

# **Pro-gender Norms in Norwegian Peace Engagement: Balancing Experiences, Values and Interests**

INGER SKJELSBÆK

*Centre for Gender Research, University of Oslo and Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO),  
Norway*

TORUNN LISE TRYGGESTAD

*Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), Norway*

The national self-image of Norway is as a gender equal and peace promoting nation. Norwegian gender equality policies grew out of a strong social and political civil society engagement from below combined with equal rights laws as well as quota systems implemented from above by the state. In this paper, we explore the inter-section of pro-gender norms and peace engagement in Norwegian foreign policy. While gender mainstreaming has been on the agenda of Norwegian development cooperation for decades, the introduction of pro-gender norms in peace engagement is a more recent phenomenon. How are gender equality norms and concerns understood and promoted by Norwegian peace facilitators in practice. And how are pro-gender experiences, values and norms balanced in Norwegian peace engagement?

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In recent years a growing number of states have appeared on the international scene as ‘women-friendly’, meaning that they have made pro-gender norms and gender equality central to their foreign policy. Among the states gaining most attention for such policies are Australia, Canada, Sweden and the UK (Aggestam et. al 2019; Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond 2016; True 2016). With Sweden taking a lead, many of these states have even labelled their foreign policy ‘feminist’. Norway, on the other hand, has refrained from doing the same. Although pro-gender norms and gender equality are increasingly prominent features also of Norwegian foreign policy, there still seems to be reluctance to label or frame

it explicitly as 'feminist'. This is particularly interesting because gender equality is considered a core value in Norwegian society.

Likewise, since the early 1990s, the Norwegian self-image as a peace-promoting and gender equal nation has come to be seen as a Norwegian value. Engagement for peace has been an element of Norwegian foreign policy, which has enjoyed ardent support by various governments, despite differing political ideologies. "Norwegian foreign policy remains stable", has been a political mantra in election campaigns as well as from different foreign ministers over the past decades. This engagement has been, uncontroversial and viewed almost as an extension of seemingly inherent Norwegian national characteristics; a small state with good intentions coupled with a non-colonial past.<sup>1</sup> In a study of newspaper articles on Norwegian peace engagement in the period 1993-2003 a dominant discourse is detected in which "Norway was invested with considerable agency, power and ability in promoting peace, with discursive links between 'Norway', 'peace promotion' and 'success' being established" (Skånland 2010, p.35).

In parallel with the contemporary notion of Norway as a peace nation, Norwegian gender equality policies emerged in the 1980s and 1990s in domestic politics, after a period of strong Nordic state feminism and emergence of prominent female politicians (Hernes 1987). It was particularly the social democratic government led by Gro Harlem Brundtland (Norway's first woman prime minister), which epitomized this policy when she in 1986 formed the most gender-balanced government to date, with a 40% representation of women ministers. In tandem, these two dimensions of Norwegian public identity formation have created a sense of Norwegian exceptionalism; a way of thinking and arguing that promoting peace and gender equality are essential ingredients of a Norwegian national identity and core societal values.

Interestingly, and despite the prominence of pro-gender norms and policies in Norwegian society overall, the articulation of pro-gender norms and aims has until recently not been as explicit in the domains of Norwegian foreign policy, at least not in the 'traditional' domains of foreign policy, nor in the field of peace and reconciliation

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<sup>1</sup> The non-colonial image remains despite Norwegian colonizing culture and language policies via the indigenous Sami population in Northern Norway which lasted until the 1980s.

engagements. How the integration of gender norms in Norwegian peace engagement has come about in policy and practice is under-researched. It has not been addressed in the existing body of literature exploring in depth Norwegian peace engagement (Taulbee et al, 2014, Nissen 2015, Saulter 2015) and our paper will contribute to filling some of this void. In this article we have two aims; first, an empirical one namely to find out how Norwegian peace mediators themselves articulate the ways in which gender equality is, or has become important, in their peace mediation efforts, and second, a conceptual one namely to assess how gender equality and peace mediation goals reinforce or challenge each other.

The empirical basis for our analysis is semi-structured interviews of 10 Norwegian diplomats, who have been centrally involved in peace mediation and facilitation efforts.<sup>2</sup> Some of them belong to the Norwegian foreign policy elite (in terms of formal high-level positions), while others occupy mid-level positions within the foreign service. The majority of the diplomats interviewed have been involved in peace engagement activities for many years and across a number of peace facilitation processes. These elements of thematic specialization and stability over time distinguishes them from the traditional diplomat, who generally serves in a position for 2-4 years before moving on to a new position or posting abroad, working on new topics.

The focus of the interviews was threefold: to track the interviewees personal trajectories for engagement in peace mediation; to unpack how gender elements were addressed in the mediation processes; and finally, how the role as Norwegian men and women, i.e. their national and gendered identities, impacted the ways in which they could address gender in the mediation process. Our analytical aim has been to understand how our interviewees, i.e. those who do peace facilitation in practice, understand the ways in

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<sup>2</sup> Of these 10 diplomats four were men and six were women. In selecting the interviewees we started out contacting some of those we knew from media reports and general knowledge about Norwegian foreign policy had been involved in Norwegian peace facilitation processes. From there on we also used the 'snowball method' in identifying interviewees. The actual selection of interviewees has been based on opportunity. These are notoriously difficult people to interview because they travel extensively and are otherwise engaged in diplomatic activities, which makes it difficult for them to set aside time for interviews. In addition to the 10 diplomats we also included in our material the personal, written accounts of a couple of senior Norwegian diplomats with experience from both Norwegian-led and international peace mediation efforts. In their autobiographies they provide accounts of their activities and experiences, including being Norwegian diplomats expected to promote pro-gender norms.

which pro-gender policies intersect with peace mediation; its practice and aims. We are interested in how they *narrate* impact; i.e. how they construct temporal and casual links between experiences, events and policies (Sarbin, 1987). Our analytical methodology has been to group statements in along different temporal dimensions; statements arguing for continuity in policy, arguments for change in policy and arguments about contestations. These will be outlined in more detail below. Chinkin & Kaldor argue (2017, p.41) that the state can be seen, from a feminist perspective, as a “male subject combatting other males abroad”. Our aim is to see if this image is contested by our interviewees, and if contemporary Norwegian peace mediation efforts stem from a state feminist conceptualization of the state, i.e. a state which is not a male subject, but a promoter of pro-gender norms and policies.

### **State feminism and its impact on Norwegian foreign policy**

The adoption in October 2000 of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) on Women, Peace and Security offered a global opportunity for Norway to highlight and bring together the two prominent features of self-identification; gender equality and peace promotion. The resolution recognizes the important roles and contributions of women in conflict prevention, conflict management and peacebuilding. Further, it calls on the international community to do more to include women in all matters of international peace and security. In the years that have passed since the adoption of the resolution Norway has played a very active global role – normatively as well as financially – in advancing the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda (Skjelsbæk & Tryggestad, 2019). Norway was one of the first UN member states to adopt a national action plan on WPS in 2006. More recently, women’s inclusion in peace mediation have become a hallmark of Norway’s international peace and reconciliation efforts, most notably in Colombia (Salvesen & Nylander 2017). Norway positions itself as a state actor to be reckoned with when it comes to pro-gender foreign policies. Or, as former Foreign Minister of Norway (2013-2017), Børge Brende of the Conservative Party said in a speech on gender equality in Norwegian

development and foreign policy; in this field Norway could be a “superpower”.<sup>3</sup> Being a small state, there are not many traditional foreign policy areas where Norway could take on global leadership. Thus, the political space to promote pro-gender norms in Norwegian foreign policy has been warmly embraced, as showcased by the comments by Norway’s former Foreign Minister mentioned above. But, proclaiming to have a feminist foreign policy like Sweden, is not on the table. The term *feminist* cannot even be found in any of the key documents adopted on Norwegian foreign policy in recent years, including the action plans on Women, Peace and Security (Norwegian Ministries 2019) and Gender Equality in Foreign Policy and Development Cooperation (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016). Seen from the outside there appears to be a tension within the Norwegian foreign policy apparatus between on the one hand heralding Norway as a global leader in terms of commitment to gender equality in its foreign policy, while on the other hand shying away from publicly and explicitly proclaiming Norwegian foreign policy feminist or pro-gender. These tensions stem, as will be argued below, amongst others from particular conceptualization and practices of Norwegian peace mediation. But, first we need to explain pro-gender policies and their centrality in the Norwegian national identity construct.

### **State Feminism and Norwegian national identity**

In order to better understand the ways in which gender equality became such a central feature of Norwegian national identity, it is important to understand the state feminist model and how it developed in the domestic context. It was Helga Hernes who first coined the term in 1987. The fundamental element of state feminism is the idea that the state can act as a constructive partner, even a guarantor, to promote greater social equality between men and women. Hernes (1987) argued that feminist goals could be promoted by women entering into a partnership with the state, by women taking on leading political roles and taking ownership of policy development. However, the development and implementation

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<sup>3</sup> Foreign Minister Mr. Børge Brende at the launch of the National Action Plan for Women’s Rights and Gender Equality in Norway’s Foreign and Development Policy 2016 – 2020 (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016) on 13 June 2016 at the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD).

of woman-friendly and gender-equal social policies would be dependent on continuous pressure from below, from women and women's organizations. The Scandinavian social democracies, as they appeared in the 1980s, had "the potential to be woman-friendly", according to Hernes (1987). This approach, at the time, was in opposition to the skeptical view of the state that prevailed in many feminist milieus (both scholarly and activist) where it was customary to analyze the state system as a manifestation of general male domination, as one of the core problems of patriarchal power. Hernes, on the other hand, was arguing that the state could, in time, and given the correct socio-democratic conditions, become an ally of the feminist cause.

Moving fast forward to contemporary Norwegian society the state has become precisely such an ally of the feminist cause. According to Cathrine Holst (2009, p. 114), state feminism "has become an umbrella term for government activities that have the formal intention of promoting gender equality". However, today the term 'state feminism' is primarily used by scholars to describe a combination of laws and welfare schemes that in the aggregate represent a 'top-down', state-sponsored strategy to promote gender equality in various sectors of domestic politics. The most prominent examples are generous arrangements for parental leave and laws to protect against gender discrimination in the work place. These policies, which initially were fought for by women's organizations and feminist policy makers within the state apparatus, are now increasingly taken for granted by most Norwegians. Politically it would be very difficult to disrupt these rights and policies in Norway today. Still, you will hardly find any politicians or policy-makers within the state apparatus publicly framing these policies as 'feminist'. The favored term, in both domestic as well as foreign policy, has been that of gender equality policies. In Norway, 'feminism' is regarded as a divisive, prescriptive term, representing a political project with a radical, transformative agenda. 'Gender equality', on the other hand, "is typically understood in terms of a harmonious, linear process of gradual development" (Teigen and Wängnerud 2009: 25). In the Norwegian context, 'gender equality' has emerged as a value laden term for which there is great consensus. It has emerged as an identity marker of a core value that characterize "us". Gender equality is a descriptive term for a national identity.

While Norwegian society has changed quite fundamentally since the 1980s, in terms of becoming more women-friendly and gender-equal, some scholars have noted that the

state feminist model has now, perhaps, become transformed to a foreign policy mode of operating (Tryggestad 2014). Skjeie (2013) notes that:

“The older understanding survives [...] and is of course reflected particularly strongly in UN policy development and institution-building in the area of gender equality. [...] [S]tate feminism today [is] perhaps more relevant transnationally than in a Norwegian or Nordic context (Skjeie, 2013, p. 29).“

Skjeie continues to describe state feminism as a kind of achievable utopia, as though this woman-friendly society is a society where gender will not determine what one can do – as though it has almost been erased. In this “achievable utopia” Norway’s economic wealth is seen as linked to gender equality politics, which, in turn, becomes a form of political currency on the international stage. One example of this was seen when the *World Development Report 2011* was launched in Norway. At the launch the Minister of International Development and Environment at the time, (and former Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Special Advisor to Sri Lanka), Erik Solheim, gave opening remarks where he underscored that gender equality was just as important for Norwegian economic growth as the discovery of oil off the Norwegian coast in the early 1970s (Journalen 2011). This point has been reiterated by several Norwegian Ministers, including former Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg. In a speech on 8 March 2012 he stated that the economic value of Norwegian women’s participation in the work force was higher than that of Norway’s oil revenue (Aftenposten 2012). He warned that if the participation of women in the Norwegian workforce was reduced down to the OECD average, the value of the production loss would equal Norway’s total oil wealth, including values not yet extracted.

These statements serve two rhetorical purposes; first, it has a “look to Norway”<sup>4</sup> effect in which these experiences of economic growth are intimately linked to Norwegian

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<sup>4</sup> This is a term which stems from a speech by U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt given during the handover ceremony of the Royal Norwegian Navy ship HNoMS King Haakon VII at the Washington Navy Yard on 16 September 1942. The quote was as follows; "If there is anyone who still wonders why this war is being fought, let him look to Norway. If there is anyone who has any delusions that this war could have been averted, let him look to Norway; and if there is anyone who doubts the democratic will to win, again I say, let him look to Norway." [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Look\\_to\\_Norway](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Look_to_Norway). Last accessed 17 August 2018.

national gender equality identity and welfare politics, and second, that Norway has experiences which can be beneficial to other countries. The argument made by prominent politicians is that Norway can offer knowledge and expertise based on its own experience; countries can get wealthier if they prioritize gender equality.<sup>5</sup> This combination; the positive domestic experience with gender equality policies and willingness to share this knowledge internationally has become a foreign policy currency; especially in the domain of development cooperation. The adoption of UNSCR 1325 in 2000 provided an opportunity for Norway to make use of this currency in a new domain of its foreign policy; notably in its peace engagement. But, could Norway's positive experiences with gender equality policies simply be transferred to peace mediation efforts in a seamless way? Before discussing this further, an outline of peace engagement and Norwegian foreign policy is needed.

### **Peace engagement and Norwegian Foreign Policy**

The role that Norway has taken on in international peace mediation comes against a long historical backdrop. Norwegian foreign policy has placed great emphasis on peace engagement, and some argue that it has been *the* most central aspect of Norwegian foreign policy even before Norwegian independence from Sweden in 1905 (Knutsen et.al, 2016, p. 96).<sup>6</sup> The Norwegian nation building project, after independence, was based in part on the notion of Norway – and Norwegians – as a particularly peace-loving nation and people (Leira 2013).

There is a large Norwegian literature on the trajectories of the Norwegian peace engagement (such as Knutsen, et.al, 2016; Tamnes 1997; Pharo 2005) and its role in nation branding (such as de Carvalho & Neumann 2015). What the literature points to is that peace

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<sup>5</sup> For many years this was a much-used rhetoric among politicians representing the centre-left of Norwegian politics. In recent years, however, national statistics as well as studies have supported this claim (see for instance Østbakken, 2016). Increasingly, Norwegian politicians and policy makers make references to studies published by institutions such as the World Economic Forum (2017) and the World Bank (2018).

<sup>6</sup> Following the Napoleonic wars (1800-1815) Denmark lost the Norwegian territory to Sweden, leaving Norway in a union with Sweden from 1814 to 1905.

engagement has been a key pillar of Norwegian foreign policy since the 1960s. Late Foreign Minister Knut Frydenlund defined the following three goals of Norwegian foreign policy: securing Norway's freedom and sovereignty; securing Norway's interests; and, last but not least contributing to securing global peace and promote cooperation between peoples (Frydenlund 1966, p. 143). An insistence on Norwegian interests being best served by engaging in *idealpolitik* has since prevailed in rhetoric and policy. The argument that it is in Norway's interest to actively engage in international peace and security efforts has been made by every foreign minister since Frydenlund's time. For a long period, Norway's peace engagement took the form first and foremost of contributions to UN peacekeeping operations and political and financial support to the UN system and multilateralism. From the early 1990s onwards, however, Norway has become just as well-known for its many bilateral peace engagements around the world, and increasingly so under critical scrutiny (Taulbee et. al 2014, Wallensteen and Svensson, 2016, Keskinen et.al. 2016).

According to the Norwegian MFA, Norway has, since 1993, officially made active contributions to peace processes in the following conflicts (in alphabetical order); Afghanistan, Columbia, Guatemala, Middle East, Myanmar, Nepal, the Philippines, Somalia, Sri Lanka, and Sudan/South Sudan. In addition, Norway is engaged in processes that are not official and therefore not part of this list.<sup>7</sup> The first major peace processes Norway engaged in – the Oslo Process (Israel/Palestine) and Sri Lanka – were characterized by high political ambitions of profiled individuals and quite extensive media attention (Nissen 2015). Leading politicians in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) took on active roles themselves as mediators and facilitators, which in turn lead to high visibility and increased risks of jeopardizing the processes. It peaked in 2004 when rallies were organized in Colombo, Sri Lanka, against Norway, and a doll depicting Norwegian Special Advisor Erik Solheim, was put on fire. The majority of the profiled individuals involved in Norwegian peace mediation during the 1990s and early 2000s were men. Peace mediation had become an attractive career opportunity, bringing with it considerable status for the individuals involved. It also appeared as an activity that considerably strengthened Norway's small state status in international politics (de Carvalho and Neumann 2015).

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<sup>7</sup> [https://www.regjeringen.no/en/topics/foreign-affairs/peace-and-reconciliation-efforts/innsiktsmappe/peace\\_efforts/id732943/](https://www.regjeringen.no/en/topics/foreign-affairs/peace-and-reconciliation-efforts/innsiktsmappe/peace_efforts/id732943/). Last accessed 15 April 2019.

In the early 2000s Norwegian peace engagement gradually changed its modus operandi; still active but more low-key. Top-level politicians at the MFA took on supportive roles and involved themselves first when direct political support was required. More importantly, however, from the early 2000s Norwegian peace engagement became more professionalized. During the Norwegian engagement in the Sri Lanka process a Sri Lanka Unit was set up at the MFA in Oslo. In parallel with the Sri Lanka engagement, Norway was also involved in a number of other processes, and there was a need to strengthen the support capacities. In 2001/2002 a decision was made by then State Secretary Vidar Helgesen to turn the Sri Lanka Unit into a Section for Peace and Reconciliation. The purpose was to institutionalize and systematize the lessons and knowledge gained to make peace mediation and reconciliation a profession within the MFA. The establishment of this section should become a turning point also for how issues of women's inclusion and gender perspectives were integrated into Norwegian peace engagement. This will be addressed in more detail below.

What also came out of the professionalization process within the MFA was the operationalization of the 'Norwegian model for peace engagement', which was first conceptualized in the mid-1990s by then State Secretary Jan Egeland (Neumann, 2015). Some critics have argued that it is not really a model as such, but rather a way to organize Norwegian peace engagement (Nissen 2015). It has the following general features (as outlined by the MFA):<sup>8</sup>

- A long-term willingness to provide assistance; both for economic development and peacebuilding.
- Provision of resources; both human and financial.
- Close cooperation with Norwegian NGOs; which have served as door openers and providers of access.
- Experience; built over many years, including working with non-state actors.
- Good relations with key international actors; both individual states and multilateral organizations (the UN in particular).

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<sup>8</sup> This information can be found on the webpage of the Norwegian government, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/topics/foreign-affairs/peace-and-reconciliation-efforts/innsiktsmappe/norway-peace-work/id446704/>. Last accessed 15 April 2019.

- No colonial past; Norwegian engagement is perceived to be sincere and not motivated by political or economic self-interest.<sup>9</sup>
- Focus on peace facilitation rather than ‘mediation with muscle’.

Interestingly, pro-gender norms are still not listed or specified on the government webpage as core values or principles of the Norwegian peace engagement model even if women’s inclusion and integration of gender perspectives in peace processes have become an integral part of Norway’s most recent peace engagement (Tryggestad 2014; Salvesen and Nylander 2017; Norwegian Ministries 2019).

### **Situating gender equal experiences, values and interests in Norwegian peace mediation**

What then, do Norwegian peace mediators tell us about the ways in which pro-gender norms and policies intersect with peace mediation practices and goals? Through our interviews we found that the mediators describe different balancing acts according to three distinctly different topical areas; *experiences* with gender equality as a Norwegian way of organizing sociopolitical life; gender equality as a distinctly Norwegian *value* which is now embedded in a competitive foreign policy field; and finally that Norwegian foreign policy *interests* are served well by showcasing gender equality. Below we will show how these different narratives of gender equality intersects with Norwegian peace mediation.

#### ***Narratives of experience***

The peace mediators in this interview study have all grown up with gender equality as a core feature of Norwegian social and political life. In the stories by the women in the sample there are many accounts of being ‘first’ in many positions. These experiences of being ‘firsts’, often as a result of conscious efforts to bring women into positions of power and prestige, a well-organized day care system and male partners taking their fair share of the

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<sup>9</sup> For a critical post-colonial perspective on the notion of the Nordic countries as outsiders to colonial power-relations see Keskinen et.al 2016.

burden at home has enabled women to also step up in the Norwegian MFA. It should be noted, however, that compared to the rest of Norwegian society the MFA was slow in transforming into a gender equal culture (Neumann 2008). In fact, after women were given the right to vote in 1913 (as one of the first European countries to do so) gender equality in state employment was introduced with some noticeable exceptions: “members of the King’s council (i.e. ministers), persons of the state church, ‘diplomatic and consular positions’, military positions and, finally, new areas that might be deemed sensitive” (Neumann 2008, p. 676). Neumann further states (2008, s. 681) that the changes in gender equality policies within the MFA came “due to the imbrication of the MFA in general state-society relations and has been regularly resisted by the apparatus”. Women’s slow introduction to the foreign service was not unique to Norway, but rather a trait that has characterized diplomacy in many countries (Aggestam & Towns 2018a).

While gender equality policies and pro-gender norms were introduced and adopted in the ‘soft foreign policy’ domain of development aid (including personnel policies within that sector) from the 1980s onwards (Engh 2006), this was not the case within the more traditional domains of foreign policy. The sense of exceptionalism within the MFA prevailed, and the imbalance between the number of women and men in the diplomatic missions and within the MFA in Oslo changed only in the early 2000s when women constituted about 1/3 of the diplomatic corps. From the early 1990s women made up about half of the trainees at the diplomatic academy. By 2003 women were in majority at the academy (Neumann 2008) and by 2016 the MFA had become a gender equal organisation. By then women made up 53% of the total work force of the MFA (headquarters in Oslo and diplomatic missions combined) and 48% of leadership positions (Norwegian Government, 2017).

Being firsts in traditionally male dominated positions is described in somewhat different ways by the female interviewees;

“For me it was a kind of competition between men and women. I wanted [that position] and I knew that I had to be better than the guys, not equal with them [...] when they finally sent me to my first mission I was unsure how I would handle it [...] and I would say that it took me almost 10-15 years before I was secure enough to trust my own leadership style, and not try to be like my male colleagues.”

Another interviewee sees her various roles as ‘a first’ in a number of high-level positions as having been less of a struggle but more a natural development and how she was appointed or invited to these various positions without clearly aiming and competing for them.

“I was asked to be in the secretariat for the Foreign Minister [...] and then sent to [place] as ambassador. I don’t think that I was sent because I was a woman, but because I had the necessary competence for the position(s).”

Whether the experience of being firsts, as women in high level positions where they could engage in peace and conflict mediation was seen as a result of gender and/or merit varies, but they all acknowledge that being a Norwegian woman in such position entails certain gendered commitments and handling of expectations by others. “I notice that I get called on a lot to talk about gender and equality in my post as ambassador, and that our experiences with gender equality serve as examples for others”, says one of the interviewees. She goes on to explain that she has been in the media, and given a number of talks about how we organize parental leave and childcare. “it seems to be something we bring with us”, she concludes and frames gender equal policies as a Norwegian branding element, something that gives her a platform for visibility.

But maintaining this image in the international domain requires steady follow up. There needs to be a match between rhetoric and practice. The “optic” as several of the interviewees call it, needs to match the policy. You cannot preach gender equality, if it is not seen how this is done. That has made it hard for some of the “firsts” to convey this message because they have been alone or a minority amongst men. In the early days of Norwegian peace engagement this was probably particularly hard, since the first processes Norway was involved in paid little attention to gender equality or women’s representation. But, as one interviewee points out “there is no reason why a Norwegian Minister should travel around the world with all male delegations today”, implying that there are more than enough qualified women to choose from within the MFA and other relevant circles, and that being attentive to this is important for Norwegian image formation. Having more visible women would also make pro-gender concerns more credible. Should they fail to do so, it would reflect very badly on Norway as a trustworthy actor, not only in relation to

gender equality, but potentially also in other policy domains. The connection between Norway as a gender equal country which places great emphasis on its peace engagement reinforce the image of Norway as a benign country, “a country which is small and neutral and does not have many hang-ups or hidden agendas” as one interviewee said. Representing Norway as a woman in peace mediation is therefore a reinforcing nation branding exercise, and “enables a thinking out there that the Norwegians are ok, we can trust them”, the interviewee concludes.

In their study of Nordic peace diplomacy Wallensteen & Svensson (2016) note that there is a distinct difference between Norway and its Nordic neighbours, in that Norway places emphasis on the *facilitator role*, while the other countries place greater emphasis on the mediator role. It is as if the Norwegians invite to a dinner party by only opening their house for visitors and letting them decide the menu, as opposed to a dinner party where the menu is already set by the host. But in order to be asked to host, your house needs to be in order.

Therefore, the issue of double standards is a recurrent theme in many of the interviews. While women have the power to be in power in Norway, this is not the case in many of the peace processes in which Norway – and Norwegians – have been involved in. In her accounts of the failed peace process between Sudan and South Sudan, former UN Special Envoy and Norwegian Minister of Development Cooperation, Hilde Frafjord Johnson (2016, p.81) states that “peace negotiations are by default between *warring parties*”, and she goes on to say that “women do not get central positions in peace negotiations” (Johnson, 2016, p.83). She explains how she tried to include women in the peace processes in Sudan but concludes that she was not as successful as she would have liked in her attempts. Without making a causal link, she warns that there has been a tension between mediators and the mediating parties when there has been a too strong insistence on the inclusion of women because it can be seen as a sign of Western overruling of the processes (Johnson, 2016, p. 83). This is a tension which is reiterated by several of the interviewees, and plays into the reluctance to make use of the term ‘feminism’. In his reflections about his role as United Nations Special Representative to Afghanistan and Head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) from 2008 – 2010, Norwegian diplomat Kai Eide writes that;

“For me the situation for women was first and foremost a question of human rights but it was also a question of how to rebuild Afghan society. I had never experienced a rebuilding of a society with only half of the population involved. (Eide, 2010, p.98)”.

In the reflections by the two Norwegian UN representatives, as Envoy and Representative respectively, we see that gender equality concerns are part of their repertoire for addressing the inclusivity in a peace process, but they both acknowledge how difficult it can be. By playing up the gender equality card, too much could be a risk; for them personally, by being cast as too Western and possibly even too Nordic, and for the process, because it could entail too much involvement at early stages in a mediation process. As one interviewee point out; “I am all for gender inclusivity and the fact that this is being pushed from the top, but does it need to be part of every step of the way in a process [...] to me this shows that the degree of lip service goes to the roof, and this is particularly so for Scandinavian countries such as Norway”.

Interestingly, several of the interviewees with direct experience from peace processes facilitated by Norway express more positive views and perspectives on the importance of women’s inclusion and gender equality measures, and what is achievable in peace mediation efforts. As one of the interviewees put it

“We – just as the parties to a conflict – go through phases. We cannot include all kinds of issues from day one. You can, but there are limits to how much you can insist. And you have to be careful when you come from Western Europe or Scandinavia. It has to be nurtured and grow organically. Find the right timing, and I think we did, like the initiative to establish a gender sub-committee (in Colombia). When we did, it was acceptable to both parties.”

The experiences Norwegians have with gender equality in domestic and political life can be showcased in peace mediation, as the interviewees suggest. But as they also note, this entails’ a delicate balancing act. Positive experiences with gender equality in Norway serve as a door opener for Norwegian political visibility, and this image needs to be maintained, optically as well as substantially. Yet, insisting too strongly on gender equality in peace mediation is seen as particularly risky for Norwegian peace mediators because this could

be seen as too liberal, Western and value driven in the mediation process. Therefore, making a distinction between “focusing on women’s rights and issues during the mediation process instead of instituting women’s participation in the mediation process”, according to one interviewee, has been a middle ground tactic.

What we see described here is a balancing of expectation and practice. In order to appear as a credible actor in the realm of peace mediation Norway needs to gender balance its peace mediation teams. This displays that the Norwegian experiences with gender equality domestically, is also reflected in foreign policy practices; that Norway talks the talk and walks the walk. In other words, gender equal peace mediation teams sets Norway up as a reliable mediator, a partner to reckoned with who does not appear to have a double standard. At the same time, there is not too much insistence on the mediating teams following suit vis-à-vis the conflict parties. That could have an adversarial effect in delicate processes and could infringe on the Norwegian insistence on being a peace facilitator as opposed to a peace mediator, to be outlined below.

### *Narratives of values*

As noted in the introduction, Sweden has adopted a feminist foreign policy, Norway has refrained from doing so. Across the interviews the Swedish determination to relabel their foreign policy is seen as a bold value statement. The Swedish determination to base their foreign policies on such a clear value laden choice impacts the self-reflection amongst the Norwegian peace mediators. Before discussing this in more detail, let us take a quick look at what the Swedish feminist foreign policy entails. Aggestam & Rosamond (2016) have described elegantly the three R’s in the feminist foreign policy toolbox: “Representation, Rights, and Reallocation. In other words, Sweden seeks to promote women’s representation and participation in politics in general and in peace processes in particular; to advocate women’s rights as human rights, including women’s protection from sexual and gender-based violence; and to work toward a more gender-sensitive and equitable distribution of global income and natural resources” (Aggestam & Rosamond 2016, p. 325). Clearly these are all priorities that Norwegian foreign policy makers can subscribe to and have done for many years (Skjelsbæk & Tryggestad 2019). But it is as if the willingness to relabel these priorities under the f-word instigates resistance. One reason articulated by one

interviewee is that these priorities are seen as intrinsic to Norwegian values, so there should be no reason to name and showcase them; they are part of the Norwegian identity. Without commenting directly on the Swedish feminist foreign policy this interviewee explains the status of the WPS agenda in Norwegian foreign policy in the following manner:

“This is a topic that is important, across party affiliations in Norway. It is part of who we are – a natural reflection of the position of gender equality in our society. In addition, there are expectations from others, that we both can and will contribute, and we do. So, in my view it is a natural extension. It is a policy area that means something, that subsequent governments have spent a lot of time and resources on, a topic of high priority. And this gives us visibility. But it is not an uncomplicated area, few areas of foreign policy are, so you have to be wise in how you handle it. I think we are, so that is why we are in the lead.”

To label Norwegian foreign policy ‘feminist’ would suggest that Norway has a political transformative agenda and a way of approaching mediation that would be predetermined. Returning to the dinner menu metaphor alluded to earlier; it would be as if the dinner menu would be set, and this would infringe on the carefully crafted facilitator role. The rhetoric around Norwegian peace mediation rests heavily on a benign notion that the parties actively seek out Norway, or Norwegians, as well-suited partners/facilitators. Wallensten & Svensson (2016, chap.3) outline the different ways in which Nordic peace mediation is initiated and the title of the chapter is “It started with a phone call” suggesting a casual and informal initiation to peace mediation, or facilitation. The call could come from the parties themselves, such as when the former Vice President of Sudan Ali Osman Mohamed Taha called the Norwegian Minister of International Development Cooperation at the time Hilde Frafjord Johnson to ask if Norway could facilitate contact with the Sudanese People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) in 2003 (Wallensten & Svensson 2016, p. 39; Johnson, 2016). Or, it could be a call from UN Headquarters such as when Norwegian Foreign Minister Thorvald Stoltenberg was called up by UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Gahli in 1993 and was asked to take over the role as Special Envoy to the Balkans (Wallensten & Svensson 2016, p.39). These are examples of cases where Norwegians have been asked to take on roles on behalf of the UN. In other processes the Norwegian engagement has been based on personal connections in the conflict areas in question, coupled with a political willingness to take risks, and a flexible bureaucratic culture which could turn around quickly and respond with human and financial resources.

One example is the connections made through the research conducted by the research institute FAFO<sup>10</sup> in 1990-1992. A number of studies were carried out on the socio-economic living conditions amongst Palestinians, led by Terje Røed Larsen. This work paved the way for the Norwegian engagement leading up to the Oslo Peace Accords in 1993. The trust and confidence the Norwegians had gained from the Palestinians was an asset in the mediation process that followed. In addition, one interviewee points out “Yassir Arafat’s brother had worked with Norwegian nurses at a hospital in Cairo and had a soft spot for Norwegian women”.

Another example can be found in the case of Guatemala where Norwegian NGOs had been active since the 1970s and had built strong connections and trust which enabled a role in the peace process in 1991 between the state forces and the guerrilla movement (Wallensten & Svensson 2016). Individuals, research institutions and NGOs have contributed in paving the way for Norwegian peace engagement in various forms and the reason why Norwegians have been successful at this (not to be confused with the peace processes as such being all successful) have been explained in different ways – referring back to ‘the Norwegian model’; Norway has no colonial past, Norway has a legacy of long-term development cooperation and engagement, and Norway and the Nordics have had a favourable social and political development (Sørnbø, 2015, Taulbee et.al 2014, Tryggestad 2014, Wallensten & Svensson, 2016).

Top down policies coupled with a strong pressure from NGOs and policy and research communities, a model resembling the state feminist one, has also been a central feature of the advancement of the WPS agenda and Norway’s engagement in this normative framework. Tryggestad (2014, p. 445) notes that “What is particular in the Norwegian model is the level of institutionalization of such collaboration, as well as the broad domestic consensus across political parties on the application of this collaboration as a Norwegian foreign policy instrument”. Tryggestad (2014, p.445) further notes that, the “welfare-state model that defines the structure of Norwegian society has strongly influenced the country’s

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<sup>10</sup> FAFO was founded by the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) in 1982 and was reorganised as an independent research foundation in 1993. FAFO conducts research on changes in living and working conditions, industrial relations, societal participation, democracy and development in a range of social and economic settings - in Norway, Europe and beyond.

political visions as to how sustainable development, social justice and peace can be achieved. The WPS agenda encompasses a set of norms on women's rights that fit hand in glove with what is seen as Norway's normative state interests". But to go from there to declare a feminist foreign policy is delicate. One interviewee was concerned with how too much focus on training women to be part of peace mediation could impact mediation in a negative way; "there were a number of meetings with Margot Wallström and others in Stockholm to train women to be mediators, but it is only a repetitive exercise, it does not move the process forward". The interviewee goes on to say that the trainings by the Swedes might have changed perceptions and ideas over time and that future processes might be different. The fact that Margot Wallström has operated according to a strong feminist agenda has enabled the Norwegians to play a different role and "make the Swedes engage other countries"; Sweden has been in driver's seat and Norway has been in the backseat. One interviewee tells a story about how appalled s/he was at the lack of interest in a case of abuse against a young girl in one of the countries s/he had worked in that s/he had contacted Margot Wallström to ask her to call the ambassador from the given country for a talk, this would "make the Norwegian Foreign Minister" follow suit. This was a calculated way of using the Swedish feminist foreign policy to engage Norway in ways that would enable, perhaps, a feminist foreign policy in practice but not in name. Another interviewee is more open to the fact that there might be admiration and respect for the feminist foreign policy and notes that;

"[t]here were lots of people who thought that Margot Wallström and her feminist foreign policy with a strong focus on human rights would insult the Saudis and others and that they would have trouble getting elected to the UN Security Council, but it seems that it is quite the contrary, that they have a strong international standing and that they flag certain values and that is very interesting [...] It seems that it is possible to have a very value laden foreign policy without it having repercussion."

With its feminist foreign policy Sweden appear willing and ready to challenge established procedures in international relations – and in so doing has gained a lot of media attention. Norway's approach seems to be that of making changes happen by working slowly and gradually from within the system, and not attract too much attention.

Norwegian peace engagement has been criticized for an unwillingness to define a value-based standpoint for the engagement (Harpviken & Skjelsbæk, 2010). It is as if it serves the Norwegian national interest as well as the way in which peace mediation has evolved, to be less vocal about the reasons for this engagement than what has been the case for Norway's Nordic neighbours. Maintaining a narrative that Norway's particular way of engaging in peace and reconciliation efforts is something that emerges from our national experiences and values is the preferred story. An opposite narrative which would suggest that Norwegian national identity is formed by the political choices to engage in mediation and gender equality appears too risky. Yet, showcasing values, as opposed to experiences, might be brought to the fore by the volatile international political climate where populism and extremism are on the rise and where gendered norms, violence and identities constitute the frontlines of contention. Gender equality norms epitomize the battle over traditional versus progressive values and Norway might need to reconsider its tactics, as implied in the quote by the interviewee above.

#### *Narratives of interests*

The Norwegian model for peace engagement, particularly the narrative of its willingness to be in it for the long haul, has positioned Norway as a credible actor in peace facilitation. It has also strengthened Norway's ability to operate as a credible norm entrepreneur on WPS (Tryggestad 2014). Norway is generally perceived by many countries of the Global South as a neutral actor with no immediate material or geopolitical agendas. It has enabled Norway to enter into dialogue with governments and non-government actors that from the outset may have been skeptical of, or indifferent to, liberal normative agendas such as WPS. This has been the case in several of the peace processes Norway has been engaged in (Salvesen and Nylander, 2017). It is worth noting, though, that the prominence of the WPS agenda in Norwegian peace engagement is a fairly recent development. In the early days of Norwegian peace engagement, issues of gender equality and women's rights were rarely put on the agenda, even if it has been part of Norwegian development aid for decades (NORAD 2011). According to one of our interviewees s/he could not remember that it was a central topic in the peace processes in for example Guatemala or the Middle East. The approach at the time was that of

“[V]iewing the parties as unitary, institutional actors, who were responsible for their own constituencies. Our approach was non-reflexive. We did not think that it was wrong to bring it up. It was simply not the dominant thinking”.

Many of our interviewees talk about how UNSCR 1325 and the WPS agenda has changed both the thinking and practice when it comes to Norwegian peace engagement. Across interviews we are told how MFA staff are working systematically with the WPS agenda and how new ideas for its implementation are continuously suggested. Although the MFA has a Special Envoy on 1325 with overall responsibility for the agenda, there is now in addition a considerable institutional capacity within the MFA on WPS. According to one of our interviewees;

“[...] it has provided those involved with a greater insight and the facilitation teams have become better at designing methodologies. Everyone knows the WPS agenda well and have become much better at looking for and taking advantage of windows of opportunity for its implementation than what was the case only ten years back”.

The political leadership of the MFA does not have to demand action, like it used to, in order to profile Norway on gender in its peace engagement. WPS has for instance been identified as a thematic priority in the ongoing peace processes Norway is facilitating (Colombia and the Philippines); it has been a thematic priority during Norway’s membership periods of the UN Peacebuilding Commission (most recently 2016-2018); and in Norway’s campaign to be elected one of the non-permanent members of the UN Security Council for the period 2021-2022 (Norwegian Foreign Minister 2018). On a number of occasions, the WPS agenda has served as an instrument in Norwegian foreign policy for bringing up other topics of national interest with important allies. This was particularly the case during Hillary Rodham Clinton’s tenure as Secretary of State from 2009-2013 (Danielsen et al 2013). One of our interviewees refers to this period as ‘particularly intensive’ when it comes to ‘deliverables’ on WPS to make Norway more visible. The same interviewee notes that “today work on WPS is something you simply do. It is not politically incorrect to bring WPS issues up in various political dialogues; rather it has become a mainstream part of politics”.

“It has become a matter of course to deal with this (WPS) as ‘security’. It has become a totally integrated part of..... it is almost unthinkable that we should stop working on WPS.”

However, it is noted by several of our interviewees that Norway now meets stronger competition as a lead nation on WPS than it used to only a few years back. When rejoining

the PBC in 2016, Norway had to compete with 5-6 other countries to become the ‘focus country’ on UNSCR 1325. In its on-going Security Council membership campaign Norway is up against tough competition from Canada and Ireland on WPS. How Norway will respond to the increased competition on WPS from other countries remains to be seen. From the perspectives of our interviewees it is in Norway’s interest to continue to take a lead on WPS in its foreign policy. First, Norway already has an international profile on gender equality, which has to be maintained. Second, there is a growing recognition among MFA staff that it makes sense to actively promote the WPS agenda in peace processes. But taking on this role has its possible pitfalls in peace mediation contexts. It could infringe on the perceptions of Norway as a neutral facilitator. One way the Norwegian diplomats seem to resolve this tension is to be careful not to talk too much about WPS as a rights agenda, but rather focus on the pragmatic benefits of implementing it, such as achieving a qualitatively better peace and strengthen the legitimacy of the peace process among civil society. One interviewee refers to it as “an intellectual and empirical journey”; the recognition that if peace processes are not inclusive and solidly anchored in society, they will not succeed. “Recognizing this, you cannot continue to overlook half the population”, s/he maintained.

### **Conclusion: “We are only as good as the peace we create”**

Narratives about the role of gender equality in Norwegian peace mediation is based on stories about Norwegian experiences, values and interest as shown by the interviewees above. Under these thematic narratives lie other narratives, about continuities, changes and contestations. In their thorough account of Nordic peace mediation Wallensten & Svensson (2016, p.173) point out that the higher positions women have in a given society the more likely it would seem that gender dimensions as well as gender equity would characterize peace mediation. It is therefore surprising that the Nordic countries historically have fared quite poorly in this domain, according to Wallensteen & Svensson. Norway is no exception. From the engagement in the Middle East, to Guatemala, the Balkans, Sri Lanka and Sudan women’s participation in the processes, as well as the inclusion of gendered language in the peace agreements, were not high on the agenda. There were attempts to integrate

gender dimensions in these processes, but they were on the side and marginal. For a long time there has been, in other words, a gap between the practice and rhetoric of peace mediation. In the more recent peace engagements, such as Colombia and the Philippines, there has been a gradual change. There seems to be a cautious and meticulous efforts to on the one hand, focus on the inclusion of gender equality norms as a pragmatic approach to mediation design, but at the same time to depoliticize this as a feminist transformative value-based project. This is a difficult position for the peace mediators. How then, can we understand the narratives of our interviewees and the ways in which they talk about their own norm entrepreneurship and how they have dealt with this gap? One interviewee states that Norwegian peace engagement “is only as good as the peace it creates”, a bold statement which inevitably sets Norway up for strong narratives of failure. Many of the high-profile peace processes Norway has engaged in, are still hot conflicts, and the peace mediation attempts have not succeeded. But, if the parameter is peace mediation as a process as opposed to outcome, the stories change.

While the integration of pro-gender norms came fairly late to Norwegian peace engagement, there is a strong narrative about the continuity of the state feminist project in Norwegian society at large and its relevance to the foreign policy domain. To the majority of our interviewees – who represent a new and younger generation of diplomats who have grown up in a gender-equal Norwegian society – this continuity appears as almost self-explanatory. They shrug their shoulder and say that “of course” this, i.e. pro-gender policies, are important. It is explained as a continuation of Norwegian experiences with a feminist state (although they do not use the exact term), with gender equal welfare policies, and experiences with gender equality policies in other spheres of Norwegian state apparatus. Just as women took ownership of policy development in the domains of the welfare state – with some male exceptions – women also took ownership of the development of pro-gender policies within the MFA. This applies both to policy development in Norwegian foreign policy in general (such as the national action plans on WPS), and to Norwegian peace engagement in particular. The professionalisation and operationalisation of Norwegian peace engagement coincided with women’s rapidly increased entry into the foreign service, and the conscious introduction of gender balance policies in the Section for Peace and Reconciliation in the 2000s. Many of our interviewees also emphasise the importance of

prominent Norwegian women politicians in advancing Norway's pro-gender foreign policy internationally. The narrative of continuation suggests that peace mediation was one of the last "frontiers" of a domestic gender equality development process. The continuity is seen as a norm travel from domestic to foreign policy, and within foreign policy from the soft domains of development cooperation to more traditional domains of peace and security politics. It is narrated as the fulfilment of a Norwegian identity project; a small state which has found an area to punch well above its weight, to be a potential "superpower" on the international stage.

Yet, the seemingly natural extension from domestic to foreign (and security) policy is also narrated as a form of change. This is seen as a change which has less to do with pro-gender equality norms as such, but more to do with the increase in Norwegian peace and reconciliation engagements. If Norway is only as good as the peace it creates, then the *process* of peace mediation is as important as the outcome and in the process of professionalizing Norwegian peace engagement, pro-gender policies have gained momentum. Peace facilitation emerged as a profession within the MFA, a profession built on a more systematic analysis and research on practical experiences and lessons learned. What has also made Norwegian peace engagement distinct is the availability of flexible funding, a political willingness to explore what was possible to achieve and to risk failure in outcome. Designing a peace process which also includes pro-gender norms and policies is seen as integral to professional peace facilitation by our interviewees. The Columbian peace process is a case in point; as a new way of doing gender-inclusive peace facilitation (Nylander et.al 2018). The Norwegian individuals involved were more conscious about process design and inclusivity, down to the gender-balanced composition of the Norwegian facilitation team itself. From a Norwegian perspective the Colombian case is not only seen an example of successful Norwegian peace engagement. It is also a most welcome example of gender-sensitive peace facilitation, and by these parameters it is described by our interviewees as a success, even if the long-term outcomes of the process are still unclear. These pro-gender developments represented changes in the Norwegian MFA, in the operationalizing of peace mediation; its thematic focus and design. One interviewee emphasized that this change also represented a new way of thinking about the role of the state; from being a peace mediation partner, to being one of several mediation partners

along with civil society actors of different kinds. Further, the pro-gender changes are described as driven by internal dynamics in the Norwegian MFA and political priorities in Norway where mediation efforts were given larger budgets.

Finally, an emerging narrative across the interviews is that the pro-gender policies are contested and that these contestations operate on domestic as well as foreign policy levels. Clearer articulations of pro-gender policies in other countries challenge Norway and its own-proclaimed superpower status in this field. At the same time, our interviewees appear self-confident about the 'Norwegian way of doing it'. As has been noted above, Norwegian foreign policy has, historically been very consensus-driven. The same is true for gender equality and welfare policies. Proclaiming clearer feminist goals, in the way that Sweden has done, does not seem to enjoy much support in Norway. It could have undesirable impact on domestic (i.e. it could disrupt the strong domestic consensus on foreign policy priorities) as well as foreign policy. It could frame Norway as less of a neutral facilitator, and more as a mediator with a strong normative and value-driven muscle. Thus, a more low-key pro-gender diplomacy is pursued in Norwegian peace engagement, a diplomatic practice that is seen as a natural extension, not of experiences and values only, but of Norwegian identity. This balancing act is also seen as a strength of Norwegian diplomacy, making Norway able to respond in discrete ways when outside actors such as the UN and parties in conflict ask for mediation support. Norway does not actively pursue involvement in peace processes but engages in such activities upon invitation from the parties, applying what some of our interviewees describe as a 'patient diplomacy'.

Yet, the need to be seen as a state with strong pro-gender policies also in the domain of foreign policy is an important currency in the intricate game between states on the international scene (Wohlforth et al 2017, Aggestam & Towns 2018b). The challenge is to be recognized without gloating, being recognized without proclaiming a feminist foreign policy. If this balancing act serves Norwegian interests, identity and image remains unknown. Another factor which has not been explicitly discussed with the interviewees is the rise of populist political movements as well as conservative civil society groups with anti-gender equality policies. These groups and political developments might challenge a Norwegian foreign policy refraining from proclaiming clear, value-based pro-gender foreign policy priorities.

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