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Foreign policy reorientation: Feminist foreign and development policy in ministerial documents and debates

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Foreign Policy Reorientation

Feminist foreign and development policy in ministerial documents and debates

Claudia Zilla

On 1 March, federal ministers Annalena Baerbock and Svenja Schulze jointly presented the Guidelines for a Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) of the Federal Foreign Office (AA) and the Strategy for a Feminist Development Policy (FDP) of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). Despite coordination between the two ministries and similar consultations with civil society, the ministers presented documents that differ in form and content and also draw on feminist approaches to varying degrees. Together, however, they have initiated a debate in Germany on the goals and means of international policy. In order for the desired cultural and systemic change to go beyond gender equality, a broader inter-ministerial effort is needed.

Over the past decade, concepts of feminist foreign and development policy have increasingly emerged in various countries around the world as a political framework for foreign action, but also for shaping processes and structures within ministries (SWP Comment 48/2022). Feminist foreign and development policy usually claims to be committed first and foremost to human rights, adopts the perspectives and demands of feminist approaches, and considers the findings on the benefits of inclusion. First, it is not only about recognising and protecting rights, but also about empowering people to claim their right to have their basic needs met. Second, it takes up the feminist critique of the patriarchal structures that underlie the power hierarchy between the sexes and, beyond that, multiple forms of discrimination and oppression. The emancipatory impulse goes beyond the demand for

“more rights for all” (within the dominant order). The structural conditions for the possibility of a self-determined life for all should also be taken into account. Third, feminist foreign and development policy draws on empirical evidence concerning the positive effects of including hitherto structurally marginalised persons and perspectives in political processes and institutions.

The dispute over the F-word

There is a debate in Germany and internationally about the appropriateness of the adjective “feminist” in relation to foreign and development policy. Why not simply speak of a human rights-based, humanistic or inclusive foreign and development policy? Various arguments are put forward in sup-



port of this: Since the critique of an inclusive and intersectional feminism today refers not only to power asymmetries between the sexes, but also to multiple forms of discrimination, the term may now be too narrow. A feminist foreign and development policy would also run the risk of limiting itself to women and girls and neglecting other unjust asymmetrical power relations. This objection is, of course, directed at a major shortcoming of many national FFPs and FDPs, which, despite their (superficially) ambitious rhetoric, do no more than implement gender mainstreaming and gender equality. This has also been the target of criticism from parts of the feminist movement, who see their concerns being appropriated and instrumentalised by the state. The term “feminist”, however, underscores the peculiarly transformative – that is, against the status quo – claim that other approaches do not make in this way. A feminist foreign and development policy also has the potential to connect with the history of feminist struggles, offer feminist perspectives on international politics and take certain developments – such as the UN Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda and its action plans, the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), etc. – out of their respective political and technical niches, bundle them into a conceptual framework and thus make them accessible to a wider public. Finally, the controversial nature of the F-word stimulates discussion about policy goals and means.

The concepts of AA and BMZ

In Germany, AA and BMZ have for the first time established their own feminist frameworks in the form of the Guidelines for a Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP Guidelines) and the Strategy for a Feminist Development Policy (FDP Strategy), which are not yet available in English (translations in this publication are by the author). Both documents mention coordination between AA

and BMZ and the desire for cooperation with other ministries. However, so far there is no inter-ministerial foreign policy of the German government that is feminist in the broadest sense. This raises the question of coherence both in foreign affairs – with which other ministries, such as the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action or the Federal Ministry of Defence, are also active – and in the relationship between foreign and domestic policy.

Although limited to their own ministries, both concepts are guiding principles that should shape the actions of all policy areas and regions in which AA and BMZ operate, as well as all their instruments – including the implementing organisations mandated by BMZ, such as Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KfW). In line with feminist approaches to involving civil society more closely in institutionalised policy processes, the drafting of the FFP Guidelines and the FDP Strategy was preceded by a consultation process with actors from politics and administration, academia and non-governmental organisations. The fact that in the case of AA – and in contrast to BMZ – no representatives of the Global South were involved in this dialogue has been criticised by parts of German civil society.

The AA and BMZ documents differ significantly in form and content. Ten guidelines form the core of AA’s FFP Guidelines, which run more than 80 pages and are published in booklet form. The first six relate to AA’s external action. The last four deal with the functioning of the Foreign Service. The FDP Strategy of BMZ comprises a total of 40 A4 pages. It is divided into five chapters. After an introduction, the initial situation and the feminist approach are presented. This is followed by a description of the four fields of action within which Germany’s future feminist development policy is to be implemented and a chapter on evaluating success. The BMZ paper is much more specific than the AA paper in its use of terms and descriptions of problems. Whereas the FDP Strategy contains many definitions

(and a glossary), there are fewer technical terms in the FFP Guidelines. These are then explained in the text. Both documents illustrate the implementation of the feminist approach by describing existing projects and measures. Neither paper takes a position on what should be done differently or stopped.

Framing

The FFP Guidelines and the FDP Strategy are framed differently in the respective forewords of the ministry heads. Unlike the AA paper, which begins with a victim/perpetrator narrative, the BMZ paper uses an agency narrative that emphasises the potential of people to act effectively.

The preface to the AA document begins with a scenario of violence: “As long as women are not safe, no one is safe,” reads Foreign Minister Baerbock’s first sentence. The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and the sexualised violence “that Russians have since unleashed on Ukrainian soil”, as well as the murders and human rights violations, but also the protests in Iran, create a framing with nation-state references right from the start. A feminist foreign policy is therefore “bitterly necessary”.

Development Minister Schulze introduces the FDP Strategy with the question of justice. Women, who make up half of the world’s population, should also have half of the power. “Women”, she says immediately afterwards, “are important actors for sustainable development. They have so much strength, knowledge, special skills and innovative ideas — in short, enormous potential!”

Descriptions of gender power asymmetries and other structures of discrimination are often accompanied by stereotypical characterisations of groups that are discriminated against or marginalised. Such discourses often degenerate into perpetrator/victim narratives. When it comes to paying special attention to the needs of disadvantaged groups or empowering them, there is a danger of portraying them as “vic-

tims”, as weak or inferior and in need of special protection. Feminist approaches counter this by recognising agency, that is, the ability of individuals to act and be effective.

Problem diagnostics

The use of key concepts to describe and evaluate problems can be an indicator of the extent to which the two ministerial documents are informed by feminist approaches and theories. Both the FFP Guidelines and the FDP Strategy are based on the principle of “justice” and the recognition of the benefits of inclusion. They assume “that societies are more peaceful and prosperous when all people can participate in political, social, and economic life” (AA), or that “there is less poverty, less hunger, and more stability in the world [...] when women have equal rights and responsibilities” (BMZ). Thus, two aspects — the one intrinsic-normative and the other extrinsic-utilitarian in nature — justify why equal participation should be made possible for all people.

According to AA, feminist foreign policy is “an integral part of a value-based foreign policy”. It is about “naming historically grown power structures” and “overcoming them”; however, these power structures are not described as patriarchal in the FFP Guidelines. Moreover, the concept of patriarchy or patriarchalism, which is central to feminist social critique or any of its derivatives, does not appear anywhere in the FFP paper. However, it is used 13 times in the FDP Strategy. The “patriarchal power system”, “patriarchal social system”, “patriarchal social order”, “patriarchal norms”, “patriarchal power relations”, “patriarchal power structures”, etc., are referred to as the cause of the problem and as a description of the status quo to be overcome. In the glossary of the BMZ paper, patriarchy is defined as “a system or social order structured by the general domination of men over women and the construction of a power relationship between the sexes. In a patriarchal social order, all authoritative values,

norms and patterns of behaviour are shaped by and oriented towards men.”

Similarly, the term “feminism” is used as a noun and given an explanation only in the FDP Strategy. Here, too, there is “(no) attempt at a definition”, referring to the plurality of feminist currents, movements and approaches. “Common to all feminisms is [...] their resistance to discrimination and oppression and their commitment to gender-equitable power relations.” Capitalism as a system is not questioned in any of the documents. The (unpaid or poorly paid) reproductive work inherent in the economic system — a major theme of feminist social critique — is only addressed in the BMZ paper under the term “care work”. “Data from 2020 show that, on average, about three-quarters of the world’s unpaid care work is done by women,” the paper says. The FDP strategy also raises the issue of poor working conditions (especially for women) at the beginning of supply chains, which German and European supply chain regulations are supposed to address.

Overall, the BMZ paper draws more frequently and explicitly upon critical analytical categories of feminist approaches than the AA paper.

Target groups and diversity

Both ministerial documents can be understood as concepts of affirmative action or positive discrimination. These are positive measures designed to counteract social discrimination against certain social groups by granting them specific advantages. “Affirmative” in this sense means the special affirmation and support of these groups (EIGE).

In line with this, the focus in both cases is on three groups of people, in descending order of priority: (1) women and girls, (2) marginalised groups, (3) all people. The FFP Guidelines state: “A feminist foreign policy thus aims at the equality of women and girls worldwide. It addresses the particular concerns of marginalised groups. It seeks to ensure that all people enjoy equal rights.” At the same time, they state: “A

feminist foreign policy is not a foreign policy for women, but for all members of a society. It includes, not excludes.”

The BMZ paper also emphasises that feminist development policy is not a “policy by women for women”. However, it also makes clear that women and girls — as the largest group in the world to be discriminated against — are at the centre. Gender equality is therefore the primary goal, followed by the fight against other forms of discrimination “based on gender identity, sexual orientation, age, origin, disability, socio-economic status, ethnicity or religious affiliation or ascription”. The stated aim of the FFP Guidelines and the FDP Strategy to change the structures that underpin these multiple intersecting discriminations and to embrace diversity makes the AA and BMZ approaches transformative, inclusive and intersectional.

Both ministerial documents recognise the plurality of women and marginalised groups and describe the diversity of people (including their identities and realities) as an enrichment to be promoted. The FFP Guidelines and the FDP Strategy address (to varying degrees) groups of people who are excluded from the full realisation of equal rights. In addition to women and girls, those affected by poverty and hunger, the politically vulnerable, indigenous peoples, people of colour, Black people and LGBTIQ* persons are mentioned.

With regard to the latter group, the BMZ paper (only) explicitly states that feminist development policy is “based on an inclusive, non-binary understanding of gender”. Heteronormativity, which is closely linked to the binary gender norm, is not addressed in either paper. However, if discrimination based on sexual orientation is to be tackled and same-sex relationships are to be not only “accepted” but recognised as legitimate and equal, heteronormativity must be overcome.

Past and responsibility

Unjust asymmetrical power relations also include the (post-)colonial structures that

shape international relations. Whereas the FDP Strategy refers to the “Global South” several times, the FFP Guidelines do so only once. In both documents, German colonial history appears as a reference point, but without naming territories or using the terms “restitution” or “reparation”.

“The power imbalance between the countries of the Global North and the Global South has colonial origins and has grown over centuries,” the FDP Strategy states. “European colonialism” and the “colonial patterns of thought that still have an effect today”, including in development policy, are critically reflected upon. The “acknowledgement and apology for the atrocities of colonialism” would be of particular importance. The claim is formulated to “pursue a post-colonial and anti-racist approach”.

According to the AA paper, feminist foreign policy is “based on critical self-reflection of one’s own history, faces up to historical responsibility, including for our colonial past, and is open to learning from others”. This is why the ministry funds “scholarships for academics from the former German colonial regions to research German colonial history and its effects”.

In the context of these new concepts, which are understood as human rights-based and anti-racist and deal with the question of the past and responsibility, as well as with the critical examination of one’s own history, there is, however, one notable omission: Both the FFP Guidelines and the FDP Strategy omit any reference to the Second World War, the Holocaust or the Nazi regime.

Goals and targets

In implementing their objectives, AA and BMZ intend to follow the Swedish 3Rs model. This means that the two ministries will work to respect and promote the *rights* of women and girls (and marginalised groups) in all their areas of activity, to strengthen the *representation* of women and girls in politics and their equal participation in all areas of society, and to improve women’s access to *resources* (financial,

human and natural). In future, therefore, there should be “gender budgeting”, that is, the allocation of financial resources to projects that contribute towards gender equality to varying degrees.

In their documents, both AA and BMZ set a target of spending 85 per cent of project funds on gender-sensitive or GG1 projects and 8 per cent on gender-transformative or GG2 projects by 2025. According to the OECD Gender Equality Policy Marker, GG1 projects focus on the technical and content-related objective, while gender aspects are considered a secondary objective. In GG2 projects, gender equality is the primary objective. According to this distinction, gender sensitivity refers to the consideration of the different gender-specific needs of people. Gender transformative projects address the causes of gender inequalities in order to dismantle the power hierarchies based on them in the long term (FDP Strategy).

On the one hand, gender sensitivity should be a matter of course; implementing organisations such as GIZ have had gender strategies in place for some time. On the other hand, the share earmarked for gender-transformative projects is conspicuously low.

Focal points and instruments

Both ministerial documents set out priorities. According to the FFP Guidelines, the concept of human security is to be given greater emphasis, and dialogue with civil society at home and abroad is to be intensified. In addition, the FFP will support the implementation of the WPS agenda and promote the fight against sexualised and gender-based violence in armed conflicts, gender-sensitive approaches to arms (export) control and the protection of sexual and reproductive health and rights. Both ministries aim to counter an “anti-feminist push-back” (AA) or the “global strengthening of right-wing populist and anti-feminist tendencies” (BMZ).

No objectives or evaluation criteria are attached to this qualitative programme.

Feminist foreign and development policy is understood by AA and BMZ as a “work in progress” and a process that requires the development of monitoring and evaluation tools.

The domestic dimension

The extent to which Germany can serve as a role model in the field of feminist foreign and development policy and contribute to the international norm diffusion also depends on domestic political factors. The FFP Guidelines and the FDP Strategy recognise that a credible feminist foreign and development policy requires the “implementation of a progressive gender equality agenda in Germany” (BMZ), which includes institutional changes within the ministry itself. Indeed, in many areas Germany does not come off particularly well in an international comparison. For example, the gender pay gap is just under 18 per cent (worldwide 20 per cent, in the EU just under 13 per cent). The proportion of women in the German Bundestag was 35 per cent at the start of the new legislative period. This put the German parliament in 42nd place out of 188 parliaments. According to the FFP Guidelines, only 27 per cent of AA representations abroad are headed by women (although women make up around 50 per cent of the workforce at AA).

AA and BMZ are committed to promoting equality, diversity and inclusion and to ensuring equal opportunities and non-discriminatory work environments. To this end, a number of institutional reforms and incentives will be introduced.

From a global perspective, Germany enjoys limited normative legitimacy on the issue of gender justice — unlike, for example, Sweden, the former pioneer of feminist foreign policy. However, the “feminist commitment” of AA and BMZ can help to advance feminist concerns domestically.

The debate in Germany

In the German debate on feminist foreign and development policy, various recurring narratives can be identified, depending on the actor. In the (social) media, it is often ironically commented that German foreign policy should in future pay more attention to the needs of women and children as well as men when building sanitary facilities. This is in reference to a comment made by Foreign Minister Baerbock when she illustrated the feminist approach to the reconstruction of a village in Nigeria. The mockery reveals a failure to recognise how often “gender-neutral” projects take adult men without disabilities as their benchmark. This is also often the case in urban planning in the heart of Europe. Foreign and development policy support measures must take the different needs of various groups of people seriously and be context- and culture-sensitive — although that is humane and reasonable, it is not yet a feminist foreign policy.

The government emphasises, for example in the FFP Guidelines, that “feminist foreign policy is not synonymous with pacifism”. Even more: “Russia’s war against Ukraine shows that in the face of brutal violence, human lives must also be protected by military means.” At the same time, however, feminist foreign policy is “committed to the humanitarian tradition from which classical peace policy and arms control derive”. Without any exploration of the tense relationship between the two positions, this confession comes across as an apodictic statement about the supposed harmonious compatibility of “feminist foreign policy” and the “turn of the times” (*Zeitenwende*). But even with the recognition of the right to (armed) self-defence, anti-militarism, disarmament and non-proliferation remain central feminist demands in international politics. This position also includes efforts at negotiation, mediation and diplomacy. Against the background of Foreign Minister Baerbock’s explicit advocacy for a “pragmatic approach” of “real feminism”, the lack of reflection on what a feminist shaping of German and European

support for Ukraine — in and beyond arms deliveries — could look like is surprising.

The dichotomous and polarised debate about a “yes” or “no” to arms supplies to war zones masks a creeping departure from a logic of peace in politics and society that regards the use of force as a last resort.

Increased attention to vulnerability at the nation-state level and the quest for defence capabilities are certainly part of this trend. According to an Ipsos survey conducted in March 2023, a clear majority (61 per cent) in Germany supports the reintroduction of compulsory military service, including for all genders (43 per cent). At the same time, the number of minors recruited by the Bundeswehr rose from 1,239 to 1,773 between 2021 and 2022, an increase of 43 per cent. In 2019, the parliamentary groups Die Linke and Bündnis 90/Die Grünen had submitted (separate) motions against the recruitment of minors. However, these attempts failed because the other parties voted against them.

Old certainties, expressed in formulas such as “change through trade”, which now appear to have been shaken by Russia’s actions, have been surprisingly quickly replaced by new maxims: The statement that “Putin must not win” is based on a binary logic of victory and defeat, which relegates the human security of those affected by the war to the background.

Another strand of the debate focusses on the feminist shortcomings of others (abroad). Iran is a keyword here. In the name of a feminist foreign policy, parts of civil society are calling on the German government to take tougher action against those in power who violate human rights on a massive scale. In this context, the ethic of conviction often takes precedence over the ethic of responsibility. Even in the feminist context, there are conflicting goals, for example between support for the oppressed on the one hand and measures for a non-violent transition — or at least a commitment to political and social liberalisation, or the conclusion of a nuclear agreement — on the other. The need to maintain access to

civil society for international aid organisations can also conflict with putting repressive rulers on terror lists (SWP-Aktuell 16/2023).

Systemic understanding

Within the framework of feminist theories, consideration is given to how a political community can be organised beyond a (national) state that is based on patriarchal structures of violence. In what capacity should democratic processes be based on ideas of cosmopolitanism? What (alternative) political structures would more equitably shape the space of opportunities and constraints for people to flourish in a community? These questions are as big as they are important. On the lowest rung of the ladder of abstraction, on the other hand, are questions about gender-sensitive sanitation design and support for local women’s organisations.

There is a large middle ground between the two, where more coherent and equitable policy-making is now possible and urgently needed. According to the FFP Guidelines, the Women’s Advisory Group for International Assistance in Yemen was established on the initiative of AA in July 2022. Will German arms exports to countries involved in the war in Yemen be stopped in the spirit of a feminist foreign policy? Will a feminist perspective on the “dilemmas of arms exports” change anything about previous priorities and assessments? To what extent will feminist perspectives shape the content of the new Arms Export Control Law? What is a feminist approach to the current focus on “defence capability” and “security of supply”? From a feminist viewpoint, are these terms at all suitable for grasping the problem and finding possible solutions? What are the implications of a focus on human rights and human security for the design and implementation of sanctions regimes and trade agreements, for policies towards states and for conflict management?

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Feminist approaches aim to overcome the dichotomy between foreign and domestic policy. The need for a link — in the sense of a coherent policy — can be seen, for example, in the areas of migration, asylum law and rescue at sea. Here, many existing regulations contradict a human rights-based and feminist policy. If feminist foreign and development policy is to contribute to the desired “cultural change” (FFP Guidelines) or “systemic change” (FDP Strategy), it must be measured against the changes in this area. This, however, requires a comprehensive understanding of the new foreign policy orientation within the German government. Without an understanding of the systemic dimension of change that takes into account the interdependence of different policy areas — including domestic and foreign policy — a feminist foreign and development policy will merely bring about more gender mainstreaming and equality. However, this would not be a transformative approach, but only a weakly compensatory one that does little to shake existing patriarchal power structures.

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