

This is what a feminist foreign policy looks like

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Margot Wallström's decision not to sell arms to Saudi Arabia demonstrates the fundamental rethink needed to achieve a feminist foreign policy. Herein lies women's power to stop war.

It may have escaped your notice, but something very significant has happened. It made the news briefly in the European press, not at all in the US, but in Sweden the papers are now in debate. The "significant something" is a [particular decision](#) made by Margot Wallström, the Swedish Foreign Minister.

How many of us read the papers, listen to the news of what is happening in places like Syria, Iraq, Nigeria or Ukraine and feel disgusted and upset - but also helpless to make a difference? We watch with horror the [impact of explosive weapons](#), like rockets and artillery and mortars and barrel bombs, wielded by all sides in these wars. The use of these explosive weapons in towns and cities brings deaths and injuries to civilians, destruction of their homes, schools and hospitals, and loss of food, water, shelter and sanitation.

Do we pause to worry about where these and other [weapons come from](#) and how they get into the hands of those who bombard towns and cities, who commit war crimes, or who perpetrate crimes against humanity?

Think of this phrase: "crimes against humanity". It describes violent acts, which are so horrific that they denigrate all of us and our common humanity. There are [laws](#) against such acts, international laws that States and individuals are [supposed to respect](#). But they do not respect them and we let them get away with it because we are missing something. That missing link is between us as an electorate, our leaders as our State, and the impact of what they do in our name.

Margot Wallström just gave back the people of Sweden their humanity, although not all see it that way. And, of course, she is being criticised for it and the nature of that criticism is, inevitably, gendered.

If you missed it: she denounced the Saudi authorities for their human rights record and in particular the sentence of 1,000 lashes and flogging of liberal Saudi blogger Raif Badawi. "Mediaeval" she defined it. How many of us have said the same? But she is a Foreign Minister and has authority, so she did not just turn off the radio and walk away. She complied with international law and said no to the cooperation agreement on arms deals with Saudi Arabia – one of the world's worst human rights violators, also to be found in the UK list of such transgressors but with no consequences.

Margot Wallström is now being condemned as naïve, emotional and lacking political judgment. Former Foreign Minister Carl Bildt has said that "There is a real risk... [the cancellation] will hit Swedish interests, not only in Saudi Arabia itself." Does he mean that Sweden has an interest in providing weapons that might be used to violate human rights? I think not. He is more likely referring to the money that will be lost to the economy, which is the reason why Sweden made the deal with Saudi Arabia in the first place.

Margot Wallström's decision has angered even those who do not seem to have a dog in this fight: Volvo, H&M and the SEB bank group. This illustrates just how close all economy is to the arms trade.

As David Crouch wrote on 11 March in the Guardian:

The bust-up could also weaken Sweden's chances of re-election to the UN security council next year,

which the government has made a strategic foreign policy goal. "No one will listen to Sweden now for many years to come," said Per Jönsson, a Middle East expert at the Institute of Foreign Affairs in Stockholm. Worsening relations with Israel and the Arab world meant Wallström, seen as a star when she took office, was now "becoming an obvious problem", commented Sweden's leading business newspaper, Dagens Industri.

Am I the only one who sees the comment about the membership of the Security Council as a condemnation of that body? As if, if you play the game of the Permanent 5, you are one of the boys, if you don't, then you don't get to play. The United Nations is ostensibly the world's largest peace organization.

Is this what we want? A world where only those who sell weapons are taken seriously? Where only those who carry and use weapons are to be respected? Where courageous women who denounce violence and extremism become the subject of attack and vilification? How very "mediaeval" - but with men in suits instead of men in cloaks.

There is now even more reaction: Saudi Arabia is to deny visas to Swedes. Game theory: a response is expected. That response should be global solidarity with the action taken by Sweden.

There are choices that we have to make. We can have foreign policies that give succor to regimes that kill, torture and maim their own citizens, and then pass on the weapons we sell to their protégées in other countries. Or we can choose a fundamental change in the way we do business and demand foreign policies that promote human rights and that refuse to facilitate conflict through the use of more and more violence and militarism. It requires a serious rethink of our understanding of peace and security towards a more holistic approach; the crux of the upcoming major [international civil society conference](#) hosted by WILPF under the banner Women's Power to Stop War.

Our governments represent us: they sell arms in our name, they support rogue regimes in our name, and they claim that by doing so, they are securing our economic wellbeing and our security. Well, they do neither.

Our inaction in the face of what we see and read on a daily basis, and on what we allow to be done to others, makes us complicit in the catastrophes that affect ordinary people, just like us, every day.

Margot Wallström showed us what can be done when we put principles and human decency above "business as usual." This is what a [feminist foreign policy](#) looks like.

She needs support and we should let it be known that she has it.

Read read more articles in 50.50's series [Women's Power to Stop War](#) in the run up to WILPF's [international civil society conference](#) in the Hague, April 2015.