

# Changing Political and Societal Discourse in the Context of NATO Accession: A Focus on Finland

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## Introduction

‘Masks have been taken off and only the cold face of war is visible’, declared Finnish President Sauli Niinistö in response to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Just three months later, on 18 May 2022, Finland, alongside Sweden, submitted its application to join NATO. While scholarship on Finland’s NATO membership process and its implications is steadily growing, the gendered dimensions of the process remain underexplored. In this chapter, we address the gap by providing a feminist reading of the NATO membership debates in Finland. We maintain that most Finnish foreign and security policy making takes place on a gendered continuum, spanning from feminized human rights and development policy through to masculinized, male-dominated security and defence policy (see [Vastapuu and Lyytikäinen, 2022](#)). Russia’s attack against a European country, we argue, shifted the balance in Finnish foreign policy significantly towards the masculine end of the spectrum. This shift carries implications for Finland’s engagement with global gender equality policy, the participation of women in peace and security policy making within the country and abroad, as well as Finland’s NATO membership profile. Drawing on empirical evidence, we exemplify how the silencing of women and sidelining of gender policy commitments has occurred systematically during the process leading up to Finland’s NATO accession.<sup>1</sup>

Research on Finland’s NATO accession process continues to expand. Existing contributions examine the conditions and reasons that pushed Finland

to seek membership in the Alliance (Forsberg, 2023); Finland's 'shelter strategy' as a push factor to join NATO (Thorhallsson and Vidal, 2023); the impacts of 'Finlandization' on the Finnish-NATO relations (Arter, 2023); political negotiations that led Finland to submit the application (Koskimaa and Raunio, 2024); and the evolution of public opinion during Finland's 'NATO spring' (Nisch, 2024; Elo and Särkkä, 2023). Nonetheless, feminist analyses remain limited, with the exception of Lotta Kivelä's (2024) media analysis of the Finnish NATO debate and Rosengren et al's (2025) comparative analysis on Finland and Sweden's government officials' statements from that same period.

Finland is an interesting case for exploring the relationship between foreign and security policy, military alliance building and their gendered aspects in many ways. Finland and NATO share a history of collaboration on gender policy as Finland sought to profile itself with its Women, Peace and Security (WPS) expertise during the years leading up to Finland's accession to the Alliance (Stenius, 2022; Mustasilta et al, 2022). Moreover, the combination of universal male conscription, latent militarism (Hast et al, 2024; Vastapuu et al, 2024; Kotilainen and Vastapuu, 2024) and relatively high degree of gender equality (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023) make Finland an interesting case for exploring gendered silences vis-à-vis Finland's NATO accession.

As we will argue, the crisis set in motion by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 unmasked the paradoxes of both Finnish foreign and security policy making and of its gender equality regime. Building on research carried on Swedish defence and security policy (Kronsell, 2005; 2006; Wright and Bergman Rosamond, 2024), we identify two types of gendered silencing in the decision-making process that led to Finland's application to NATO in May 2022: silencing of women and their agency in the policy-making process, and silence on gender equality questions in foreign and security policy (with the WPS agenda as a case in point). We maintain that the crisis did not only reveal the real face of Putin and his government but also unmasked the embedded values and paradoxes of foreign and security policy making in Finland.

Our analysis in this chapter is based on a review of existing literature on Finland's relationship with NATO and the country's application to join the Alliance, qualitative analysis of public debate leading up to the application, particularly in the Finnish Parliament, as well as quantitative analysis the gender balance in the institutions that make Finnish foreign and security policy. We have focused our analysis on the public debate and policy making in the spring of 2022, particularly the period between Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 and Finland's application for NATO membership on 18 May 2022.

This chapter has three main sections. First, we introduce Finnish foreign and security policy making as a gendered continuum of noisy silences that builds on the underlying societal gender contract. Second, we outline

Finland's path to NATO after the Cold War. In the third section, we analyse Finnish public and policy-making discussion regarding Finland's response to the full-scale invasion of Russia to Ukraine and Finland's ensuing NATO application. We outline the ways in which Finnish decision-making process excluded women's voices and agency and omitted women's rights and gender equality as relevant issues in foreign and security policy.

### **Noisy silences in foreign and security policy**

As we examine Finland's decision to apply for NATO membership, exploring silences is a crucial step in understanding who has a voice in policy making, what is taken for granted and what issues can be left out of the agenda. The absence of discussion on masculinity (Kronsell, 2006) and violence (Sandman, 2023) have been identified as notable in the construction of security and defence policy in the context of Sweden. Kronsell argues that silence on gender is in fact 'a determining characteristic of institutions of hegemonic masculinity' (2006: 109). Such 'noisy silences' (Tamboukou, 2008: 111) can sometimes tell us more about what is considered 'common sense' (and thus left unsaid) than that what is stated out openly.

Silence and self-silencing can also be a strategy of self-protection or of activism (Parpart and Parashar, 2019; Blomqvist et al, 2021; Shepherd, 2021). Albeit in a different policy context, Wright has suggested that officials may self-silence on certain topics 'because they perceive that their colleagues are not willing or able to hear what they have to say' (2024: 10). In the context of WPS policy, advocates and officials have reported self-silencing by not using 'problematic' words such as feminism or patriarchy and keeping stories and emotional performances exclusively 'motivational and inspiring' (Shepherd, 2021: 127).

In their study of Sweden's accession to NATO, which was carried out in close cooperation with the government of Finland as both countries submitted their applications simultaneously, Wright and Bergman Rosamond develop a useful typology: gendered silence encompasses both 'the widespread tendency to omit women's distinct embodied voices and experiences' from policy narratives as well as the 'omission of gender justice and equality from states' and other actors' external policies' (2024: 592). Building on the notion of security narratives (Wibben, 2010; Shepherd, 2021), Wright and Bergman Rosamond have investigated both Swedish and NATO narratives on the Swedish accession process. They posit that gendered silencing on the WPS agenda by both actors can be understood as a security strategy, whereby NATO was presented as 'the masculinized protector of a feminized Sweden that is in need of saving' (Wright and Bergman Rosamond, 2024: 596–597; see also Rosengren et al, 2025). Such narrative required active silencing on Sweden's well-known brand as a country with a track-record of placing gender at the top of their foreign

policy agenda, a status it had acquired especially during the execution of feminist foreign policy between 2014 and 2022.

We have argued elsewhere that Sweden and Finland were active partners in pushing for gender equality at the international arena with almost matching resources – albeit the latter without openly declaring its foreign policy as feminist (Jauhola and Lyytikäinen, 2020; Vastapuu and Lyytikäinen, 2022). We argue in this chapter that there was a somewhat similar dynamic of gendered silencing at play within the Finnish NATO accession process as well.

Finnish foreign and security policy can be seen to exist on a gendered continuum ranging from feminized human rights, global development and gender equality policy through to masculine and male-dominated defence policy. This gendered continuum builds on a gender segregation that is part of the Finnish gender equality contract and has been prevalent across society throughout modern history (Julkunen, 2010). While women's participation in the labour market, including that of mothers of small children, has been high for decades, Finland has the highest gender-based segregation in the labour market among the Nordic countries, for example. Women look after most of the care work in the home and in the formal labour market while they also overwhelmingly work in the public sector and concentrate in the sectors related to the three Cs: cleaning, cooking and caring, while men dominate the three Ms: machinery, money and management (Perrons, 2005). We see a similar imbalance within foreign and security policy making, an area that has been less extensively researched from the perspective of gender balance.

In Finland, women emerged in the foreign policy decision-making in the 1990s, when for the first time women held ministerial positions relevant for foreign and security policies and politics.<sup>2</sup> This development occurred as part of a broader change at the end of the Cold War, which was marked by an increase in the number of female parliamentary candidates as well as female Members of Parliament, resulting in a gender balanced Parliament by 2007 (Niemi, 2017). Today, the gendered nature of foreign, security and defence policy is evident in the composition of Parliamentary Committees related to foreign policy as well as in the pattern of their expert hearings.<sup>3</sup> Women MPs have been persistently underrepresented as members of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Finnish Parliament (Ketola, 2024). The Committee is seen as highly prestigious and has often seen party chairpersons and other high-level politicians as members, which has made it more difficult for women to participate (Siukola et al, 2020).

The gendered nature of foreign policy is also evident in the Foreign Affairs Committee's hearings. During the last electoral term, from May 2019 to February 2023, the Foreign Affairs Committee heard a total of 1,846 experts, 38 per cent of whom were women. The gender distribution of experts across consulted topics makes it clear that expertise is highly gendered. Women

make up most experts in human rights and development policy while men are heard in matters of national security. Defence policy making is even more male-dominated than foreign policy (Paavola et al, 2022; Ketola, 2024). Out of the experts heard by the parliamentary Defense Committee from 2019 to 2023, only 23 per cent were women.

In diplomacy, the number of women in leading roles has also increased steadily. In 2008, only 30 per cent of the leadership roles within the Ministry for Foreign Affairs were held by women whereas today, women make up at least half of Ministry staff in leadership positions and well over half in all other roles (Vastapuu and Lyytikäinen, 2022). For instance, in 2023, 49.5 per cent of Finland's ambassadors were women, coming second only to Canada (51 per cent) among NATO member states and well above the approximately 30 per cent NATO member average (based on Chehab, 2023). However, some of the more prestigious ambassadorial positions remained out of reach of women until 2024, when women were appointed for the first time as Finland's ambassadors to NATO, Russia and the United States.

If Finland's foreign service has reached gender parity as one of the few NATO members, its defence policy making and the defence forces remain some of the most male-dominated among all NATO members. In 2021, Finland reported having 4.6 per cent women in armed forces, significantly below the NATO member country average of 12.5 per cent. Of NATO's member countries, only Türkiye had a lower proportion at 0.4 per cent. Although the proportion of women in the Finnish Defence Forces is very low compared to most NATO members, there is an upward trend and the proportion of women in the armed forces has doubled since 2014 (The NATO Committee on Gender Perspective, 2021). Finland also ranks towards the bottom of all NATO member and partner countries in the number of women in leadership positions within the defence forces: there are no women as general level officers. Moreover, only 2 per cent of senior or field grade officers and 3 per cent of junior officers are women (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023). The low representation of women in decision-making roles in the defence forces has been noted in international gender equality fora: it is one of the issues that the United Nations Committee on Countering All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) put under expedited monitoring in its review of the status of women in Finland in 2022.

## **Finland and NATO 1990–2022: bridges over troubled water**

Finland's rapid accession to NATO in 2023 is one of the most significant changes in the history of Finnish foreign, security and defence policy. It is comparable to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe

(CSCE) in Helsinki in 1975, which led to the creation of the OSCE, and Finland's EU membership in 1995 in the aftermath of the Cold War. What unites these three major moments in Finnish foreign affairs is that they have all included careful balancing between the East and the West, with the perceived threat deriving from neighbouring Russia. Indeed, after Finland joined NATO as its 31st member state, NATO's border with Russia doubled in length, as Finland and Russia share a border of some 1,340 km. While the CSCE reinforced Finland's policy of neutrality during the Cold War, Finland's membership of both EU and NATO have politically aligned the country closer to the West.

Military alignment and open discussion on defence policy alternatives remained sensitive topics after the end of the Cold War. Although neutrality was abandoned with EU membership in 1995, public discussions on military issues with Western partners remained challenging for Finland in the early years of EU membership (Elo and Särkkä, 2023). Nonetheless, Finland joined NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) in 1995, immediately after the partnership was established, and in 2014, cooperation was elevated to NATO's Enhanced Opportunities Partnership (EOP). According to Särkkä (2023), Finland sought to profile itself as a contributor to international peace rather than as a beneficiary of shelter provided by NATO, 'nudging closer to the transatlantic community as partners' (68).

Up until 2022, only two Finnish political parties – the centre-right Swedish People's Party and National Coalition Party – had officially supported applying for NATO membership while other parties were not favourable to it (Weckman, 2023). As a result, no coalition government prepared for applying for membership. Indeed, actively pursuing NATO membership was not considered politically smart due to the low support rate among the general public (Weckman, 2023). Moreover, whatever NATO debate may have existed was mired with elitism, as foreign policy experts and policy makers participated in seminars and workshops and drafted reports (for example, Sierla, 2007; Bergquist et al, 2017) but the question did not enter popular discussion or politics in any meaningful way (Elo and Särkkä, 2023).

Finland's official stance, established by various governments, became the so-called NATO option. First formulated in 1995, the 'NATO option' refers to Finland's policy of not actively considering or seeking NATO membership, yet not excluding the membership as an option either (Forsberg, 2023). The option was couched in a narrative that maintained that it is an internationally accepted principle that each country has the freedom to choose its alliances (Elo and Särkkä, 2023), although in practice, there were concerns about the Russian reaction should Finland choose to exercise that right.<sup>4</sup> In the main, Finnish foreign policy elites and broader public consciousness never saw NATO as a (potential) factor of state identity, but rather as an enabling factor of security cooperation. As argued by Särkkä, 'Finland's relationship

with NATO was instrumental, emphasizing the relevance of different means and tools that Finland's partnership with the Alliance enabled' (2023: 68).

Within both the EU and NATO, Finland focused on crisis management. In the EU, Finland assumed an active role in the development of civilian crisis management tools and approaches, whereas in NATO, Finland participated in military crisis management operations and in the development of NATO's crisis management training. Crisis management provided Finland an opportunity to align itself closer to Western security and defence policy elites without taking the decisive step of joining NATO (for example, in Afghanistan, see [Mustasilta et al, 2022](#)).

In the context of crisis management, Finland opted to promote 'softer' security themes, particularly gender equality and human security. This emphasis grew significantly in the early 2000s, as the EU's civilian crisis management expanded, and Finland grappled with its role in implementing the newly adopted Security Council Resolution 1325 on WPS ([Jauhola and Lyytikäinen, 2020](#)). Over the years, Finland has become known for the high number of women it has seconded to civilian crisis management missions ([Savoranta and Pitkäljärvi, 2020](#); [Vastapuu and Lyytikäinen, 2022](#)), whereas as a NATO partner, Finland promoted its gender objectives under the umbrella of the WPS agenda ([Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2018](#)). According to an external evaluation, Finland profiled itself as a WPS expert and promoted the integration of the agenda into operational planning within NATO ([Stenius, 2022](#)). Interest was shown among NATO allies for Finnish experiences in operative intelligence gathering and in the recruitment of women into civilian crisis management roles. The focus on WPS can also be observed in Finnish civilian crisis management secondments to NATO from 2010 to 2023. During this time, 10 out of 19 seconded civilian experts to the Alliance were women, a slight majority. Moreover, two of the seconded positions were dedicated to advancing NATO's work on gender and women's rights.<sup>5</sup>

Finland also participated in NATO's largest operation in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021, largely motivated by an opportunity to deepen its relationship with the United States and key European allies and to gain access to NATO in ways that otherwise would not have been possible for Finland as a non-member ([Mustasilta et al, 2022](#)). Support for women's participation and gender equality was one of the most important areas of focus for Finland's engagement, within both the NATO and EU missions, as well as broader diplomatic and development policy engagement on Afghanistan ([Mustasilta et al, 2022](#); [Doty et al, 2023](#)). The context of a military crisis management mission in Afghanistan thus provided Finland with a 'lesson machine' ([Enloe, 1981](#)) that allowed it to engage actively with the global Women, Peace and Security agenda.

While Finland has attracted international attention for reaching gender balance within civilian crisis management missions and for keeping gender

issues on the agenda, it has yet to meet the UN target of recruiting 15 per cent women in military crisis management roles (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2023). Finland has, however, contributed to integrating gender perspectives into NATO crisis management through the development of crisis management training, particularly through its participation in the Sweden-based Nordic Centre for Gender in Military Operations. It is notable that the Finnish Defence Forces did not have a gender advisor at the time of its NATO membership application. A part-time one has since been appointed (Lyytikäinen et al, 2025). The explicit integration of any learning from the NATO ‘lesson machine’ was thus limited to overseas crisis management missions until Finland’s full NATO membership (also Rantala, 2022).

While Finland has kept a high profile as a supporter of crisis management and the WPS agenda within its engagement with NATO, the debate about NATO membership has primarily been a debate about Russia. Ever since the first study on Finland’s potential NATO membership was published in 2007 (Sierla, 2007), perspectives on gender equality and human rights have been notably absent from the membership discourse. The NATO membership process of 2022–2023 cemented this development, where gender issues, human rights norms or the WPS agenda do not belong to the discussion about Finland’s NATO accession and its broader ‘security solution’ (Finnish Government, 2022b: 3). The dominant rhetoric of military strategy and traditional geopolitics easily overshadows more structural questions, such as who participates in shaping policy, how to gain access to these discussions and who is accepted as a participant. It is to this analysis that we now turn.

## **Gendered silences in Finland’s decision to apply for membership**

The beginning of the full-blown war in Ukraine in early 2022 marked a security policy crisis in Finland, which rapidly increased support for NATO membership. Fear of the war escalating to Finland was pervasive. Even feminist anti-militarist researchers found themselves preparing for a possible war, to the extent that some planned possible evacuation routes for themselves and their families (Hast et al, 2024). In such a state of fear and anxiety, public opinion on NATO membership shifted dramatically from hesitation to strong support (Weckman, 2023). In the first polls that were carried out only a few days after the invasion began, support for NATO accession was at over 50 per cent for the first time in history. There was a striking difference from earlier years when the support had stayed between 20 and 40 per cent. In the following months, there was a ‘tsunami’ (Nordenstreng and Rahkonen, 2022) or ‘landslide’ (Elo and Särkkä, 2023) of NATO support. In 2023, men were more prone to support NATO (Weckman, 2023) but the gendered

differences seem to have shrunk by the beginning of 2024 when the support for NATO was equally strong among both men (88 per cent) and women (87 per cent) ([Advisory Board for Defence Information, 2024](#)).

To facilitate the NATO decision through a democratic process, the government prepared two reports to Parliament, which paved the way for the formal decision to apply for membership ([Finnish Government, 2022a, 2022b](#)). Both reports adopt a state-centred notion of security. The first report, published in April ([Finnish Government, 2022a](#)), provides a more thorough discussion of the changed security environment and implications for Finnish society, economy, foreign affairs and defence in different areas, while the second one, published in mid-May ([Finnish Government, 2022b](#)), focuses on the technicalities of NATO membership and proposes that Finland applies to join the Alliance. According to the [Finnish Government \(2022a\)](#), the country's national security and territorial integrity is guaranteed through maintaining and developing its defence capabilities, both in terms of military defence and ability to respond to hybrid and cyber threats, as well as six forms of partnership, such as bilateral collaboration with the UK and US, membership of the EU and potential membership of NATO.

While the reports are grounded in a state-centred conception of security, there are also references to broader notions of societal and human security, particularly in the first report ([Finnish Government, 2022a](#)). The role of society is highlighted as relevant, even necessary, in terms of psychological resilience, capabilities for civil defence and the ability to protect critical infrastructure and cybersecurity. A conception of human security also emerges briefly in the context of the humanitarian and human rights consequences of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine ([Finnish Government, 2022a](#)). It is noteworthy that both societal and human security are discussed in the context of state security: societal and individual reliance are to be mobilized in service of national defence, if the need for it should arise.

We will now look in more detail at how women got their voices heard and to what extent Finland's previous commitments for gender equality and the WPS agenda featured in these reports and the ensuing societal and parliamentary debates. We argue that gendered silencing characterized both the public discussion and the policy-making process during the months that led to Finland's application to NATO. Two types of gendered silencing took place: the silencing of women and the silencing of gender equality policy. We will now look at each type of silencing in turn, asking whose voice was heard and what issues were prioritized in the decision-making process.

### *Silencing of women*

The role of women was paradoxical in the NATO decision-making process. On the one hand, Finland joined NATO while the coalition government

in power was led by five female party leaders, four of whom were in their early 30s, leading a female-majority cabinet of ministers. While both Prime Minister Sanna Marin and President Sauli Niinistö played an important role in leading Finland towards the decision to apply for NATO membership, Sanna Marin has received little attention for her role in shepherding the historic decision through Finnish political debate and in international fora. A notable example is journalist Lauri Nurmi's (2023) book on the Finnish NATO accession process of Finland, published only five months after Finland had joined the Alliance. While male politicians are regularly referred to in the book, Prime Minister Sanna Marin and her cabinet receive little attention. The pervasive gendered silences of the book remained ignored through its reception and high acclaim in the media (for example, Hämäläinen, 2023).

Furthermore, the exclusion of women could be seen at different levels of the decision-making process, which we examine through the work of two Parliamentary Committees engaged in the NATO debate as well as experts and policy makers interviewed by the media. After its publication, the first government report (Finnish Government, 2022a) was discussed in 11 different special committees of the Parliament, which all heard experts and formulated their recommendations for the government. The prestigious Foreign Affairs Committee compiled the reports of the other committees into its report and, in its discussion, also commented on the government's subsequent decision to apply for NATO membership. The Foreign Affairs Committee heard 41 politicians, senior civil servants, diplomats and other security and foreign policy experts, including the Prime Minister, President of the Republic and several other ministers (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2022). Just under 30 per cent of those heard by the Committee were women, a relatively low figure given the high number of women in the cabinet of Prime Minister Marin and the gender balance among ambassadors. Moreover, the figure is lower than the average proportion of women (38 per cent) in Foreign Affairs Committee hearings on average during Prime Minister Marin's governmental term.

In the media, the framing of men as foreign and security policy experts was overwhelming. Lotta Kivelä's (2024) analysis of the NATO debate in the Finnish media<sup>6</sup> shows a highly gendered mediascape: of all the interviewees, 74 per cent were men – including politicians, policy makers, academics, war and defence experts, citizens and media representatives. When investigating the three expert categories only (thus excluding politicians, citizens and media representatives), men constituted 67 per cent in the policy-maker category, 77 per cent of academics and 92 per cent of war and defence experts. In other words, in the latter category, fewer than one in ten interviewed experts were women. This analysis highlights the pervasive silencing of women and their expertise as policy makers, academics and defence experts at a time with critical implications for the future of the

country. This is noteworthy, particularly in the Finnish context where the proportion of women diplomats, for instance, is the second highest among NATO member countries.

### *Silencing of gender issues*

In addition to the marginalization of the voices and agency of women in the NATO decision-making process, we also find that there was a resounding silence around the issue of gender equality, including the WPS agenda, throughout Finland's decision-making process about NATO. Both government reports ([Finnish Government, 2022a, 2022b](#)) failed to consider gender or related power relations and their impact on state, societal, or human security. While passing mention was made in the reports to the vulnerability of certain groups of people in humanitarian situations, the reports do not explicitly consider specific effects on women and girls, or gender minorities. This omission is also interesting given that the [Finnish Government \(2022a\)](#) paid considerable attention to societal security and societal aspects of defence: gender was not seen as relevant in this context, say, in considering the societal effects of war or hybrid attacks, or the strategies to mobilize all parts of society for military and civil defence. Neither were Finland's international commitments, for example, around the Women, Peace and Security agenda, mentioned. These omissions are particularly interesting considering Finland's continued prioritization of the WPS agenda in its engagement with NATO in the two decades leading up to Finland's membership, as discussed earlier.

The government reports were discussed in the Finnish Parliament across a range of committees, and this would have given the Finnish foreign policy elites the opportunity to engage with some of the gender issues that the reports ignored. The Foreign Affairs Committee did not go out of its way to correct the government's omission and only refers to gender issues once, as it highlights the importance of recognising the needs of Ukrainian refugee women and girls in the most vulnerable positions, and particularly their risk of experiencing sexual and gender-based violence and human trafficking ([Foreign Affairs Committee, 2022: 18](#)). There is no reference to gender issues in Finland's own crisis preparedness and response or in the context of NATO application and accession, in many ways continuing the tendency familiar within the Finnish Defence Forces of seeing 'gender' as relevant only in operations outside of Finland ([Rantala, 2022](#)).

The Employment and Equality Committee of the Finnish Parliament became the only policy-making space where gender equality and women's rights experts were heard as part of the parliamentary hearings, which resulted in a thorough discussion of potential gender implications of the changed security situation. To begin with, the Committee called out the

government's silence on 'the impact of war and crises to different genders and groups of people' ([Employment and Equality Committee, 2022: 2](#)). At the same time, committee members and experts participated in self-silencing ([Wright, 2024](#)) and downplayed the relevance of gender in the debate. The Committee stated that it is understandable 'that the [government] report, which discusses the advantages and disadvantages of military alliances, focuses on strategic defence issues and that gender equality and non-discrimination issues related to crisis management are hardly addressed' ([Employment and Equality Committee, 2022: 2](#)). As a result, the Committee framed its response in terms of providing a gender equality and non-discrimination perspective on crisis resilience and internal security. This suggests that gender was not seen as relevant to national security, defence policy and NATO accession even in the eyes of the country's leading gender policy experts and MPs most dedicated to the issue.

Regardless of downplaying its own relevance, the Committee outlined several areas where a 'gender equality and non-discrimination perspective' would improve the analysis carried out by the government and thus Finland's overall security situation. Women were seen to have an important role in maintaining Finnish defence capabilities as well as in conflict resolution and peacebuilding in potential crisis situations. In fact, the Committee argued, based on the Law on Gender Equality, any public authorities established for crisis situations should apply gender quotas. Moreover, the Committee discussed gendered effects of crises and war, including the need to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, in Finland and in Ukraine. In addition, it drew attention to the fact that the universal male conscription in Finland results in particularly stark gender-specific effects for men in the event of war or preparation for war. Finally, the Committee pointed to the significance of the anti-gender movement, which Russia actively supports, in misinformation campaigns, and the vulnerability of Finland's government and civil society that has women in so many leadership positions to misinformation campaigns ([Employment and Equality Committee, 2022](#)).

Although a range of perspectives were discussed and documented by the Employment and Equality Committee on the ways in which gender would be relevant in the new security situation, and in Finland's application to join NATO, these were not picked up in the mainstream foreign policy debate. As mentioned earlier, the foreign policy committee chose to highlight the gendered needs of displaced Ukrainian refugees, reflecting Finland's long-standing record of seeing the Women, Peace and Security agenda as relevant to women in conflict-settings 'out there' ([Foreign Policy Committee, 2022](#)). Now that the potential of armed conflict in Finland had become more likely than what it had been in decades, Finland's foreign policy elites showed an unwillingness or inability to consider international norms, such as those

reflected in the WPS agenda, as relevant for Finland's potential crisis response or 'security solution' (Finnish Government, 2022b: 3).

## Conclusion

It can be concluded that in Finland's response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the resulting Finnish NATO bid, expertise and policy agency was highly gendered. The main Parliamentary Committees dealing with the changing security environment and NATO accession were predominantly male, as was the expert pool used by the media. One of the striking paradoxes of the NATO debate was that even though the cabinet of ministers had a female majority at the time and the percentage of women diplomats was among the highest in the world, their agency in the process has been systematically downplayed or neglected. The focus and expertise utilized during the NATO accession process can be seen as contradictory to the broader human rights-based foreign policy embraced by the Sanna Marin government.

Through our empirical analysis, we have argued that similar to the changes in Swedish foreign policy during and since its NATO membership bid (Wright and Bergman Rosamond, 2024; Rosengren et al, 2025), women's voices as well as gender equality policy was silenced in Finland's NATO application. Our analysis of the crisis and the ensuing expert consultations, political debates and media discussions reflects the highly segregated division of labour in Finnish foreign and security policy making. Despite progress in women's representation in foreign and security policy processes over the past three decades, Finland's NATO accession has further cemented the traditional gender division in Finnish society, public debate and decision-making.

Our feminist analysis of Finland's NATO membership process has implications beyond the national context. Our analysis shows that a relatively significant number of women as key actors in foreign and security policy does not necessarily correspond to their substantive power, voice, or visibility. Further research is required to determine the root causes of the silencing of women in more detail. However, the dearth of references to the role of Sanna Marin, who served as Finland's Prime Minister during the Finnish NATO accession process, indicates a deliberate silencing of women while exaggerating the role of men. Moreover, it is possible that Finland's international reputation as a promoter of gender equality has created expectations for NATO that Finland cannot fully meet, as its foreign and security policy follows a wider societal gendered division of labour where men are expected to provide security while women are expected to provide care.

As Finland is now grappling with shaping its future profile as a NATO ally, the Alliance is also working through a historical shift in focus towards its core task of deterrence and defence. Although Finland's partnership-era

collaboration with NATO – such as on WPS – primarily focused on crisis management, this emphasis shifted as Finland moved toward membership. Both Finland and NATO began prioritizing the Alliance’s core mission of deterrence and defence. As we have seen, the Finnish Defence Forces have one of the lowest proportions of women among NATO member countries and lacked a gender advisor before the country applied for membership. Questions of gender policy had largely been confined to Finland’s participation in crisis management missions and the political and military collaboration with NATO in the context of those missions.

As NATO increasingly emphasizes defence and deterrence in Europe, questions arise about the role of WPS and broader gender issues. Will they be fully integrated to European defence capabilities or become even more sidelined than before, tied exclusively to crisis management? Finland and NATO will both grapple with this challenge in the near future. Our chapter has shown some of Finland’s unique advantages as well as challenges in centring the voices of women in the defence-focused and Europe-centred future of the Alliance. Our analysis of the months that led to Finland’s decision to apply for NATO membership do not offer much cause for optimism in this regard.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Leena Vastapuu acknowledges support from the Research Council of Finland, grant number 370177.
- <sup>2</sup> Finland’s and in fact world’s first female defence minister Elisabeth Rehn was appointed in 1990 and Finland’s first foreign minister Tarja Halonen was appointed five years later in 1995. In the early 2000s, Halonen led Finland’s foreign policy as its President over two six-year terms from 2000 to 2012.
- <sup>3</sup> Quantitative analyses of the numbers of men and women in decision-making relies on binary notions of gender and can only give an indication of the gender relations at play. We, however, see this analysis as important in understanding the gender segregation at the root of Finnish foreign and security policy making.
- <sup>4</sup> Finland’s relationship with Russia, and by extension its NATO policy, has long historical roots, including in Finland’s wars with the Soviet Union during the Second World War and its Cold War strategy of neutrality in order to maintain Finnish-Soviet goodwill. This legacy shaped Finland’s NATO stance for decades, marked by a strategy of ambiguity: strengthening Western cooperation while avoiding actions that might provoke Russia. Concerns about how Russia might respond to NATO membership remained a central factor in Finland’s cautious approach (Forsberg, 2023).
- <sup>5</sup> As per information provided by Crisis Management Centre Finland. Full list can be requested from the authors.
- <sup>6</sup> Media articles analysed were from 1 January to 31 March 2022 and the data set comprised 671 news articles published in the mainstream media (Kivelä, 2024).

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