instead. The second scenario would lead to only relying upon and working with willing women by the foreign development actor, which would usher, in fact, to the first issues at hand. This reflects a process in development that is deeply bedded in power relations since the realisation of desired values is only possible in a scenario where resistance is bypassed and unacknowledged. The analysis showed that the Swedish foreign service understands itself as the one who can bring agency to those 'chosen' women, that in turn reflects the saviour mechanism criticised by postcolonial feminist scholars. When Sweden also states that it rejects any tradition and works only with women and organisations who are compliant with the Western understanding of gender equality or human rights it could be assumed that the issue above is at hand and dominated the cooperation with ECOWAS in the first place.



The postcolonial feminist critique states, partnerships are never equal and function as a mechanism to establish western values via soft power mechanisms. These soft power mechanisms can entail the production of knowledge and funding. As Contu and Girei (cf. 2014) show, at that point, that "the exchange of money buys compliance, binding the recipients qua beneficiaries to do what, from the outset, they have little control about as they feel they 'have to accept the conditions'" (218). Further, and coming here to the issue of knowledge construction, these partnerships often come into a state where people in the South are expected to comply since they are seen and understood as traditional, unmodern or uncivilised and in need of help what in turn constructs them as passive recipients of northern knowledge (cf. *ibid.*). It can be observed that on the one hand Sweden underlines the meaning of partnerships within their official documents and the analysis even showed that Sweden sees responsibility for a country's development within the country's government itself. On the other hand, Sweden is somewhat conscientious. The analysis showed that Sweden only seeks collaboration with local institutions, governments, organisations and civil society who align with its liberal feminist values, such as women empowerment, gender equality or democracy. Beyond that, Sweden's development cooperation with ECOWAS entailed both soft power mechanism criticised. Beside the above shown knowledge construction Sweden has been funding ECOWAS in many regards, such as trade policies, trade regulations, or government and civil society activities (cf. Opeanid).

Often these partnerships are dominated by standard policies. For Sweden's cooperation with ECOWAS the UNSCR 1325 and the WPS Agenda, as international recognised agreements on gender and women's issues, were essential. Both agreements however were criticised in the last decades. Henry (cf. 2021), for example, starts its critical deconstruction of the WPS Agenda with the fact that "whiteness is central to the operation of WPS as a normative political practice because of its current manifestation in, and form, global governance institutions." (22). Here, white feminist voices claim expertise and work with theories developed in the global North in conflict contexts (cf. *ibid.*) due to the hierarchies of power in knowledge production (Haastrup 27). In order to break open these power structures Henry (cf. *ibid.*) urges for the integration of a 'critical race feminist theory' when applying the WPS agenda. That entails a certain seriousness of intersectionality, where differences are not only understood as a technology but as a challenge of inequalities. A subject advisable for Sweden, since their definition of intersectionality found in the analysed documents leaves out the term race completely. A fact that seems to go in line with Sweden domestic feminist policies, where the term race was even banished from the anti-discrimination laws, as McEachrane (cf. 2018) showed (471). Combining that with the fact of Sweden practising



gender training based on the WPS Agenda it could be argued that Sweden acts in a white, Western and Eurocentric way.

The neoliberal economic branding in development attempts of the Global North was also severely criticised by postcolonial feminist scholars. It showed that the planned privatisation of, for example, social services had severe consequences for the local population. The analysis showed that Sweden bases its economic understanding on the egalitarian liberal brand, where the state plays a significant role. Sweden's (feminist) economic values have shown, that it does not support neoliberal values but rather pushes for a transformation of an informal economy towards a formal economy. In a formal economy the state regulates, provides, and protects its citizens, specifically women and girls standing in the economy. A formal economy allows also for financial agency of women and girls. That makes survival probable and fundamental transformation attainable (cf. Wilson 2011: 318). Therefore, it seems that Sweden understood and saw the failure of neoliberal development approaches in recent years in Africa and works, in line with their egalitarian liberal understanding, towards more state credibility of partner countries. So, Sweden indeed does not follow a neoliberal economic agenda to change the state of women, as criticized by postcolonial feminists. It does, however, push for the construction of a liberal economic performance in general, whether egalitarian or not. That still could be considered as an universal apprehension where a liberal economy is understood as one solution for all.

The subject of poverty and the desire to end it is a common part of (western) development approaches. Sweden's understanding of poverty marks a shortage of material assets and a lack of power as well as influence over one's situation, choices as well as safety. Sweden sees the end of poverty realised by an integration of the perspectives and needs of poor women, men, and children. As Green (cf. 2006.) states, these poverty policy designs are admittedly more advanced than the understanding of poverty in the last century (1109). However, they still rather reflect the poverty concepts of institutions committed to the 'Millennium Development Goals', or the 'SDGs', than having the capability to fully grasp "the experiences of those categorised as poor" (ibid.: 1111). Sweden indeed committed to the MDGs and later to the SDGs in development cooperation (Bexell&Jönsson 2016: 17). Such an approach towards poverty can neglect and overlook the meaning of poverty for diverse individuals within diverse social and economic contexts (cf. Green 2006: 1111). Integrating the voices of people categorised as poor in policy attempts has the appearance of diversity. However, the homogenisation of poverty, where people are constructed foremost as oppressed, vulnerable, marginalised, and without proper social networks or institutions, is a common course within development policies across geographical areas (cf. ibid.). What speaks for a homogenisation of poverty embedded in Sweden's foreign policy and

development cooperation is the fact that democracy, human rights, and individuality realised on an institutional level are seen as the answer to poverty as well as the fact that Sweden understands globalisation as a solution to poverty. And even though Sweden does not apply a neoliberal agenda within its feminist foreign policy, it still argues for a capitalist economic system by urging partner governments to participate in global trade, direct investments, and globalisation structures to end poverty. At that point, it could be argued in contrast to postcolonial feminist scholars that it is not necessarily neoliberal vocabulary but a capitalist vocabulary that could be enough to reproduce colonial and imperial structures by a Northern development actor, in this case, the Swedish state. The postcolonial critic sees it as essential to acknowledge the history of colonialism in order to understand power structures and hierarchies that influence the daily life of many until today. If history is not adequately reflected and realised, colonial and imperial structures can be reinforced. It can be observed that in the last decades the Swedish state established itself as a defender of universal human rights, supported struggles against colonialism, criticised racism and imperialism, and defended the self-determination of 'third-world' countries after World War II (cf. McEachrane 2018: 471/Fur 2013: 21). As a result, Sweden constructed itself as suitable for an anticolonial and decolonial role in international cooperation and substantiated that purpose by presenting itself without having any colonial history (cf. *ibid.*). However, Sweden's self-presentation is somewhat untrue. As a European country, Sweden benefitted and contributed to colonial rule. During the 18th century, the Swedish nation developed a version of human beings divided into racial groups "with distinct geographical origins and physical and psychological characteristics." (*ibid.*). Especially in the decades before World War II, the Swedish state actively promoted the picture of white supremacy and non-white inferiority (cf. *ibid.*: 477). As McEachrane (cf. *ibid.*) shows, Sweden illustrated the African people in racial stereotypes back then (477). Moreover, racial ideals and understandings were not Sweden's only participation in colonial rule. In 1649 the Swedish government established the 'African Trade Company' (cf. Snickare 2022: 29). This trading company organised transatlantic enslavement trade by shipping textiles, metals, and more goods "to West Africa to exchange for gold, ivory, and people, and then to English and Portuguese overseas plantations, where they exchanged the enslaved people for sugar and spices, which were shipped back to Swedish and other North European harbors." (*ibid.*: 28f.). The trading company was established in Cabo Corso, in present Ghana, in West Africa. Until 1663 the African Trade Company existed under royal license and with the financial support of the Dutch industrialist Louis De Geer till the location was conquered by the Dutch Republic (cf. *ibid.*: 29). Sweden does not mention or recover its colonial history in any part of the analysed documents. Further, Sweden is even neglecting its colonial history. That makes Sweden's development cooperation with

ECOWAS highly contentious since the ECOWAS member states are based in West Africa. In order to take the liberalisation of women seriously, it is important that feminist foreign policies and development cooperation acknowledge the colonial and imperial history in order to end oppressive structures relevant for women in the global South since these structures were initiated by European states during colonisation in the first place.

### Concluding Remarks

In conclusion it can be said that this research project with its rather explorative research character remained at the surface. However, based on a balanced assessment of the above information and despite the research limitations, especially concerning the usage of secondary data instead of primary sources when it comes to feminist conceptions in the ECOWAS member states, it could be said that Sweden, with its liberal feminist concept, has the capability and possibility of reproducing imperial and colonial structures in ECOWAS member states via various soft power mechanism embedded in the Swedish's feminist discourse as demonstrated by the postcolonial feminist analysis. Even though this master project subject is in need of submersion, the resulting hypothesis culminate in the recommendation, that if the Swedish state decides once more to perform a feminist foreign policy, it would be advisable to base the feminist concept not on the liberal brand with all its universalities and Eurocentric perspectives on women's issues, which centre the white, Western women and gender understanding. Instead, it would be sensible to integrate the voices, ideas, and values of the local women on the side. In the case of this thesis, the local voices of people located in the ECOWAS member states and not just under the conditions stated by the Swedish state but vice versa, where local women are the experts in realising feminist and gender principles in West African states.

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