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**Research Report**

## Feminist foreign policy: Concepts, core components and controversies

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# SWP Comment

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## Feminist Foreign Policy

Concepts, core components and controversies

Claudia Zilla

In their Coalition Agreement 2021–2025, the parties that form the current German government agreed to pursue a “Feminist Foreign Policy” (FFP). The German Foreign Office is now committed to do so, while the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development seeks to pursue a “feminist development policy”. FFP will also be a discussion topic in Germany’s first National Security Strategy. Germany is thus following a trend, as ever more governments commit to FFP or at least seek to realise certain elements. Yet what the FFP approach actually means in theory and practice remains vague and contentious: what preconditions it requires, in what contexts it applies and what implications it involves. This openness provokes debates across politics, civil society and academia. Although the national implementations of FFP only very partially realised feminist demands, the mere fact of official policy referencing feminism challenges traditional ways of thinking and political patterns, encourages reassessment of political priorities and their coherence, and can potentially promote political innovation.

A succession of states in various regions have instituted “feminist foreign policy”, “feminist development cooperation” and/or “feminist diplomacy”. The first was Sweden in 2014, followed by Canada (2017), France (2018), Luxembourg (2019), Mexico (2020), Spain (2021) and Libya (2021). Germany followed suit in 2021.

Two questions dominate the FFP debate: What is FFP (and feminism or feminist), what should it be? And how can the FFP implemented by governments be evaluated, both against its own objectives and from broader feminist perspectives? The political practice has been followed by academic efforts to clarify concepts and develop

theory, building on feminist approaches in various disciplines.

### Growing gender awareness at the international level

Although FFP is a comparatively recent phenomenon, it can also be seen as the result of a growing awareness of gender in international politics (Aggestam et al. 2020). The genealogical review reveals a steady expansion of the gender focus. It began in development policy and spread first to the fields of human rights and conflict and security. Now gender awareness



has arrived in foreign policy itself (Thomson 2022).

The origins lie in the three World Conferences on Women held during the United Nations Decade for Women: Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980) and Nairobi (1985). In 1979, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The Convention came into effect in 1981, with Germany ratifying in 1985. The fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995) produced the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

Gender equality also found its place in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs 2000–2015, goal 3) and their successor, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 2016–2030, goal 5). In 2000, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) at the initiative of Namibia's minister of women's affairs, Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah. Nine further resolutions on gender-related issues followed (the WPS Agenda), including Resolution 2467 on sexual violence in conflicts, introduced by Germany in 2019 as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council. Since 2005, about one hundred states – including Germany – have adopted National Action Plans to implement Security Council Resolution 1325.

Gender sensitivity has also grown within the institutions of the European Union (EU). In 2015 the Council of the European Union underlined the importance of “initiatives to promote women's and girls' rights, gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls” in development policy. The EU Commission's Strategic Engagement For Gender Equality 2016–2019, later updated for 2020–2025, defined the framework for its activities in this field. In 2020 it published its Gender Action Plan III (Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in External Action 2021–2025) to promote the gender perspective in the EU's external relations, followed in 2022 by a proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on combat-

ing violence against women and domestic violence.

This multilateral framework, to which the national FFPs refer, is in the first place an achievement of the transnational civil society feminist movements (Cheung et al. 2021). On 1 July 2021, seven governments committed to a FFP launched the Global Partner Network for Feminist Foreign Policy together with twelve civil society organisations (Thompson et al. 2021). The Network aims to promote policy innovation, shared learning processes and policy convergence (the latter by developing a common framework for FFP and criteria for its operationalisation).

## Transformative approach with gender perspective

Whether FFP is seen as a recent phenomenon or the outcome of a process going back decades, it certainly represents a new branding. For the first time a specific policy area has been officially designated (by governments) *feminist*. Foreign policy is a field whose structures are particularly strongly male-dominated, and therefore privileges the perspectives, ideas and experiences of men. A “gender-neutral” foreign policy consequently reproduces gender inequality, because it fails to take adequate account of the different gender-specific perspectives. Instead it cements the status quo. For in an asymmetrical gender order men and women's experiences diverge. Due to their different positions and roles in society they experience power structures differently. For example women and men are affected differently by poverty, conflict and war (in terms both of probability and quality), and their contributions to development and peace also diverge.

There are both *normative* and *pragmatic* arguments for gender equality: On the one hand, the goal of gender equality can be *intrinsically justified*, as a value in its own right. In this sense, it can be seen as a matter of human rights and anti-discrimination. On the other, research into the effects of gender

equality generates *extrinsic* arguments for equal participation for women, with empirical evidence showing that gender equality correlates positively with prosperity and peace. In other words, improving women's conditions and opportunities also benefits society as a whole and the international system.

To cite just a couple of examples: having more women in parliament (descriptive representation) has a positive effect on legislation (substantive representation), in a way that strengthens human rights (IPU). Improving women's access to production factors such as agricultural land and financial services has an incomparably stronger positive effect on hunger and poverty than if access is only expanded for men (Brot für die Welt). Women's participation in peace processes promotes the implementation and sustainability of agreements (cfr; UNWOMEN).

While the demand for equal participation of women initially addressed domestic affairs, it now also encompasses international relations in the form of FFP. In a broader understanding foreign policy also encompasses trade and defence as well as diplomacy and development cooperation.

However broad or narrow the understanding of foreign policy, the adjective *feminist* underlines the intention to go further than just working towards gender equality: not just to be reformist within existing structures but structurally *disruptive* and *transformative*. There is, however no consensus about the conditions required for such a transformative change according to (different interpretations of) feminism, nor over its reach and implications.

## Understandings of feminism

What "feminism" actually means is contested, as the term encompasses various different currents. Critical reflection has led to a continuous expansion of the originally Western concept. Thus, different interpretations of feminism have been developed thanks to the contributions of Black women,

women from the Global South and trans persons, among others.

Feminist positions in the Western liberal current acknowledge that a socially constructed — not natural — power relationship exists between the sexes (male dominance = patriarchy), which is linked to an unequal distribution of rights, privileges, resources, opportunities and so on. Feminism *deconstructs* supposedly "natural" power structures, making them visible and showing that they are not preordained. In *normative* terms these feminist positions regard the structural power asymmetry as unjust, discriminatory and oppressive. They *demand* abolition of the patriarchy and equality of the sexes in all spheres of society.

The *emancipatory goal* of feminism is to abolish every form of domination between the sexes (and not simply to reverse the existing one). Marxist feminist approaches argue that this presupposes the abolition of capitalism. Certain interpretations of feminism question whether comprehensive emancipation would be compatible with national politics and/or the existence of the state, which is regarded as a patriarchal repressive apparatus.

Queer feminist positions seek to overcome heteronormativity (heterosexuality as the overriding norm in society) and the gender binary (the social acknowledgment of only two distinct genders, male and female) as the social ordering principles for sexuality and gender. This breaks with the fixation on cis-gendered men and women whose gender identity corresponds to the gender assigned at birth. An *inclusive* understanding of feminism also embraces further identities such as LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersexual, asexual and others).

Criticisms of "white feminism" for reproducing racist and colonial ideas and structures led to the emergence of feminist positions opposing all types of discrimination and oppression — based on sex, gender, sexual orientation, skin colour, disability, religion, origin, etc. Currents that adopt a critical stance on overlapping forms of discrimination are referred to as *intersectional*.

The question here is how the interaction of different manifestations of discrimination affects the (social) life of individuals.

Adding further aspects to this inclusive intersectional understanding, one can identify more strands within feminism that have developed over time. Some of the central questions that are being discussed within feminism are:

- *Nature vs. society*: The question of the existence and role of a biological basis for gender differentiation in society.
- *Praxis vs. theory*: The relationship between feminism as political activism and advocacy movement on the one side and feminism as an academic discipline (for example in form of gender studies) and a type of social theory on the other.
- *Reform vs. transformation*: What is the value of gradual corrections within patriarchal structures that may lessen discrimination and asymmetries (for example through gender quotas) but do not fundamentally transform the imbalance from the ground up, and possibly even accentuate the gender differentiation.

## Theoretical-normative framework

Against the background of feminist understandings, the debate over national FFP variants raises a series of questions. Does the concept and implementation of FFP go beyond gender mainstreaming? What substance is there behind the rhetoric of structural transformation? What exactly is the emancipatory moment? The central question is ultimately: What is actually *feminist* about foreign policy, what is the fundamental thrust of the “feminist factor” in foreign policy?

The national FFP initiatives have encouraged academic efforts seeking to clarify the concepts. Some of these are *empirical*, comparing and systematising national documents to identify shared core elements (Thompson 2020). Others are *theoretical*, building on the body of existing feminist approaches in political science, international relations, and peace and conflict studies.

Thompson et al. (2020) propose a comprehensive normative definition of FFP: “Feminist foreign policy is the policy of a state that defines its interactions with other states, as well as movements and other non-state actors, in a manner that prioritizes peace, gender equality and environmental integrity, enshrines the human rights of all, seeks to disrupt colonial, racist, patriarchal and male-dominated power structures, and allocates significant resources, including research, to achieve that vision. Feminist foreign policy is coherent in its approach across all of its levers of influence, anchored by the exercise of those values at home, and is co-created with feminist activists, groups and movements, at home and abroad.”

Cheung et al. (2021) regard FFP as ethical policy seeking to improve decisions and bring about incremental change. They identify “five core values”: (1) intersectionality, (2) empathetic reflexivity (self-critical awareness of own position and needs of others), (3) substantive representation and participation, (4) accountability and (5) active peace commitment.

At a lower level of abstraction, a feminist perspective in FFP (whether advocacy or academic) often argues for demilitarisation and for prioritising peace over security, inclusion over exclusion, mediation over sanctions, solidarity over competition, and cooperation over domination. This establishes a normative framework for thinking and action within which the continuous process of (re)negotiating concrete positions and problem-solving strategies plays out.

## Pioneered by Sweden

Sweden has the oldest and most comprehensive FFP concept (Thompson et al. 2021). It is regarded as a model and pioneer, in an example of the phenomenon discussed in international relations as norm diffusion (Aggestam et al. 2019a). Sweden has acquired a reputation for promoting gender equality at home and abroad, and many states credit it with great normative legitimacy (reputation and recognition) (Rosén

Sundström et al. 2021). In 1994, Sweden passed a law making gender mainstreaming government strategy.

Sweden officially inaugurated its *feminist foreign policy* in 2014 under Foreign Minister Margot Wallström, who had been UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict from 2010 to 2012. The Swedish government at the time described itself as “feminist” and announced it would systematically integrate the gender perspective into its foreign policy agenda, encompassing foreign and security policy, development cooperation, and trade and promotion. Sweden’s FFP pursues the transformative goal of changing structures and enhancing the visibility and agency of women and girls. The government characterises its FFP approach as intersectional.

The “3Rs” (see below), with which Sweden initially defined its FFP, have achieved the status of a model, and serve as the starting point for governments — like Germany — that wish to pursue a similar path. The Handbook of Sweden’s feminist foreign policy (2019) describes the three “Rs” as follows:

- *Rights*: Promoting “all women’s and girls’ full enjoyment of human rights, which includes combating all forms of violence and discrimination that restrict their freedom of action”;
- *Representation*: Promoting “women’s participation and influence in decision-making processes at all levels and in all areas”;
- *Resources*: Ensuring “that resources are allocated to promote gender equality and equal opportunities for all women and girls to enjoy human rights”.

A fourth “R” for the *reality* of women’s and girls’ lives was subsequently added to reflect the demands of context sensitivity.

The Swedish handbook goes on to define “six long-term external objectives”: “1) Full enjoyment of human rights; 2) Freedom from physical, psychological and sexual violence; 3) Participation in preventing and resolving conflicts, and post-conflict peacebuilding; 4) Political participation and influence in all areas of society; 5) Economic

rights and empowerment; 6) Sexual and reproductive health and rights”.

Various posts and programmes have been established to implement FFP, including the Swedish Foreign Service Action Plan. Since 2017, this has included an internal dimension to ensure that the “3Rs” are also implemented within the Foreign Service itself. A gender equality ambassador coordinates the FFP, leading a team that prepares the FFP Action Plan and liaising with the gender equality department in the Labour Ministry. The latter promotes and oversees the government’s gender policy in all policy areas. Focal points for FFP have been created in the Foreign Service’s departments and missions abroad. The Swedish Gender Equality Agency was founded in 2018 to support the government’s equality policy.

## Criteria and criticisms

When assessing the Swedish FFP and comparing it with other national variants (Thompson et al. 2021), central aspects of the advocacy and academic debates are salient: The *reach* of the Swedish FFP approach is regarded as comprehensive, in the sense that it encompasses multiple areas of foreign policy. It also includes a domestic component. The Canadian and French approaches for example are narrower: The former applies to “feminist development cooperation”, the latter merely refers to “feminist diplomacy”.

Sweden’s FFP is characterised by strong *institutionalisation*, manifested in various organisational entities and objectives. France’s feminist diplomacy, for example, is less developed and less institutionalised. Sweden’s monitoring and (independent) evaluation and impact analysis are weak, however, as are Canada’s. The introduction of further “Rs” for *research, reporting and reach* is therefore recommended (Thompson et al. 2021).

From the perspective of inclusive feminism the Swedish *focus* on women and girls is narrow, binary and cis-centred. Luxembourg applies a broader concept. The German Foreign Office also stresses that FFP is



not “a policy by women for women” and uses the term “3R+D”, where “D” stands for promoting diversity. The German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development has adopted similarly expansive concepts. Sweden is also criticised for failing to translate its declared intersectionality into conceptual and operational terms. Specifically in relation to women and girls, however, Sweden receives relatively positive evaluations for the *implementation coherence* of its “3Rs” (discourse versus action) and the financing of programmes with a strong gender perspective (*budgeting*) (Thompson et al. 2021).

There is strong criticism, however, for Sweden’s lack of *horizontal coherence*, especially between its FFP and its arms export policy (Aggestam et al. 2019b). Although the Swedish export control law of 2017 states that “the democratic status of the recipient country constitute[s] a key condition for examination of licence applications”, Sweden continues to supply arms to regimes that violate human and women’s rights. One widely cited example is weaponry sold to Saudi Arabia and used in Yemen.

The postcolonial feminist perspective also questions how Sweden employs FFP as a strategic narrative (Zhukova 2021) and how Sweden and other states use FFP to enhance their status in global hierarchies (Achilleos-Sarll 2018). Sometimes FFP is criticised as the imposition of Western norms whose basis in a liberal feminism (or feminist universalism) fails to do justice to the diversity of cultural contexts. Suggestions that Western states need to “save” women (in the Global South) may be dismissed as “feminist imperialism”.

Despite its transformative aspirations, the Swedish approach is altogether rather reformist, and operates entirely within the existing economic order (Thomson 2020). Its non-radical nature is likely to have contributed to its international dissemination (or to have made this possible in the first place). While Spain and Mexico also advocate structural change, other countries like Canada prefer to avoid making disruptive promises in their FFP documents.

## Deconstructing and Rethinking

Three problems form the heart of the critical discussion around FFP: firstly the gap between rhetoric and practice, secondly the tension between FFP and other policy areas, and thirdly the discrepancies between the heterogeneous demands of different feminist perspectives.

The existence of an official FFP provides an opportunity to take the government at its word and demand accountability. Activists and researchers apply their respective methods to review and analyse the national FFP variants. One must not forget that feminist movements and theories have been around a good deal longer than the *feminist turn* in foreign policy.

Governments may use FFP to present a progressive face while propagating lightweight, uncontroversial versions of feminism. But even then they do at least introduce the concept of feminism into the political discourse, making it politically acceptable. FFP encourages governments to orientate their foreign policy (more strongly) on (disadvantaged) groups rather than only on states, to open it (more widely) to civil society and activism — for example through consultations — and to coordinate it (better) with other ministries.

If a FFP is not designed to be *systemic* and merely represents an agenda to promote women’s rights in the areas of diplomacy and development cooperation, it will inevitably fall short when measured against the ambitions of a feminism seeking transformation rather than reform. Nevertheless, even the narrow national versions of FFP can strengthen the multilateral normative framework (CEDAW, WPS, SDG etc.) by internalising its norms. It remains to be seen whether FFP will survive changes of government and whether the approach will be deepened and expanded over time.

It is probably no coincidence that in most cases the ministries that have introduced feminist foreign and/or development policies have been headed by women. That was also the case in Germany. But that does not mean that feminist goals will be advanced

wherever women lead. Although dominant groups are the main supporters of ruling orders, marginalised groups also contribute to their stabilisation by adjusted, compliant behaviour. Additionally, patriarchal structures hinder the translation of descriptive representation of disadvantaged groups into substantive representation. Finally, because feminism is – politically and theoretically – pluralistic, there may be different (feminist) views on one and the same problem.

Having more women in the armed forces and a defence ministry under female leadership, while military spending and arms exports are increasing – is this all compatible with FFP? Yes or no to arms supply to war regions so that (female) victims can defend themselves against (sexual) violence or be protected from it by soldiers – what is the feminist answer to this? Do we arrive at alternative concepts, diagnoses, coping strategies and solutions, if we examine phenomena such as the “strategic competition”, the “geopolitical rivalry”, the “trade war” or the “migration crisis” through a feminist lens?

FFP undoubtedly invites discussion about these and other questions. It challenges traditional ways of thinking and action. The transformative aspect of FFP encourages critical reflection about power structures that have come to be regarded as “natural” – and about our own position in them. FFP also offers an opportunity to review priorities and means and to work earnestly for policy coherence. It introduces new perspectives and raises the normative bar for political decisions and their justification. Not least the disruptive ideal of FFP can boost alternative perspectives and inspire deconstructing and rethinking. Therein, too, lies the potential of a feminist take on foreign policy.

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