6 Protecting the brand?

The hesitant incorporation of gender equality in the peace nation

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The international context in relation to gender and peacebuilding has changed dramatically over the last two decades, in ways that have had a major impact on the branding of Norway and other Nordic countries abroad. The most important change on the international scene was the adoption in October 2000 of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. This resolution was inspired by, and adopted five years after, the Fourth World Conference on Women, convened by the UN in Beijing in 1995. The Beijing conference was the largest international women's conference that had ever been organized, and the first that had a strong focus on gender and armed conflict.

In broad terms, UN Security Council Resolution 1325 focuses on women's participation in peacebuilding; on their protection from gender-based violence and its prevention; and on women's inclusion in post-conflict relief and recovery activities (Tryggestad, 2009). Resolution 1325 also calls on the international community, including UN member-states such as Norway, to do more to include women in all matters related to international peace and security. In the years that have passed since the adoption of the resolution, nine follow-up resolutions have been adopted, and Norway has played an active global role, both normatively and financially, in advancing what has now formally become the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda (Skjelsbæk and Tryggestad, 2019). Norway has become known as a WPS champion.

The WPS agenda has provided Norway with an opportunity to highlight and bring together two prominent features of its national self-identification – gender equality and peace promotion – at the global level. Norway was also one of the first UN member-states to adopt a national action plan on WPS in 2006 and has played an active role in promoting this agenda through various UN entities (such as the UN Peacebuilding Commission). More recently, the inclusion of women in peace mediation activities has become a central part of Norway's international peace and reconciliation efforts, most notably in Colombia (Salvesen and Nylander, 2017), which has also added to Norway's reputation as an ardent WPS supporter. Finally, WPS has been highlighted as a thematic priority for Norway's membership of the

UN Security Council for the period 2021–2022 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Norway, 2020). Still, Norway appears to be reluctant to make the most out of the branding opportunity that this development represents. How can we understand this hesitance – and what impact does it have on the branding of Norway as a peace nation?

In this chapter, we discuss what the promotion of gender equality entails for Norwegian peace mediation efforts, along with the types of branding challenges and opportunities that emerge in this context.¹ In addition, we ask how its involvement in such processes affects the gender-branding of Norway as a peace nation. We will examine these questions in the light of the establishment and practice of the Nordic Women Mediators (NWM) network and a set of Nordic national action plans (NAPs) that set out how the individual Nordic countries intend to follow up UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. A comparison with the other Nordic countries facilitates further understanding of why and how Norway has been so hesitant to incorporate gender equality in the branding of its role as an international peace mediator.

Proclaiming, like Sweden, that it will have a feminist foreign policy is not on the table in Norway. The term *feminist* cannot be found in any of the key documents adopted on Norwegian foreign policy, including the most recent action plans on WPS (Norwegian Ministries, 2019) and gender equality in foreign policy and development cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Norway, 2016). A competitive space is thus emerging in which Norway is engaged in the highest number of peace and mediation efforts of all the Nordic countries (Wallenstein and Svensson, 2016), and Sweden is the most pronounced when it comes to gender engagement in its foreign policy, which serves to differentiate Norway and Sweden on the international scene. Sweden becomes the global forerunner on gender equality and women's rights, while Norway is less so even if the two countries have comparable histories on domestic and foreign engagement in this policy field. In Norway, there appears to be a tension within the foreign policy apparatus between, on the one hand, declaring Norway a global leader in terms of its commitment to gender equality in its foreign policy and, on the other, shying away from publicly and explicitly promoting the country's concrete efforts on gender – not to mention proclaiming Norwegian foreign policy feminist. As we argue below, these tensions stem from a particular conceptualization and practice of Norwegian peace mediation that emphasizes the virtues of being a neutral facilitator rather than a 'mediator with muscle'.

Norwegian-style peacebuilding

Engagement for peace has been an element of Norwegian foreign policy that has enjoyed considerable support among various governments, despite their differing political ideologies. 'Norwegian foreign policy remains stable,' has been a political mantra both in election campaigns and in the declarations

of a range of different foreign ministers in recent decades. This engagement has been uncontroversial and viewed almost as an extension of seemingly inherent Norwegian national characteristics: a small state with benign intentions coupled with a non-colonial past.² In a study of newspaper articles on Norway's peace engagement in the period 1993–2003, a dominant discourse can be 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: 35).

In parallel with the contemporary notion of Norway as a peace nation, Norwegian gender-equality policies emerged in the 1980s and 1990s within the country's domestic political arena after a period of strong Nordic state feminism and the rise of prominent female politicians (Hernes, 1987). These policies were particularly epitomized by the social democratic government led by Gro Harlem Brundtland (Norway's first woman prime minister), when Brundtland in 1986 formed the world's 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 is an essential ingredient 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 gender-equality norms and aims has until recently not been as explicit within Norwegian foreign policy, at least not in the 'traditional' domains of foreign policy nor in the field of peace and reconciliation engagements. We also observe that the integration of gender-equality norms within Norway's peace engagement has not been addressed in the existing body of literature that explores in considerable depth Norway's engagements for peace in the Middle East, Sri Lanka and Sudan (Taulbee et al., 2014; Nissen, 2015; Salter, 2015), despite the fact that central actors in these processes have argued that they were concerned with gender dimensions (Skjelsbæk and Tryggestad, 2020).

The role that Norway has come to take on within international peace mediation must be viewed against a long historical backdrop. Considerable emphasis has been placed on peace engagement within Norwegian foreign policy, and some have argued that it has been *the* most central aspect of Norwegian foreign policy since even before Norway gained its independence from Sweden in 1905 (Knutsen et al., 2016: 96).³ Post-independence, the Norwegian nation-building project was based in part on the notion of Norway and Norwegians as a particularly peace-loving nation and people (Leira, 2013). The fact that it is Norway that awards the annual Nobel Peace Prize, while Sweden awards the other Nobel prizes, has added to this self-perception.

There is a large Norwegian literature on the trajectories of the Norwegian peace engagement (e.g. Tamnes, 1997; Pharo, 2005; Knutsen et al., 2016) and

its role in nation-branding (e.g. de Carvalho and Neumann, 2015). What this literature points to is that peace engagement has been a key pillar of Norwegian foreign policy since at least the 1960s. In the 1960s, Foreign Minister Knut Frydenlund (1966: 143) 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 promoting cooperation between peoples. 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. The same argument was also advanced as a key justification for why Norway was seeking a non-permanent seat at the UN Security Council for 2021–2022. For a long period, Norway's peace engagement first and foremost took the form 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 (Taulbee et al., 2014; Nissen, 2015; Wallensteen and Svensson, 2016; Keskinen et al., 2016).

According to the Norwegian MFA, since 1993 Norway has officially made active contributions to peace processes in the following conflict countries and regions (in alphabetical order): Afghanistan, Colombia, Guatemala, the Middle East, Myanmar, Nepal, the Philippines, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan/South Sudan and Venezuela. It is also engaged in a number of unofficial processes that do not form part of this list (*Government.no*, 2019a). The first major peace processes in which Norway engaged – the Oslo Process (Israel/Palestine) and the Sri Lankan peace process – were characterized by the involvement of profiled and politically ambitious individuals and quite extensive media attention (Nissen, 2015). Leading politicians from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs themselves took on active roles as mediators and facilitators. The engagement of these leading politicians led to high visibility, but also raised the stakes in terms of political costs if their efforts proved unsuccessful. One example of this risky dynamic came in 2004 when anti-Norwegian rallies were organized in Sri Lanka's capital, Colombo, and a doll depicting the Norwegian Special Advisor Erik Solheim was set 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).

In the early 2000s, however, the Norwegian peace engagement gradually changed its *modus operandi*. Norway remained active, but in a more low-key manner. Top-level politicians at the MFA took on supportive roles and involved themselves more actively only when direct political support was required. More importantly, from the early 2000s Norway's peace engagement also became more professionalized. During the Norwegian engagement in

the Sri Lankan peace 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 (e.g. in Sudan), and it became necessary to strengthen the ministry’s support capacities for these types of activities. 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 aim was to institutionalize and systematize the lessons and knowledge gained from previous and ongoing experiences to make peace mediation and reconciliation a profession within the MFA. The establishment of this section would also become a turning point for how issues related to the inclusion of women and gender perspectives were integrated into Norway’s peace engagement.

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 this is not really a model as such but rather a way of organizing Norway’s peace engagement (Nissen, 2015). As of April 2019, Norway’s peace engagement had the following general features (as outlined by the MFA):

- A long-term willingness to provide assistance, both for economic development and for 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 from working with non-state actors.
- Good relations with key international actors, both individual states and multilateral organizations (particularly the UN).
- No colonial past; Norwegian engagement is perceived to be sincere and not motivated by political or economic self-interest.⁴
- A focus on peace facilitation rather than ‘mediation with muscle’.

Interestingly, gender-equality norms or WPS are not mentioned on this list as core values or principles of the Norwegian peace engagement model, even though the inclusion of women and the integration of gender perspectives within peace processes had already become an integral part of Norway’s most recent peace engagements when it was made (Tryggstad, 2014; Salvesen and Nylander, 2017; Norwegian Ministries, 2019). In December 2019, the presentation of the Norwegian peace engagement on the official webpage of the MFA was updated, but WPS is still not listed among the ‘Hallmarks of Norway’s Peace and Reconciliation Work’.⁵ Some brief statements on how Norway has facilitated the inclusion of women in peace processes have been included, along with a link to further information on Norway’s activities in relation to WPS (*Government.no*, 2019b). However,

there are no explicit statements on how or where Norway intends to take this agenda further.

The omission of WPS from the list of ‘Hallmarks of Norway’s Peace and Reconciliation Work’ is also reflected in the actual practice of peace engagement. Often operating under time constraints, Norwegian diplomats (mainly men, but also women) involved in the country’s peace engagement efforts admit that they have repeatedly experienced shortcomings in terms of the operationalization of priorities and the implementation of policies related to gender equality.⁶ While they may have had good intentions in relation to the appointment of women as lead peace facilitators, team leaders and thematic experts on the Norwegian side, they have often found it difficult to carry these intentions through in practice, the argument being that they usually mobilized teams and experts on short notice and did not have a sufficiently good overview of women within the foreign policy apparatus or Norwegian civil society with the specific competences required (generally a combination of thematic expertise and language skills). Until the mid- to late 2000s, like many other countries, Norway was therefore paying lip service to gender-equality ambitions in peace processes but not doing particularly well in practice in terms of including either women or gender-equality norms and perspectives in Norwegian peace engagements.

We will argue that this lack of focus on gender equality in peace engagement is related to the nature of Norwegian-style peacebuilding, as described in a study on peace diplomacy by Wallensteen and Svensson (2016), who have argued that there is a distinct difference between Norway and its Nordic neighbours in this context, in that Norway emphasizes its role as a *facilitator*, while the other countries of the region place greater emphasis on the *mediator* role. The Norwegian approach, then, might be compared to a situation where one invites guests to a dinner party by opening their house for visitors and letting them decide the menu, rather than a dinner party where the menu is already set by the host. But how does the notion of gender equality complicate this role?

Norwegian-style gender equality

It is puzzling that gender equality is seen as such a central aspect of Norwegian identity but still not put centre-stage in the country’s peace and reconciliation efforts. One explanation for this, however, can be found in the conceptualization of state feminism, a term that was first coined by Helga Hernes 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 of woman-friendly and gender-equal social policies would be dependent on

continuous pressure from below, from women and women's organizations. During the 1980s, according to Hernes (1987: 157), the Scandinavian social democracies appeared to have 'the potential to be woman-friendly'. At the time, however, such an approach went against the sceptical view of the state that prevailed in many feminist milieus (both scholarly and activist), where it was customary to analyse the state system as a manifestation of general male domination, as one of the core problems of patriarchal power. Hernes, on the other hand, argued on the basis of historical analysis and contemporary observations that, in time and given the correct socio-democratic conditions, the state could become an ally of the feminist cause (see Larsen, Chapter 1 of this volume).

Since that time, gender equality has permeated Norwegian society as a norm, but not always as a reality in all spheres of life (see Holst and Teigen's discussion in Chapter 8 of this volume). While Norwegian society has changed quite fundamentally since the 1980s, some scholars have noted that the state feminist model may have morphed into a foreign policy mode of operating (Tryggestad, 2014). As Skjeie (2013: 29) notes:

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 goes on to describe state feminism as a kind of achievable utopia, as though the state feminist society would be a woman-friendly society in which gender would not determine what one can do – almost as though it had 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. Clearly, achievable utopias are also a goal in peace and reconciliation efforts – to enable societies to move away from a violent past towards an imagined peaceful and prosperous future. Gender equality, then, through a state feminist model with mobilization from below and a friendly state apparatus above, becomes not only an idealized future but an achievable one. This is both rhetoric and practice for Norwegian peace mediators.

One example of this was seen when the *World Development Report 2011* was launched in Norway (World Bank, 2011). At the launch, then Minister of International Development and Environment Erik Solheim (who had previously been the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' special advisor to Sri Lanka) gave opening remarks in which 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, Stoltenberg stated that the economic value of the participation of Norwegian women in the

workforce was higher than that of Norway's oil revenue (*Aftenposten*, 2012), and 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.

Such statements serve two rhetorical purposes. First, they have a 'look to Norway'⁷ effect in which the country's experiences of economic growth are intimately linked to its national gender-equality, identity and welfare politics; second, they suggest that Norway has experiences that 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, and that countries can get wealthier if they prioritize gender equality.⁸ This combination – the positive domestic experience with gender-equality policies and a willingness to share this knowledge internationally – has become a foreign policy currency, especially in the domain of development cooperation.

The adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 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 – though this was something that needed to be done with care. A core concern in this context turns on terminology and the difference between Sweden's outspoken emphasis on a feminist foreign policy and Norway's cautious emphasis on gender equality. 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) or as a harmonious collaboration with the state, as a practice. In the Norwegian context, 'gender equality' has emerged as a value-laden term around which there is considerable consensus. It has emerged as an identity marker of a core value that characterizes 'us'. 'Gender equality' has thus become a descriptive term for a national identity.

Below, how Norway balances its cautious approach to gender in its peace mediation efforts and engagement will be illustrated through an examination of two examples: the Nordic countries' national action plans (NAPs) on UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and the Nordic Women Mediators network. In our view, a Nordic comparison on these matters provides further understanding of why Norway is so hesitant to incorporate gender equality in its branding as a peace nation.

Nordic competition over gender equality and peacebuilding

Since the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000, a growing number of states have appeared on the international scene as 'women-friendly', which often means that they have made gender-equality norms and images central to their foreign policy. Among the states gaining most

attention for such policies are Australia, Canada, Sweden and the UK (Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond, 2016; True, 2017; Aggestam et al., 2019). Sweden is taking the lead with a clearly stated feminist foreign policy. Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond (2016: 325) have elegantly described what they term the ‘three Rs’ in Sweden’s 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.

Clearly these are all priorities that Norwegian foreign policy-makers can subscribe to and have done for many years (Skjelsbæk and Tryggestad, 2019). Still, it is as though there is a resistance not only to the idea of re-labelling these priorities under the f-word, but also to being explicit about Norway’s efforts and achievements in relation to gender equality in its foreign policy. A critical reading of the various national action plans on UN Security Council Resolution 1325 produced by the Nordic states highlights this Norwegian resistance to feminist labelling, particularly in the comparison with Sweden.

The Nordic countries were among the first to develop NAPs on the implementation of Resolution 1325. Denmark was actually the first country in the world to do so in 2005 (Denmark, NAP 2005–2008), followed by Norway and Sweden in 2006, and Finland and Iceland had also developed their first NAPs by 2008. All the Nordic countries were therefore included among the first 12 countries to develop NAPs. And, as can be seen from Table 6.1, they have all developed subsequent NAPs that make the WPS agenda a central theme in their foreign policies, with increasing strength and emphasis.

In their various NAPs, all of the Nordic countries articulate different reasons for why the WPS agenda is important for them. Starting with very modest goals, Denmark does not articulate any particular national goals in relation to the WPS agenda in its first NAP (Denmark, NAP 2005–2008).

Table 6.1 Number of Nordic UN Security Council Resolution 1325 national action plans

<i>Country</i>	<i>First</i>	<i>Second</i>	<i>Third</i>	<i>Fourth</i>
Norway	2006–2011	2011–2013	2015–2018	2019–2022
Sweden	2006–2008	2009–2012	2016–2020	
Finland	2008–2011	2012–2016	2018–2021	
Denmark	2005–2008	2008–2013	2014–2019	
Iceland	2008–2013	2013–2016	2018–2022	

Norway, however, sees the WPS agenda as integral to Norway's commitment 'to promote a more just world' (Norway, NAP 2006–2011: 2),⁹ while Sweden boldly addresses the lack of women in peacebuilding efforts and declares that 'Sweden is, and will continue to be, at the forefront of work to reverse this development' (Sweden, NAP 2006–2008: 1). Finland devotes a whole section of its first NAP to articulating why the WPS agenda is important for Finland and states that 'the promotion of the rights of women and girls is one of Finland's human rights policy priorities' (Finland, NAP 2008–2011: 11). Iceland declares in its first NAP that one of the objectives of its engagement on WPS issues 'is that Iceland's special status and strength in the area of gender equality will become more visible' (Iceland, NAP 2008–2013: 2).

All of the Nordic countries have revised and updated their NAPs over time and have produced at least three different plans, with Norway being the exception with four. They all address similar aspects of the WPS agenda, linked to peacebuilding, peacekeeping, gender-based violence, reporting and accountability, and funding. Over time, the NAPs become longer, are given a more professional appearance and use more glossy paper. With each new NAP, commitments, strength of language and mode of tracking implementation increase. The fact that the WPS agenda has become a policy area in which the Nordic countries seek to shine on the international stage also becomes apparent with each new NAP. The NAPs develop into a competitive space in which they seek to portray themselves as forerunners on the WPS agenda.

A good example of this development is provided by the case of Denmark, which did not articulate particular national goals linked to the WPS agenda in its first NAP, but devotes several pages to the centrality of the agenda for Denmark in its third NAP, in which it does not fail to mention that Denmark was the first country in the world to develop a NAP. Further, this third NAP states that 'the promotion of the women, peace and security agenda is a cornerstone in Denmark's foreign, security and development policy [because] we know that inclusive and equal societies are essential to prevent continued violence and foster sustainable peace' (Denmark, NAP 2014–2019: 7), which links foreign policy aims with domestic experiences with gender equality, as well as peace with its neighbours.

Sweden stands out because it sees itself as a model country, not only morally committed to taking the lead, as articulated in the first NAP, but also a 'look-to country' for others, as articulated in its second NAP, in which it is declared that 'Sweden was one of the first countries to adopt a national action plan and the Swedish plan has attracted interest and inspired several other countries and international organisations' (Sweden, NAP 2009–2012: 6). In its most recent NAP, Sweden's leadership is emphasized to an even greater extent, and the commitment to a Swedish feminist foreign policy is introduced when it is stated that 'Sweden's feminist foreign policy has a clear focus on supporting women as actors for peace and security' (Sweden,

NAP 2016–2020: 3). A few sentences later, this particular form of foreign policy is directly linked to the WPS agenda when it is stated that ‘Sweden will have clear political leadership to further the Women, Peace and Security agenda’ (Sweden, NAP 2016–2020: 3).

Finland maintains its commitment to women’s rights as human rights in its subsequent NAPs. It also points out that

since Finns have experienced wars and conflicts, they have an understanding of the long-term impact that conflicts can have both on individuals and entire nations, including the profound impact on the structures of society and the way in which it functions.

(Finland, NAP 2018–2021: 8)

Iceland presented a comprehensive new NAP in 2018 in which it traced national and international developments linked to WPS. However, perhaps most importantly in the context of nation-branding, this NAP enabled Iceland to position itself as a model country for others when it stated:

Iceland ranks as the most gender equal country in world according to the Global Gender Gap Report. Furthermore, Iceland is among the safest countries in the world. These two facts allow the Icelandic government to be both a strong and a credible representative of the message contained in Resolution 1325: that gender equality goes hand in hand with stability and peace in the international community.

(Iceland, NAP 2018–2022: 7)

While all the other Nordic countries have become increasingly bold in their statements about what the WPS agenda means for them, Norway maintains a different tone and language throughout its four NAPs. Though ministers and others have boasted about Norway as a gender-equal superpower in their speeches, we do not find the same language in the NAPs themselves. The slogan of the Norwegian campaign for a non-permanent seat in the UN Security Council for the period 2021–2022 was ‘consistent partner, common future’. This slogan also sums up Norway’s nation-branding in the NAPs. Norway’s aim in its commitment to the WPS agenda is described in its first NAP as being ‘part of our endeavour to promote global security, peace and justice’ (Norway, NAP 2006–2011: 1). In relation to peace mediation in particular, the second NAP states that ‘Norway will promote the participation of women and an integrated gender perspective in peace processes and negotiations’ (Norway, NAP 2011–2013: 6), an approach that is very different from that of the Swedes, who aim to take the lead (see quote above). The language does not get any stronger in the following NAP, in which it is stated that ‘Norway will play its part in implementing the Security Council resolutions through political leadership, targeted efforts across different sectors, diplomacy and financial support’ (Norway, NAP 2015–2018: 5). Finally,

what is offered in the most recent NAP is more systematization when it is stated that

Norway will have a more systematic focus on women, peace and security in our efforts to support the implementation of peace agreements, strengthen the gender perspective in international operations and missions, and increase our efforts for women and girls in our humanitarian work.

(Norway, NAP 2019–2022: 4)

It is as though Norway's track record in gender equality and peace engagements is simply assumed instead of being articulated. The branding efforts lie in consistency, hard work and good intentions, as illustrated in the following passage about how gender equality and peacebuilding are conceptualized by Norway:

Norway is working to ensure that peace and reconciliation processes are inclusive and that peace agreements safeguard women's and men's rights, needs and priorities. We strive to ensure that more women participate at all levels in peace and reconciliation efforts, and that everyone who is involved in a peace process knows how to integrate the gender perspective in their work.

(Norway, NAP 2019–2022: 12)

Why has Norway opted for such toned-down language in such important branding documents? Why, unlike its Nordic neighbours, does Norway not spell out the differences that make Norway unique in the domain of WPS? Before discussing this further, we will revisit the Nordic Women Mediators (NWM) network, which has become a site for national collaboration on and competition over how to brand something that all the Nordic countries seem to be good at – namely, gender equality and peace – but which they talk about and showcase in very different ways.

The Nordic Women Mediators (NWM) network: competitive collaboration

As a direct follow-up to the creation of a network of women mediators in the Southern African region in 2014, the Nordic Women Mediators (NWM) network was initiated by the Norwegian government and formally launched in Oslo in November 2015.¹⁰ The central idea of the network was to assemble an easily accessible overview/list of Nordic women with direct experience of peace mediation/peace facilitation.¹¹ Women included on this list should be individuals qualified for high-level international positions (such as peace envoys and heads of missions) as well as thematic experts who could join peace mediation teams. The aim was both to facilitate access to women who

could be recruited to peace mediation positions and to establish a network in which they could share their experiences and learn from each other.

At the time of the network's launch, the Norwegian MFA's Section for Peace and Reconciliation was headed by Tone Allers, a woman who herself had direct experience from Norwegian peace facilitation efforts in both Colombia and the Philippines. She was strongly committed to the WPS agenda, as were many other employees in the Section (both women and men). Still, Norwegian diplomats took care to emphasize that the new network should not be promoted as a Norwegian but rather as a Nordic initiative, and it was seen as way of creating better peace processes, not as a network with articulated feminist or nationalist goals. The importance of involving the governments of all five Nordic countries was stressed. Two processes were initiated in parallel: while Norwegian diplomats reached out to their working-level counterparts in the other Nordic countries to assess the interest in a regional network, the Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution (NOREF) and the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) were commissioned to develop a concept note, make a first rough list of possible network members (from all of the Nordic countries) and start mapping potential operational partners in the Nordic countries. In this initial phase of the project, the Norwegian MFA's main objective was to develop a network primarily of women with direct experience from Track One processes.¹² Accordingly, the group of women would be small and exclusive.

It soon became clear, however, that while Norway could provide the names of quite a few women with this kind of hands-on experience (relative to the overall number of women in international peace mediation), the other Nordic countries were unable to do the same. These countries had been involved in fewer peace processes, and few women had been involved in such activities. Norway could therefore have moved along on its own, developing a unique network of Norwegian women experts, but chose to stick to the original idea of developing a Nordic network and not portraying Norway as going at this alone. While there was interest in the initiative among all the other Nordic countries, they differed in their approaches to the project. Finland immediately expressed support along the lines of Norway's thinking. Iceland also expressed support and interest, but wanted to expand the notion of 'mediation' to include women with experience from different types of international negotiations (such as fishery negotiations). Denmark was initially lukewarm, with reference to lack of both financial resources and lack of direct experience from international conflict mediation. When it eventually decided to become involved, however, Denmark was the strongest proponent of the need to apply a broad understanding of 'peace mediation', one that would also encompass conflict resolution and peacebuilding (areas in which Denmark had much more experience). Finally, Sweden also opted to support the Nordic network initiative, but clearly saw this as an opportunity to link the initiative with its feminist foreign policy, an approach that was quite at odds with Norway's aims.

Here, again, we observe the differences in how the Nordic countries approach the question of nation-branding, and these are perhaps most notable in relation to Norway and Sweden. While Norway's approach from the very beginning was that of serving as a network facilitator – and emphasizing the network initiative as a collective Nordic effort – Sweden has more explicitly used the network as an opportunity for self-promotion abroad. Instead of making the most out of the NWM initiative as an opportunity to brand Norway as the leading 'gender-equal peace nation', Norway prioritized Nordic collaboration and sought to make Norway blend in with its neighbours.

Today, the NWM network consists of around 50 women professionals from the five Nordic countries with expertise in conflict mediation, peace negotiations and peacebuilding (broadly defined). Although the institutional expertise and affiliation of many of its members are listed as international and regional organizations, as well as civil society, the vast majority of the members are professionals working within – or recently retired from – the ministries of foreign affairs of the five Nordic countries. This adds a particularly interesting competitive layer to the collaboration. In addition to the Nordic-level network, each Nordic country has also established national networks of women mediators as branches of the overarching NWM. The size, organization and scope of the activities of these five national networks vary. The Norwegian network is by far the largest (counting close to 60 women), while the membership of the other four national networks ranges from 15 to 20 members. The size of the Norwegian network is a reflection of Norway's long-time peace engagement, which during the last ten years has gradually provided an increasing number of women, both within the MFA and in Norwegian civil society, with thematic and technical experience from peace facilitation and peace negotiations. It is also a reflection of Norway's emphasis on professionalizing peace mediation by including thematic expertise among the membership, rather than making the NWM more explicitly political and value-driven (as in the case of Sweden). Norway's 'peace mediation dominance' could have provided Norway with a unique branding opportunity. Still, Norway refrained from adopting such an approach. The members of the Norwegian network are members in their personal capacity and generally maintain a low profile in the public arena. The Swedish network, on the other hand, stands out and comprises a small number of carefully selected senior women who operate as personal envoys of the Swedish minister of foreign affairs (the network members were initially appointed directly by former minister of foreign affairs Margot Wallström), and has been branded as an important instrument of Swedish feminist foreign policy.

Further, while all the other Nordic countries have named their national networks NWM (Nordic Women Mediators) followed by the country name (e.g. NWM-Denmark, NWM-Finland) – and in so doing emphasize the regional connection – Sweden named its national network the Swedish Women's Mediation Network, with no direct reference to its being part of a larger regional or Nordic initiative. Although the Swedish government was already

in dialogue with Norway and the other Nordic countries about the establishment of the NWM, and plans had been made for its formal launch in Oslo in November 2015, Sweden moved ahead and announced its Swedish Women's Mediation Network during the UN General Assembly in September 2015 (Folke Bernadotte Academy, 2015). As can be seen in the ways in which Sweden has articulated its role in the NAPs, as discussed above, it should come as no surprise that Sweden also in the context of this network wanted to take the lead and stand out. The Swedish feminist foreign policy commits it to doing so – this is something that they feel other nations expect from them, and on which the Swedish government delivers.

Conclusion

Since the launch of the NWM in 2015, there has been a mushrooming of regional women mediators' networks around the globe.¹³ A Global Alliance of all these regional women mediators' networks was launched during the high-level week of the UN General Assembly in September 2019. In all these different regional processes, the Nordic countries have been involved in various ways – either in consultative roles or through the provision of political and financial support – with Norway operating as a driving force. In the case of the establishment of the Global Alliance, Norway was also the initiator and key facilitator, hosting the first consultative meeting in Oslo in March 2018. However, Norway was once again reluctant or careful not to take on a role that was too prominent or visible or to use these various network initiatives for its own branding purposes. On the contrary, while it has been important for Norway to brand the NWM as a Nordic collaborative effort, in the case of the Global Alliance it seems to have been even more important to downplay any national interests and to focus instead on facilitating inter-regional collaboration on and commitment to a global cause. Here again, then, we see how Norway's approach to both peace engagement and the advancement of the WPS agenda is heavily influenced by its self-perception as a facilitator. We suggest that this is not based on any form of innate characteristics of Norwegians as modest or humble, but must be seen as being linked to Norway's broad engagement in peace and reconciliation efforts around the globe. Boasting about gender equality or coming across as someone who is imposing gender norms – even when this might serve the country well within the competitive space of the WPS agenda – could come at a cost for Norway's many peace engagements. Since Norway's peace engagement enjoys considerable bipartisan political support in Norway, is a source of popular pride (though there are also critical voices) and provides the country with access to heavyweight political players on the international stage, an overly outspoken focus on gender equality could be risky politics for Norway.

Still, the need to be seen as a state with strong gender-equality 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 and Towns, 2018). The challenge for Norway here is to be recognized without gloating – and without proclaiming a feminist foreign policy.

Being among nations of ‘firsts’ on domestic gender-equality policies since the 1980s, it is also interesting that it was the African region that provided the direct impetus for the establishment of a Nordic Women’s Mediators network. The Nordic network did not emerge as a Nordic political innovation, as so many other gender-equality initiatives have. In their thorough account of Nordic peace mediation, Wallenstein and Svensson (2016: 173) point out that the higher the positions women hold in a given society, the more likely it would seem that peace mediation activities will be characterized by gender dimensions and gender equity. It is therefore surprising that the Nordic countries historically have fared quite poorly in this domain.

On this, Norway is no exception. In its engagements from the Middle East, to Guatemala, the Balkans, Sri Lanka and Sudan, neither women’s participation in peace processes nor the inclusion of gendered language in peace agreements has been high on the agenda. There were attempts to integrate gender dimensions into these processes, but they were on the side and marginal. For a long time, in other words, there has been a gap between the practice and the rhetoric of peace mediation. In more recent peace engagements, however, such as those in Colombia and the Philippines, a change can be observed. There seems to be a cautious and meticulous effort to focus on the inclusion of gender-equality norms as part of a pragmatic approach to mediation design while at the same time downplaying any suggestion that this should be seen as a feminist transformative value-based project. Gender-equality measures draw on the state feminist model of practice: mobilization from below with a friendly state apparatus above. The NAPs and the NWM network have been important sites for balancing the aims of promoting gender equality and peace engagement. Norway is consistently a low-key player. At a time when a growing number of like-minded states are adopting feminist foreign policies, it remains to be seen whether Norway’s balancing act will continue to serve Norwegian interests, identity and image well. On this question, the jury is still out.

Notes

- 1 This chapter builds on Skjelsbæk and Tryggestad (2020). The edits and rewriting have been approved by *Foreign Policy Analysis*.
- 2 The non-colonial image remains in the public mind despite the colonizing nature of Norway’s culture and language policies towards the indigenous Sami population in Northern Norway, which lasted until the 1980s.
- 3 Following the Napoleonic Wars (1800–1815), Denmark lost the Norwegian territory to Sweden, leaving Norway in a union with Sweden from 1814 to 1905.
- 4 For a critical postcolonial perspective on the notion of the Nordic countries as outsiders to colonial power relations, see Keskinen et al. (2016).
- 5 This information was found on the webpage of the Norwegian government and attributed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; see *Government.no* (2019b).

6 This has been shared with the authors both in formal interviews and in informal conversations.

7 This is an expression that stems from a speech by US President Franklin D. Roosevelt during the handover ceremony for 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.

see *Wikipedia* (n.d.)

8 For many years, this form of rhetoric was much used by politicians from the centre–left of Norwegian politics. In recent years, however, both national statistics and 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).

9 For ease of consultation, publication details for the national action plans of the individual Nordic countries have been grouped together in a separate section following the reference list.

10 See Hattrem (2015).

11 For more information, see the Nordic Women Mediators website at <https://nordicwomenmediators.org/>.

12 ‘Track One’ refers to official diplomacy that is carried out by official representatives of states or international organizations.

13 Other formally established regional networks are FemWise-Africa (2017), the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network (2017) and the Women Mediators Across the Commonwealth (2017). In addition, the ASEAN Women for Peace Registry (AWPR) was launched in December 2018, while a meeting was organized in Cairo in July 2019 to discuss the establishment of an Arab Women Mediators Network.

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