Feminist Voices Could Change the Nature of International Diplomacy

Can diplomacy organise itself more effectively so that outcomes take into account the interests of these largely silent multitudes that comprise women?
“I have two words to leave with you tonight, ladies and gentlemen: inclusion rider.” These words from Oscar-winning actress Frances McDormand command attention. We need more female representation in various fields. Gender equality should define the grammar of daily existence.

“Feminism” was the most looked up word in the Merriam-Webster dictionary last year. The dictionary defines feminism as “the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes” and “organized activity on behalf of women’s rights and interests”.

The first woman ambassador – from anywhere in the world – to the US, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, was once asked, “How does it feel to be ‘world feminist number one’?” She replied, “I am not a ‘feminist’. As far as I can see, the question of being male or female has nothing to do with the duty of both sexes to take their part in world affairs.”

Pandit’s reference to the duty of both sexes to take part in world affairs was particularly telling. It symbolised a natural grasp of a universal truth – that women have as much the right and the responsibility to guide human destiny as their male counterparts.
instance, a feminist foreign policy in our region would embrace the idea of a South Asian commons; it would speak and act in favour not of ravaging disunities, but of rationalising unities, of merging capacities to build, to develop, to link. It would weigh the interests of humanitarianism against the interests of power. It would feel the true pulse of the unknown, the marginalised, the excluded, understanding the economics of proximity rather than promoting proximity as a peril.

I was once told on social media that the “pipe dream of feminist foreign policy will die before it is even conceived. Very disappointing and a waste of time”. Clearly, given the politics of the subcontinent, very few vest their hopes in crafting a future where the women of the region lead with their voices and actions to build a peace that overrides conflict. Peace is clearly only a dream.

The question to ask, drawing reference to the definition of feminism, is: Can diplomacy organise itself more effectively so that outcomes take into account the interests of these largely silent multitudes that comprise women? Can women make themselves more effectively heard? They say the strongest indicator of a state’s progressiveness is not its democracy or wealth, but the way it treats its women and how much the latter issue impinges on the national consciousness.

Obviously, strength lies in numbers. In India, very few women are engaged in international studies or relations. They are mostly conspicuous by their absence in a panel – or ‘manel’ – discussions and often overlooked when it comes to such participation since male “experts” are the default choice. The contributions of women are mostly forgotten.

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In the real locus of power, the UN Security Council, the responsibility to protect becomes a tool driven more by the raw calculus of strategic interest. Even beyond, the cases of Libya and Syria (and Iraq) show the complete insensitivity to the facet of human dislocation, the destruction of societies and human heritage, the erasing of borders and the effects on the welfare of women and children. We are yet to find a way in which we combine feminine soft power with masculine hard power to create that ideal purusha and prakriti in diplomacy.

The Swedish foreign minister, Margot Wallstrom, is absolutely justified when she says that striving towards gender equality is not only a goal in itself but also a precondition for achieving our wider foreign, development and security policy objectives. Her strategy focuses on the three Rs: promoting the ‘rights’ of women and girls, supporting women’s ‘representation’ in decision making and ensuring financial ‘resources’ for promoting gender equality. Rights, representation and resources – no government worth its name should have any quarrel with any of these concepts when they apply to women. Each country has to develop its own dynamic in this regard. There is no one playbook that we can automatically relate to or apply.

What do women need most, regardless of what their professional field of choice is? I believe it is voice – that which enables them to articulate their cause, their interests and their aspirations. And voice needs amplification, the amplification that comes from numbers, from adequate representation. If women constitute 50% of the population, it is obvious that their representation in professions, and in leadership positions, should be equal to or at least close to equal to that of men who are similarly placed.

The third aspect after voice and amplification relates to service conditions. In my own experience, women in the Indian Foreign Service have undertaken a long march to the present day from the days in which the “stain of sex determination” prevailed, where married women diplomats could not continue to work, where you could not apply to join the foreign service if you were married, and where you could scarcely aspire to the top positions of responsibility in the service. The famous Supreme Court case of Ambassador C.B. Muthamma, a pioneering woman member of the Indian Foreign Service, is an example.

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In fact, it is little wonder that the inspiration for women in post-independent India to enter public service was provided by women like Ambassadors Muthamma and Pandit, Lakshmi Menon (the first woman minister of state for external affairs) and the unique Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay. Here is the latter speaking of an Indian worldview in the years prior to independence, in a voice far ahead of her times and in a tone even more progressive than the male stalwarts leading the freedom struggle: she points to India’s “insular peninsular outline” as having

“widened into the global, with an increasing awareness that we and the rest of the world are but part of a single sphere, that our destinies are inevitably linked, our paths interlocked…It is not idle curiosity or cheap sentiment which shapes the question that haunts and harasses every diplomat like a family ghost: ‘What about India?’ We may well say ‘Everything’… India is more than a test, it is a symbol. It is the mirror in which the world sees the shape of things to be…It is towards a world which recognises the right of every nation to determine and rule its own destiny but in a cooperative world order, that the women of India and of the world have to strive for, if humanity is ever to enjoy decency, peace and happiness.”

Any consideration of the feminist voice in foreign policy cannot also ignore the life and times of Indira Gandhi, India’s first woman prime minister. Her example is particularly interesting because she led the country at a time of momentous developments concerning not only domestic politics but also India’s external interface, both regionally and internationally. If her foreign policy reflected feminist qualities, these were difficult to discern. She had little choice but to demonstrate that she could lead like a man in a man’s world, intent on establishing that her pragmatism in politics set her apart from the romantic idealism of her father, Jawaharlal Nehru.
Mrs Coretta King, wife of U.S. Civil Rights Leader Martin Luther King, Jr. shaking hands with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on January 24, 1969. Credit: US Embassy India

One can argue that leading a democracy as complex as India’s is a daunting task in the best of times, and that Gandhi through the power of her example did prove that women were as capable as their male counterparts in demonstrating leadership at critical times in a nation’s history and in exceptionally difficult circumstances, as the events leading to the birth of Bangladesh showed. She was, through her actions, creating a path for women of succeeding generations to follow. In many ways, Gandhi’s success made it possible for middle-class India to suspend disbelief about women entering the arena of politics, national security and diplomacy, and pursuing full-fledged careers in public service.

The question, however, still remains on whether women bring a purely feminine-oriented perspective to the conduct of public policy. The issue would be different if the number of women in public policy decision-making was to substantially increase and if women are no longer in a minority. That becomes their influence in the future. Shall we do so, or we will remain in the history of decisions taken on gender equality.
An Afghan woman had this to say recently about the future of her country: “We are not responsible for the destruction” she said, “but we should be responsible for the reconstruction.” The former British foreign secretary, William Hague, said in 2016, “The full social, economic and political empowerment of women is the greatest strategic prize of the 21st century.”

Feminists can come from both genders. The important thing is that we recognise and respect gender equality, the right of women to be heard and to make decisions that affect the peace and security of our homelands, to promote their participation in public life and to expand their leadership opportunities. We, the people must include she, the people.

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Sanitary workers as the government imagines them, and as they really are.

Jothi stands at the Corporation office, with a Swachh Bharat poster next to her.

Divya Karthikeyan

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Coimbatore: The dark, thick sludge moves along the water. Thirty-year-old Jothi attacks it with a shovel furiously. She pushes out the garbage from the drain on to the road, pausing for just a bit to adjust the cloth around her head. There is a dead rat in the oozing muck. Jothi picks it up and throws it aside.

“You shouldn’t have done that with your hand,” I end up saying.

“Someone’s got to do it right?” she says. As Jothi moves around in the drain...
hands to pick up a rat, and the next you’d be feeding your children with the same hand,” Jothi says.

Soon after she finishes her work, Jothi cleans up and puts on a bright yellow colour coat, the official garb for the “sanitary workers” of the Coimbatore municipality. Jothi is one of many women in Coimbatore who supplement their Rs 3,000 monthly income as a government sanitary worker with manual scavenging for Rs 200 a day whenever work comes in. For all practical purposes, Jothi is a missing statistic. Sanitary workers employed by the government in Coimbatore cannot involve themselves in manual scavenging. If they do, they aren’t included in the data.

The sanitary workers, as the government imagines them

We speak at a corner of the corporation office, right next to a poster of the government’s flagship scheme, Swachh Bharat. The workers on the poster with hats and protective equipment look nothing like Jothi.

A typical day for Jothi starts at 4:30 am. “I wake up, make food for my children and husband, and work from 6 am. We have to clean the ditches near the bus stand and on the road. I fell sick recently and lost a lot of money because of that. When the ditch smells, we almost faint from the smell. But after that we deal with it. The only problem is, I have seen many people have long-term problems because of this. At least the men can drink to deal with their pressures, we as women can’t and won’t do that,” she says.
A pensive Madan Kumar looks on as he discusses the rampant caste discrimination of manual scavengers.

According to news reports, Tamil Nadu has the highest number of manual scavengers. Chennai, Trichy, Pudhukottai, Kumbakonam all made it to list of places where manual scavengers were to be rehabilitated – but Coimbatore, to the surprise of many, remained absent.

An official from the Adi Dravidar Welfare department in Coimbatore district who did not want to be named has been fighting to get Coimbatore included. Late last year, 210 manual scavengers from Coimbatore city came forward to self-declare. “The district collector was supposed to forward this data to the Tamil Nadu government, but it remained stuck at the collectorate level. The collector wants to scrutinise it,” he says. ‘Scrutiny’, according to the official, is a euphemism for hushing up cases, even threatening those who self-declare to withdraw their applications, all in a bid to keep the districts’ manual scavenging free status. “I’ve sent reminder letters, I’ve even told the collectorate to forward the applications many times, but to no avail,” he says. The collector has refused to comment.

A majority of the manual scavengers reside in the western belt of Salem, Coimbatore, Namakkal. They belong to the Arunthathiyar caste, part of the Paraiyar, form the major sub-castes. ‘We are known as the Dalit of the Dalits,”
says Dharmaraj, a manual scavenger. “Often the sanitary inspectors and supervisors are from the dominant caste, and while they treat us well, we often overhear how lowly they talk about us to other inspectors,” he says.

Dharmaraj explains his experience of 20 years as a manual scavenger.

**Caste in stone**

Dharmaraj J. belongs to the Arunthathiyar caste, and has worked as a manual scavenger for over 20 years. He has now joined a collective that fights to eradicate the practice. In his rented home behind a small landfill, he pulls out a bunch of xerox copies. “I secretly picked up the registration books belonging to supervisors. Most of the names of people who showed up were marked as absent,” he claims. This means money from the day’s work that was supposed to given to people who did the job of cleaning was taken by the supervisors. “Names are also made up. I’ve worked here for 20 years. There is no person called Celine here,” he adds. It’s a big allegation, and Dharmaraj knows that. Why isn’t out in the open, I ask him?

“I feel like this will do more harm than good. I have brought this up with my seniors, and they have dismissed me, saying it is too explosive as corruption,” he says.
Almost all manual scavengers are Arunthathiyar, and a lot has to do with how they can be taken advantage of due to their caste. “That we cannot form a group or voice out our concerns. That we will forever remain subservient,” he says.

“We are born into this caste, and relegated to do this work, and we will die like this. What can any of us do?”

Behind Dharmaraj’s house is a slum, where many others like Madan Kumar live. He works for a private sewage treatment plant. The companies often outsource the work to people like Madan at a meagre price. “Even if the government tries to put an end to this work, private companies still exist to employs us. Both me and them make a quick buck,” he says. Rs 150 for a day’s work is all he gets.
but also in work. We have no capital to start a shop, we aren’t included in any list which the government can use to say that they will rehabilitate us, we are invisible,” says Madan.

This caste, this work, was set in stone long ago

Then there are those who are doubly invisibilised. “Why is this not being covered more in the media?” Jothi smiles at the camera and asks. “It is not very nice to show people that we do the work that they can’t even bear the stench of,” she answers herself. A few others in her vicinity agree. Not all of them clean drains like Jothi does. “In Tamil Nadu, even if the Arunthathiyar caste is uplifted from these ditches, it will be the men who will be considered first, women second,” she says. There are uncomfortable looks all around Jothi. “These women, these Arunthathiyar women, will not talk because we don’t know how to do anything other than this work. We are not expected to talk or fight. Because this caste, this work, this body of labour,” she says, moving her hands up and down her body, “was set in stone long ago.”

All photos by Divya Karthikeyan.

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