

FEMINIST REIMAGINING OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES



FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY

ENERGY AND RESISTANCE

EDITED BY COLUMBA ACHILLEOS-SARLL,
TONI HAASTRUP, AND JENNIFER THOMSON



FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY

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FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY

Energy and Resistance

Edited by
Columba Achilleos-Sarll, Toni Hastrup, and
Jennifer Thomson

With an Afterword by
Laura Sjoberg

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List of Abbreviations

AMLO	President Andrés Manuel López Obrador
AU	African Union
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CDF	Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith
CSO	Civil society organization
EU	European Union
FFP	feminist foreign policy
FIAP	Feminist International Assistance Policy
G7	Group of Seven
GAPS	Gender Action for Peace Security
GBV	gender-based violence
GIMAC	Gender is my Agenda Campaign
LGBTQIA	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual
OGIP	Our Generation for Inclusive Peace
NAP	National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	non-governmental organization
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
UNRWA	United Nations Relief & Works Agency
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
WHRD	Women Human Rights Defenders
WILPF	Women's International League for Peace and Freedom
WPS	Women, Peace and Security
WRO	women's rights organization
YPS	Youth, Peace and Security
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
IR	International Relations

Notes on Contributors

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From Columba: above all, I am immensely grateful to have had the opportunity to collaborate with two feminist scholars whom I deeply admire and respect, and who have challenged and inspired me to become a better thinker and writer. Without their commitment to this project, and indeed our multiple collaborative projects, along with their dedication and determination, this edited book would not exist. Finally, to my family and partner: you are everything, and everything I do is a reflection of your love and support.

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From Jennifer: Thank you to Columba and Toni for being the most delightful and collegial of co-editors on this project. A special thank you for bearing with my absences across not one, but two, periods of maternity leave. It has been a pleasure to think and work with you, and I hope this is only the beginning. Thank you to Brad and cubs, whose arrivals bookended this project.

Columba Achilleos-Sarll, Birmingham, UK

Toni Haastrup, Manchester, UK

Jennifer Thomson, Bath, UK

Introduction:

Energy and Resistance in/to ‘Feminist’ Foreign Policy

Columba Achilleos-Sarll, Toni Haastrup, and Jennifer Thomson

In 2014, Sweden adopted feminism as the guiding orientation of its foreign policy, a significant moment in the history of state feminism. It was a symbolic and political shift in how foreign policy would be conceptualized and practised, reflecting a deliberate commitment to feminist principles in international affairs beyond being a matter of international peace and security. In the years that followed, over a dozen states developed their own versions of feminist foreign policy (FFP) and, after more than a decade, an FFP ecosystem has emerged ([Table I.1](#)). Beyond those that formally adopted FFP, countries such as Mongolia (2023) and Bolivia (2024), among others, have expressed interest in pursuing a feminist approach to their international affairs. All this would suggest that, in its short lifespan, FFP has generated notable *energy*.

Yet, barely a decade in, the fortunes of FFP have shifted. In late 2022, Sweden elected a nationalist right-wing government, which took power in part thanks the parliamentary backing of the far-right Swedish Democrats under a confidence and supply deal. The Swedish Democrats subsequently rescinded Sweden’s FFP. The following year, Argentina elected Javier Milei as President, who campaigned on a platform that included eliminating the Ministry for Women, and overturning the country’s nascent FFP. And, in early 2025, the Netherlands governing coalition which had championed FFP, was replaced by a more right-wing grouping. The new foreign minister promptly withdrew support for all programmes related to gender equality. In Canada, Mark Carney has reversed his predecessor innovation, declining to move forward on an FFP. These regressive moves call into question the continued efficacy of FFP as a state-led project and have occurred almost as quickly as FFP has expanded.

As various contributions in this volume demonstrate, FFP has reignited debates within feminist circles about how to hold governments accountable

Table I.1: Countries that have made claims to feminist foreign policy, with context

Country	Date of adoption	Context
Sweden	2014	The first adoptee of FFP, in 2022 Sweden announced it was dropping the policy, following the election of a right-wing government, dependent on the far-right Swedish Democrats party to govern.
Canada	2017	Canada followed Sweden to adopt its Feminist International Assistance Programme (FIAP) following the then Prime Minister's declaration that he was a feminist. Despite this early move, Canada, under the Liberal Party, failed to adopt a comprehensive FFP, despite launching the process towards a White Paper on FFP in 2020.
Luxembourg	2018	Luxembourg's FFP was adopted relatively quietly and stealthily removed without much fanfare amidst a pivot towards increased militarization characterized by a greater commitment to defence.
France	2019	France's version of FFP centred on feminist diplomacy that prioritised gender equality, especially in the Global South.
Mexico	2020	In 2020, Mexico's Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Marcelo Ebrard, pledged the country would follow an FFP, becoming the first country in the Global South to adopt one. While internationally the country has been a strong advocate for gender equality, domestically the country has some of the highest rates of gender-based violence.
Spain	2021	While Spain declared an FFP, its primary goal has been the mainstreaming of gender equality across its foreign policy apparatus and practices, prioritizing intersectionality.
Libya	2021	Although Libya's feminist movement achieved success in declaring a feminist approach to foreign policy supported by the former minister of gender equality, this has not truly been adopted by the government of Libya.
Germany	2021	As Germany adopted its FFP and its Feminist Development policy, it appeared to have devised the most comprehensive and progressive FFP approach. Yet, the return of a right-leaning government and commitment to increased militarism in early 2025 calls into question whether FFP will continue as an approach to German foreign policy
Chile	2022	In March 2022, Chilean Foreign Minister Antonia Urrejola announced that Chile was developing an FFP, becoming the first country in South America and the second country in Latin America to adopt one.

Table I.1: Countries that have made claims to feminist foreign policy, with context (continued)

Country	Date of adoption	Context
Colombia	2022	In March 2023, the Colombian government announced that it was developing its FFP. At the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) 68 in March 2024, the Colombian FFP was officially launched by the Colombian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Colombia's FFP focuses on four areas: social and environmental justice, total peace, and education, science, and culture. It was co-created with 18 feminist organizations and in partnership with 10 bureaus at the Colombian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
The Netherlands	2022	Despite initial enthusiasm, even hosting the second global FFP conference, the Netherlands changed tack in 2025. The right-wing government announced swinging cuts to the country's aid budget in early 2025, including eliminating all programmes related to women's rights and gender equality.
Argentina	2022	Following Javier Milei's presidential victory in 2023, the country's FFP was removed.
Slovenia	2023	The first Central European country to adopt FFP, Slovenia's approach integrates feminist principles into its diplomatic engagement, development cooperation, and multilateral advocacy, particularly within the EU and UN.
Scotland	2023	While foreign policy is a reserved issue and thus under the jurisdiction of Westminster, the Scottish government adopted a Feminist Approach to International Relations (FAIR). FAIR is a whole foreign policy approach that emphasizes gender equality, human rights, and intersectionality at home and abroad, including its orientation towards the Global South. It emphasizes ethical trade, climate justice, and feminist leadership in diplomacy.
Bolivia	2024	Bolivia announced its intention to adopt FFP at the Mexico City FFP Ministerial Conference held in July 2024.
Liberia	2025	On the margins of the annual African Union summit, Liberia announced its upcoming adoption of FFP as gender-responsive foreign policy, highlighting its relevance for Africa and as a means for transforming governance, peace, and socio-economic development across the continent.

to their feminist rhetoric and what such policies should aim to achieve in practice. The advent of feminism in foreign policy has created entry points for alternative feminist worlds. While it signals greater democratization of foreign policy making in pursuit of more progressive ends, it also exposes contestations about the compatibility of different strands of feminisms – anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, and anti-militarist – with the inherently hierarchical structure of international relations that places the state at the centre, prompting the question: is feminism compatible with foreign policy?

This chapter juxtaposes FFP's emergence and regression against the rise of reactionary, far-right, anti-gender and anti-feminist politics. It first situates the volume within the animating concepts and leitmotifs of 'energy' and 'resistance'. While the explicit inclusion of feminism within foreign policy has sparked curiosity among feminist scholars and practitioners alike, it has also provoked various forms of resistance within and beyond feminist spaces. The chapter then explores the implications of these twinned phenomena. Next, it presents the current field of FFP with attention to norms, ethics, and power, as well as race and coloniality. The final section introduces the structure and the main arguments of this collection, highlighting how it contributes to an emerging sub-field that interrogates feminism in foreign policy scholarship and practice.

Energy and resistance

The motifs and twin dynamics of 'energy' and 'resistance' illuminate the state of FFP that the contributors to this volume analyse. Since we began discussions about this collection back in early 2023, the initial energy surrounding FFP has given way to significantly more resistance, with FFP increasingly representing a key site for global pushbacks against anti-gender norms (see [Haastrup, 2025b](#)). Of course, this resistance does not only come from anti-gender mobilizations, but also from groups who are historically marginalized in global politics, including in FFP ([Haastrup, 2025a](#); see also Kezie-Nwoha, [Chapter 3](#)). We locate this energy and resistance accompanying FFP as a normative and ethical framework within the twin processes of the continued rise of both co-opted feminisms and anti-gender mobilizations, which not only challenge what 'feminism' means but also crowd-out a variety of alternative articulations of feminist praxis.

Energy

Since FFP's inception, the inclusion of feminisms, as least discursively, in the formal practices of global politics has been made more visible. Globally, the 'mainstreaming' of feminism in foreign policy has led to civil

society organizations (CSOs), networks, women's rights organizations, and (transnational) advocacy groups responding, promoting, and holding governments accountable to their FFP commitments as part of their core (gender) work. Unlike other pro-gender policies that had emerged within international relations, such as the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda that came before, FFP in its official declaration by Sweden originated from the state rather than civil society. While state and civil society approaches to FFP differ (as the contributions in this volume explore), broadly speaking the policy framework signals a shift to a more people-centred approach to security and diplomacy among other areas of global politics. Furthermore, it places greater emphasis on rights and an imperative to adequately fund women's and LGBTIQ+ networks and groups internationally. To an extent then, FFP offers a domain for transnational feminist civil society to coalesce and organize.

Indeed, although FFP originated from the state, civil society has seized the opportunity to advance a feminist agenda in international affairs (for example, [Garcia and Scheyer, 2024](#); see also Deschamps-Laporte and Santoire, [Chapter 10](#)). By publicly advocating for FFP as a tool to advance gender equality in international relations, they help keep it on the agenda and sustain its momentum. FFP is not, however, as we argue elsewhere ([Achilleos-Sarll et al, 2025](#)) and elaborate further below, the exclusive ownership of the Global North, nor of states. In fact, with states rolling back on their FFP commitments, countries in the Global South – particularly in Latin America – have taken a leading role in developing FFP and its associated norms and practices. Lastly, feminist academics working on this theme, although disproportionately located in the Global North, continue to breathe life into FFP as an object of intellectual feminist pursuit and source of hope, while also cautioning against its unqualified embrace. Energy is therefore reflected in the adoption and diffusion of FFP as a normative, state feminist agenda, in civil society organizing and activity, and academic attention.

Situating FFP within governance and state feminism signals towards the 'success' of feminism in halls of power. Governance feminism describes the 'imbrication of feminist ideas and ideals with the techniques and rationalities of government, which in turn are produced within and productive of institutions and processes of governance' ([Shepherd, 2022: 732](#)). To realize governance feminism, scholars demonstrate how particular strands of feminist knowledge, notably liberal and neoliberal feminisms, become conflated with the dominant security agenda ([Pratt, 2013: 773](#)). Governance feminism, white feminism, and securo-feminism ([Abu-Lughod, 2023](#)) have always been caught-up in militaristic, imperial, and neoliberal projects. As one might expect, FFP is underpinned by liberal and neoliberal feminism, blunting, as feminist scholars argue in this volume and more widely, its so-called 'transformative potential' (see [Guerrina et al, 2023](#)).

There is much contestation over FFP as a feminist project – and, indeed, questions over whether it can be called a feminist project at all. While the vocabulary is qualitatively different from the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda, which for states has typically centred the ‘women-in-conflict’ framework (Cook, 2016), FFP explicitly embraces the ‘f’ word – a word that often provokes strong reactions. As scholars note, the term ‘feminism’ does not necessarily make a policy or practice feminist in any transformative sense, notwithstanding that feminism, and histories of feminism, are themselves paradoxical (Delap, 2020).

Resistance

Yet, FFP is also marked by resistance, and can be understood as a key battleground in broader anti-gender politics. This resistance manifests in two ways: (1) resistance *within* feminist circles and (2) resistance from *external* anti-gender forces.

Firstly, resistance *within* feminist circles, particularly from scholars and activists in the Global South as well as critical voices from Central and Eastern Europe (see Kezie-Nwoha, Chapter 3; Krulišová et al, Chapter 6; Diaby and Mukalazi, Chapter 8), highlights tensions and limitations in both the conceptualization and implementation of FFP. Even in states that have adopted an FFP, it is not an institutionalized or normatively settled agenda, let alone fully implemented. In fact, even if we consider FFP as a normative agenda, it lacks validity because it is neither widely affirmed nor broadly circulated (Kirby and Shepherd, 2024). In the end, FFP still constitutes a foreign policy orientation whose character will be dependent on the whim of the state or government of the day.

Feminists have also been highly critical of the substance of much FFP. Contributions in this volume highlight the absence of any real commitment to thinking about the climate catastrophe (Cohn and Duncanson, Chapter 1); to listening and acting on voices from the Global South, including Indigenous peoples (Kezie-Nwoha, Chapter 3; Jayakumar, Chapter 5; Ballangarry et al, Chapter 2); and the reliance of FFP on conventional militaristic approaches to global problems (Haastrup et al, Chapter 7). As we outline later, this critique is prevalent within FFP praxis wherein the feminism that is deployed to govern FFPs are severely wanting, limited, and in many cases deeply problematic.

In the course of putting this collection together, we have critiqued and observed critiques to the responses of powerful states to ongoing mass atrocities, notably in Ukraine and Palestine. The silences of Western feminists, as Abbas and Ajour note in their contributions (see the Conclusion), including from countries that have adopted FFP, have fuelled debates around solidarity, resistance, and militarism and further exacerbate those harms.

In the case of ongoing genocidal violence in Palestine, powerful donor governments (including some FFP states) have been complicit, often by their failure to act against the incessant violence wrought by Israel against the Palestinians, including children. In this way, they fail to leverage any modicum of feminist ideals like gender equality in their foreign policy approach. Consequently, feminism in foreign policy, whether via FFP or indeed the seemingly more institutionalized WPS agenda, is facing what can be described as a crisis of legitimacy (see also Haastrup et al, [Chapter 7](#); NcNamee, [Chapter 4](#)), including the Western, liberal/neoliberal feminism that is often understood to underpin it ([Pratt et al, 2025](#)).

Beyond this, civil society challenges how FFP has developed and how FFP governments choose to work (or not) with civil society. For instance, activists in Mexico criticize the government's sidelining of civil society, denying genuine participation, particularly during the previous López Obrador-led administration ([Philipson Garcia and Valesco Ugalde, 2025](#)). In Germany, scholarship highlights how certain voices and perspectives are not prioritized ([Färber and Standke-Erdmann, 2025](#); [Mühlenhoff et al, 2025](#)). Finally, feminists draw attention to the international dynamics and circulation of knowledge production, and how governments and the wider FFP community often defer to anglophone voices in the Global North, rather than engaging with and giving up space and power to existing feminist actors and movements ([Haastrup, 2025a](#); [Garcia and Ugalde, 2025](#); [Sepulveda, 2025](#)). This is a trend we know too well from the WPS agenda ([Haastrup and Hagen, 2020](#); [Achilleos-Sarll, 2024b](#)) and one that we admit has been hard not to replicate in this volume.

Secondly, resistance is growing from increasingly powerful anti-gender far-right forces. As feminists have taught us, anti-genderism is implicated in the structures of coloniality, gender essentialism, racial capitalism, neoliberalism, and resurgent nationalisms ([Holvikivi, Holzberg and Ojeda, 2024](#)). At the same time feminism has formally entered the male-dominated world of foreign policy as a serious topic of concern, there has also been a global rising tide *against* feminism. The pursuit of FFPs and underlying goals of gender equality can thus be described as having the potential to become 'another fault-line in international politics' ([Aggestam and True, 2021](#): 385; [Aran et al, 2025](#): 273). Beyond FFP, global actors and alliances increasingly question the notion of 'gender ideology'. There have been several roll-backs in key feminist policy areas, including sexual and reproductive health rights ([Gilby et al, 2021](#)), trans rights (for example, [Amery and Mondon, 2024](#); [Galpin and Vernon, 2024](#)), and Indigenous rights ([Ballangarry et al, Chapter 2](#)). Much of this is happening in contexts experiencing democratic backsliding and the imposition of powerful autocracies ([Fodor, 2022](#); [Graff and Korolczuk, 2022](#)) in an increasingly dizzying and frankly terrifying array of countries across the globe including the USA, Hungary, Iran, and Argentina.

While anti-genderism is predominantly associated with the far right, resistance is also evident across the political spectrum, including more centrist, secular, liberal, leftist, and even feminist perspectives.

The tensions arising from this ‘feminist turn’ in the context of the rise of anti-genderism are further compounded by intersecting crises (Cohn and Duncanson, [Chapter 1](#)). In the words of historian [Adam Tooze \(2022\)](#), we are living in a time of ‘polycrisis’, in which each problem is intertwined with others, such that solutions appear hard to discern: the climate emergency; a resurgence of violent conflicts worldwide; increased authoritarianism, militarism, militarization, and martial politics; deepening inequalities continuing to reverberate from the global COVID-19 pandemic; and, humanitarian crises, including occupation, settler colonialism, and genocide in Palestine, and continuing conflicts in the Middle East, Horn of Africa, and Ukraine.

If there is any cause for hope, it lies in the fact that, despite this context, FFP and feminisms more generally have always been more resilient than expected. For example, [Townsend et al \(2024\)](#) suggest that although Sweden has abandoned its FFP, it may be ‘stickier’ than expected due to processes of institutionalization that have embedded the policy over the past decade in ways that abandoning it are likely unable to fully reverse. Commenting in the magazine *Foreign Policy*, Rachel George claimed that ‘the new Swedish government’s hands may be tied when it comes to reversing many of its feminist policies in practice’ ([George, 2022](#)), particularly given the longstanding role that Sweden has played in relation to gender equality in international affairs. Of course, the limits of what sticks is worth considering – perhaps gender equality is sticky, but is the feminist ethos that questions power hierarchies equally so? At the same time, the investments of transnational civil society FFP itself and broader commitments to seeing feminist practices within global politics means that something about FFP will continue to linger, at the very least providing a normative compass around which feminist voices can advocate.

Histories, origin stories, and racial hierarchies

As we have discussed elsewhere ([Achilleos-Sarll et al, 2023](#)), FFP scholarship has generally been divided between normative accounts (for example, [Aggestam and Bergman Rosamond, 2016](#); [Achilleos-Sarll, 2018](#); [Aggestam et al, 2019](#); [Robinson, 2021](#)), and empirical ones, tending to prioritize Sweden and Canada (for example, [Tiessen and Swan, 2018](#); [Parisi, 2020](#); [Thomson, 2020, 2022](#); [Sundström et al, 2021](#); [Jezierska, 2022](#)). However, less systematic attention has been paid to contexts outside of Europe, thus reproducing a political economy of knowledge production that centres Europe and the Global North more broadly, with the FFP field slower to

provide comparative analysis (although see [Sundström et al, 2021](#); [Zhukova et al, 2022](#); [Achilleos et al, 2025](#); [Thomson and Wehner, 2025](#)).

Yet, feminist entries into foreign policy have a much longer history than the initial explicit adoption of FFP by Sweden. Indeed, FFP must be situated within global feminist histories to avoid an import/export model of normative diffusion from the Global North to the Global South, which has been a tendency of much FFP scholarship to date, as well as the overemphasis on a state-based narrative that marginalizes the role of civil society or women's and youth organizations and leadership ([Jayakumar, Chapter 5](#); [Kezie-Nwoha, Chapter 3](#); [McNamee, Chapter 4](#)). Although it has often been described – and we have also contributed to this framing – as a distinct practice or ‘turn’, FFP cannot be explored outside of a longer arc of global and national feminist histories, initiatives, and activism.

For example, in 1915, at a conference in the Hague, over 1,000 women peace activists gathered at the International Congress on Women (ICW) to appeal to the warring parties to end the First World War (see [Addams et al, 2022](#)). These women did not end the war, but they were successful in articulating what a feminist anti-war agenda would look like to inform the practices of states in global politics. Similarly, the exercise of feminist values as guide for international relations had a clear uptick with the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution (SCR) 1325 on ‘Women, Peace and Security’. While UNSCR 1325 is often viewed as emanating from the UN, it of course draws on a longer history of feminist transnational campaigning within and without borders. If UNSCR 1325 is viewed as a source of emergence for FFP then acknowledging the story of African feminist leadership is essential. The global Women's conferences (Mexico City in 1975; Copenhagen in 1980; Nairobi in 1985; and Beijing in 1995) were themselves a source for what has become the WPS agenda. These conferences are especially worth noting, since they articulated many of the demands that have been taken up by FFP implementing states in their conceptualizations. Furthermore, they provided spaces of dialogue and contestation about what feminism meant across different domains of global politics, themes that remain resonant as states take up the feminist mantle.

FFP can claim, therefore, multiple ‘origin stories’ via distinct and intersecting, global and national historical lineages that date back much further than Sweden's formal adoption in 2014 (see [Achilleos-Sarll et al, 2023](#)). As [Parashar and D'Costa \(2017: 28\)](#) argue, ‘the language of “feminist foreign policy” may be a new vocabulary in the context of the West, but both feminist practices and objectives in foreign policy have existed for a long time in the South Asian context’ (see also [Rathore, 2024](#)).

This entanglement of the global and the national means that, invariably, as with all international relations, vectors of race and coloniality are evident in FFP – in its scholarship, its origin stories, and in its practice. The imbrication

of race and coloniality as core to the practices of international relations, and the hierarchies engendered by the idea of foreign policy, including those of settler states, in part underscores the incompatibility, if not impossibility, of a ‘feminist’ foreign policy (see [Haastrup, 2025a](#); Sjoberg, in the Afterword). Take, for example, Canada – a settler colonial state, the advent of whose Feminist International Development Assistant Policy (FIAP) is set against state violence regarding missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (see Ballangarry et al, [Chapter 2](#)), or Germany, whose unwillingness to act in the face of genocide even when espousing FFP.

Despite the many FFP states that have colonial histories (and are complicit in the coloniality of global politics), there is often a refusal to acknowledge this in their actual policy practices ([Färber and Standke-Erdmann, 2025](#)). Indeed, the more recent co-optation of intersectionality as a marker of varying identities over the acknowledgement of the implications of varying systems of oppression has led many to call it a ‘buzzword’ ([Mason, 2019](#)) in the FFP domain. In reality, there is little sense of what it would mean to take the reality of intersectionality seriously. More often than not, FFP states claim an intersectional conceptualization of foreign policy as part of their ‘soft power’ credentials as ‘good’ feminist actors and as a way of projecting themselves as global ‘leaders’ and ‘experts’. In so doing, they can identify as morally superior, even while reproducing racialized hierarchies in international politics ([Haastrup and Hagen, 2020](#); [Thomson, 2022](#)).

Norms, practices, power

It is against this partly optimistic yet profoundly gloomy context that academic and civil society work on FFP has taken off. Its emergence has, to some extent, helped rubberstamp and foreground feminist approaches to foreign policy as a distinct field of enquiry within Foreign Policy Analysis ([Thomson and Wehner, 2025](#); [Aran et al, 2025](#)), historically hostile and largely resistant to gender ([Aggestam and True, 2024](#); [Achilleos-Sarll et al, 2023](#)). This scholarship has accelerated in parallel to FFP practices in areas as diverse as, among others, aid, diplomacy, migration, and peacemaking (for example, on aid see [Tiessen, 2024](#); on diplomacy see [Rathore, 2024](#); on migration see [Mühlenhoff et al, 2025](#); on peacemaking see [Akbari, 2024](#)) and tends to include rapid policy reactions to states’ adoptions, declarations, and U-turns. The first strand of FFP scholarship focuses attention on FFP as a normative framework (for example, [Thomson, 2020](#)) and as an inherently ethical project (for example, [Aggestam and Bergman Rosamond, 2016](#); [Robinson, 2021](#)). While pointing towards its potential, this literature is largely critical of the policy framework, arguing that FFP fails to move the dial beyond national interest to encompass norms of global justice and peace. More positively, much of this literature argues that feminist approaches to foreign policy challenge

(or have the potential to challenge) mainstream approaches to power wherein foreign policy is usually understood as ‘a hypermasculine performance where states pursue national security and economic gains through “hard” and “soft” power’ (Achilleos-Sarll, 2024a: 32). Within this body of scholarship, academics make visible the plural ‘feminisms’ underpinning FFP in relation to thinking about the conditions of its possibility (Färber and Thomson, 2025).

The second strand of FFP literature examines its institutionalization and practical implementation through empirical accounts of FFP adopter states, most notably Sweden and Canada (for example, Tiessen and Swan, 2018; Parisi, 2020; Thomson, 2020, 2022; Sundström et al, 2021; Jezierska, 2022; Towns et al, 2024). However, as growing numbers of Global South states begin to adopt FFP, the literature is increasingly expanding its geographical focus to encompass a broader range of European (Achilleos-Sarll et al, 2025; Haastrup 2025a; Thomson and Wehner, 2025) and Latin American contexts (Sepulveda, 2025; Thomson and Wehner, 2025), a shift we explore further later.

While much energy has been expended conceptualizing what FFP is, comparatively little attention has been paid to examining why states adopt or reject it as an approach to foreign policy in the first place, and the role of domestic politics in both enabling the development of FFP and its dismantling (Towns et al, 2024; Thomson and Wehner, 2025). Additionally, few studies trace connections between feminism and foreign policy to longer histories of ideas around power, gender, and women’s rights (Achilleos-Sarll et al, 2023), or interrogate the policy intersections that FFP engages (including the differences between a feminist approach to development versus a feminist approach to foreign policy, as seen in the policies of both Germany and Canada).

New interventions in feminist foreign policy

Collectively, this volume makes theoretical, methodological, and empirical contributions. As we demonstrate earlier, the wider scholarship on FFP has been significant in co-constituting the knowledge and doing of FFP. Nevertheless, with the contributions in this collection, we foresaw the opportunity to engage creatively with the idea of FFP that is rooted, in its relevance and conceptualization, in the expertise and experiences of the author(s). As a consequence, when we initially made a global call for contributions, we were especially keen to include unusual suspects and unfamiliar approaches to the subject. We consciously sought to curate a volume that included writing that went beyond the strict academic parameters that drew from typical approaches to the study of feminism in International Relations/Studies but also welcomed the accounts of practitioners and creatives working in this field. As a result, the collection

incorporates entries atypical to academic edited collections in the form of conversations and poetry. These illustrate the diversity of the ‘methodological’ approaches to the study of FFP, and foreign policy (analysis) more generally. This approach also serves to (un)discipline FFP within the constraints of International Relations proper. In so doing, while we ourselves remain nominally International Relations/Studies scholars, we hope that this approach to FFP also enriches and encourages others to reach beyond what is accepted as possible in how we study foreign policy and international relations more broadly.

This volume contributes to a diverse range of underexplored, often taken for granted themes within FFP. It blurs the lines between the experiences of practitioners, academics, and civil society to tell a unique story of FFP(s). As such, there are narratives of civil society engagements with FFP; the intersections of other newer and progressive approaches with FFP; and the intergenerational dimension of FFP is explored, among other themes.

This book further contributes an understanding of different cases from across the world, including engaging with Global South contexts. Moreover, contributors adopt a range of feminist epistemologies, including critical, intersectional, Black, post- and decolonial approaches that endeavour to decentre Europe/North America, which has hitherto been central to FFP narratives and origin stories. In doing so, our collection creates a platform for scholars, activists, and practitioners to come together to explore this feminist turn in global politics and narrate FFP otherwise.

Chapter overview

The volume seeks to tell a story about FFP in five parts. The first part, ‘[Reimagining a Different World](#)’, provides an alternative reading of foreign policy. It asks: how might foreign policy change when an emancipatory feminism is centred? To begin, Carol Cohn and Claire Duncanson ([Chapter 1](#)) question if the radical potential of FFP can address the multiple and intersecting planetary crises that we are living through, or if FFP is merely a repackaging of existing approaches. In conversation with Jennifer Thomson, Julie Ballangarry, and Alice Ridge ([Chapter 2](#)) discuss Australia’s Indigenous approach to foreign policy. They explore what an Indigenous approach means, how it has developed in the political context of contemporary Australia, and whether such an approach might exist in tandem or in competition with feminist understandings of foreign policy. This is especially relevant given the appetite within civil society and academia in Australia for FFP.

The second part, ‘[Talking Back: Who Gets to Do FFP](#)’, challenges mainstream narratives of FFP and, indeed, who is perceived as a legitimate knowledge-maker in what we know about FFP. This emerged from the

fact that much of what we know about FFP comes from either official state policies, the civil society groups who sometimes help to develop them (often based in the Global North), and the academics engaging with these policies, decision-makers and select practitioners. Here, the goal has been to explore other influences and perceptions that have been seen as a positive evolution of foreign policy. The energy with which feminism has become imbricated with foreign policy has meant that, typically, contestations around the idea and practices of FFP are parsed over. Helen Kezie-Nwoha ([Chapter 3](#)) thus explores the role of African civil society in discussions of FFP on the continent. She argues that FFP presents both challenges and pitfalls for the continent. Moreover, she notes that it has not been adequately focused on the lived experiences and social organizing of African women, which has implications for what becomes policy priority and how this is implemented on the African continent. In Elinor McNamee's contribution ([Chapter 4](#)), the focus is on young people's understanding and perception of FFP as a policy framework, through her work with the non-governmental organization (NGO), Our Generation for Inclusive Peace. As she points out, FFP may struggle to survive without the understanding of young people who demand more of the feminism that informs foreign policy. She concludes that intergenerational perspectives and youth participation in the evolution of FFP is essential to its longevity, not least as we begin to see formal roll-backs. Concluding this section, Kirthi Jayakumar ([Chapter 5](#)) draws on perspectives from Asia to rethink this turn in foreign policy. Jayakumar asks what lessons from feminist organizing in the majority world might offer as feminist aspirations to transform foreign policy.

In the third part, 'Contestations within FFP', authors explore some of the tensions that appear in the state practice of feminism in the name of foreign policy and what it means for how we think about the world around us. For instance, Kateřina Krulišová, Míla O'Sullivan, Maryna Shevtsova, and Oksana Potapova ([Chapter 6](#)) engage in a dialogue from their position as scholars from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), speaking from an 'in-between' region of the world that is neither Global South nor North and in the context of Russia's imperialist war in Ukraine. They explore what feminism looks like in this particular context, one where anti-militarist traditions seem to clash with the consensus that Ukraine must be permitted (and facilitated) to defend itself. Yet, and as Toni Hastrup, Annika Bergman Rosamond, and Christine Agius show in their contribution ([Chapter 7](#)), FFP is already imbued with militarist logics and, indeed, the feminism in the foreign policy of many European countries constitutes martial politics. Using illustrative examples of NATO member states and their seemingly contradictory, yet consistent, reactions to Russia's war in Ukraine and Israel's genocide in Palestine, they demonstrate the impossibility of FFP for bringing into being transformative feminist peace. The section concludes with Fatim Selina Diaby and Miriam

Mona Mukalazi's poem ([Chapter 8](#)) that invites the reader to think about 'whiteness' within European FFPs, and the relative silence around race and coloniality amidst the enthusiasm with which feminism in foreign policy has been welcomed.

The fourth part, 'FFP within the Gender Governance Architecture', situates FFP within the broader pro-gender global policy architecture, including contemporary and growing resistance to it. Detmer Kremer and Eva Tabbasam ([Chapter 9](#)), drawing on their experiences within Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS) in the UK, assess the trends in FFP vis-à-vis inconsistent policy outlooks with respect to Ukraine and Palestine. Importantly, they name how FFPs of Global North countries are entangled with the very systems of oppression feminism at its most liberatory seeks to challenge. For them, mitigation occurs when Global North organizations seek to forge solidaristic relations with partner organizations in the Global South.

Undoubtedly, the opening for FFP had come after almost a decade and a half of the WPS agenda. Yet, despite conflation and overlaps, these are distinct. What is common is that FFPs often rely on commitments to the implementation of the WPS agenda in the peace and security domain. It is in this context that Laurence Deschamps-Laporte and Bénédicte Santoire ([Chapter 10](#)) explore the coexistence of FFP and WPS, the latter being a global normative framework often narrated as a United Nations agenda. They ask: how do the two work (or not) together in the Canadian and Mexican contexts? They conclude that WPS is more resilient when compared to FFP due to political shifts at the national level, including anti-gender and anti-feminist mobilizations (see also [Haastруп, 2025b](#)).

The cases of Canada and Mexico are complemented by a parallel discussion of France and the United Kingdom (UK) by Clara Eroukhanoff and Hannah Partis-Jennings ([Chapter 11](#)). In these contexts, the backlash brought about by anti-gender and anti-feminist mobilizations is interrogated by Eroukhanoff and Partis-Jennings via the role of the Vatican. They demonstrate why feminist advocacy and policies remain a necessity to safeguard against a more comprehensive regression of foundational gender norms.

This section concludes with a practitioner perspective from Delphine O ([Chapter 12](#)), France's *chef* responsible for the development and implementation of the FFP. Accounting for the broader global pro-gender architecture as well as increased backlash, her account is one that underscores the possibilities brought about by FFP specifically for supporting gender equality via foreign policy, and its role in normalizing gender as part of diplomatic practice. At the same time, it highlights challenges such as bureaucratic inertia, as well as the implications of France's colonial and security legacies. Yet, amidst what many view as a global roll-back on gender equality, this chapter is resolute about why feminism continues to matter within foreign policy practice.

In lieu of a traditional Conclusion, we asked four scholars to use the current moment to ask: what does FFP really mean, and to whom? In this final chapter, Laura Beltrán, Olena Yermakova, Reem Abbas, and Ashjan Ajour draw on their knowledges and experiences of Colombia, Sudan, Ukraine, and Palestine respectively. Sharing similar anxieties about the current moment, they consider *whether FFP represents a step change or business as usual?* This ending reflects the voices of those who are living in or have lived through war and who yearn for feminist alternative worlds. A key thread in these contributions is whether and how FFP influences responses to war, militarism, and genocide.

The book closes with an Afterword by the feminist scholar Laura Sjoberg. Taking account of the lessons gleaned from all the contributions in this collection, Sjoberg reflects on both the potential and the pitfalls of FFP. She acknowledges the promise of feminist approaches to reorient international politics toward questions of justice, care, and equality, while also warning that tying feminist discourse too closely to state foreign policy risks diluting its critical edge. In her view, the challenge is to preserve feminism's transformative potential without allowing it to be co-opted by the very institutions it seeks to reform.

In this spirit, we, too, recognize both the opportunities and the tensions that accompany efforts to bring feminist ideas into the realm of foreign policy, and we end this Introduction with a shared hope that the conversations begun in these pages can contribute to sustaining feminism's critical and transformative promise.

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PART I

Reimagining a Different World

A Feminist Foreign Policy for Our Times

Carol Cohn and Claire Duncanson

Introduction

It is now commonplace to recognize that we are living in a historical moment characterized by unprecedented intersecting crises ([Tooze, 2022](#); [Turnbull, 2022](#)). Catastrophic climate disruption, environmental degradation, and biodiversity collapse; deepening inequalities both within and between individual countries; a global pandemic that is bound to be one of many proliferating public health crises; the growth of anti-democratic and authoritarian regimes and attacks on human rights, especially on those of women, minorities, Indigenous people and environmental defenders; an increasing lack of faith not just in specific governments but in governance itself and the idea of the public good; the continuing scourge of war and failures to build peace that is sustainable; the continuing physical and structural violence of racism and of patriarchy. And all of these, singly and together, are leading and will increasingly lead to humanitarian crises and displacement at a scale the world is completely unprepared to deal with, and that most people seem unable to cognitively or emotionally apprehend.

State leaders may mention the need to respond to some or all these intersecting global crises as part of their foreign policies, but rarely in a way that generates confidence that they grasp the enormity of the task. Ecological collapse is imminent. From devastating fires across Canada to the inability of the ocean surrounding Antarctica to freeze in familiar ways (a scenario that was not even being considered just a few years ago), we see the evidence of climate change and biodiversity collapse. Three billion people cannot afford a healthy diet because of the way we distribute food, and an increasing number of people – a quarter of humanity – are living in warzones, with

all the shattering of lives that implies, from forced displacement, to sexual violence, to the inability to protect loved ones from harm (UN DESA, 2023; UN Secretary-General, 2023).¹ In 2022 global military expenditure surged for the eighth consecutive year to an unprecedented \$2.24 trillion, and that was before the intensification of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and Israel's bombardment of Gaza (Tian et al, 2023). And, of course, the ramping up of violence by state and non-state armed groups, and the concomitant militarization – including both the production of weapons and the destruction they cause – further contributes to ecological collapse.

These crises call out for a radical rethinking of the goals and practices of foreign policy. Foreign policy has conventionally been a tool for states to pursue their own national security and economic prosperity, via regulated competition and alliances with other equally self-interested states. Any serious reckoning with our current historical moment, however, makes clear that states cannot continue doing things as they have always done them. The approach of pursuing a narrowly conceived 'national interest' has now become disastrously inadequate to and inappropriate for our tenuous historical present and our even more tenuous future.

Feminist foreign policies (FFPs) are often presented as if they could offer that radical alternative. They have been presented by feminist advocates as: 'offering an alternate and intersectional rethinking of security from the viewpoint of the most marginalised' (CFFP, 2021: np); an approach that 'scrutinises the destructive forces of patriarchy, capitalism, racism, and militarism across all issue areas' (CFFP, 2021: np); and a route 'to disrupt colonial, racist, patriarchal and male-dominated power structures' (Thompson et al, 2021: 26). The emphasis in feminist activism and scholarship is on FFPs as disruptive, as an approach that 'names entrenched power structures and takes a transformative, intersectional approach to overcoming them' (CFFP, 2021) and that 'fundamentally challenges rather than maintains the status quo' (Achilleos-Sarll, 2018: 36; see also Goetz, 2021).

But what about the reality? Sixteen countries have now adopted an FFP. To what extent have they disrupted the business as usual of foreign policy? This chapter assesses the promise and the practice of FFPs when it comes to tackling the intersecting crises of the 21st century. It starts with assessing the potential of FFPs, highlighting feminism's unique power to challenge both dominant narratives and dominant structures of power. It then turns to the text of a range of FFPs to see how they conceptualize today's crises and how states should respond. We focus on just two of the crises, war and ecological collapse, in part for reasons of limited space, but in part because all the crises we list in our opening paragraph are interrelated. That is, we face 'not just a set of discrete punctual problems, but a deep-structural dysfunction lodged at the very heart of our form of life' (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 2). As such, how FFPs characterize war and ecological collapse and

how they plan to respond to them, tells us something about the potential of FFPs to address the intersecting crises of our time. We find that the FFPs adopted by governments tend to acknowledge that we are in crisis, and that the crises are gendered in their impacts. But when it comes to responding, FFPs tend to say little about the need to address the root causes of these crises; despite feminist advocates' vision of FFPs disrupting the 'destructive forces of patriarchy, capitalism, racism, and militarism' (CFFP, 2021: np), governmental FFPs steer well clear of any attempt to tackle these forces. Instead, the solutions they emphasize are predominantly the inclusion, participation, and representation of women. While this is an important policy goal in and of itself, we argue that the focus on inclusion, unfortunately, ends up functioning as a distraction from the kind of feminist approach required to address the crises the world now faces.

Militarism, war, ecological collapse, and the potential of feminist foreign policies

We share the hope of those feminist advocates who believe that FFPs have great potential. As we have argued elsewhere (Cohn and Duncanson, 2025), the distinctive epistemological and methodological commitments of feminist analysis could radically transform what it means to do foreign policy in ways that would enable us to respond adequately to the intersecting crises we face. At the heart of what we need to tackle intersecting crises such as militarism, war, and ecological crises are two things which we know are deeply interrelated. We need to change (indeed, radically transform) both dominant power structures and dominant ways of thinking. Feminist approaches, feminist theory, and activism have focused powerfully on those very challenges, and they have a lot of resources to bring to bear in trying to make this happen.

The power of a feminist analysis is that it prompts us to take what is given, what is taken for granted, and make it strange in ways that are generative of radically new approaches of operating in the world. Feminists ask why, for example, we assume that the manufacture and use of weapons and the building of impenetrable borders would make us safe and secure. They ask why we assume that extracting, using, and using up nature, while discarding and polluting in the process, is the route to prosperous and fulfilled lives. A feminist analysis can reveal the gendered ideas that underpin these destructive assumptions. The association of toughness, strength, independence, and winning-over opponents with masculinity, feminists argue, contributes to the legitimization of self-interested and adversarial foreign policies, delegitimizing approaches that are more collaborative and cooperative. In other words, state leaders' 'assumptions and beliefs about which security policies will be effective arise from a series of gendered

ideas about how to most effectively exercise power, what it means to be “strong” and what “works” to keep us secure’ (Cohn, 2019: 9). Meanwhile, the approaches we need, approaches that start with the recognition of our fundamental interdependence – with each other and with nature – and which emphasize collaboration, have been delegitimized as weak, naive, or ‘unrealistic’ (Cohn, 2019: 10).

Similarly, feminism can lead us to problematize the assumption that the appropriate relationship between ‘man’ and nature is one of domination, extraction, and depletion, where the planet’s resources are there for man to use and use up as he sees fit. A feminist analysis highlights that this assumption is not a universal truth but a particular understanding, based in modern, Western, Christian, white man’s theology and philosophy (for example, Merchant, 1980; Plumwood, 1993; Salleh, 1997). A feminist analysis also reveals that the alternative approaches we need are again delegitimated by their gendered associations. Approaches that acknowledge that nature is not something for humans to dominate, control, or even protect, but rather something that we are a part of, in a complex interdependent relationship (WECAN, 2016; Salleh, 2020) that are feminized, dismissed as naive and unrealistic, or backward and primitive.

With its powerful epistemological and methodological commitments to problematize what is taken for granted, a feminist analysis can and must lead to a demand for addressing the *drivers* of inequalities, injustices, and insecurities, that is, for tackling their *root causes*. It can draw attention to the mutually reinforcing dynamics of militarism, war, and ecological crises. The extraction and exploitation of the planet’s natural resources and its people over centuries in the service of profit-making for the few is a dynamic that has always been violent, as states and corporations have fought for lands and resources, wielding armed forces in order to protect their access and secure their position in a global competition (Rodney, 1972; Galeano, 1973). And that violence continues in the present, in the activities of extractive industries, agro-industrial corporations, and powerful states whose practices control the ecological fate of a vast proportion of the world’s land, as well as the quality of its air and water and the amount of greenhouse gases that are emitted into the atmosphere (Grove, 2019; IRP, 2019; Sultana, 2022). A feminist analysis can thus highlight the necessity of structural change – the daunting challenge of transforming how we organize economic and social life, with all the taking on of vested interests that entails.

Feminist analysts have argued that to prevent catastrophe, states need to divest from harm and invest in care and nature (for example, Muchhala, 2021). To divest from harm means to cease investing in, inter alia, arms manufacturing and trading, the development of weapons of mass destruction, the pursuit of violent ways of resolving conflict, the ongoing industrial-scale extraction of the Earth’s limited resources, and the subsidizing of polluting

forms of production and consumption. To invest in care and nature means investing in sustainable forms of food production such as agroecology. It means investing in the social infrastructure that sustains lives and livelihoods – from social housing, health care, and education, to childcare, elderly care, and social welfare systems. It means investing in nature restoration and regeneration. In sum, it means a transformation of how we organize life on Earth, away from the linear, extractivist, development model and towards a circular, regenerative, and ecologically sustainable model, as set out in the visions and roadmaps of the many pioneers of post-growth and wellbeing economies (Raworth, 2017; Kothari et al, 2020; Yahaya, 2021).

What does this kind of feminist analysis have to do with FFP? How should this analysis of the roots of intersecting global crises shape how we understand what the goals of FFP might be? We would argue that it necessitates a thorough rethinking of the goals and practices of foreign policy altogether. Instead of the usual goal of foreign policy, which is to advance a narrowly conceived national interest (that is, economic growth, strong borders, and military might), foreign policy's aim has to be to tackle the intersecting crises of poverty, inequality, violence, and ecological collapse at their root, by reorienting economic and social life to focus on delivering human and planetary wellbeing. And this requires that the core practices of foreign policy must shift from competitive to collaborative. To be clear, this collaboration must go well beyond making commitments at conferences to share the burden of transitioning away from fossil fuels. We mean something more profound, something we do not yet see much of on the global stage: the recognition of our fundamental interdependence, and thus a collective reorganizing of social relations around the ideas of caring for each other and for nature. It means a sustained collaborative effort to rebuild our entire global economic and state system in a way that works in the service of people and planet.

Feminist foreign policies and their responses to intersecting crises

The number of countries adopting FFPs had risen to sixteen by the end of 2023, giving many feminist advocates cause for celebration. The Feminist Foreign Policy Collaborative proclaimed, 'Feminist foreign policy is on the rise, the banner of a rapidly diversifying and expanding cohort of countries who are seeking – we hope – to adopt the highest level of ambition in advancing gender justice and the global goals of equality, peace and planetary integrity around the world' (Thompson et al, 2023: 1). What do we see when we look closely at the text of these policies? How do they propose to respond to the intersecting challenges of militarism, war, and ecological crises?

Extant FFPs tend to note the challenges of the current historical moment, the intersecting crises that threaten safe and secure lives on this planet. But

despite all the rhetoric about ambitious new approaches, the aims and actions contained within FFPs seem far from commensurate with the enormity of the challenge. Although FFPs do tend to note the devastating and disproportionate impacts that militarism, war, and climate change have on women, they say very little about their root causes. They say nothing about the need for structural change in our economic and social systems, nor the need to replace competition with collective action to achieve that change.

Instead, FFPs tend to propose two types of policies. First, policies that focus on addressing and ameliorating negative gendered impacts, especially sexual- and gender-based violence, or on channelling international development funding to programmes that include a focus on gender equality. The second focus is on policies that aim to support and empower women to participate, whether in the market, peace processes, community-level peacebuilding work, decision-making about environmental issues, or management of natural resources.

There are already well-made, and well-worn, critiques of these kinds of policies. In particular, feminists have pointed out that policies limited to women's inclusion and empowerment run the risk of reinforcing gendered stereotypes and inequalities. We agree that discourses of women as natural peacemakers (Charlesworth, 2008; Otto, 2009), as engines of development (Chant and Sweetman, 2012), or as naturally more environmentally responsible (Arora-Jonsson, 2011; Resurrección, 2013; Leach, 2016; Buckingham and Masson, 2017; Kronsell, 2019) can serve to reinforce gendered stereotypes that undermine women's ability to thrive in public life. We also agree that the expectation that women can deliver peace, development, or environmental sustainability, in contexts where they lack power and resources, risks burdening already overworked women.

However, there is a third important critique to be made. In examining FFPs, we find that the focus on women's inclusion and empowerment functions as a distraction from the kind of feminist approach required to address the crises the world now faces: that is, feminist analysis' potential to radically challenge business as usual, to rethink how we organize international relations and how we conceive the goals of our economy.

We explicate this point through examination of a sample of FFPs. We focus primarily on countries in the Global North because of the outsize role Global North states have played in creating our intersecting crises. Having launched the extractivist and exploitative global economy and created the militaristic state system which underwrites it, the onus is on them to repair and make reparation for the global injustices and insecurities that have resulted. Thus, their FFPs bear particular responsibilities. Our Global North sample includes Sweden, despite its 2022 abandonment of FFP, because it developed considerable policy and practice over the eight years it pioneered the concept. It also includes France and Canada, two other early adopters,

and Germany and Scotland, two relatively recent adopters. Though it is not our main focus, we were also curious about whether FFPs from Global South countries, which are in such a different structural position vis-à-vis global crises, would align with the dominant pattern. Or might they offer an alternative approach? Here, we look at the FFPs of Chile and Mexico.

Sweden's FFP recognized war and climate change as crises, and pointed to their particularly gendered impacts, but, like most FFPs, it said nothing about tackling the root causes of these crises. It stated, 'War and crises result in societies being shattered, families being split up and development coming to a halt. Women and girls, men and boys are affected in different ways' (Government Offices of Sweden, 2018: 63). Regarding climate change, specifically, it said:

Climate effects in the form of drought, flooding and extreme weather lead to poorer health and growing food and water supply problems. These challenges hit the world's 1.3bn poor people the hardest, and because women have limited access to political, economic and material resources, this has a negative effect on their vulnerability to – and ability to adapt to – climate impact. (2018: 84)

When it comes to solutions, however, there was little mention of the drivers of war and the climate crisis. Rather the emphasis was on women's inclusion and representation: the 'work for sustainable peace and security must be representative and inclusive' (2018: 63). In relation to climate change, the FFP Handbook elaborated:

Women are often responsible for the majority of agricultural work and for their families' food security. Women also often play a key role in the use and administration of forest resources and water. Women are thereby important agents for change who can contribute to important perspectives and solutions for dealing with climate change. (2018: 84)

The same framing can be found in the *Canadian Feminist International Assistance Policy*, which begins by noting that women and girls 'are often the most vulnerable to poverty, violence and climate change' (Government of Canada, 2017: ii), and goes on to devoting several pages to the ways in which women and girls are particularly at risk from climate change (2017: 43–5). As the solution to these challenges, the emphasis is on participation, representation, and empowerment. The Government of Canada commits to, for example, 'support the meaningful participation of women and women's rights organisations in peace negotiations and conflict prevention efforts' (2017: 59), and to 'support local woman-led agricultural businesses, including

local women's cooperatives and associations, which are best placed to support food security and economic sustainability at the local level' (2017: 39).

France's *International Strategy on Gender Equality* also notes war's gendered impacts on women:

In certain countries, and especially in situations of internal conflict, sexual violence is organised, planned and even systematic. It is used as a weapon of war to terrorise civilian populations, tear apart families and break down society. Modern-day conflicts are also breeding violent extremism: radical groups, under the guise of religion, are promoting a degrading image of women and encouraging violence against them, including rape, sexual slavery, forced marriage and pregnancy, trafficking and imprisonment. (French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2018: 9)

The proposed actions are focused on increasing participation of women in peace and security, with little on challenging the root causes of militarism and war. On climate, too, France's strategy focuses on impacts: 'Climate variations affect women in a specific way, especially in the Global South, because they contribute significantly to the food security, agriculture, forestry, healthcare and energy sectors' (2018: 18). The solution? 'Greater gender equality and women's empowerment are key elements in curbing climate change' (2018: 18).

Germany's FFP continues the pattern. In its discussion of armed conflict, it first focuses on impacts, highlighting the nature and prevalence of gendered harms of war such as sexual violence and the proliferation of small arms. Then the summary of its aims and ambitions is focused on women's inclusion:

We integrate the perspectives of women and marginalised groups into our worldwide work for peace and security. We enact and further develop the Women, Peace and Security agenda. We advocate for greater participation by women and marginalised groups in inclusive peace processes. We combat sexual and gender-based violence in armed conflicts. We strengthen humanitarian arms control and advocate for a safe world without nuclear weapons. (Government of Germany, 2023: 16)

The German FFP's approach to the climate crisis was similar:

We recognise inequalities and vulnerabilities exacerbated by the climate crisis and counteract them through our climate diplomacy and external energy policy. Women and diverse societal groups are important stakeholders and leading players in our climate and energy diplomacy.

We help to counterbalance the specific impact of the climate crisis on women and marginalised groups. (2023: 17)

In other words, their main feminist strategy for tackling intersecting crises is inclusion, with little said about tackling the root drivers of war or ecological collapse.

Scotland's *Feminist Approach to International Relations* begins by noting that the 'global climate and biodiversity emergencies are twin reinforcing crises which disproportionately impact those who have done least to cause them' (Scottish Government, 2023: 4). Later sections elaborate on the gendered harms of conflict ('conflict drives inequality and poverty, including specific, gendered impacts on women and girls' (2023: 15)) and the gendered harms of eco-crises ('women are at the frontline and remain disproportionately affected by climate change and nature loss' (2023: 13)). Aside from one action under climate justice, which aims to secure 'transformation to a just and inclusive global economy by taking steps towards a long-term goal for structural change that reduces inequalities' (2023: 14), the actions it proposes focus heavily on 'reducing gendered impacts' (2023: 13) and enhancing the participation of women (2023: 14).

If we turn to look at the FFPs of Global South states, such as Mexico and Chile, it is hard to find evidence that these FFPs are any more focused on addressing the root causes of intersecting crises. Mexico, the first country in the Global South to adopt a FFP, in 2020, prioritizes women's rights and gender equality within its own foreign ministry (Government of Mexico, 2020). Although recent government statements mention addressing 'root causes', there does not seem to be any more attention to transforming the global economic system or the militarized state system than we see in any Global North FFP (Government of Mexico, 2024: np). Rather, the intention in such statements is to tackle the root causes of inequality, which are positioned as 'discrimination, violence and poverty at the regional level' (2024: np).

Chile's FFP perhaps offers more of an alternative vision. It starts with a chapter devoted to the 'international context', which clearly outlines the need for reform of the current economic paradigm and situates the FFP as aiming to achieve this. Uniquely among FFPs, and perhaps reflecting its genesis during the COVID-19 pandemic, it has a section on promoting care economies, calling for collaborative action to promote 'recovery plans with affirmative actions to achieve substantive equality, promoting comprehensive care systems, decent work, and the full and equal participation of women, ensuring their economic, political and social autonomy in order to achieve a transformative, sustainable and gender-equal recovery' (Government of Chile, 2023: 36). Yet, much of the Chilean FFP, especially when it moves from the introductory international context section and focuses on practical action points, is restricted to women's inclusion and empowerment.

Crises, catastrophes, and feminist foreign policies

Sylvia Walby (2015, 2022) delineates four possible outcomes of a crisis: a crisis can be contained; it can intensify an existing set of relations; it can lead to a transformation of society from one form to another; or it can lead to catastrophe. It seems clear to us, as to many who are attentive to the lives of the most marginalized and to the health of ecosystems, that the most likely outcome of the crises we face at this historical moment is the fourth: catastrophe. But it needn't be. Crises can be a turning point for 'transformation of the societal system from one form to another' (Walby, 2022: 502). They can lead to 'a revolution, a critical turning point or tipping point into a new form of society' (2022: 503). The critical question about FFPs, we think, is whether they can play a role in that transformation.

Current FFPs acknowledge that we face intersecting crises, crises with gendered impacts, but there is very little evidence of them utilizing a feminist analysis to radically transform the societal systems that have caused those crises. Instead, there is much faith placed in including and empowering women as a strategy for change. As a strategy for gender equality, this is, of course, essential. The inclusion, representation, and empowerment of women – in foreign ministries, at the grassroots, in decision-making spaces – is necessary as a matter of justice. It is also an arena in which progress has been painfully slow. Indeed, 'at the current rate of progress it will take up to 286 years to close the gaps in legal protection and remove discriminatory laws; 140 years for women to be represented equally in positions of power and leadership in the workplace, and 47 years to achieve equal representation in national parliaments' (UN DESA, 2023).

However, gender equality, in and of itself, is arguably not a strategy for addressing the intersecting crises of our time, in time. The imperatives to extract, use and use up natural resources to maximize profits, and to project military might and create impenetrable borders to safeguard 'national interests', are what are driving the crises of insecurity, inequality, and planetary collapse. If FFPs do not tackle the structures that underlie militarism, war, and ecological collapse, women's inclusion is going to make little difference.

We write while war rages in Gaza, Ukraine, Yemen, Sudan, and Myanmar, and while heatwaves and wildfires strike across US and Europe (*The Guardian*, 2024). Far from being unconnected, the spending on militarism and war – which grew by 25.9 per cent from 2012 to 2022 to over \$2.2 trillion – not only drains resources from climate action, but produces huge emissions and other pollution, and escalates the geopolitical tensions that undermine multilateral climate action (TNI, 2023). And the conjoined evils of military spending and climate degradation grew even worse in 2023. An escalation of violence in Gaza, Ukraine, and Sudan put that year's figure for global military spending at \$2.44 trillion (Tian et al, 2024). Meanwhile, the world's

energy-related CO₂ emissions increased to a record high. Noting that current commitments to fight climate change would barely cut global emissions at all by 2030, Simon Stiell, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, said the next two years are ‘essential in saving our planet ... we still have a chance to make greenhouse gas emissions tumble, with a new generation of national climate plans. But we need these stronger plans, now’ (Abnett and Jessop, 2024). Given the absolute urgency, how can we forgo the potential for transformational action that FFPs could, but do not now, offer?

We perhaps too often use the metaphor of shuffling deckchairs on the Titanic (Cohn and Duncanson, 2025). But nothing seems more apt for capturing the madness of our times: striving to make small, marginal adjustments to our usual activities and institutions, while doing nothing to correct our relentless course toward catastrophe. FFPs, as articulated by governments, do little more than add a concern with gender equality to pre-set foreign policy goals, goals which were already defined in mainstream, masculinist policy institutions – that is, the very institutions which set our course toward planetary catastrophe. The course itself must be changed. Unless we use feminist analysis to rethink the meaning and purpose of foreign policy itself, we are wasting our time.

Of Walby’s (2022) possible outcomes for crises, it is ever clearer that we are heading for the fourth outcome: catastrophe. Yet, in the spirit of Gramsci, we write in the optimism that it might be possible to correct the course, to steer in the direction of the third: transformation. The original meaning of crisis, after all, is ‘a turning point’; whether for ‘better’ or ‘worse’ is left open, undetermined. FFPs are one of the tools that has the potential to effect this change of outcome. They have provided space for feminists in civil society and academia to articulate the root causes of the intersecting crises, and to advocate for the policies that would enable people, and nature, to survive and thrive. What is required now is for some of that radical feminist scholar-activist energy to make it into the actual FFPs and then, more importantly, into the actions of states.

Note

- ¹ Not a single conflict-affected country is on track to achieve the SDGs on health, hunger or gender equality.

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First Nations and Feminist Approaches to Foreign Policy in Australia

A conversation with Julie Ballangarry and Alice Ridge, moderated by Jennifer Thomson

In 2022, the newly elected centre-left Australian government announced that it would pursue a First Nations approach to its foreign policy. At the same time, over the last decade there have been extensive conversations in the country about the potential of adopting a feminist foreign policy (FFP). This conversation, between Julie Ballangarry, an Indigenous (Gumbaynggirr/Dunghutti) lecturer and researcher in public policy, political science, and Indigenous politics at Griffith University, and Alice Ridge, Senior Research, Policy and Advocacy Advisor at the International Women's Development Agency, which convenes the Australian Feminist Foreign Policy Coalition, moderated by Jennifer Thomson (Senior Lecturer, University of Bath), explores what is meant by an Indigenous approach to Australia's international affairs, and how it is interconnected with FFP.

Indigenous foreign policy

Jennifer: Julie, could you explain what is meant by an Indigenous foreign policy?

Julie: It's really important to highlight that an Indigenous foreign policy (or a First Nations foreign policy, which is interchangeably used) is still in its infancy, both in practice and scholarship.

We first formally saw an Indigenous foreign policy implemented in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2021. It sought to embrace Māori vision (*kaupapa Māori*) customary

practices and behaviours (*tikanga Māori*) in New Zealand's foreign policy. New Zealand's Indigenous foreign policy was driven by Nanaia Mahuta – New Zealand's first female Māori foreign minister. In her inaugural speech, Mahuta articulated her desire to bring Māori perspectives and knowledge to the forefront of New Zealand's foreign policy, highlighting the principles and mutual respect embodied in the *te Tiriti o Waitangi* (the Treaty of Waitangi) provided a foundation for how New Zealand conducts its foreign policy in today's society. Underpinning the approach were four Māori values: *Manaakitanga* (kindness or the reciprocity of goodwill), *Whanaungatanga* (connectedness or shared sense of humanity), *Mahi tahi* and *Kotahitanga* (collective benefits and shared aspirations), and *Kaitiaki* (protectors and stewards of our intergenerational wellbeing).¹ This case provides a foundation to understand how a formal Indigenous foreign policy embraces Indigenous culture and knowledge, to place value on shared humanity, custodianship, and intergenerational wellbeing and sustainability.

A First Nations foreign policy reached Australia in 2022. Minister Wong [Minister for Foreign Affairs] suggested that Australia's foreign policy should express the full measure of who we are as a nation by weaving the voices and practices of Indigenous Australians into our foreign policy and the Department of Foreign Policy and Trade (DFAT).² Essentially, from the government's perspective it is about embedding First Nations perspectives and interests into Australia's foreign policy.³

To me as an Indigenous woman and Indigenous scholar, First Nations foreign policy should at its core focus on First Nations justice, including three key elements: kin, Country, and what I describe as 'critical pedagogy'.

Firstly, 'kin' simply can be described as upholding First Nations peoples' collective rights. Our culture is heavily based on relationships and caring for one another. Both elements are found within UNDRIP – the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.⁴

The next part is Country.⁵ Country doesn't mean a nation state in Aboriginal English; it means the place that you belong. We do not exploit the land for profit, we look after Country. We can somewhat translate that to the notion of climate justice in a Western sense.

Essentially ‘kin’ and ‘Country’ provided the momentum to start upholding First Nations justice domestically as well as internationally to move towards a more just, sustainable, and peaceful society. Indigenous peoples of Australia, pre-invasion, had a very sustainable, peaceful, and sophisticated systems, which were dismantled upon colonization. We had our own form of foreign policy, where we had our own Country and borders, and our clansmen would use diplomacy to maintain peaceful societies and balance. We would have peaceful relations with our neighbouring clan groups, and when other clan groups would come on to our Country there were protocols that had to be upheld, just like in today’s society; for example, when you go to a country, you have a passport, the country has certain rules, so on and so forth. We had diplomatic processes and governing systems prior to colonization and a lot of that is still embedded in what we do today. For example, the ways in which we engage with the settler state is a form of diplomacy that we have inherited from our culture. So, when we think about First Nations foreign policy it’s not just about Australia adopting something to put out to the world, it’s also about understanding that First Nations peoples interact with the state as their own sovereign people as well.

In addition, a First Nations foreign policy is a form of critical pedagogy. It should question power – in particular, colonial powers and Whiteness to help dismantle and disrupt systems, but it should also awaken non-Indigenous peoples’ critical consciousness to understand structural and systemic barriers to First Nations justice. Historically, our voices have been excluded, both at the domestic and international level. And it’s only recently that we’ve started to see momentum, particularly in the international space with the UN and UNDRIP. In 2007, it [UNDRIP] was taken to the United Nations General Assembly and passed. This was after nearly 30 years of Indigenous peoples fighting for our rights, through activism and negotiations, to be recognized at the international level. There were four countries that initially voted against it – Australia, New Zealand, America, and Canada. Australia later signed on in 2009 with the rest in 2010. So, Australia has been working towards including Indigenous people more, but it has been to insert us into a system rather than really understanding and dismantling those structures of power.

A First Nations foreign policy has a very unique perspective theoretically. To uphold First Nations rights is about understanding why we have been excluded and then how to remedy that – largely through questioning ongoing structural colonial powers that are still existent in our nation and many others. It prefaces and uses First Nations peoples as knowledge holders to understand and deconstruct these power relations that still exist and persist in the ongoing colonialism of Indigenous peoples. It does this by using a critical lens to understand power relations to address the social, environmental, and economic problems that persist from colonization to move towards a harmonious society. In practice, a First Nations foreign policy embeds knowledges, perspectives, and approaches or ontological understandings, and centres First Nations justice through genuine representation and having a voice in decision-making processes. A lot of nations, settler and colonial nations, have a reconciliation movement but it doesn't necessarily live up to its promise and so this can help in that. It can also help in nation-building. This is an important aspect to build into this because, from my perspective, Australia doesn't necessarily have a strong national identity. People perceive Australia as a White nation and see it as a nation of these ... like Hemsworths, right? They have this perception – particularly people in the UK – they watch *Home and Away* and think that's Australia. When they think of Indigenous peoples, we're just an object, an artefact that is wheeled out as tourism, as a soft power, rather than a core part of our identity. I don't think Australia really has a strong national identity, particularly modern Australia, and a First Nations foreign policy can really foster nation-building.

The journey to Indigenous foreign policy in Australia

- Jennifer: Could you tell me a little bit about the history of how this declaration of First Nations foreign policy came to be? And what was the political context that allowed that to happen?
- Julie: A lot of Indigenous people have used the international space to push agendas, which is very evident through the UN. We bypass the domestic and go to the international arena. Even though international law isn't legally binding, it helps to shape norms and help advance how nation states interact with and uphold their Indigenous people rights.

The Declaration [UNDRIP] is a great starting point, but Australia hasn't necessarily implemented it as best they can – if at all. The Australian government claims that the broad Indigenous policy 'Closing the Gap'⁶ is its key policy platform to give effect to the Declaration.⁷ However, like many other Indigenous policies, decisions are often made without significant engagement of Indigenous communities in agenda-setting or service delivery.⁸ This is in itself at odds with the foundational rights set out within the Declaration, the right to self-determination.

In terms of Australia adopting a First Nations foreign policy, there was taste for it in 2017 when the Uluru Statement from the Heart⁹ was delivered. This Statement wasn't delivered to government, it was an invitation from Indigenous peoples to the Australian public, which is really key for people to understand. One of the unfortunate things was when we had the referendum, it became a political football.

The previous Morrison and Turnbull government didn't really take up the Uluru Statement of the Heart, whereas the Albanese government said that they would enact it in full if they were elected. A part of that election promise was also a First Nations foreign policy. James¹⁰ and I wrote a paper for the AFFPC [Australian Feminist Foreign Policy Coalition],¹¹ and we took it to a roundtable with Senator Penny Wong, who was the Shadow Foreign Minister at that point. In May 2022, Senator Wong announced that, if Labor was elected, they would deliver a First Nations foreign policy. Labor fulfilled this promise once elected. Minister Wong described a First Nations foreign policy as being about weaving 'the voices and practices of the world's oldest continuing culture into the way that Australia talks to the world'.¹² It was about Australia trying to rebrand itself.

In March of 2023, Justin Mohamed was announced as Australia's inaugural Ambassador for First Nations people by the Foreign Minister. The role of the Ambassador was the first for Australia (and the world), which meant that we had Indigenous representation at the international level. The Ambassador leads the Office for First Nations Engagement and works on engaging with Indigenous peoples, domestically and internationally, to progress Indigenous rights globally, as well as help grow First Nations trade and

investment between nations. From what I understand, his first year was about engaging with First Nations people in Australia to get that understanding about what it is that Indigenous people want domestically. He's also gone into the Pacific to look at ways that we can engage together, so it's about working with our neighbours as Indigenous people did previously.

According to DFAT, the Ambassador's role includes embedding First Nations perspectives into Australia's foreign policy, enhancing Australia's engagement in the Indo-Pacific region, progressing First Nations' rights and interests globally, support First Nations trade and investment and bolster Australia's First Nations diplomatic capability and advocacy.¹³ He's also been engaged in a number of different international forums, including the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and COP28. In December 2023 DFAT announced an Office for First Nations International Engagement. What we can gather and what is publicly available is that the office is currently working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to help develop and implement a First Nations approach which includes trade, investment, and development. One thing that is very clear is that it appears to have a large focus on trade and investment aiming to embed First Nations perspectives and interests.

There needs to be a lot more focus as well on that critical pedagogy within DFAT. A lot of it seems to be about actionable policy that can happen right now, which is not a bad thing, but also you can't just slot us into a system that's not designed [for us]. We've seen a lot of building infrastructure to fit into what we have at the moment, but there also needs to be an analysis of where power sits.

Australia's 2023 referendum

Jennifer: Could you tell me a little bit about the referendum¹⁴ and if you think it might have any have any impact on a First Nations foreign policy?

Julie: I just want to start by saying that I was really upset, along with a lot of other First Nations people, as well as the non-Indigenous people that stood in solidarity with us, around the 'No' result. I actually sat there, and I watched the ABC [the Australian Broadcasting Corporation] play

it and it was just absolutely dumbfounding how quickly it was called. I cried; I cried a lot.

Not all Indigenous people wanted a 'Yes' vote. Some wanted 'No'. There were different reasons for that – there were fears that it would cede our sovereignty, that things that we were working towards would be taken away, that we would be integrated within a colonial system. There were differing perspectives, but a fair majority of Indigenous Australians were absolutely devastated, as I was. It showed really that our education system and the way that we talk about Indigenous issues is inadequate and that we still see Indigenous people as a problem, or [as needing] to be assimilated within the mainstream society. That was a lot of people's understanding [of the referendum] – the concept of 'why do they [Indigenous Australians] deserve special rights?' There was so much negative talk, misinformation, and smear campaigns. It was really devastating. Some of the leaders, the Elders¹⁵ that mobilized the referendum, called for a week of mourning. A lot of Indigenous people, and organizations, blacked out our social media. We didn't talk, or comment on it, we took time out to mourn and heal. Because even though it was a question of having Indigenous people included within the Constitution, to have a voice to Parliament, a lot of Indigenous people felt like the referendum was a question of whether we belonged within the nation or not. And even though that wasn't directly the question, it was by having us in the Constitution, our nation, our modern nation's founding document – it meant a lot, and it meant that we could start to move forward and have structural change. Indigenous politics in Australia is always a topic of contention, and it has been my whole life. And consequently our lives are highly politicized, especially when we try to assert our rights.

I thought we had progressed as a nation. Through my lived experience, I've watched our nation grow and progress only to watch [the referendum] knock it back. The hardest part for myself was seeing the Elders and our old people – decades of fighting for constitutional recognition dissipated in front of their eyes. Prior to the vote, there were Elders saying, 'they [non-Indigenous people] voted for us in '67',¹⁶ they will stand with us again'. Even more devastating was seeing the large 'Yes' outcomes in remote communities, because 'the Voice' was to benefit mostly people in remote

Indigenous communities, people that need it the most. And so, what that said was that Australia didn't, they don't know the issues, they don't know that this is where it was needed. It wasn't necessarily for someone like me to have a voice or have a platform, it's for people that don't and people that need it the most, our most marginalized peoples within our community.

British settlers declared Australia *terra nullius* – 'a land that belonged to no one' – so there's absolutely nothing in place for Indigenous people today. No treaties, nothing. We don't even have the bare minimum in comparison to other nations like Canada, New Zealand, or America. I'm not saying that they have it better, but they have some kind of agreement [treaties] between the settler state and themselves; we don't even have that to leverage.

We had this huge movement [around Indigenous rights] and people were really enthused and even state governments and local governments were working towards truth-telling processes or treaty processes. And since the referendum it has seen other progressive efforts pulled back. For example, Queensland originally had bipartisan support for a 'Path to Treaty',¹⁷ however since the referendum we've seen the opposition not support the treaty process and would repeal the legislation if they win the next election. It's not politically favourable at the moment; politicians are pulling their support because state elections are coming. We have also seen local governments move backwards. There is a protocol which is a Protocol of Respect, which I talked about earlier – this was when you went on to someone's Country, you were welcomed, and you were acknowledged and you were told what you could and couldn't do. An Acknowledgement of Country in Australia is a protocol to show respect to First Nations peoples. A lot of local councils have now said, 'we're not doing it'. The fallout from the referendum is allowing people to renege on basic Indigenous rights and recognition.

But in terms of First Nations foreign policy, specifically, to my knowledge, nothing has publicly been addressed following the referendum. I do believe Australia as a nation has to work hard to gain its legitimacy back after a resounding 'No' vote with our international peers. And from a personal perspective, I don't know how you can promote a First Nations foreign policy that aims to progress

First Nation's rights and interests when the Australian public gave a resounding 'No'. Trust needs to be really reworked between the government and First Nations peoples. Almost seven out of ten people voted 'No'.

It's important that the First Nations foreign policy does continue. There are specific mentions in the Ambassador for First Nations People role description, which I alluded to before, those five points, where the sub-points specifically talk about Voice, Treaty, Truth. I suspect there'll be some reshaping of that. But, if anything, it's a sign that Australia must work harder and not pull back, our First Nations foreign policy really has to go full steam ahead in the wake of the referendum.

Australia and feminist foreign policy

Jennifer: Alice, in many ways, Australia fits the bill of a country that would adopt a feminist foreign policy, but it hasn't. Could you just give a sense of why that is and what the conversation is around FFP?

Alice: The conversation on feminist foreign policy has become much more part of the foreign policy debate in the past five or so years. It's really gone from something that was very much on the fringes and not taken at all seriously to something that there's a conversation about, regardless of whether or not people are supportive. It's seen as a much more legitimate part of the conversation, which we've seen globally as well.

There's a couple of barriers for Australia in adopting feminist foreign policy, and some of them are legitimate and some of them are maybe more political. On the one hand, there's the foreign policy gatekeepers, the older White men as a rule, who see the word 'feminist' as quite disruptive, quite political and don't necessarily want to see it brought into foreign policy conversations. On the flip side of that, there's also a perception that Australia is already doing a lot on gender equality and foreign policy, and gender and development. And even a sense that perhaps we're doing more in the gender and development space than some of the countries who *have* committed to feminist foreign policies. Then there's a reluctance from allies or supporters within the bureaucracy to use political capital on the word, because, well, we're already doing some of those things

where we've got some of the principles, we've got some of the approaches. Maybe the word is going to be politically difficult, so we'll just carry on with what we're doing.

The other barrier which is important to think about carefully is that Australia's foreign policy outlook is much more towards the Pacific and Asia and particularly Southeast Asia – with, of course, the spectre of China always looming. A lot of our foreign policy thinking is about countering China's influence in the region. That shapes Australia's approach and appetite for things like this in a significant way. Other countries, particularly the European countries, [are] much more in dialogue with each other; they're seeing their peers talk about feminist foreign policy and saying, 'That sounds like a great approach. Great, we'll use that language too'. And certainly, they're conscious of the different way that feminism is perceived in different regions, but that doesn't seem to be much of a barrier. Whereas for Australia, there is a sense that it would be much more difficult to walk into a meeting with a foreign minister from the region and start talking about feminist foreign policy. That's a concern worth taking seriously but not an insurmountable barrier. We have tough conversations all the time. If diplomats are worth their salt, they can figure out how to make a concept relevant to the culture that they're speaking to, and women's rights' organizations and feminist movements do that all the time.

Adding to what Julie said about the political drivers for adopting the First Nations foreign policy is that, by contrast, people in the Pacific see Australia as a colonial state, and they feel a sense of solidarity with Indigenous Australians. This government came into office with a strong focus on building up, and what they would call as 'repairing' relationships with Pacific countries. Feminist foreign policy at the government level might have been a bit more politically challenging – again not insurmountable – but certainly challenging. The First Nations foreign policy was a way of saying to those Pacific governments, 'we understand how you see us and that's actually how we want to engage with you', rather than this myth that Julie mentioned of Australia of the White colonial nation.

Jennifer:

How do these two approaches sit together? Would it be possible for an Indigenous approach and a feminist approach to foreign policy to work in tandem?

Julie: Alice and I have had this conversation many, many times. Firstly, I'll preface it with ... as an Indigenous woman, I do things that can be inherently feminist, but I do these things because it's how I see the world, how I've been taught to live in the world. A lot of our knowledge systems can correlate with a feminist ideology. There are several key similarities. An Indigenous perspective is particularly concerned with power analysis and is critical to understanding and deconstructing systemic racism and disadvantage. There is a divergence, though, when it comes to sovereignty. Most of Indigenous peoples' current issues stem directly from colonization and the stolen lands that we have had taken, and then from that, the lack of rights that we have as a people. These are key barriers to our fundamental rights as First Nations peoples.

But a feminist approach is complementary. They don't need to be in competition with each other – both approaches can strengthen the other. In terms of a feminist approach, intersectionality is huge. Understanding First Nations women's experiences and our approaches is fundamental to the feminist movement. For example, if you're an NGO [non-governmental organization] working in the development space and you're working in the South Pacific and you have an understanding of First Nations peoples' histories and cultures, and understand their approaches to things, then there are going to be similarities with people that they work with in the Pacific because our cultures are fundamentally based on similar concepts around relationships and reciprocity, and caring for the environment. Understanding First Nations people in a feminist space can help understand feminism and intersectionality on a greater scale and vice versa.

Alice: A key difference between feminist foreign policy and First Nations foreign policy is that First Nations foreign policy should also be engaging with the sovereign First Nations within that country as well as looking internationally. Whereas for feminist foreign policy, there's the participation of women, but it's not the same. It's not a sovereign understanding.

Feminism hasn't always had a good track record on this [intersectionality and integrating First Nations peoples' rights], and that's important to acknowledge. There's been strong critiques of White feminism in the Australian context

from Aileen Moreton-Robinson who wrote *Talkin' Up to the White Woman*,¹⁸ which is an important critique of White Australian feminism and the way that it's failed to include First Nations women or be led by First Nations women. I do think that feminism done well, done the way that I would like to see it done, is compatible with this. And Julie's point around power analysis and engaging with structural power is key – feminism must engage with coloniality as a system of power. The experience of White women in Australia is deeply shaped by our colonial history, just as the experience of First Nations women is shaped by it. Maybe I shouldn't say 'just as', because it's not the same. It's not the same outcome, but we are both shaped by that history and that power structure.

Where they're most compatible is around that transformative potential. That's what we've been trying to explore in the Australian context, is what can we also learn in a practical way from other countries who've tried to implement feminist foreign policies and where they have or haven't gotten to that transformative potential. Not just putting some more women at the table without really changing anything, not just implementing a couple of gender initiatives and calling that feminist foreign policy. Those are the kind of the limitations of that we've seen from FFP that we want to avoid with First Nations foreign policy. There's a lot that we can learn in terms of what has and hasn't worked when it comes to that real kind of transformative potential.

Indigenous and/or feminist foreign policy?

Jennifer: This is a deliberately contentious question, but is it a case that an Indigenous foreign policy has won out over the idea of a feminist foreign policy?

Julie: At the micro level, I don't know if the voter cares. Everyday Australians wouldn't even know that there's a First Nations foreign policy and we just went through a referendum. People have no idea what's going on unless it's in their immediate vision. But obviously politicians want to look politically favourable, they want people to vote for them. It was bold that the government went there saying, 'we'll implement' the Uluru Statement, we'll enact it in full as an election promise because it could have killed them politically in the lead up to the election, and it didn't.

Now that the referendum has failed, politically moving forward, they may be more cautious in how they spotlight Indigenous-based policy and change.

Alice: In the most simplistic form, I would say, yes, the framing has won out. But both approaches can be implemented in a complementary way, even while the overall framing is 'First Nations'. At the highest level, I don't think we're going to see the word 'feminist' in front of foreign policy for Australia. We are still waiting on the DFAT International Gender Equality Strategy, and we're holding out some hope that that will talk about a feminist approach. That would be entirely appropriate within the context of the First Nations foreign policy commitment for the gender strategy to commit to a feminist approach.

Jennifer: One moment in domestic Australian politics that really cut through on an international level was Julia Gillard's misogyny speech,¹⁹ which is over a decade old now. Do you think things have changed since then? Do you think Australian politics have become more open, welcoming to feminist or 'alternative' ways of thinking about *doing* politics since then?

Alice: The conversation about the experience of women politicians has advanced a lot. At the time of that speech, it was almost controversial to say that women were having a different experience, like even naming that was seen as quite bold. Certainly, in the last decade, with the #MeToo movement, we've had some big waves from that in Australian politics, and that conversation about the experience of women politicians has really advanced. In terms of at the policy level, that's a harder question and I don't think we've made as much progress there.

Julie: In terms of politics, particularly, our current Labor government has one of the largest female minister or senator cohorts, which is inclusive of Indigenous women. But we also must be cognizant that they are still working within party lines. They do their best at what they can, but, in terms of policy, I agree with Alice. There's always room to do more and they would really benefit from more structural power analysis and listening to the experiences of those women who have experienced domestic violence to have suitable policy solutions.

Jennifer: The last thing I wanted to ask you was your thoughts on the public perception of feminism within Australian politics

and society. And I'd be particularly interested, Julie, on a sense of how feminism is perceived or understood within Indigenous communities? Going back to what we were saying earlier, is it seen as a White colonial concept?

Alice: Perceptions of feminism have shifted a lot in the past ten years, certainly, ten, fifteen years. It's gone from controversial to name that women have a different experience to much more mainstream conversation of feminism and much more comfort with the term. Having said that, it's concentrated among younger demographics, it's concentrated in urban areas, more educated populations. It's not across the whole population and it's probably not the most powerful people in society who've changed their views, or softened their views, towards feminism. But there is this sort of demographic shift and much more comfort with the concept.

Julie: I want to touch on something Alice said about younger demographic, and I think TikTok has a lot to answer for but also help in the movement. The misogyny speech during COVID-19 really went viral, and it introduced a whole younger generation to something that maybe they didn't even know happened. It engaged a whole generation, a younger generation, to take what Alice was saying from something that was seen as a woman complaining, to something that's really idolized and seen as strength.

Certain Indigenous people would have a great understanding of what 'feminism' is, as well as a critique of it. There are many Indigenous women who call themselves a feminist but would critique White feminism like Alice was alluding to. But I also think Indigenous people are good at naming power and power relationships and power imbalances, because we experience it all the time and we understand that it's different for White women than it is for us. Even if you're not 'educated' in the sense of knowing what it is, you can name it, but you might not be able to name it as feminism. There are things where feminism and Indigenous ways of understanding the world overlap naturally. Five years ago, I would never have said I'm a feminist. But the more I understand the concept, the more I go, 'oh yeah, yeah, yeah'.

Particularly in other communities, worrying about gender is the last thing on their minds, it's more about things like food security or housing security or financial security.

And so, these are things that play into, for example, violence, and sometimes when things are normalized or you live in an environment that's not healthy, you're not worried about the other things. Indigenous scholarship will highly critique White feminism, but also a lot of the time Indigenous scholars, or people in critical positions, will lean on feminism as well, particularly the intersectional lens of it, to move things forward.

Alice: One example of an area of feminism that I've seen really shift over the last couple of years, based on the influence of First Nations women, is anti-carceral feminism, and particularly in the violence against women space. Not to say that First Nations women here didn't have the ideas already, but certainly the Black Lives Matter movement in the US and the conversations about defunding the police, and anti-carceral conversations there, have really opened up a lot of White Australian mainstream feminist eyes to the issue, and then made them notice that actually their Indigenous sisters in Australia have also been pointing this out, that really punitive, carceral solutions to gender-based violence end up criminalizing Indigenous men at really high rates. Seeing the GBV [gender-based violence] sector in Australia must really grapple with that issue and grapple with the role that feminism or that advocacy for women's rights and women's safety has contributed to this incarceration of Indigenous men. We haven't resolved it. I don't think it's a rosy story yet, but there's a real growing awareness of that as an issue.

Julie: That's a great example. There is a body of work that talks about that idea that we're criminalizing violence against women in Indigenous communities, and so it's not looking at structural or systemic barriers that aid in particular behaviours of people. When our men go to jail, we know they're more likely to reoffend and end back up in jail. There are underlying symptoms and causes that need to be addressed.

Conclusion

Australia has not joined the group of FFP nations and looks unlikely to do so anytime soon. Yet there have been extensive conversations in the country in recent years about feminism within public policy and the political sphere. Furthermore, its declaration of a First Nations policy represents a new

positioning of itself regionally and on the world stage. Within this, there is clear space for the country's historically strong work on gender to continue, and for Australia to continue to align with other FFP states in multilateral fora.

This conversation demonstrates the ways in which foreign policy decisions reflect domestic politics, with First Nations foreign policy being adopted at a particular moment in the history of Indigenous politics in Australia. It also shows foreign policy as a response to regional geopolitical pressures, including a desire to realign the country in relation to its neighbours in the context of the rising challenges posed by China. As with FFP, First Nations foreign policy needs to be understood in the political and geographical political context in which it is emerging.

Notes

- ¹ Government of New Zealand, 'Inaugural foreign policy speech to diplomatic corps', speech by Hon Nanaia Mahuta, 4 February 2021, Available from: <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/inaugural-foreign-policy-speech-diplomatic-corps>
- ² Foreign Affairs debate, 2022, with Marise Payne and Penny Wong at the National Press Club, Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WrhTyW9PBuE>
- ³ Yarn (or yarning) is an Indigenous term that means respectful active listening and learning. Yarning enables a space that fosters knowledge sharing, reflection and relationship-building.
- ⁴ The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People is the most comprehensive international instrument on the rights of Indigenous people inclusive of recognition, protection, and promotion of Indigenous peoples' rights to survival, dignity, and wellbeing.
- ⁵ When the term 'Country' is spoken about by Indigenous Australians it is capitalized because it is referred to in the same manner in which a person is spoken about. It is a living and breathing entity that holds space.
- ⁶ Closing the Gap is Australia's broad umbrella policy for reducing the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples on key health, education, and economic targets.
- ⁷ Australian Human Rights Commission (2021) *Implementing UNDRIP*, Available from: https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-10/implementing_undrip_-_australias_third_upr_2021.pdf
- ⁸ Australian Human Rights Commission (2021) *Implementing UNDRIP*, Available from: https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-10/implementing_undrip_-_australias_third_upr_2021.pdf
- ⁹ The Uluru Statement from the Heart was an invitation to the Australian people, from First Nations peoples, to walk together to build a better future. It called for the establishment of a constitutionally enshrined Voice to Parliament which would act as a permanent advisory body to Parliament on issues that affect First Nations peoples, in addition to treaty and truth-telling. Moreover, altering the Constitution to establish a Voice to Parliament would have also formally recognized Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First peoples of Australia. See <https://ulurustatement.org/the-statement/view-the-statement/>
- ¹⁰ James Blackwell is a Wiradjuri man and Indigenous research fellow from the Australian National University. See <https://bellschool.anu.edu.au/people/james-blackwell>
- ¹¹ Available from: iwda.org.au/assets/files/AFFPC-issues-paper-Indigenous-Foreign-Policy-Blackwell-Ballangarry-FINAL.pdf
- ¹² Foreign Affairs debate, 2022, with Marise Payne and Penny Wong at the National Press Club, Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WrhTyW9PBuE>

- ¹³ Office for First Nations International Engagement/Ambassador for First Nations People, Available from: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/international-relations/themes/indigenous-peoples/ambassador-first-nations-people>
- ¹⁴ In October 2023, Australia held a referendum on enshrining an Indigenous Voice to Parliament into the Australian Constitution. This was the first of three recommendations from the Uluru Statement from the Heart. The referendum was unsuccessful.
- ¹⁵ Elders is capitalized out of respect.
- ¹⁶ This refers to the 1967 Referendum which saw 90.77 per cent of Australians vote 'Yes' to remove references in the Constitution that discriminated against Indigenous Australians. The successful referendum saw the Constitution changed to include Indigenous Australians to be counted as part of the population and the transfer of power from the states to the Commonwealth to make laws for Indigenous people.
- ¹⁷ See <https://www.legislation.qld.gov.au/view/whole/html/asmade/act-2023-012>
- ¹⁸ Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2000) *Talkin' Up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism*. University of Queensland Press.
- ¹⁹ See <https://youtu.be/fCNuPcf8L00>

PART II

**Talking Back: Who Gets to Do
Feminist Foreign Policy?**

Feminist Foreign Policy or Gender Equality? The Role of African Feminists and Civil Society

Helen Kezie-Nwoha

Introduction

This chapter traces the role of the African women's movement in influencing global and regional women's rights agenda and considers how they should shape feminist foreign policies (FFP) globally and at home. Historically, the African women's movement has influenced global policies, including the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) (see [Ilesanmi, 2021](#)). However, their involvement in shaping FFPs has thus far been limited and often marginalized. This chapter calls for greater inclusion of African civil society and women's movement in the development and implementation of FFPs to ensure that these policies genuinely reflect and address the needs of African women. The chapter is based on ten interviews with African feminists, across the continent.¹

The African women's movement is defined as a collective of both individuals, and formal and informal organizations that work collectively at local, national, and regional levels to promote the rights of women and ensure gender equality in cultural, political, social, and economic spheres within and beyond Africa. Formal organizations are those who work in a specific location and are registered with the government as legal entities operating within the laws governing non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Informal organizations are groups working towards a collective aim such as economic wellbeing but are not officially registered with government authorities. The women's movement remains a vital part of African civil society and works across class, age, ethnic, social, political, economic,

religious, and cultural boundaries. Examples include the African Women's Development and Communications Network (FEMNET), Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace, Women in Law and Development in Africa (WiLDAF) and Gender Is My Agenda Network (GIMAC), the African Women Leaders Network (AWLN), Akina Mama wa Africa (AMwA), Uganda Women's Network (UWONET), Women's International Peace Centre (WIPC), Femme Africa Solidarite (FAS) among others. Individuals who work in other sectors including business, health education, and trade that contribute to gender equality and women's empowerment are also part of the women's movement.

Writing this chapter at a time when the world is experiencing some of the worst conflicts and violations of human rights in Sudan, Ukraine, and Palestine demonstrates the influence of global powers to (not) influence international diplomacy and foreign policy. For instance, the United Nations Security Council, the body mandated to maintain world peace, has five permanent members (P5) with veto power. Having this power means it can be used as a tool of their own power regardless of perspectives of other council members and indeed the General Assembly. It is an illustration of conventional approaches that uphold realism, national interest, and state sovereignty (Waltz, 1979). The manner in which some world powers such as the United States have defended this violence is a clear indication of their insincerity in pursuing a just and equal world, which is an important principle of FFPs. These states seek to maximize their power and prescribe to the survival of the state, prioritize national interest, and ensure state sovereignty is the cornerstone of their international diplomacy. They care less about the principles of human rights as prescribed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. For these states, incorporating feminist principles in their foreign policies is impossible (Scheyer and Kumskova, 2019).

Methodology

The methodology adopted for this research involved a combination of desk review and in-depth interviews with ten African feminist leaders of varying career stages. The desk review focused on existing literature related to FFPs, examining the engagement of African civil society and women's movements in influencing FFP. The review provided an understanding of the current landscape of FFPs, with a particular focus on the involvement of African civil society.

In-depth interviews were conducted with leaders and representatives from African feminist organizations. Those interviewed included five self-defined feminists from East Africa, one from West Africa, two from North Africa and two from Southern Africa. All the feminists interviewed are active in the women's movement, working on issues of women, peace, and security,

sexual and reproductive health and rights, militarization, peacebuilding, media, land rights, and economic justice at local, national, continental, and global levels. Their experiences of working on a range of issues at different levels informs their reflections on FFP. These interviews aimed to capture insights and firsthand experiences regarding their roles in influencing the development and implementation of FFPs.

This chapter reflects analysis derived from interviews conducted between January and April 2024. Participants were identified through purposive sampling, drawing on professional networks and ongoing collaborations with individuals engaged in women's rights, governance, health justice, and FFP. Interviews were conducted in person and virtually, based on participant preference and accessibility considerations. The data collection approach followed principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and care throughout the process. Participants were informed of the purpose of this chapter, how their contributions would be used, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Interviewees included individuals at varying career stages, early, mid and advanced, whose work spans community-based organizing and policy advocacy at regional and global levels. Their perspectives are shaped by both professional experience and lived realities, which are critical forms of knowledge within our collective effort to advance social justice.

The role of African feminist movement in influencing global policy making

Global feminist movements and women's rights organizations (WROs) have been the driving force for the promotion of gender equality since the 1950s (Iris, 2014). From the Nairobi conference in 1985 to the Beijing conference in 1995 and the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) Committee, and the United Nations Human Rights Universal Peer Review mechanisms, African women's rights and feminist organizations have been part of these movements (Berger, 2014). This section reviews the central role of African civil society and the African women's movement in promoting global policy making for gender equality in Africa and beyond. African civil society and WROs continue to be catalysts for global change. Their efforts, resilience, and commitment to gender justice have not only transformed the lives of women on the continent but have influenced the content and scope of international agreements, ensuring that the unique experiences and concerns of African women are recognized and addressed.

In many African countries such as Nigeria, Uganda, Ghana, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, among others, the historical context is marked by

challenges, including wars and the enduring impact of colonization. The African women's movement have played a pivotal role in the struggles for independence, nation-building, and peace processes, pushing for participation, particularly for women, minorities, and other marginalized groups in these processes, including playing significant roles in international advocacy for women's rights and gender equality throughout history (see [Tsikata and Ossome, 2024](#)).

African WROs actively engaged in international platforms, recognizing the interconnectedness of women's issues globally. The participation of African women's movements in these spaces has informed advocacy for the domestication of these global legal frameworks to regional and national women's rights frameworks and laws.

Frameworks like the Maputo Protocol and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, adopted by the African Union in 2003, emerged from the activism that led to the Beijing Declaration, Platform for Action, CEDAW, and UNSC 1325, the Women, Peace and Security agenda. The Maputo Protocol is a regional human rights instrument. It took effect in 2005 and guarantees the rights for women, including participation in political and social equality with men, autonomy in decision-making in reproductive health, and the prohibition of female genital mutilation. The Maputo Protocol enhances the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, established in 1981 and enacted in 1986, by focusing specifically on women's rights and freedoms. Countries in Africa were mandated to domesticate the Maputo Protocol based on their realities through constitutional alignment, legislative reforms, policy adoption, and judicial interpretation.

The struggle for women's rights in Africa has involved multiple issues including fighting against discriminatory laws, gender-based violence, challenging societal norms, and unequal access to education and employment. Women across the continent began organizing themselves into grassroots movements and advocacy groups following various international women's conferences. Over time, these local initiatives evolved into formidable WROs that transcended national borders.

Women, Peace and Security

African civil society and WROs have been central in the areas of peace and security. The women's movement has advocated for the involvement of all parties in resolving conflicts and pushed for peace agreements and post-conflict reconstruction plans to address the disproportionate impact of war on women in conflict situations. Significant efforts have been witnessed in post-conflict countries like Uganda, Liberia, South Africa, Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea; and even in conflict countries such as South Sudan,

Mali, Niger, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Sudan. During transitions, women's active participation in nation-building, especially within institutions, has become a norm. WROs have campaigned for the inclusion of women in diplomacy as well as ensuring gender awareness aligns with the realities of each country.

The success of African WROs in contributing to global frameworks is rooted in collaboration and solidarity. From colonial struggles to contemporary global initiatives such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), their contributions have led to the inclusion of critical areas of concern in international frameworks like the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Musindarwezo, 2018). Hendricks (2017) and Diop (2011) both highlight Africa's significant role in the creation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. Hendricks (2017) notes that the targeting of women in African conflicts catalyzed advocacy efforts by civil society, leading to the recognition of the unique impact of armed conflicts on women and girls. This advocacy was crucial when Namibia in 2000 presided over the Security Council, leading to the adoption of UNSCR 1325. Diop (2011) further elucidates that those key African conferences, specifically the 1985 Nairobi Conference and the 1994 Dakar Conference, directly influenced the content and focus of UNSCR 1325, linking women's issues with peace and security globally. These events underscored the regional commitment to addressing these challenges, paving the way for the resolution's introduction in 2000.

Regional dynamics

Africa is a diverse continent and most WROs adopt different strategies to address these issues depending on the dynamic in their regions. For example, the East African region has seen protracted conflicts in South Sudan, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, while West African civil society has focused more on democratic governance. Regional dynamics shape the strategies and priorities of WROs, with disparities in funding flows and visibility across different linguistic and geographical regions. For example, interview participants alluded to the fact that the francophone West African region historically received less attention and resources than the East and Southern African regions from most donors due to language restrictions: 'I think sometimes you find that for a long time the francophone region have [had] limited funding flows' (Interview with a Kenyan feminist, 2023). Interview participants noted that France has been more active in French speaking countries (Interview with a Kenyan feminist, 2023). There seems to be a trend that countries are more akin to support their former colonies, particularly France (Barbiere, 2015).

African WROs embrace intersectionality in promoting gender equality within international relations by acknowledging diverse linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic realities across the continent. They navigate these complexities by ensuring inclusivity across rural–urban divides, ethnicities, languages, ages, and other identities to address the diverse needs and challenges faced by marginalized communities. The historical legacy of colonization necessitates consideration of language justice (the recognition that people communicate in different languages and the commitment to ensure that these languages are respected and made accessible in all forms of communication), access to technology, and the fluidity of identities within and across national borders. Despite these challenges, African feminists prioritize inclusive activism that transcends singular identities, recognizing the interconnectedness of various struggles. By acknowledging and centring the intersecting identities and experiences of individuals, African WROs better understand the ways that power operates and perpetuates inequalities. This approach has enabled more comprehensive and equitable strategies that prioritize the voices and concerns of all individuals, particularly those who have been historically marginalized or excluded. Moreover, considering intersectionality has fostered solidarity across diverse communities and regions, promoting more robust and sustainable movements for gender justice and transformative policy change on the continent and beyond (Rodriguez-Knutsen, 2023).

African women's rights organizations' engagement with feminist foreign policy

The chapter now turns to consider how African feminists perceive FFP. Interviews with African feminists examined the extent of engagement of African WROs in both the development and implementation of FFPs. The major themes that emerged from the interviews were: the silence and erasure of African WROs from FFP processes; International NGOs (INGOs) acting as proxies for African WROs through collaboration and partnerships; the lack of knowledge of African WROs on FFP; the meaning of gender equality and the challenges WROs face.

Silence and erasure

The approach adopted for the development of FFPs has often silenced African women's voices, including their immense contributions (as evidenced earlier). African feminist and women's movements have been excluded from the development of FFPs, even though FFPs often target least-developed countries, many of which are in Africa. According to a young feminist who was interviewed: 'They [countries with FFPs] develop FFPs before they

consult CSOs [civil society organizations] in Africa, mostly they will invite one African woman to represent the continent' (Interview with a young African feminist, Kenya, 2023).

One interviewee mentioned that she was invited to spaces where agendas had already been set and issues of FFP tailored towards the interest of the organizers of such meetings. According to her:

I feel that yes, we have been invited to many consultations. Even when I just joined the organization I am leading now, I would be invited to the gender development group in Uganda, and at some point, there was a conversation around feminist foreign policy, but it wasn't strong consultation in that sense. (Interview with an African feminist leader, Uganda, 2024)

From this perspective, African WROs have had limited direct engagement in conversations on the design of FFPs. Their involvement has largely depended on pre-existing partnerships and connections with INGOs, or development partners and embassies based in capitals in Africa.

Another way African WROs are silenced in FFP spaces is through their marginalization in policy making. One of the interviewees stated that 'the FFP space is still closed to African WROs' (Interview with a young Kenyan feminist, 2024). The marginalization of African WROs has raised questions of the role of African WROs in FFPs. Feminists interviewed agreed that it is important to involve WROs in FFP development. Without such inclusion, there is a risk of overlooking critical issues affecting the intended beneficiaries of FFP that could have been brought to the table by African CSOs. The need to ensure inclusive perspectives is crucial to ensuring that FFP effectively addresses the concerns of the diverse communities it aims to serve, particularly those in aid-receiving countries in Africa. This will include ensuring the inclusion of local women leaders, youth, and persons with disabilities and other marginalized groups in FFP consultations; moving away from donor-driven agendas towards co-created priorities that reflect local realities; funding and using research led by local civil society and feminist organizations to inform interventions; and translating FFP related documents and training into local languages to ensure meaningful engagement.

As a part of a group of African feminists under the auspices of the African Feminist Collective on Feminist Informed Policies (AfIP Collective) formed in 2022, we responded to this silencing and erasure by holding webinars to generate interest of African feminists in FFP, and to call for more inclusion of African feminists in FFP spaces. In our Statement of Intent, we noted that African perspectives on FFP are often marginalized in dominant narratives surrounding FFP concept development and practice. Moreover, the participation of African feminists in discussions on FFP has largely been

reactive, focusing on responding to the priorities of the Global North or contributing to an agenda that has already been set (Haastrup et al, 2023). We proposed an approach that integrates the priorities of African women and feminist movements to achieve an emancipatory model of the world.

International non-governmental organizations acting as proxies for African civil society organizations

In the early stages of FFP development, the practice is usually for FFP adopters to consult different constituencies including CSOs. For example, research participants shared that they participated in various consultations such as those held by Germany and the Netherlands that aimed to capture the voices of diverse WROs. The interviews revealed that INGOs often act as proxies for African civil society in such meetings, speaking on their behalf and including the needs of communities where these WROs work (Interview with a young Kenyan feminist, 2024). The representation of African WROs' voices in FFP spaces is legitimized through collaborations and partnerships of INGOs in countries that have adopted FFPs with WROs in Africa. Most of the INGOs have had direct engagement in the FFP process and because most have partners in Africa, they claim to represent African CSOs and women's movements. According to one of the feminists interviewed from Uganda who heads a regional feminist organization: 'I feel that the people who have been most involved are still largely INGOs. The so-called international agencies have been more active' (Interview with an African feminist leader, Uganda, 2024). This illustrates the engagement with INGOs who speak on behalf of African CSOs and the needs of Africans in general.

Generally, most of these meetings and consultations happen in capital cities where embassies of FFP states are located, or in some cases online. In these spaces, there is limited or no involvement of African civil society (Interview with an African feminist leader, Uganda, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic taught us that meetings could be held online without direct physical contact. With this way of working, most meetings are held online with very few African CSO representatives invited to participate. Most of those who speak during such webinars are INGO representatives, who act as proxies for the views, perspectives, and needs of Africans. This is despite the fact that the INGOs' work in Africa does not give them the mandate to speak on behalf or represent the views of African CSOs and the needs of African people. Without direct consultation with African CSOs, INGOs continue to profile the agendas of their organizations in FFPs and not those of African civil society. There was consensus among the ten interviewees of the importance of involving civil society directly in FFP development.

Limited knowledge of feminist foreign policy

The concept of FFP is relatively new and has been developed by governments mostly in the Global North, with implementation to date remaining partial or uneven. Most WROs in Africa have limited knowledge of the existence of FFPs, and as a result there has been limited direct involvement of African civil society in the development and implementation of FFPs. In addition, most of the FFP countries' engagement has focused on the international level among governments with FFPs. This approach hinders the ability of African civil society to participate and provide important scrutiny of the content and objectives of FFPs.

Without a clear understanding of FFP objectives, it becomes challenging for the women's movement to effectively evaluate its alignment with the principles of gender equality. Three of the young African feminists interviewed cited the lack of awareness of FFPs, including their intent and mode of operation. They expressed that they had been excluded, and while they acknowledged that everyone was excluded, their exclusion was worse. Consequently, they call for the concept of FFP to be unpacked to enable their full engagement and their ability to access its alignment to the daily lives of young people in Africa (Interview with young feminists from Kenya and Algeria, 2024). According to one interviewee: 'To tell you the truth, I have heard the word feminist foreign policy, but I don't know what it means. You need to help us young African feminists to understand it for us to engage with it' (Interview with a young feminist from Algeria, 2024).

While formal acknowledgment of FFP may be lacking, civil society, including the women's movement in Africa, is actively addressing feminist issues informally. For example, efforts against human trafficking and the feminization of migrant labour are recognized as feminist concerns (Interview with a pan-African feminist in Senegal, 2024). FFP is often applied differently by states and CSOs, while governments may not adopt FFP as a label they may have gender equality objectives in their foreign policy. On the other hand, CSOs and the women's movements may already be advocating feminist priorities through ongoing activities that may not be identified as FFP. Identifying these different approaches and understanding is important in analysing FFP implementation. As stated by one of the interviewees, African feminists are eager to highlight the colonial legacies of border, and to stress them as a feminist issue: 'African women have intervened on how their communities should be treated, and how borders should not be a hindrance to their lives, just because they are drawn by colonizers' (Interview with a pan-African feminist in Senegal, 2024). Such an issue was understood to not immediately be of concern to Global North driven FFPs: 'We see different examples of women traders on border point. When we think of policy oftentimes, we think of people in big offices, but how do we think

of policy engagement at the local level to open our understanding on what engagement in foreign policies is?’ (Interview with a pan-African feminist in Senegal, 2023).

Gender equality

When defining FFP, [Thompson et al \(2021\)](#) compare it to the dictionary definition of foreign policy as ‘the policy of a sovereign state in its interaction with other sovereign states’ ([Merriam-Webster, 2018](#)). They pair this with the definition of feminism as ‘the theory of the political, economic and social equality of the sexes’ and ‘organized activity on behalf of women’s rights and interests’. Combining these, they define FFP as *the policy of a sovereign state in its interaction with other sovereign states based on the theory of political, economic and social equality of the sexes, delivered to advance women’s rights and interests*.

They argue that for foreign policy to be feminist, it must adopt an intersectional approach and interrogate power. Their expanded definition emphasizes decolonization, intersectionality, and the dismantling of colonial, racist, patriarchal, and male-dominated power structures, framing FFP as a policy that prioritizes peace, gender equality, and environmental integrity; protects human rights; and allocates significant resources to achieve this vision.

Gender equality is thus central to FFP. To explore how this is reflected in practice, African feminists interviewed were asked to what extent existing definitions and implementations of FFP align with gender equality principles.

One of the feminists interviewed stated that, ‘existing definitions and implementation of FFPs, especially those by governments, are often more closely aligned with the concept of gender equality rather than the broader principles of feminism’ (Interview with a pan-African feminist in Senegal, 2023). She argued that while gender equality is one aspect of feminist concerns, feminism encompasses a wider range of issues, including decolonization and demilitarization. Gender equality, as commonly quantified through indicators, may not necessarily address the broader goals of feminism (Interview with a pan-African feminist in Senegal, 2023). Another interviewee stated that, ‘feminism goes beyond numerical representation and aims to eliminate systemic oppression, considering factors like power distribution’ (Interview with a young Kenyan feminist, 2024). Feminists interviewed ascertained that the operational stance of governments on FFPs often revolves around the notion of gender equality. According to one interviewee, ‘there is no gender equality without decolonization and demilitarization of the world as it is right now’ (Interview with a pan-African feminist in Senegal, 2023).

Feminist liberation involves not just numerical equality but a transformative change in power dynamics, enabling individuals to determine their own

destinies without fear of reprisal. In addition, feminism seeks to dismantle systemic and historical oppressions, fostering equality among nations, individuals, and communities. According to one of the interviewees, ‘merely quantifying gender equality in various metrics, such as the number of women participating in peacekeeping, may miss the mark on feminist liberation’ (Interview with a pan-African feminist in Senegal, 2023). While such indicators may signify progress in gender parity, they may not necessarily address the root causes of inequality or empower individuals to shape their destinies. As another interviewee noted: ‘Gender equality counts numbers, feminism challenges power relations. The concern of feminism is to eliminate all the barriers, systemic and historic oppression towards equality between nations. People can quantify gender equality in many things, but does that take us towards feminist liberation?’ (Interview with a pan-African feminist in Senegal, 2023).

Feminism scrutinizes the quality and substance of equality, emphasizing the need for transformative changes that challenge existing power dynamics. The ‘responsibility of assessing whether FFPs align with the principles of gender equality falls on the African women’s movement’ (Interview with a Ugandan feminist, 2023). African women’s rights CSOs and feminist organizations lead on gender equality, generating feminist analysis and practitioner tools to ensure programmes are grounded in feminist principles.

Challenges in promoting gender equality and feminist principles

African CSOs vary in size and location. Some are based in capitals and work nationally; others are more grassroots level working locally. Others are larger and work at a regional level, with offices in more than one country. Depending on their size, location, and scope of work, African civil society faces numerous challenges.

Interviews reveal that African CSOs face significant challenges in promoting gender equality and feminist principles in international relations. First is that ‘the term “gender equality” has been co-opted, and while progress has been made, concerns arise about whether significant shifts in gender power dynamics have occurred’ (Interview with a pan-African feminist in Senegal, 2023). According to a Ugandan feminist interviewee, while ‘feminism is recognized as a highly political movement; gender equality has become more accepted at the policy level’ (Interview with a Ugandan feminist leader, 2024). She cautioned that there is resistance to using the term ‘feminism’ due to its political connotations, as the oppressor is always scared of anything that is ‘political’. Governments may claim gender equality more readily than feminist principles due to the fear associated with the political nature of feminism: ‘The term “feminist foreign policy” can face similar resistance, even from women embedded in existing systems of government’ (Interview with a Ugandan feminist, 2023).

According to another interviewee, the spaces where foreign policy is defined and practised often adhere to Western-imposed etiquette and norms, making it challenging for minority voices, including women, to express themselves powerfully:

There is a lot of respectability in foreign policy spaces. They are organized as diplomacy, which most times gives an upper hand to someone who already has power. Women find it difficult to express themselves in such places. These spaces are neutralized because from a Western point of view, there are certain etiquette drawn by white people that are followed in foreign policy that do not allow traditional forms of expression, and the way African people would express themselves in foreign meetings and are understood. (Interview with a pan-African feminist in Senegal, 2023)

This respectability can limit the impact of feminist language in diplomatic spaces. The importance of language and decorum in diplomatic spaces, often defined by Western standards (Standfield, 2020; Xhemaili, 2022), raises questions about how traditional forms of expression can be accommodated. The impact of such norms on those advocating for gender equality and FFP is a critical consideration of how these factors impact the effectiveness of feminist principles in shaping policies and practices.

Other challenges for civil society include under-resourcing, limited transnational connections, and accessibility and affordability to global advocacy spaces. For example, as one interviewee noted:

African civil society based at the national and local levels have limited access to global meetings such as the Commission on the Status of Women, due to lack of funding, travel restrictions due to visa requirements, and cannot have staff or offices in these cities where the multilaterals are situated, unlike international organizations. (Interview with a Ugandan feminist, 2023)

These constraints hinder their ability to engage effectively in global advocacy efforts and limit their visibility and impact on the international stage.

These challenges underscore the complexity of promoting feminist principles within policy frameworks and the need for critical examination of how political dynamics and linguistic nuances shape advocacy efforts in international relations. Advocating for the principles of FFP faces similar challenges, exacerbated by issues such as the 'co-option of feminist narratives, pinkwashing, and the erosion of thought leadership within feminist movements' (Interview with a Kenyan feminist, 2023). Overall, both endeavours are constrained by structural barriers and the politicization

of feminist work, highlighting the need for greater support and solidarity within the global feminist community.

There is also a selective acknowledgment of civil society's role in promoting gender equality. As one interviewee noted:

Governments in Africa often acknowledge the role of civil society in legal frameworks and in upholding constitutions. For example, in Uganda the government acknowledges the role of civil society in policymaking. However, the actualization of this acknowledgment is selective, especially in increasingly undemocratic environments, where civil society is perceived as a threat. (Interview with a civil society leader, Uganda, 2023)

Some African states such as Uganda, Tanzania, and Ethiopia have put in place restrictive laws that have led to a shrinking civic space for civil society. Without adequate space and resources, civil society at national and local levels struggles to express its views boldly and comfortably, diminishing its influence on policy and decision-making processes and promoting gender equality and women's empowerment issues. The challenges faced by civil society in promoting gender equality and FFP are intertwined.

Internally, despite possessing diverse knowledge and experiences, civil society at all levels struggles to aggregate this information into usable material due to lack of resources to improve skills. This lack of aggregation hampers the contribution of civil society to policies and laws related to gender equality. In addition, CSOs and the women's movement often operate in silos, with little coordination or shared strategy.

This lack of unity distorts their ability to provide alternatives to the government, demand change, and challenge the status quo collectively. Viewing civil society primarily as NGOs funded by development partners limits its scope and sustainability. There is a need to leverage contributions from media, academia, and professional bodies to ensure diverse and sustainable inputs beyond donor funding. The broader civil society, including trade unions, NGOs, professional bodies, the media, and women's rights organizations, must unify and collaborate for a more substantial impact.

The exclusion of women's issues from broader civil society discussions limits their visibility and influence. Beyond NGOs, leveraging the diverse contributions of the media, academia, and professional bodies is crucial. This approach reduces dependency on donor funding and ensures a more comprehensive and resilient civil society. Academia, as a space for independent thinking and writing, is vital for offering alternative perspectives. The preservation of academic freedom is vital for enriching civil society discourse and contributions. The involvement of professional bodies, such as law societies and medical associations, adds weight to civil

society's collective voice. Collaborating with these bodies ensures a broader and more impactful representation of citizens' concerns.

The role of African civil society in shaping feminist foreign policy

There is an opportunity for African CSOs and the women's movement to contribute to shaping FFPs. They possess a wealth of expertise, knowledge, and experience on gender equality and women's empowerment based on their work, which presents an opportunity to influence the direction of FFP. They need to adopt strategies that enable FFP countries to leverage this expertise by ensuring that information on what has worked in promoting gender equality and achieving women's empowerment is widely shared and disseminated. This includes documented practices and knowledge from grassroots organizations and movements that may not be formally recorded. By amplifying the dissemination of information, feminists and women's movements can engage with policy makers and contribute to shaping FFPs in a meaningful way. Additionally, civil society can play a crucial role through research to identify what is not working and what has been successful in FFP implementation. While policy makers may believe their FFPs are effective, civil society's research can provide insights into the actual impact and effectiveness of these policies. By highlighting challenges and proposing improvement solutions, WROs contribute knowledge that can inform more robust and effective FFP strategies. This can be done through an emphasis on the following areas.

Accountability for recognition of past injustices and policy commitments

African civil society groups and the women's movement have advocated for accountability from governments with FFPs for past damages during colonialism. There are significant examples of African civil society, particularly those working at national and regional levels, demanding for accountability in the form of reparations in Africa. For example, Ghana has been a vocal advocate for reparations in the African Union. This is intrinsically linked to feminist principles. Holding countries accountable for their past crimes is integral to transitional justice and ensuring accountability. African civil society should not allow governments to claim legitimacy for having FFPs without addressing fundamental issues such as reparations. Instead, they should firmly reject such claims and demand genuine action toward addressing historical injustices and promoting true gender equality and justice.

In the face of the increasing buy-in to formulating FFPs, African civil society must remain vigilant and firm, especially in the context of ongoing

resource extraction from the continent. It is important not to lose sight of the broader issues while acknowledging specific initiatives such as financial aid for sexual and reproductive rights as signs of progressiveness. Even in financially constrained times, it is vital to understand the political implications of such support and maintain awareness of the underlying dynamics of exploitation faced by the continent. African civil society should address these challenges internally while also advocating for systemic change at the continental level. By doing so, they can continue to highlight cases of exploitation and work towards finding sustainable solutions that empower African nations.

In this chapter, accountability is a feminist principle that ensures that commitments and policies are not altered, diluted, or used for political gain. For example, adopting feminist language within policies without allocating resources for their implementation. It is important to ensure that commitments made by countries, particularly in engagements with Africa, translate into tangible benefits for African people. Accountability also safeguards against the co-option and erosion of feminist gains. As one of the feminists interviewed noted, ‘while it is positive to see more individuals identifying as feminists, it is essential to ensure that the principles and values of feminism, as understood by African movements, are preserved and not diluted’ (Interview with a Kenyan feminist, 2023). This highlights the need to look beyond rhetoric. Although African CSOs and feminist movements are obliged to push FFP governments to meet their commitments, recognizing that by adopting FFP governments invite scrutiny, CSOs and feminist movements must also engage in honest discussions about what it truly means for governments to adopt feminist principles. This means being transparent about what is achievable within current global political and social contexts.

Building connections and collaborations through feminist foreign policy

According to one interviewee, ‘in the ongoing debate about whether to reform existing oppressive systems of power or focus on constructing alternative systems, my perspective is that these approaches are not mutually exclusive’ (Interview with a Kenyan feminist, 2023). It is essential to engage with existing systems, such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, despite their flaws, because they continue to significantly impact African economies. Similarly, regarding FFP, while current implementations may not fully align with our ideals, it is still crucial to participate in the process (Interview with a Kenyan feminist, 2023). Using Canada as an example, one feminist interviewed for this chapter affirmed that the adoption of FFPs has led to increased commitment to allocating resources to feminist movements; this demonstrates that some countries are willing to invest in gender equality initiatives (Interview with a Kenyan feminist, 2023). While this approach may not be radical, it represents incremental progress.

Engaging with these processes allows the feminist movement to access resources and create opportunities that can contribute to advancing the feminist agenda. It is about finding a balance between critiquing existing systems and leveraging available resources to drive positive change.

Despite the opportunities that exist, many challenges were also identified by participants interviewed, such as inconsistency and short implementation period for policies. For instance, Europe's approach often falls short of genuine FFP: 'While the adoption of FFP is a welcome development, acknowledging the inconsistency and briefness of policies enacted by successive governments is obvious' (Interview with a Kenyan feminist, 2023). This pattern is not unique to Europe; even in the United States policies frequently shift with changes in governments. There is a tendency among liberal governments to maintain a moral high ground, projecting themselves as distinct from right-wing governments while engaging in similar practices, such as extraction and imperialism. Despite the rhetoric of progressive policies, the underlying pursuit of power often dictates their actions. Consequently, these policies may overlook critical issues such as migration policies and continued imperialist practices.

The emergent nature of some FFPs underscores their lack of grounding in the realities of governance within their states. Rather than genuine commitments to feminist principles, they may serve as superficial gestures to appease certain constituencies while maintaining power dynamics that perpetuate inequalities and imperialism. The desire for power remains a dominant force, making it unrealistic to claim the existence of a feminist policy without fundamentally shifting the consciousness of a nation. There must be a significant transformation within a society before it can authentically adopt feminist principles. It is akin to distinguishing between day and night; the contrast is glaring. Therefore, any government, whether African or otherwise, that hastily labels its foreign policy as feminist should be viewed with suspicion. Even Liberia, in its attempt to implement a feminist foreign policy, faced challenges, highlighting the complexities involved in genuinely embracing feminist principles at a national level.

Indeed, some countries have adeptly utilized gender as a tool on the international stage. However, this does not necessarily reflect a genuine commitment to feminist ideals but rather an opportunistic co-optation of gender discourse for diplomatic purposes. We are in a critical time where geopolitical tensions can escalate rapidly, as evidenced by recent events manifested in the approaches to Ukraine and Gaza. The assumption of a peaceful world during the drafting of FFPs may not hold in the face of such uncertainties. Additionally, the entrenched power dynamics within institutions like the Security Council pose significant challenges. The requirement for unanimous approval from all permanent members before passing resolutions can often hinder effective peacekeeping efforts. These negative trends pose

a challenge to the implementation of FFPs at home and abroad for many of these countries. While engagement is therefore crucial, and FFP provides key spaces for networks and collaborations to grow, deep challenges remain.

Another significant opportunity lies in the vast array of international spaces where CSOs and WROs engage with FFP countries. CSOs and WROs' participation in various international forums presents a valuable opportunity to influence and shape FFPs. Leveraging these spaces effectively can enhance civil society's ability to advocate for their priorities and hold governments accountable for their commitments. Civil society can also contribute to the actualization of FFP through direct implementation. Through involvement in implementation processes, CSOs gain insights that can inform FFP refinement. This process of implementation, learning, and feedback enables CSOs to continuously inform and shape FFPs, leading to better outcomes.

Conclusion

This chapter traces the role of African CSOs and WROs in regional and global women's rights agendas and how they shape FFPs. The chapter indicates that African feminist movements and WROs remain the driving force and have been at the centre of advocating for women's rights instruments at the regional and global levels since the 1950s, including in the struggle for independence, fighting for discriminatory laws, and challenging gender-based violence, societal norms, and unequal access to education and employment. In addition, African WROs have played a critical role in the establishment of the WPS agenda and ensuring its implementation and adaptation to national contexts when addressing the specific needs of women.

From the interviews with feminists and leaders of WROs for this chapter, African feminist perspectives on FFP demand a focus on the lived experiences and challenges that African women face. Participants emphasized the intersectionality of gender with other forms of oppression such as race, ethnicity, class, and colonial legacies, and the importance of centring intersectionality in advocacy for women's rights. They believe that to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment in the context of foreign policies there is a need for systemic change, a dismantling of patriarchal power structures, and addressing issues such as economic injustice, political participation, climate crisis, social justice, and migration rooted in grassroots activism and movements. The approach of African feminists and WROs is holistic: they prioritize solidarity across diverse identities and struggles; emphasize the need to acknowledge diverse linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic realities; and demand reparations for historical injustices and the decolonization of policies and institutions to ensure inclusive advocacy.

In contrast, FFP definitions primarily focus on the principles and strategies adopted by governments or institutions to promote gender equality in their international engagements. While these policies may draw from feminist principles, they are often developed within the context of international relations and diplomacy. However, they may overlook or inadequately address the specific needs and contexts of African women, particularly those related to colonial legacies, economic exploitation, and systemic inequalities, as indicated by the interviewees. Despite these differences, both African feminist perspectives and FFP definitions share a commitment to advancing gender equality and women's empowerment, albeit with distinct focuses, contexts, and approaches.

The engagement of African civil society and women's movements with FFP reveals both challenges and opportunities in promoting gender equality and feminist principles within international relations. While there may be limited direct involvement in FFP development, the African women's movement actively addresses practical feminist issues at various levels and contributes to the discourse on FFP informally. However, barriers such as political resistance, under-resourcing, and restrictive laws hinder the full realization of civil society's potential to advocate for gender equality. Nonetheless, there is a growing recognition of the importance of inclusivity in FFP development, and the need for balanced perspectives and the involvement of marginalized voices to ensure that FFP effectively addresses the diverse concerns of its beneficiaries.

Interviews reveal that African WROs' engagement with FFPs expose some shortcomings, including: silencing and erasure of African WROs from FFP processes; INGOs serving as proxies for WROs and communities through partnerships and collaborations; lack of knowledge of FFP by African WROs; and the limited space for WROs to engage in spaces where FFP is discussed. Participants made the following recommendations to addressing these challenges:

1. Espousing the true principles of feminism via accountability to the women and girls that are the beneficiaries of FFP objectives.
2. Enabling women and girls' voices and needs to influence FFP development.
3. Recognizing intersectionality informs FFP focus.
4. Providing support to increase knowledge on FFP for the different categories of African women and girls.
5. Ensuring spaces for the discussion and articulation of FFPs are accessible to African women, feminist movement and WROs.

Moving forward, fostering inclusive collaboration, resource mobilization in partnership with African CSOs and WROs, and advocacy efforts defined by the African women's movement are essential for advancing gender equality and feminist principles in international relations across Africa.

Note

- ¹ The key research questions guiding this chapter and interviews were: To what extent do African CSOs engage with or contribute to influencing global policy making and more specifically the development and implementation of FFPs? What roles do CSOs and the women's movement play in influencing the implementation of FFPs? What challenges do African CSOs face in promoting gender equality in international relations and advocating for the principles of FFP? These questions provided the foundation for the arguments and analysis presented in this chapter.

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Together in the Movement: Six Lessons from Youth, for the Feminist Foreign Policy Community

Elinor McNamee

Stand up. Fight back.

The Canadian Press, ‘Indigenous Youth Chant
“Stand Up, Fight Back” at B.C. Anti-Pipeline
Protest’, 2020

Climate justice. If we don’t get it – shut it down.

Mazza, ‘If we don’t get climate justice,
shut it down’, 2021

Women, life, freedom.¹

These are just a snapshot of the demands coming from youth activists around the world as they mobilize for issues ranging from global climate action, to gun control, to economic justice, and democratic reform. When looking at recent non-violent movements around the world, an impressive common denominator has been the leadership and significant presence of young people, especially young women, mobilizing for action ([Cebul, 2023](#)). While young people have always been on the frontlines of progress and social movements, they are now participating at unprecedented rates and are becoming politically and socially engaged earlier in their lives ([Carnegie, 2022](#)).

Not only are young people becoming increasingly vocal advocates for change, but they are also deeply effective ones too. As data published by the

United States Institute for Peace (USIP) demonstrates, social movements with extensive frontline participation by young people are more likely to succeed in their goals (Cebal, 2023; see also Cebul, 2022; Chenoweth and Marks, 2022). According to the USIP study, leadership and meaningful participation of young people also lead to broader and more inclusive movements, in part because of their focus on systemic issues and building bridges across existing political divides. While there are many reasons for this unprecedented youth mobilization, recent studies point to the threats of climate change, lack of access to new forms of technology to innovate, frustration with older generations and stagnant progress, and the existential anxiety of inheriting a world marred by social issues, inequalities, and climate threats (see Cebal, 2023; Carnegie, 2022).

Despite the remarkable impact of young people, they continue to be marginalized and face structural barriers to their meaningful inclusion. One development in feminist politics more generally, where the potential of young people continues to remain glaringly untapped, is that of feminist foreign policy (FFP). Today, FFP is largely being shaped by think tanks, governments, international non-governmental organizations, and academia. These are all spaces that typically exclude young people, and when young people are included, it is often as token representatives or as an afterthought.

This has created a troubling paradox: even though young people are invaluable contributors to feminist progress, and even though they push feminist spaces and policy makers to be more progressive, intersectional, and decolonized, young people are still largely missing from FFP. This chapter puts forward six lessons by young people for the FFP community to challenge this paradox.

The reflections and perspectives shared in this chapter are based on surveys conducted in 2023 and my own observations and experiences working in youth engagement and FFP since 2018. Participants were identified through purposive sampling, drawing on professional networks and ongoing collaborations with individuals engaged in the work of the feminist organization Our Generation for Inclusive Peace.

Participants in this research were asked to complete a ten-question survey, participate in an interview, or both. All respondents chose to complete the survey, which included both thematic and general open-ended questions about FFP. While formal institutional ethics approval was not required in our organizational context, we followed principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and care throughout the process. Participants were informed of the purpose of the project, how their contributions would be used, and their right to withdraw at any stage.

Respondents included individuals at varying career stages, and geographies, whose work spans community-based organizing, policy advocacy, and regional engagement. All respondents identified as youth,² and their

perspectives are shaped by their professional and lived experiences as young people engaged, working in, or interested in FFP.

Intergenerational solidarity and changing views of feminism

As a community of practice, those who have championed the emergence of FFP are rightly concerned about the longevity of the project, especially after Sweden rescinded its FFP in 2022. Incredible progress has been made creating and advancing FFP (as evidenced throughout this volume). However, institutional and systemic change are ideal features of FFP that require long-term, generational efforts. Feminist progress is built on the foundations of our predecessors, and our ultimate vision of FFP will likely not be achieved in one decade, or even in our lifetime. If FFP is to be a transformational initiative, and not one defined by brevity or passing political will, it will be because young people will take ownership and continue the work. It will be because of intergenerational solidarity.

Encouragingly, young people want to be part of the movement. As this chapter demonstrates, however, there is an intergenerational divide in terms of the ideas, hopes, and aspirations for FFP. This divide is evident when it comes to accounting for who holds power in shaping FFP today. This is no different from the wider feminist movement, where intergenerational dynamics have often been a defining feature of feminist progress; subsequent generations benefit from the fruits of our elders' labour, and in turn we build upon their work.

The activism of contemporary young feminists is digitally driven, puts more emphasis on intersectionality, and is generally sex-positive, queer, and trans-inclusive (Grady, 2018). Like many youth movements, it also demands more from political leaders, is focused on systemic change as opposed to incremental progress, and is accompanied by increasing scepticism and disillusionment with established systems and ways of thinking. However, young people are not a monolith and neither is their feminism. While there are certainly generational trends emerging in feminist thought and activism, culture, geography, age, race, lived experience, among others, all shape individual formations of feminism, and, by extension, young people's engagement with FFP.

In 2019, renowned social justice advocate and feminist thinker Angela Davis toured college campuses in the United States. In her lectures, she emphasized the need for older generations of activists not only to recognize the leadership of younger generations, but to actively allow young activists to lead the way, stating that 'radical change has always come from young people' (*Time Magazine*, 2020). Anecdotally, those of us who work on youth engagement in foreign policy, and in particular FFP, have noticed that there

is often a reticence to meaningfully work with young people, let alone to let them lead in the way Davis encourages us to do.

Young people are necessary to the feminist movement and should be embraced as equal partners. Their critiques should be seen as a form of contribution; when they challenge it is because they recognize that there is something worthwhile to build upon. Apathy would be more troubling than critique, and what this chapter will show is that young people are anything but apathetic toward FFP. Drawing on my experiences as a young feminist founder of Our Generation for Inclusive Peace (OGIP), I contend that FFP *needs* intergenerational solidarity.

Our Generation for Inclusive Peace

OGIP is a research and advocacy organization that supports young gender equity advocates in the peace and security sector. We noticed a divide between the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) sectors. Even more concerning, there appeared to be growing competition between the two agendas due to limited institutional attention and resources. OGIP thus set out to bring the two agendas closer together. We did this through championing youth, removing barriers, and building a global community of young advocates and researchers. Believing that the commonalities are far greater than the differences between the two agendas, OGIP endeavours to integrate a gender perspective into YPS, and youth perspectives into WPS. In doing so, we aim to create a stronger synergy between two agendas that are, at their core, working toward similar and mutually reinforcing goals. In doing this work, OGIP grew from an idea into a thriving community of young advocates and researchers on five continents: North America, Europe, South America, Africa, and Asia.

Since its creation, OGIP has published a series of research papers, policy papers, and blogs on issues ranging from migration to power politics to feminist recovery. We have connected young people with opportunities and international organizations, established a network of gender advocates, have been invited to speak at countless events, including at the UN Generation Equality Forum, and have joined the UN Women, Peace, Security and Humanitarian Action Compact as a Catalytic Member. We did all this (and more) in a way that centres and prioritizes the voices, innovations, and efforts of young people. Our successes are a testament to the fact that when young people are given the space, support, and resources to thrive, they are capable of anything. Our work also shows that there is a growing demand within the peace and security sector to include young people.

However, this work has also come with its inevitable challenges. Even though I am encouraged by the breadth of opportunities being given to our community members, I have repeatedly found that inclusion does

not necessarily mean *meaningful* inclusion. Unfortunately, engaging with institutions, governments, and large international organizations can leave young people feeling tokenized, with their voices falling on deaf ears, and that their presence is merely a tick-box exercise, instead of a genuine openness to learning from young people and allowing them to influence the spaces that they have been invited into. This can lead to a deep frustration and scepticism, which the FFP community should be keenly attuned to and meaningfully address (see more in Lesson 6). I have been repeatedly in awe of how our co-founders, volunteers, and community members do this work, not because of clout or financial gain, but because we truly believe that young people are part of the solution to building a more peaceful world.

What is equally as important, if not more so, than *what* OGIP does as an organization, is *how* it works. When my co-founders and I were building the foundations of OGIP, we invested just as much effort in shaping ways of working that are grounded in feminist practice as we did in building our programmes and activities. These ways of working centred around three main practices. First, OGIP is a flat organization without hierarchy. All of our decisions are made by discussion and consensus, trusting each other's expertise and remaining grounded in feminist values that we identified as a community. Second, OGIP has a central team of volunteers who manage the day-to-day operations and programmes, but the heart of the organization is the wider community of practice. Any opportunities are automatically offered to our community members, and our community members also shape our organizational priorities. Third, OGIP is run by young people, for young people. The way that OGIP operates is an example of the innovation that young people bring to the table when they are given space and resources to see their ideas manifested.

While FFP encompasses far more than just the WPS and YPS agendas, the mutually reinforcing goals of WPS and YPS are also reflected in the transformational vision that is layered onto FFP, both as a theory and as a political project. While the definition of FFP is open to debate (UN Women, 2022), many who work on FFP largely define it as a people-centred approach to foreign policy that centres feminist principles, prioritizes the advancement of gender equality, human rights, and disrupts traditional colonial, patriarchal, and male-dominated power structures within state policy (Feminist Foreign Policy Collective, 2022; UN Women, 2022). Not only do the WPS and YPS agendas also reflect this transformative vision, but the agendas are often central mechanisms that states which posit to have an FFP use to implement it. For these reasons, even though members of the OGIP community are often focused on the YPS and WPS agendas, they frequently engage with and think critically about FFP.

This chapter reflects on the views, ideas, critiques, and aspirations for FFP from the perspective of youth.

Lessons from young people on feminist foreign policy

Lesson 1: Radical potential, disappointing results

When asked ‘Can feminist foreign policy help us address global challenges in a meaningful way?’ and ‘Can foreign policy be feminist?’, almost every participant responded with an enthusiastic, but caveated, ‘yes’. Given younger generations’ increasing scepticism and disillusionment of established systems and ways of thinking, this endorsement of FFP should be seen as a promising indication of young people’s commitment to the FFP project. What excites them is the radical potential it can offer, especially with an emphasis on shifting systems of power. One respondent stated ‘Feminist foreign policy ... should go beyond individual policies to challenge the underlying structures of inequality, including patriarchy, colonialism, racism, and capitalism. It should seek to dismantle these structures and build more just and equitable societies for all’ (Respondent 3, 2023).

Young people see FFP as more than the promotion of gender equality within existing international relations. For them, a feminist approach to foreign policy is one that calls for a fundamental restructuring of international, state, and power relations. Furthermore, naming something as ‘feminist’ is a high threshold to reach, and that states merely passing and promoting gender policy – while important – does not in fact make a foreign policy feminist. As one respondent stated:

Feminist foreign policy, if representative of grassroots actors, civil society, persons of all genders, sexualities, socio-economic backgrounds, and ages has the potential to radically reshape what foreign policy means and could be ... Feminist foreign policy cannot just be about quotas for representation, or the disaggregation of data, though those steps are certainly important. It must represent truly radical feminist ideas including demilitarization, disarmament, non-proliferation, the autonomy of all persons, respect for all persons, and the creation of strong social safety nets to achieve equitable societies. ... A feminist foreign policy, in its truest sense, represents liberation. (Respondent 7, 2023)

This hope is accompanied by strong caveats. It is the *idea* of FFP that excites young people, who also expressed disappointment with the reality and current manifestations of FFP itself. They see feminism as a tool to dismantle systemic inequality and fundamentally alter the current normative structures of international relations, and that those in positions of power must choose to use these tools if they wish to claim that their foreign policy is feminist. To illustrate this point, one respondent noted:

I think in a hypothetical sense, if feminist foreign policy was implemented in a practice true to its conception, it could absolutely

help to address global challenges in a meaningful way. However, as we're seeing with ongoing global conflict — and particularly the genocide of Palestinians in Gaza — the language of feminist foreign policy is often used in the West in a very shallow way to reinforce the status quo without truly adhering to intersectional feminist principles. (Respondent 2, 2023)

There is a disconnect, then, between how 'feminist' is defined by activists versus how it is defined by governments, resulting in FFP becoming more of a buzzword and 'pinkwashing' than a genuine call to action. Because of this, FFP is seen as merely perpetuating existing systems and falling short of its radical vision and potential; some respondents even said that FFP is not currently feminist in function, and that it is just a way for states to instrumentalize feminism to uphold existing power structures. There was also deep scepticism about the likelihood that power-holders would be willing to make the changes necessary to reimagine what foreign policy should and could be if guided by feminist principles. So, while young people largely believe in the vision of FFP and are excited about its transformative potential, they want to see even more commitment to follow through on its radical vision.

Lesson 2: No progress without addressing colonialism

Colonialism is one of the most significant barriers to a full manifestation of FFP according to the respondents for this chapter. Specifically, how colonialism continues to shape and influence both foreign policy and feminism. Many young people see colonialism as a defining influence in today's global order, and they expressed deep scepticism and critique that FFP does not go far enough in addressing colonial relationships between states, and particularly their gendered impact. This is not surprising given that feminism, and FFP in particular, is an effort to reshape existing power relations, of which colonialism, and lasting colonial legacies, is one of the most stark and influential in the modern international system. This was eloquently captured by one interview respondent: 'Feminist foreign policies have made the Western world dictate what is best for women in the Global South, making them impose policies that do not take into consideration the social, cultural and political aspects of different regions' (Respondent 18, 2023). While another suggested:

I think that feminist foreign policy has largely been seen as a Western, in fact Nordic, endeavour. In order for it to be more effective, it must be fully embraced on a global scale, with wide regional diversity. Implementation of a feminist foreign policy is quite difficult without

a clear understanding of what feminism itself means broadly, and how it is socialised in that context. (Respondent 15, 2023)

Others also observed a troubling parallel between foreign policy and some feminist movements, which both rely on and perpetuate colonialism and racism, with one respondent saying, ‘feminist movements in Western countries have been predominantly led by white, middle-class women, resulting in the exclusion of women of colour and Indigenous women from discussions and decision-making processes related to feminist foreign policy’ (Respondent 4, 2023).

This also raises questions about which feminist groups have access to political elite and the institutions shaping FFP, creating a cyclic influence between power holders in feminist movements and power-holders in political institutions. When young people feel excluded from both these spaces, entry points into FFP feel even more elusive. Several respondents expressed concern about this cyclical relationship and, in particular, that power-holders shaping FFP continue to prioritize the voices of Western and white women, allowing for the sector to continue ignoring the experiences, needs, and challenges which are faced by marginalized women:

Feminist foreign policy, if applied with radical, and not white or corporate, feminist values in mind, has the potential to reshape how we conceive of security, peace, justice, cooperation, and statehood itself ... This can only happen if states develop (through participatory, feminist practices) strong, intersectional feminist foreign policies and commit to them through concrete policy measures and having these principles inform all interactions. It will take courage to break from (white/Euro-centric) patriarchal systems and ways of thinking, and a great deal of political will. (Respondent 3, 2023)

Colonialism is not a distant memory, but a perpetual system that continues to shape social order (Kezie-Nwoha, [Chapter 3](#), this volume). Both feminism and foreign policy exist within this social order and therefore continue to be influenced by colonialism. A feminist approach to foreign policy cannot exist without meaningfully addressing both the legacies of, and ongoing, racism and colonialism within foreign policy and feminist movements.

Lesson 3: Changing world, changing views

The rise of FFP in the last decade coincided with a rapidly changing world, marked by shifting geopolitical realities, a global pandemic, and a plethora of social justice movements from Ni Una Mas to #MeToo to Black Lives Matter. This alignment may be more than just a coincidence, as the world

has sought new solutions to emerging issues, and FFP presents a way to think and do foreign policy differently. However, the multiple crises and social movements the world is witnessing are undoubtedly shifting young people's perspectives on several issues, including on FFP.

One of the issues where there seems to be a stark intergenerational divide is that of Israel and Palestine (Vinall, 2023), which has widened even more since the Hamas attack on 7 October 2023 and the ensuing years of violence perpetrated by Israel in Gaza against the Palestinian people. One of the most insightful lessons that emerged from the surveys conducted for this chapter is that many young people's views on FFP are changing because of what they are witnessing in Gaza. Unprompted, several of the interviewees cited the actions of Israel since October 2023 to explain why they are becoming more sceptical of FFP and, in particular, states' ability and willingness to implement FFP in a meaningful way. As one respondent stated:

Foreign policy will always bear the stains of colonialism, and in so many ways just continue to reinforce colonial power structures and alliances. We're seeing this happen in real time right now as Western powers flock together to protect Israel ... Many of these countries boast their own 'feminist foreign policy'. However, it never seems to apply when it challenges their own interests. In comparing the moral outrage and ongoing support granted to Ukraine versus the treatment of Palestinians, we see a perfect illustration of the way that the language of feminism is so often co-opted and manipulated. (Respondent 21, 2023)

While not all young people see this issue in the same light, from the mass mobilization of pro-Palestinian students on college campuses in Spring 2024, it would seem that young people are far more radical and vocal in their views on foreign policy than older generations. It is no wonder then that many young people are feeling disheartened and jaded about the state of foreign policy in general, and the potential of FFP in particular, since 7 October 2023.

Another change that is shifting young people's views on FFP is the rise of populism and the increasing return to right-wing politics that is currently happening globally (Whitehead, 2023). This shift in political power is seen as an existential threat to FFP, and young people are concerned that FFP will be a short-lived project and the victim of passing or limited political will. As one respondent noted:

There is a misunderstanding of [feminist foreign policy] as a bipartisan issue — associated with a certain progressive nature. While it is progressive, it should not be viewed solely as that. [Feminist foreign policy] is beneficial

to progressives, conservatives, and everyone in between. Principles of feminism are universal, and if packaged in the right way, opponents can come to terms with understanding that. (Respondent 9, 2023)

While another said:

One of the main challenges that I see for feminist foreign policies are that their development and implementation are dependent on government's political agendas. In many instances, governments can eliminate or reformulate a feminist foreign policy to further align with their political ideologies or not. So, feminist foreign policy can be revoked if a more conservative or alt-right government ascends in many democracies ... A clear example of this is how in many feminist foreign policies there appears to still be a strict gender binary understanding erasing and eliminating spaces for queer and gender non-binary and non-conforming representation and approaches to progress and justice mechanisms. (Respondent 11, 2023)

The global rise of the far-right in politics, reinforced by well-funded and strategic anti-gender movements, is not only challenging the aspirations of FFP but shaping young people's views and relationship to feminism and gender equity. Young people are witnessing the influence of right-wing populism among their peers, with young men now supporting far-right political parties at unprecedented rates, and at rates higher than young women (Dickson et al, 2024). This means that not only are young people well placed to understand first-hand the challenges that right-wing populism poses to feminist progress, but they are key allies in confronting the influence of regressive politics among their peers.

Lesson 4: The necessity of nuance

FFP is hard to define because of the multiple feminisms that exist within it. Many of the respondents were particularly thoughtful about this nuance, with some framing this as a challenge, concerned that the lack of a singular unifying definition may lead to fragmentation and uncertainty:

The term 'feminist' is feminist foreign policy's greatest strength and greatest weakness. Although naming a foreign policy – a foundational policy for the state – as feminist sends a message that the state is prioritizing feminism, it is not always clear what feminism means in context. For critics, even if they agree with the policy content, the term 'feminist' is becoming increasingly politicized as an ideology. (Respondent 2, 2023)

When I think of ‘feminist foreign policy’ it feels like more of a buzz word used in government, and I see a disconnect between how ‘feminist’ is defined by government and by activists. Of course there are many feminisms, but the ambiguity of the term ‘feminist’ in ‘feminist foreign policy’ allows governments to set the parameters of what can be considered feminist. (Respondent 6, 2023)

However, others instead saw the vague and broad definition of FFP as an opportunity to incorporate multiple feminist approaches and perspectives under one umbrella. One respondent reflected that ‘if we want to make space for all women and gender experts to shape feminist foreign policy this should include women [from] differing views, who may come from rural communities, or from more traditionalist backgrounds, who are often excluded from the conversation and decision-making processes’ (Respondent 5, 2023).

By the same token, young people are not monoliths, and while age and generation are certainly defining characteristics of how we move through the world, young people have multiple identities which shape their views on FFP. Young people are very aware of this and often push back on the idea that there is a singular ‘youth voice’, and instead, advocate for a system where all voices and perspectives are held with equal weight and importance.

When questioned further, some interviewees thought that this lack of nuance was driven by those who currently shape and define FFP, which young people perceive to be a homogenous and powerful group. One respondent captures that sentiment well by stating:

Oftentimes, those that get to shape feminist foreign policy are those within a very small circle. They are the officials who work within the governments adopting them, and they are the NGO [non-governmental organizations] workers who dedicate themselves to engaging on these topics. Often, the latter are only able to do so with funding from the former, creating a cycle where primarily Western and interrelated voices are feeding into this process. (Respondent 4, 2023)

Opening the FFP project to more diversity of thought, experience, and identity will result in much needed nuance within FFP itself. Just as there is no singular feminism, there is no singular definition of FFP. This nuance is critical to allow for a balance between the multiple feminisms that exist within FFP and the multiple perspectives and views of young people that should help shape it.

Lesson 5: Growing backlash to feminism

When asked about the challenges currently facing FFP, every respondent identified the growing backlash against feminist movements as an existential

threat not only against FFP but also against women's rights and gender equity. Many are concerned that this backlash is succeeding in dampening the potential of FFP. As one respondent put it: 'Feminist foreign policy must address the issue of being too radical for the people who would oppose it, and not nearly radical enough for those who truly identify with intersectional feminist theory and movement building' (Respondent 16, 2023).

Well-funded anti-feminist movements are growing (such as anti-gender ideology movements, anti-2SLGBTQIA+ efforts, and the rise of the manosphere and backlash against feminism in online spaces) and they are keenly aware of the need for intergenerational buy-in for their movements' longevity and success. They are therefore specifically targeting young men and boys with dangerous and harmful messaging about feminism and women's rights. In a recent study conducted by the King's Global Institute for Women's Leadership (Campbell et al, 2024), research showed that men and boys from Gen Z (born between 1995 and 2010) are more likely than baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) to believe that feminism has done more harm than good. Many young men and boys openly admire personalities like Andrew Tate and Jordan Peterson³ and take up their harmful views on masculinity and gender roles (Booth, 2024). However, this same research also indicates that there is a growing divide between young men and young women in Gen Z on ideas of feminism and gender equality, and that most men and boys of this generation still think that feminism has done more good than harm.

Young gender equity advocates recognize this threat and see it among their peers. Many of the respondents identified the anti-gender movement not just as a theoretical threat to FFP, but also as a security risk to those who work on feminist issues:

Growing and well-funded anti-gender movements also pose a threat. These movements pose a safety threat to activists, public servants, and politicians advancing feminist foreign policy. Their ability to sway popular opinion through disinformation and to impact elections can also pose a threat to the re-election of governments advancing feminist foreign policy. (Respondent 14, 2023)

The anti-feminist movement is a real and tangible threat to FFP, women's rights, and gender equity, and the movement is strategic with how they are leveraging intergenerational solidarity to achieve their goals. To counteract the impact of the anti-feminist movement, the FFP community must become equally aware of intergenerational dynamics and see building solidarity with young people as a strategic advantage and existential necessity in an increasingly masculinized and *misogynized* environment.

Lesson 6: How to meaningfully include youth

All respondents said that they did not feel meaningfully engaged in the development and implementation of FFP, despite being interested and willing to participate. I will repeat that because it is worth reading twice: *None of the participants for this chapter felt that they belonged in the FFP project.*

Many do not have opportunities to engage, and when these limited opportunities do appear, they are unfunded, ad hoc, extractive, or tokenistic. They also find that the opportunities offered to them are not tailored or relevant to their needs or experience. For example, young people often find that the only engagement mechanisms offered to them are mentorship programmes, whether they are wanted or not. While mentorship can be helpful, and certainly has its place in supporting young people, it often comes with an assumption that young people are only present to learn and are not leaders, nor have any contribution to make in their own right. What young people want and require is a platform for their leadership to be recognized and funding for their work:

Meaningful engagement can't start and end with consultation. Governments looking to meaningfully engage youth should think about core funding to youth-led organizations that advance their feminist foreign policy priorities, providing compensation for youth contributions to policy processes recognizing that many youth volunteer their time to contribute, looking internally at how youth are being engaged in their own institutions, and ensuring policy implementation is transparent so youth can hold their governments accountable. (Respondent 12, 2023).

When asked how they would like to be meaningfully engaged in FFP, and by the FFP community, the recommendations made were the same good practices for the meaningful participation of women, civil society, and grassroots organizations, which those within the FFP community are already familiar with and advocate for. These include early and frequent engagement, predictable and sustainable funding, and creating meaningful relationships and partnerships. It also requires recognizing the expertise of young people as more than just experts on youth. It is not uncommon for young people to be invited to speak at events on a thematic issue related to peace and security, only to be asked solely about engaging young people. Yes, young people care about youth engagement, but they also have significant expertise that they are eager to share. We would not be comfortable with inviting a woman expert on peace and security to an event and then only asking her about gender issues. So why do we accept it for young people? Working with young people does not require recreating the wheel, it merely requires that their contributions and leadership are recognized, and that they are then welcomed as equals in the movement.

Conclusion

These six lessons – of feminism’s radical roots, addressing colonialism, adapting to a changing world, embracing nuance, being strong in the face of backlash, and maintaining meaningful solidarity – are not new lessons to the FFP community. They are found in the wisdom of feminist generations who came before us. What matters – and what should be celebrated – is that these lessons are taking root in new generations who want to be allies in the movement. If FFP is to be sustainable, it needs young people; and young people want to be a part of it, not because they are sceptical, but because they are hopeful. They believe in the potential of FFP, and if implemented fully, see it as a way to actualize systemic change. It is in the FFP community’s own interest to unleash the seismic power of intergenerational solidarity.

Intergenerational solidarity first starts with the recognition that our labour is equal. It is then built on a symbiotic relationship that honours the wisdom of our elders and embraces the ideas of our youth. This chapter would not have been possible without the contributions of young people from around the world, and from the OGIP community, who volunteered their time to share their reflections, ideas, and critique for this chapter. This chapter is in every way a reflection of them, their aspirations, their ideas, and their hopes, and may it serve as a reminder that our work is better and it is stronger when young people are a part of it.

Notes

- ¹ The slogan of the Kurdish Women’s Movement has also been used by Iranian protestors in the aftermath of the killing of Mahsa (Jina) Amini (Amnesty International, 2024).
- ² Youth is formally defined and understood as a transitional period from childhood to adulthood, often characterized as a period where an individual’s levels of independence, both personal and financial, are growing, though this definition fluctuates between different organizations and scholars. In United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015) on Youth, Peace and Security, youth is defined as 18–29 years of age with the recognition that there are differing definitions at the national and international level. Our Generation for Inclusive Peace defines youth as up to age of 35 with acknowledgement of the flexibility of the concept.
- ³ Andrew Tate, a former kickboxer turned social media influencer, and Jordan Peterson, a Canadian psychologist and author, have amassed large online followings by promoting harmful masculine ideals and opposing feminism and gender-inclusivity. Through their platforms, they normalize misogyny, shaping a digital culture that is hostile to feminism and gender equity.

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Learning from the Majority World: Decolonial Feminisms to Build Feminist Foreign Policies

Kirthi Jayakumar

Introduction

Current and past feminist foreign policies (FFPs) adopted by states focus on the bare minimum of providing aid, enhancing women's participation in select areas, and pursuing gender equality. These FFPs reflect state feminism, a type of feminism that is created or approved by the government of a state (Hernes, 1987). States use the word 'feminist' in ways that produce a universal approach to gender equality, which is an anathema to the idea of a decolonial feminism, which challenges colonial, patriarchal systems by centring the experiences, knowledge, and resistance of marginalized feminists, particularly in the majority world, while rejecting Eurocentric feminist frameworks. Feminist thinkers and practitioners have long been 'dissatisfied with moral universalisms, which are often premised on particular, masculinist accounts of what it means to be human, and with moral particularisms that are premised on accepting the dominant, patriarchal norms of culture as equivalent to culture itself' (Hutchings, 2013: 7).

FFPs present a difficult reminder that the colonial legacy is alive and well: be that in the provision of aid (Chiba and Heinrich, 2019) or the heavy emphasis on an add-woman-and-stir approach, with a limited focus on intersectionality in practice. Without attempting to interrogate, let alone dismantle these institutions, I contend that a state-led foreign policy *cannot* be feminist in the transformational sense of the term. Instead, such policies at best reflect feminist co-option to produce, in Verges' (2021) words, 'civilizational feminism' by not interrogating the state itself as a deeply patriarchal institution. Feminist analyses of the militarized, patriarchal state

raise questions about the validity of the state as holding a monopoly of security (Steans and Tepe-Belfrage, 2016), which makes it useful to look at and learn from the practice of non-state actors including feminist movements and activists around the world.

While the label ‘feminist foreign policy’ may have been coined and used in 2014 for the first time, this chapter argues that feminism in foreign policies has a longer lineage through practice. They can be observed in practice and action, especially across the majority world, throughout history. Feminist activists and movements ‘have always pushed boundaries set by the state, by men, by the powerful, and in doing so, laid the foundations for a new world’ (Olufemi, 2020: 11). Women have collectively mobilized to respond to, resist, address, and dismantle colonialism and patriarchy, and have resisted the erasure of and dominance over their communities. They have interrogated power and explored alternative modes for governance that are neither shaped nor motivated by violence. The proliferation of FFPs signals a commitment to another world order (Scheyer and Kumskova, 2019). The rich wisdom from women’s movements and collective action in shaping and implementing particular aspects of foreign policy such as land sovereignty, governance, partnerships beyond borders, across the majority world constitutes knowledge that we must turn to in imagining and reconceptualizing FFPs.

This chapter moves away from state engagements with FFP towards the lived experiences and actions of women in the majority world through their movements and mobilizations, which offer us valuable lessons for rethinking FFP. This chapter explores examples of *practices* of foreign policy from across the majority world, informed by a variety of *feminisms*. A caveat: the majority world is neither a homogenous monolith, nor its feminisms studied through a hagiographic lens. The majority world is an assemblage of feminisms and actors operating across feminist movements that should not be held up to a higher standard than the masculinized world of foreign policy.

Here, I showcase four examples of feminist organizing and activism of the majority world that predate state-made FFPs. These examples present actions such as resisting colonialism, extractivism, and occupation, and reimagining the world order. Taken together, they highlight the state-centric nature of FFPs to date and show what FFP could learn if it expanded its vision to consider the achievements and efforts of feminist movements. I begin by considering more generally how feminists in the majority world address decoloniality in theory and practice.

Feminists in the majority world: decolonial approaches to feminist foreign policy

All feminisms interrogate power at some level, even if they may differ in terms of their definition, views, or approaches. Accordingly, to qualify as

feminist, foreign policy should strive to interrogate power (see especially Kezie-Nwoha, [Chapter 3](#), and Kremer and Tabbasam, [Chapter 9](#)). Across the majority world, some of the most enduring manifestations of power include settler colonialism, occupation, extractivism, and militarism, oftentimes enacted and furthered by powerful states, multilateral coalitions, and regional and international organizations.

Historically, several feminist movements in the majority world have questioned power by resisting structural and systemic violence ([Kusnierkiewicz, 2019](#)). They have sought to overcome oppression on the basis of gender, class, race, and sexuality, which originated from colonialism and continues to be entrenched in the capitalistic world system of power ([Lugones, 2010](#)). These feminist movements have resisted what [Lugones \(2008\)](#) called the ‘modern-colonial gender system’, which refers to the dominance of heteronormativity and patriarchy in societies where social relations are reordered based on sex, gender, and sexuality. A critical component of these efforts has been the act of subverting externally imposed systems and structures, while holding their own by protecting their lands and resources, practices and ways of life, and worldviews.

I argue that this feminist subversion is a form of foreign policy in action, especially when such subversion resists colonialism, extractivism, appropriation of land and resources, and measures that threatened to erase whole communities and ethnic lines. At its foundation, such subversion concerns the assertion of these feminist movements’ agency to exist, practice their ways of life, and to pursue their worldviews in the face of erasure and colonial dominance. To interpret the efforts of feminist movements across the majority world throughout history as FFP in action is not to practice presentism, but rather to show that the subversive efforts of feminist movements world over, throughout history, have actually been forms of FFP. By reclaiming land from colonial clutches, feminist movements have asserted their communities’ sovereignty over their lands. By resisting the drain of their resources through practices like food sovereignty, feminist movements have fought extractivism and instead asserted long-held traditional practices and knowledge. I consider these powerful forms of foreign policy in practice, for these movements have resisted imperialistic forces that sought to overwrite their ways of living and doing to shape the world order and its institutions (including state-led foreign policy) that endure today. History shows that subversion has always existed, and that women have been at the forefront in many such endeavours. In the words of Lola [Olufemi \(2020: 11\)](#):

Being robbed of history situates feminism elsewhere. It prevents us from thinking of how to do activism and community work in our own lives. It turns the history of feminism ... into a linear narrative of linear progress led by middle class white women and flattens the complex

and interconnected ways that radical grassroots groups transformed their communities, and in doing so, expanded what it means to be feminist. When this history is actively erased, not only do we lose out on valuable knowledge, we also lose the ability to learn from, expand on, and continue the legacy that was forged through struggle ... [It] teaches those of us engaged in feminist organizing that we are not the first and will not be the last, we are simply a continuation of everything that has come before us: Our task is to persist.

Feminist movements have not only found ways to organize outside the template of the state but have also been successful at it. Their mobilization and impact offer valuable insights on what it means to truly bring in a feminist approach to international relations. In these examples lie wisdom that can help us subvert the hijacking of feminism by the state, which is, many argue, co-opting the idea of feminism through FFP (see Kremer and Tabbasam, [Chapter 9](#)). Feminism is a lot more than merely gender equality or add-woman-and-stir. The examples expanded upon here show how vital it is for FFP to go beyond efforts at inclusion in existing structures and instead to tackle power inequality. Feminist movements have resisted state control and domination, engaged creatively with and used the state as agents to achieve their means, and preserved their traditions and cultures as fundamental to their existence. Their engagement neither reflects an add-and-stir approach nor is it reactive, but was and remains a sustained, ongoing fight cross-cutting generations, geographies, and issues. Finally, these case studies align with the overarching feminist view of dismantling binaries, doing away with heteropatriarchal hierarchies, and acknowledging multilevel systems of governance rooted in agency, which consider the local of tremendous significance ([Parashar et al, 2018](#)).

Resisting colonialism

Indigenous women and colonized women have long practised FFP in their resistance to colonial rule. The creation of the modern state operated to the detriment of Indigenous communities the world over. The demarcation of boundaries and borders either led to their displacement or forced conformity within the new template for governance. In the process, these communities were sidelined, and Indigenous women, especially, came to be ‘rarely accounted for in world politics’, more often seen as ‘static cultural artifacts rather than as dynamic political agents’ ([Picq, 2018](#): 3; see Ballangarry, Ridge, and Thomson, [Chapter 2](#)). However, even as they are stationed at the margins and peripheries, Indigenous women have played a significant role in resisting colonial rule. For instance, women played a key role in overthrowing and resisting colonial rule during the Haitian Revolution

(Girard, 2009), the Abeokuta Women's Revolt in Nigeria (Ugwuja and Onyishi, 2023), the Kikuyu Revolt during the Mau Mau Rebellion in Kenya (Presley, 1988), and the Nupi Lans in North-East India (Henthoiba, 2015), among many others. In all these endeavours, the women did not participate as merely additive agents but led efforts as active entities seeking to protect the future of their lives, livelihoods, and communities. They stood up against economic exploitation and resisted both colonial rule and extractivism. In effect, they were dynamic political actors who participated in international politics (Picq, 2018). Their resistance shaped political practice by pushing for reforms, forcing the colonizer to retreat or roll-back harsh policy measures, and preserve their own ways of life.

Indigenous women's engagements with national and global politics continue to remain etched in their worldviews challenging state sovereignty and the dynamics of Westphalian world politics. One example is that of Kichwa women in Ecuador, who used the state as an agent to deliver on their political rights. During the 2008 Constitutional Reforms in Ecuador, they advocated for gender parity, which culminated in the constitutional guarantee of decision-making power for women in the administration of justice, alongside 20 articles that specifically name and address collective rights, as well as the rights to nature. This was the first constitution in the world to explicitly guarantee the rights of Indigenous women and to grant legal rights to nature (Akchurin, 2015). The women shifted legal authority out of the state into the hands of Indigenous people by questioning the dominant understanding of sovereignty as exclusively belonging to the state (Picq, 2018). In the process, they contested the 'post-colonial state phobia and used the state as an external arbitrator' (Picq, 2018: 5). These women asserted their pluriethnic (the recognition of multiple ethnic groups within the state without assimilating them into a singular state identity) and pluricultural (the recognition of multiple cultural groups within the state without assimilating them into a singular state identity) citizenship, creating what Picq (2018) calls 'vernacular sovereignties and bypassing state sovereignty in the process'. They made subnational mechanisms of Indigenous justice accountable to international women's rights by relying on international law to push the state to protect their rights (De la Cadena, 2005).

Protecting land, resisting occupation

Indigenous communities have long faced settler colonialism through occupation of and eviction from their lands, as well as through military violence manufactured, produced, and/or enacted on their lands. These events have erased Indigenous communities, their traditions and practices, and ways of life. Food sovereignty has been an effective way for these communities to hold and protect their territories. It refers to the knowledge

of native species present on the land and the type of seeds that are appropriate to plant in each territory and the specific methods to be followed in doing so (Cherofsky, 2013). The practice has been developed over several years as part of their right to control the use of their territories, and became law under common Article 1 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant of the Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, which affirms that no people shall be deprived of their means of subsistence (Cherofsky, 2013).

Typically, the role of women is central to food sovereignty. Rather than a stereotypical or essentialist function, women in several Indigenous communities play this role because of the traditional knowledge they hold and their deep connection to the earth (Cherofsky, 2013). They are often the primary food producers. Part of this involves preserving their communities' rights to food sovereignty (Vivas, nd). For instance, Guaraní women from Paraguay conserve native varieties of plants and spread awareness on agroecology to resist large-scale industrial farming, genetic modification of food crops, and seed patents (Dominguez, 2018). Maasai women in Kenya have cultivated vegetable farms within their homes and created greenhouses to cultivate crops with less water to build resilience in the face of climate change (Makoye, 2024). Guajajara, Ka'apor, and Awa-Guaja women in Brazil protect large swathes of land to conserve traditional crop cover (Loures and Sax, 2020). Xicana women in South Central, Los Angeles, established a women's cooperative to support each other to cultivate edible and medicinal plants in their territories, to resist their supplantation, and to protect the integrity of their lands (Juarez, 2010). The Sivirú community in the Colombian Pacific has relied on generation of women's traditional knowledge in cultivating and nurturing home gardens in their region, which has helped feed and nurture their communities (Turner et al, 2022).

Food sovereignty is a powerful form of resistance to the systemic displacement and erasure of Indigenous communities, a phenomenon as old as colonialism. Contemporary challenges like climate change are also fast showing us how our return to Indigenous agricultural practices might be the only way to save ourselves from a rapidly denuding planet. Indigenous women's practice of food sovereignty is deeply wedded to the idea of preservation, not just their own communities, but of all of life on earth. They fight capitalistic and neoliberal structures that dominate over their lives, livelihoods, and resources, and in the face of these oppressive systems, food sovereignty helps them reaffirm their right to self-determination.

Mobilizing for change through partnerships

Feminist groups have long found community beyond and in spite of borders, mobilizing transnationally in demonstrations of solidarity. In engaging

across lines of nationality, citizenship, ethnicity, race, colour, caste, and class, these women enact diplomacy in their dialogues with one another, foreign policies in defining their engagement with each other, and building communities of practice on shared interests and alignments grounded in feminist thinking. One example of this is the Radical Grandmothers of Thailand, a group of Isaan activists and organizers from north-eastern Thailand, who are actively involved in resisting the Tungkhum Ltd (TKL) gold mine in Na Nong Bong village in Loei, Thailand. Since 2006, TKL has been engaged in mining gold, affecting the lives and livelihoods of the villagers by destroying their sources of clean water and agricultural lands (Mongelli, 2020). Mining has produced immense harm: from polluted water sources to killing fish and crabs, from reducing livestock to forcing agrarian communities to rely on alternate means of livelihood such as weaving for survival (Cultural Survival, nd). In 2016, the Radical Grandmas began actively resisting TKL. They funded their resistance by selling their traditionally woven products. In 2016, a group of women on a study-abroad programme centred on environmental human rights were introduced to the Na Nong Bong village (Mongelli, 2020). When the Radical Grandmas met these women, one of the grandmas asked if the delegation would sell the scarves they wove in the international market while sharing their stories as anti-mining activists. The delegation agreed. This set up a powerful cross-border collaboration that involved an agency-driven redistribution of economic and social capital.

The sale of scarves supported the Radical Grandmas' resistance to the appropriation of their lands and resources and enabled the preservation of the traditional art-form of weaving. The mines closed in 2018 after a lawsuit with Deutsche Bank left TKL bankrupt, and the women continue to advocate for reparations, healing, and environmental restoration (Mongelli, 2020). It is also a powerful example of women mobilizing across lines, and those in relative positions of power redistributing their capital without taking over or commandeering the initiative they were supporting, an outcome that contrasts sharply with, say, the institution of 'humanitarian intervention', where the militaristic intervention produces more harm than good under the ruse of humanitarianism.

Reimagining the world order: women-led communes

Imagining alternatives to the Westphalian state is a feminist endeavour. The modern state continues to carry a colonial imprint in its interactions with those within and beyond its territorial scope. One approach to reimagining the world order is the creation of women-led communes, which are communities or collectives that are primarily organized, governed, and run by women.

In Syria, a group of Kurdish women have built their own state in a corner of the country. Meant only for women and children, Jinwar was founded on 25 November 2016, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women (Sahin, nd). The name ‘Jinwar’ is a combination of *jin* meaning woman and *war* meaning space, land, or home. It is funded by women’s organizations from all over the world and collaborates with international and local organizations such as the Free Women’s Foundation of Rojava and the Jineology Committee. The commune is built on the foundations of a democratic, confederalist paradigm, where the key goals are democracy, ecological protection, and women’s liberation. Decision-making power is shared and rests with grassroots organizations, and healthcare, sustenance through agriculture, and education are offered as a collective pooling of skills and resources. Jinwar is funded by the harvest produced by the women themselves, and their spaces are designed to be environment friendly – such as through the construction of mud huts and the shift away from industrialized agriculture toward ecological gardens (Smith, 2019). Through this, Jinwar has effectively sought to revive the quasi-deserted areas of Rojava, where war has cut water supplies, and to preserve cultural practices of the communities within.

Art plays a major role in the commune. Handcrafted art is placed across the space in the commune to affirm and reflect the strength of the women who are nurturing and building this ecological community. The commune does not have a central figure of leadership, but rather has a form of collective leadership, elected through a democratic process. Selected members share power, taking turns to serve as a leader, and to keep vigil at the entrance of the village (Cioni, nd).

Feminist foreign policy in action: lessons from the majority world

Such examples illustrate that we live in a world of many diverse, and perhaps varying, feminisms. In the four examples that have been presented, we see common threads, but there are also differences in these feminisms – for example, where the Kichwa women of Ecuador took a feminist approach to use the state as their arbitrator, the women who created Jinwar decided to sidestep the state as an institution altogether. A single, universal idea of feminism cannot make space for these diversities, whereas pluriversal understandings of feminism make space for these differences. We do not see pluriversal feminisms currently being reflected in existing FFPs, including those from non-Western states. Contemporary approaches to FFP, as espoused by largely rich, Global North countries, have the ability to set the agenda on what FFP is. They also, through their intrinsic place in the global hierarchy, have the potential to define what qualifies as feminist itself. This

inherently carries with it the non-accommodation and, with time, erasure of feminisms that do not align with this universal idea, which stops at the ideas of gender equality and merely adds more women to positions of power.

Feminist movements across the majority world must be considered knowledge producers which offer insights for how we may shape foreign policy engagements through a feminist lens. Drawing on the examples mentioned earlier, this section takes forward lessons for FFP.

The first key takeaway is the need for a dedicated attempt to transcend gender equality alone as the focus of FFPs. The pursuit of systemic, structural change must be centred for a foreign policy to be truly feminist. Merely adding women into positions of power and leadership has a limited impact and does not necessarily question the systemic barriers for the exclusion and inequality in the first place. The Kichwa women and the women of Jinwar are powerful examples of creating space for feminist engagements outside of the state. These women did not seek to add their representatives to a system that made no place for them in the first place but called for the overhaul of the entire system.

A second major lesson is addressing, dismantling, and healing from colonialism (see also Kezie-Nwoha, [Chapter 3](#); McNamee, [Chapter 4](#)). Most global institutions are inherently colonial, manifesting in the continued practices of extractivism, settler colonialism, military occupation, cultural appropriation and erasure. There are important learnings in this regard to be drawn from the practitioners of food sovereignty, including the revival of non-extractive traditional practices for engagement with the environment and reclamation of land ownership for those displaced from it by colonial power. Healing from colonialism can begin only if there is an acknowledgment of its longstanding historic and contemporary impacts by those perpetuating it. Without this, any attempt at being feminist in a foreign policy context will not shift the needle.

A third key learning is the dismantling of other forms of systemic and structural violence, including but not limited to heteronormative and capitalistic systems. These systems inherently privilege a select few to the detriment of the majority, oftentimes doing so on hierarchies of gender, caste, race, class, ethnicity, ability, age, and much more. As a result, some are excluded by the system, some targeted by it, and several live lives on the margins of a system. Feminist movements across the majority world have long known and affirmed that this way of life cannot be the norm. Their resistance to these harms has involved calling for the dismantling of these systemic violences, on the one hand, and asserting their knowledge, practices, and traditional ways of living, as well as working within the broader ambit of community, on the other hand. In the case of the Radical Grandmothers of Thailand, the grandmothers not only asserted their stand against a corporate mining operation but also asserted their worldviews and traditional practices

to sustain themselves and their families. They mobilized transnationally, relying on the relative positionality and privilege of the delegation of women from the US to support their initiative through both fair trade and advocacy.

Fourth, the future approach to governance and leadership mechanisms under the ambit of state-led FFPs can also draw from women's movements in the majority world. State-led FFPs have been rolled back, indicating that feminism is negotiable to the state. This is, in itself, an opportunity to interrogate patriarchal institutions and respond to them with radical imagination for what could be possible. Rather than bringing more women into the fold without looking inwards on the systemic nature of inequity, collective efforts like Jinwar show us that there are forms of governance and leadership that produce meaningful impact without replicating structural violence. By prioritizing leadership by rotation, participatory decision-making, and a non-extractive relationship with the environment, they actively demonstrate what it means to dismantle patriarchal ways of statecraft. This is not a function of their gender as much as it is an active striving to move away from entrenched systemic violence.

A final lesson from women's movements across the majority world is the hope and the pursuit of softer and gentler ways of engaging with the world that it encourages us to pursue. The earth has been in the stewardship of Indigenous communities for tens of thousands of years and had not seen the rapid destruction that it has witnessed over just the past 400 or so years since the emergence of the Westphalian state order and the Industrial Revolution, which laid the foundation for the heteropatriarchal, capitalist, extractive, and colonial world order. This does not mean that a feminist approach to reimagining the world order must be understood as essentialism in practice, but rather that feminist approaches have seldom been considered and meaningfully involved in worldmaking efforts (Taplin, 2017).

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PART III

**Contestations within Feminist
Foreign Policy**

Feminist Approaches to Foreign Policy: Perspectives from Europe's East

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Introduction

The existing academic and civil society debates on feminist foreign policy (FFP) provide policy makers, academics, and pundits alike with rich theory and an extensive toolkit to incorporate feminist principles into their analysis, policies, and practice. Despite this, the reactions of many, including self-described feminist champions, towards Russia's 2022 full-scale re-invasion of Ukraine have often reflected the realpolitik mindset and application of armchair theories as well as knowledge extraction and epistemic disrespect of local feminist voices (O'Sullivan and Kruliřová, 2023a; Yurchenko, 2023; Hendl et al, 2024). Coming from the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region, we have been acutely aware of the challenges and limits of transnational feminist solidarity and the need to pluralize the voices that impact and influence institutions and policies, including feminist approaches to foreign policies. Most of the prominent voices informing global FFPs remain those coming from or based in the Global North, where FFPs have been largely adopted.

Creating this shared space for our decolonial conversation on feminist policy making amidst Russia's imperial and gendered war against Ukraine (Kratochvíl and O'Sullivan, 2023; Shevtsova, 2024) is urgent to us. We argue that adopting a feminist decolonial approach to build regional and global solidarity and justice is key. Firstly, it allows us to recognize the historical and ongoing impacts of the Russian/Soviet imperialism on Ukraine and the broader CEE and Central Asia. Secondly, it invites us to critically engage

with local embodied knowledges – those that have struggled against the double colonality as represented by both Russia’s imperial violence as well as Western ‘Othering’ and peripherization, epistemic pressures, and erasures (Tlostanova, 2020; Kassymbekova and Marat, 2022; Sonevysky, 2022; Potapova and O’Sullivan, 2024).

This chapter encapsulates our collective conversations anchored in feminist decolonial work on CEE and the broader region referred to as the ‘Global East’. This term draws attention to yet another hierarchy within the Global North–South dichotomy and the absence of the ‘East’ in the hegemonic academic knowledge production ecosystem (for example, Müller, 2020; Krulišová and O’Sullivan, 2022; Santoire, 2023; Stavrevska et al, 2023). We speak of and from a ‘non-region’ located ‘in-between’ the unclear North–South demarcations, often invisible in discussions on colonality and imperialism (Todorova, 2005; Blagojević, 2004; Tlostanova, 2012; Tornquist-Plewa and Yurchuk, 2019). Adopting a decolonial lens to understand how colonality shapes the everyday, we focus on what Bohdana Kurylo (2023: 687) terms the ‘seemingly inconsequential [and] banal encounters’ with Western academia and with structures of epistemic and political power beyond it. We pay attention to the experiences of people whose lived realities ‘can be theorised about by someone else’ but are often considered ‘unable to produce knowledge that could be trusted as “valuable” and “objective enough” for the standards of Western mainstream’ academia (Stavrevska et al, 2023: 3; see also Sonevysky, 2022). These epistemic practices, also present in feminist foreign policy-making debate, are shaped by power hierarchies: be it (lack of) power over one’s academic career, the power of a particular story being told by a particular narrator, or the power to impact policies (Burlyuk and Musliu, 2023).

Although the ‘f’ word is often challenged and resisted by CEE governments, the region is also home to deeply rooted feminist traditions, regional solidarity, and active feminist movements. When Western policy makers, pundits, and researchers increasingly turned their attention to Europe’s East after February 2022, Ukrainian and CEE feminists warned against speaking over local voices, extracting knowledge, and erasing embodied experiences of those long impacted by Russian imperialism (Feminist Initiative Group, 2022; Tsymbalyuk, 2023). These debates uncovered a previously unknown terrain for feminist approaches to foreign policy, spurred by Western arms deliveries to support Ukraine’s right to resistance through self-defence against Russia’s continued imperial violence, long advocated by Ukrainian feminists (see Feminist Initiative Group, 2022). All four of the authors of this chapter have been part of the ongoing debate that sheds light on epistemic imperialism (Sonevysky, 2022) and challenges abstract feminist theorizing. We argue that some feminist work – often written by well-established and therefore

academically privileged voices – enthusiastically champions pacifism and critiques militarism, likely unintentionally disregarding the material reality of Ukrainians (for example, [Hendl et al, 2024](#); [O’Sullivan and Krulišová, 2023a, 2023b](#); [Potapova, 2023](#); [Shevtsova, 2024](#)).

In this chapter, we critique feminist foreign policy making through three interrelated aspects from our collective conversation: locations, discourses, and resources. We understand FFP as more than a set of documents and practices of a few states; like the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, we see it as an ecosystem of policy documents, discourses, activist mobilizations, and academic research and careers ([Kirby and Shepherd, 2024](#): 3–4). While this text draws mostly from our recorded online meetings between November 2023 and February 2024, the experiences we recount span various lengths of our academic and activist careers. We begin with the diverse voices and locations shaping (feminist) foreign policy, the entrenched power dynamics, and the epistemic injustice in this process. We then speculate on alternative frameworks that challenge the prevailing status quo and explore avenues for pluralizing and decolonizing feminist approaches to foreign policy. In this conversation, we adhere to feminist emancipatory citation policy: rather than citing those we critique for epistemically unjust scholarship, we cite and amplify the feminist voices that critique them with us and centre the embodied experience of Russian imperialism ([Hendl et al, 2024](#)).

The conversation reflects how we see our agency and positionality in relation to the hierarchical structures and actors shaping FFP theorizing, policy, and practice. In so doing, we aim to contribute to more plural decolonial discussions of FFP that go beyond the Western core and recognize the need to create spaces of intersecting East–South–West knowledge exchanges shaping policies. Speaking from our position of embodied knowledge and experience in this region, we also focus on the security situation in CEE. Nonetheless, we strive to contextualize our discussion, recognizing the interconnectedness of crises across geopolitical landscapes embedded in deeply racialized and regional hierarchies. We recognize the need for global feminist solidarity, dialogue, and collective agency.

Feminist foreign policy locations and discourses: whose voices are heard and whose remain absent?

We move between academic, policy, and activist spaces in Western, Central, and Eastern Europe, and have found ourselves challenged by the pressures these different feminist locations and power relations operating within them and between them put on us. The question of whose knowledge counts and whose voices are listened to and heard in academia and beyond kept creeping into all our conversations.

Responding to these epistemic issues, we discuss how we perceive and understand the FFP knowledge production ecosystem from our CEE scholar-activist perspective.

Kateřina: For myself and Míla, instances of epistemic injustice in feminist research uncover complex feelings. I think this might be true for a lot of CEE scholars in and outside our discipline. After all, we are part of that discipline; it is our home that we very much care about. We spent a lot of time debating what can be done in such moments. The countless hours of drafting and deleting emails or social media posts addressing various instances of epistemic injustice, softening the to-be-published critique of knowledge production hierarchies, or trying not to name and shame, reflect the limits of our agency and activism in academic settings. Some of us have been told that we have either been ‘unlucky’ to be based at institutions where our feminist stance was seen as not valuable or even disruptive or that we are ‘lucky’ to have seemingly ‘made it’ in the West.

Speaking of location, my immediate thoughts go to the dominance of the Global North in knowledge production on FFPs similar as in Feminist Security Studies (see [Kruliřová and O’Sullivan, 2022](#)). This absence became glaring to me only lately, which shows how taken for granted Western dominance of feminist scholarship has been in my education and career. Be it individual articles in high-impact journals or FFP fora (for example, [Achilleos-Sarll et al, 2023](#)), these are predominantly texts by Global North-based scholars who cite scholars mostly based in the Global North while recognizing the erasure of other contexts or coloniality of FFP. This is not to erase the complex identities and roots of these scholars or critique their important contributions to the field. Indeed, I am also based at a UK university and have benefitted from its institutional support and reputation. What I want to draw our feminist efforts to is the need to more actively seek and support voices based in non-Western academia. The recent book *Feminist Policymaking in Turbulent Times* ([Partis-Jennings and Eroukhmanoff, 2024](#)) attempts to include Global South authors but, again, the East is absent. This is a pattern that the majority of feminist volumes in our discipline share. This also relates to the fact that the East

is missing in editorial and advisory boards of journals and book series and in the knowledge 'centre', which further enforces epistemic exclusion and limits the embodied knowledge available to them. Then we must ask, is the East irrelevant to the turbulent times? Is the East irrelevant to feminist policy making? And what happens when the East suddenly becomes relevant through a gendered war? And why did it take me so long to recognize this? As a CEE feminist researcher based in Western academia, what does this mean for me?

The relative lack of CEE voices reflects the lack of institutions and structural support for feminist and queer research in our countries of origin. This either leads to relative isolation or moving somewhere else where such a position is accepted or welcome. The empty signifier of 'luck' or lack thereof further reveals a peculiar position CEE women researchers occupy in academia. Being the 'lucky' Eastern European academic based in the 'West' carries a lot of challenges. Some time ago I challenged an openly pro-Russian scholar delivering a guest lecture at my university. I was, predictably, patronized by them by being told we Eastern Europeans should 'get over' the past, meaning Russian imperialism. My colleagues worried about me being emotionally upset, and I couldn't help but feel that my arguments were minimized because of my perceived emotional response to this scholar. We all – including me – subsequently moved on from that discussion.

Mila: In the past two years, I have also noticed a significant spike in interest in FFP towards Ukraine from Western scholars, PhDs, policy makers, and civil society, who often lack the knowledge of this 'non-region' and many use the war as an academic opportunity. Similarly, this also happened in former Yugoslavia. On the one hand, it is vital to support knowledge exchange through initiatives such as pairing Western and Ukrainian/CEE scholars (see, for example, Shevchuk and Duncanson, 2025) as well as organizing events such as FFP workshops focused on Ukraine, which informed the policy paper 'Building Back Better for Everyone' (Lomonosova and Provan, 2024). These initiatives remind us of the fact that feminist and FFP research gets funded predominantly in and by Western and Northern Europe.

On the other hand, this ‘Eastern turn’ is permeated with a tendency to apply Western feminist theories, including the postcolonial lens, regardless of the gendered reality and imperial nature of Russia’s war against Ukraine (see [Mäliksoo, 2023](#)). CEE and especially Ukrainian feminists and scholars have clearly and loudly protested this and there is now sufficient literature that shows Russia is an imperial aggressor aiming to subjugate Ukraine and warns against portraying Ukraine and CEE as weak and illiberal through Russia-centric analyses ([Oksamytna, 2023](#): 498; see also [Burlyuk and Musliu, 2023](#); [Hendl et al, 2024](#)). So, the critique is out there, and we have hoped this would lead to more critical self-reflections which should be inherent to feminist practices.

Still, some feminist scholarship continues to criticise FFP countries for sending weapons to Ukraine in support of their self-defence. Others who support self-defence increasingly treat Ukraine as a case study in disengaged analysis that extracts local knowledge to claim epistemic authority for the Western armchair theorizing about self-defence, anti-militarism, or FFP. There are also post-colonial FFP texts which point at Central Europe’s racism towards refugees from Ukraine but fail to dig deeper and explore how the racialization of Europe’s East is reproduced through exploitation via cheap labour, sex work, or surrogate motherhood, and how it relates to Western feminist policy making. It is easy to condemn Poland and Hungary as racist and homophobic. While I do not wish to deny these issues, I believe feminists should not engage in a lazy critique that speaks and theorizes ‘over’ the region and overlooks or extracts local knowledge to make a conclusion based on Western FFP theories.

Engaging with a Russo-centric analysis which reproduces realist theory and renders Ukraine and its agency invisible (see [Khromeychuk, 2022a, 2022b](#)) is another case. Indeed, we have come across leading Western feminist scholars of war perpetuating the myth of ‘Russia’s imperial innocence’ ([Kassymbekova and Marat, 2022](#); [Hendl et al, 2024](#)) by building their text on Russian propaganda or claiming that supporting Ukraine’s military is being on the wrong side of history. From the CEE perspective it seems that too often the FFP scholarship has, under the postcolonial label, been disconnected from the lived experiences and feminist

activism on the ground and from the basic premise that research should contribute to the emancipation of those impacted by colonial and imperial legacies.

On a more positive note, the East–West feminist solidarity clash in the wake of Russia’s war against Ukraine and the Western debate about it has spurred solidarity in the CEE region. I feel that despite widespread frustration, we have managed to utilize our conversations in the past years for our empowerment by caring for each other and giving each other confidence that our collective feminist efforts matter. Indeed, the epistemic injustice has been so pervasive and serious that it has contributed to decolonization debates in the region of CEE and Central Asia and we can see it clearly in the founding and mission of the RUTA Association for Central, South–Eastern, Eastern European, Baltic, Caucasus, Central and Northern Asian Studies. Having the opportunity to attend two RUTA conferences in Ukraine, I can only recall that Western feminist academics have much to learn about epistemic spaces created with care for social justice, marginalized voices, and multidirectional global dialogues and solidarity.

Maryna:

In the aftermath of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the call to actively engage with those whom existing FFP policies are aimed at is ever more urgent (see [Hendl et al, 2024](#)). However, this engagement must critically reflect on several underlying issues that have long hindered the effectiveness and inclusivity of such policies. Firstly, the expertise of CEE scholars is often ignored or undervalued in global discourses (see also [Burlyuk and Musliu, 2023](#)). Unfortunately, it forms a continuous practice in Western academia. This year I was invited to evaluate an academic work focusing on the case of Ukraine, and I was the only Ukrainian among seven evaluators, five of them coming from Western Europe. The *work* in question was not simply of low quality; it also contained false information and multiple factual errors that I pointed out. Yet my comments were simply dismissed and when I refused to agree this *work* deserved a positive evaluation, I was told to know my place and not to question the competence of ‘senior colleagues from a prestigious Western university’. I had to leave the committee and asked to have my name withdrawn from the list of evaluators as otherwise I would be pushed to sign the joint protocol. This reflects a broader,

persistent patronizing attitude from Western scholars and policy makers toward their CEE counterparts, including those from Ukraine. Such attitudes perpetuate a hierarchical knowledge production system, where Western perspectives are prioritized and local insights are relegated to a secondary status. In other words, despite the region's direct experience with conflict, authoritarianism, and the complex interplay of gender and geopolitics, CEE scholars like us frequently find their voices marginalized in favour of those from the Western or Global North academia.

Similar marginalization takes place at the level of policy- and decision-making within international organizations and institutions. However, the failure of FFP to meaningfully engage with Ukrainian voices underscores a significant disconnect between the rhetoric of shifting toward FFP in several countries in the Global North and reality, a gap that Western countries have yet to fully acknowledge or take responsibility for (see [Santoire, 2024](#)). This denial prevents the necessary self-reflection and meaningful changes needed to genuinely address the needs of those most affected by the conflict. Engaging with CEE voices is not just about inclusion; it's essential for the legitimacy and effectiveness of FFP. To become a truly transformative framework, FFP must directly address these challenges and adapt to the complexities of global conflicts in a just and equitable way. Another key issue for me is being a socially engaged scholar. For a long time, that has meant getting involved in human rights activism, especially LGBTQ rights. But since the full-scale war in Ukraine started, that commitment has become even more critical. The problem is that trying to balance activism with my work at the university has been tough – way tougher than I expected.

Most universities do not create a supportive environment for activism. Being an activist often feels like something that is frowned upon in academic circles or not seen as sophisticated enough. Not to mention that a female academic can often be accused of not being impartial or being 'too emotional' if she engages in activism. It adds to the general frustration created by neoliberal practices and intense competition in academia. We need to talk more about the existing lack of dialogue between civil society and academia, and sometimes even outright distrust. That disconnect does not just make things harder for people like

me trying to do both, it harms both sides. We are missing out on opportunities to learn from each other, and that is something we cannot afford, especially now.

On top of that, most people who are struggling to secure a stable position in Western academia do not have the time – or the energy – to do proper fieldwork and build networks and connections with the subjects of their studies. The demands of being an academic are overwhelming. Between the constant pressure to publish, recruit students, and somehow market us and our research, it is hard to imagine squeezing in anything else (not to mention the double-burden of home obligations for women). Activism, especially feminist activism, should not be seen as just a side project or a hobby. It is serious work that requires just as much dedication as any academic pursuit, if not more. But the way the system is set up, it almost feels like you have to choose one or the other. And that is a choice no one should have to make, especially when both roles are so interconnected.

Oksana:

I approach this space as someone who is just entering academia and is driven by a desire to change things and have a real impact on policy. But I wonder how we as CEE scholar-activists who move between East and West can disrupt these places of power. Speaking from my experience as an activist engaged with feminist policy making in Ukraine, I still tend to see FFP as an empty signifier or yet another buzzword. I keep asking myself what actual shift there is in terms of countries implementing FFP in comparison to the Women, Peace and Security framework. To me, the way the FFP agenda circulates makes little sense and risks becoming yet another framework you – be it a scholar or an activist – need to understand to get funding to do projects. And it is based on hierarchical relations – FFP has its indicators that must be met regardless of the needs on the ground in Ukraine. The tension between rhetoric and reality is very much visible in my everyday work. In December 2024 I attended an event that was leading up to Ukraine's Recovery Conference (URC) in Berlin. While many things were discussed, the word feminist was not mentioned once, until I asked about it from the audience. It felt almost like a reminder to the German government: you have an FFP, what does it mean to you in practice? Later, in June 2024, we did see a greater

inclusion of women's rights organizations in the URC space, however, the term 'feminist' was not at the centre of the discussion either.

Another example of how devoid of substance many FFP efforts still are is the donor–civil society dynamic, which has been highlighted by many women's organizations in Ukraine since the full-scale invasion. While bureaucracies in funding and hierarchies of expertise between donor agencies and local activists have been apparent before, the full-scale invasion brought this issue to the forefront with the multitude of humanitarian, peacebuilding and other donors flooding to Ukraine. Their style of cooperation remains top-down, removed from local needs and far from inclusive, while local knowledge of those working in communities is not effectively integrated into decisions and programming and funding ([HIAS, 2024](#)). Luckily, after three years of pushback from below, and thanks to ongoing global conversations about the urgent need to decolonize funding mechanisms for sustainable support of local movements, some international funders are starting to move towards more flexible and localized funding models. However, these efforts risk being erased or minimized by drastic cuts to funding for gender-related and feminist work, which we observed in early 2025 and which risks continuing.

I have spent the past two years speaking to Western audiences about the Russian war against Ukraine from a feminist perspective. I came to realize that focusing only on critique can be exhausting and bring a lot of frustration as we need to be able to articulate at least some path forward. While I have appreciated the opportunities to speak about and from my context, I can't always know much of this knowledge I am (and others who do this work) able to transmit. For so long our expertise on the global scale was undermined or not seen as relevant. When our region becomes 'hot', all of a sudden, we are invited to speak everywhere. Yet, alongside feelings of exhaustion and fatigue, I ask myself if I am not just a token Ukrainian on the panel who was invited there in order to demonstrate inclusion. Leaving these spaces of important policy and academic debates, I often wonder what my impact is and how will I ever know what happens to all this knowledge I try to communicate to various audiences. Do I (we)

even have that actual impact? What do we do with all this critique? How do we use it to think about alternatives for the future? These questions lead me (back) to working with grassroots movements and creating spaces where collective knowledge can emerge from practice and embodied struggle. Still, the challenge of making that knowledge visible on the larger scale remains relevant.

Feminist foreign policy resources: knowledge extraction and political economy of feminist policy making

Perhaps the most pressing issue needing to be addressed is the consistent problem of knowledge extraction or what [Donovan \(2023\)](#) terms 'academic resourcification'. Donovan's work builds on [Bazdyrieva's \(2022\)](#) discussion of Ukraine being reduced to a resource whose 'land, soil and living and non-living matter' is to be extracted in both Soviet and Western imaginations. Our own knowledge, often personal and embodied, has too often been resourcified and unattributed by Western academics. This has taken many shapes.

Oksana: I have recently experienced my personal feminist story of war being used as a narrative arc for a book without my permission. When I tried to address the situation, many circuits of power within academic spaces became evident to me. My intention was to eventually say something publicly, but as I sought support in this effort, I was met with multiple subtle and not-so-subtle restraints, which was quite painful and shocking to experience. Some time has passed and I can now look at this experience with a certain distance, but in the moment of going through it and sharing it with my peers, the metaphor I had on my mind as I tried to describe it was that it felt like a #MeToo moment, but in the realm of knowledge extractivism. Yes, my body was not violated, [but] I still experienced a breach of integrity and a violation of my intellectual and personal boundaries in a moment of extreme vulnerability. When I shared it with peers, I heard – to my own surprise – a reaction which sounded very much like 'me too', meaning that something similar had happened to them: either as activists, or emerging scholars, their knowledge has been appropriated without consent, and they were left silent due

to existing hierarchies within institutions or spaces where they tried to address this. Such stories, and their numerous occurrences, were another echo of systemic but obscured epistemic violence. Reflecting on this incident months later, I realize that this incident had another kind of impact on me: it undermined my trust in ethical research practices within [the] feminist academic community. At the same time, it led to my increased interest in ethical and trauma-informed research practices and emancipatory knowledge production approaches, which I am keen to integrate in my work as I navigate spaces between research and activism, laden with traumatic and sensitive experiences.

Maryna: We also need to discuss an ongoing issue of knowledge extraction, where Western academia and think tanks or consulting companies capitalize on the topics emerging from the war in Ukraine and crisis in the region without sufficiently crediting or compensating local experts. This exploitation perpetuates a form of intellectual colonialism, where lived experiences and analyses of those in the CEE region are appropriated for Western benefit. Such practices not only reinforce existing power imbalances but also undermine the very principles of feminist solidarity and equality that FFP purports to uphold. Just to illustrate this, recently a colleague of mine was offered €700 to draft a concept note for a project on research on Ukraine that a think tank could use for a project proposal to get funding. I also came across several projects in Western universities where funding applications were drafted rapidly to get resources to study the case of Ukraine from various perspectives but not a single Ukrainian scholar or institution in Ukraine was invited to join. The best-case scenario Ukrainians are offered [is] to join the Advisory Board or Committee – unpaid – to legitimize the projects in the eyes of observers.

Mila: I have also repeatedly encountered my knowledge being used by Western feminist scholars who have previously ignored the region, without referencing my work. I am constantly asking myself, why do some Western feminists peer on a topic outside of their scope of expertise? Why do they need to become overnight experts and produce quick pieces on a region they previously ignored and do so through extractivist unfeminist practice? How can journals such as [the] *European Journal of Politics and Gender*

publish quick academic pieces on feminist WPS responses to Ukraine with entire paragraphs lacking references to direct knowledge? Why do they think that as established Western feminist scholars of security they have an automatic knowledge authority on CEE? Some of them have failed to use their privileged position at a Western institution to disrupt rather than maintain the East–West epistemic hierarchies. Indeed, their institutional power is not comparable to CEE where feminist research is still challenged, and European grant allocation is marginal compared with Western Europe.

Kateřina: While I am not aware of my work being resourcified, I have been increasingly uneasy about the mounting pressures that researchers face to publish and prove their impact. We discussed our lack of understanding of what impact our work has earlier. However, being based in the UK, the requirements of the Research Excellence Framework (REF), and specifically its ‘impact’ element, present another challenge for me, and I am sure many others. The pressure that scholars face to evidence the impact their research has on policy creates, in my opinion, conditions that encourage extractivism and resourcification. In this sense, it is not only the responsibility of researchers to resist the resourcification itself but also to challenge the institutional policies and practices that lead to it.

Ways forward

While we acknowledge the complexity of these issues and understand that immediate solutions may not be readily apparent, we view this piece as a part of initiating dialogue. We envision it as the outset of a broader and more inclusive discussion that will evolve into tangible actions and catalyse systemic transformations in due course.

Oksana: When in my conversations with activists and academic dialogue with scholars from the Global South I noticed many parallels with regard to the Western treatment of our regional contexts – the one we discussed at the start of this chapter. What I have seen as one of the responses to this is a turning away from (or, at least, a conscious effort to step aside and de-prioritize) some names in Western feminist scholarship and renowned scholars and turn (more) towards each other. This reorientation might be also useful in FFP

theorizing and policy making. In her piece about the embodied knowledge of suffering, Darya Tsymbaliuk talks about ‘disengagement as a practice of decolonial resistance’ (Tsymbaliuk, 2023: 698). And even though in her piece Darya talks more specifically about disengaging with Russian culture to assert Ukraine’s autonomy, I believe this practice, as well as the embodied resistance that it is accompanied by, can be equally applied to our decolonial resistance within spaces of knowledge-making. Another form of refusal may lie in centring and bringing to the fore other forms of knowledge, produced and shaped in ways that go beyond the usual academic or policy language and format. This is what Sladjana Lazic and Elena Stavrevska refer to as ‘plurivocality’, which both invites a plurality of experiences that inform our knowledge of peace and ‘also involves subverting the coloniality and primacy of academic knowledge production by and through poems, community stories, oral histories and knowledges, gossip and whispers, podcasts, fiction, and other forms of expressions’ (Lazic and Stavrevska, 2024).

Mila: With the Russian war against Ukraine, so much epistemic injustice has come to the surface, revealing how fundamental decolonial feminist CEE approaches are to feminist policy making and research. Most importantly, the CEE perspective can inform FFPs and create and advance theories that will account for the reality. These issues range from debates on self-defence, powerfully articulated in Oksana’s ‘Letter to Western Feminists’ (Potapova, 2023), to the long-standing East–West socio-economic hierarchies discussed earlier, as well as the largely overlooked role of anti-gender foreign policy – advanced by Russia as a direct counterpoint to FFP.

Maryna: To address some of the issues we have discussed in this conversation, I propose the following steps: this list is, obviously, not exhaustive. First, it is essential to foster genuine partnerships that value equal contributions and long-term engagement between academics and institutions from [the] Global North and CEE and other regions of [the] Global South/Global East. This involves decentralizing knowledge production by supporting local voices, encouraging co-authorship, and creating supportive academic environments where activism is recognized and valued alongside traditional scholarly

work. Second, addressing power imbalances requires critical self-reflection and training within Western academia to dismantle patronizing attitudes, while promoting intersectional feminist practices that consider the diverse experiences of those in CEE. Institutional policies should be reshaped in a way that would make them advocate for feminist values and provide resources that support scholars' activism and mental wellbeing. Finally, I believe that bridging the gap between academia and civil society can be achieved by creating dialogue platforms and promoting community-based research. Reasonable and well-thought-out ethical guidelines must be enforced to prevent knowledge extraction, ensuring proper attribution and compensation for CEE scholars. By redistributing resources and creating more equitable opportunities, Western academia can enrich itself with diverse perspectives and build stronger, more collaborative global networks.

Kateřina: Our collective conversations rooted in solidarity and openness are so important to me. This is not the only space we managed to create for ourselves, and I am very grateful to other friends and colleagues who have shared and discussed some of these issues with me. Despite some of the frustrations we discussed in this chapter, regional solidarity, learning from one another, and reflecting together in a safe space have been immensely valuable for me. I hope to widen this network to scholars and activists from the Global South and offer more ways to bring the Global North in.

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The Martial Politics of Feminist Foreign Policy

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Introduction

The rise of FFP in the last decade has inspired hope among feminist security and International Relations (IR) scholars as well as feminist advocates that alternative approaches to peace and security may be possible outside the narrow purview of national interests (Achilleos-Sarll, 2018: 36; Goetz, 2021). Central to most FFPs is a commitment to the implementation of the UN Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, which is now a key pillar of a growing number of states' foreign policies (Aggestam and True, 2020). While each state interprets FFP in its own terms and within its own limitations, feminist ideas – and indeed, *different feminisms* – suggest that foreign policy can be transformed or be transformative as a practice, addressing structural barriers within global peace and security. This has manifested in a range of FFPs – those that mainly address gender imbalances and lack of gender-equal representation in foreign affairs and those that view foreign policy through feminist principles with a focus on diplomacy, development, and non-violence (Aggestam and Bergman Rosamond 2016; see also Ansorg, Hastrup, and Wright, 2021).

However, the relationship between FFP, defence, and militarization presents a gap in feminist IR knowledge production (see Wright, 2024b; and Wright, 2024a; Wright and Bergman Rosamond, 2024b for exceptions). In both academic and practitioner circles, FFP tends to elide defence from key security discourses and practices. Comparatively, the WPS agenda has been adopted by security institutions, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), introducing a range of feminist principles to its standard operation procedures (SOPs). Indeed, NATO was an early adopter

of the WPS agenda in 2007 and has continued to promote WPS as an organization and in its member states, as well as their militaries.

Yet, as a military alliance, militarization is core to NATO. This explains the justification of military priorities and the increased influence of the military in societal affairs in NATO member states (Rodriguez, 2018). At the time of writing, the second Trump administration has changed the US position on the war in Ukraine, arguing that European NATO members should increase their defence and contribute substantially more to Ukrainian security. Subsequently, European states are scrambling to increase their defence budgets and production to counter decreased US military support. In this context, a progressive feminist perspective on what security entails finds little resonance with the military alliance, not least since its rationale and existence rely on militarization and war preparedness. What, then, are the prospects of FFPs as a source of transformative innovation in the context of NATO membership?

In this chapter, we argue that the transformative potential of FFPs is limited or challenged by the demands of NATO allegiance. Several NATO members (Germany, Canada, Luxembourg, Spain, France, the Netherlands, and Slovenia) have adopted FFP. Yet FFP is not promoted with the view to bringing feminist principles into NATO, nor is NATO interested in formulating its own FFP. Feminism, likewise, remains contentious in the context of a global far-right populist backdrop (Agius et al, 2021). NATO members such as Turkey and Hungary (and now the USA under Donald Trump) are critical of ‘gender ideologies’, which they argue corrupt traditional family values and gender roles (see Çağatay, 2019; Vida, 2019).

FFP is hampered by the limitations of states, particularly their shallow interpretations of feminism and those that inhibit systemic transformation away from structural violence, including conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence. FFPs tend to be *performative* and adopt liberal feminist frameworks (Guerrina et al, 2023), where inclusion and representation are prioritized, rather than advocating for *transformative* structural change. A more ambitious vision of transformation requires an intersectional approach to power, and recognition that patriarchy and ‘the historical practice of foreign and security policy has led to a most insecure, unequal, and destructive global status quo that is failing most people’ (cited in Junotane, 2024). The state, as the referent object of security, then, prioritizes its interests, rather than seeking to ‘proactively ... eradicate the injustices, oppression, and exclusion, which uphold dominant and oppressive power structures’ (CFFP, 2021: 3). Many FFP states remain dedicated to a form of liberal politics that demonstrates concern for gendered violence, and yet they are deeply implicated in militarism and militarization that sustain such violence.

To explore the implications of NATO membership and the limits of FFP, we employ Howell’s concept of martial politics (2018), which

enables a critical assessment of how violence inherent in liberal regimes emerge and thrive. Martial politics holds that militarism and militarization are continuations of governance and violence within liberal norms (for example, [Henry, 2024](#)). It captures the difficulties involved in untangling FFPs from military/civilian relations. To sustain our key arguments, we provide three brief illustrative cases of states that adopted FFP: Canada, Germany, and Sweden. Common for all three states is their engagement in militarism/militarization while professing to support global gender equality through their external relations. Sweden instigated its FFP in 2014 as a non-NATO member and then abandoned it, partly in pursuit of NATO membership. Canada, a non-European member of NATO, has limited its FFP to international development rather than pursuing a holistic approach. Finally, Germany, the largest European state to adopt FFP, sought to conduct a more progressive and intersectional FFP, though not free of militarism. Germany's FFP was seriously challenged by the country's wish to continue to militarily support Israel in the midst of the genocide in Gaza, with no regard for feminist principles of peace and security.

Here, we explore several points of incongruence across NATO states' FFPs in relation to defence and gender equality, and the limits of their FFPs to challenge martial politics in relation to two current conflicts that have gendered and intersectional implications: Ukraine and Gaza. Martial politics dominates NATO membership, but FFPs have also been framed by neoliberal feminism, or 'accommodating feminisms', rather than intersectional and transformative feminist interpretations that counter structural gendered violence. Structural violence refers to the inherent forms of violence in social and political structures and institutions that harm women and other intersectionally marginalized groups, preventing them from full emancipation, dignity, and security that is people-centred. Such violence is not confined to lethal force and armed conflict but also includes encroachments on human rights, denial of reproductive rights and care, or deeply embedded forms of colonial and racial forms of oppression as well as domestic violence and abuse.

Situating feminist foreign policy within the NATO universe

Feminist IR scholarship highlights how militarism and militarization threaten sustainable and just peace (see [Enloe, 2000](#); [Cockburn, 2010](#)). Militarization typically refers to the process by which military influence extends into various aspects of society, politically, economically, and culturally ([Thee, 1977](#)). Militarization, moreover, is often understood in terms of war preparedness: preparing the nation for war and escalating military threats, which typically involves increased acquisition of arms and military expenditure. Underpinning militarization is militarism, which refers to a distinct ideology

that glorifies war and conflict, the use of force, advocating for a military build-up in response to a perceived military threat (Eastwood, 2018). It also involves the promotion of military values in both military and civilian affairs, justifying military priorities across cultural, economic, and political spheres (Enloe, 2007). Thus, militarism is a broader concept than militarization in that it encompasses a strong belief in the efficacy of military power to solve security dilemmas, often leading to the normalization of militarized responses to global challenges and by extension the legitimization of war (Demmers and Gould, 2018; Koslicki and Willits, 2018; Stavrianakis and Stern, 2018). However, the distinction between militarization and militarism is often blurred, with Mabee and Vucetic (2018) providing a discussion of this blurriness. Feminist scholarship has shown how patriarchal gender norms and other systems of intersectional oppression like class, capitalism, coloniality, and racism contribute to the perpetuation and normalization of militarism and war, often negatively impacting on marginalized communities, particularly women of colour (see Cockburn, 2010; Howell, 2011; Cohn, 2013). Feminists, then, challenge the violent structures of power that perpetuate systemic inequalities and gendered harms (Cockburn, 2010; Mohanty, 2011; Cohn, 2013, Enloe, 2022).

NATO is often used to exemplify the functions of militarism/militarization; it plays a significant role in shaping defence strategies, military cooperation, and security initiatives across Europe and North America. It demands that members spend 2 per cent of their GDP on defence and has often driven increases on defence spending among member states. Current estimates show that 23 members meet or even exceed this target (which include FFP states Germany, France, and the Netherlands; Sweden also exceeds this target) (NATO, 2024). However, Trump's position on US military support for Ukraine and his demand that European states carry a heavier burden in defence spending – suggesting 5 per cent of GDP – have seen NATO states prioritize a significant increase in defence spending (Sharp, 2025), which NATO committed to in June 2025 at its Hague Summit. Elevating military spending as a measure of commitment to the alliance contributes to the militarization of national defence policies and moves NATO further away from feminist approaches to tackling insecurity, let alone promoting a people-centred security agenda. While militarism and militarization tend to dominate contemporary NATO discourses and practices, there is also an effort to promote what the alliance sees as typically Euro-Atlantic normative values such as freedom, security, cooperation, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law (Kuus, 2009). These values extend beyond NATO's immediate sphere, also informing the alliance's engagement with partners such as Australia, Japan, and Colombia, all of which support NATO's WPS policy. By engaging in joint military activities and providing security assistance to partner nations, NATO extends its militarized influence beyond

its core membership, contributing to the broader militarization of peace and security practices globally.

Although engagement with the WPS agenda has been normalized within NATO, notably through its integration into the alliance's core tasks (NATO, 2022), NATO tends to pursue highly masculinized and militarized policies (Wright et al, 2019). Its specific reading of the WPS agenda as an entry point to feminism reinforces a liberal feminist vision of gender inclusivity that does little to significantly transform the global gender order, rather serving to valorize masculine institutions and practices. Thus, feminist principles have been effectively co-opted by NATO, which prides itself on being a 'gender equal' institution. Indeed, in 2022 at an open lecture at the Swedish Defence University, Cynthia Enloe was asked if there was a clash between FFP and NATO. She answered: 'The worry is they won't clash. They will be made to neatly fit' (2022). Given this approach and the shadow NATO casts on its member states, we question the capacity of NATO FFP states to enact FFPs that are transformative of the hierarchical global order which is rooted in sexism, racism, and other inequalities.

In seeking to understand the ease with which FFPs have become compatible with militarism, which in turn reinforces sexism and racism, we argue that Howell's work on martial politics offers a useful frame for the study of the militarism/militarization dynamic. Martial politics enables a critical assessment of how various forms of violence inherent in liberal regimes thrive (Howell, 2018). Historical injustices emerging from colonialism and empire as well as the ongoing criminalization of immigration in the West are examples of such violence (Howell, 2018). Martial politics views militarism/militarization not as an exception to politics (see Mabee and Vucetic, 2018), but as a continuation of governance and violence within liberal norms (see Henry, 2024) even during times of peace (Liu, 2023). As a concept, martial politics sheds light on the interconnectedness of violence and governance within liberal frameworks, emphasizing the normalization of military practices as part of everyday politics (Liu, 2023; Henry, 2024).

Martial politics, then, centres on power, and attention must be paid to the 'multi-modal process of marginalization (globally and locally) that takes place when martial politics is engendered' (Jester, 2023: 314). Viewed as a natural function of liberal governance, martial politics creates an inherent hierarchy within global politics that impacts negatively on the most marginalized globally, not least women in the Global South. The effects of normalizing violence under the guise of liberal values, such as those espoused by NATO, reinforce the 'global colour line', or what Sen (2024), borrowing from Du Bois, defines as a racialized (and gendered) division of the world. NATO and its member states have frequently justified military activities and interventions by pointing to their centrality in upholding its liberal core values, thereby reinforcing their position within the global foreign policy,

peace, and security landscape. As such, martial politics is detrimental to the prevention of structural violence. Indeed, structural violence thrives as a consequence of martial politics because it normalizes socio-political harms. Israel's starvation of Gaza's Palestinian population, for example, made visible in its ongoing genocide in Gaza, has deeper roots in settler colonialism and practices of population control (see [Shalhoub Kevorkian, 2009](#); [Winter, 2016](#); [Smith and Agius, 2021](#)).

The defence of these values and their contradictions are demonstrated in NATO's position on recent armed conflicts. For example, NATO has consistently condemned Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, defining the incursion of Russia into Ukraine as an act of aggression, accepting Russia as an occupying force and therefore Ukraine's right to defend itself. Israel, a partner of NATO, receives significant support from the alliance and NATO has on several occasions defended Israel's right to self-defence ([NATO, 2023](#)), despite decades of historical violence and colonial occupation in the Middle East. As NATO partner, Israel also benefits from arms transfers. It is notable that two NATO FFP states (Germany and Canada) abstained in the UN General Assembly's vote on a resolution demanding of Israel to end its occupation of Palestine in September 2024 ([Gritten, 2024](#)), even though they have consistently supported resolutions that condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine. While France and Canada chastise Israel, particularly with respect to famine in Gaza in 2025, support remains firmly behind Israel. Against the backdrop of recent geopolitical developments, NATO's FFP states have veered towards interpreting responses to insecurity as requiring increased militarism/militarization. We argue that martial politics continues to prevail among NATO member states, dominating FFP states' security and defence policies.

NATO's feminist foreign policy states: realizing martial politics?

To assess the extent to which martial politics is embedded within or conditions FFPs, this section provides an overview of how the FFPs of an illustrative sample of NATO states can be interpreted according to the following criteria: (a) how feminism is understood in the framing of FFPs, (b) the relationship between militarization and defence in FFPs, and (c) approaches of these states to structural violence, with emphasis on Ukraine and Gaza. Most FFP states within NATO privilege military assistance over other forms of assistance, providing military technology and weapons systems rather than gender-sensitive foreign and humanitarian assistance (see [Bomprezzi et al, 2024](#)), with both conflicts being deeply gendered. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has led to a large-scale displacement of women and children. Sexual trafficking, mass rape, and sexual violence have been features of the

invasion. In Gaza and across Palestine, women and children have borne the brunt of the occupation, especially in the aftermath of 7 October, being subjected to starvation, violence, and a lack of maternal health care. Yet, FFP states have largely remained silent on the gendered impacts of both conflicts, acting in ways that contradict their professed feminist ideals. We argue that the aforementioned criteria are essential for understanding the limits of FFP practices, revealing inconsistencies and contradictions.

Sweden

Sweden was both the first state to adopt and abandon an FFP and, as such, is an instructive case in point, telling us what might happen when a country scraps its feminist ambition in favour of martial politics (Bergman Rosamond, 2024). Sweden's self-assigned 'feminist government' adopted the world's first FFP in 2014, with the intention of 'systematically integrat[ing] a gender perspective' into all aspects of its external relations (Nylund, Håkansson and Bjarnegård, 2023: 257). Sweden's former Foreign Minister, Margot Wallström, signalled that the 'f-word' implied a new way of conducting foreign policy, one that would be transformative yet practical, focusing on gender equality and inclusion as well as normative change in global politics (Aggestam and Bergman Rosamond, 2016).

While Wallström sought to apply feminist principles to transform foreign policy and apply gender equality more widely across other policy areas, Sweden's focus on the '4 Rs' (rights, representation, resources, and 'reality') was from the outset constrained by Sweden's long-established arms trade and its increasing integration with NATO and EU defence structures (Agius, 2018). While the Swedish armed forces sought to incorporate the WPS agenda into its structures and practices, it never engaged with the principles of FFP. Defence and military policies were strikingly absent from Sweden's FFP articulations (Bergman Rosamond and Agius, 2024). In fact, the adoption of FFP coincided with a gradual increase in Sweden's territorial defence spending, as well as military exercises and simulations usually in conjunction with NATO and other member states along national borders in response to Russian incursions into Swedish sovereign space, which was, indeed, viewed as being compatible (Agius and Edenborg, 2019; Bergman Rosamond and Wibben, 2021). Since 2020, Sweden's defence budget has doubled, and is projected to reach 2.6 per cent GDP by 2030 (Swedish Government, 2024). This increased reliance on military alliances and Sweden's commitment to war preparedness became more pronounced in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Increased support for NATO membership and the new security environment also entailed rethinking Sweden's doctrine of military non-alignment, as the pursuit of NATO membership became the key focus.

Sweden's aspirations towards NATO membership also led to the silencing of its FFP (Bergman Rosamond and Agius, 2024; Wright and Bergman Rosamond, 2024). The Social Democratic government that introduced FFP did not see a contradiction between its FFP and NATO membership. Nor did it in a meaningful way analyse Sweden's NATO membership bid or the Russian invasion of Ukraine within a feminist frame. Sweden's FFP was eventually abandoned by the Conservative-led coalition government that was elected in October 2022. Tobias Billström, in one of his first announcements as Foreign Minister, explained that while Sweden would support gender equality, 'the label obscures the fact the Swedish foreign policy must be based on Swedish values and Swedish interests' (cited in Walfridsson, 2022). Rather than promoting feminism in foreign policy, Sweden would conduct a foreign policy based on national security interests, distancing itself from its longstanding support for international solidarity and global justice. While not renouncing gender equality as a key value, feminism was put on the backburner, giving way to militarization and NATO membership.

Sweden's security interests also involved adopting a militarized approach to supporting Ukraine. Since February 2022, and by mid-2025, Sweden has provided approximately SEK 90 billion (€7 billion) in military support to Ukraine. Its military support to Ukraine outstrips its humanitarian and civil support (Government Offices of Sweden, 2025). While Sweden was the first Western state to recognize Palestine as a state in 2014, its approach to Israel's right to self-defence 'in compliance with international law and international humanitarian law' (Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024) indicates a lack of coherence embedded in its stated values, especially after the ruling against Israel by the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Its relatively small levels of weapons exports to Israel saw a significant increase, and at the end of October 2023 a 10-year deal with Elbit Systems was signed by the Swedish Defence Material Administration (Action on Armed Violence, 2024: 22). While Sweden has increased its humanitarian support to Gaza by approximately SEK 520 million since 7 October 2023, the Conservative-led government suspended its support for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in January 2024, following allegations of Hamas infiltration (Government Offices of Sweden, 2024). Sweden is one of the very few states in the world that has not resumed its support for UNRWA.

Canada

Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) was introduced in 2017. It came off the heels of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau publicly declaring himself a feminist. FIAP is a very specific iteration of FFP as it applies only to the development sphere of foreign policy. According to feminist FFP scholars, FIAP prioritizes gender equality and gender-responsive

humanitarian action, aligning with feminist principles of being human-rights-based, strategic, transformative, activist-driven, evidence-based, and accountable (Zulver, 2019; Banerjee, 2024). This accords well with the Euro-Atlantic values that are the *raison d'être* of NATO (see Zyla, 2013). Canada has engaged in some efforts (seen as insufficient by some critical accounts) to address the discrepancy in its WPS National Action Plan (NAP) in the context of gendered violence in conflict and its history of settler colonial violence against First Nations women (Bergman Rosamond, Cheung and DeLeeuw, 2023). Likewise, if we relate Canada's position on settler colonial violence beyond its borders, its approach to Palestine is somewhat opaque. Canadian representatives have consistently asserted that Israel has the right to protect itself to ensure its own security. Despite suspending arms transfers to Israel, arms exports continued due to loopholes under its trade agreement with the USA (D'Amours, 2024). Meanwhile, the Canadian government has reiterated its support for Palestinian self-determination and a Palestinian state, with commitments to supporting 'the humanitarian and development needs of the Palestinian people' (Government of Canada, 2024b). Both positions rest on broadly liberal foreign policy values, however, there is no reference to the FIAP as a basis for these positions.

Canada, like Sweden, sees no contradiction in its commitment to a feminist approach to development and poverty reduction and its conduct of martial politics. NATO membership is the 'core of Canada's security alliances and responsibilities' (Broadhead and Howard, 2019: 426). Between 1995 and 2021, Canadian military expenditure remained consistent, with some significant increases after 2021. Still, Canada does not meet the recommended NATO-set target of 2 per cent of GDP, though it exceeds the 20 per cent recommendation on equipment expenditure as a share of defence expenditure (NATO, 2023) – in other words Canada is spending significantly more on defence equipment since it adopted its FIAP.

Canada is a major arms producer. Since 2022, Canada has delivered \$4.5 billion in military assistance to Ukraine, having committed itself to do so until 2029. Canada's applauds 'the bravery and courage of Ukrainians who are fighting to defend their *independence* and *freedom*' and works closely with NATO 'to help Ukraine defend its sovereignty and security'. Moreover, Canada provides military training and capacity building and will do so until 2026 (Government of Canada, nd, emphasis added). Since 2022, Canada has committed over \$442 million in development assistance to support Ukraine's emerging needs in the face of Russia's illegal invasion. Its bilateral development assistance, framed within its FIAP policy, focuses on inclusive governance, human rights, the promotion of entrepreneurship and job creation, particularly in agriculture, as well as the strengthening of 'the rights, protection and empowerment of Ukrainian women and girls with support for women's rights organizations, political participation and decision

making, and accountability efforts'. Its humanitarian assistance amounts to \$352.5 million in humanitarian assistance, with gender-based violence being prioritized ([Government of Canada, 2024a](#)). Similar to Sweden, its military contributions outstrip its humanitarian support to Ukraine.

Germany

Aside from Sweden, Germany's FFP was probably the most significant in Europe, due to its global role and powerful position in the European security and defence architecture. The electoral victory of the Christian Democratic Union in 2025 and the formation of a new government in May 2025 led to the retrenchment of Germany's FFP (see [Balbon and Färber, 2025](#)). Germany's FFP until April 2025 was composed of a feminist development policy ([Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development \[BMZ\], 2023](#)) as well as guidelines informing its approach to international relations and foreign policy ([German Federal Foreign Office, 2025](#)). Like most other FFP states, the implementation of the WPS agenda was a key dimension of Germany's FFP. Germany signalled a willingness to engage in transformative politics, recognizing the intersection of a variety of power relations, of which gender is one. Initial commentaries of Germany's FFP looked very favourably on it as progressive, since it acknowledged the enduring impacts of global power hierarchies that are both racialized and colonized.

According to the left-wing coalition that adopted FFP, NATO is an 'indispensable part' of the German and European security structure where it sees itself as a main contributor ([Alliance for Freedom, Justice and Sustainability, 2021](#)). Meanwhile, defence spending has consistently risen over the years. In 2024, Germany was the fourth largest military spender in the world, after the US, China, and Russia. Collectively, NATO members' military spending constituted 55 per cent of global expenditure (\$1.51 trillion) ([Höller, 2025](#)). Concurrent to the negotiation of Germany's FFP was a parallel process to develop a National Security Strategy (NSS) for the first time in German history. Germany's NSS places focus on individual security, which is linked to some of the principles of FFP:

We want our security policy to be defined broadly and to focus on the *individual*. Enhancing the *security of the individual and guaranteeing their democratic rights and freedoms* also enhances the stability of the state and of society. In keeping with a feminist foreign and development policy, we are championing the rights, resources and representation of women and marginalised groups. ([German Federal Government, 2023](#): 29, emphasis added)

While this position is clearly aligned with so-called Euro-Atlantic values, arguably it encroaches upon a more ambitious FFP and again our two

examples of recent crises exemplify this. Germany is the second largest arms exporter to Israel, which accounts for 30 per cent of the latter's arms imports. The year 2023 saw a ten-fold increase in munitions licensed to Israel (€326.5 million) from the previous year (AOAV, 2024: 19–20). These weapons contributed to Israel's atrocities in Gaza and were in defiance of the provisional measures of the International Criminal Court (Reuters, 2023).¹ In comparison, Germany has on various occasions since October 2023 suspended support to Palestine. Overall, support to Gaza since October 2023 has come to about €300 million. At the same time, Germany supports Ukraine unequivocally. The position held by the former German government is that 'Germany provides support for Ukraine by supplying equipment and weapons, these come from supplies of the Federal Arms Forces and from deliveries from industry financed from the Federal Government's funds for security capacity building' (German Federal Government, 2025). In 2024, support in the form of military assistance was approximately €7 billion with overall past and future commitment at almost €28 billion (German Federal Government, 2025). In comparison, humanitarian support since February 2022 until February 2025 has totalled approximately €1.3 billion (Germany Federal Foreign Office, 2025).

Conclusion

Our analysis of the self-imposed limitations on FFP as well as the entanglements of martial politics that come with membership in NATO demonstrates that FFPs are not likely to be 'made to fit', as Enloe predicted, but could entirely disappear. The Swedish Conservative-led government's abandonment of FFP is a case in point here. Additionally, the FFPs of Luxembourg and the Netherlands have also been dropped. While Luxembourg simply removed references to FFP, in the Netherlands the government outrightly disavowed commitments to instruments and priorities related to gender equality. Although Canada announced in March 2025 that it will keep its FIAP, a fuller FFP which seeks to address more domains of foreign policy appears to be permanently stalled (see Leclerc, 2025). All of this is happening in a context of increased anti-gender resistance (Eroukhmanoff and Partis-Jennings, Chapter 11) and increased militarism/militarization. One thing is certain, the pressure on NATO members to increase their military budgets, procurement, and production is unlikely to go away, and such militarism has seriously watered down existing FFPs. Nonetheless, as feminists have long argued, wars are gendered and women are particularly vulnerable in war, and this is no different in Gaza and Ukraine (IRC, 2024). Thus, FFP states within NATO and beyond should use their foreign policies to challenge such gendered dynamics. Yet, FFP states have tended to reaffirm their support for Israel, with only Slovenia, a recent adopter of FFP, having backed South

Africa in the ICJ case against Israel. It has supported the proceedings of the Genocide Convention in both Ukraine and Palestine and condemned both Hamas and Israel for ‘serious violations of international humanitarian and human rights law in Gaza’ (Republic of Slovenia, 2024).

In an increasingly turbulent world order, defined by a return of geopolitical tensions, the possibility of war in Europe seems more likely. Yet, this likelihood is premised on an idea of security-making that effectively shuts down alternative avenues to structural peace and security. Unfortunately, as our assessment has shown, in practice and as a gender-just norm, FFP has been sidelined, both by its implication in military security structures, but also by FFP states’ limited visions of feminism. As we have argued in this chapter, FFPs are informed by ideas of security that reinforce martial politics, thwarting the potential of feminist transformation in foreign policy practices. Generally, then, the narrow interpretation of security significantly limits what FFP can be and what it can achieve. In some cases, FFP has become an alibi for reinforcing the status quo, and, as such, it does little to challenge structural violence and gendered harms. This in turn creates a mistrust in FFP states, especially in the global majority world, where Global North FFPs are increasingly seen as (neo)colonial policy exercises (Riviera Chavez, 2022; see also Kezie-Nwoha, Chapter 3; McNamee, Chapter 4).

Note

- ¹ In 2025, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz authorized a partial freeze on arms exports to Israel. However, experts claim that this will not impact the core of weapons trading between the two countries (see Neubert, 2025).

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as I F

Fatim Selina Diaby and Miriam Mona Mukalazi

‘as I F’ is a poem about Imperial Feminism. It criticizes the hypocrisy of European feminist foreign policies (FFPs). We were writing this poem when political censorship regarding solidarity with Palestine reached another peak in Germany after the 7th of October 2023. As feminist activists and scholars, we cannot remain silent while witnessing how decolonial feminist actions against genocide(s) are being criminalized and shut down. Therefore, we see it as our obligation to call out current injustices and, at the same time, give ourselves room to think about alternatives.

Our poem ‘as I F’ is a critique of the notion that radical feminist concepts are co-opted by nation states. Government officials and powerful non-governmental organizations (NGOs) pick and choose in their communiqués which concepts of feminism align with nation-state interests. This sort of pinkwashing only functions as a tool to erase the blood on their hands.

By expressing our thoughts through poetry, we want to encourage our audience to pursue different artistic paths of resistance that contribute to a wider political discourse on what practising feminist policies looks like.

as I F

rulebooks with words that shimmer and gleam
hide the obvious
within borders and demarcation
within bodies and nations
within land and sea

the rule and the books have always been
imperial old dreams

as if official promises
could ever fill
our emptiness
with their weight
as I F published words in governmental print
ever washed
a paper
clean
of its
bloody stains and sins
as if the communiqué
made breakfast in the morning
put bread and honey
on tables
where
families sit
with empty plates
and chairs
never to be filled again
as if the sun awakens flowers
to ask
what new policy
europeans
made to be

as if the wind blows
pink dust
to congratulate
a newly elected government
because we live in a democracy
as if the sky
becomes heaven on earth
inviting citizens of
white supremacy
to rule
again
for the greater good
that shimmers and gleams
in the name of
Imperial Feminism dreams

PART IV

**Feminist Foreign Policy within
the Gender Governance Architecture**

Feminist Foreign Policy Falling Flat

Detmer Kremer and Eva Tabbasam

Introduction

The Beijing Platform for Action, United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, and the emergence of feminist foreign policy (FFP) are turning points in establishing states' responsibility and role in advancing gender-centred approaches to peace and conflict. At Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS) – the UK's civil society network on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) – we see an increasing tension between feminist aspirations, co-option, and policy realities of FFP, which Diane Otto identified over a decade ago in relation to the WPS agenda ([Otto, 2014](#)). Our contribution, in which we recognize our positionality as Global North-based practitioners with a team that holds multiple intersecting identities, interrogates the pursuit of FFP by nation states and how it translates into practice. Our perspective has also been complemented by interviews with those who identify themselves as Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRD), activists, and Global Majority WPS experts working in states with FFP or where FFP is applied to. This contribution seeks to highlight the contradictions of FFP champion states with their existing domestic and foreign policy agendas, and by doing so unearth the possible risks that self-professed 'liberal' states pose by co-opting the feminist agenda pose to perpetuate oppressive systems including racisms, (neo) colonialism, patriarchy, and ableism. As FFP is an emerging agenda during a geopolitically volatile time, we noted the rapidly shifting policy landscapes even as we sought to prepare this contribution: FFP champion states such as the Netherlands have abandoned it following right-wing electoral victories and the deepening genocide of the Palestinian people perpetrated by Israel, which are slowly altering long-standing policy positions and approaches.

By January 2024, 13 countries had adopted FFPs, with a handful of other states adopting feminist-informed policies ([UN Women, 2023](#)).¹ At the same time, there is an extensive pre-existing gender architecture in global politics, that includes the WPS agenda and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Through our work on WPS, and engagement within the WPS community through our relationships with sister networks globally, women's rights organizations (WROs), donors, and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) as well as engagement with the multilateral fora, we have noticed a shift away from state investment in such pre-existing commitments ([GAPS, 2023a](#)). Notably, in 2021–22, 43 per cent of bilateral allocable overseas development assistance (ODA) had gender equality as a policy objective (US\$64.1 billion), down from 45 per cent in 2019–20. ODA to support women's rights organizations and movements, and government institutions dropped to US\$631 million on average per year in 2021–22, from US\$891 million in 2019–20 ([OECD, 2024](#)).

This is fundamental to why GAPS is interested in FFP. We ask: does FFP provide a policy agenda with actual feminist principles, identified by civil society, that complements and reinforces the limited and beleaguered gender architecture that exists? Or is it simply a form of nation branding for 'liberal' states informed by patriarchal and colonial logics that use a feminist agenda to build state legitimacy ([Holmes and White, 2023](#))? For us, this question must be at the heart of considering the role or the extent to which feminism can play within state policy, as feminism, for us at least, is inherently about consistently and constantly interrogating relationships, structures, definitions, and dynamics of power ([GAPS, 2023b](#)). At the core of this lies the question: can states in their current colonial configurations and with specific monopolies on resource and power ever be feminist?

As WPS practitioners with organizational and personal commitments to anti-racism, decolonial and intersectional feminism, we propose that states are unable to adopt a truly feminist stance, and we illustrate this inability throughout this contribution as we assess FFP state responses to conflict, including the differentiated responses to Ukraine and Palestine. Furthermore, we seek to urge caution to civil society, in particular to Global North feminists who are often the loudest in advancing the FFP agenda, to the risks and harm that stem from the co-optation of feminist principles by states. This contribution, however, is not a total rejection of the FFP project, and we note the uptake of FFP in countries such as Bolivia and Colombia, which have commitments to decolonization and 'de-patriacalization', which actually seek to interrogate power, provide reparations, and seek gender justice. Instead, we propose concrete recommendations on how engagement with FFP should strengthen the existing gender architecture such as the

Women, Peace and Security agenda, as well as inform the uptake of feminist approaches, as identified by civil society, both to domestic and foreign policy.

Methodology

Our contribution draws from the expertise of GAPS as a practitioner of feminist approaches to gender, peace, and security. Our mandate is to hold to account, monitor, and evaluate UK and global implementation of the WPS agenda, and to highlight the realities and needs for women, girls, and marginalized groups living in conflict-affected contexts. We do this by supporting and amplifying national and grassroots civil society, especially WROs, through collective advocacy, campaigning, policy, and research. Our work, as a network, is inherently collaborative and communal, which embeds a feminist creation of knowledge production into what we do.

We complemented our perspectives through key informant interviews with those who identify themselves as WHRDs, activists and Global Majority WPS experts from Egypt, Palestine, Ukraine as well as a WPS practitioner based in the Netherlands. The interviews were all virtual and conducted in early 2024. The interviews focused on the experience of FFP in their diverse contexts: how did FFP appear in your work? What has its impact been? How does FFP relate to other gender policies you work or are familiar with? All interviewees consented to being explicitly named and having their words attributed to them, with full understanding of how it would be used in this context. In this article, we have done so to acknowledge the intellectual contributions of these feminist leaders and render visible South to North knowledge transfer. Subverting hierarchical distributions of knowledge creation is core to how GAPS achieves its objectives. We are cognizant of the epistemological power we hold by being North-based practitioners, and the inclusion of the interviews aims to challenge the gatekeeping roles North-based institutions often play in the creation and validation of knowledge. We recognize there are multiple feminisms, and this informs any meaningful engagement on what feminisms can or cannot be brought into multilateralism (Vishwanath and Mukund, 2022). For this contribution, GAPS also draws from its extensive engagement in the FFP multilateral and domestic space, including attendance of the 2023 Shaping Feminist Foreign Policy Conference hosted by the Netherlands and the Beyond Feminist Foreign Policy briefing series, which brought together civil society and academic stakeholders across the UK (GAPS, 2023b). In addition to the interviews, we also conducted desk research, including academic literature, reports published by FFP practitioners, and reviews of FFPs, including those adopted by states or proposals put forward by political parties, such as the UK's Labour Party.

Feminist foreign policy in practice

FFP is a vision of foreign policy often conceived of as a project that seeks to re-envision institutions and governance in intersectional gender-just ways, with an explicit aim to move beyond gender-mainstreaming approaches that hold a narrower focus on representation and participation within existing structures (Scheyer and Kumskova, 2019). We will interrogate this conception of FFP by examining positive and negative trends of FFP implementation. We define positive and negative trends based on whether implementation advances gender-justice. We define gender justice here as a more transformative, anti-racist, decolonial approach to reckoning with historic and contemporary inequities rooted in gender and intersecting identities. While this appears as a relatively binary framing, we understand it as a spectrum which demonstrates how FFP might both provide possibilities for gender justice as well as hindering it.

We have selected responses from states like Germany and the Netherlands, which adopted FFPs, to signal a distinct and progressive global positioning and identity (Government of the Netherlands, 2022) to ongoing situations of violence in contexts such as Ukraine and Palestine because they are illustrative of whether FFP is currently living up to its ‘feminist’ ambitions. Among civil society spaces, there is a clear narrative around different and oppositional and inconsistent state responses to these respective situations. Layla Saleh (2024) juxtaposes the language used of FFP champions like former German Minister of Foreign Affairs Annalena Baerbock that demonstrates the public aspect of this tension, which we have also witnessed within private government spaces. We quote it in full to show the stark difference in language:

At the Shaping Feminist Foreign Policy Conference last September, Germany’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Annalena Baerbock catalogued how ‘Russia’s horrific war’ was ‘above all affecting women, the elderly and children.’ She then explained how such impacts of the war were among the ‘rights’ component of Germany’s FFP: ‘That we guarantee the right to protection and where we cannot guarantee protection, we need to call those who infringe upon and violate rights to account.’ Fast forward to the war in Palestine. Baerbock’s (and other Western officials’) repeated visits to Tel Aviv, amidst Israeli massacres and the flattening of Gaza, signalled support, not accountability, for war crimes.

The support given to Ukraine (United States Embassy in Ukraine, 2023) generally reflects positive efforts that are matched by material support that impacts the lived realities of those living in Ukraine, especially women and girls. Examples of this support include the provision of support and safe routes for refugees, including the right to work and education from states

including Germany and the Netherlands as well as the United Kingdom (which does not have an FFP but as a penholder on WPS at the UNSC is considered a gender champion) (Walsh and Sumption, 2023; European Council, 2024). These rights are not available to refugees from other contexts. This support further stands in stark contrast with the silence and delayed responses in securing evacuation for passport-holders of FFP countries trapped in Gaza, as well as the absence of new pathways for Palestinian refugees (Caroll, 2023). FFP states have also rapidly pledged substantial investments for the reconstruction of Ukraine (O'Carroll, 2023), including €1.5 million from Germany specifically to investigate sexual and gender-based violence and assisting the Ukrainian authorities with documentation and investigation (Federal Foreign Office, 2023). The Netherlands has made similar pledges (Government of the Netherlands, 2024). As both German and Dutch governments have changed, these commitments have been weakened or withdrawn. This risk, embedded in how FFP is envisioned and implemented, will be discussed further in this contribution.

These pledges made to support Ukraine stand in sharp contrast to the slower and more dismissive approaches to Palestine. The Netherlands and Germany foster and maintain a culture of impunity in the current multilateral system by shielding Israel from meaningful accountability, especially within the international justice system, including at the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice (Reuters, 2024; Talmon, 2024). The Netherlands even sought to defy its domestic courts by attempting to circumvent orders to halt weapon sales to Israel (Derix, 2024). Moreover, instances of documented sexual violence, particularly against Palestinian men, have been largely disregarded, exposing a failure to adequately address the gendered dimensions of the conflict (Patten, 2024; UNRWA, 2024). The disparities in response and support for Ukrainians and Palestinians, coupled with domestic encroachments on freedom of speech (Hooper, 2023; Oltermann, 2024) and post-9/11 anti-Muslim racialization (Kundnani, 2015), are clear. The symbolic raising of Ukrainian flags across the government buildings of FFP states and the complete absence of Palestinian ones (Camut and Boonen, 2023) are a public manifestation of this tension in how FFP is conceived of and implemented.

FFP should adhere to principles that align with the inherently political nature of feminism, scrutinizing unbalanced power relations within the international system and prioritizing structural change. As we will demonstrate through our analysis of this tension, doing so ultimately makes clear that even the response to Ukraine itself is not necessarily as feminist as often presented. This analysis also considers the intersectional realities of conflict-affected populations and upholds feminist principles of solidarity and advocacy for freedom, justice, and human rights.

Understanding feminist foreign policy: positive trends

The current momentum and visibility of FFP is one of its strengths if harnessed, as it can be used by civil society, states, and other stakeholders to reinvigorate, evolve, and link up existing gender architectures such as CEDAW and WPS. It can allow for possible alliances between FFP states, enabling more coordinated, joined up, and explicit responses to emerging challenges such as the anti-gender movement (Khan et al, 2023). It could also serve as a calling for advancing a transformative approach to the WPS agenda, with a clearer focus on addressing root causes and systemic inequalities as more robust and sustainable ways to prevent conflict (CFFP, 2022). This can strengthen waning commitments from states to women's meaningful participation, leadership, and resourcing.

The *feminism* in FFP enables more comprehensive conversations regarding power. This includes confronting the power that resides within government as well as the power relations between governments and those they interact with, whether they be civil society, other governments, or multilateral organizations. Anne-Floor Dekker, of WO=MEN, noted that FFP has allowed for more conversations with civil servants that incorporate challenging unequal power relationships (Interview 1, 2024). The adoption of FFP in specific states has contributed to mainstreaming a conversation on power relations. Dekker mentioned that in her work on the Netherlands WPS National Action Plan (NAP) this was significantly more difficult as Dutch policy commitments do not by default consider power analysis.

Confronting power permits alternative approaches to policy. FFP can confront the binary between global and local policies by centring communities within conceptions of security, and considering local expertise as essential to policy creation (Philipson Garcia and Velasco Ugalde, 2022). Addressing unequal power relations re-politicizes a gender agenda that has been largely depoliticized and resituates eradicating gender inequality as fundamental to a just and peaceful world. Egyptian feminist Hibaaq Osman, of Karama, explains it as 'bringing feminist principles into the heart of politics. People are used to women talking about soft things such as peace, but now we are talking about justice' (Interview 3, 2024). FFP enables the inclusion of issues central to inequality that are not 'traditionally' covered by WPS and can complement it and push it further. This includes socio-economic rights, which could enable more joined-up approaches to tackling the root causes of violence as it confronts the material causes of inequity. FFP has renewed policy discussions around the need for demilitarization and anti-war commitments. This is a core feminist commitment, yet one which the WPS agenda has been critiqued for renegeing on, instead of focusing merely on 'making war safer for women' (Weiss, 2011) and increasing the

participation of women within the military industrial complex (Kaya, 2020; GAPS et al, 2023).

The adoption by states of more inclusive and intersectional policy language has been attributed to the increased adoption of and discourse around FFP (Smith and Ajadi, 2020), which is often contrasted with WPS language that still operates along binary lines and is not explicitly intersectional (Hagen, 2016). The adoption of such language enables civil society to hold governments to account as it now falls within the state's mandate. Positive examples include increased visibility of LGBTQI+ communities and an increased focus on and inclusive consultation practices (Demirci et al, 2023). While this enables new routes for advocacy and accountability, we agree with a point raised by every single one of our interviewees: without internal government accountability mechanisms and appropriate institutionalization it is difficult to enforce, develop, and maintain, as was the case for Sweden (Walfridsson, 2022).

A key inclusion that requires closer examination is decolonization. This is because FFP has been the first official policy where such language is adopted, and this therefore poses an important interrogation of the power of states. A much-lauded example is the German guidelines on establishing FFP, which call for states to face 'up to historical responsibility, including for our colonial past' (Federal Foreign Office, 2023). This inclusion is a noteworthy shift in how colonial Global North states discuss their own role in the creation and maintenance of the injustices their policies aim to rectify (see also Kezie Nwoha, Chapter 3). However, the impact of this inclusion must be nuanced (Färber and Standke-Erdmann, 2025): Global South feminists have pointed out that the inclusion so far has not resulted in a fundamental shift of North-based knowledge production on FFP and continues to maintain pre-existing dominant white supremacist narratives (African Feminist Collective, 2023). Staying with Germany, while it is significant that Germany for the first time acknowledges the genocides it committed as a colonizer against the Nama and Herero in present-day Namibia, Nama and Herero communities were not included in the FFP creation nor does Germany intend to pay reparations (Scheyer et al, 2021).

FFP commitments have resulted in new and meaningful resourcing, including direct funding for WHRDs and WROs such as Canada's Equality Fund. This is urgent, as feminist movements receive less than 1 per cent of ODA, and LGBTQI+ movements receive less than 0.04 per cent (Khan et al, 2023). Canada increased from 0 per cent of their bilateral allocable ODA in 2015–16 to 3.1 per cent in 2017–18 and 7.1 per cent in 2019–20 (Sowa, 2023). The adoption of FFP has also spotlighted feminist funding models, such as Mama Cash, MADRE, the Leading from the South consortium, and the Urgent Action Fund as examples (Tabbasam and Karayi, 2024). The additional resourcing has enabled new programmes, with Oksana Potapova

of the Ukrainian Feminist Network relating that a Ukrainian feminist had said that it was ‘the first time I am being paid for feminism’ working on a gender equality mapping project funded by Canada and Sweden (Interview 4, 2024). While the additional resourcing is important, it remains inadequate for the need we at GAPS and our partners see. Feminist movements in states such as Ukraine are prioritized over those in Palestine; and feminist and feminist-informed states appear reluctant to renew funding commitments (GAPS, 2023c).

Understanding feminist foreign policy: negative trends

Alongside the positive developments FFP has brought, there are also concerning trends we and our partners have witnessed. This includes the difficulty for states to ensure that their adoption of feminist policies is indeed feminist and applied consistently. The Netherlands’ FFP was cut after a far-right electoral victory, but during the entire time the Netherlands claimed to have adopted an FFP, the country failed to articulate any policy, guidelines, thematic focus, or an understanding of how FFP would apply across Dutch policy. In Germany, the antimilitarist tenets part of many definitions of feminism are ignored as German military expenditure has increased to €45 billion from 2015 to 2020. Germany remains the fourth-biggest exporter of arms globally and has increased and fast-tracked its arms exports to Israel despite the International Court of Justice ruling regarding the risk of genocide in Palestine (CFFP, 2022; Reuters, 2023). Within the Global North states that have adopted FFP, the agenda remains confined to foreign development or diplomatic policy, or as Hibaaq Osman describes it, ‘a little thing in the corner’ (Interview 3, 2024).

Much of the visible state, academic and civil society discourse, leadership and advocacy around FFP remains predominately white, heterosexual, cisgender, middle- to upper-class Global North, able-bodied women (Philipson Garcia and Velasco Ugalde, 2022; Demirci et al, 2023). FFP appears unable to name and confront colonial realities and enact punitive measures against those that attempt to do so. The explicit example here is Palestine, where FFP states like Germany and the Netherlands have been completely incapable of naming and confronting settler colonial violence that has increased in brutality since 7 October 2023, but which has been a long-standing colonial project enjoying Global North support for decades.

Many FFPs still uphold the largely colonial dichotomy of domestic and foreign policy, an approach which fails to fully integrate the interlinked and transnational nature of most systems of both oppression and liberation. It can also reiterate colonial pathways of knowledge production (African Feminist Collective, 2023). This then replicates similar critiques WPS faces of how for Global North states WPS is a foreign policy agenda, while for

Global South states it is a domestic one (GAPS, 2023b). For example, the Netherlands has numerous programmes training gender units within police forces in the Global South, shaping carceral practices, yet ironically the Dutch police force itself does not even have a gender unit (Interview 1, 2024). This is in addition to how many Global North FFP states are anti-feminist in their domestic policies, especially in areas such as asylum, transgender rights, climate action, freedom of speech and assembly, and diverse political participation. This colonial direction of travel also exists in political stances.

In what Hibaq Osman calls a ‘colonial-satellite relationship with no respect for difference’ (Interview 3, 2024), Germany imposed its pro-Israeli stance onto South-based feminist movements after they expressed solidarity with Palestine. Azza Soliman experienced such imposition when her organization, the Centre for Egyptian Women’s Legal Assistance, and many others had their funding cut by Germany after speaking out in solidarity with Palestine (Interview 2, 2024). This punitive approach directly undermines the political agency and independence of feminist movements, and forces compliance with donor-defined priorities and objectives. Even within Global South states themselves, these dynamics are replicated. In Mexico, feminism is conspicuous in the country’s presence in multilateral fora yet absent in defence, trade, and domestic policy, where there are high rates of femicide or anti-Indigenous racism (Velasco Ugalde, 2023). This is slowly changing in certain Global North WPS NAPs, as the most recent British and Norwegian NAPs illustrate by explicitly including domestic components in WPS implementation, but does not appear to be replicated under the current batch of Global North FFPs (Norway, 2023; UK, 2023).

WPS is already an under-resourced policy area within most governments. When the Netherlands adopted FFP (which it abandoned in 2025), rather than weaving the WPS and FFP agendas together, they were set up to have distinct plans and evaluation frameworks, yet were implemented by the same team. At the same time, the priorities many states have articulated so far under their FFP generally mirror calls under WPS, such as increased participation and gender-responsive relief efforts (Scheyer and Kumskova, 2019). This further stretches already limited capacity to largely implement duplicative goals and programming and misses out on opportunities to leverage already existing gender policies that have been embedded more deeply across different departments (Demirci et al, 2023).

The adoption of FFPs by states creates an authoritative state-sanctioned definition of feminism. Civil society actors have reported already that states with FFPs are sometimes less likely to listen to them or compromise, as they now consider themselves holding definitional authority on feminism (Demirci et al, 2023). This risks a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach which undermines the reality of multiple, grassroots-owned feminisms (Scheyer et al, 2021). The starkest example is Germany, where the *zeitenwende*

– often translated as a turning point, and signifying the abandonment of Germany’s post-war anti-militaristic stance, largely triggered by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine – is defined as a feminist response (Pierobon, 2024). Situating the increased militarist approach, including increased investments into the manufacturing of weapons and increasing arms trade, puts women and girls more at increased risk of gender-based violence (Gerome, 2016; Baerbock, 2022). Strengthening the existing gender architecture is that the approach of creating WPS NAPs permits having both a standardized, globally set standard to hold states accountable by, while permitting the development of contextualized, localized, and specific approaches to gender, peace, and security. While WPS NAPs are ideally such a tool, a persisting shortfall that GAPS and its members have long-since pointed out is of policy coherence: of considering domestic and foreign policy jointly (GAPS, 2023a).

Other words besides ‘feminist’ that movements have used then also become at risk of having their meanings redefined by the state. Ana Velasco Ugalde (2023) warns of the conflation of intersectionality with gender perspective, mirroring prior conflations of women with gender, which ‘dilutes the disruptive spirit of intersectionality that accounts for multidimensional identities beyond binary gender categories’. By using these words and changing their definitions or not applying them consistently, states weaponize justice agendas to perpetuate structural forms and systems of violence and exclusion (Batarseh, 2021). Germany maintaining itself as a feminist state while directly arming Israeli forces; silencing feminist movements domestically and in the Middle East; and undermining the credibility of international law, all work to empty the language and tools communities have created for themselves in the pursuit of justice.

Cumulatively, all these trends point to a more cynical interpretation of FFP, namely of it being a branding exercise for states (Demirci et al, 2023). Many have called this practice ‘pinkwashing’, which Theo Sowa (2023) helpfully defines in terms of FFP and is worth quoting in full:

If it [FFP] remains focused merely on promoting activities that include women and girls rather than on adopting feminist analysis and approaches that counter various and intersectional discriminations including, but not limited to, gender, racial, disability, economic and political injustices. It is pinkwashing if resources continue to underfund initiatives designed to promote and advance equalities and justice. It is pinkwashing if the policy doesn’t target shifting unequal power relations consistently throughout the principles, practices and implementation of all aspects of its foreign policy – including analysis of and action on its own internal gender balances and decision-making processes and actors. It is pinkwashing if a state with a feminist foreign policy

funds gender equality and at the same time supports exploitative trade activities that undermine the rights of populations and embed injustice.

Pinkwashing is useful to nuance the approach states have taken to Ukraine and Palestine (Puar, 2013). As previously quoted, Saleh (2024) made clear a very public action of vocally supporting women in Ukraine through commitments to feminism yet states with FFP continue to vocally stand by Israel with a minimum shift of positioning months into a brutal Israeli campaign of mass violence. However, analysis from feminists from Ukraine makes clear that the flashy branding and passionate rhetoric have often remained just that.

Oksana Potapova (Interview 4, 2024) made clear that despite lofty commitments there is no clarity on the material and political impact on how Western European states are re-shaping Ukrainian civil society and feminist movements. She explains grassroots critiques of this are rising. In addition, Potapova notes that FFP states can support decolonial narratives in Ukraine – in which Russia is the colonial villain – as opposed to Palestine, which would require a sincere and vulnerable confrontation with the deep and multidimensional complicity in the Israeli settler colonial project as well as systems of anti-Semitism and white supremacy within Europe itself. But even with such rhetorical commitments, feminist approaches remained markedly insufficient: Potapova (Interview 4, 2024) details how the large-scale arrival of resources and big INGOs brought bureaucracy and elitist jargon local feminist movements did not have access to. Local organizations that were selected as partners rapidly grew into dominant players within Ukrainian civil society, squeezing out smaller organizations, especially those of marginalized communities. This creates a professional class of select women seen as representative of Ukrainian civil society, privileging those with access and understanding of international policy frameworks (ActionAid, 2023). Potapova – with awareness that she herself is part of this cohort – sees that it is these women that are invited to high-level panels and conferences to bolster the feminist credentials of FFP states. This is despite the noted absence of WROs and WHRDs in reconstruction conferences; the extreme focus on private reconstruction for Ukraine; a persisting failure to consider gender and sexual orientation with the strategic objectives of Russia (Gifkins et al, 2022); and the militarized nature of the response, exemplified by a sharp increase in weapon investments (Tian et al, 2024).

Germany itself states in its FFP that ‘feminist foreign policy is not synonymous with pacifism’ (Federal Foreign Office, 2023). These inconsistencies highlight a gap in fully addressing the diverse needs and vulnerabilities within conflict-affected populations. There has not been a common feminist response to the war in Ukraine, and that when faced with acts of aggression, states will respond through different means and channels without following their FFP frameworks and adopted principles

(Chehab, 2023) or by entrenching more traditional WPS approaches, such a unidirectional transfer of knowledge from the Global North and West to the ‘other’ (O’Sullivan, 2024). The differentiated application of rhetoric between Ukraine and Palestine shows the same struggles around the consistent and universal application of Global North-dominated policy creation, whereas a closer look shows the surface-level application of FFP despite the transformative potential with which feminist ancestors and movements have imbued the word feminism.

A final consideration is that FFP’s sleekly branded and extremely public face risks it becoming a politicized battlefield for the anti-gender movement. Indeed, such was the case in both Sweden and the Netherlands, where far-right gains at the ballot box meant the end of FFP. Without the institutional framework of WPS, it could be an easy target for attack, and with its possible enmeshment with the WPS agenda, further erode the existing global gender architecture. Within the overstretched gender teams within the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there lacks expertise on the anti-gender movement internationally, whereas domestic anti-gender risks are not considered because domestic and foreign policy remain disjointed. This also provides an opportunity to invest in a more robust, institutionalized WPS agenda with a focus on strengthening its prevention pillar in order to be able to tackle transnational challenges such as those posed by the anti-gender movement. Crucially, to do so successfully is to ensure learning from South-based feminist movements that have developed wide-ranging tactics to successfully confront anti-gender actors.

Conclusion

As a self-identified feminist network, we understand the power feminism has as a movement for justice. Now that a growing number of states are adopting policies named as feminist it requires a sincere engagement if the radical realities of feminism can be translated into the patriarchal state. While we note Audre Lorde’s truism that ‘the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’ (1984), can tools of revolution be brought into the master’s house? FFP is, of course, not the first attempt, as feminists have always tried to build more just configurations of power and policy. One such attempt is the WPS agenda. What these agendas have in common is ambitious potential within the confines of patriarchy. The difference is the explicit co-optation of ‘radical’ language within these predominately patriarchal and colonial flawed spaces. As we have witnessed, and discussed in this contribution, this enables states to maintain colonial and exclusive agendas under the guise of progressive leadership.

However, this does not mean a total disavowal of FFP is suggested either; rather its momentum ought to be harnessed to invest in and strengthen existing gender architecture like WPS and to challenge it to go further. This

is why we outlined a spectrum of positive and negative FFP developments rooted in the realities of Ukraine and Palestine. FFP is now here, regardless of whether theoretical musings lead us to embrace or dismiss it. As practitioners, we therefore agree with Anne-Floor Dekker (Interview 1, 2024), that a useful focus is on ensuring feminist approaches are applied to WPS, and indeed all policy. These approaches include consulting and partnering diversely; ensuring meaningful access to decision-making processes; resourcing, including but not limited to sufficient, flexible, and core funding; genuine cross-cutting policy coherence and consistency, including disrupting domestic/foreign binaries; feedback loops to ensure learning across all stakeholders; and challenging and addressing internal and external unequal power relationships. Oksana Potapova (Interview 4, 2024) adds the important call to fund solidarity by resourcing spaces for horizontal dialogues between feminist movements, especially spaces donors and Northern partners do not participate in. Any form of resourcing must not force feminist movements to be beholden to donors, especially when those donors are (neo)colonial states. As Azza Soliman (Interview 2, 2024) makes clear and, pre-empting such funding dynamics and their white saviour/supremacist implications, notes: ‘we have experienced funding cuts many times, but we are fighters. We will continue.’

Ultimately, what is most important is feminist practice not feminist branding. Global North policy debates, especially those around frameworks designed for equality and peace, must be in direct conversation with the realities of feminist movements, especially from the South. Only then can co-optation by states be resisted and the transformative potential of feminism harnessed. As Hibaaq Osman (Interview 3, 2024) said, we feminists ‘want to break [policy] open. We are more sophisticated, daring and political because it matters to us and impacts us in our personal lives. We don’t just need peace. We need justice.’

List of interviews

Interview 1: Anne-Floor Dekker, WO=MEN – a Dutch gender platform, interviewed by Detmer Kremer, 25 January 2024

Interview 2: Azza Soliman, the Centre for Egyptian Women’s Legal Assistance, interviewed by Detmer Kremer, 25 January 2024

Interview 3: Hibaaq Osman, Karama, interviewed by Detmer Kremer, 2 February 2024

Interview 4: Oksana Potapova, Ukrainian Feminist Network, interviewed by Detmer Kremer, 9 February 2024

Note

¹ The numbers are constantly in flux with retrenchments and additions. For example, as of 2026, Germany no longer pursues FFP.

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Co-Existence or Competition? The Discursive and Normative Politics of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda and Feminist Foreign Policies

Laurence Deschamps-Laporte and Bénédicte Santoire

Introduction

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda and feminist foreign policy (FFP) stand as the two dominant gender normative frameworks for states to signal and implement feminist objectives internationally.¹ While both frameworks focus on enhancing gender equality and women's rights globally, the dynamics underpinning their co-existence remain underexplored both in feminist scholarship and in practice. This chapter examines their discursive, normative, and political co-existence by explicitly investigating the cases of Canada and Mexico. We ask: do WPS and FFP commitments by Canada and Mexico overlap, or are they understood as distinct policy frameworks in discourse and practice? Focusing on Canada and Mexico shifts the focus outside of Europe, where analyses of FFPs were previously centred (Aggestam et al, 2019; Rosén et al, 2020; Nylund et al, 2023). Relocating the comparative analysis to the North American continent also sheds light on new tensions in gender norms formulation.

Despite sharing similarities, Canada and Mexico project their FFP discourses toward distinct audiences. While Canada has branded its policy in line with Scandinavian progressive feminist ideas and seeks to appeal to the Global North and a national Canadian audience, we observe a dichotomy in Mexico's policy. On the one hand, it is part of an effort to brand the

country as a progressive feminist leader in Latin America and the first country in the Global South to adopt an FFP. On the other hand, written FFP statements exhibit few international objectives, appearing primarily as an internal policy (Thomson, 2024).

This chapter seeks to contribute to International Relations discussions on the co-existence of FFPs and WPS agendas. We examine Canada's and Mexico's FFPs alongside their WPS National Action Plans (NAPs), scrutinizing policy documents, official statements, and speeches to uncover overlaps, contradictions, tensions, and gaps within these frameworks. Practical insights also inform the analysis. Both authors have been involved in Canadian policy-making processes, contributing to the formulation of Canada's policies. Laurence Deschamps-Laporte has served in advisory roles to several Canadian foreign ministers, while Bénédicte Santoire is active in a civil society network overseeing Canada's implementation of its WPS commitments.

Our findings reveal that the WPS agenda remains the most concrete and actionable feminist programme for both countries. We argue that while Canada's 'invisible' FFP appears to consist of a political rebranding of the WPS agenda, Mexico's FFP takes on a more introspective ministerial approach with unclear links to its WPS commitments. Both FFPs are 'policies' in so far as this is how these governments themselves frame them. They emerge as a collage of documents, speeches, and declarations that appear incomplete, in progress, and not published as a coherent written policy. They also display inconsistent references to existing published policy documents and shifting terminology regarding gender, feminism, and 'women and girls'. In sum, echoing Thomson (2022), we defend the position that FFPs are the result of WPS norms expansion. However, as of 2025, we also observe a global decline in the popularity of FFPs and a weakening in their implementation. As such, this expansion of norms also appears more fragile than the relatively well-established WPS agenda.

Diverging paths, shared criticisms: the cases of Mexico and Canada

Mexico and Canada serve as compelling case studies for this analysis due to their distinct policy development paths. However, both countries have encountered similar criticisms from their domestic civil societies regarding the execution of feminist policies. Although Canada follows the global trend by initially adopting a WPS NAP and subsequently declaring an FFP, Mexico has reversed this sequence.

The WPS agenda stands as the primary gender framework that has preceded normatively, politically, and historically FFPs. Yet both agendas are viewed as complementary (Aggestam et al, 2019: 27–8; Zhukova et al, 2021: 3). Despite their normative alignment and shared goals of rethinking

international politics through a feminist, or more often, a gender lens, governments frame FFPs as surpassing the objectives of the WPS agenda. As such, theoretically, FFPs have a broader scope than the WPS agenda, encompassing diplomacy, development, defence, trade, peace, and security (Johnson-Freese and Markham, 2022).

In the case of both Canada and Mexico, the legitimacy of their proclaimed feminist identity has been criticized by their respective feminist civil societies due to severe domestic crises, namely the ongoing femicide crisis in Mexico (Philipson García and Valesco Ugalde, 2021) and the disproportionate rates of disappearance and murder of Indigenous women and girls in Canada (Deschamps-Laporte, 2021). The Canadian FFP faced criticism similar to most other FFPs, particularly for lacking a clear definition of what makes it feminist and how feminism is understood by its proponents; this ambiguity weakens its implementation (Mason, 2019; Thompson and Clement, 2019; Cadesky, 2020; Morton et al, 2020; Rao and Tiessen, 2020; Sundström et al, 2021). Since its initial mention in 2017, feminist scholars have pointed out the inherent hypocrisies and incoherence of Canada's FFP (Swan and Tiessen, 2018; Chapnick, 2019; Deschamps-Laporte, 2021; Swan, 2021; Zahar and Deschamps-Laporte, 2023). This hypocrisy is notably illustrated through Canada's failure, or rather its refusal, to act on the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. Feminists' recurring critiques also focus on arms exports to authoritarian regimes and the unethical practices of Canadian mining companies abroad destroying local Indigenous livelihoods (Bouka et al, 2021).

In Mexico, the pervasive domestic femicide crisis continues to challenge the government's avowed feminist discourse, echoing the situation in Canada. Femicides and women's disappearances in the country's northern border states have escalated into a national gender crisis. The government's international feminist ambitions are at odds with its remilitarization and lack of progress in responding to the wave of femicides. While Mexican feminist scholars have studied the killings and disappearances of women (Camacho, 2005; Fregoso and Bejarano, 2010; Muñoz, 2011; Alonso and Nienass, 2022), the literature analysing the Mexican FFP is still nascent (Thomson, 2020; Reyes and González Velázquez, 2021; Philipson García and Velasco Ugalde, 2022).

FFPs become objects of norms projection, evoking liberal modernity and compliance with the international liberal order (Thomson, 2022: 173). Countries such as Canada and Mexico also politically mobilize the FFPs domestically to construct narratives that they further utilize to advance their soft power (Zhukova et al, 2021: 21). Examining Canada and Mexico's FFPs amid their domestic political gender crises reveals the significant tension between idealism and practical implementation, which is constrained by national political and economic factors. Both Canada and Mexico struggle to implement this ethical approach to foreign policy. These efforts, expected

to diverge from conventional (realist and neo-realist) strategies, encounter significant obstacles, especially in this time of global crises, rearmament, and backlash (Aggestam and Bergman Rosamond, 2019; Robinson, 2021; Achilleos-Sarll et al, 2023). The prevalence of femicides in these countries highlights their failure to transform their foreign policy while simultaneously achieving justice for women within their borders (Vucetic, 2017; Hudson and Eason, 2019; Scheyer and Kumskova, 2019; Midzain-Gobin and Dunton, 2021; Philipson García and Velasco Ugalde, 2021; Santoire, 2021, 2024).

Mexico's FFP and WPS: estranged sisters, then reunited

The Mexican government has not released a detailed public document that is clearly identified as the reference for its FFP; however, various data sources and documents inform Mexico's feminist ambitions. In September 2019, Marcelo Ebrard, the Mexican Secretary of Foreign Affairs (2018–23), first announced in his United Nations General Assembly address in New York the country's intention to adopt an FFP. Ebrard's unveiling of a new Mexican FFP, following his appointment by leftist President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (elected in 2018, and referred to as AMLO hereafter), can be interpreted as Mexico's attempt at aligning itself more visibly with a progressive global agenda. A Mexican FFP represented a shift away from the centre-right politics of former President Enrique Peña Nieto, symbolizing both a rhetorical and symbolic change in political identity.

In his speech, Ebrard (2019) justified this new agenda to the General Assembly by arguing that 'the Government of Mexico considers itself to be a feminist government ... We believe that gender equality is the basis, the foundation of a society that is characterised by equality.' Here, feminism is presented as an attribute of this new government. Shortly after, in 2020, Marta Delgado, Undersecretary for Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Mexico, published an article detailing the tenets of Mexico's FFP (Delgado, 2020). Delgado's paper presented her country's new aspirations in broad strokes and in English, thus targeting an international audience. Her paper did not reference Resolution 1325 or the WPS agenda. The academic-seeming paper included similar content to a press release published on the website of the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the new policy on January 9, 2020 (Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 2020). Both texts emphasize the policy's five pillars: a feminist approach to foreign policy (international leadership), gender parity within the ministry, creating a violence-free and safe environment in the ministry, promoting equality 'that can be seen' (*la igualdad se ve*) in the ministry, and intersectionality.

Additionally, a 23-page PowerPoint presentation, which appears to have been prepared in Mexico City for Mexican diplomats to use as a reference when asked about the new FFP, can be found online. However, it is not easily accessible and has not been formally presented as an official policy document. The presentation justifies Mexico's FFP as a unique opportunity under Mexico's current progressive government, declaring: '2020 will be a feminine and feminist year: the year of Leona Vicario, the heroine of the homeland, the commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and Mexico's hosting of the Generation Equality Forum' ([Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 2020: 3](#)). The presentation also illustrates how Mexico's FFP differs from other existing FFPs, for example, by presenting it as coherent with internal policies, a sign the government was aware of that recurring critique in other countries. It further elucidates the abstract pillar of '*La igualdad se ve* [Equality is seen]' by framing it as a policy requiring proactive communications to ensure the visibility of women in Mexico's diplomatic service.

Finally, the presentation defines a high-level implementation plan extending to 2024. It encompasses initiatives such as the publication of manuals, the creation of awards, and the establishment of ethical committees. Most of these measures remain internal to the ministry, rendering them unlikely to be publicly announced and challenging to monitor. The plan also encompasses some outward-looking measures, communication campaigns at the UN, and initiatives, such as 'cooperation and international assistance on human rights, gender equality, and ending discrimination'. However, like in Delgado's paper, or in the Spanish press release on the government's website, the language is vague, and it remains unclear whether these initiatives aim to be carried out by Mexico or if these entail requests for outside assistance for their implementation.

Overall, the Mexican FFP is primarily constructed as an identity and an aspiration for change within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Simultaneously, its formulation aims to legitimize its role in the global feminist community by demonstrating leadership in multilateral events and presenting historical and political arguments. However, it is not clear whether this inward focus extends to addressing Mexico's pressing issues of femicide and gender discrimination domestically. Some could critique Mexico's FFP as overly narrow in scope, while others might regard it as one of the few realistic and humble FFP efforts. Moreover, Mexico's FFP could similarly be perceived as investing in its core competency: improving women's participation in politics and government. Despite a domestic crisis of violence and femicides, Mexico has steadily increased women's political representation, propelled by the 2019 constitutional reform known as 'parity in everything' (*Paridad en todo*), which mandates complete gender equality in all decision-making institutions.

The disconnect between Mexico's FFP and WPS agendas

Mexico's FFP documents and speeches generally do not reference the WPS agenda. However, in his UN speech, Ebrard included a reference to a different international agenda by announcing that 'the Government of Mexico will support all the efforts of Beijing+25 and the United Nations initiatives that are in progress' (2019). This was namely to position Mexico's role in the events that marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women and the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995). On that occasion, in 2020, France and Mexico co-hosted the Generation Equality Forum, which UN Women convened. These events came almost 45 years after the first-ever UN Conference on Women held in Mexico City in 1975 – a historic milestone that launched decades of UN-centered Global South women-led activism, which then gave rise to an array of international gender frameworks such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and later the Resolution 1325. As such, Mexico's speeches aim to highlight a deep connection between the current Mexican government and the rich historical lineage of Global South feminist mobilizations. It speaks to a global audience engaged in a decolonial discourse and aims to shift the focus away from Global North-centric formulations of FFPs.

Surprisingly, Mexico's first NAP came after the announcement of its FFP, contrary to the rest of the FFP countries. It was published in January 2021, a year and a half after Ebrard's (2019) UN speech to the General Assembly (Ciudadana, 2021). It was endorsed by several departments: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of National Defence, the Ministry of the Navy, the National Institute for Women, and, finally, the Ministry of Security and Citizen Protection, the NAP's author. This is the ministry that oversees the National Guard, a security force established in 2019 by the AMLO government, tasked with internal security operations. Its inception has intensified the militarization of Mexico and sparked significant political controversies because, for many Mexican feminists, the creation of the National Guard represents AMLO's broken promise of fundamental security sector reforms. Despite its establishment, violence in the country has persisted unabated (Tucker, 2023). The Mexican NAP positions the National Guard as a critical actor in international cooperation efforts and emphasizes that it will undergo human rights and gender training within the framework of this plan (Ciudadana, 2021: 2).

Mexico's NAP does include references to its newly launched FFP in its introduction and mentions it twice more within the 27-page document. On both occasions, it highlights the FFP's existence and utilizes it as a reference point to underscore Mexico's commitment to advocating for increased

representation and participation of women in multilateral organizations and international security forums and organizations (Ciudadana, 2021: 8, 22). Mexico's NAP aligns comprehensively with the original Resolution 1325, encompassing classical pillars and areas of action. However, it uniquely addresses specific issues such as combatting small arms and light weapons proliferation and organizing elections. While these are less conventional elements for a NAP, they reflect significant political debates in Mexico over the past years. There has been a mounting crisis of small arms proliferation and trafficking, particularly among criminal gangs across Mexico and Central America. Furthermore, the focus on elections, considering the contentious reform of the electoral commission, can point to the national political context in shaping the content of the plan. This reform has been AMLO's government priority, underscoring the alignment of the NAP with current political agendas and the government's strategic objectives.

Mexico challenges expectations regarding the creation and evolution of FFPs and the construction of gender norms. Unlike typical scenarios where FFPs emerge following a succession of NAPs, Mexico's FFP takes a distinctively unusual political trajectory. Existing material on FFP directly references WPS only once (Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 2020) but sets the stage for Mexico to play a significant role in co-hosting significant UN events on gender equality. While feminist civil society often advocates for FFPs from the Global North to prioritize domestic goals first, this examination shows that Mexico's FFP does not strictly focus on international or domestic concerns. Instead, it tailors an international agenda to the internal objectives of its foreign ministry while cultivating an image as a Global South leader in multilateral fora.

Despite what seems like a cacophony of aspirations, the unexpected formulation and path of emergence of these frameworks in Mexico offer valuable insights into global policy development. This non-linear construction of policies resonates with the perspective of Pouliot and Thérien (2023), who characterize global policy making as a patchwork process reminiscent of Levi-Strauss's concept of *bricolage*. Policy makers are *bricoleurs*, crafting policies by piecing together available resources while navigating individual and collective incentives and pressures. This intricate process involves integrating domestic imperatives while constructing global norms. What characterizes this complex *glocal* policy-making process is its way of patchworking, more so than its structure and predictability. The belief that policies follow a predetermined order and a fluid process is an illusion. What may appear to be Mexico's disorderly construction of feminist ambitions reflects a norm in global policy making, a pattern also evident in Canada's case.

Finally, Mexico should not, as one of the rare Global South countries with an FFP, face a heightened standard of policy scrutiny compared to G7 (Group

of Seven) and European countries with FFPs. Feminist scholars and activists have consistently voiced concerns regarding the inconsistencies within the FFPs and WPS agenda of the countries that have put bold ambitions forward. Mexico's commitments in this regard must be subject to similar scrutiny and analysis, and Mexican feminists have expressed scepticism about the country's FFP, especially considering certain public statements made by AMLO (Philipson García and Velasco Ugalde, 2021; Philipson García, 2023). For example, against the backdrop of a surge in violence against women during the COVID-19 pandemic, AMLO remarked in a press conference that many of the calls to a central emergency centre for preventing violence against women – totalling 26,000 reports in 2020 – were deemed 'fake', adding that Mexico's femicide crisis has been 'manipulated by the media', thus fuelling distrust among Mexican feminists vis-à-vis the credibility of their government's feminist aspirations (Kitroeff, 2020; Thompson et al, 2021). This cynicism is part of a more extensive feminist backlash against the AMLO administration. Activists have repeatedly denounced the government for its inaction on gender-based violence. In 2021, protests reached a level that prompted the government to fortify the National Palace in Mexico City to deter feminist demonstrators.

Canada's invisible FFP

Canada launched its Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) in 2017, a strategy that prominent cabinet members, including Justin Trudeau, Marie-Claude Bibeau, Chrystia Freeland, and Mélanie Joly, have championed. The term 'FFP' also starts appearing in speeches and declarations that same year in 2017 (Freeland, 2017). Since then, Canada has introduced several new initiatives related to its professed feminist aspiration in foreign policy. These include but are not limited to, integrating a gender perspective into agreements such as the Canada–Chile Free Trade Agreement, the establishment of the Elsie Initiative for Women in Peace Operations, the appointment of a WPS ambassador (Jacqueline O'Neill, 2019–25) or advocating for feminism in significant multilateral fora like the G7 (Chapnick, 2019). The FIAP comprises only one part of what the government considers its FFP, but it is often the focus of analysis as it is the only written component so far. Since then, the Canadian government has often used the reference to the 'FFP' and 'FIAP' interchangeably, which has created notable confusion (Global Affairs Canada, 2019).

The FIAP itself consists of a 92-page policy document outlining Canada's approach to international aid. It is defined as a feminist policy that 'seeks to eradicate poverty and build a more peaceful, more inclusive, and more prosperous world. Canada firmly believes that promoting gender equality and empowering women and girls is the most effective approach

to achieving this goal' (Global Affairs Canada, 2017: vii). Several areas of action are identified: gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls; human dignity; growth that works for everyone; environment and climate action; inclusive governance; and peace and security. Terms such as 'empowerment', 'gender equality', and 'feminism' are never defined and are used interchangeably.

In the FIAP, gender equality is instrumentalized as a tool to ensure Canadians' safety and economic prosperity, rather than it being a value in itself: 'Canada is part of a global community. This is why we invest in international assistance: helping to eradicate poverty and vulnerability around the world *enhances our own safety and prosperity*' (Global Affairs Canada, 2017: vi, our emphasis). Canada repeatedly has announced its feminist ambitions as aimed at women's economic empowerment (for example, access to the market) (Morton et al, 2020; Parisi, 2020; Thomson, 2020). In other words, this approach frames women's emancipation within a neoliberal context, positioning the lack of economic empowerment as the main driver of gender inequalities and, thus simultaneously, portraying women and girls as capable 'superheroines' tasked with solving global issues (Zhukova et al, 2021: 1; see also Parisi, 2020).

The FIAP symbolizes not a shift but a perpetuation of Canada's persistent foreign policy efforts to construct its image as the global 'good guy' – liberal, progressive, generous overseas development aid donor, promoter of gender equality – with roots dating back to the Canadian International Development Agency's 1976 adoption of 'pro-gender' institutional and policy guidelines (Parisi, 2020: 3–4; Rao and Tiessen, 2020: 352; see also Howell, 2005). This feeds into a nostalgic foreign policy collective imagination that Canadian politicians often nourish, obscuring some of the darkest moments of Canadian foreign policy history: its role in Afghanistan, the torture that occurred in a Canadian-led peacekeeping mission in Somalia, or the sexual abuse by Canadian police in the Haiti UN peacekeeping mission, to name a few examples.

Domestically, through the FFP and the FIAP, the Trudeau government tried to distinguish itself from Stephen Harper (Thomson, 2022). A clear break from their Conservative predecessors is evident in slogans such as 'Canada is back' and 'from 1995–2015, Canada's government failed to champion women's rights' (Bibeau, 2017). Similarly, by claiming that 'our new feminist international assistance policy is the most ambitious and progressive in the history of Canada's diplomacy. It will make Canada a global leader in promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls' (Bibeau, 2017, our emphasis), it solidifies Canada's role both abroad and domestically, emphasizing Trudeau's government. This attempt at domestic political differentiation through the FFP and the FIAP echoes the Mexican context. Beyond the domestic dynamics, the FIAP and then the

FFP emerged at a specific ‘historical juncture’ happening at the regional, national, and global levels (Parisi, 2020: 3). It was seized as an opportunity to enhance Canada’s global reputation, driven by a desire to distinguish itself from the United States under the first Trump administration. The momentum created by the emergence of other FFPs around the world at the same time also served as a catalyst for its inception.

In sum, as in the case of other countries who have announced similar policies, Canada’s FIAP has been accused of having an ambiguous and relatively flat understanding of ‘feminism’ and ‘intersectionality’ in addition to a short-term, instrumentalist vision of gender, detached from the structural causes of global gender inequalities, thus reproducing a typical white, neoliberal feminism emerging from the Global North (Mason, 2019; Morton et al, 2020; Swan, 2021; Bouka et al, 2021; Tiessen, 2021). Canadian feminist civil society has criticized the Canadian government for repeatedly declaring that they have a FFP but without a central guiding document to support their claims (other than the FIAP, focused on international development aid) and for their failure to ‘*walk the talk*’ on feminism whether through contradictory trade practices, record-low foreign aid spending, missed opportunities or partial prioritisation of feminist actions at home and abroad, and slow progress in finalising a national action plan on missing and murdered Indigenous women’ (Tiessen, 2021: 234; see also Midzain-Gobin and Dunton, 2021; Woroniuk, 2022).

Canada’s FFP in the shadow of the WPS agenda

The relationship between the WPS agenda and the Canadian NAP, the FFP, and the FIAP is convoluted in Canadian declarations and documents. A close reading of relevant FIAP documents (Global Affairs Canada, 2017) reveals that the WPS NAP is situated as one *component* among others of its feminist approach to foreign policy. In Bibeau’s speech announcing the FIAP, she mentioned that Canada’s WPS NAP consisted of one area of action (‘peace and security’) (Bibeau, 2017). Other documents, such as the NAP, state that ‘the full implementation of the [WPS] action plan remains a priority for the Government of Canada and *is a cornerstone of our Feminist Foreign Policy*’ (Global Affairs Canada, 2021, our emphasis) and ‘*is at the heart of Canada’s Feminist Foreign Policy* that includes its Feminist International Assistance Policy and Defence Policy’ (Government of Canada, 2017: ii, our emphasis).

Such statements speak of an imagined ‘FFP’ rather than the ‘FIAP’. However, the FIAP itself is presented as only one part of Canada’s larger FFP (which we still ought to see), a combination of complementary policy documents. Indeed, Canada’s invisible, or imagined, broader FFP framework is defined in these terms:

Feminist foreign policy, which applies a feminist lens to *all aspects of Canada's international engagement*, including the Feminist International Assistance Policy; the Canadian National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security; Canada's inclusive approach to trade; and the new defence strategy. Feminist foreign policy calls for policy, advocacy and program efforts to focus on addressing fundamental structural barriers that prevent gender equality, taking into account the needs of those most affected by multiple forms of discrimination. (*Global Affairs Canada, 2019*, our emphasis)

Canada's Feminist Foreign Policy, *including its International Assistance Policy*, puts women and girls – gender equality, empowerment and human rights – at the centre of decisions on humanitarian action, development assistance, and peace and security interventions. (*Government of Canada, 2017*: 8–9, our emphasis)

This notion of complementarity is also present in Canada's Defence Policy *Strong, Secured, Engaged*, where it is played out that 'combined with our upcoming International Assistance Policy and progressive, feminist foreign policy, this defence policy will help accomplish our shared objectives' (*National Defence, 2017*: 7). One explicit link that is made in the document later (2017: 55) is the advancement of the WPS NAP, but the document does not speak of an FFP, nor does it articulate how the NAP is embedded in the strategy of the Department of National Defence (*National Defence, 2017*: 55).

Ultimately, the long-awaited Canadian FFP is always presented as a rhetorical 'umbrella' and transcendental foreign policy vision, encompassing a patchwork of policy declarations and documents but never defined as a coherent whole. Indeed, our analysis shows that the FIAP and WPS NAP are conceived by the Canadian government as components of an imagined FFP. For this reason, Canadian feminist scholars and activists have pressed for a comprehensive policy document on FFP. A meticulous examination of policy statements and documents indicates that the FIAP, FFP, and NAP are frequently conflated or depicted as ostensibly functioning together. We argue that Canada's NAP serves as the backbone of the FFP, thus far, and constitutes its primary actionable component.

WPS and FFP co-existence and (dis)connections in Canada and Mexico

The WPS agenda and FFPs share similarities in their content, objectives, and the issues they aim to address, such as gendering peace, security, conflict resolution, and violence. They both strive to enhance women's meaningful

presence and participation in all spheres of international decision-making. Feminist scholars have critiqued the WPS agenda's narrow focus, noting its failure to address the root causes of conflicts and global problems. They have called for a widening of the WPS agenda, notably by creating more systematic NAPs (in the Global North) that are not solely oriented towards what a country does abroad to avoid reproducing harmful (neo)colonial and imperialist logics (Haastруп and Hagen, 2020).

FFPs are promised by their proponents to extend the scope of practice and strive to enable systemic change in how foreign policy is conducted by incorporating diplomacy, development, trade, and defence matters. By including international development, FFPs can also focus on issues related to reproductive health, sustainable development, and poverty, which are not typically regarded as central to the WPS agenda. Several feminist scholars and activists have urged the new FFPs to transcend the discourse of gender equality and focus on representation and visibility. They called for these policies to act as catalysts for fundamentally reimagining the practice of international relations, including in regard to security and peace, by building on WPS norms (Johnson-Freese and Markham, 2022).

Our findings suggest that Canada and Mexico fall short of this aspiration. In fact, we conceive of these FFPs as the results of the widening and evolution of the WPS norm over time. We agree with Thomson's assessment that FFPs might be, in fact, 'a repackaged commitment to a liberal policy agenda' that was previously initiated by the WPS agenda and other global gender norms since the UN's Decade for Women, now happening in the distinct context of a growing anti-feminist backlash worldwide (Thomson, 2022: 175).

Simultaneously, as evidenced by our two cases, both the WPS agenda and FFPs reveal analogous silences and shortcomings. The practices associated with these frameworks fail to address the root causes of systemic international ills and broader structural issues such as poverty or violence, mainly due to the ways they are institutionalized and used by powerful actors. For example, neither Canada nor Mexico question militarism and its gendered impacts. In fact, the military is often portrayed as a vehicle for advancing gender agendas, which prompts local feminist critiques of these policies' blind spots.

The genesis of these agendas also differs. On the one hand, the WPS agenda stemmed from wide-reaching transnational feminist advocacy networks, from the grassroots to the UN. The UN Security Council Resolution 1325's adoption in 2000 occurred 'at the peak of the liberal peacebuilding era, which was characterised by widespread optimism for exporting liberal ideas of human progress, development, and democracy around the world and to the Global South' (Aggestam and True, 2021: 145). On the other hand, while FFPs sometimes originate in part from civil society demands (Chapnick, 2019; Deschamps-Laporte, 2021), they more frequently materialize through top-down state initiatives and fail to centre civil society as the central

agents of these policies (Ansorg et al, 2021). Once launched, WPS plans and FFPs typically establish dialogue mechanisms between civil society and government, though these often fail to meet civil society's expectations and are criticized as superficial.

While there is hope in the fact that FFPs have served to normalize or reignite momentum surrounding the term 'feminism' and highlight its relevance in the practice of foreign policy, they also pose risks of co-opting feminism if the implemented policies remain superficial. One must keep in mind that the emergence of FFPs happened in a specific 'discursive, political and ethical momentum [in global politics], and it is emerging at a time where the need for feminist mobilisation – against the forces of patriarchy and populism – is more urgent than ever' (Robinson, 2021: 4). In that sense, FFPs cannot be perceived as a mere rhetorical product of the widespread global acceptance of gender norms – but perhaps as a new type of response to the rampant backlashes against previously established progressive gender norms. These policies can become discursive political tools for governments to distinguish themselves from anti-feminist political discourses, contexts, or countries. As of 2025, the global mainstreaming of feminism as a brand appears to be already waning.

In sum, our analysis of Canada's and Mexico's FFPs reveals deep ambiguities, aligning with the literature that portrays the FFP norm as vague and elusive (Thomson, 2022), echoing the characterization of WPS norms (True, 2016; True and Wiener, 2019; Kirby and Shepherd, 2020). The 'F' etiquette for these countries contributes to a process of state identity construction (Zhukova et al, 2021). This construction process is also partisan, as new governments claim these policies as an act of differentiation (Thomson, 2022: 182), which in turn renders them vulnerable when that party is not re-elected, as in the recent case of Sweden or Germany. Feminist policies are unlikely to survive an eventual shift of party in Canada or Mexico.

While the two countries followed different WPS–FFP trajectories, in Canada and Mexico, the most explicit, comprehensive, and actionable feminist programme remains the WPS agenda. Canada's elusive FFP appears to be a political rebranding of the WPS agenda complemented by a collage of various terms, documents, and speeches. It remains in the shadow of its NAP. Mexico's FFP adopts a more introspective departmental approach without clear links to its WPS commitments. Mexico's NAP is articulated in clearer terms and distinguishes itself as a foreign policy document rather than as what can be interpreted as a departmental culture policy. Discursively, Canada's FFP aligns with Sweden's past efforts to promote progressive feminist ideals, aiming to resonate with both the Global North and the Canadian audience by leveraging Canada's reputation as a global 'feminist leader'. Meanwhile, Mexico's FFP is part of a global and regional progressive branding effort aimed at presenting the country as a leader in the Global South and Latin

America, potentially reviving forms of leadership within the formerly non-aligned group of states. However, both lack coherence, depth, and precise framing of the relationship and co-existence between the two frameworks.

The cases of Canada and Mexico illustrate two types of deployments of feminist agendas within the North American context. The two governments articulated these policies in contrast to growing global and regional anti-gender movements, which became particularly influential during Trump's first term in the neighbouring United States. Trump's chauvinistic and misogynistic rhetoric reverberated along the southern and northern borders, further compelling Trudeau's and AMLO's governments to present themselves as international and regional feminists. Nonetheless, both countries have remained profoundly challenged by dire domestic gender crises. Formulating comprehensive feminist policy visions presented the risk of exposing their governments' failures to address their most pressing domestic gender crises in Canada and Mexico.

These governments' fragmented relationships with their civil societies also weaken their implementation. When civil society is consulted, critical voices who do not affirm their countries' legitimacy as 'feminist leaders' tend to be sidelined. These countries' capacity to structure their WPS and FFP commitments coherently, domestically, and internationally is also a condition for engaging in legitimacy-building processes around the articulation of feminist norms. These processes, which rely on coherence and inclusive participation, might also be vital in predicting whether new gender norms can diffuse and survive national and international political change, which will inevitably occur as both countries tend to swing back and forth between progressive and conservative governments (Elgström, 2000; Van Eerdewijk and Roggeband, 2014; Engberg-Pedersen et al, 2019).

While this chapter focuses on the period extending to the winter of 2024, several changes have occurred since in Canada and Mexico. In Mexico, Claudia Sheinbaum of the same party (Morena) as her predecessor, AMLO, was elected president in summer 2024, taking office in October, and aims to continue building on Morena's progressive agenda. Sheinbaum's campaign did not mention FFP as an electoral platform commitment. However, FFP development appears to remain a priority for Foreign Minister Juan Ramón de la Fuente, former Mexican Permanent Representative to the UN under AMLO. In Canada, toward the end of Trudeau's term, in March 2024, a new NAP (2023–2029) was released. Though more extensive than previous plans, its launch has been cautious amid crises, notably in Gaza. Mark Carney became prime minister in March 2025. Although Carney is of the same political party as Trudeau, with many of the same cabinet ministers, gender and feminism were not at the centre of his messaging campaign and premiership. For example, Canadian civil society awaits the nomination of a new WPS ambassador, as Jacqueline O'Neill's term ended in 2025.

If the emergence of FFPs occurred during a distinct discursive and political moment in global politics over ten years ago, when the need for feminist mobilization against patriarchy and populism was urgent, can FFPs survive a new wave of such a backlash in North America? With Donald Trump re-elected for a second, more authoritarian term, and a surge of international conflicts, the fragility of FFPs is reaffirmed. Their discursive nature and the weakness of their implementation have made them vulnerable in the face of even greater anti-gender challenges. The WPS agenda, while more established and perhaps less fragile, is certainly not immune to this backlash.

Due to the limited documentation on these policies and their implementation, further ethnographic and interview-based research on the practices associated with WPS and FFP in Canada and Mexico (and beyond) is necessary. We encourage scholars to engage in this discussion and explore the co-existence of gender norms. While doing so, we must also remain acutely aware that the overarching concern for these two agendas is not their inherent inconsistencies but rather the ongoing threats of their complete dismissal, particularly in an era marked by unprecedented misogyny, anti-gender discourses and rising authoritarianism.

Note

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Anti-Genderism and Feminist Foreign Policy: Paying Attention to the Domestic Politics of Gender

Clara Eroukhmanoff and Hannah Partis-Jennings

Introduction

Much important work on feminist foreign policy (FFP) (and gender in foreign policy more broadly) has articulated the dissonance between the domestic and the international, identifying FFP as, at least in part, a hypocritical branding exercise in light of distinctly non-feminist politics in the domestic arena. Additionally, the charge of inconsistency has been levelled when states profess a feminist or gender-focused policy, but equally pursue goals in line with *realpolitik*, militarism, and war-making. For instance, critical feminist scholars have shown how existing, former, or potential versions of FFP can be at odds with militarized approaches internally and externally (see [Tamang, 2024](#)), or that the FFP branding can obscure or neglect gendered violence and gendered inequalities within a state ([Achilleos-Sarll, 2018](#); [Haastrup, 2020](#); [Eroukhmanoff, 2024](#); [Tamang, 2024](#)). In this chapter, we build on these insights, but we do so by bringing FFP into conversation with anti-genderism, two gendered global trends that have captured a significant politics in recent years. We contend that examining anti-genderism and the deployment of the ‘anti-genderism register’ ([Tebaldi and Baran, 2023](#)) within two liberal democracies relevant to the analysis of FFP – France and the United Kingdom (UK) – reveals that conceptions of gender articulated at the state level are key to understanding the character and implications of FFP.

We assert here that two interrelated modes of gendered politics – biological essentialism and anti-trans rights discourse – are salient in France and the UK, and that this highlights the problematic disjuncture between

the promotion of gender and feminist principles in foreign policy and the domestic mobilization of the anti-genderism register. As such, we argue that scholarship on FFP needs to better take into consideration the foundational conceptualization of gender that informs the policy arena from which it emanates and the ways in which gender is invoked within domestic political discourse. Second, we point to a narrative articulated within French and British foreign policy utterances and official documents which cites a ‘roll-back’ on women’s rights and a ‘backlash’ against feminism or gender as part of what motivates gender-focused foreign policy in these countries. We argue that recognition of anti-gender politics as taking place *elsewhere* (that is, in other countries and parts of the world), can feed into particular ideas of the good state enforcing and protecting the liberal order (see [Thomson, 2020](#): 434), and obscure the ways that states mobilize forms of anti-genderism domestically to accrue political capital. We thus caution FFP scholarship and suggest contextualization around the narrative of roll-back and backlash when used to inform and justify state-level foreign policy frameworks.

This chapter proceeds as follows: first, we define anti-genderism and the ways it has developed as part of a wider movement against the inclusion of gender in policy arenas. Recognizing that anti-genderism is contextually situated, with different influences (see [Butler, 2024](#)), we focus here on the Vatican as a key site of the intellectual and normative development of anti-genderism since it has been particularly influential and illustrates the relationship between anti-genderism and conceptions of gender in state-level policy spaces. We move to discuss how biological essentialism has remained central to French state politics, problematizing France’s FFP. We then examine the UK, which has had a more tenuous relationship with the FFP label, illustrating that the centrality of anti-trans politics to elite political discourse mars any discussion of gender in policy spaces and hampers invocations of FFP, such as that in Scotland. We conclude by outlining how the discourse of roll-back at the state level can be seen as serving a strategic mode of self-representation, aimed at signalling adherence to the ideals of liberal statehood on the global stage.

The development of anti-genderism

Anti-genderism refers to a collection of political ideas which reject the constructed nature of gender, and advocate notions of innate biological difference between men and women. Though anti-genderism is fluid, and invoked differently in different contexts, it tends to promote the rejection of certain women’s rights, reproductive rights, and LGBTQI+ rights, often in the name of traditional values or pro-family politics (which are also bound up with racialized ideas of national purity and anti-migration sentiment). As articulated by [Butler \(2024\)](#), gender becomes a repository for various social

and political anxieties and begins to symbolize or be a useful scapegoat for much of what is wrong with modern life.

In terms of the genesis of anti-genderism as we now understand it, the widespread inclusion of ‘gender’ in policy-making spaces in the 1990s prompted challenges from various conservative and religious mobilizations. The adoption of a gender-sensitive agenda on the international stage as a set of agreed-upon principles – despite internal tensions about the meaning of ‘gender mainstreaming’ – was met with significant pushback from Catholic and conservative voices. These forces united around a rejection of the recognition of sexual and reproductive rights in the UN rights system (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018: 10), a position more recently reiterated in the 2024 *Dignitas Infinitas* declaration (Giuffrida, 2024) approved by former Pope Francis.

Situated within the Vatican’s counter-offensive against the feminist breakthroughs of the 1990s, the Church outlined the ‘gender ideology’ trope and placed it as an existential threat to the ‘natural family’ (Sanders and Jenkins, 2022: 371). Gender, according to Pope Benedict XVI (in Garbagnoli, 2016: 189), would lead to the ‘self-destruction of humankind’. The development and emergence of the term ‘gender ideology’ was used as a political tool to delegitimize sexual minorities’ experiences and knowledge of their struggles (Garbagnoli and Prearo, 2017: 8). As a rhetorical device, it has been able to amalgamate several progressive debates under the single label of ‘gender’, target key feminist figures such as Judith Butler (Korolczuk, 2016), and invalidate the scholarly advances made by decades of gender studies as against ‘common sense’.

Moreover, to rebrand their position as progressive in a context where feminist politics *appeared* to reach global consensus (Garbagnoli, 2016; Korolczuk, 2016), the Vatican appealed to the language of equality and urged women to embrace a ‘new Catholic feminism’ that would ‘affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society, and overcome all discrimination, violence and exploitation’ (John Paul II, 1995). The first call for this new feminism was expressed by Pope John Paul II in 1995 in *Evangelium Vitae* and then more explicitly laid out in ‘Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church’ by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) in 2004. While engaging with notions of social justice, the Vatican’s new feminism reasserted women’s responsibility and place in the domestic sphere by first and foremost protecting marital life and childbirth (Fillod, 2014: 330). Women’s capacity to give life, according to the Vatican, ‘is a reality that structures the female personality in a profound way’ (CDF, 2004). This new Catholic feminism constitutes a ‘feminism of alterity’, that it is a feminism grounded in a concept of ‘equality within difference’ (Fassin, 2016; Garbagnoli, 2016; Korolczuk, 2016; Garbagnoli and Prearo, 2017; Sénac, 2020). In this new configuration, obedience is replaced with

mutuality, and a new, forward-thinking linguistic register to think through ‘healthy’ relationships between men and women, including ‘reciprocal aid’, ‘complementarity’, and ‘collaboration’, was invented (Garbagnoli and Prearo, 2017: 31).

Thus, despite the Church’s position in the 1990s being a conservative reaction against the feminist gains of the decade (Faludi, 1991; Mansbridge and Shames, 2008; Yeung et al, 2014; Sanders and Jenkins, 2022), the Vatican appealed to a pseudo-progressive feminist repertoire, which has been able to circulate widely in political debates. The coalescing around the construction ‘gender ideology’ has led to large, dynamic, and well-organized anti-gender campaigns in many parts of the world, connecting various non-religious far-right parties, and reaching their peaks in Europe in the early 2010s when some states passed legislation for same-sex marriage, which highlights the salience of LGBTQI+ rights to the phenomenon. This not only provided an unstable and challenging backdrop for the creation and implementation of national FFPs but it also illuminates the dissonance and hypocrisy between promoting progressive and potentially transformative policies such as FFP and a national context that embraces some strands of anti-genderism. We now highlight two central ideas of anti-genderism that are salient in mainstream domestic politics in France and the UK.

Biological essentialism in France

During his first election campaign, Emmanuel Macron announced that he would make ‘equality between men and women’ the great cause of his five-year term. A year later, the Minister of State for Gender Equality Marlene Schiappa (2018) declared that ‘France [was] back’ at the UN General Assembly. This marked the launch of a ‘Made in France’ FFP through which France could (re)establish its national brand (Holmes and White, 2023: 17). Since the early 2000s, gender equality has been framed as central and historically integral to French Republican values (Garner and Fassin, 2013). Yet, France’s fragile and complex history with gender and feminism troubles the narrative that feminism was born or is well-established in France (Eroukhanoff, 2024). Not only does gender remain a site of contestation (Fassin, 2011), but anti-genderism has grown and has weaved into mainstream French politics. This was most spectacularly visible during the ‘Printemps Français’ (French Spring), the waves of protests against same-sex marriage in the early 2010s. It is also salient, though in more obscure and indirect ways, in the promotion of gender difference.

First, France has tended to focus on ‘parity’, that is, increasing the representation of women in political parties, major political institutions, and ensuring their participation in decision-making processes through the institutionalization of quotas. Though addressing concerns of equal

opportunities and women's access to power, the concept of parity is significantly narrower than the concept of 'gender equality', which encompasses issues such as health and reproductive justice, LGBTQI+ rights, intersectionality, gendered norms, stereotypes, and gendered cultural practices. Parity is also less radical than gender equality in that it treats gender difference as real, anthropological, and universal, and importantly leaves out the idea of gender as a social construction. According to [Lépinard \(2007: 379\)](#), parity campaigners 'have had to zigzag strategically between different meanings of difference and equality to make their claims compatible with the Republic's core doctrines and therefore acceptable to power holders'. While parity advocates gained the support of women's rights organizations, leading to amending the French Constitution and a parity law in 2000, focusing on the category of *women* and reinstating gender difference also raised concerns and opposition among French feminists that it essentialized women and reproduced sex hierarchies ([Lépinard, 2007: 377–80](#)).

Second, the current French government's vision of equality has resonated at times with the Vatican's notion of 'equality within difference' which supports gender essentialism. For instance, on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, [Macron \(2017\)](#) stated that promoting a culture of equality is not the same as 'denying differences between the sexes or to mix everything up, but it is about ensuring that this profound alterity, which I believe is our richness, does not lead to an intolerable inequality'.¹ Third, the essentialist view of gender in France also transpires in the privileging of the phrase 'equality between men and women' over the term 'gender' or 'genre' in the French language. In French criminal law, the term 'sexual identities' has also been preferred over 'gender identities' to criminalize discriminations, because of oppositions in legal and political circles against the introduction of 'gender theory' in French law ([Fondimare, 2014: 1](#)). Historically, 'gender' had been rejected as too militant and an import from American feminism. Adopting gender symbolized an American drift in French culture and became associated with the American culture wars of the 1990s that France had so far avoided by reaffirming universalism and republicanism ([Fassin, 2008; Berger, 2016](#)). Powerful institutions like the Académie Française – responsible for issues pertaining to the French language – noted in 2005 that 'gender' was 'excessively' deployed in the Social Sciences and the media and concluded that the inclusion of 'gender' in the French lexicon was not justified (see [Eroukhmanoff, 2024](#)).

Lastly, 'gender' has recently been grouped together with decolonial and anti-racist thought and received pushback from the government and the conservative press that it represented a 'wokist' pursuit that was not rooted in French history, culture, or Republican principles ([Campagne, 2023: 96](#)). The public outcry over the inclusion of the gender-neutral pronoun *iel* ('they') in 2021 in the French dictionary *Le Robert*, aiming to bring visibility

to non-binary people, shows the sensitivity of debates about gender in France. In 2023, with a majority of the Senate, President Macron backed a bill to ban gender-inclusive language because in French, ‘the masculine is the neutral’ and the French language, despite a male-centred grammar, ‘builds the unity of the nation’ (Andelman, 2023).

Yet it is impossible for states to claim to be feminist and do away with the term ‘gender’ altogether. Despite ‘gender’ becoming a ‘phantasm’ representing human fears about sexuality and bodily attributes (Butler, 2024), it is also a global symbol of democracy (Fassin, 2008: 386) and has been the operational term at the international level since the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action. Consequently, the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (2021a) employs the term ‘gender’ in the English version of the FFP strategy document – the ‘International Strategy for Gender Equality (2018–2022)’ – and has adopted the term ‘égalité de genre’ in 2025 in its new ‘Stratégie internationale de la France pour une diplomatie féministe (2025–2030)’ (MEAE, 2025). This move signals that France adheres to the international norms set out by the UN gender equality agenda. However, until its 2025–2030 strategy, the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs referred primarily to ‘equality between men and women’ (MEAE, 2021b),² which indicates a discrepancy between the global and the domestic message. As Fondimare (2014: 14) writes, there has been a reluctance to introduce the concept of gender (in its constructivist sense) in French law, which indicates apprehension over the disappearance of sex differences and the bicategories ‘women’ and ‘men’ as two distinct biological beings. When mainstreaming ‘gender equality’ in major political and legal institutions in France, it is thus unlikely to entail the rejection of the gender binary. Instead, a ‘gender-light’ articulation of this concept – in support of ‘essential’ gender differences – is at the centre of feminist policies in France and of the French FFP.

Anti-trans politics in the UK

The UK has not been a paradigmatic case of FFP and has existed on the periphery of the FFP conversation in some ways. Importantly, the UK contains four distinct countries and in Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales there are devolved governments responsible for elements of policy making, though housed within the overarching authority of the UK government at Westminster. Foreign policy is created and implemented by the central Westminster government which ‘retains formal sovereignty’ (Webb and van der Horst, 2021: 1). From 2010 to 2024 the right- to centre-right-wing party, the Conservative Party, was in government, holding the largest number of seats in Parliament, while the centrist to left-wing party, the Labour Party, with the second largest number of seats, was the main

opposition party. The Labour Party achieved a majority and formed a new government in 2024. One country in the UK, Scotland, has declared an FFP – a ‘feminist approach to international relations’ (FAIR), which, while significant, is limited in scope and potential by virtue of the limited nature of Scotland’s foreign policy practice, independent of the UK as a whole (Bergman Rosamond et al, 2022; Llach, 2023). Within the foreign policy priorities of the UK, gender has typically played a significant part, and it has embraced the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) architecture, often foundational to FFP (Thomson, 2022: 179), including through National Action Plans (NAPs) (see Achilleos-Sarll, 2020).

Though without scope to trace this in detail, it is important to highlight that the UK government has repeatedly emphasized gender in foreign policy, with, in recent years, a strong focus on girls’ education under Boris Johnson as part of a post-Brexit vision of ‘global Britain’ (see Połońska-Kimunguyi and Kimunguyi, 2017: 334) and a foreign policy focus on preventing sexual violence in conflict, spearheaded by another Foreign Secretary, William Hague (see Davies and True, 2017). In 2021, then Foreign Secretary Liz Truss announced that women and girls would be at the ‘centre of her foreign policy priorities’ (Gov.uk, 2021). In 2023, the UK government ‘launched a new strategy to advance gender equality around the world’ which includes supporting ‘sexual and reproductive health programmes’ (Ahmed, 2023). The framework of FFP has been directly invoked within the UK political apparatus, with Conservative peer Baroness Sugg (2021) calling for the adoption of a UK FFP, and in 2022 UN Women noted that ‘in the UK, three different political parties have pledged that they will pursue [FFP] if in power’ (UN Women, 2022). The Labour Party has previously shown interest in the possible invocation of FFP (see Pinder, 2023), though this never manifested substantively.

Scotland’s FFP focuses on four priority areas: ‘international development, trade, climate justice, and peace and security’ (Scottish Government, 2023: 3) and notes the need to address the ‘root causes’ of inequality. It takes a cross-sectional approach and, though recognizing the limitations of devolved government within the UK, aims to use international activity ‘to advance gender equality and the rights of women, girls and marginalised groups in pursuit of a fairer world’ (Scottish Government, 2023: 4). It is notable that this approach to FFP explicitly shines light on the domestic context, wanting international policy to mirror ‘progressive steps in our domestic policy’ (Scottish Government, 2023: 3) and that this is part of being a ‘good global citizen’ (p 4). Thus, while not a state with a well-defined and unified overarching FFP, the UK is an important example to consider in terms of the politics of calling the FFP framework to action within the domestic arena of a state (see Thomson, 2024), centring a particular mode of institutional feminism in foreign policy, and the potential for future implementation (see Haastrup, 2020; Thomson, 2022).

The UK is also marked by the invocation of an ‘anti-genderism register’ (Tebaldi and Baran, 2023), not just evident in the political configurations and parties on the far-right of the political spectrum, but within the political mainstream. In one striking example, Conservative Suella Braverman, then Home Secretary, gave a speech to the National Conservative Conference in London in 2023, which included condemnation of ‘radical gender ideology’. The conference, which attracted significant elite political participation in the UK, was organized by a US-based group which professed concern for ‘Western civilization’ faced with supposed ‘enemies’, including ‘radical forms of sexual licence’, and the erosion of the ‘traditional family’ where ‘relationships should be between men and women’ (Dearden, 2023).

The ‘anti-genderism register’ is most explicit in the significant mobilization of an anti-trans stance within political and media discourse (see Gifkins and Cooper-Cunningham, 2023). This is a complex arena, because, unlike with anti-genderism in some contexts, the anti-trans movement, epitomized (though not encapsulated) by the so-called ‘gender critical’ position, transcends political divides. Indeed ‘there are gender critical sub-groups within every major political party across Britain’ and there are feminist and left-wing advocates within the movement (Lamble, 2024: 4; see also Butler, 2024). Tebaldi and Baran (2023: 5) outline that the UK’s ‘transphobic Gender Critical movement’ frames itself ‘as nominally feminist and as defending women from male violence’. On the other hand, prominent anti-trans gender critical political actor Kellie-Jay Keen-Minshull has ‘well documented links with the far-right and neo-Nazi groups’ and has argued that feminism is bad for women while still using the language of women’s rights (Lamble, 2024: 5). As with the example of the Vatican’s framing of anti-gender positions within a mode of alternative feminism, the idea of protecting biologically acceptable women from male violence as a kind of feminist or pro-women positioning is repeatedly invoked in anti-trans political discourse. At the same time, ‘concerns about gender-based violence must also be situated within a wider social context where survivor’s’ experiences and needs are still routinely dismissed and downplayed, and where services for the survivors are consistently under resourced’, highlighting the limited political depth of this mode of ‘pro-women’ political invocation (Lamble, 2024: 7).

The Conservative Party mobilized anti-trans politics within so-called ‘culture war’ debates, and issues around trans rights and gender have been central to their ‘anti-woke’ political platform. There are endless examples of gender being used to accrue political capital, but an indicative illustration is the fact that in 2023 at the Conservative Party conference, ‘[p]olicies on gender and trans issues dominated announcements by ministers’ (Fisher et al, 2023). Prior to this, questions of trans rights were evident in the party’s 2022 leadership debates, which give voice to the key concerns which animate party political identity (Parnaby, 2022). Trans rights were a key political

issue in the run up to the 2024 general election, with the Conservatives claiming that, unlike the leader of the Labour Party, they ‘know what a woman is’ to signal their unwavering perspective on the biological nature of sex difference (Ferlita, 2024). The Conservatives pledged to ‘overhaul Britain’s equalities law to better protect single-sex spaces’ and defined sex as ‘only someone’s biological sex’ (McDonald, 2024). This approach to trans rights by the government at the time had serious consequences, including in relation to education and health policy, and in terms of the discrimination, pathologization, and violence faced by trans people in multiple facets of life (see, for example, Walters et al, 2020; Gifkins and Cooper-Cunningham, 2023).

The Labour Party also has a mixed record on trans rights. Despite previously affirming that ‘trans women are women’, the leader of the Labour Party, Keir Starmer, has also seemed to show support for those with a ‘gender critical’ trans-exclusionary stance and backed legislation banning trans women from female hospital wards and sports (Hansford, 2024). Labour U-turned on a promise to ‘implement self-ID amendments to the Gender Recognition Act’ while the then shadow Equalities Minister Anneliese Dodds, met with a prominent ‘gender critical’ group, the LGB Alliance in 2024 (Hansford, 2024). Generally, the rhetoric of the Labour Party shifted towards a more ambiguous stance on trans rights, which attempted to signal tolerance and inclusion but placed an emphasis on the ‘biology’ of sex and the importance of single sex spaces (see Good Morning Britain, 2024). The prominence of and approach to these issues in the UK illustrates the profound political pressure centred on questions of gender and biological difference domestically. This was further solidified in a 2025 Supreme Court decision that ‘sex is binary’ and relates to ‘a biological man or a biological woman’ within the UK Equalities Act governing discrimination (Holt and Melley, 2025).

With respect to Scotland, and in reference to its crafting of an FFP, Bergman Rosamond et al (2022: 12) have noted: ‘[f]or the Scottish Government to avoid the accusations of inconsistency that other adoptees of FFPs have faced, it is important that domestic and international policies are consistent with each other and with FFP principles.’ By championing a Gender Recognition Bill allowing for a person to ‘self-identify their legally recognised sex’ (Wallace Lockhart, 2024), despite vocal opponents to trans rights within Scottish politics (Kelleher, 2023), Scotland demonstrated a commitment to a more inclusive conception of gender identity. This is in alignment with most feminist positions (see Butler, 2024) and with the emphasis in Scottish FFP placed on ‘marginalized groups’ and consistent domestic policy. However, the Bill was blocked by the UK government in Westminster in 2023 (Wallace Lockhart, 2024). This capacity and desire to influence domestic Scottish gender policy is illustrative of the ways that the

issue of inconsistency for Scottish FFP is tied into the broader UK political landscape around the meaning of gender and highlights the need for detailed contextual understandings of domestic gender politics in places where FFP is declared.

There are different motivations for anti-trans politics evidenced between different actors. However, overall, the demonization and persecution of trans people in political discourse relies on notions of biological sex difference, and the inability of persons to exist outside of a binary gender order, demonstrating the profound salience of the foundational logics of anti-genderism to the UK context (Butler, 2024: 144–5). As such, the attempt to go beyond a focus on ‘women and girls’ and to consider the root causes of gender inequality in the Scottish FFP is undermined by the wider domestic political landscape. The deployment of gender-focused policies in foreign policy frameworks is situated in a context where gender itself has been a site of fundamental policy and political contestation, where binary sex difference is reasserted, and biological essentialism is weaponized. Considering the centrality of LGBTQI+ rights and experience to questions of sexual and reproductive rights, issues of gender equality and the phenomenon of gender-based violence in conflict (see Hagen, 2016; Aylward and Brown, 2020; Gifkins and Cooper-Cunningham, 2023; GAPS UK, 2024)³ these concerns are salient to discussions of FFP and beyond.

The discourse of ‘roll-back’

With reference to the increasing prominence of anti-rights agendas and anti-genderism in policy and politics, a discourse has emerged about the roll-back of women’s rights and gender equality, sometimes framed as a ‘backlash’ against progress or advancement in these areas. While this is an important area of advocacy and focus, we suggest that the invocation of this discourse by states can also be part of a narrative that locates gender equality roll-back *elsewhere* and obscures the salience of the anti-genderism register domestically. This, we suggest, prompts questions about the ways that gender and feminism are conceived of and mobilized in policy spaces more broadly.

In the UK context, the roll-back of women and girl’s rights has been articulated in policy frameworks as a contextual concern for UK foreign policy. For instance, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office’s Women and Girls Strategy (WGS) articulated five principles for action, the first of which is:

We will stand up and speak out for women’s and girls’ rights and freedoms on the global stage and in our bilateral relationships. We will build agile networks of established allies and include middle-ground powers, with the aim of building international consensus to stop those intent on

rolling back on rights and putting hard-won progress into reverse. (Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 2023: 12, emphasis added)

The document explains that roll-back is pursued by ‘well-funded and well organised’ actors who seek to disrupt global gender equality norms so that ‘gains’ around gender equality are now ‘under threat’: ‘These attempts at rollback threaten to reverse the gains that have been made since the Beijing Declaration, undermining the global and grassroots progress towards gender equality that the UK has for so long championed and supported’ (Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 2023: 9). Here the UK is positioned as a champion of rights, resisting the kinds of contestations around gender equality that are articulated by an anti-genderism register at the political level. This despite the ways that British anti-trans mobilizations have been clearly located as part of global anti-genderism, and that ‘Britain has recently become known as a “global hotspot” for anti-trans politics’ and as ‘home to one of the most coordinated and well-known anti-gender mobilizations in the world’, generating international concern (GATE, 2022, cited in Lamble, 2024: 2).

In a similar vein, the document outlining Scotland’s FFP begins with words from the Minister Christina McKelvie, stating that ‘we are confronting a documented, organised roll-back on the rights of women and girls globally’ (Scottish Government, 2023). In terms of where these roll-backs happen, both the Scottish FFP document, and the UK’s WGS, highlight Afghanistan as one site of concern, which not only negates UK complicity in the trajectory of gender equity frameworks in Afghanistan, but is also indicative of the idea that roll-back and politicized attacks on gender-based rights are exogenous to the UK context.

In the French context, both President Macron and Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs officials have articulated a concerning conservative mobilization, especially against reproductive rights. In 2021, Macron (2021) condemned the ‘reactionary and patriarchal forces, or an international conservatism, seeking to challenge decades of advances’⁴ and invoked a roll-back on freedoms and fundamental rights in parts of the world. The 2025–30 French feminist diplomacy strategy (MEAE, 2025: 6) also highlights ‘the multiplication of crises, the growth of anti-rights and conservative movements’. It is notable that this idea of roll-back is framed in terms of France’s own feminist advocacy on the world stage: ‘*in response* to the profound undermining of these rights, France is advocating ambitiously and incorporating the subject into all aspects of its diplomatic action’ (MEAE, 2021c, emphasis added). A worrying international context demands an ‘urgent response’, one that ‘uses political crises to build the progress of today and tomorrow’ (Macron, 2022). In a 2018 speech, the French Minister of State for Gender Equality stated:

France, for its part, thinking of the legacy of Simone Veil, will continue to defend everywhere, always, sexual and reproductive rights ... In this respect, France can only deplore the decisions of its historical allies such as Hungary, Poland, the United States of America ... to challenge, more or less directly, access to abortion.

As such, gender equality roll-back is again imagined as something happening elsewhere, and something that fuels and justifies French diplomatic feminism in the global arena. While at the same time, as articulated earlier, gender itself has been subject to significant and increasing contestation in French political discourse.

Moreover, claiming to be one of the drivers of gender equality internationally and the birthplace of feminism has enabled French officials to move through political and reputational crises at the United Nations (Holmes and White, 2023). In their study of the sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) crisis, in which French peacekeepers were involved in the sexual exploitation of children in the Central African Republic in 2014–15, Holmes and White (2023) demonstrate that French diplomats leveraged France's nation brand as a champion of gender equality and defender of universal human rights to limit reputational damage. At the same time, French officials 'marginalised the personal crisis of SEA survivors, silenced debate on the global crisis of accountability related to SEA and CRSV [conflict-related sexual violence] and concealed chronic gendered and racial structural violence' (Holmes and White, 2023: 17).

These points show the co-existence of FFP or gender centrality in foreign policy with the anti-genderism register and build on feminist critiques, highlighting how FFP and the promotion of gender norms in foreign policy can be an exercise in selective state self-identity construction, particularly though an attempt to indicate good liberal statehood on the international stage (see Thomson, 2020, 2022). It also relates to critiques of foreign policy and foreign policy analysis as externalizing and conducive to self-other binaries (Achilleos-Sarll et al, 2023: 9). We do not in any way seek to undermine the seriousness of prominent mobilizations against rights, especially women's and LGBTQI+ rights around the world, however, in this context it is also important to understand how that phenomenon can be harnessed to both support particular notions of certain states as good global actors and to erase the ways that anti-genderism is invoked within those same states.

Conclusion

Given the role of the state in legacies and practices of gendered violence and harm, it is unlikely that true state feminism will ever be possible, or

that foreign policy, with its militarist foundations, can be feminist in the fullest sense. Indeed, the move to unvarnished realpolitik and increased militarization in Europe following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as well as broad state support for Israeli atrocities in Gaza, is indicative of the fragility of any feminist gains at the state level (see Haastrup, Bergman Rosamond, and Agius, [Chapter 7](#)). However, any invocation of FFP allows space for an interrogation of the parameters through which state feminism is framed domestically and internationally. We suggest that in drawing anti-genderism into the conversation about FFP, not simply as an opposing force, but as a political form entangled with feminist policy making in different ways, the importance of contextual understandings of gender in domestic political discourse becomes clear. We further suggest that the narrative of conservative backlash against feminism, and anti-gender roll-backs of women's rights *elsewhere*, can become a part of good liberal state self-identification, explicitly ignoring deliberate mobilizations of the anti-genderism register, and even discomfort with the very idea of gender, domestically.

As such, within debates around FFP and gender in foreign policy more broadly, we advocate for increased attentiveness to the ways that biological essentialism may be foundational to notions of gender, informing the state-level policy landscape, and to modes of anti-genderism such as transphobia, harnessed politically, which explicitly rely on a reification of a naturalized gender binary and the biological foundations of sex difference. Moreover, we suggest contextualized critical caution around *state* narratives of global roll-backs on women's rights, not because they are not empirically valid, but because they can come to signify once again good versus bad states and deploy feminism as a tool of liberal branding against imagined illiberal Others (even those who were once good liberal allies).

Importantly, exploring anti-genderism and FFP in conjunction highlights the need for advocacy and policy to continually centre *gender* across different contexts, avoiding and refusing an exclusive focus on the category of women (see [Hagen and O'Rourke, 2023](#)). As Thomson and Färber (in [Achilleos-Sarll et al, 2023](#): 6) point out, this focus, through an emphasis on 'marginalized groups beyond women', has typically been more evident in civil society framings of FFP. However, there remains an opportunity opened by an invocation of feminism at the state level, which arguably creates some possible space for the political content of gender in foreign policy, even if its political potential often fails to materialize in practice.

Notes

¹ This is the authors' own translation from Macron's speech.

² Please note that the 'Stratégie internationale de la France pour l'égalité entre les femmes et les hommes (2018–2022)' has now been removed from the MEAE's website and has been replaced by the new 2025–2030 strategy.

- ³ For a salient discussion of anti-genderism and the WPS agenda in Brazil and Poland, see Thomson and Whiting 2022.
- ⁴ This is the authors' own translation from the French.

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Feminist Foreign Policy: A Practitioner's View from Paris

Delphine O as told to Kristina Lunz

Breaking new ground

When I was appointed in 2019 as France's first ambassador for feminist foreign policy (FFP), I entered uncharted territory. The announcement of France's FFP came without the large-scale mobilization of civil society often seen in countries like Germany or the Netherlands. Instead, it emerged in the context of a competitive geopolitical climate, where nations such as Sweden, Canada, and Spain were asserting leadership in gender equality. France sought to join this 'club', reflecting the productive side of international rivalry. Now, five years later, I find myself reflecting on how far we have come, the lessons learned, and the challenges that persist. France's FFP remains an evolving experiment – a bold attempt to embed principles of gender equality and inclusivity into the heart of foreign diplomacy.

When France announced its FFP in 2019, it was a bold statement of intent, but the policy lacked a comprehensive framework to give it shape and substance. Unlike some countries that introduced similar policies alongside detailed guidelines or theoretical documents, France took a different path. At the time of the announcement, the closest reference point was the International Strategy for Gender Equality, a pre-existing document that predated the FFP. While useful, this strategy was not tailored to the unique principles, objectives, and ambitions of a feminist approach to foreign policy.

Recognizing this gap, we embarked on a mission to create a new foundational document: the International Strategy for Feminist Foreign Policy. This document, which was published in early 2025,¹ is the product of extensive consultations and meticulous planning. It aims to provide a clear and comprehensive roadmap for implementing feminist principles across France's diplomatic and international

development efforts. Developing the framework was an intricate process that spanned over a year, involving consultations with a wide array of stakeholders. Internally, we engaged with various departments and directorates within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as other ministries, including those for Defence, Justice, Environment, and Gender Equality. These consultations ensured that the strategy reflected a whole-of-government approach, integrating feminist principles into diverse areas of governance and policy making.

Externally, we sought input from civil society organizations, think tanks, and academic experts. We also consulted with international partners, including like-minded countries with established FFPs, such as Sweden, Canada, and Mexico. The involvement of international organizations, such as UN agencies, donors, and foundations, further enriched the process, offering insights from global perspectives. The consultation process was not merely symbolic; it was a deliberate effort to align the strategy with the needs and realities of those it aimed to serve. By involving feminist grassroots organizations, particularly from the Global South, we sought to ensure that the policy was grounded in the lived experiences of women and marginalized communities worldwide.

The International Strategy for Feminist Foreign Policy is designed to be comprehensive and actionable, providing a robust framework that can guide France's diplomatic and development efforts for years to come. Unlike the handbooks or guidelines produced by Sweden and Germany, our strategy will be a detailed document spanning several dozen pages. It will seek to define FFP, French-style and address key thematic priorities including:

1. Gender-based violence (GBV);
2. Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR);
3. Support for feminist movements;
4. Emerging issues such as the role of technology in facilitating GBV and the intersection of gender and climate change.

The strategy will further outline priority regions for France's FFP, with a strong emphasis on supporting countries and feminist organizations in the Global South. This geographic focus reflects a commitment to addressing global power imbalances and fostering partnerships based on mutual respect and solidarity. To ensure accountability, the strategy will include measurable key performance indicators (KPIs). These indicators will allow us to track progress, assess the impact of initiatives, and identify areas for improvement.

Institutionalizing feminist foreign policy: embedding principles into structures

While France's FFP was initially driven by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and supported by the Ministry of Gender Equality, we recognized early on

that its long-term success required embedding it into the very structures of government. A policy dependent on the political will of individual leaders or ministers is inherently fragile, especially in the volatile arena of global diplomacy and domestic politics.

Over the past five years, we have worked diligently to institutionalize FFP, ensuring it evolves from a vision into a durable framework. This process has involved creating dedicated units, embedding feminist principles into existing structures, and fostering a culture of accountability.

The most significant milestone in the institutionalization process came in January 2024 with the establishment of the Mission for Feminist Foreign Policy, a dedicated sub-directorate within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Previously, gender-related initiatives were housed under the broader Gender, Population, and Development Unit. While this unit addressed gender equality, its scope was too broad to focus specifically on the unique objectives and challenges of FFP.

The creation of the Mission for Feminist Foreign Policy marked a turning point. For the first time, FFP became a distinct entity within the ministry, with a clear mandate and dedicated staff. This structural change ensures that feminist principles are no longer an add-on or a secondary consideration – they are now integral to the ministry's operations and strategy.

Why is this institutionalization significant? In a world where political leadership changes frequently, having FFP anchored in the organizational chart of the ministry protects it from being sidelined or discarded. By embedding the policy into the ministry's structures, we are building resilience against political shifts and ensuring that feminist principles remain a priority, regardless of who holds power. Institutionalization is not just about creating new units, it is also about fostering a feminist culture across government. To this end, we have worked to integrate feminist principles into the operations of other ministries and departments.

First, the development of FFP has involved collaboration with other ministries, including Defence, Justice, Environment, and Gender Equality. These partnerships ensure that feminist principles are reflected in diverse areas of governance, from environmental policy to security strategies. Second, institutionalizing FFP requires more than new structures – it demands a shift in mindset. We have introduced training programmes for diplomats and civil servants, equipping them with the knowledge and skills to apply a feminist lens to their work. These programmes cover topics such as gender analysis, intersectionality, and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. Third, to institutionalize feminist principles, we have integrated them into decision-making processes across the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. For example, all new initiatives are evaluated for their gender impact, and gender considerations are incorporated into diplomatic negotiations and agreements.

While significant progress has been made, institutionalizing FFP has not been without challenges. One of the most persistent issues is the gap

between external commitments and internal resources. While France has significantly increased funding for gender-focused initiatives abroad, the internal capacity within the ministry has not always kept pace. As the sole ambassador responsible for FFP, I often find myself stretched thin, relying on collaborations across departments and with external partners. Civil society organizations and oversight bodies, such as the High Council for Equality, have repeatedly highlighted the need for greater investment in personnel and financial resources within the ministry itself.

Institutionalizing feminist principles requires challenging long-standing norms and practices. Diplomatic institutions, like many other bureaucracies, are often resistant to change. Some colleagues viewed FFP as a departure from traditional diplomacy, questioning its relevance to security, trade, and other core priorities. Overcoming this resistance required persistent advocacy, demonstrating that feminist principles are not only compatible with but also enhance traditional diplomatic objectives.

Institutionalizing FFP is further complicated by the variability in political will among successive ministers and administrations. Over the past five years, we have worked under three foreign ministers, each with different levels of personal commitment to feminist principles. While it is encouraging that FFP has featured prominently in speeches and agendas, its implementation remains influenced by the priorities of individual leaders.

As part of this process of institutionalization, we are committed to building in accountability mechanisms. Without clear metrics for success, even the most well-intentioned policies can lose focus or momentum. Consequently, to monitor and evaluate the implementation of FFP, the forthcoming Strategy for Feminist Foreign Policy includes key performance indicators (KPIs) that allow us to track progress and measure impact. These indicators cover areas such as GBV, support for feminist movements, and the integration of feminist principles into diplomatic initiatives. Moreover, France's FFP will be subject to evaluation by independent bodies, such as the High Council for Equality. These evaluations provide valuable feedback, highlighting areas of success and identifying gaps that need to be addressed. Finally, institutionalizing FFP requires maintaining an open dialogue with civil society organizations. Their insights and critiques are essential for ensuring that the policy remains responsive to the needs of those it aims to serve. At the end of the day, my goal has always been to foster collaboration, acknowledging the value of diverse perspectives while staying true to feminist principles.

French feminist foreign policy at the multilateral level: delivering the generation equality forum

The first test of FFP implementation was the delivery of the Generation Equality Forum in 2021, co-hosted by France alongside Mexico and UN

Women. This historic event mobilized \$40 billion in commitments and introduced innovative governance structures, such as a 25-member civil society advisory group with veto power over key decisions. Announced alongside France's FFP initiative, it was intended as a concrete demonstration of commitment. The forum was an unprecedented event, the first of its scale since the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women – a 25-year gap. France took the lead to support and host the event, but at the time of announcement, many uncertainties loomed. We did not know the structure, the funding required, or whether commitments would materialize from countries or organizations worldwide. We built the initiative entirely from scratch.

From its inception, the forum sought to embody feminist principles such as inclusivity, representativeness, and democratic decision-making. While not perfectly realized, these ideals shaped the organization's framework. For the first time in such a global initiative, civil society was included in the decision-making body. The governance structure featured a 25-member civil society advisory group, balanced with representation from the Global North and South. Additionally, youth organizations were granted seats and veto power over all key decisions – from the agenda to invited participants and commitments. This redistribution of decision-making power to feminist organizations, particularly youth-led groups, represented a bold and challenging experiment. Governments and other stakeholders had to relinquish some authority to ensure a governance model rooted in feminist values.

The results of this ambitious undertaking were significant. The \$40 billion was pledged across six action coalitions, each with roadmaps, funding strategies, and actionable commitments. This ensured that the forum was not merely a platform for rhetoric but a springboard for tangible action. However, while this number is impressive, it requires context to be fully appreciated. The forum launched 3,000 commitments aimed at addressing various aspects of gender equality and women's rights. Progress has been mixed: while some commitments are well underway, others remain unfulfilled halfway through the implementation period. The midpoint of the initiative was celebrated at the 2023 UN General Assembly, providing an opportunity to reflect on achievements and challenges.

The forum's broader significance lies in its dual purpose. First, it provides a much-needed vehicle for advancing gender equality amid the challenges of intergovernmental negotiations. Although mechanisms like the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and the UN General Assembly exist, the rigidity and roadblocks within these systems often hinder progress. The Generation Equality Forum carved out a unique space where new commitments could be made and diverse actors engaged. Second, it catalyzes real-world projects and investments, bridging the gap between civil society, governments, and the private sector. This collaboration has not been without

challenges. Differences in priorities and approaches have tested the ability of stakeholders to work together, with some tempted to abandon the table. Yet, the vast majority remain engaged, demonstrating the resilience of this collective endeavour.

Second, this forum also underscores the difficulties of inclusivity on a global scale. Despite efforts to involve as many feminist organizations as possible, many felt excluded, particularly in terms of communication and outreach. These frustrations are valid, and both the forum's organizers and UN Women are aware of the shortcomings. Nevertheless, the Generation Equality Forum has initiated a crucial experiment in governance and multilateralism. By having diverse stakeholders at the table and fostering dialogue, it serves as a potential model for rejuvenating global cooperation on women's rights.

Looking ahead, the forum's success or failure will resonate beyond its immediate outcomes. If it falls short, it will reflect the broader struggle to translate collective hope and ambition into meaningful progress for women and girls worldwide. However, if it continues to drive action, collaboration, and investments, it may well set a precedent for future initiatives, proving that inclusive, feminist-driven governance can deliver real change.

Feminist foreign policy as a vehicle for transformative international relations?

France's FFP is not without its shortcomings. Recent controversies, such as the government's position on an EU directive defining rape, have highlighted tensions between feminist ambitions and domestic policy constraints. While disappointing, these moments have also spurred national debates and prompted initiatives to modernize outdated laws.

In reality, France's FFP operates against the background of a colonial history and in the context of military power. In the new strategy, there is no reference to 'decolonial' or 'anti-colonial' – largely due to domestic, not foreign policy, reasons. However, in alignment with feminist principles, we are not only increasing investments in grassroots feminist organizations, particularly in the Global South and former colonies, but also tackling a core challenge for governments: sharing power, especially decision-making power.

For example, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, through its increased 'Support Fund for Feminist Organizations', has adopted a collaborative funding approach. Decisions on which organizations receive funding are made collectively with civil society, similar to women's fund models, though not entirely delegated – akin to Canada's Equality Fund. This ensures shared priority-setting and proposal selection, while increasing collaboration with grassroots organizations and women's funds, an area historically overlooked.

This shift from vertical to horizontal collaboration is gradual, hindered by entrenched traditions and resistance. Still, within the ministry, the FFP unit's

unconventional approach is gaining traction, inspiring other departments to reconsider unilateral decision-making. Sharing power, while imperfect, is a step towards addressing structural imbalances inherited from colonialism and fostering more equitable Global North–South dialogues.

Interestingly, the relationships with feminist organizations in former French colonies often contrast sharply with those of governments. In Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali, where military juntas expelled ambassadors and severed ties citing ‘post-colonial’ grievances, we have maintained robust connections with feminist organizations. This ironic juxtaposition underscores the enduring importance of these grassroots channels, even amidst geopolitical tensions.

Yet, I see no shift in doctrine regarding militarization. The military and nuclear power remain central to France’s global projection, a stance only heightened by the conflict in Ukraine. Indeed, the war in Ukraine has tested the application of FFP in real-time. From the outset, we adopted a gender lens to address the differentiated impacts of the conflict. This included supporting Ukrainian women subjected to sexual violence, addressing the needs of women refugees, and ensuring access to reproductive health services. These efforts marked a significant shift in how France approaches conflict, demonstrating the value of feminist principles in humanitarian and security responses. I hope this precedent will influence our approach to future crises.

Overall, demilitarization is not a prominent demand from French feminist civil society, as seen in non-governmental organization (NGO) reports and the High Council for Equality’s findings. Instead, priorities focus on decolonization, power-sharing, and increased support for grassroots feminist organizations. External civil society pressures might push for demilitarization, but domestically, it is not a prevailing issue.

Conclusion: A vision for the future

FFP is a bold experiment, one that requires constant reflection, adaptation, and collaboration. It challenges traditional notions of diplomacy, pushing for a more inclusive and equitable world. As I reflect on the past six years, I am proud of what we have achieved, but I also recognize how much work remains. FFP is not just a government initiative – it is a shared endeavour involving activists, policy makers, and communities worldwide. Together, we can continue to push boundaries, reimagine diplomacy, and create a future that reflects the values of equality, justice, and peace.

As a feminist diplomat, I often find myself ‘between two chairs’, navigating criticism from both civil society and government colleagues. Activists argue that the policy is not feminist enough, while traditionalists within the ministry view my approach as too aligned with civil society narratives. This dual criticism reflects the delicate balance required to bridge these

worlds. Having come from civil society myself, I understand the frustrations of activists who feel excluded from decision-making. At the same time, I recognize the constraints of government structures.

Looking ahead, the challenge is to continue building on this foundation, addressing resource gaps, fostering a feminist culture across all levels of government, and adapting to new challenges and opportunities. By institutionalizing FFP we are not only advancing gender equality but also reimagining diplomacy as a tool for justice, inclusivity, and peace.

However, we must remain vigilant. Elections could bring a new majority that might seek to dismantle or reframe the policy. This uncertainty underscores the importance of institutionalization – embedding feminist principles into the fabric of diplomacy so they transcend individual political agendas.

Note

- ¹ Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères (2025) *France's International Strategy or a Feminist Foreign Policy*. [online], Available from: https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/meaediplomatie_fe_ministe_de_la_france_2025_eng_v3-rev2_cle029c11.pdf

Conclusion:

What Does Feminist Foreign Policy Mean in Practice? Insights from Colombia, Ukraine, Sudan, and Palestine

Laura Beltrán, Olena Yermakova, Reem Abbas, and Ashjan Ajour

The First Colombian Feminist Foreign Policy

Laura Beltrán

In late 2022, Colombia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs invited the Colombian feminist movement to develop the first Women, Peace and Security (WPS) National Action Plan (NAP) and to formulate Colombia's feminist foreign policy (FFP). I participated in both processes as a member of an LGBTQ+ feminist civil society organization named Colombia Diversa, although this article is a personal reflection as a queer feminist and young academic.

The participatory construction process of the first 1325 NAP (Alianza 1325, 2023) in Colombia engaged more than 1,500 women from different population groups,¹ laying the foundations to understand and address the need for the operationalization of intersectionality in public policies.² It identified the specific peace and security needs of women in different territories of the country and how these needs varied for LBT women, Indigenous, Afro-descendant, disabled women, and so on.

These two elements: the need for intersectionality and the participatory identification of specific needs are central contributions from the 1325 NAP process to the development of the first Colombian FFP. I propose that the parallel and intertwined process of developing the NAP informed the content of the Colombian FFP, which consists of three overarching

pillars – pacifist, participatory, and intersectional – and posits peacebuilding as one of its five axes of work.³

Most importantly, I argue that the influence of the development of the 1325 NAP on the FFP process was a way of building feminist content in a positional manner (Haraway, 1995; Harding, 1992) with a decolonial potential. This potential lies in recognizing various types of oppression affecting gender inequality and demanding changes to address these interconnected issues (Collins, 1998), to counteract the domination and violence imposed by hegemonic ways of knowing (Lander, 2000), being (Maldonado, 2007), and making the world (Curiel, 2012), stemming from masculinity, Whiteness, heterosexuality, cisgender norms, and capitalism (Lugones, 2008).

An intersectional perspective

The agreement on the meaning of intersectionality and the importance of its inclusion in public policies by a significant sector of the feminist movement was notably achieved during the participatory development of the 1325 NAP. Before the formulation of NAP 1325, these discussions had not been frequently addressed by the feminisms of social organizations in Colombia, partly because these organizations have been immersed in a scenario where public policies are formulated based on resource scarcity, and focused allocation has promoted harmful competition between social groups that undermines intersectional work.

The participatory development of the 1325 NAP brought together Indigenous, lesbian, bisexual, trans (LBT), and Afro-descendant women's groups, among others, to determine different groups' needs for peace and security and how to accommodate these in the NAP. Organizations focusing on specific groups and those without any differential approach were reminded that women's experiences and needs are not constructed along one axis of oppression.⁴

Hence, they agreed that women's realities required an intersectional perspective, understanding these axes as co-constitutive (Lugones, 2008). A significant achievement was the consensus on how traditional gender roles reinforce heterosexual and cisgender norms, contributing to violence against LBT women. As a result, the FFP was able to incorporate an intersectional perspective addressing violence against LGBTQ+ people as a shared commitment.⁵

This intersectional approach in this FFP is informed by Colombia's peacebuilding work, which has necessitated discussions on violence's structural causes. Combined with an intersectional gender lens, it highlights the need to counteract the colonial origins of oppression experienced by women and LGBTQ+ people.⁶ Thus, our localized understanding of feminism informs the FFP, differentiating it from universalizing views of women (Mohanty, 2008) and LGBTQ+ people.

Addressing country-specific priorities

The participatory identification of needs for the 1325 NAP through regional and population-based forums and government–civil society discussions often revealed broader needs than those traditionally considered related to peace and security.⁷ These needs were at the forefront of both the government and the feminist movement's minds during the FFP construction process, influencing its work axes: social justice, environmental justice, Total Peace, science and culture, and a transversal axis on institutional strengthening.

The climate change, social justice, and Total Peace axes showcase critical stances against the hegemonic conceptions of development that have traditionally taken precedence over the specific needs of women and LGBTQ+ people. The institutional strengthening axis shows that the NAP process revealed the need for the FFP to focus on depatriarchalizing and decolonizing the country's institutions, particularly those handling foreign policy.⁸ This context-specific approach, mindful of the internal effort required by foreign policy to transform the daily gender inequalities, aims for a politically committed FFP transforming international politics from a feminist perspective (Nylund, 2017; Barbas et al, 2022).

The participatory process of creating the Colombian NAP facilitated direct dialogue between civil society, the state, and international allies. This was useful in positioning, from civil society, the internal conditions that must be transformed in order to establish an FFP. This reflects progress in moving away from a state-centrism that allows for reshaping power relations in knowledge construction and how this construction shapes the world (Espinosa et al, 2013: 409). However, feminist organizations faced difficulties identifying concrete ways international instruments (beyond the 1325 agenda) could address 'domestic' needs. Only creative discussions with the government about our priorities enabled constructing international responses to 'domestic' needs. Such conversations were part of a learning process to see ourselves and our needs in international politics.

The development of the first FFP has contributed to fostering a collective understanding of the gendered impact produced by the relationship between foreign policies and daily life, which lies at the heart of a transformative and feminist purpose. Furthermore, the disengagement from state-centrism in selecting context-specific gender impacts for the FFP is a critical stance against the colonization of feminist meanings in foreign policies.

Conclusion

The intersectional approach in the FFP and its recognition of context-specific needs from civil society were propelled by the participatory process of formulating the 1325 NAP. Allowing an FFP that recognizes the material and

concrete heterogeneity of women and LGBTQ+ people, as well as disengaging from the usual state-centric construction of such policies, constitutes a critical stance against the colonization of feminist meanings in the foreign policy.

The decolonial potential brought forth by the positioning of localized intersectionality as a guiding pillar of the FFP can materialize through actions that effectively challenge specific colonial and patriarchal structures perpetuating violence against women and LGBTQ+ people. This challenge often requires changes in the development model and state apparatus, which can be effectively advanced through the established axes of the Colombian FFP.

The partial disengagement from state centrism during the participatory identification of internal priorities for the FFP must continue to advance a decolonial perspective by integrating knowledge from feminist organizations and transforming colonial approaches to address international issues. This includes territorializing the policy across different regions and promoting subnational diplomacy as outlined by the government,⁹ while also strengthening the direct and meaningful participation of Colombian women and LGBTQ+ social organizations in international spaces, fostering horizontal relationships.

What Feminist Foreign Policy Means to Ukrainian Women

Olena Yermakova

As a Ukrainian feminist, I find myself in an awkward position, a sentiment I share with many other Ukrainian feminists. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has created cleavages among feminists and significant challenges in implementing feminist foreign policy (FFP) in the context of an ongoing conflict. The concept of FFP, while well-intentioned, often fails to resonate with the lived experiences and urgent needs of Ukrainian women. In this contribution, I delve into the tensions and experiences of conflict-affected women, highlighting how the aspirations of feminist principles interact with the harsh realities of war.

Gendered dimensions of war

The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war has profound gendered impacts (Ciolan, 2022), with mixed effects on women. Particularly, at the beginning of the full-scale invasion, women were pushed into traditional caregiver roles, tasked with evacuating children and the elderly. International humanitarian and development aid efforts, often presented as aligned with FFP goals and principles, frame women as a homogenous group. In this framing, women are vulnerable, victims of war, and the focus of interventions is on their

protection (UN Women, 2024). This then becomes the main substance of the feminist element of international conflict response. For instance, prioritizing humanitarian assistance and foreign aid, and limiting military assistance (Chehab, 2023: 12).

While well-intentioned, such a framing fails to recognize the heterogeneity of women and their roles as agents of change and can perpetuate vulnerability (Picard, 2021). In Ukraine, women are not just victims, we are an active and vital component of the resistance against war and occupation.

The Ukrainian army has one of the highest ratios of women globally – an estimated 20 per cent (Euronews, 2024). This involvement of women in combat and defence efforts has arisen because of Russia's aggression.¹⁰ Ukrainian women were granted the right to hold any position in the military in 2018,¹¹ and the full-scale invasion by Russia has seen an increase in women's participation. Around 68,000 women (Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, 2024) currently serve in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, of which around 10,000 (Zemliachky, 2024) are in frontline roles. They are all volunteers.

Zemliachky¹² is a women-led civil society organization providing female military uniforms, which is one of the biggest issues Ukrainian servicewomen face. Surprisingly, the first female bullet-proof vest was designed only in 2023 – in Ukraine (Ukrainska Pravda, 2023). Until then, bullet proof vests were only fitted for a male body, which is not only uncomfortable for female soldiers, but also offers less protection due to an improper fit. This example illustrates the gendered impact of militarization; changing dynamics of security governance that ensures combat roles are not closed to women; and cooperation between the military and the civil society to provide what is necessary for these new types of soldiers.

Even in the Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine,¹³ a female resistance movement, 'Angry Mavka', is operating. Risking torture and death, women are distributing pro-Ukrainian literature, spraying graffiti, vandalizing Russian symbols, and reporting the movements of the Russian Army to Ukrainian authorities (Braschayko and Blu, 2023).

Women's contributions are not limited to the battlefield. Women have also been pivotal in grassroots political movements, advocacy for justice, and efforts to secure international support for Ukraine. Figures like Nobel Peace Prize winner Oleksandra Matviichuk and First Lady Olena Zelenska have become prominent advocates and have been calling on the world to arm Ukraine (CBC News, 2024).

Feminist resistance to war

Ukrainian feminists often find themselves feeling betrayed by many feminist groups globally and by Western feminists particularly. A manifesto¹⁴ named

Feminist Resistance Against War ([Feminists Against War, 2022](#)), and the response by Ukrainian feminists ([Feminist Initiative Group, 2022](#)), underscore this sense of disconnect between Western feminist ideals and the actual needs of Ukraine's women. The manifesto framed Russia's 2022 invasion as a 'confrontation between imperialist blocs at the global level', thus shifting focus from what is happening on the ground in Ukraine and underplaying Russia's actions (also by framing it as Putin's war). They blame NATO, frame support for Ukraine as warmongering, and oppose sending weapons to Ukraine and any increase in military spending. They claim to be standing with the people of Ukraine who demand a ceasefire. The Feminist Resistance Against War manifesto does not contain a single signature by a woman from Ukraine.

In a response titled 'The Right to Resist. A Feminist Manifesto' ([The Feminist Initiative Group, 2022](#)), published in the online journal *Commons*,¹⁵ Ukrainian feminists have argued that Western feminists' anti-militarist stance, which opposes sending weapons to Ukraine, fails to recognize the necessity of self-defence. They emphasize self-determination, call not for a ceasefire but for a just and inclusive peace, and call out Russian imperialism.¹⁶

Such cleavages in positions do not stay as ivory tower debates but echo among policy makers. For example, the 2022 letter to the Biden administration by the Congressional Progressive Caucus,¹⁷ calling on the president to negotiate with Putin over Ukraine's head, is a case in point, where the agency of Ukrainians was sidelined by a group that consists mostly of women and exclusively of feminists, exposing double standards and Western-centrism. This stance denied Ukrainians the agency to protect themselves and resist aggression. As a feminist, looking at the signature of such a 'powerful feminist voice' ([Peck, 2020](#)) as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, it is hard not to feel betrayed. Ukrainians counted on solidarity with the oppressed, but many seem to focus on the oppressor. Those who advocate for the inclusion of women's voices, failed to ask their Ukrainian counterparts on what they think and need.

The Invisible Battalion is a project that started years before the full-scale invasion, documenting the participation of Ukrainian women in the 'war against Russia's occupying army' ([Invisible Battalion Advocacy Project, 2024](#)) in Donbas. Apart from documentation and advocacy, the project works on the rehabilitation of female veterans. Women of diverse backgrounds were also active participants in democratic revolutions in Ukraine, particularly the Revolution of Dignity, also known as Euromaidan ([Goncharenko, 2014](#)). Ukraine's women have been increasingly taking up traditionally male jobs as rescuers, proud to contribute to their communities ([Main Directorate of the State Emergency Service of Ukraine in Vinnytsia Oblast, 2023](#)).

The feminist movement in Ukraine has deep historical roots, intertwined with the country's struggle for national independence. In the 19th century,

Ukrainian feminists saw their fight for women's rights as inseparable from the broader national liberation movement (Slavinska, 2022). This historical context adds another layer of complexity to the current feminist discourse, highlighting that feminism, as one of the embodiments of freedom-fighting, has different connotations in former imperial centres and former colonies (Puto, 2023). For Ukrainian women, gender and national liberation are consistent parts of a whole.

Between feminist foreign policy and gender equality

Gender equality in Ukraine is a work in progress. Notably, Ukraine ratified the Istanbul Convention only in 2022. Ukrainian women undoubtedly face an array of challenges and structural issues.

Yet, since the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian feminists like me often find ourselves in an unexpected position of seeming concern for 'men's rights'. As mandated by martial law, all men aged 18 to 60 are subject to mobilization and restrictions of rights, such as freedom of movement. Given the violations in recruitment processes, lack of demobilization opportunities, not to mention the very premise of risking your life, men in Ukraine in the current context are in a very vulnerable circumstance indeed. There is anecdotal evidence of suicide rates increasing among young men fearing mobilization and depressed from living in constant fear. Not only can they not travel abroad, but many men now remain in hiding at home to evade enlistment officers – a phenomenon that has become increasingly widespread. Many more are afraid to travel through check points between regions. With the ongoing wave of mobilization,¹⁸ many are navigating their home cities using special Telegram channels to send notifications about which streets enlistment officers have been spotted on. When men are reduced to the gendered stereotype of a defender, this echoes back to reinforce stereotypical women's gender roles too. For instance, some brigades refuse to take female combat medics, claiming women should not risk their lives as they bear children (Телебачення Торонто [Telebachennya Toronto], 2023). Moreover, as men who served return to their wives, the threat of domestic violence increases (Puto, 2023).

The economic impact of the war has also been gendered, and again, it is not only women who are facing challenges. It is bizarre to hear calls from Western advisors on the need to include more women in workplaces, when most employers are reluctant to hire men, fearing they will be drafted and the vacancy will be unfilled again, leading to a de facto gender discrimination in the job market. Many men avoid official full-time work, and unemployed men often avoid registering with the employment fund out of fear of state interactions, further complicating their economic prospects. This situation

not only affects men but also creates a double burden for women, who are pushed into breadwinner and caregiver roles simultaneously.

Gender-based violence (GBV) in conflict settings is another critical part of FFP efforts. While women are the primary victims of sexual violence, men and children also suffer (Bida, 2024). Recently, there have been increasing reports of sexual violence against civilian men under occupation (Kottasová and Voitovych, 2024) and prisoners of war (POWs) (Gall and Chubko, 2024; Kaminska, 2024). The focus on protecting women and girls often fails to address and safeguard the full spectrum of those affected, thereby perpetuating a limited understanding of sexual violence in a conflict setting.

Some of the practical implementations of FFP, while well-meaning, appear to be superficial performative feminism, failing to address the immediate needs on the ground. For instance, Canadian funding for ‘gender-inclusive demining’ has raised eyebrows (Knight, 2024). Speaking confidentially to a person working on Canada’s aid to Ukraine, they could not substantiate what the term implies. There is concern that feminist principles are superficially applied without meaningful impact on structural issues. The focus on gender-inclusivity sometimes fails to address the pressing reality that all Ukrainians, regardless of gender, need robust defence mechanisms to survive and resist aggression.

A significant criticism of Western feminist approaches is their lack of intersectional grounding and failure to adapt to local realities. FFP must consider the specific cultural, historical, and socio-political contexts of the countries it aims to support. In Ukraine, this means understanding the dual struggle for gender equality and national sovereignty and recognizing the diverse experiences and needs of Ukrainian women.

Conclusion: From sympathy to solidarity

What Ukrainian feminists need from the international community is not mere sympathy but genuine solidarity. This involves listening to Ukrainian women, understanding their unique challenges, and providing support that aligns with their needs and realities, not just theoretical ideals. It means recognizing Ukrainian women as agents of change, not just victims, and ensuring that FFP is responsive to the actual conditions on the ground.

The war against Ukraine has highlighted the importance of FFPs that are inclusive, intersectional, and grounded in local contexts. The war has also underscored the need for the international feminist movement to move beyond Western-centric perspectives and engage in meaningful, supportive actions that empower and uplift women in all their diversity. By doing so, we can honour the resilience and strength of Ukrainian women and contribute to a more just and equitable world.

A Place and Not a Marketplace for Peace in Sudan

Reem Abbas

In 2019, Sudanese women were the backbone of the Sudanese revolution that ousted former President Omer Al-Bashir whose 30-year-long rule was marked with discriminatory laws against women that criminalized the presence of women in public spaces. However, the public celebration of women as protestors, protectors, documenters, and organizers at the grassroots level quickly turned into a collective punishment campaign against them. After 2019, we witnessed rising domestic violence, honour killings, and increasing levels of sexual harassment ([Mohamed Salih, 2022](#)).

I argue that this punishment campaign continued into the ongoing war because the current types and levels of violence should not be interpreted as solely one of the outcomes of war. This is part of a larger backlash against Sudanese women given their critical role in the revolution and for daring to challenge social norms and the patriarchal political parties and military institutions.

Sudan is a country in chronic warfare. Since 1956, war and military rule have been constant in the lives of Sudanese people. The latest war is much larger in geographic scope, and with the capital as its epicentre it spread to other parts, engulfing the country in conflict and mass displacement. The displacement is unprecedented; it has been called the ‘world’s worst since the partition of India in 1947’ ([Tubiana, 2024](#)). In April 2023, residents awoke to a battle at a sports complex in the south of the capital between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a paramilitary group that had rebelled against the SAF and which had quickly begun to attack airports and military bases. From its first week, the war was quickly turned into a war on women, with unprecedented levels of sexual and gender-based violence ([Abbas, 2023](#)). Sudanese women continue to be sold in slave markets, trafficked to neighbouring states, coerced into forced labour and prostitution, kidnapped by members of the RSF militia and kept as sex slaves inside homes occupied by the RSF, and subjected to discrimination in an ever-shrinking civic space.

If the revolution failed to make serious political gains that benefited women and kept the peace in the country, it succeeded to decentralize the women’s movement and create small feminist groups all over the country, groups that continued to advocate for rights before the war and who have engaged in critical humanitarian efforts as well as anti-war efforts since last year. The women’s movement is a force to reckon with, and it is a fundamental part of the revolutionary infrastructure in Sudan. For this reason, we saw many initiatives by international organizations to convene women activists from different groups and support their participation in meetings that are taking place within the global anti-war efforts. In fact, many donors are framing

these efforts as attempts to promote their own feminist foreign policy (FFP) and commit to requirements to ensure that women are included in the peace processes while the majority frame this work as in line with their Women, Peace and Security efforts. In April 2024, UN Women convened Sudanese women in consultations to forge what they called a ‘feminist peace agenda’ (UN Women Africa, 2024) while in July 2024, for example, the African Union’s (AU’s) Special Envoy on Women, Peace and Security facilitated a large-scale women’s conference called the *Sudan Women’s Peace Dialogue* (African Union, 2024). Using such language would have been very daring before the revolution when words such as feminist and peace were politicized: the word feminist was seen as having negative connotations while peace was seen as a national security issue.

Since 2023, convenings and initiatives bringing women to discuss pathways to peace have been common, and the overall perspective is that women’s inclusion in the peace process, especially through the Feminist Peace framework, which considers that any peace process should revolve around the lived experiences of women, should be applauded. However, this approach does not understand Sudan’s militarized political marketplace and its impact on the political sphere, in general, and on women’s inclusion in politics specifically.

Here, I explain the underlying reasons that are leading to women’s under-representation as well as their decreased ability to make decisions.

What can women sell in a marketplace?

Sudan’s postcolonial history is troubled with brief periods of peace and stability and long stretches of war and destruction. In his recent book on Sudan and South Sudan, Sharath Srinivasan (2021) argues that many peace agreements in Sudan have instigated never-ending war as they ‘reward armed groups while stymying civilian-led and non-violent participations that is critical to ending violence and establishing governance’ (Abbas and Sample, 2023).

As war continued in Sudan, power-sharing agreements as opposed to peace agreements became the norm. They allowed warlords who would take up arms based on grievances they could not articulate to eventually gain access to power and resources through these agreements by claiming representation of communities they had not seen in years. The real issue at hand is what Alex de Waal describes as Sudan’s political marketplace, which is a system dominated by ‘monetized transactional politics’ (de Waal, 2016). After Sudan’s 2019 revolution, de Waal notes that Sudan’s political marketplace will become more militarized. In fact, it has always been militarized, as the marketplace continues to be dominated by men with guns, in some cases politicians who represent patriarchal political parties and tribal leaders, who

are always men and who are remunerated by the state to manage the affairs of their tribes and communities in the interests of the military. As a result, armed groups enter and leave this dynamic marketplace through transactions that are the result of peace agreements and political concessions. The men with guns are the only players in this marketplace.

A militarized marketplace has no space for women

When it comes to the militarization of this marketplace, it is important to recall that Mohamed Hamdan Daglo ‘Hemedti’, who is the founder and leader of the RSF, said in 2014 that ‘anyone that doesn’t fight doesn’t have an opinion’ (Abbas, 2024). As mentioned earlier, to have an opinion in the militarized marketplace, you have to carry a gun or be able to sell the loyalty of your tribesmen in the marketplace or belong to the biggest political parties in Sudan, which are essentially based on sectarianism, making them highly patriarchal. Women are severely under-represented in the military and armed groups due to restrictions, discriminatory practices, and conservative social norms. As an example, high-ranking Sudanese women officers rarely get ‘saluted’, but they receive monetary compensation for this salute because male soldiers refuse to salute them.

Women members in political parties in Sudan are under-represented in leadership positions due to a complex patriarchal system that is ‘shaped by the interaction and (re)construction of culture, religion, tribal affiliation, geography and politics. This has resulted in a male-dominated hierarchy at the family, household, tribal and public levels, and has led to greater social exclusion and subordination of women’ (Elkarib, 2021). The fact that the largest political parties in Sudan are sectarian and many others are inspired by sectarianism also limits women’s effective participation because leadership here is centred on spiritual authority and family lineage. Moreover, tribal leadership is extremely patriarchal even if in some tribes’ leadership inheritance is matrilineal. This social infrastructure and the political environment that it has created continues to disadvantage women in Sudan, and if it is not challenged women will continue to be under-represented and, even worse, the peace processes will lead to a temporary peace that will not resolve the militarization of politics in Sudan and will continue to sabotage non-violent civil politics.

Donors, feminist foreign policy, and peace processes

Many donors, especially Norway and the United Kingdom (UK), continue to invest in women’s participation in the ongoing ceasefire process in Sudan as part of their role in the Troika, one of the oldest intra-governmental bodies working on peace in Sudan, which besides Norway and the UK also includes the US.

I cannot call it a peace process because the main talks that are being held in Saudi Arabia and the follow-up talks in Geneva are very limited in scope and, currently, are focused on ceasefire and facilitating humanitarian routes for aid. Over the past few months, they have held convenings, conferences, meetings, webinars to harness women's perspectives on peace and they have also supported the travel and accommodation costs of women participants to conferences held by Taqadum, which describes itself as the largest civil body working against the war in Sudan.¹⁹ The conversations happening there, and even the visions that are shared, such as the vision of the Women of Sudanese Civic and Political Groups alliance (also known as MANSAM, and which is believed to be the largest women's coalition in Sudan), to end the war, do not adequately address Sudan's political marketplace, but they reiterate the need to support women's inclusion without fleshing out why it is difficult to do so and why it is even more difficult to ensure that women have an effective role to play. Moreover, the platforms ignore the fact that the political and ethnic polarization in the wider political marketplace has impacted the women's movement and has opened wounds. Recent convenings and meetings have yielded online spats in social media posts and, at a recent meeting held by the AU, participants even entered into a physical confrontation. A feminist perspective would acknowledge the differences and the influence that women war-mongers have had on the conflict. I remember travelling to a community in Eastern Sudan before the war and learning about the role of women in a recent tribal conflict and how they withheld salt from food and sugar from tea to send a powerful message to their men: your salt or sugar is with the other side. Those lessons teach us that women hold a critical power within their hands that they could use for peacemaking, but finding this power requires deep discussions within the women's movement and an understanding that the political marketplace that they try to serve is at the centre of the problem of the state and for women themselves. Equally important, women do not have to organize under one umbrella; any convening should acknowledge ideological and political differences and encourage women participants to find common interests and work towards them.

In an important commentary on FFP and peacebuilding related particularly to Germany, Cheryl [Hendricks \(2023: np\)](#) writes that, in this regard, peace processes have to 'recognise and transform unequal power relations, and to preface gender equality as a marker of peace and security'. She also emphasizes that we have to go back to defining feminism as 'transforming patriarchal systems that reinforce multiple forms of inequality and oppression' ([Hendricks, 2023; np](#)), and any peace process has to operationalize the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda to challenge gender dynamics.

Failing to do so and continuing to invest resources in the tokenization of women in peace efforts is a great shame to the women who continue to be

victimized by this war and who have suffered from societal stigma, sexual violence, and deep impoverishment. It is even a betrayal to the Sudanese women's movement that has been on the frontline of the struggle against the militarization of the state and dictatorships for the last 70 years. Tokenization is regularly happening through allocating a certain percentage of seats at political meetings to women and the process by which this happens tells a sinister story of the situation of women inside political parties. Generally, women selected for meetings and conferences related to any political or peace process in Sudan are from women's groups or civil society organizations, and if the classic peacemaking mechanism is employed, they find themselves in track 2 of the mediation process, which denies them access to important meetings, but the real problem lies in the fact that most women in those groups are actually members of political parties. Due to the discrimination and lack of opportunities given to them by their political parties, they become active in women's groups and try to work through them instead of investing their energy in pushing the agenda of the women's movement within their political parties. On a smaller scale, this denies women the opportunity to participate through different platforms as they all become representatives from civil society and, at a larger scale, this advances the patriarchy within political parties and only entrenches the patriarchal norms within them, while giving an opportunity to deflect any advocacy to improve the position of women politicians in their parties.

The women's movement should lead

Sudanese people use *Azza* as a term of endearment for Sudan. *Azza* or *Al-Azza* is the first Sudanese woman in recent history to be arrested in a political protest, and this was in 1924 (Hassan, 2019). Since then, we have seen the rise of women's groups and associations that have utilized peaceful resistance as a tool. The women's movement should come together beyond the spaces that are offered by the international community and the patriarchal political parties and articulate a strong position against militarism and against gendered power structures at the political and social level. This conversation was recently activated by a statement by Sudanese feminists called 'The Feminist Statement on War', which was written in Arabic by Sudanese feminists who wanted to establish a stance that there is an age-old feminist struggle for peace and freedom in Sudan. The statement effectively established that a war never just starts when the first bullet is shot, but it has foundations and structures that create a social, economic, and political base that instigates violence. It argued that you could not understand the conflict without looking at military expenditure or the international capitalist systems such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that governments work with

to implement policies that subjugate populations and turn civilians into sources of customs and taxes in a dehumanizing way. It also highlighted that understanding rape as a weapon of war cannot be untied from social norms that turn women's bodies into commodities for exploitation by all sides and that 'historically, the armed forces have used rape as a strategy in many wars ... to no accountability' (Hashim et al, 2023). The statement adds that 'we, as feminists, see that the internal policies opened the door for people to join the militia and carry arms, this presented an investment in war as opposed to investing in productive sectors that present a chance to build, humanitarian and economic development' (Hashim et al, 2023).

To conclude, ensuring that militarization is deeply challenged, and that non-violent civil politics is instated as the norm in Sudan is the only way to dethrone the militarized political marketplace and ensure that women are equal in the political spheres.

Feminist Foreign Policy and Feminist Solidarity During a Genocide: An Intersectional Critique

Ashjan Ajour

Feminist foreign policy (FFP) offers a vision for international relations and proposes a transformative approach which emphasizes gender equality and solidarity. It aims to address systematic global injustice by embedding feminist principles into diplomatic and policy frameworks. Yet, while this vision is compelling, too often its application reveals a disconnect between its promise and practice.

This gap is particularly visible in the case of Palestinian women in Gaza in the context of ongoing genocide, where despite international awareness solidarity often remains symbolic rather than actionable. Drawing on Fredrick Douglass's critique of American hypocrisy and extending this critique to include feminist silences in the face of genocide, and applying the principles of feminist intersectionality, I highlight the limitation of Western feminist support and propose ways for FFP to better fulfil its promise of solidarity and transformative change. Hypocrisy in this context can be understood as the dissonance between stated values and actual practice: it is the act of professing moral or ethical commitments while failing or refusing to enact them consistently. Conceptually, hypocrisy is not merely personal failing; it functions as a structural and performative phenomenon in politics and society, where public declarations of virtue mask complicity in injustice.

Building on Douglass's critique, I argue that silence in the face of atrocity functions as a form of complicity: just as Douglass critiqued performative morality in celebrating freedom while tolerating slavery, feminist communities

that fail to respond substantively to genocide are complicit in oppression (Douglass, 1852).

At the time of writing, we have been witnessing a televised genocide for over a year. Palestinian women on the ground are appealing for global support, and the lack of response calls into question the international community's indifference to their suffering (see [Ajour, 2024](#)). Western feminist silence is not universal, but it is predominantly observed among mainstream and institutional feminists in North America and Europe, particularly those aligned with liberal FFP frameworks who often prioritize neutrality or avoid contentious debates on Israel–Palestine. This active silence within feminist scholarship and wider community reveals a deeper systematic failure to confront colonial violence ([Pratt et al, 2025](#); [Shoman et al, 2025](#)).

This silence legitimizes oppression and undermines feminism's core commitment to justice and constitutes a profound ethical and intellectual shortcoming. Such silence legitimizes oppression, undermines feminism's core commitment to justice, and constitutes a profound ethical and intellectual shortcoming.

Palestinian feminist scholars such as Rema [Hammami \(2004\)](#), Nadera [Shalhoub-Kevorkian \(2009\)](#), and Islah [Jad \(2018\)](#) have explored the intersection between colonial violence, gendered oppression, and Palestinian resistance. Their work emphasizes how Palestinian women's experiences are frequently overlooked in the mainstream narratives despite the pivotal role in resisting occupation and advocating for justice. For instance, Shalhoub-Kevorkian's earlier work highlights the compounded trauma of violence and legal erasure under occupation, illustrating how Western feminist frameworks often fail to account for settler colonial contexts ([Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2009](#)). These insights remain crucial for analysing the current genocide in Gaza (2023–25) where such dynamics are intensified.

Can Western feminist solidarity framed by FFP address the severe suffering of Palestinian women amidst the ongoing genocidal violence? FFP envisions a world where international relations are guided by justice and empathy, where every policy decision is scrutinized through the lens of gender equality ([Tickner, 2014](#)). Yet, the suffering of Palestinian women in Gaza contrasts with that promise. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) report states that at the end of September 2024 some 6,297 women and 11,355 children have been killed in Gaza since the 7th of October ([OCHA, 2024](#)).

Genocide, settler colonialism, and the targeting of social reproduction

The Nakba in 1948 forcibly displaced over 750,000 Palestinians from their lands and their right to return has been denied. The Israeli state has continuously subjected Palestinians to violence, dispossession, and ethnic

cleansing (Pappe, 2007), as part of an ongoing settler colonial project aimed at uprooting them from their homeland (Wolfe, 2006). This includes controlling the reproduction of Palestinian women, a phenomenon scholars describe as ‘reprocide’ (Shoman, 2025). Jemima Repo (2024) explores the gendered dimensions of the ongoing Israeli assault on Gaza, focusing on the deliberate targeting of social reproduction.

The destruction of life, targeting vital infrastructure such as homes, hospitals, and sanitation systems is central to this genocide, disproportionately affecting women due to their caregiving and reproductive roles. Similarly, Hala Shoman (2025) examines the concept of ‘reprocide’, shedding light on how reproductive violence is used as a tool in this genocidal strategy. Israeli attacks target women as agents of the reproduction of life itself as mothers and caretakers, targeting women as reproducers of social and cultural life, underscoring the gendered nature of the violence and how it is ignored by international feminist discourse (Repo, 2024).

Israeli settler colonialism perpetuates systematic injustice, leading to long-term suffering and the deprivation of Palestinian rights (Said, 1995). In my article ‘Unveiling the Colonial Violence of Space in the Gaza Genocide’ I explore the genocidal war and prolonged blockade of Gaza since 2007 as a collective punishment of Palestinian space and bodies (Ajour, 2025). Reflecting on my personal experiences as a Palestinian scholar based in the UK with a family in Gaza, I recount my family’s forced displacement, the destruction of our home, and the struggle for basic survival in harsh inhumane conditions. I critique the Western media’s dehumanization of Palestinians and its failure to recognize the historical context of the genocide. For example, coverage often frames Israel as a defensive actor while erasing decades of occupation and ethnic cleansing. In my narrative ‘An Account from the Genocide in Gaza: What My Family Is Going Through Is Impossible’ (Ajour, 2023) I record how my family, like many others, endured Israeli bombardment, forced displacement, and the destruction of our homes as part of the dispossession of Palestinians since 1984, and the suffering caused by the genocidal violence including targeted attacks on civilians, the blockade leading to the lack of medical supplies, and the destruction of health facilities rendering Gaza in practice as a concentration camp.

Women carry the burden of war, experiencing extreme hardships due to violence, displacement, and an ongoing blockade, facing multiple layers of physical and psychological conflict. Denied their access to basic needs and services such as food, water, healthcare, and hygiene, some, those I know from my family, believe death would be a relief. Israeli National Security Minister Ben-Gvir called for ‘ways more painful than death’ for Palestinians who are frequently forced to give birth under bombing, often on hospital floors without anaesthesia or pain relief. Due to a lack of feminine hygiene products and water shortages, many take medication to stop their menstrual

cycle. Shaving their heads to prevent diseases from the filthy conditions, they sleep on cold, hard floors in overcrowded shelters or tents. They witness their children's deaths, pulling their bodies from the rubble, and face starvation, which prevents them from producing milk for their babies who die from hunger. Those who survive the bombings are frequently detained, tortured, sexually assaulted, and left without access to life-saving medications for cancer or dialysis.

Selective compassion: complicity and silence

This reality calls into question the effectiveness of Western feminist movements and their solidarity efforts. Although Western feminist solidarity is practised, it tends to be symbolic rather than substantive (Pratt et al, 2025). In the immediate aftermath of 7th October, some feminist organizations, including the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), issued statements condemning the escalation of violence in Israel and Palestine and denouncing the harm to all civilians (WILPF, 2023). While WILPF also noted the gendered impacts of conflict, its statements did not directly address the intensified suffering of Palestinian women under genocidal violence, a point that underscores the uneven integration of intersectional and decolonial analysis within mainstream feminist advocacy. While Western feminist movements may issue statements of support or condemn the violence, these expressions often fail to provide meaningful support and assistance to those women who are being killed on a daily basis. This suggests not simply a gap in resources but a deeper failure to integrate race, coloniality, and settler colonial analysis into feminist frameworks (Abu-Lughod, 2013). Fear of backlash, accusations of antisemitism, and institutional alignment with liberal foreign policy agendas may further contribute to silence (Pratt et al, 2025).

This superficial engagement highlights a disconnect between FFP's theoretical commitments and its practical impact. The events of 7th October highlighted this among some Western feminists who, while condemning the violence against Israeli women, overlook the ongoing suffering of Palestinian women. This raises questions about the inclusivity and sincerity of their feminist principles and solidarity and reveals the tendency to prioritize the experience of women in more privileged contexts while marginalizing those who are subjected to colonial violence. This selective compassion dehumanizes Palestinian women and aligns with the colonial narrative which dismisses their lived experience. Are we truly advocating for justice and equality if we remain complicit and silent in the face of the suffering of Palestinian women?

I have previously argued (Ajour, 2024) that Western audiences often dehumanize Palestinians by presenting the events of 7th October without

the historical context of Israeli settler colonialism after the Nakba in 1948. True solidarity entails understanding the roots of Palestinian suffering and recognizing Palestinian resistance as legitimate. It also requires rejecting a conflation of anti-Zionism with antisemitism. This involves naming hypocrisy clearly: the same governments and institutions that frame themselves as champions of women's rights enable the bombardment of hospitals and schools in Gaza. The silence of mainstream feminists mirrors this state hypocrisy, reinforcing colonial hierarchies of whose lives and grief count as politically significant.

I provided critiques of Western hypocrisy and mainstream media portraying the Israeli colonial state as a victim while ignoring decades of violence against Palestinians. Western audiences need to educate themselves on the Palestinian right to freedom and self-determination in the same way as Jewish advocates who oppose Israel's actions under the banner of 'Never Again'.

An intersectionality matrix of domination: towards feminist solidarity

The limits of Western feminist solidarity is evident in the lack of an intersectional approach which examines how overlapping systems of oppression such as gender, race, and nationality create unique experiences of marginalization (Crenshaw, 1989). The violence faced by Palestinian women reflects a reproductive genocide targeting their roles as caregivers and cultural bearers. The destruction of Gaza turned it into a concentration camp where life-sustaining resources are systematically stripped away, leading to collective starvation and suffering. The targeted destruction of healthcare facilities exacerbates their crisis (UNRWA, 2024). This assault on the very essence of Palestinian existence is not just a physical attack, it is an act of social death aimed at rendering life unbearable for those who remain. This is part of a broader strategy of social death – an assault on the very conditions of Palestinian existence.

These multiple forms of oppression require a more nuanced and responsive approach from Western feminists. Yet silence from mainstream institutional feminists in North America and Europe persists, particularly those aligned with liberal FFP frameworks. By failing to name settler colonialism as a structuring force of violence, these feminists reinforce selective compassion and leave Palestinian women outside the boundaries of solidarity. Geopolitical interests often interfere with the implementation of feminist principles. Western nations that advocate for FFP face political and economic pressures that shape their foreign policy, often leading to compromises that prioritize their national strategic interest over feminist or humane ideals. The influence of these geopolitical interests overshadows any human support and results in the selective application of feminist values. Here again, hypocrisy emerges when solidarity is performed rhetorically, while state and institutional

feminists remain silent about arms sales, blockade enforcement, and colonization. Instead of addressing the immediate needs of women in wars, policies are shaped by the political agenda of imperial power and undermine core values of feminist solidarity.

The conditions imposed on Palestinians reveal an underlying goal that transcends physical destruction and reflects the strategic effort to make life unbearable while facilitating the aim of ethnic cleansing and forced displacement. The closed borders of Gaza for 17 years transformed it into an open-air prison, and the disregard for the lives of Palestinians, as seen in the prioritization of geopolitical interests over human concerns, highlights the need for a critical evaluation of what feminist solidarity entails. Frederick Douglass's 1852 speech 'What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?' provides a historical lens through which to critique this disconnect. He questioned the morality of celebrating freedom in the face of ongoing slavery (Douglass, 1852). His critique resonates with the contemporary evaluation of FFP. As Douglass challenged the validity of celebrating freedom amidst oppression, we must examine whether FFP's principles of solidarity and transformative change are reflected in its practice.

Edward Said articulated the need to speak truth to power (Said, 1993), and in that vein we need to critique FFP and geopolitical interests, which often serve imperial agendas rather than justice and human rights. Without such critique, FFP efforts risk becoming another tool of political power rather than a force for real justice. To bridge the gap between FFP's ideals and its real-world impact, an intersectional approach is essential. This involves recognizing and addressing the unique forms of oppression experienced by women in Gaza.

By prioritizing and amplifying their voices, FFP can develop support strategies that are responsive to their needs. This includes engaging with women who are directly affected by the war to ensure the policies and interventions address the root cause of their suffering. Furthermore, moving beyond symbolic solidarity requires that feminist movements take actions that address the needs of women in Gaza. This means not only issuing statements but also mobilizing political pressure, challenging arms trade complicity, and standing against the conflation of anti-Zionism with antisemitism that silences critique. This includes advocating for policy changes and applying political pressure on those perpetuating violence. True solidarity involves more than statements of support, it requires a commitment to addressing the structural and systematic factors that perpetuate injustice and inequality (Nash, 2008). Commitment to gender equality and justice means challenging political and economic interests that may undermine the support of women and ensure that their need in war zones is prioritized in international relation efforts (Tickner, 2014).

While FFP offers a promising vision for a more just world, its practical application reveals shortcomings, particularly in the context of the genocidal

war in Gaza and Palestine. Douglass's critique of hypocrisy and the principles of intersectionality provide valuable frameworks for understanding these limitations and can help move Western feminism beyond superficial support.

Notes

- ¹ To verify and expand related information about the process, see: <https://www.cancilleria.gov.co/newsroom/news/luego-23-anos-colombia-responde-compromiso-formular-plan-accion-resolucion-1325>
- ² To understand the context specific intersectional approach resulted and proposed by feminist civil society in Colombia concerning NAP 1325, consult the documents regarding 'Proposals on How to Incorporate an Intersectional and Territorial Gender Approach in the Action Plan of Resolution 1325' developed by the Alliance 1325 and available from: https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1KJ1eU7vIXIEf_jEZOWHdcUwC06lpy_uz
- ³ At the time of writing this chapter, the Colombian FFP officially presented by the Colombian government to the United Nations during the 68th Commission on the Status of Women was undergoing an internal legal process in Colombia to receive presidential backing. As of January 2026, this process has not yet been completed.
- ⁴ For example, a woman is not just lesbian; she is often also Black and poor. Her needs are not separately created because she is lesbian, separately because she is Black, and separately because she is poor. Therefore, her needs for peace and security would not be well met if addressed separately.
- ⁵ The Colombian NAP defines, as a guiding differential approach in policy, among others, the approach based on sexual orientation, gender expression, and gender identity. And the FFP included LGBTQ+ people as a central subjects targeted by this foreign policy.
- ⁶ Regarding the mandates of cisgender and heterosexual identities, this process led to an examination of how the coloniality of the Catholic Church is intertwined with the broader social discrimination that drives various crimes against LGBTQ+ individuals by armed actors in Colombia. To delve deeper into this matter, refer to the contribution I made to the Colombia Diversa report 'Coloniality and SOGIE' (*Colombia Diversa*, 2023). It is also interesting to note the collaborations I undertook with Indigenous women's organizations to discuss sexual and gender diversity, as well as the measures of NAP 1325 concerning discrimination within Indigenous groups.
- ⁷ I am referring to needs that are typically dismissed by international experts as 'private, domestic, local, or trivial', which, in terms of Enloe (1989), should be included from a feminist perspective to transform the international scenario.
- ⁸ Some of the concrete ways this is happening include conducting gender diagnostics in the different teams of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Colombia*, 2023), creating and funding an internal gender team (see: https://youtu.be/VrtZt5Wbzng?si=CNsYJg_dnlam4n9), and stipulating an action to create anti-discrimination guidelines in diplomatic and migration bodies.
- ⁹ This strategy was consulted by the government with national feminist organizations in June 2024. It aims to bring FFP closer to people in different parts of the country through its dissemination and the collection of localized needs that the FFP can and should address, feeding into the initially stipulated actions. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has publicly commented on this matter. See: https://youtu.be/VrtZt5Wbzng?si=CNsYJg_dnlam4n9
- ¹⁰ The Russo-Ukrainian war started in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the war in Donbas. In 2022, it escalated to a full-scale war when Russia attacked and tried to overtake the entire country.

- ¹¹ Details on the relevant legislation ‘On the Ensuring of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men During Military Service in the Armed Forces of Ukraine and Other Military Formations’ are available on the Verkhovna Rada’s website: http://w1.c1.rada.gov.ua/pls/zweb2/webproc4_1?pf3511=61190
- ¹² For more information, see zemliachky.org
- ¹³ Legal experts overwhelmingly agree (Global Rights Compliance, nd; Bellinger III, 2022) that Russia can be defined as an occupying power in Ukraine. When the Russian army invaded Ukraine, Russia broke international law and Ukraine’s internationally recognized borders. Russia had recognized Ukraine’s borders, too, and pledged to respect them and Ukraine’s sovereignty when signing the 1994 Budapest Memorandum.
- ¹⁴ Published in *Spectre*, a US-based Marxist journal (*Spectre*, nd).
- ¹⁵ ‘The “Commons” journal of social criticism is a left-wing Ukrainian media about economy, politics, history and culture, founded in 2009, whose editorial board shares egalitarian and anti-capitalist views’ (*Commons*, nd).
- ¹⁶ For examples, see Capire, 2022 and Feminists Against War, 2022.
- ¹⁷ The text of the letter is available on the official website: https://progressives.house.gov/_cache/files/5/5/5523c5cc-4028-4c46-8ee1-b56c7101c764/B7B3674EFB12D933EA4A2B97C7405DD4.10-24-22-cpc-letter-for-diplomacy-on-russia-ukraine-conflict.pdf. It was retracted the following day after an intense backlash from other Democrats (Ward and Berg, 2022).
- ¹⁸ This chapter was drafted in June 2024, shortly after a large-scale mobilization wave had started, following the adoption of a new mobilization law in April after much public and political resistance.
- ¹⁹ In February 2025, Taqadum splintered, and some of its members formed Somoud while others became an official political arm of the RSF and called themselves Tasees.

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Afterword:

What Is at Stake When Calling Foreign Policy Feminist?

Laura Sjoberg

It is an important time for thinking about the compatibility of feminisms, the state, and foreign policy. In this volume, Kremer and Tabbasam ([Chapter 9](#)) note that ‘feminist foreign policy is steadily gaining increased traction’, fitting into an ‘extensive pre-existing gender architecture in international policy’. This is definitely the case, as more states are talking about and adopting ‘feminist foreign policies’ (FFPs), while gender attracts significant controversy in the international arena.

In the [Introduction](#) to this volume, Achilleos-Sarll, Haastrup, and Thomson set out to evaluate both the practice of FFP and academic work theorizing it critically. They take stock of whether foreign policy can be feminist, what states that claim to have FFPs actually do, how to hold these states accountable for their ‘feminist’ rhetoric, and how to study gender, feminisms, and foreign policy. As noted in the editors’ [Introduction](#), these questions are all the more important, and timely, at a moment when an anti-gender backlash seems to be near-ubiquitous across a wide variety of contexts in global politics. Across this book, a variety of high-quality, well-researched theoretical and empirical chapters address these questions, looking for the promises and problems of FFPs.

All of these contributions reach in some way beyond existing scholarship on FFP. The volume delivers on the editors’ stated goals of providing creative analysis, more diverse methods, more diverse topics, and a less Eurocentric approach, asking key questions about what FFP is, what is contested about it, who advocates for it, who does it, and how it is situated in global politics.

This short engagement will look at a few of the many contributions that this book makes in the service of some of the editors’ questions in which I have a particular interest. Particularly, I will address two questions: (1) Can feminism ever be compatible with foreign policy? and (2) What are

the racial and colonial hierarchies in FFP practice? I start by laying out my presuppositions in answer to those questions and continue by engaging the chapters of this book to augment, critique, and reformulate my answers. I conclude (insomuch as that is possible) with some lessons for research on FFP from the contributions to this book.

Can feminism ever be compatible with foreign policy?

I first became acquainted with feminist IR during my time at university – not in a classroom, but in college policy debate about US foreign policy towards Iraq in the late 1990s. College policy debate in the US is a research-based competitive activity debating what policy should be (I promise, I am going somewhere ...). In a debate round, I made a policy proposal about lifting economic sanctions and then lost that debate round to a theoretical gendered criticism of the paternalistic logic of my approach to lifting sanctions based on J. Ann Tickner's (1992) *Gender in International Relations*. I did not enjoy losing debate rounds, so I went out and purchased the book. I read it and found the principles in it absolutely captivating. It was literally everything I had ever wanted to know about global politics. Immediately after reading it, I was thrilled. But then (and here's where I was going) I sat down and tried to rewrite my policy proposal through feminist lenses. I could not do it.

I went to graduate school to try to reconcile feminist theorizing about international relations (IR) with the making of foreign policy, assuming that my college-self just did not have enough knowledge to do the work well, and I would acquire the necessary tools there. That did not work out too well for me – I did not figure it out with the additional education that I got in graduate school, or at any point thereafter. Close to 30 years later, it still has not worked out. For a while, I was trying and failing. But by the end of graduate school, I was determined that I had assumed an impossible task, and that FFP was an oxymoron. I made this decision for two reasons: FFP is impossible in practice because of the problematic context of the international arena, and impossible in theory due to the gendered and racialized nature of foreign policy itself. Across this book, some of the authors recognize and engage the dynamics of both of these issues.

The international arena as a problematic context

The first reason I decided that FFP was an impossible thing to imagine was that the *context* of foreign policy is so *anti-feminist* that FFP becomes not possible to 'make' without a (impossible) deconstruction of this context. My early fascination was with what a FFP-maker would do with US foreign policy to Iraq in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In college and graduate school, I had a lot of answers – apologies and reparations,

self-critique, food aid, and geo-strategic de-escalation were just a few of them. All sounded both overall normatively desirable and desirable from a feminist perspective.

Still, the overlap between those ideas and the options which were politically feasible in the United States at the time was exactly zero – and has probably decreased since the time I was thinking about it, if that is possible. This zero-overlap was not a coincidence but structural. The US foreign policy establishment (not uniquely but perhaps in unique ways) was so entrenched in layers of masculinist thinking that actual feminism would be near-impossible if not impossible to intersect into the discourses and practices of US foreign policy. In many ways, feminist scholarship tells us that this is overdetermined. I will briefly discuss three: that states are gendered both as institutions and in practice, that gendered states have security-based and militaristic foreign policies, and that these gendered states and their militarized foreign policies interact in an inherently competitive international arena.

States are gendered

Feminist work has made the case that the state itself is a gendered institution, and that various states also have gendered characteristics and dynamics. I have previously argued that ‘state identity, militarism, nationalism, and war-making are both linked and gendered’ (Sjoberg, 2013: 133), which influences the level and nature of violence in foreign policy making. This is *not* to argue that states are led by men and therefore more bellicose, and if they were led by women they would be less bellicose. Instead, my argument is that states were constructed on and continue to operate on values associated not only with masculinities but with heterosexisms and cissexisms. Feminist work has pointed out gendered elements in the idea of the ‘Westphalian state’ and practice in a state system which references it and the role of gender in constructing and spreading nationalist sentiments (see, for example, Weber, 1997; Yuval-Davis, 1997). As Raewyn Connell explains, inside of states, ‘there is a gendered configuring of recruitment and promotion, a gender configuring of the internal division of labour and systems of control, a gender configuring of policy making, of practical routines, and ways of mobilizing pleasure and consent’ (Connell, 1995: 73). In other words, states in the international arena work in ways that privilege a gender hierarchy and reject values associated with femininities.

A state which privileges masculine, heterosexist, and cissexist values will find it difficult to keep those values inside its borders for the purpose of projecting an FFP outside, even if it were possible for it to function under the weight of that internal contradiction. This is even more the case in the atmosphere of rising explicit domestic anti-genderism in many states that

either had or contemplated FFPs, and in many of their allies. In this book, Eroukhmanoff and Partis-Jennings (Chapter 11) engage with some of the effects of this problem. Particularly, they argue that biological essentialism and anti-trans rights discourse highlight the problematic incompatibility of gender/feminism in foreign policy and domestic anti-genderism. In this context, it is possible to see the state as patriarchal both as it omits women from traditional accounts and practices of statehood *and* because it treats both women and traditional notions of femininities as being in need of protection. As Eroukhmanoff and Partis-Jennings explain, the coexistence of FFP and anti-genderism in some regions and states affirms some feminist critiques of FFPs as a (gendered) part of state identity construction exercises.

Foreign policy is security-focused in gendered ways

One of the main ways in which (gendered) state identity constructions create a problematic international context for FFPs is through the tendency of gendered states to build their foreign policies focused on or revolving around security (as traditionally understood). In this text, Kirthi Jayakumar (Chapter 5) asks an important question: can the modern state, a Eurocentric creation born out of war, be feminist at all, much less adapt a feminist foreign policy?

This question is important because it highlights the masculinized nature of state understandings and pursuits of security, and the problems of juxtaposing that with feminisms, in foreign policy or somewhere else. This is a point that comes up across this text, particularly in the co-authored chapter by Haastrup, Bergman Rosamond, and Agius (Chapter 7), where they note that, among NATO members, ‘the transformative potential of FFPs is limited or challenged by the demands of NATO membership’. This is because NATO membership is itself by definition militarized, and it is difficult to imagine an FFP that runs alongside militarization. This is why Haastrup, Bergman Rosamond, and Agius problematize the ‘ease with which FFPs have become compatible with militarism’ and ‘which in turn reinforces sexism and racism’.

There are some that characterize this set of dilemmas as a challenge for FFPs: how can they navigate a security-focused international context to bring feminisms into state calculations and state interests? For me, though, they are barriers rather than challenges for two reasons. First, as Haastrup, Bergman Rosamond, and Agius suggest, FFPs are not only being blocked by (masculine, cissexist, heterosexist) state militarisms, they are becoming complicit in them, and therefore (unintentionally) naturalizing them. Second, there is the question of commensurability – whether feminist principles can coexist and operate *with* sexisms, heterosexisms, and racisms. Haastrup, Bergman Rosamond, and Agius wonder about the possibility of

gender-just global transformation in the midst of the prevalence of militarism in the international arena. I think that they are right in this concern that a gender-just global order must be one without, rather than in complicity with, militarization. Militarization in the international arena is a barrier to the possibility of FFP.

International politics is competitive, which is gendered

The militarization of foreign policies is not only attributable to the gendered nature of states in the international arena, but also to the competitive nature through which states interact with each other in global politics. Feminist scholars have pointed out how the international system is itself gender-hierarchical, as well as how states often interact (compete) with each other as if they are looking for status along gender hierarchies. These features of the international arena are not conducive to the possibility of (or possibility of the success of) FFPs.

This is because states that privilege values associated with masculinities in an international arena which incentivizes (gendered) competition (as well as competition over gender) are making policy in a context that is conducive to feminist perspectives being hearable or actionable. It is in part because of these difficulties that Kremer and Tabbasam ([Chapter 9](#)) ask ‘does FFP provide a policy agenda with actual feminist principles?’ The hostility of the international atmosphere to feminist principles and practices causes the pursuit of FFP to confront difficulties with consistency, the co-optation of feminist terms by the state, and the state setting the meaning of feminisms, including how they are implemented or applied (see [Chapter 3](#)). In practice, this often means that FFPs are reduced to tools for including women in militarist foreign policy, or seeking their representation in militarist institutions rather than approaches to imagining feminine-inspired values in foreign policy spaces.

Trying to make FFPs work in such a problematic international context, then, can be stymied by that context itself, which curtails the potentials of feminism, such that FFPs do not and cannot reach their goals of implementing feminist practices in state-policy making. With Cohn and Duncanson ([Chapter 1](#)), I find it problematic that ‘If FFPs do not tackle the structures that underlie militarism, war, and ecological collapse, women’s inclusion is going to make little difference’. As they note, though, the limitation of FFPs are only part of the problem. Instead, the ‘focus on women’s inclusion and empowerment functions as a distraction from the kind of feminist approach required to address the crises the world now faces’. In other words, FFPs might not only fail to reach the goal of dealing with the problems that feminist theory might see as the most pressing in global politics, they might actively distract from doing so.

The international arena as a problematic context

The question of whether foreign policy can be feminist, then, is not (only) a question about whether the principles of how a state interacts with other states could *in theory* be inspired by feminist theory and feminist praxis. It is also a question of whether that *theoretical* possibility, if it existed, could be implemented in current states, and in the current state system. This brief section has suggested that the *theoretical* possibility of FFP is itself a moot point, because the making of FFPs takes place in an international arena so hostile to their establishment and practical success that they are rendered stymied, ineffective, instrumentalized, and complicit – all signs of impossibility. The (contemporary instantiation of the) state being gendered (and often anti-gender), heterosexist, and cissexist makes the idea that said state might have an FFP quite difficult to imagine. While some states are *less* sexist, heterosexist, and cissexist than others (or those tendencies manifest in different, often racialized, ways) no state has moved away from those structures. As such, the structure of the state as an institution seems at odds with having an FFP. But even if that were not the case, the gendered state interacts with other states in gendered and racialized ways that prize security discourses and their attendant militarisms, fostering and reifying an international atmosphere of competitiveness. In this environment, many of FFPs' feminist principles can find no place to thrive. Instead, FFPs can either disappear or become reduced to (decoy or proxy) efforts for the inclusion of women, which can be either unhelpful or, even counterproductive, to feminist transformation of foreign policy principles or practices. Under the weight of these struggles, I think FFP can be characterized as impossible in practice.

The (gendered) nature of foreign policy

I also argue that FFP should be understood as impossible in theory as well, because the very idea of 'foreign policy' contravenes feminist principles. To understand this argument, it is important to look closely at the word 'foreign' as an adjective moderating the word 'policy' in the concept and practice of foreign policy. In order for there to be a 'foreign' policy, there must be a 'foreign' for the (non-foreign) self to have a policy *towards*, and that policy must be the purview of the (non-foreign) self as an entity, technically outside of its relation with the (foreign) other. A feminist analysis of these dynamics problematizes them.

Early conceptual work in feminist IR critiqued binary constructions in contemporary global politics – male/female, strong/weak, and rational/emotional being key among them (see, for example, [Tickner, 1992](#)). This work also critiqued the self/other dichotomy, where feminist theory gives

us strong reason to question the distinction between self and other, and the normative privileging of self over other (see, for example, [Spike Peterson, 1999](#)). This is because the normative privileging of self over other creates a political hierarchy around parochialized group-certification, and promotes the centring of the self and the marginalization of the other. From seeing the negative implications of the centring and normalization of the masculine, and therefore the marginalization and othering of the feminine, many feminist theorists have critiqued the institutionalization of the self/other in international politics alongside other political and politicized dichotomies. They have also agreed with and bolstered critiques of this dichotomy coming from other perspectives in global politics, particularly from decolonial scholars pointing out the racialized nature of the self/other dichotomy (see Mbembe, 2019).

Yet foreign policy relies on (perhaps the most problematic) of these dichotomies. For foreign policy to exist, there must be an ‘us’ having a policy towards another ‘them’ (the foreign in foreign policy). In this formulation, ‘us’ is not only distinguished from ‘them’ but held in a privileged position related to ‘them’. ‘Us’ is then ontologically and normatively both distinct and superior. In this context, foreign policy is all about how ‘we’ position ‘us’ vis-a-vis ‘them’, a formulation which cannot be anything but competitive, where ‘we’ seek a superior position compared to ‘them’. On top of this, the ‘us/them’ dichotomy in foreign policy is not just a normatively laden distinction but imposes directionality on agency. ‘Us’ decides for and towards ‘them’, where ‘our’ foreign policy towards ‘them’ is something in which ‘we’ are choosing actors and ‘they’ are passive recipients. The makers of foreign policy act *on* (rather than with) the targets of foreign policy making.

It is in this context that, in this volume, Diaby and Mukalazi ([Chapter 8](#)) identify ‘the hypocrisy of European feminist foreign policies’. For example, Spain’s Action Plan for its FFP emphasizes ‘gender equality as a “distinctive element” of their foreign policy’, which inspires it to take on a number of gender-related commitments at the international level (Spain’s FFP, p 3). These include to ‘apply the feminist approach in its foreign action by incorporating fundamental issues of equality into policy dialogue’, which includes emphasizing women’s participation in conflict prevention and peacemaking, women’s right to be free of violence, women’s health rights, women’s rights to participate in societal decision-making, and women’s rights to dignity when Spain interacts with countries which are not meeting benchmarks on those goals (Spain’s FFP, pp 5 and 8). The word ‘feminist’ appears 99 times in a 30-page document, mostly in reference to seeing Spain’s foreign policy as inspired by feminist principles. At the same time, inside those feminist principles is an assumption of Spain’s superior position as it relates to those values than many states towards which Spain will have a foreign policy, and not once does the plan discuss the making of Spain’s ‘foreign

policy’ *with* the ‘foreign’ other. Instead, it discusses how the Spanish FFP will inspire it to negotiate with that ‘other’ – positioning the Spanish ‘self’ and the foreign ‘other’ as separate, separable, and in a hierarchical relationship.

Spain’s FFP is more complicated than these simple observations, of course, and the Spanish FFP is not alone in reifying some of these problems with ‘foreign policy’. That said, it does show some of the intrinsic problems with the idea of ‘foreign policy’ being made ‘feminist’. Relationality, dialogue, radical equality, and other key feminist principles are incompatible with the self/other dichotomy, competitive interaction of ‘self’ and ‘other’, and the ‘self’ making decisions (without the ‘other’) on how it will interact with and treat that ‘other’. This compounds, and is compounded on, the hierarchical nature of the language of ‘domestic’ (/civilized) for ‘self’ and ‘foreign’ (/alien) for ‘other’. These dynamics are an important part of addressing the second question in the introduction to this book that I am interested in, namely, about the racial and colonial hierarchies in FFP and FFP scholarship.

What are the racial and colonial hierarchies in feminist foreign policy practice?

While these questions have been touched on by scholars before ([Achilleos-Saril et al, 2023](#); [Guerrina et al, 2023](#)), this book takes a broader-reaching and more comprehensive approach than most at the racial and colonial hierarchies both inherent in and manifest in FFP generally and FFPs specifically. As I noted earlier, I think that the dichotomy between ‘domestic’ and ‘foreign’ policy is necessarily anti-feminist, and I agree with Kremer and Tabbasam ([Chapter 9](#)) that it is also necessarily colonial, where ‘we’ adopt instructive policies towards ‘them’ in foreign policy – feminist and otherwise. For these and other reasons, in this book, Jayakumar ([Chapter 5](#)) has pointed out that FFP has so far constituted ‘a difficult reminder that the colonial legacy is alive and well’, replicating and reifying the colonial tendencies of foreign policy more broadly. I will focus for the rest of this section on three ways the authors in this book show that colonial legacies are alive and well in FFP practice: the propensity of FFPs for treating feminisms as singular rather than plural or multiple, the tendency for FFP practitioners (and scholars) to ignore how feminisms have been practised in policy interactions before, and the trend of FFPs paying inadequate attention to local women’s activists in places on the ‘receiving’ end of those FFPs.

Multiple feminisms

Even if my fear that the state (and/or the international arena) might get to define (and narrow) feminisms for the purpose of producing FFPs does not come to fruition when every FFP is made and practised, most FFPs

are not focused on recognizing, honouring, and putting into dialogue multiple feminisms. This has led many scholars, in this book and beyond, to ask questions about which feminisms inspire FFPs, and how and why that matters. In this volume, Haastrup, Bergman Rosamond, and Agius (Chapter 7) note that each FFP is guided by a different feminism (or even set of feminisms). But this does not mean that all feminisms are positioned equally in terms of the likelihood that FFP is inspired by them – instead, some feminisms (particularly those rooted in white, Western, liberal atmospheres) are more likely to be the basis for FFPs than majority-world feminisms (see Ballangarry and Ridge, with Thomson, Chapter 2). Jayakumar (Chapter 5), then, adds normative weight to the exploration of the multiple feminisms in FFPs by asking whose feminism counts as FFP?

This matters both in terms of theorizing FFPs and their practice. For example, Ballangarry and Ridge, with Thomson (Chapter 2), note that there are not just many feminisms, but many different values among feminisms, and indigenous feminist ‘foreign policies’ would look very different than Western, liberal feminist ‘foreign policies’. This is because much of the underlying logic of Western, liberal feminisms is individualistic, and much of the underlying logic of the first nations feminisms to which these authors refer are questions about how people relate to each other and how people are to be treated. Kezie-Nwoha (Chapter 3), then, notes that it is important to pay attention to the substantive qualities of feminisms that form the underlying basis of FFPs, in order to scrutinize ‘the quality and substance of equality’ with an emphasis on solidarity, repatriation, and decolonization. Since most feminisms that end up forming the basis for FFPs neglect these values, attention to them matters.

Attention to solidarity, repatriation, and decolonization in a prospective FFP, however, would not need to be imagined from nothing. Instead, several of the authors in this book note that decolonial feminisms and Indigenous women have been practising approaches to making policy specifically and interacting with people generally that are both decolonial and feminist. Specifically, Jayakumar (Chapter 5) brings attention to the fact that ‘several feminist movements in the majority world have questioned power by resisting structural and systemic violence’. This has not only come in the form of critique, but in the form of counter-hegemonic practice, where ‘Indigenous women and colonized women have long practised FFP in their resistance to colonial rule’.

At the same time, the authors in this book emphasize that it is important that FFPs not devalue the knowledges that come from global majority feminisms. It would be both normatively wrong and practically problematic to take an Indigenous feminist approach to FFPs without both substantive and actual inclusion of Indigenous feminisms. As Krulišova, O’Sullivan, Shevtsova, and Potapova (Chapter 6) explain, the problem is both real-world

and epistemic, where one of the authors recounts her ‘knowledge being used by Western feminist scholars who have previously ignored the region, without referencing my work’. Rather than extractive relationships, which are often both epistemically unfair and practically problematic, these four authors suggest looking to ‘foster genuine partnerships that value equal contributions’.

‘Target’ voices

One way to foster genuine partnerships is to envision what FFPs would look like if they were rooted in decolonial feminisms and led by decolonial feminists. As Jayakumar ([Chapter 5](#)) argues, future approaches to FFP should model women’s movements from the majority world. The authors across the chapters of this book provide a number of potential directions for thinking about what this would look like.

For example, Kezie-Nwoha ([Chapter 3](#)) explores what the role of African women’s movements should be in influencing the global women’s right’s agenda generally, and FFP specifically. In this exploration, Kezie-Nwoha explains that FFP often silences African women’s voices even though FFPs are mostly directed towards their countries, and despite the fact that African women want to be included. Reem Abbas, discussing Sudan ([Conclusion](#)), points out that FFPs also need to be able to account for backlash and conflict-related gender inequalities. Abbas explains that there are a lot of countries with FFPs which are involved in enforcing the ceasefire in Sudan, but they are not following through on those feminist principles. She argues that women’s movements in Sudan need to lead in (feminist) policy making in Sudan, and that they need to do so in a way that ensures that militarism is heavily challenged.

The theme that those claiming to have FFPs need to follow up on the principles of feminisms in their policy practices resonates in other areas of this book as well. For example, in this volume, Krulišowa, O’Sullivan, Shevtsova, and Potapova ([Chapter 6](#)) note the reactions of feminists to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine have often disrespected local feminist voices, explaining that ‘Ukrainian and CEE feminists warned against speaking over local voices, extracting local knowledge, and erasing embodied experiences’. Later in the book, Yermakova ([Conclusion](#)) expresses a similar concern that Western feminists are quick to ignore the needs of women in Ukraine in favour of their own pre-existing views. Yermakova argues that ‘what Ukrainian feminists need ... is not mere sympathy but genuine solidarity’.

Lauren Beltrán ([Conclusion](#)) makes a similar suggestion about Colombia, pointing out the decolonial potential of addressing country-specific priorities and taking an intersectional approach to conflict and post-conflict processes, including but not limited to gender equality. In addition to

having the potential to improve the robustness of the feminisms in FFP, such an approach can foster partial disengagement from state-centrism, and therefore contribute to deconstructing some of the fundamental gendered problems related to the context of the international arena and the nature of foreign policy.

Is feminist foreign policy possible?

The idea of FFP is appealing – if foreign policy *could* be feminist, that would be desirable, not only for feminists, but for those who associate feminisms with peace, or with care, or with better futures. After all, as Cohn and Duncanson (Chapter 1) remind us, ‘the power of a feminist analysis is that it prompts us to take what is given, what is taken for granted, and make it strange’ in foreign policy, to enable the possibility for a radical alternative. Yet this radical alternative is often illusive, where FFPs *look* radical but do little to change the ‘goals and practices of foreign policy’ (Cohn and Duncanson, Chapter 1). While Kremer and Tabbasam (Chapter 9) explain that FFPs have inspired some complex conversations about power, the use of more inclusive and intersectional language, and the deployment of new and meaningful resources, it is important to note both the internal contradictions and external problematic impacts of FFPs individually and the phenomenon of FFP generally.

Before reading this volume, I was convinced of the overall impossibility of feminist foreign policy and the negative implications of FFPs, and of the important stakes in pointing that out. After reading this volume, my concerns about FFP have only increased, as some of the authors have added to the insidious ways that I fear FFPs might be used (Kremer and Tabbasam (Chapter 9), for example, argue that they can be ‘a branding exercise for states’ and Deschamps-Laporte and Santoire (Chapter 10) argue that they can ‘become objects of norms projection’). With Ajour (Conclusion), I become all the more sceptical of the possibility of FFP having a meaningful *feminist* impact in the world when I see states which claim to have a feminist approach to foreign policy meeting the current genocide in Palestine with complicity and silence.

On top of these misgivings about how FFPs work, I doubt both that a feminist approach to foreign policy is *workable* in existing states and the current state system, and I doubt that it is *possible* in an atmosphere where foreign policy requires the separation and hierarchical organization of ‘self’ and ‘other’ in the international arena. That said, impossible though it may be, as Kremer and Tabbasam (Chapter 9) remind us in their contribution to this volume, ‘FFP is now here, regardless of whether theoretical musings lead us to embrace or dismiss it’. And Cohn and Duncanson (Chapter 1) highlight both the power of feminisms and the power of using the term ‘feminist’

as a label. It is, then, our task as both feminist scholars and participants in global politics to think critically about what those FFPs are, in theory and in practice, and what they could be. This book is, in my view, a marquee contribution to that critical thinking, one that explores the multiple, and even contradictory, potentialities of (impossible) FFP and FFPs.

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