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Sweden, NATO and the Gendered Silencing of Feminist Foreign Policy

Abstract

Sweden was the first state to adopt a Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) in 2014, drawing on its state feminist tradition and support for the UN Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. Yet following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and its move to seek NATO membership - abandoning its non-alignment - a gendered silence on FFP pervaded. Significantly, this thus predated the official abandonment of FFP following the election of a new government in October 2022. NATO membership was viewed as incompatible with FFP. Yet, NATO has long sought to project itself as a gender just actor, including through engagement with the WPS agenda culminating in its inclusion in the 2022 Strategic Concept. Further, Sweden – as a NATO partner – had been a stalwart of the Alliance’s work on WPS. This article contributes to understanding the role of gendered silences in shaping strategic narratives, in this case concerning Sweden’s NATO membership bid. It provides insight for policy makers and diplomats on the impact gendered silence can have on the wider efficacy of FFP and WPS, even during processes such as NATO enlargement which might otherwise be viewed as ‘gender neutral’.

Introduction

In June 2022, at NATO’s Madrid Summit, Sweden and Finland were formally invited to join the defence alliance. This marked a significant change in both states’ approach to global politics and national security, moving away from their longstanding doctrines of non-alignment, and prior to that neutrality.¹ The move was catalysed by Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 which significantly shifted public opinion in both states towards NATO membership. In April 2023, Finland became a NATO member, while Sweden remains in limbo as an ‘invitee’ country despite a favourable pronouncement by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the NATO Vilnius Summit in July 2023, with a promise to expedite the process. Both Turkey and Hungary, at the time of writing, have yet to ratify Sweden’s NATO membership, which is far from a ‘done deal’.² Nonetheless, the Vilnius Summit provides the cut off for our analysis. Our article demonstrates that NATO enlargement is a contentious security issue, defined by³, agonism and silencing.

¹ Annika Bergman Rosamond and Christine Agius 'Military intervention and the loss of memory: Sweden, NATO and identity' (with Agius, C.), in Agius, C. et.al. (eds.) *Identity making, displacement and rupture: performing discourses of belonging, place and being*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018.

² Following, Turkey's agreement ahead of the NATO Vilnius Summit in July 2023 to forward Sweden's accession protocol through Parliament, Hungary has now declared it is in 'no rush' to ratify Sweden's accession.² Although our analysis found Hungary was not a focus of the issue narrative of Sweden's NATO membership during the time period examined, it is likely to become so.

³ Tracey German, 'NATO and the Enlargement Debate: Enhancing Euro-Atlantic Security or Inciting Confrontation?', *International Affairs* 93, no. 2 (1 March 2017): 291–308.

Sweden's prospective NATO membership is an important case in point to examine given that it was until recently a champion of a feminist transformation of global politics, being the first state to adopt a Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) in 2014 – a policy based on women's rights, resources and representation. However, Sweden was also the first state to abandon its FFP leaving many surprised, in particular since a number of states have recently adopted FFPs, not least several NATO states. The Swedish case provides insight into the compatibility of FFP, the UN-endorsed WPS agenda and NATO enlargement. Sweden was until 2022 a stalwart of support for the implementation of the WPS agenda at NATO.⁴ It seemed set then that Sweden's bid for NATO membership would include a strong focus on WPS, with the latter being a central part of its FFP as well as its wider 'gender cosmopolitan' tradition in global politics.⁵

However, this was not the case, rather gendered silences have permeated the narratives surrounding NATO and Sweden since February 2022. In this article we locate our study within feminist scholarship that has sought to uncover women's voices in global politics, taking account of their distinct experiences and addressing the question posed by Cynthia Enloe 'where are the women'? Feminist scholars have been attentive to this question by paying attention to women's lack of voice, not least in times of war and conflict.⁶ While recognising the significance of studying the non-inclusion of women's voices and experiences in global politics our understanding of gendered silence is broader in reach, including the structural silencing by states and international organisations (IOs) of gender equality and justice in their policies and communications. Our definition of gendered silence also takes account of the different ways in which states and IOs resort to the silencing of other actors in global politics, feminising and silencing the other and assigning masculinist leadership and protection to the self. As we demonstrate below the strategic narratives surrounding Sweden's NATO membership reveal a tendency to treat NATO as the masculinised protector of a feminised and silenced Sweden in need of protection. Turkey and Hungary's gatekeeping and refusals to expedite Sweden's EU membership application is another example of such silence. Employing such a broad definition we trace gendered silences in strategic narratives, centring the analysis on the storytelling conducted by Sweden as well as NATO in relation to the former's NATO bid. While there is feminist scholarship on the gendered dynamics of strategic narratives, there are few studies that specifically address gendered silences within strategic narratives.⁷

⁴ K.A.M. Wright, 'NATO'S Adoption of UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security: Making the Agenda a Reality', *International Political Science Review* 37, no. 3 (2016): 350–61; Charlotte Wagnsson, 'A Security Community in the Making? Sweden and NATO Post-Libya', *European Security* 20, no. 4 (2011): 585–603.

⁵ Annika Bergman Rosamond, 'Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy and "Gender Cosmopolitanism"', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 16(2): 217-23, 2020.

⁶ Cynthia Enloe, 'The Risks of Scholarly Militarization: A Feminist Analysis', *Perspectives on Politics* 8, no. 04 (2010).

⁷ Ekatherina Zhukova, 'Postcolonial Logic and Silences in Strategic Narratives: Sweden's Feminist Foreign Policy in Conflict-Affected States', *Global Discourse* 37, no.1 (2023): 1-22. Cai Wilkinson, 'The Unsaid and Unseen: On Hearing Silences and Seeing Invisibilities in Strategic Narratives', *Critical Studies on Security* 3, no. 3 (2015): 338–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2015.1103020>.

Below we provide a two-level analysis of gendered silences in strategic narratives, focusing on the issue narrative of Swedish NATO membership, and how gendered silences have been employed in the strategic narration surrounding that issue by Sweden itself, and NATO. First we identify silences within Sweden's strategic narration of the Ukraine war and its related wish to join NATO, with the principles of FFP and WPS being left out from such storytelling. Second, we provide an analysis of gendered silences in NATO's strategic narratives, in particular NATO news items that were released pre and post February 2022. This involves not only studying NATO communications on the Swedish NATO bid, but also recognising that NATO states such as Turkey and Hungary, have sought to silence and demasculinize Sweden by denying it a speedy entry into NATO.

While the previous Social Democratic government never denounced its FFP ambitions, rather leaving it out from its national security statements and negotiations with NATO, the current right wing government openly declared the irrelevance of FFP in times of war and militarism. Thus, Sweden's FFP, from having been a pioneering ethical endeavour, emulated by many states, became silenced and more or less disappeared from the narration of the Swedish security agenda in the spring of 2022, making it easier for the newly elected Conservative-led coalition government to officially abandon it. Our article thus provides new insight into the silencing of gender justice and equality within Swedish foreign policy as well as the compatibility of FFP and NATO membership. It also sheds light on the general state of the WPS agenda and FFP in the global politics of security and defence at NATO.

As noted above several NATO members have adopted FFPs, however, the Alliance itself has not done so, despite calls for it to do so.⁸ Some of these states, notably Germany, have noted that their conduct of FFP is fully compatible with not only their NATO membership but a strong emphasis on defence. This suggests that Sweden, as a future member of NATO, would have been able to retain a strong commitment to the principles of FFP post-entry. In fact, NATO has engaged with the WPS agenda with increasing intensity since 2007, notably through the creation of the position of the Secretary General's Special Representative on WPS⁹ and the inclusion of WPS in the Alliance's new Strategic Concept, adopted at the Madrid Summit in 2022¹⁰. In fact, NATO's self-narrative partially has been shaped around a highly visible engagement with the WPS agenda in recent years, forming a core part of the Alliance's public diplomacy.¹¹ This raises questions about NATO's omission of the WPS agenda from its narration of Sweden's membership aspirations, in particular since 'gender equality' and 'women's rights' are often invoked as part of a broader international security policy

⁸ G.R.A. Doyle et al., 'Why NATO Should Adopt a Feminist Foreign Policy', Atlantic Council, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/why-nato-should-adopt-a-feminist-foreign-policy/>.

⁹ Wright, 'NATO'S Adoption of UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security: Making the Agenda a Reality'.

¹⁰ Diana Morais, Samantha Turner, and Katharine A.M. Wright, 'The Future of Women, Peace and Security at NATO', *Transatlantic Policy Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (2022): 103–11.

¹¹ K.A.M. Wright and Annika Bergman Rosamond, 'NATO, Angelina Jolie and the Alliance's Celebrity and Visual Turn', *Review of International Studies* 47, no. 4 (2021): 443–66; K.A.M. Wright, 'Telling NATO's Story of Afghanistan: Gender and the Alliance's Digital Diplomacy', *Media, War & Conflict* 12, no. 1 (2019): 87–101.

discourse.¹² In contrast, the two states yet to ratify Sweden's NATO membership: Turkey and Hungary have become known for their preference for 'gendered nationalism' expressed in traditional family values, mythical notions of the masculinist state, as well as women's reproductive responsibilities,¹³ favouring masculinist leadership.¹⁴ The temporal and wider geopolitical aspects of Sweden's NATO membership bid are therefore complex and gendered, particularly when set against the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine war and the gendered dynamics undergirding it.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we outline our approach to strategic narratives and the importance of accounting for gendered silences within such storytelling. In so doing we provide a definition of gendered silence that is multidimensional, referring both the widespread tendency to omit women's distinct embodied voices and experiences from strategic narratives as well as the structural omission of gender justice and equality from states and other actors' external policies. We then discuss our methodological approach, reiterating the importance of adding a stronger feminist dimension to strategic narrative analysis. In laying out the broad theoretical and methodological framings of our piece we turn to the strategic narratives that surround Sweden's relationship with NATO, not least its support for NATO's WPS work prior to 2022. We also investigate the contents and broader narration of Sweden's FFP and its silencing in the wake of Sweden's wish to join NATO, and in response to the fullscale Russian invasion of Ukraine. We specifically address the gendered silences within Sweden's identity and issue narratives, and, by extension, how these were projected by NATO. To conclude, we argue that the terms of Sweden's NATO membership have been set by its narration, and that the gendered silences within that narration have contributed to the marginalization of the WPS agenda and the distinct values of FFP within the membership process. This raises questions about the compatibility of NATO membership and adhering to a FFP agenda in global politics. It is also a reminder of the precarious inclusion of WPS at NATO. Though the WPS agenda remains central to the strategic narratives of many states and other actors, it can easily be silenced when other conflicting and more urgent priorities perceived as 'gender neutral' emerge, undermining part of the purpose of WPS and by extension FFP, namely to challenge gendered silences.

Strategic narratives and gendered silences

States, international organisations (IOs) and other actors engage in storytelling, curating narratives about themselves, their national and global preferences as well as their understanding of global politics. A narrative then is 'a particular configuration of

¹² Soumita Basu, 'Gender as National Interest at the UN Security Council', *International Affairs* 2 (2016): 255–73.

¹³ A. Graff 'Gender Ideology: Weak Concepts, Powerful Politics' (2017) *Religion and Gender* 6(2): 268-72). Yuval Davis, *Gender & Nation* (Sage 1997).

¹⁴ Selin Çağatay, 'Varieties of Anti-Gender Mobilizations. Is Turkey a Case?', LSE Engenderings, 2019, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2019/01/09/varieties-of-anti-gender-mobilizations-is-turkey-a-case/>; Bianka Vida, 'New Waves of Anti-Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Strategies in the European Union: The Anti-Gender Discourse in Hungary', *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters* 27, no. 2 (31 May 2019): 13–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/26410397.2019.1610281>. Christine Agius, Annika Bergman Rosamond A and Catarina Kinnvall Populism, Ontological Insecurity and Gendered Nationalism: Masculinity, Climate Denial and Covid-19, *Politics, Religion and Ideology* 21, no. 4 (202)432-450.

a story [...], a sequenced representation of events or experiences'.¹⁵ Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle provide a three-pronged definition of strategic narratives; identity, international system, and issue narratives. Identity narratives, broadly speaking, are stories about the actor's self-identity, its unique features and the key norms it seeks to instil in global politics. International narratives refer to storytelling about the structure and character of the international system and the world at large, and, 'who the players, are and how it works'.¹⁶ Issue narratives centre on the issues that the actor in question views as the most pressing and therefore should be prioritised. Such narratives shape the nature of policy discussions on a specific topic or issue and lay out potential responses to it, with conflict, war, encroachments on human rights and gendered injustice and harm being instructive examples here. These three types of strategic narratives, moreover, are co-constitutive, with an actor's identity shaping the way it envisages the world and what issues it seeks to prioritise or omit from its strategic narration. Frequently actors opt for plots that are consistent with their particular brand, while omitting those that contradict their prioritized goals.¹⁷ As such, states frequently engage in strategic storytelling that serves their interests and preferred value systems with key omissions being present in such stories.¹⁸ This entails vigilantly considering 'every word, image and deed' in narrating the story about the nation and its priorities and interests.¹⁹ Failure to do so can damage the nation's global brand as well as its credibility and moral worth in global politics. For example, Sweden's abandonment of FFP has stained its reputation as an exceptionally gender-sensitive state. NATO's short lived efforts to redefine its identity narrative as a gender just actor, dedicated to the eradication of sexual violence in conflict, employing entertainment techniques, could also be viewed as such failure.²⁰

Moreover, strategic storytelling hinges on states and other actors' ability to reach multiple audiences, domestically and globally, ensuring that their brands and priorities are received by targeted publics.²¹ The former Swedish government, for example, rather successfully managed to communicate its vision of FFP during its term in office (2014-2022) to multiple audiences, adding strength to its reputation as a gender-just state. This diplomatic communication shifted as a result of Russia's fullscale invasion of Ukraine, and Sweden's NATO membership bid, with emphasis being placed on its ability to contribute to NATO's collective security machinery. The targeted audience was primarily NATO and its members. Meanwhile, the primary audiences for NATO's strategic narratives are located in member, partner and other state, including publics

¹⁵ Laura Shepherd, *Narrating the Women Peace and Security Agenda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), P.9. Wright and Bergman Rosamond, 'NATO, Angelina Jolie and the Alliance's Celebrity and Visual Turn'.

¹⁶ Alistair Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, 'Strategic narrative: A means to understand soft power', *Media, War and Conflict* 7, no.1 (2014): 70-84.

¹⁷ Karin Aggestam, Annika Bergman Rosamond and Elsa Hedling, 'Digital Norm Contestation and Feminist Foreign Policy', *International Studies Perspectives*, online first (2023):1-20.

¹⁸ Annika Bergman Rosamond and Elsa Hedling, 'The Digital Storytelling of Feminist Foreign Policy: Sweden's State Feminism in Digital Diplomacy', *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 18, no. 4. (2022): 314-324.

¹⁹ Jan Hanska, 'From Narrated Strategy to Strategic Narratives', *Critical Studies on Security* 3, no. 3 (2015): 323-25,

²⁰ Wright and Bergman Rosamond, 'NATO, Angelina Jolie and the Alliance's Celebrity and Visual Turn'.

²¹ Wright and Bergman Rosamond, 'NATO, Angelina Jolie and the Alliance's Celebrity and Visual Turn'.

and elites.²² For example, NATO's strategic narratives influence perceptions of the Alliance in places as far away as Australia and New Zealand.²³ NATO's strategic narratives have also gained reception in popular culture. At their most successful the use of strategic narratives turns the media into a 'conveyor belt transmitting elite cues to the public'.²⁴

A growing number of feminist scholars are employing a strategic narrative approach to the study of foreign, defence and security policies. For example Wright and Bergman Rosamond do so to capture the narration of NATO as a gender actor seeking to eradicate sexual violence in conflict.²⁵ Zhukova et.al. have investigated the tendency amongst FFP states to employ strategic storytelling for the purpose of gaining soft power globally.²⁶ Of particular interest here is Zhukova's investigation of the silencing of Sweden's FFP in the media of 20 states, all tarnished by conflict, showing that there is 'a postcolonial disengagement with Sweden's strategic narratives' in such reporting.²⁷ Also insightful is Wilkinson's observation that 'ignoring silences and invisibilities in the analysis of strategic narratives' risks losing track of the overarching structures that affect people's lived experiences.²⁸

As yet though there is little research that specifically address the gendered silences within *strategic* narratives, with the broader feminist scholarship on narratives providing insight here. From a feminist perspective it is essential to study narratives because 'the continual reproduction of these narratives solidifies historically developed practices - violent practices that insist on the imposition of meanings that privilege state-centered, military forms of security'.²⁹ Thus, narratives are not neutral observations but assign meaning to the social and political world, with such meanings often being gendered and shaped within patriarchal power relations. Important to our study then is Shepherd's observation that narratives are 'always partial and necessarily exclude much in their telling'³⁰, and, as such they silence some perspectives on global politics. Some stories are privileged over others because configurations of power "legitimise, authorise and value certain narratives over others'.³¹ Often strategic narratives are conveyed to serve states' interests and value

²² K.A.M Wright, 'NATO', in *Oxford Handbook of Digital Diplomacy*, ed. C Bjola and I Manor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

²³ Ben Wellings et al., 'Narrative Alignment and Misalignment: NATO as a Global Actor as Seen from Australia and New Zealand', *Asian Security* 14, no. 1 (2018): 24–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2017.1361731>.

²⁴ Peter Viggo Jakobsen and Jens Ringsmose, 'In Denmark, Afghanistan Is Worth Dying for: How Public Support for the War Was Maintained in the Face of Mounting Casualties and Elusive Success', *Cooperation and Conflict* 50, no. 2 (2015): 211–27, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836714545688>.

²⁵ Wright and Bergman Rosamond, 'NATO, Angelina Jolie and the Alliance's Celebrity and Visual Turn'.

²⁶ Malena Sundström Rosén, Ekatherina Zhukova, and Ole Elgström 'Spreading a Norm-Based Policy? Sweden's Feminist Foreign Policy in International Media.' *Contemporary Politics* 27, no. 4 (2021):439-60.

²⁷ Ekatherina Zhukova, 'Postcolonial Logic and Silences in Strategic Narratives: Sweden's Feminist Foreign Policy in Conflict-Affected States'.

²⁸ Cai Wilkinson, 'The Unsaid and Unseen: On Hearing Silences and Seeing Invisibilities in Strategic Narratives',

²⁹ Annick T R Wibben, *Feminist Security Studies A Narrative Approach* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010). P. 47.

³⁰ Laura Shepherd, *Narrating the Women Peace and Security Agenda*, P.10.

³¹ Laura Shepherd, *Narrating the Women Peace and Security Agenda*. P. 11.

systems.³² For example, the narration of Sweden's FFP was that of a success story³³, without much self-examination. In a similar fashion Wibben posits that 'grand narratives restrict which meanings are possible ... and which are not'.³⁴ Narratives also can challenge taken-for-granted knowledge in favour of new storylines.³⁵

Drawing on Shepherd and Wibben, we identify gendered silences within the issue narrative of Sweden's bid for NATO membership, with our two-level analysis centring on stories told by both Sweden and NATO. Here we draw upon contributions by feminist scholars who highlight the significance of giving women voice to ensure their freedom and empowerment. From a feminist IR perspective this entails identifying the silencing of gender and women's voices in mainstream scholarship.³⁶ It means asking 'where are the women?'³⁷ and staying attentive to the silencing of their voices and experiences within global politics.³⁸ Part of recovering such silences is to '(t)o study war as experience' which 'requires that the human body come into focus as a unit that has agency in war and is also the target of war's violence.'³⁹ That recognition is present in feminist thinking on war, conflict and defence with Laura Sjoberg noting that 'war is more than military power and dominance—it involves dealing with economic destruction, gendered oppression as well as environmental concerns.'⁴⁰

While our analysis below does not specifically address the omission of women's voices and individual experiences within global politics, we recognise the gendered effects of such silencing worldwide. Rather we investigate the gendered silences employed by global actors such as states or IOs and their omission of pro-gender norms from their strategic narratives. The omission of FFP and the WPS agenda from Sweden's membership bid by the country itself and NATO is an instructive example of such structured silence. Thus, we align ourselves with scholarship that calls for a critical assessment of the role and functioning of silences within strategic narratives, seeking to understand why some actors opt for gendered silencing as a security strategy. In this context, gender scholar Cai Wilkinson argues that

'what is not said or seen in a narrative is likely to be just as important as what is. After all, a central characteristic of a successful narrative is that it is plausible, meaning that inconsistencies and contradictions must be resolved via the judicious exclusion, as well as inclusion, of information'.⁴¹

³² Annika Bergman Rosamond and Elsa Hedling, 'The Digital Storytelling of Feminist Foreign Policy: Sweden's State Feminism in Digital Diplomacy'

³³ Laura Shepherd, *Narrating the Women Peace and Security Agenda*.

³⁴ Annick T R Wibben, *Feminist Security Studies A Narrative Approach*, P. 43.

³⁵ Annick T R Wibben *Feminist Security Studies A Narrative Approach*.

³⁶ Lene Hansen, 'The Little Mermaid's Silent Security Dilemma and the Absence of Gender in the Copenhagen School', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 29, no. 2 (June 2000): 285–306.

³⁷ Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*.

³⁸ Enloe, C. 2010. *Nimo's War, Emma's War: Making Feminist Sense of the Iraqi War*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

³⁹ Christine Sylvester *War as Experience. Contributions from International Relations and Feminist Analysis*. London: Routledge. 2013, p. 65.

⁴⁰ Laura Sjoberg. 'Why Just War Needs Feminism Now More Than Ever.' *International Politics* 45, no. 1. 2008:45.

⁴¹ Cai Wilkinson, 'The Unsaid and Unseen: On Hearing Silences and Seeing Invisibilities in Strategic Narratives', *Critical Studies on Security* 3, no. 3 (2015): 338–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2015.1103020>.

For example, NATO's strategic narration of its involvement in Afghanistan contained significant gendered silence and thus contradictions, notably the absence of Afghan women's voices from NATO's projected success story which was premised on 'saving Afghan women', denying them their agency.⁴² In contrast, the work on Central Asian states' strategic narratives vis a vis the Russia-Ukraine war has uncovered the role of silences as a means to show disagreement, while avoiding victimisation by Russia, demonstrating that silence can also provide agency.⁴³

Our definition of gendered silence also stays attentive to the ways in which states and IOs sometimes resort to the silencing of other actors in global politics, feminising 'the Other' and assigning masculinist leadership and protection to the self. As we demonstrate, in the strategic narratives surrounding Sweden's NATO membership, we see NATO cast as the masculinised protector of a feminised Sweden in need of saving. Sweden has lost its agency and voice in this process, not least its FFP and its role as core supporter of WPS at NATO, which provided agency. The reluctance on the part of Turkey and Hungary to expedite Sweden's EU membership application is also an example of such silencing, though of another calibre. Indeed, Turkey, has been represented as a masculinised gatekeeper framing its opposition to Sweden's NATO membership in terms of the protection of its own territory.⁴⁴

In sum, the employment of silencing within strategic narratives is a varied practice, not only can such silences be gendered and colonial, but they can also enable certain forms of politics. Below we account for our methodological approach and then explore the absence of FFP and WPS from both Swedish and NATO strategic narratives.

Methodological approach

Our methodological ambition is to contribute to strategic narrative scholarship by adding a more pronounced critical feminist perspective which allows for the identification of gendered silences within narratives, in this case pertaining to Sweden's NATO membership. Specifically, we draw on feminist narrative analysis as well as previous work on NATO which has sought to develop such an approach.⁴⁵ The intellectual and methodological challenge here is to account for the narration of something that has not been articulated as part of a strategic narrative. Here we draw on Annika Kronsell's feminist approach to the study of silence which favours a 'deconstruction of the texts and discourses emerging from ... institutions' enabling 'reading what is not written, or what is between the lines'.⁴⁶ For us this entails accounting for the absence of references to the WPS agenda and FFP in the wider

⁴² Wright, 'Telling NATO's Story of Afghanistan: Gender and the Alliance's Digital Diplomacy'.

⁴³ Timur Dadabaev and Shigeto Sonoda, 'Silence Is Golden? Silences as Strategic Narratives in Central Asian States' Response to the Ukrainian Crisis', *International Journal of Asian Studies*, 24 June 2022, 1–23.

⁴⁴ Türkiye, Finland, and Sweden, 'Trilateral Memorandum', n.d.

⁴⁵ Wright and Bergman Rosamond, 'NATO, Angelina Jolie and the Alliance's Celebrity and Visual Turn'.

⁴⁶ Annika Kronsell, 'Methods for studying Silences: gender analysis in institutions of hegemonic masculinity' in Brooke A. Ackerly, Maria Stern and Jacqui True, *Feminist Methodologies for international Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

NATO-Swedish relationship. To this effect we unpack a range of scholarly and official sources that enable the identification of dominant narratives that pertain to the aforementioned relationship.

Below we provide a two-level analysis. First we turn to the meta-narrative of Sweden's position within NATO as a partner and supporter of its WPS agenda. This we pair with an unpacking of the country's FFP story, briefly identifying its ambitions and shortcomings and identifying gendered silences within that storytelling with particular focus on the post-February 2022 period. We then identify the strategic (identity and issue) narratives that NATO seeks to project concerning first, Sweden as a partner (pre February 2022) and second, Sweden, as an aspiring NATO member (post February 2022). First, we analysed news items appearing on the NATO website between 1st January 2014 (the year Sweden adopted its FFP and so when we might expect WPS to appear) and 24 February 2022, pertaining to NATO's partnership with Sweden (see Table 3). This involved a search for Sweden and then identifying relevant material, for example, content related to Swedish visits to NATO and NATO visits to Sweden. Of the 136 news items the search returned, 17 focused specifically on Sweden's partnership with NATO in the headline or content. In some cases NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg's remarks or a transcript of a press conference were linked to the news items, these have been included in our analysis.

Next, we analysed the news items released by NATO on its website concerning Sweden's membership bid between 25 February 2022 and 10 July 2023. This cut-off was chosen because it coincided with the press statement by Stoltenberg and Erdoğan ahead of the NATO Summit in Vilnius, where Turkey agreed to move forward the accession protocol for Sweden. We also included news items related to Turkey, where they concerned Sweden.⁴⁷ There were a total of 647 news items released during this time frame, 26 mentioned Sweden in the headline and related to Sweden's membership bid. In many ways it is unsurprising that there was significantly more focus on Sweden by NATO following its membership bid, than in the six years prior. In mapping out these discursive fields, which constitute the broader strategic narratives, we employed NVivo which also enabled the identification of the absence of feminist and pro-gendered themes, not least FFP signifiers, in the coverage of Sweden. This enabled us to better understand the reception of Sweden's membership bid and the gendered silences within it.

Sweden, NATO and the WPS agenda

The current story about Sweden's partnership with NATO was forged during the post-Cold War period, through the Partnership for Peace framework (PfP), which Sweden joined in 1994 having abandoned its policy of neutrality ahead of its entry into the EU in 1994.⁴⁸ Since then Sweden has become 'one of NATO's most active and effective

⁴⁷ It is worth noting that during both time periods we examined, Hungary was only mentioned 3 times (see Table 2), suggesting Hungary was perceived of as less of an obstacle to Swedish membership of NATO than Turkey at this juncture.

⁴⁸ Annika Bergman Rosamond and Christine Agius 'Military intervention and the loss of memory: Sweden, NATO and identity'

partners.⁴⁹ That partnership has gradually gained significance in Swedish strategic narratives pertaining to security and defence. Principally, such storytelling has centred on Sweden's participation in NATO-led military exercises, operations and deliberations on the WPS agenda. Sweden has effectively capitalized on its reputation and experiences as a trusted NATO partner, not least in the months leading up to its application to NATO.

NATO's first WPS policy was adopted in 2007 in conjunction with one of the Alliance's forums for engaging partners, the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC), of which Sweden is a member. In particular, Sweden has provided support and expertise to NATO's WPS work, externalising its longstanding commitment to gender justice domestically and globally.⁵⁰ Thus, Sweden has been at the forefront of NATO's engagement with gender issues through its support for the WPS agenda⁵¹. The role of Sweden, and other partners, as Wright argues, came 'to symbolise the separation of the WPS agenda from NATO and the Alliance's core purpose as a defence organisation', or how it became 'siloed'.⁵² For example, Sweden provided the first Gender Advisor to Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) from 2011 to 2016, adding strength to its self narration as a gender just NATO partner.

Thus, Sweden's perceived expertise in regards to WPS, in comparison to NATO members and other partners, meant that it came to be relied on in the field of WPS.⁵³ For example, at the 2012 NATO Chicago Summit, Sweden was tasked with delivering a report on the implementation of WPS in NATO operations. It is significant to note that a partner was designated responsibility for evaluating the work of allies and NATO, indicating the trust underpinning the relationship between NATO and Sweden. Sweden also supported NATO's adoption of Bi-Strategic Command 40-1 on integrating a gender perspective across the Strategic Commands in 2009.⁵⁴ Thus, even prior to its adoption of a FFP, Sweden had sought to position itself at the centre of global efforts to implement WPS and doing so in collaboration with NATO.⁵⁵

Notably, Sweden hosts NATO's department head for gender training, the Nordic Centre for Gender in Military Operations (NCGM)⁵⁶, a task that often been emphasised in its strategic narration as a stalwart of NATO's WPS work. Yet, the NCGM cannot become a 'Centre of Excellence' in line with other specialisms because, although a multi-ally initiative, the site is located in Sweden outside of the Alliance's territory. Thus, the NCGM though central in sustaining Sweden's identity narrative as a

⁴⁹ NATO, 'NATO's Relations with Sweden', *NATO*, 2013, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_52535.htm.

⁵⁰ Annika Bergman Rosamond and Annica Kronsell 'Cosmopolitan militaries and dialogical peacekeeping: Danish and Swedish women soldiers in Afghanistan'. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. 20, no.2 (2018):172-187.

⁵¹ Katharine A.M. Wright, Matthew Hurley, and Jesus Ignacio Gil Ruiz, *NATO, Gender and the Military: Women Organising from Within* (London: Routledge, 2019).

⁵² KAM Wright, 'Silences and Silos: NATO's Engagement with UNSCR 1325' (Guildford, University of Surrey, 2016).

⁵³ Wright, 'NATO'S Adoption of UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security: Making the Agenda a Reality'.

⁵⁴ Robert Egnell, Petter Hojem, and Hannes Berts, *Gender, Military Effectiveness, and Organizational Change: The Swedish Model* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

⁵⁵ Egnell, Hojem, and Berts.Bergman Rosamond 'Protection Beyond Borders: Gender Cosmopolitanism and Co-constitutive Obligation'

⁵⁶ Morais, Turner, and Wright, 'The Future of Women, Peace and Security at NATO'.

trustworthy and dedicated gender partner of NATO carried certain limitations. This however, did not prevent Sweden from skilfully employing its PfP status in the projection of its identity narrative to NATO, 'selling' itself as a state already well adjusted to the workings of the Alliance.

contribution to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. Sweden's involvement in the ISAF was a strategic decision to assist NATO in its attempt to eradicate global terrorism, and, as such, create a more stable international security order, and, in turn enhancing its legitimacy as a NATO partner. However, participating in ISAF was also an expression of Sweden's wish to use its military for the purpose of promoting the security and human rights of Afghan women, in line with NATO and the wider WPS agenda.⁵⁷ Part of this narrative was to ensure that Swedish women soldiers were involved in operations.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, Sweden continuously maintained that its involvement in Afghanistan was a peace operation, informed by cosmopolitan ethical ambitions, rather than an attempt to align itself with NATO, despite its contribution being of a 'robust' nature.⁵⁹ Thus, the NATO-Sweden partnership is complex, with many of the stories centring on practical cooperation, rather than being driven by shared strategic values.⁶⁰ Below we discuss the broad contours of Sweden's adoption of a feminist foreign policy in 2014, a shift that was rooted in the country's support for the WPS agenda.

Sweden's Feminist Foreign Policy narrative – from activism to abandonment

A key plot in Sweden's self-narrative is its dedication to global gender justice, an ethical stance that also prevailed in its FFP storytelling.⁶¹ Sweden then for a long time viewed itself as a feminist pioneer in international affairs, with FFP providing an opportunity to 'externalize Sweden's state feminism', in particular, by advocating global gender equality norms in foreign policy through a cosmopolitan lens.⁶² It also enabled Sweden to take on a leadership role as a champion of the WPS agenda.⁶³ However, Sweden's FFP was also an exercise in results-orientated and 'smart' politics⁶⁴ and strategic nation branding⁶⁵, telling a story about the other-regarding feminist self. This strategy was a prominent feature in the strategic storytelling about Sweden's FFP, building on a self identification as a state that is exceptionally mindful of the needs of women and girls across worldwide.⁶⁶

⁵⁷ Annika Bergman Rosamond, 'Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy and "Gender Cosmopolitanism"', .

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Annika Bergman Rosamond and Christine Agius 'Military intervention and the loss of memory: Sweden, NATO and identity'

⁶⁰ Charlotte Wagnsson, 'A Security Community in the Making? Sweden and NATO Post-Libya', *European Security* 20, no. 4 (2011): 585–603.

⁶¹ Annika Bergman Rosamond and Elsa Hedling, 'The Digital Storytelling of Feminist Foreign Policy: Sweden's State Feminism in Digital Diplomacy'.

⁶² Annika Bergman Rosamond 'Protection Beyond Borders: Gender Cosmopolitanism and Co-constitutive Obligation' *Global Society*, 27(3): 319-336, 2013

⁶³ Världsförnt , <https://fn.se/aktuellt/varldshorisont/feministisk-plattform-fyller-20-ar/> , 2020.

⁶⁴ Karin Aggestam, Annika Bergman Rosamond and Annica Kronsell 'Theorising Feminist Foreign Policy' m *International Relations*, 33(1): 23-39, 2019

⁶⁵ Jezierska, K, and Towns, A. (2018) 'Taming feminism? The place of gender equality in the 'Progressive Sweden'brand', *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* vol 14, no 1, pp. 55-63.

⁶⁶ Annika Bergman Rosamond, 'Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy and "Gender Cosmopolitanism"', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 16(2): 217-23, 2020.

As noted above, Sweden's FFP consisted of the '3Rs – rights, representation and resources', and was grounded in a "fourth R – reality". The three initial Rs have been emulated by a number of states, for example Germany. Sweden's FFP covered a range of areas including foreign and security policy, peace, human rights, democracy; disarmament and non-proliferation; international development and trade. However, military and defence were not part of its FFP nor prevalent within the official storytelling about its success, despite the Swedish armed forces' efforts to integrate the WPS agenda into all its practices.⁶⁷

Although Sweden's FFP inspired many and led to some key results, for example, the launch of several peacebuilding initiatives,⁶⁸ it did not constitute a radical transformative agenda leading to a real shift in Swedish foreign policy. It was critiqued for being neoliberal in its ambition, not transformative enough and insufficiently attentive to the gendered injustices that occur within its national borders.⁶⁹ It was also a highly sophisticated exercise in nation branding, employing digital storytelling⁷⁰ and communication and cultural cooperation strategies⁷¹ to gain recognition in global politics. However, these strategies were not necessarily rooted in the Swedish public enabling the new Swedish government to entirely sideline FFP in 2022.

The previous Social Democratic government side-lined FFP when faced with a war in its vicinity, which rapidly led to the dismantling of its FFP. Yet, Sweden's NATO bid relied on female shuttle diplomacy, with then Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson and Foreign Minister Ann Linde travelling to Washington and Brussels to convince the allies of the benefits of Swedish NATO membership. However, on those trips they rarely approached Sweden's NATO bid through a FFP lens.⁷² In October 2022, Sweden's FFP was officially dropped, with the Conservative Foreign Minister Tobias Billström noting that while 'equality between men and women is a core value for both Sweden and the government' the new government will not conduct an FFP since, in his view, 'that label has not fulfilled a good purpose and has hidden the fact that Swedish foreign policy needs to be based on Swedish values and interests'.⁷³ This U-turn in Swedish foreign policy was enabled by the lack of support for the country's FFP among the members of the new coalition government and the broader militarism of the Swedish policy in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine⁷⁴, contributing to the

⁶⁷ Annika Bergman Rosamond and Annick Wibben. Feministiska institutioner? Utrikespolitik och nationellt försvar (Feminist Institutions? (Foreign Policy and National Defence, in Edenborg, E. et. al. (eds.), *Feministiska perspektiv på global politik*, Lund: Universitetslitteratur, (2021).

⁶⁸ Karin Aggestam and Annika Bergman Rosamond. 'Peace and Feminist Foreign Policy' Richmond O, Visoka G, eds. The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Peace and Conflict Studies. UK: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

⁶⁹ Annika Bergman Rosamond, 'Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy and "Gender Cosmopolitanism"'

⁷⁰ Annika Bergman Rosamond and Elsa Hedling, 'The Digital Storytelling of Feminist Foreign Policy: Sweden's State Feminism in Digital Diplomacy'.

⁷¹ Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs. 2019. *Handbook: Sweden's feminist foreign policy*, Stockholm: Government Offices, pp. 53-57.

⁷² Bergman Rosamond 'Glöm nu inte feminismen!' *Sydsvenskan* (2022): 6-7.

⁷³ *Aftonbladet* 2022. 'Tobias Billström skrotar den feministiska utrikespolitiken', <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/eJJOMI/tobias-billstrom-skrotar-ud-s-feministiska-utrikespolitik>'.

⁷⁴ Bergman Rosamond 'Glöm nu inte feminismen!'

gendered silencing of Sweden's NATO membership bid, with FFP hardly figuring in the 2022 elections.⁷⁵

Sweden, the founder of FFP, then has abandoned its feminist approach to foreign policy, while NATO states such as Canada, France, Germany, Spain, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands have adopted FFPs. As opposed to Germany that specifically has stated that its FFP includes military and defence policies, the current Swedish government deemed NATO membership incompatible with the values and ambitions of FFP. Yet, Sweden had long ago moved away from its former neutral profile 'through more robust military applications, whilst embodying a peaceful self-narrative linked to military non-alignment, active internationalism and a 'feminist foreign policy'.⁷⁶ In relation to Russia, Swedish FFP seemed at first a feminine counter to Russia's masculinist power, yet its deployment in conjunction with militarization, saw it deployed as a tool of strength.⁷⁷ This tells us that previously Sweden's FFP has not been viewed as incompatible with militarism in practice. At the discursive level though Sweden's strategic narration of its NATO bid mirrored the exclusion of defence and security from the its FFP.⁷⁸ Rather, that story has centred on promises to increase the country's national defence budget and the protection of its borders from an increasingly hostile Russia. This helps to explain why Sweden's application for NATO membership was almost entirely void of gender analysis.⁷⁹

Sweden's application to join NATO was rushed through parliament and though it was preceded by cross party deliberations there were no signs of feminist engagement informing those discussions. As Anna Clara-Bratt, the editor in chief of the Swedish magazine *Feminist Perspektiv*, and a well known feminist, noted:⁸⁰

'Still, everybody is surprised. A few weeks after the invasion of Ukraine, all social democratic ministers said very clearly: 'We will never ever enter NATO. I was actually surprised and thought, 'Well, they're really firm. I can trust them.' Then, they never said why they changed their mind. All of a sudden, they just did overnight and then staged a democratic process among representatives of the party.'

Sweden may have steeped its foreign policy in feminist logic for eight years but that commitment was insufficiently anchored in Sweden's political fabric to resist the abandonment of FFP, in the face of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It also

⁷⁵ Bergman Rosmond 'Glöm nu inte feminismen!'

⁷⁶ Christine Agius, 'Rescuing the State? Sovereignty, Identity, and the Gendered Re-Articulation of the State', in *Revisiting Gendered States: Feminist Imaginings of the State in International Relations*, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190644031.001.0001>.

⁷⁷ Christine Agius and Emil Edenborg, 'Gendered Bordering Practices in Swedish and Russian Foreign and Security Policy', *Political Geography* 71 (2019): 56–66.

⁷⁸ Annika Bergman Rosamond and Annick Wibben. Feministiska institutioner? Utrikespolitik och nationellt försvar (Feminist Institutions?).

⁷⁹ Bergman Rosamond 'Glöm nu inte feminismen!'

⁸⁰ Anna Clara-Bratt and Selay Dalaklı, 'In the Shadow of NATO Application: Sweden's Feminist Foreign Policy' (SES Eşitlik, Adalet, Kadın Platformu, 2022), <https://esitlikadaletkadin.org/in-the-shadow-of-nato-application-swedens-feminist-foreign-policy/>.

reflected the omission of feminism from Sweden's security agenda in early 2022. Thus, amnesia, militarism and gendered silence defined Sweden's strategic narration of its FFP at this time. Rather than contributing to the protection of women and girls through its foreign policy, not least through the WPS framework, Sweden is itself subjected to gendered silencing, with its treatment of NATO as the masculinised protector of a feminised and silenced Sweden being indicative of such gendered logics. Turkey and Hungary's gatekeeping and refusal to expedite Sweden's EU membership application add to the gendered silencing of Sweden.

This feminisation is in contrast to the rewriting of Sweden's identity narrative, which centres on its capability to be 'serious military actor', dedicated to the upgrading of its armed forces, and, ultimately militarism and masculinist leadership.⁸¹ From this perspective FFP is a threat to its quest for NATO membership.⁸² If strategic narratives create the scope of possibility⁸³, they also contribute to impossibilities, and as we go on to demonstrate the gendered silences in the issue narrative concerning NATO-Sweden, framed FFP as incompatible with NATO expansion.

Gendered silences in NATO's narration of Sweden's membership bid

Since NATO's initial engagement in 2007, WPS has moved from a topic where there was resistance from some member states to one of consensus, with WPS now being a key dimension of the 2022 Strategic Concept⁸⁴, even if there are differing opinions on the meaning of WPS amongst allies.⁸⁵ The WPS agenda has also become a core part of NATO's public diplomacy and identity narrative projection⁸⁶, which has itself been highly gendered.⁸⁷ NATO's identity narrative has been steeped in its wish to be viewed as a promotor of the WPS agenda, employing digital, textual and visual language in sustaining that gendered storytelling.⁸⁸

In what follows we identify the gendered silences that prevail in Sweden's road to NATO membership as projected through NATO's strategic narratives and the role of the masculinist protection logic within them. Such gendered silences, we argue, contribute to the collective silencing of women, with the WPS agenda being a platform for furthering gender justice worldwide.

⁸¹ Government Offices of Sweden, 'Sweden's Road to NATO', 2022, <https://www.government.se/government-policy/sweden-and-nato/swedens-road-to-nato/>.

⁸² Charles Szumski, 'End of "Feminist" Foreign Policy as Turkey Still Blocks NATO Accession', EURACTIV, 2022, https://www.euractiv.com/section/all/short_news/end-of-feminist-foreign-policy-as-turkey-still-blocks-nato-accession/; Lisa Toremark and Anna Wieslander, 'How Will Sweden's Right Turn Affect Its Foreign Policy Priorities?', Chatham House, 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/11/how-will-swedens-right-turn-affect-its-foreign-policy-priorities>.

⁸³ Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

⁸⁴ NATO, 'Strategic Concept', 2022, <https://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/>.

⁸⁵ NATO Official, 2022

⁸⁶ Wright, 'Telling NATO's Story of Afghanistan: Gender and the Alliance's Digital Diplomacy'; Wright and Bergman Rosamond, 'NATO, Angelina Jolie and the Alliance's Celebrity and Visual Turn'.

⁸⁷ Elsa Hedling, Emil Edenborg, and Sanna Strand, 'Embodying Military Muscles and a Remasculinized West: Influencer Marketing, Fantasy, and "the Face of NATO"', *Global Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (10 March 2022): 1–12.

⁸⁸ Wright, 'Telling NATO's Story of Afghanistan: Gender and the Alliance's Digital Diplomacy'.

Our focus here is on how NATO has projected strategic narratives concerning the issue narrative (Sweden’s NATO membership) and Sweden’s identity narrative. The first thing to observe is that in February 2022, NATO news items related to Sweden’s membership appeared more regularly, usually one to two items a month with the exception of September, December and March 2023. Finland joined NATO on the 4th April, and in April and May there were no news stories primarily concerning Sweden’s membership. This is also the period prior to the presidential and parliamentary elections in Turkey, understood to be a final barrier to Sweden’s NATO membership, and with the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan preoccupied domestically there was little merit in ‘selling’ Sweden’s NATO membership credentials. The centrality of Turkey to the post-February 2022 issue narrative of Sweden’s NATO membership is evident in the increase in word frequency, from 0 pre-February 2022 (1st January 2014 to 24th February 2022) to 75 post-February 2022 (25th February 2022 to 10th July 2023) (see Table 2). Though Hungary has since September 2023 become vocal in its hesitance towards Sweden’s NATO membership, as Table 2 demonstrates, it was not a core feature of the issue narratives during the focus of our analysis.

Table 1 Word frequency analysis of NATO news items related to Sweden

	# news items	Secretary General	Gender OR WPS
Pre February 2022	18	24	28
Post February 2022	30	140	5

Table 2 Word frequency analysis of NATO news items related to Sweden

	Sweden	Finland	Turkey	Hungary	Russia	Ukraine
Pre February 2022	151	40	0	0	14	15
Post February 2022	375	183	138	3	41	81

The broader absence of WPS from NATO’s projection of Sweden’s identity narrative and the NATO-Sweden issue narrative post-February 2022 is juxtaposed against a narrative projection which otherwise is consistent between the two periods in terms of

focus. What has changed is the narration of Sweden's agency, with Sweden now being portrayed as a state in need of NATO protection, rather than a contributor to NATO, resulting from the gendered silence vis a vis WPS and by extension FFP. Post-February 24th 2022 there was a comparable emphasis to pre-February 2022 on diplomatic affairs versus military matters, with 23 (88.5%) news items concerning diplomatic visits or meetings, 2 (7.7%) military exercises or training and 1 (3.8%) a NATO initiative on space. Pre-February 2022, 15 (88.2%) news items concern diplomatic visits or meetings and 1 (11.8%) military exercises or training. While reference to Russia was a key thread of the pre-February 2022 narratives, references have unsurprisingly more than doubled from pre to post February 2022 from 14 to 41 (see Table 1).

In examining the issue narrative further, we find that the Secretary General has taken on an iprominent mediator role between Turkey and Sweden in the strategic narration of Sweden's NATO membership bid, a role he is familiar with having taken on such a position during the Trump presidency.⁸⁹ This is demonstrable in the increase in in-text references to him post February 2022 (see Table 1), Notable here though is the absence of the WPS agenda from Stoltenberg's declarations of support, despite his prior declarations that WPS is the 'smart thing [for NATO] to do.'⁹⁰ Rather, NATO enlargement is narrated as gender neutral when set against the backdrop of a war in Europe and the urgency this entails, as the Secretary General stated in July 2022: 'we [Finland, Turkey and Sweden] all agreed that the full membership of Sweden is in the security interest of all Allies, and we all want to complete this process as soon as possible.'⁹¹

This quote is illustrative of how the Secretary General, as the 'face of NATO', comes to embody a complicit masculinity within this issue narrative, benefiting from but not fully embodying hegemonic masculinity, in contrast to the hegemonic masculinity Turkey personifies, unyielding in its demands of Sweden (and NATO).⁹² Both contrasted against a feminised Sweden in need of protection by NATO, thus upholding a narration of the issue narrative through masculinist protection.

The relationship between the issue narrative, and Sweden's self/identity narrative in the context of the narration of the masculinist protection becomes clear when we examine the gendered silences within them. Pre February 2022, 2 headlines make reference to Sweden's support for WPS at NATO, and a further 6 news items refer to Sweden's WPS work in their content. This indicates that WPS was a core part of the construction of Sweden's identity narrative vis a vis NATO. Significantly, post-February

⁸⁹ Leonard August Schuette, 'Why NATO Survived Trump: The Neglected Role of Secretary-General Stoltenberg', *International Affairs* 97, no. 6 (1 November 2021): 1863–81.

⁹⁰ Wright, Hurley, and Gil Ruiz, *NATO, Gender and the Military: Women Organising from Within*.

⁹¹ NATO, **NATO Secretary General hosts meeting of senior officials from Finland, Türkiye and Sweden** (2023) https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_216724.htm?selectedLocale=en#:~:text=Secretary%20General%20Jens%20Stoltenberg%20hosted,Sweden%20to%20join%20the%20Alliance.

⁹² R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995).

2022 no reference is made in headline or content to WPS or a gender perspective (see Table 1). Notably, prior to February 2022 NATO Officials visiting Sweden often, though not always, made a point of visiting the Nordic Centre for Gender in Military Operations (NCGM). Once Sweden became an invitee, and although the frequency of such visits increased, the NCGM is no longer included on the agenda and no visits are made. Nor does the NATO Special Representative on WPS visit Sweden post February 2022. This contributes to the gendered silencing of Sweden's support for NATO's WPS work, and by extension its flagship FFP, in Sweden's identity narrative and by extension the issue narrative of Sweden's NATO membership bid. Moreover, this serves to silence and feminise Sweden, in effect removing its agency as a consequence of its pronounced aspirations to achieve NATO membership in the face of insecurity, rendering it vulnerable and in need of masculinist protection.

Conclusions

This article has demonstrated the impact that gendered silences in the strategic narratives of states and IOs can have on the efficacy of FFP and WPS, during processes which might otherwise be viewed as 'gender neutral', including NATO enlargement. This is particularly so when they are imbued with urgency, in this case in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The projection of strategic narratives by NATO concerning both Sweden's identity and the issue of Sweden's NATO membership contribute to understanding how FFP and WPS become silenced during this process of NATO enlargement. As we have demonstrated WPS was a defining characteristic of both these issue and identity narratives prior to February 2022 and Sweden's decision to join NATO. This article thus provides an important contribution to understanding the compatibility of FFP with NATO enlargement. We demonstrate that Sweden's FFP was effectively dropped in practice under the social democratic coalition government, months prior to its official abandonment by the newly elected Conservative led coalition in October 2022. Strategic narratives and the gendered silences within them, therefore contribute not only to creating possibilities, but impossibilities too, in this case Sweden as a NATO member under the auspices of its FFP. In this case, the masculinist protection logic which underpinned the issue narrative of Sweden's NATO membership aspirations removed Sweden's agency to articulate what was its flagship FFP, a signifier that for eight years underpinned its identity narrative.

Despite WPS being an integral part of the NATO-Sweden partnership prior to February 2022 both in practice and narration, the WPS agenda was silenced when there was a tangible possibility of Sweden becoming a member. This happened despite Sweden having been instrumental in shaping the Alliance's initial and early engagement with the agenda as a partner including as part of its FFP, leading to a Swedish loss of agency in relation to NATO. Beyond the implications for Sweden and FFP, this also has broader significance for both NATO and the WPS agenda. While Allies elevated the WPS agenda, as a key commitment of the 2022 Strategic Concept, the agenda was omitted from NATO's communication of the Swedish membership bid. This

mirrors a wider gendered silence amongst the West and NATO on WPS commitments in response to the invasion of Ukraine, whereby the values of gender justice and equality have been largely eradicated from global security discourse.⁹³ It is particularly ironic that an agenda aimed at addressing gendered silences in global politics, is silenced by two actors (NATO and Sweden) that had previously championed it as part of their identity narratives and the wider issue narrative of NATO-Sweden relations.

This in turn has undermined the credibility of NATO as a WPS actor, and will limit its ability to project the agenda as part of its self/identity narrative going forward. At NATO, Sweden's gendered silence opens the space for other Allies to step forward to support WPS. However, perhaps *if, or* once, Sweden becomes a member and the political contention surrounding its membership emanating from Turkey and Hungary fades away, space will be opened up again for Sweden to contribute on WPS, but with FFP having been dropped from its identity narrative it is unlikely to be of the same calibre.

⁹³ K.A.M. Wright, 'Gendered Silences in Western Responses to the Russia-Ukraine War', *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 2022; Katharine A M Wright, 'Where Is Women, Peace and Security? NATO's Response to the Russia-Ukraine War', *European Journal of Politics and Gender* 5, no. 2 (2022): 275–77.