

## Are women important in US foreign policy?

Written by Matthew A. Hill

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MATTHEW A. HILL, JAN 28 2011

Madeleine Bunting wrote a fascinating piece regarding the inclusion of a feminist agenda in US foreign policy (USFP) in the Guardian on January 16, 2011 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/jan/16/hillary-clinton-feminist-foreign-policy>). Fascinating, because it forces me to assess what I think about the success of inculcating a women's agenda into USFP. The article gave me a, more than deserved, optimism of the successful introduction of women-focussed USFP. This blog outlines a few key points on why this optimism could be misplaced. It appears that the importances of short-term and individual cases are being inflated as key issues that can address the structural gender imbalances in societies (including our own). Further research is required to determine whether the points I highlight here reflect the policy or the (mis)representation of the policy by the author. What I can say is that the article has raised some important questions that have made me think more deeply about this subject, and for that I am grateful. Not all the points are going to make sense to everyone and some do expect a certain amount of prior knowledge, but in the comments sections please do ask me to explain things further, and more importantly if you disagree tell me!

'She [Clinton] is the most powerful politician to advance an explicitly feminist agenda'.

- Is the feminist agenda dictated by the domestic political audience or the foreign recipients?
- Is this explicit feminist agenda a further refinement of US democracy promotion as developed by previous administrations? If so, does it have the same structural flaws that democracy promotion has; imposition of liberal cultural normative behaviour that is too alien for local people to grasp, particularly due to a top-down (blueprint) imposed approach that expects change but does not foster its successful growth?

'On countless occasions since arriving at the state department, Clinton has asserted that the rights of women and girls are now core to US foreign policy'.

- Asserting the rights of women and girls is an inculcation of a liberal value-laden system within the national interest framework. It must be remembered though, that its inculcation by the Obama administration does not mean that there is no hierarchy of interests, and as such, that it will not be trumped by 'more important' national interests.
- What does core mean? Core in rhetoric, core in practice, core in values, core in interests?

'It's clear there are major constraints on this [gender] agenda. It gets nowhere in the Middle East, while Afghanistan presents a big challenge – Clinton has insisted peace cannot come at the cost of women's rights. But the signs aren't good that she can hold this line. Meanwhile, there are critics who worry that her advocacy could backfire and antagonise conservative societies, and even prove inimical to US interests.'

- This extract is at the end of the article and it seems to me as if this is the main point that the rest of the article should hang from.
- Also, this paragraph is rightly highlighting the relative importance of gender-focused national interests in comparison with other US national interests. It must be remembered that just because gender is included as a national interest does not mean that it plays an instrumental role, or that it is more than rhetoric. Could it be that gender-focused policies are only supported when they are in-line with narrowly defined US national

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economic and security interests?

'The empowerment, participation and protection of women and girls is vital to the long-term security of the US'.

- Could this be another example similar to the long-term aim for a world full of democracies, in that the long-term desire is to have it but national interests are usually determined by short- and medium-term that are less to do with ideology and more to do with realist-defined national interests?

'Last month this rhetoric was translated into policy in the long awaited Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review, which aimed to redefine US foreign policy around civilian power'.

- The article entire, in my opinion, misrepresents the impact of the QDDR on US foreign policy. The QDDR is a review document it is not a policy directive.
- This redefinition around civilian power is actually more an awakening of previously-held views regarding the need for USAID to be the principal development arm of the US government; a role which was diluted with the Department of Defense's control of development work during the Bush administration (e.g. in Iraq). It does not mean that development work will be the core focus of US foreign policy only that it will be one of many considerations.

'For a security agenda traditionally dominated by weaponry and military expertise, this is radical stuff. It draws on a powerful consensus built up behind the overwhelming evidence that women are vital to a range of key global concerns.'

- Guaranteed that it is radical theory but it is still only a review document and not policy and also is likely to be trumped, as Bunting suggests, by other more realist-based interests. Therefore, the 'radical' framework is not quite so radical after all!

'She [Clinton] makes this abstract thinking concrete on her foreign visits. Her press entourage finds itself dragged around meetings with micro-credit groups, activists and politicians – all women. It's strategic, she admitted in an interview – "It's a constant effort to elevate people who, in their societies, may not even be known by their own leaders. My coming gives them a platform, which then gives us the chance to try and change the priorities of governments."'

- This example does not mean that the US has a concerted gender aware foreign policy. It is important that Secretary Clinton is elevating the voices of women in these societies through her visits. It is a policy that recognises the power of the individual to affect change, including on structures of society and government. While this is important to do, I do not think it should be given too much weight in regards to its ability to change the system. I see it as a short-term jolt which ultimately will have little impact on the society in the long-term if it is not supported by structural changes.

'One of the biggest killers of women and children in the developing world is cooking stoves. Inhalation of smoke from open fires kills 1.9 million a year. Plus, gathering firewood makes women and girls vulnerable to sexual violence, quite apart from the environmental consequences of chopping down trees. Yet the issue has had a fraction of the attention of Aids/HIV or malaria. Last September, Clinton launched a global alliance for clean cookstoves with a US pledge of \$50m and a target of 100m stoves by 2020. One observer said: "It was classic Clinton, very practical; it's modest but makes a massive difference – but it took a woman to get it.'"

- Although the pledge should be fully commended for saving lives it will not resolve the problem of sexual violence, and its role, whether accidental or not, should not be inflated.

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### **About the author:**

Matthew A. Hill is a senior lecturer in International Relations at Anglia Ruskin University. The aim of this blog is to examine US politics and pick an idea not fully-formed and run with it to see where it goes. Sometimes it will wither away but other times it will inspire to think about the idea further. Your input is encouraged and welcomed.