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Gender Equality in Foreign and Security Policy: A Question of Leadership

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About the Speaker

Stella Ronner-Grubačić was appointed on 1 July 2021 as the first EU Ambassador for Gender and Diversity at the European External Action Service (EEAS).

After having obtained her Master's degree (European Studies) at the University of Amsterdam in 1989, and having finished post-graduate studies of International Relations at the Clingendael Institute in The Hague, Ms Ronner-Grubačić started her diplomatic career at the Dutch Foreign Ministry in 1991. She worked in the Foreign Ministry's multilateral department, after which she was posted at the Embassy in Belgrade. Her following posting in Paris was preceded by a year ('cycle international') at the Ecole Nationale d'Administration in Paris.

In 2001, Ms Ronner-Grubačić was seconded to the OSCE Mission to the Former Republic of Yugoslavia. Following that, she became Spokesperson to former Foreign Minister Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, at the time when the Netherlands held the OSCE Chair. In 2004, she took up the position of Spokesperson for the Dutch EU Presidency. Following various other positions in the Ministry in The Hague, including as Ambassador for the Millennium Development Goals, she was appointed Ambassador to Croatia in 2010. After having served in The Hague as Director of Communication, Ambassador Ronner-Grubačić was accredited as Ambassador to Romania and the Republic of Moldova. From Bucharest, she moved to Athens, where she was accredited as the Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to the Hellenic Republic in September 2019 until her appointment to her current position.

Abstract

On 13 October 2022, Ambassador Stella Ronner-Grubačić, Ambassador for Gender and Diversity at the European External Action Service, delivered the ninth annual high-level *EU Diplomacy Lecture* on “Gender Equality in EU Foreign and Security Policy: A Question of Leadership” at the College of Europe in Bruges. She argued that leadership and gender equality are inter-related, especially in the current geopolitical context. The European Union (EU) has a robust policy framework on gender equality in place. Nevertheless, gender equality is being challenged by antagonistic actors aiming to promote polarisation in other countries, including members of the EU, through disinformation campaigns and other means, distorting gender equality as a purely Western notion and inciting hatred against the LGBTIQ community. What is now needed is Gender Responsive Leadership, that is, leaders who are aware of the challenges and their impact and who are able to act on them.

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Unconscious bias

Everybody holds beliefs, assumptions or attitudes subconsciously that affect the way we feel and think about others around us. And actually, the fact that we all have biases is not something concerning as such. It is a result of how we have been brought up, our experiences, our surroundings. What is more important is that we are aware of them, that we are conscious about our biases.

But what happens to our foreign and security policy when most decision-makers have this unconscious bias? The decision making on foreign affairs and on security will be based on assumptions and guesses. And it will lead to decisions that will not respond to the realities or needs of 50 per cent of the population.

Because equality requires not 30 per cent, not 40 per cent but 50 per cent. And, as elaborated by a UN report released just last month, with the current rate of progress, it will take us almost 300 years to achieve gender equality.¹ Actually, the study reveals how gender disparities are worsening in the face of 'cascading' global crises – such as the Covid-19 pandemic, violent conflicts and climate change – coupled with the backlash against women's sexual and reproductive health and rights. One thing is for sure: we do not have 300 years.

That is why I am here today. To talk about gender and diversity. But I also want to talk to you about leadership. I will explain to you how these two, gender equality and leadership are related – and why the linkage between the two is so important. Especially in the current geopolitical context.

The challenges: disinformation and anti-gender narratives

The war in Ukraine has made two things very clear: First of all, the war waged by Russia has profoundly upset the geopolitical order as we knew it, placing, among other things, gender equality at the heart of political debates. Those who are antagonistic to the West and Western values have manipulated gender equality to further trigger polarisation within, but also between nation states. The second thing the war in Ukraine has made clear: it points to the need for a type of leadership that is aware of these fundamental changes and what is required to deal with these. I will come back to you about what I mean by this but allow me to first elaborate on my initial point.

¹ UN Women, *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The gender snapshot 2022*, 10.

The war waged by Russia has caused a sea change in geopolitical relations and a new world order has developed. We are more and more encountered with a confrontation between, on the one hand, democratic countries that uphold the universality of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and on the other hand, illiberal countries that contest a rules-based international order. The separation between these groups of countries with dramatically opposing ideas and visions for the future, runs through Europe. European countries see the values that we hold high increasingly being challenged, such as the rule of law and the rights of individuals to be equal and having equal rights to live their life the way they choose and make their own choices. Actually, Europe itself has become the target of disinformation campaigns and foreign interference, promoting a narrative that seems to be successful in several places around the world.

What is relevant to note is that these disinformation and influence operations are not gender neutral. In fact, quite the opposite is true. What seems to cut across all of them are the following three things:

- First, they intentionally misrepresent gender equality as a 'Western' ideology that is harmful for societies. They portray gender equality as something that is linked to the erosion of social norms and opposed to the so called 'traditional family values'.
- Second, they utilise harmful gender stereotypes as a deliberate tactic in an attempt to discredit Western women politicians and women journalists, in particular those amongst them who do not subscribe to a conservative worldview. The other side of the same coin is that they use harmful stereotypes on masculinities to incite aggression in men.
- Third, this type of disinformation and influencing is also meant to intentionally polarise democratic debates through the use of social media platforms with the objective to incite fear and hate against different population groups, particularly LGBTIQ persons.

It is difficult to pinpoint a specific time when this all started. Some scholars have traced organised anti-gender campaigns all the way back to the 1990s. What seems to be clear, is that their influence in foreign policy became more evident from approximately 2010 onwards. Since then there seems to be an ample body of evidence that these very gendered disinformation narratives have been directly linked to, and largely sponsored by, foreign powers that are antagonistic to Europe and its democratic values.

This may sound like a topic of relevance only to Europe or the West, but unfortunately it has a much broader, and much more international impact:

Gender equality did not use to be a contested topic. It was widely understood to refer to equality between women and men in respect of their rights, responsibilities and opportunities, while recognising that there were not only biological differences between men and women, but also that men and women were assigned with socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considered appropriate for women and men.

I would like to point out that the above, in fact, is also the definition that is used in the EU Gender Action Plan III, more commonly referred to as GAP III.² This is a policy framework for mainstreaming gender in the EU and in its external actions.

Where GAP III does differ from its predecessors, is that it places a focus on intersectionality, highlighting that the EU should focus on the most disadvantaged women, taking into consideration factors such as racial, ethnic and religious background, age, disability and sexuality. And GAP III says it should be read in conjunction with the EU LGBTIQ equality strategy.³

GAP III has not been endorsed by all EU Member States. If anything, this is a clear indication that discussions on gender equality are complex even within the EU.

A similar fate applies also to the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, better known as the Istanbul Convention. Its entering into force in 2014 was followed with wide-spread disinformation campaigns and false narratives about the convention, especially about the word 'gender' that is included in the convention's text. These intentional misrepresentations have diverted the discussion from gender equality, which this convention is about, to gender identity, which this convention is not about. As a result, in some countries the Istanbul Convention has been ruled as unconstitutional. In this context it has not been possible for the EU as a whole to become a party to the convention. One neighbouring country to the EU has even withdrawn from it.

² European Commission and High Representative, *EU Gender Action Plan (GAP) III*, JOIN(2020) 17, 25.11.2020.

³ European Commission, *Union of Equality: LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025*, COM(2020) 698, 12.11.2020.

For me, as an Ambassador for Gender and Diversity, this is worrying for various reasons, and on multiple levels:

- First of all, we are living in times where international agreements on women's rights are being held hostage to conservative powers and have become targets of deliberate disinformation campaigns. The strong policy frameworks that women's rights organisations have fought for so successfully, still exist, but their implementation is becoming increasingly difficult when practical tools such as action plans cannot be agreed upon. New international agreements, at least progressive ones, are rather impossible to imagine.
- Secondly, we are living in times where states across the world seem to have forgotten that they have signed international conventions that guarantee each person's right to non-discrimination. Applying an intersectional lens to gender equality is about non-discrimination. It is about ensuring that we leave no-one behind, that in foreign policy we do not only see the world as it is presented to the white cis women but also to women of colour, women of different religious affiliations, women with a migrant background, women with a disability and LGBTIQ women.
- Lastly, in respect of diversity and non-discrimination beyond gender equality: We are living in times where LGBTIQ persons and their identities have been hijacked as propaganda tools to spew hate, to polarise, to divide societies and to trigger disunity in Europe and beyond. Times where LGBTIQ persons face hate crimes and sometimes even pay the price of global power politics with their lives.

Clearly, these are developments that we need to counter with all the might that we can muster. But how? What can the EU do to counter this trend? What answers do we have to this challenge?

The response: the tools at our disposal

This brings me to the second thing that the war in Ukraine has brought to us, together with this newly shaped world order: the war in Ukraine reinforces the **need for a different type of leadership; we will increasingly need leaders who are conscious of these fundamental changes and what they do to people. And who are able to act on these.** But before I elaborate on this, let us go back a little to the (policy) structure that we currently have in place.

On paper everything is fine; we have an impressive set of international conventions and treaties. In 2023, we will even be celebrating 75 years of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which in its article 2 specifies:

"Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status".⁴

Furthermore, the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women that came into force 41 years ago has been ratified by 189 of the 193 UN Member States. And through the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action the world leaders put forward a future where women and girls could exercise their freedoms and choices and realise their rights.

The EU in particular has a very robust policy framework on gender equality; the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025,⁵ the European Pillar of Social Rights,⁶ and the Gender Action Plan III. Together with the Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy,⁷ these documents provide us with a clear compass to promote gender equality and equal opportunities, and, more generally, an inclusive society where everybody can participate. So, the question is: why does it not work? Why, despite all the legal frameworks and commitments, are we still so far away from the main objectives and why do we continue to have far too few women in leading positions, be it in politics or in government agencies, at the highest courts or on companies' boards?

Why is gender equality so hard to achieve? Why is it so difficult, despite all these years, despite all these documents and all our efforts, to realise this goal?

My answer to that question: the world in which we live, in which we work and in which we have to perform, and the world in which we raise our children, this world is not equal. This world does not provide us with the same opportunities. And when we do not have same opportunities, it harms women. And, by doing so, it harms men also.

⁴ <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

⁵ European Commission, *A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025*, COM(2020) 152, 5.3.2020.

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights_en

⁷ European Commission and High Representative, *EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024*, JOIN(2020) 5, 25.3.2020.

To give you an example: Across the world, women perform three times more unpaid care work than men, and in no country in the world, men and women provide an equal share of unpaid care work. Yet, doing so would actually be good for the men. Benefits of men carrying out more equitable portions of unpaid care work, particularly childcare, include an enhanced mental health and well-being amongst men, and reduced incidences of violent or risky behaviour, including less alcohol or drug abuse.

Further facts and figures:

- Women account for only a quarter (26 per cent to be exact) of national parliamentarians
- While land is perhaps the most important economic asset globally, less than 15 per cent of agricultural landowners are women.
- Approximately one in every three women worldwide have experienced physical or sexual violence.

The facts are very telling. We have homework to do in Europe, but also in the world. And what we need is a new type of leadership to deal with these trends and a new focus in our foreign policy.

What we need is a foreign policy that takes into consideration women, that starts from the awareness that women play a meaningful role, whether it be in political discussions, in peace processes or in policy decision making. This is not a question of the label that we attach to it. It is a question of 'doing it'. It is a question of practising what we preach. Of walking the talk. And it is a question of making sure that everybody, so every staff member of the EEAS, puts its weight into achieving this. Now this is the real 'hard work'; this is why an Ambassador for Gender and Diversity is still needed. Even today, in 2022. Because thinking along these lines is still not engrained in the minds of people, of my colleagues, of society. And to change that, is one of my core tasks.

Why do I need to explain that, when we discuss Ukraine and accountability, we need to be specific and recognise that we also talk about sexual violence against women and the need to ensure that gender equality is taken into account in the recovery planning? Why is it not an automaticity that when we write Council conclusions on Afghanistan, we include a specific reference to the situation of women and girls that requires monitoring? Why does it come more naturally to focus on military means to deal with a conflict rather than focus on the contribution women can bring to reduce

the chances of a violent conflict? Or how important gender equality actually is, to avoid a violent conflict in the first place.

This, dear future colleagues, is where convincing, repeating, insisting, cajoling is still very much needed. To put it bluntly: one needs to be a pain to others who do not want to see it, or who simply do not see it. Who consider this is 'an extra' or an 'add-on' that we will deal with in case we have extra time. Changing the mindset of policy makers, of diplomats and politicians is urgent. We need to put an end to this. If I can do anything to help that process, to speed up this change, I will consider my job successful. This is for me the essence of being Ambassador for Gender and Diversity – a role that one day should become superfluous.

Does this mean that the EU needs to follow the examples of countries like Germany or Spain and formally adopt a feminist foreign policy? This is a discussion that is yet to be had. Let me just say that I think the objectives as such can be achieved quite well with the current policy framework we have in place.

The missing piece: Gender Responsive Leadership

Still, there is in my view something else that is needed now. It can be referred to as the **missing piece of the puzzle** and it is called **Gender Responsive Leadership**. Because despite all the progress made, we still are not advancing enough, nor quick enough. Gender equality continually keeps being pushed to the margins – in the global security debate and throughout our organisations. We cannot continue to deal with gender equality only once we have taken care of the other, 'more important' issues. If the leadership is not the first one to promote gender equality and setting a good example, then who will? Change processes need to be led by the management, starting from the top. This also applies to the process of integrating a gender perspective in everything we do. Doing this, is a skill that everyone can learn. But it is the responsibility of the leadership to ensure that their institutions have the capacity to transform that skill into actionable deliverables. Accountability is a key word here, and this is created by clearly defining promotion of gender equality as a leadership responsibility.

This requires more than reporting about equality issues or even working on gender balance in one's own organisation. It requires bold initiatives such as the one taken by the EEAS Secretary General Stefano Sannino last year when he concluded that Afghan women needed to have a voice in decisions that concern them or their

country. To facilitate this, we launched an Afghan Women Leaders Forum, a platform that includes women of diverse backgrounds, women who have fled from Afghanistan, but also women who decided to stay after the Taliban takeover. There are other examples too, not always as big and prominent as the Afghan Women Leaders Forum, but important nonetheless. We introduced the concept of Gender Responsive Leadership in the EEAS senior management board and made sure that gender equality and diversity were important topics on the agenda of the EU Ambassadors conference in October 2022. And, to give you another small example, we avoided any panel discussion being exclusively male. Sometimes change requires a lot of small steps.

These examples also go to show: when we have a leadership that is gender responsive, things do change, change becomes possible.

Let me mention in this regard also the speech that European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen delivered on the occasion of the State of the Union on 14 September. She did this speech after meeting with young people in Taizé and she said:

*1,500 young people "have different views, come from different countries, have different backgrounds and speak different languages. And yet, there is something that connects them. They share a set of values and ideals. They believe in these values. They are all passionate about something larger than themselves. This generation is a generation of dreamers but also of makers. ... We should put their aspirations at the heart of everything we do. ... we should leave the world a better place for the next generation."*⁸

What the Commission President did not mention is this: her ambition requires a kind of leadership that consistently sees the value in integrating a gender perspective. The fact that she, being the first woman President of the Commission, included a reference to the Istanbul Convention in her very candidacy speech for becoming European Commission President in July 2019 is proof to that. Again: this shows that change can happen when our leadership is gender responsive. Working to instil this skill into the leadership culture of not only the EEAS or the EU as a whole, but all our institutions, is the real hard work. I am willing to put my weight behind it, but your help is very much needed. We need to do this together.

⁸ https://state-of-the-union.ec.europa.eu/index_en

And in fact, I believe that you have the power to do this. You are the leaders of the future. The gender responsive leaders that we need, are in this room. We will need you to take forward this leadership and translate it into concrete EU diplomatic initiatives and external actions that takes full account of women on an equal basis, thereby transforming EU diplomacy.

I hope that with this speech, you feel empowered – to change and be these gender responsive leaders that we need. I look forward to seeing you take up this role.

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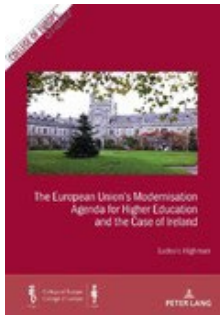
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