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Advancing Feminist Foreign Policy in the Multilateral System: Key Debates and Challenges

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Executive Summary

Since the first feminist foreign policy (FFP) was adopted by Sweden in 2014, sixteen countries have either published an FFP or announced their intention to do so. While FFPs could help revitalize the multilateral system and ground it in feminist principles, debates have emerged over what they can and should encompass. To explore the future of FFPs, the International Peace Institute, in partnership with the Open Society Foundations and in collaboration with the co-chairs of the Feminist Foreign Policy Plus (FFP+) Group, Chile and Germany, convened a retreat on Feminist Foreign Policy and Multilateralism in July 2023.

Some proponents of FFPs have indicated that these policies can be a way to democratize and transform multilateralism, integrating feminist approaches and principles into multilateral institutions and leading to more inclusive and equitable outcomes. This requires seeing FFPs as not just a “women’s issue” but also as a way to reinvigorate an inequitable system through transformational change and the interrogation of entrenched power dynamics, including in areas such as trade, climate, migration, and disarmament.

One obstacle to realizing the potential of FFPs is that there is no single definition of feminist foreign policy. Part of the challenge is that there are many interpretations of feminism, some of which reflect a more transformative, systemic approach than others. Nonetheless, states have been working toward common guiding principles for FFPs. The FFP+ Group’s “Political Declaration on Feminist Approaches to Foreign Policy,” agreed in September 2023, illustrates state priorities while also mirroring some of the values emphasized by civil society, such as a focus on the root causes of inequality and a collaborative approach.

Ultimately, there is no single way to “do” feminism, and approaches to FFP should and will be varied. If FFP is to survive and grow, it will encompass contradictions and compromises, and civil society and member states will have to collaborate to advance feminist principles in the multilateral arena. Toward this end, FFP-interested states should meaningfully engage with ongoing debates around what FFPs should be, particularly in five areas:

- Militarization, demilitarization, and the root causes of violence;
- Global perspectives and postcolonial critiques;
- The branding and substance of FFPs;
- The domestication of FFPs; and
- Accountability and sustainability.

Introduction

The recent growth of feminist foreign policy-making has come at a complicated time, amidst increased backlash against “gender ideology” and women’s human rights and alongside a growing dissatisfaction with the multilateral system.¹ At the same time, it represents a natural evolution of decades of feminist action and a potential avenue to restore trust in inclusive multilateralism.

The first feminist foreign policy (FFP) was adopted by Sweden in 2014. Despite Sweden’s revocation of the policy in 2022, FFPs have spread in the decade since its adoption. As of March 2024, sixteen countries have either published an FFP or announced their intention to do so. In particular, FFPs appear to be increasing in popularity in Latin America, with Mexico, Chile, and Colombia adopting FFPs, reflecting a regional resurgence of progressive governments underpinned by feminist currents.² At the same time, there are differences of opinion regarding the ability of FFPs to be transformative, particularly within civil society. While FFPs may represent one approach to shaping state responses to the crises facing the multilateral system, they will have to overcome challenges to implementation to deliver truly gender-equitable outcomes.

In July 2023, the International Peace Institute, in collaboration with the co-chairs of the Feminist Foreign Policy Plus (FFP+) Group, Chile and Germany, convened a retreat on feminist foreign policy and multilateralism. The retreat brought together approximately thirty participants representing fourteen UN member states, as well as civil society and academia.³ This paper examines some of the key debates and challenges around FFPs that emerged during the retreat and from desk research, focusing on five major themes:⁴ (1) militarization,

demilitarization, and the root causes of violence; (2) global perspectives and postcolonial critiques; (3) the branding and substance of FFPs; (4) the domestication of FFPs; and (5) accountability and sustainability. The report concludes by examining FFPs as a way forward to engage with a multilateral system in crisis and advance feminist principles, with a focus on civil society collaboration.

Defining the Principles of Feminist Foreign Policy

There is no single definition of feminist foreign policy. Part of the challenge with defining FFP is that there are also many interpretations of feminism, some of which reflect a more transformative, systemic approach than others. As a result, states have different ways of interpreting “feminist” and mainstreaming the concept in their foreign policy. Despite the lack of a single, agreed-upon definition of what constitutes a feminist foreign policy, several fundamental principles are commonly accepted. These principles have evolved from the initial Swedish model, which focused on “three Rs”: women’s rights, resources to support, and representation of women.⁵ This relatively surface-level definition is reflective of the way many states have conceptualized FFP.

Definitions emerging from academia and civil society tend to be more expansive and transformative. Stephenie Foster and Susan Markham identify four principles that countries with an FFP share. These FFP frameworks:

- “Include gender equality as a goal and strategy,
- contain a broadened definition of ‘security,’
- elevate diverse voices, and
- address historic power imbalances.”⁶

As of March 2024, sixteen countries have either published an FFP or announced their intention to do so.

1 Damjan Denkovski, “Disrupting the Multilateral Order? The Impact of Anti-Gender Actors on Multilateral Structures in Europe,” Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy, 2022.

2 Chris Arsenault, “How Left-Wing Forces are Regaining Ground in Latin America,” *Al Jazeera*, December 14, 2021.

3 The objectives of the retreat were to foster an understanding of FFP and feminist analyses and strategies and to identify key areas of consensus across FFPs. Another objective was to explore opportunities for FFP as a tool to build bridges between the Global North, Global South, member states, and civil society. Finally, a key aim of the retreat was to discuss ideas for how the FFP+ group can integrate feminist ideas and practices into the UN system and member states’ relationships with each other and with civil society. This paper builds on many of the discussions from the retreat, with a focus on challenges identified by the participants.

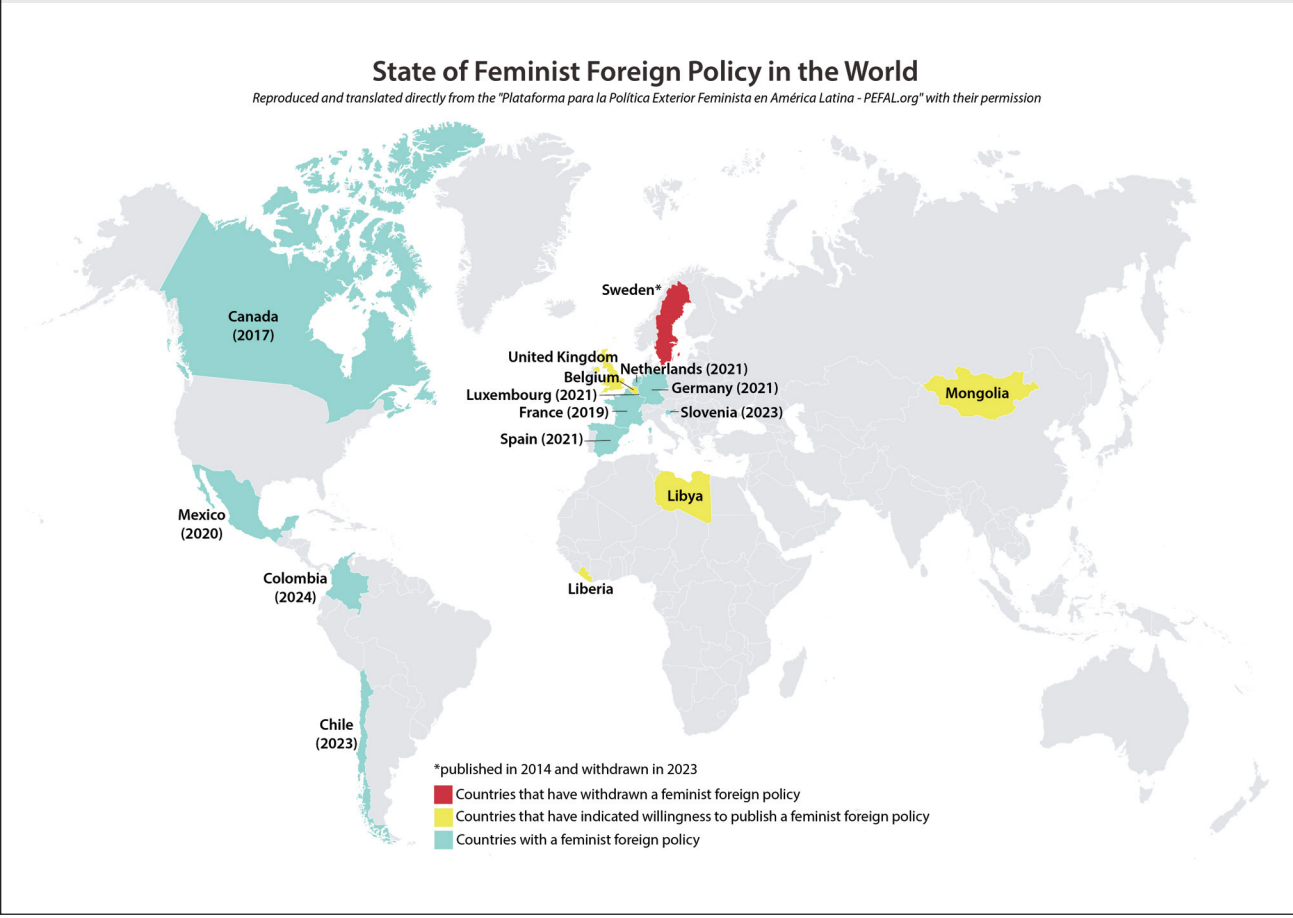
4 For a comprehensive review of different FFPs and aligned policy efforts, see: Lyric Thompson et al., “Defining Feminist Foreign Policy: The 2023 Edition,” Feminist Foreign Policy Collaborative, September 2023.

5 Lyric Thompson, Spogmay Ahmed, and Tanya Khohar, “Defining Feminist Foreign Policy: A 2021 Update,” International Center for Research on Women, 2021.

6 Stephenie Foster and Susan A. Markham, *Feminist Foreign Policy in Theory and in Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2024), p. 27.

Box 1. Status of FFPs around the world

The NGO Política Exterior Feminista en America Latina (PEFAL) uses a “stoplight” method to track progress on the adoption of FFPs. As of March 2024, countries in green had formally published an FFP. Countries in yellow have the “potential to publish” an FFP, meaning that they have either indicated a willingness to publish an FFP or significantly included a gender perspective in their foreign affairs ministry. Red indicates that a country has withdrawn its FFP, with Sweden currently being the only country to have done so.⁷ Every populated continent, apart from Australasia, is now engaging with feminist foreign policy-making in some form.



The Feminist Foreign Policy Collaborative proposes a more comprehensive definition that focuses on addressing structural inequalities, collaborating with civil society, and harmonizing domestic and foreign policies. It defines FFP as

the policy of a state that defines its interactions with other states, as well as movements and other non-state actors, in a

States have different ways of interpreting “feminist” and mainstreaming the concept in their foreign policy.

manner that prioritizes peace, gender equality and environmental integrity; enshrines, promotes, and protects 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

⁷ Política Exterior Feminista en America Latina (PEFAL), “Estado de la Política Exterior Feminista en el Mundo,” available at <https://pefal.org/>.

the exercise of those values at home and co-created with feminist activists, groups and movements, at home and abroad.⁸

Similarly, Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS) underscores that a meaningful FFP must seriously confront power structures such as racism, colonialism, militarism, and the patriarchy.⁹ It bears mentioning, however, that many of the most prominent civil society organizations working on FFP are located in the Global North.

In practice, not all FFPs meaningfully include each of these elements. This has led to accusations that some states are co-opting the feminist label by appropriating, diluting, and reinterpreting feminist ideas for different political purposes than originally intended.¹⁰ Some feminist advocates have questioned whether it is even possible for a state to be truly feminist.¹¹ For instance, many feel it is unlikely that any state would implement transformative feminist policies focused on disrupting unequal power structures to promote gender equity, as this would disrupt the patriarchal and militaristic systems that states uphold.

Considering the range of approaches to FFP, civil society organizations have created several tools to evaluate what different countries' FFPs include and the progress they have made. For example, the FFP Collaborative evaluates the existing country frameworks and new commitments of the sixteen governments shown on the map above across five areas: (1) rights; (2) resources; (3) representation; (4) research and reporting; and (5) reach (an expansion from the three priority areas in Sweden's original FFP).¹²

Another tool is the Feminist Foreign Policy Index, launched by the International Center for Research on Women in 2023, which evaluates forty-eight countries against a transformative vision of what FFP could be.¹³ The index scores countries on their feminist commitments from 0 (weak integration)

to 1 (strong integration). It evaluates twenty-seven indicators across seven priority areas: peace and militarization, official development assistance, migration for employment, labor protections, economic justice, institutional commitments to gender equality, and climate. Sweden leads the group with a score of 0.80, and the United States ranks last with a score of 0.12. Considering these tools are still new, their impact on FFPs is an area for further research.

UN member states have also begun to forge a common vision for FFP, including at the seventy-eighth UN General Assembly in September 2023, when the FFP+ Group adopted a "Political Declaration on Feminist Approaches to Foreign Policy." The FFP+ Group was formed in January 2022 and now includes nearly twenty states that either have an FFP or are interested in advancing feminist engagement in the multilateral space.¹⁴ While the group's declaration does not lay out a common definition of FFP, it outlines six political commitments:¹⁵

- Demonstrating a commitment to advance gender equality and women's participation, prevent discrimination and violence against women, and promote their human rights;
- Integrating feminist principles throughout foreign policies while recognizing that members of the group may be at different stages in design and implementation;
- Striving to ensure the human rights and representation of women, access to resources, and just and inclusive societies;
- Collaborating within the UN system and other multilateral, regional, and bilateral contexts to further gender equality, "including by tackling the root causes of unequal power relations and structures";
- Cooperating with civil society to include their voices in policy- and decision-making processes; and

8 Thompson, Ahmed, and Khohar, "Defining Feminist Foreign Policy: A 2021 Update."

9 Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS), "Beyond Women Peace and Security: Developing a Feminist Vision of Foreign Policy," 2023.

10 Sara de Jong and Susanne Kimm, "The Co-optation of Feminisms: A Research Agenda," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 19, no. 2 (2017).

11 GAPS, "Beyond Women Peace and Security."

12 Thompson et al., "Defining Feminist Foreign Policy: The 2023 Edition."

13 International Center for Research on Women, "The Feminist Foreign Policy Index: A Tool for Systems Change," available at www.ffpindex.org/.

14 As of September 2023, it included Albania, Argentina, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, France, Germany, Israel, Liberia, Luxembourg, Mexico, Mongolia, the Netherlands, Rwanda, and Spain.

15 FFP+ Group, "Political Declaration on Feminist Approaches to Foreign Policy," September 2023.

Box 2. Linking feminist foreign policy and the women, peace, and security agenda

FFPs exist alongside and reinforce other member-state commitments, particularly on women, peace, and security (WPS). The WPS agenda, first adopted in 2000 through UN Security Council Resolution 1325, emphasizes the disproportionate impact of conflict on women and their role in peacebuilding processes across four pillars: protection, participation, prevention, and relief and recovery. FFPs can overlap with state commitments on WPS in areas such as humanitarian and development assistance. While the WPS agenda is discussed primarily in the Security Council, linking it to FFP can help mainstream feminist approaches in other multilateral fora.

Compared to FFPs, the WPS agenda is more institutionalized. There are now ten Security Council resolutions on WPS that are binding for all UN member states, and most countries have adopted national action plans (NAPs) to implement the agenda. Another major difference is that FFPs are more closely tied to the identity of individual states. While the WPS agenda originated in civil society prior to institutionalization in states, FFP has done the opposite, originating in the state and moving top-down, “often to the surprise of civil society actors.”¹⁶

One challenge to linking FFPs and WPS is that it risks reinforcing some of the shortcomings of the WPS agenda. The WPS agenda has been critiqued for becoming securitized and for focusing on incorporating women into security apparatuses rather than transforming militarized systems and addressing the root causes of conflict.¹⁷ Moreover, many NAPs, particularly in the Global North, focus on advancing gender equality abroad in conflict-affected contexts rather than harmonizing domestic and international efforts or acknowledging complicity in creating insecure conditions (such as through arms exports). This means that in practice, NAPs tend to focus on “making war safer for women” rather than eradicating conflict.¹⁸

Many critiques of the WPS agenda are mirrored in debates surrounding the uptake of FFPs. For example, some states considered unfriendly to gender rights have adopted NAPs primarily as a symbolic gesture to further their foreign and security interests or in response to external pressure.¹⁹ This parallels critiques about the co-optation of FFPs. Relatedly, critics of WPS have argued that it often promotes an “add women and stir” approach. There is a synonymous concern that FFP risks merely adding “elite women” to foreign policy and stirring.²⁰ Another criticism of the WPS agenda is that the Global North is the agenda’s conceptual “home,” leading to the perception that the Global South is an “implementation laboratory” rather than a knowledge- and norm-producer in its own right.²¹ Similar critiques have been made of FFPs, though FFPs originate in individual states with their own interpretations of the concept, presenting an opportunity to share knowledge and best practices across contexts.

Despite their differences, the WPS agenda and FFP could complement each other, with the development of FFPs helping to reclaim the potential of WPS to focus on structural transformation. Because they have a larger scope than the WPS agenda, FFPs can also apply feminist approaches to different multilateral issues such as migration, climate, care policy, and trade. Additionally, the recent launch of several FFPs in Latin America demonstrates how these policies could help make the WPS agenda more relevant to contexts without traditional armed conflict and better integrate the concerns of the LGBTIQ+ community, which it has often excluded.²²

16 Jennifer Thomson and Columba Achilleos-Sarll, “Conclusion to the Forum,” in Columba Achilleos-Sarll et al., “The Past, Present, and Future(s) of Feminist Foreign Policy,” *International Studies Review* 25, no. 1 (2023), p. 24.

17 The process of “securitization” refers to the politicization of certain identities or issues that are framed as “security threats,” subsequently justifying the use of military or other force to address them. Gretchen Baldwin and Taylor Hynes, “The Securitization of Gender: A Primer,” Global Observatory, October 11, 2022.

18 Laura J. Shepherd, “Making War Safe for Women? National Action Plans and the Militarisation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda,” *International Political Science Review* 37, no. 3 (2016).

19 Jennifer Thomson and Sophie Whiting, “Women, Peace and Security National Action Plans in Anti-Gender Governments: The Cases of Brazil and Poland,” *European Journal of International Security* 7, no. 4 (2022).

20 Columba Achilleos-Sarll, “Reconceptualising Foreign Policy as Gendered, Sexualised and Racialised: Towards a Postcolonial Feminist Foreign Policy (Analysis),” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 19, no. 1 (2018).

21 Soumita Basu, “The Global South Write 1325 (Too),” *International Political Science Review* 37, no. 3 (2016).

22 Daniela Sepúlveda Soto and Evyn Papworth, “What Can We Say about the Emerging Feminist Foreign Policies in Latin America?” Global Observatory, September 5, 2023; Paul Drummond and Tamya Rebelo, “1325 and Beyond: Moving Forward the WPS Agenda in Latin America,” *Women in International Security*, July 2020.

- Committing to meet regularly and exchange best practices and lessons learned.

These commitments illustrate state priorities while also mirroring some of the values expressed in civil society visions of FFP, such as a focus on the root causes of inequality and a collaborative approach.

Key Debates and Challenges

Several debates and challenges have arisen both in the literature on FFP and in discussions convened by IPI. This report outlines five main challenges: militarization and demilitarization, postcolonial critiques, branding and substance, domestication, and accountability and sustainability.

Militarization, Demilitarization, and the Root Causes of Violence

One ongoing debate has been how FFPs address militarization rooted in masculinity as an underlying cause of violence and, by extension, how they approach demilitarization.²³

Feminist civil society organizations have long questioned the assumption that militarized responses improve security.

Militarization involves the normalization of militaristic responses and can promote gendered hierarchies that privilege “militarized masculinity.”²⁴ At the state level, the indicators on peace and militarization in the FFP Index help illustrate how militarization manifests itself. These include levels of military expenditures, international arms transfers, adoption of disarmament treaties, and the ratio of military spending to spending in other

areas such as education.²⁵

Militarization is costly, with high defense spending often usurping funds that could be used for human security and social development projects that could help address the root causes of violence. Moreover, there is a clear link between the arms trade and gender-based violence.²⁶ Feminist civil society organizations have long questioned the assumption that militarized responses improve security, including in their original vision for WPS. Beyond activists, however, “disarmament and demilitarisation [have been] starkly absent from debates on and implementation of the WPS agenda.”²⁷ This has started to change, and in 2020 the secretary-general identified reducing military expenditures as one of the five goals for the next decade of WPS in his annual report.²⁸

Yet many states with FFPs continue to spend heavily on their militaries. Of the top fifteen military spenders in 2022, three of them (Germany,

France, and Canada) have FFPs.²⁹ Another top spender, the United Kingdom, does not officially have an FFP, although the Labour Party has expressed interest in developing one.³⁰

This raises the question of whether states with high military expenditures can truly undertake feminist policymaking. Feminist advocates have questioned whether this high level of military spending can be justified under an FFP.³¹ For many of them, militarization and FFPs are incompatible. Toni Hastrup has argued that a commitment to militarization “limits the possibilities of an emancipatory FFP.”³² Instead, advocates

23 Cynthia Enloe defines militarization as “a step-by-step process by which a person or a thing gradually comes to be controlled by the military or comes to depend for its well-being on militaristic ideas.” Cynthia Enloe, *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), p. 3.

24 Militarized masculinity refers to a form of masculinity associated with dominance over women (and others, including other men), the association of the military with traditionally male characteristics, and violence as an enforcement of these characteristics. Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy, “The CFFP Glossary,” March 2021.

25 Foteini Papagioti, “The Feminist Foreign Policy Index: A Quantitative Evaluation of Feminist Commitment,” International Center for Research on Women, 2023.

26 Ray Acheson, “Gender-Based Violence and the Arms Trade,” *Global Responsibility to Protect* 12, no. 2 (2020).

27 Senem Kaptan, “UNSCR 1325 at 20 Years: Perspectives from Feminist Peace Activists and Civil Society,” Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, October 2020.

28 UN Security Council, *Women and Peace and Security*, UN Doc. S/2020/946, September 25, 2020.

29 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), “The Top 15 Military Spenders, 2022,” April 2023, available at <https://www.sipri.org/visualizations/2023/top-15-military-spenders-2022>.

30 Thompson et al., “Defining Feminist Foreign Policy: The 2023 Edition.” It is worth noting that Scotland's Feminist Approach to International Relations calls for pressing the UK government on certain issues related to militarization, including limitations on arms transfers and denuclearization. Scottish Government, “Taking a Feminist Approach to International Relations,” November 2023.

31 PAX, “10 Feminist Approaches to Foreign Policy to Advance Peace and Security: Recommendations to Governments from Feminist Peace and Security Practitioners and Researchers,” September 2023.

32 Toni Hastrup, “Militarism in the Wake of Feminist Foreign Policy,” in Achilleos-Sarll et al., “The Past, Present, and Future(s) of Feminist Foreign Policy,” p. 20.

have called for a shift in focus toward conflict prevention and “human security” to be a core principle of FFPs.³³

Russia’s 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine exposed some of these disagreements over FFPs and military spending among both member states and civil society actors. Several countries with FFPs, including Germany, Canada, and Sweden, have been supplying high levels of financial and military aid to Ukraine. Some have argued that this counteracts feminist principles of anti-militarism. To them, a response based on the principles of FFP should prioritize humanitarian rather than military assistance, as well as the representation of women in the negotiation process, the upholding of international treaties on women and children, and the humane treatment of refugees.³⁴ Others, however, have justified military support to Ukraine under FFPs, arguing that self-defense is a feminist act.³⁵ These competing perspectives underscore that there is no “right” way to implement an FFP.

Member states also differ on how they address militarization under their FFPs. Germany’s FFP guidelines emphasize pragmatism, noting that “FFP is not synonymous with pacifism.”³⁶ Colombia, on the other hand, announced in March 2023 that it was developing an FFP centered on the values of pacifism, participation, and intersectionality.³⁷ These differences reflect broader debates over whether FFPs should focus on defending gains that have already been made, advancing incremental reforms, or striving toward radical change

Policymakers developing FFPs in the Global North are often blind to the racialized dimensions of foreign policy and view women in the Global South as lacking agency or as “other.”

in line with more transformative interpretations of feminism.³⁸

Learning from Global Perspectives and Postcolonial Critiques

Another critique of FFPs is that they are another policy norm being exported to the Global South by the Global North, echoing some of the critiques of the WPS agenda outlined in Box 2. As summarized by the International Center for Research on Women, “Some question whether feminist foreign policies are just the latest postcolonial export of northern countries, well-intentioned but perhaps ultimately equally uninformed by the perspectives of those on the receiving end and removed even from the realities of their own domestic policies.”³⁹ These postcolonial critiques highlight that policymakers developing FFPs in the Global North are often blind to the racialized dimensions of foreign policy and view women in the Global South as lacking agency or as “other.”⁴⁰ They also may view themselves as “inherently more feminist” and push countries in the Global South to apply the same one-size-fits-all approach to “catch up.”⁴¹ This approach tends to focus on representation rather than structural change and to aim toward the same universal outcomes regardless of context.⁴²

Another blind spot in many discussions around FFP is the Global South’s long history of feminist engagement with foreign policy without the label

33 Foster and Markham, *Feminist Foreign Policy in Theory and in Practice* p. 41; Daniela Philipson García, “Feminist Interventions: Resisting the Militarization of the Climate Crisis,” Women’s Environment and Development Organization and Center for Feminist Foreign Policy, June 2023.

34 Sara J. Chehab, “Feminist Foreign Policy and the War in Ukraine: Hollow Framework or Rallying Force?” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 25, no. 6 (2023).

35 Retreat on “Feminist Foreign Policy and Multilateralism,” Greentree, NY, July 2023.

36 Saskia Brechenmacher, “Germany Has a New Feminist Foreign Policy. What Does it Mean in Practice?” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 8, 2023.

37 Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, “Colombian Feminist Foreign Policy: Pacifist, Participatory, and Intersectional,” concept note prepared for the 67th Commission on the Status of Women, March 2023; Gender Security Project, “FFP Countries: Colombia,” available at <https://www.gendarsecurityproject.com/feminist-foreign-policy-countries/colombia>.

38 Columba Achilleos-Sarll and Jennifer Thomson, “Introduction to the Forum,” in Achilleos-Sarll et al., “The Past, Present, and Future(s) of Feminist Foreign Policy,” p. 3.

39 Lyric Thompson and Rachel Clement, “Defining Feminist Foreign Policy,” International Center for Research on Women, March 2019.

40 Nadine Ansorg, Toni Haastrup, and Katharine A. M. Wright, “Foreign Policy and Diplomacy: Feminist Interventions,” in *Handbook of Feminist Peace Research*, Tarja Väyrynen et al., eds. (London, Routledge, 2021); Neha Tetali, “What Can Feminist Foreign Policy Learn from Postcolonial Feminism?” Global Observatory, October 23, 2023.

41 Tetali, “What Can Feminist Foreign Policy Learn from Postcolonial Feminism?”

42 Conversation with scholar, April 2023.

of “FFP.”⁴³ For instance, Swati Parashar and Bina D’Costa argue that “both feminist practices and objectives in foreign policy have existed for a long time in the South Asian context” even though FFP is considered “new vocabulary in the context of the West.”⁴⁴ Some African feminists feel that their perspectives have been largely erased from narratives around the development and practice of FFP and that knowledge production on FFP, including within civil society, has been dominated by the Global North.⁴⁵ Recognizing these contributions can help interrogate the dominant, racialized narratives around FFP and heed Black feminists’ call to “make foreign policies as if Black and Brown Lives Mattered.”⁴⁶

While foreign policies may never fully represent transformative feminist principles, there are ways to decolonize how we understand FFPs and incorporate this history of feminist engagement. As highlighted by Neha Tetali, the contributions of postcolonial thinkers not only critique existing policies but also “allow for the reimagining, restructuring, and reconstructing of policymaking to consider local forms of knowledge and accord importance to bottom-up perspectives.”⁴⁷ Reimagining FFPs requires learning from those whose perspectives have been marginalized and including them in the creation of FFPs. Feminist advocates have also argued that the language and labels of FFPs must be adaptable to different contexts.⁴⁸

The emergence of more FFPs in the Global South, particularly Latin America, creates opportunities

for sharing best practices across regions. Some states in the Global South are reimagining FFP by adapting the concept to their context, their interpretation of feminism, their priorities, and their historical narratives.⁴⁹ Chile, for example, frames its FFP as a natural part of its history of democratic progress.⁵⁰ Mexico, Chile, and Colombia all emphasize intersectionality in their FFPs. The FFP drafted by Argentina’s previous administration included a transfeminist perspective, reflecting the country’s history of leadership on promoting the rights of LGBTIQ+ people.⁵¹ These Latin American FFPs also liberate the concept from its association with foreign aid or assistance, which has been a key component of FFPs in many wealthy countries.⁵² One feminist advocate shared how regional co-learning within Latin America has been valuable, noting that they “want to create policies according to our context and our culture.”⁵³ This sort of learning is facilitated by initiatives like *Política Exterior Feminista en América Latina* (PEFAL), the first platform exclusively in Spanish dedicated to FFP, which facilitates the sharing of context-specific expertise and lessons learned.⁵⁴

Proponents of FFPs have started to take some of these lessons on board. For example, the FFP+ Group endeavors to induct new members in Global North/Global South pairs to strike a balance and promote interregional partnerships. Focusing on lessons learned from feminist engagement in foreign policymaking in diverse regions rather than prescribing a universal approach to FFPs will be key to addressing some of these critiques and going beyond a North/South binary.

43 Jennifer Thomson and Karoline Färber, “The Emergence and Development of FFP,” in Achilleos-Sarll et al., “The Past, Present, and Future(s) of Feminist Foreign Policy,” p. 4.

44 Bina D’Costa et al., “Disrupted: The Feminist Foreign Policy Issue,” Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy, November 2017. See also: Indian Council of World Affairs, “A Gender-Sensitive Indian Foreign Policy: Why and How?” March 2021; Khushi Singh Rathore, “A Feminist Foreign Policy for India: Where to Turn?” E-International Relations, August 6, 2021.

45 Debating Ideas, “Statement of Intent on Feminist Informed Policies Abroad and at Home,” African Arguments, July 21, 2023.

46 Yolande Bouka, “Make Foreign Policies as if Black and Brown Lives Mattered,” in *Feminist Solutions for Ending War*, Megan Mackenzie and Nicole Wegner, eds. (London: Pluto Press, 2021).

47 Tetali, “What Can Feminist Foreign Policy Learn from Postcolonial Feminism?”

48 Retreat on “Feminist Foreign Policy and Multilateralism,” July 2023.

49 Conversation with scholar, April 2023.

50 Retreat on “Feminist Foreign Policy and Multilateralism,” July 2023.

51 Thompson et al., “Defining Feminist Foreign Policy: The 2023 Edition.”

52 Thompson, Ahmed, and Khohar, “Defining Feminist Foreign Policy: A 2021 Update”; Daniela Philipson Garcia and Ana Velasco, “Feminist Foreign Policy: A Bridge Between the Global and Local,” *Yale Journal of International Affairs*, April 29, 2022; retreat on “Feminist Foreign Policy and Multilateralism,” July 2023.

53 Conversation with scholar, June 2023.

54 PEFAL, “*Política Exterior Feminista en América Latina*,” available at <https://pefal.org/>.

What's in a Label? Branding and Substance of FFP

More fundamentally, there is an ongoing debate over the importance of the “feminist” label and its vulnerability to co-optation. This debate reflects the divide between more and less transformative interpretations of feminism. To those with a more transformative interpretation, FFPs may appear to be more of a branding exercise than a substantive commitment. While these qualities are not mutually exclusive, there is a risk that states are merely “jumping on the bandwagon” without necessarily acting in line with feminist principles.⁵⁵

For example, Jennifer Thomson has highlighted that states often adopt an FFP to signify their “adherence to the liberal world order... and their role as ‘good’ international actors.”⁵⁶ This parallels critiques of “pinkwashing,” when states present themselves as beacons of LGBTIQ+ rights to distract from other discriminatory and violent practices.⁵⁷

The debate over labeling is particularly fierce when governments calling themselves feminist commit distinctively un-feminist acts.⁵⁸ This has come up recently in the context of the response of states with FFPs to Israel’s indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks on Gaza and the collective punishment of Palestinian civilians following the Hamas attack of October 7, 2023.⁵⁹ Many states with FFPs, particularly in the Global North, have abstained from voting on cease-fire resolutions in the UN

Security Council or paused funding to UNRWA, potentially crippling the humanitarian response in Gaza.⁶⁰ Many civil society activists have criticized these states’ positioning on the war in Gaza as anti-feminist for prioritizing a militarized national security approach over human security, including at a conference on FFP in November 2023.⁶¹

Nonetheless, even when FFPs are a branding exercise, they can simultaneously represent a substantive commitment and produce positive results. One report evaluating Sweden’s FFP noted that while “FFP was never merely a label,” it rebranded existing gender equality efforts to “put old wine in new bottles.”⁶²

However, others emphasize that this label still matters, arguing that Sweden’s FFP created a shift from seeing feminism and gender equality as “important” to seeing them as “expected.”⁶³ This echoes

research finding that international law and treaties can affect state behavior by setting expectations of how states should behave.⁶⁴

These debates over the FFP label bring up the question of whether promoting gender equality is the same as promoting feminist principles. Some states may feel that the feminist label is unnecessary since they are already promoting gender equality in their foreign policy. However, some advocates argue that the “feminist” label implies a more radical, aspirational vision than terms like “gender-sensitive.”

Using the “feminist” label can also signal political commitment to feminist principles in the face of a

To those with a more transformative interpretation of feminism, FFPs may appear to be more of a branding exercise than a substantive commitment.

55 Conversation with scholar, May 2023.

56 Jennifer Thomson, “Gender Norms, Global Hierarchies and the Evolution of Feminist Foreign Policy,” *European Journal of Politics and Gender* 15, no. 2 (2022).

57 Corinne E. Blackmer, “Pinkwashing,” *Israel Studies* 24, no. 2 (2019).

58 Retreat on “Feminist Foreign Policy and Multilateralism,” July 2023.

59 Amnesty International, “Damning Evidence of War Crimes as Israeli Attacks Wipe Out Entire Families in Gaza,” October 2023.

60 Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), “Gaza: UN Experts Call on International Community to Prevent Genocide against the Palestinian People,” press release, November 16, 2023; Kirithi Jayakumar, “How Have States with Feminist Foreign Policies Reacted to the Palestine Question?” Gender Security Project. See also: “Gaza Crisis: General Assembly Adopts Resolution Calling for ‘Humanitarian Truce,’ Civilian Protection,” *UN News*, October 27, 2023; Marissa Conway, “Aid Cuts Are Not Criticized as Violence Against Women, But They Should Be,” *PassBlue*, February 19, 2024.

61 Hivos, “Are We Just Talking the Talk Instead of Walking It?” December 2023; Thania Paffenholz, “Five Takeaways from the Shaping Feminist Foreign Policy Conference in The Hague by Thania Paffenholz,” Inclusive Peace, 2023.

62 Ann Towns, Elin Bjarnegård, and Katarzyna Jezierska, “More Than a Label, Less Than a Revolution: Sweden’s Feminist Foreign Policy,” Expert Group for Aid Studies, February 2023.

63 International Peace Institute, “Shattering Glass: The United Nations Security Council, Its Elected Ten, and Women, Peace and Security,” March 6, 2024, available at <https://www.ipinst.org/2024/03/shattering-glass-uns-its-elected-ten-and-wps#7>.

64 See, for example: Beth Simmons, “International Law and State Behavior: Commitment and Compliance in International Monetary Affairs,” *American Political Science Review* 94, no. 4 (2014); Beth Simmons, *Mobilizing for Human Rights: International Law in Domestic Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

right-wing backlash against women's rights.⁶⁵ This backlash extends to the UN itself, which has faced an anti-feminist coalition of states and conservative NGOs aiming to push back women's rights and restore the "natural family."⁶⁶ Sweden's revocation of the label "feminist" from its foreign policy after its recent change to a more conservative government speaks to the disruptive power of the term. Some argue that the "f-word" elevates gender mainstreaming to a "more controversial" form that challenges institutionalized power hierarchies.⁶⁷ In this vein, Cynthia Enloe has argued that "dropping 'feminist' really will be just the kind of incentive that a lot of foreign ministries would like to stop paying attention to gender."⁶⁸

At the same time, there can sometimes be strategic value in avoiding the FFP label. For example, one Australian civil society actor highlighted that avoiding the label of "feminist" may have allowed gender-responsive policies to survive through conservative governments by flying under the radar.⁶⁹ It is therefore important to consider the context and use language strategically to advance feminist principles with or without the term "feminist."

To domesticate FFPs, states need to address issues such as gender inequality and gender-based violence not only on the global stage but also at home.

Domesticating FFP

While it may seem counterintuitive to focus on the domestic side of a foreign policy, internal dynamics affect and are affected by foreign relations.⁷⁰ For example, countries with higher levels of gender equality have been found to be less likely to use military force to resolve international disputes.⁷¹ Similarly, how states treat marginalized citizens at

home can inform how they treat marginalized people abroad through foreign policy.⁷² These links underscore the need to ensure that FFPs are localized and domesticated.⁷³

To domesticate FFPs, states need to address issues such as gender inequality and gender-based violence not only on the global stage but also at home. Failing to do so carries reputational risks. As summarized by PAX, "The legitimacy of an FFP—and that of the implementing country—is based upon the degree to what the state in question practices what is preached."⁷⁴ Many FFP documents do reference internal measures or emphasize an alignment with domestic policy.⁷⁵ In most states, however, there is some level of disconnect. In Mexico, for example, high femicide rates, a socially conservative

head of state, and a militarized response to internal security challenges have led some feminist civil society activists to ask, "What does Mexico's FFP do for Mexican women?"⁷⁶

One way states can better link their FFPs to domestic policymaking is to ensure civil society input and connect to grassroots movements. In practice, many FFPs are not developed collaboratively. For example, Sweden developed its FFP with little input from civil society organizations—rather, it came as a "top-down surprise."⁷⁷ A more collaborative approach could include consultations with civil society, a more transparent policymaking process, and provision of educational and financial resources to civil society organizations to help them engage in the process. For example,

65 Conversation with scholar, May 2023.

66 Jelena Čupać and Irem Ebetürk, "The Personal is Global Political: The Antifeminist Backlash in the United Nations," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 22, no. 4 (2020).

67 Karin Aggestam and Annika Bergman-Rosamond, "Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy in the Making: Ethics, Politics, and Gender," *Ethics and International Affairs* 30, no. 3 (2016).

68 Cynthia Enloe and Daniel Conway, "Cynthia Enloe: 'Be Sceptical of Militarization,'" *The World Today*, February 3, 2023.

69 Retreat on "Feminist Foreign Policy and Multilateralism," July 2023.

70 Columba Achilleos-Sarll and Toni Haastrup, "Strange Bedfellows? FFP in the Context of Foreign Policy Analysis," in Achilleos-Sarll et al., "The Past, Present, and Future(s) of Feminist Foreign Policy," p. 10.

71 Mary Caprioli, "Gendered Conflict," *Journal of Peace Research* 37, no. 1 (2000).

72 Bouka, "Make Foreign Policies as if Black and Brown Lives Mattered."

73 Foster and Markham, *Feminist Foreign Policy in Theory and in Practice*, p. 22.

74 PAX, "10 Feminist Approaches to Foreign Policy to Advance Peace and Security."

75 Thompson, Ahmed, and Khohar, "Defining Feminist Foreign Policy: A 2021 Update"; Thompson et al., "Defining Feminist Foreign Policy: The 2023 Edition."

76 García and Velasco, "Feminist Foreign Policy: A Bridge Between the Global and Local."

77 Conversation with scholar, May 2023.

Colombia's process for developing its recently launched FFP included a mechanism for consulting with civil society, including women's organizations and LGBTIQ+ people.⁷⁸ States could also connect internal and external policymaking by grounding their FFPs in regional grassroots movements such as the "Green Wave" advocating for abortion rights across Latin America.⁷⁹

One important consideration for civil society consultations is that knowledge production around FFPs, particularly regarding who is considered an "expert," is rooted in power hierarchies related to race, gender, and class. Consultations between states and civil society risk reproducing these hierarchies by privileging certain voices over others. To avoid this, both states and civil society organizations need to be aware of and challenge these power dynamics.⁸⁰

Accountable and Sustainable Implementation

Two of the greatest challenges facing FFPs are measuring their effectiveness and ensuring their implementation. As almost all FFPs are less than a decade old, states and civil society organizations are still exploring how to assess them, promote accountability for their implementation, and ensure they outlive potentially regressive changes in government.

Governments have taken various approaches to monitoring the implementation of their respective policies. These include multiyear strategies, annual action plans and reporting, and accountability frameworks with indicators and outcomes.⁸¹ Civil society organizations have proposed that all FFPs should include publicly available action plans

developed in consultation with civil society, transparent reporting on progress implementation, transparent budgeting, and sector-specific accountability measures.⁸² As mentioned above, states could also assess the alignment between their domestic and foreign policy.

Civil society also plays an important role in holding governments to account for implementing their FFPs, including through civil society shadow reporting.⁸³ Initiatives such as the FFP Index can also help assess how the adoption of an FFP is impacting foreign policy decision-making. Many government officials are aware of and may consider these metrics. For instance, a representative from Germany acknowledged that Germany's ranking on the FFP Index would likely fall due to its increase in military funding to Ukraine but saw little alternative.⁸⁴ While the impact of civil society monitoring on foreign policy decisions is not yet clear, initiatives like the FFP Index can be a resource for governments looking to pursue a feminist approach to foreign policymaking.

One question raised by member states is how they can better anchor FFPs in their foreign ministries and beyond to help them survive transitions to more conservative governments.⁸⁵ One way to do this could be to better connect FFPs to local actors. As summarized by Daniela Philipson Garcia and Ana Velasco, "To ensure that feminist foreign policy survives electoral cycles, local institutions and civil society must feel ownership over it."⁸⁶ In practice, this requires governments to include civil society in the development of these policies, be transparent about their implementation, and provide NGOs the resources they need to be involved.

78 Colombian Government, "Por Primera Vez en la Historia Colombia Presentó su Política Exterior Feminista ante Naciones Unidas," March 15, 2024.

79 Center for Reproductive Rights, "Latin America's Green Wave," September 2023.

80 Karoline Färber, "Communities of Actors in the Production of FFP Knowledges," in Achilleos-Sarll et al., "The Past, Present, and Future(s) of Feminist Foreign Policy," p. 7.

81 For a brief overview of comparative approaches to implementation and reporting, see: International Women's Development Agency, "Feminist Foreign Policy in Practice: Comparative Analysis of Country Frameworks," March 2020.

82 Alice Ridge et al., "Feminist Foreign Policy: Key Principles & Accountability Mechanisms," International Women's Development Agency, International Center for Research on Women, and Center for Global Affairs (New York University), May 2019.

83 Ibid.

84 International Center for Research on Women, "FFP Index: Government Accountability in a Digital Era," March 9, 2023, available at <https://www.icrw.org/events/ffp-index-government-accountability-in-a-digital-era/>.

85 Retreat on "Feminist Foreign Policy and Multilateralism," July 2023.

86 Garcia and Velasco, "Feminist Foreign Policy: A Bridge Between the Global and Local."

Feminist Foreign Policy and the Crisis of Multilateralism

FFPs have emerged in parallel to a global backsliding on gender and human rights and hostility among some member states toward advancing these principles in the multilateral system. They have also emerged alongside increased attention to the “crisis” of multilateralism due to declining international cooperation and fragmenting international institutions. Yet this “crisis” has also created space to contest and question the purpose and structure of multilateralism and, ultimately, to transform it.⁸⁷ The zero draft of the Pact for the Future, prepared ahead of the Summit of the Future in September 2024, commits not only to “re-earn” trust but to “build a multilateral system that delivers for everyone, everywhere.”⁸⁸

In their most aspirational form, FFPs represent an avenue for multilateral transformation.

Member states are thinking about what having an FFP means for their engagement across the multilateral system. In its political declaration in September 2023, the FFP+ Group committed to collaborate within the UN system and multilateral contexts.⁸⁹ All FFP documents also emphasize the importance of multilateralism. For instance, Chile’s FFP states that “it is possible to strengthen multilateralism and transform the power dynamics behind gender inequalities through concrete actions with feminist approaches at the international and regional levels.”⁹⁰

So far, however, the impact of FFPs in multilateral

forums has not always been felt. For instance, while three out of seven G7 members have FFPs, critics have argued that “the FFP agenda does not often find its way into G7 outcomes.”⁹¹ Other critics have noted that countries with FFPs are often unwilling to “fight the fights” to introduce more progressive language in the G77.⁹² During negotiations on multilateral agreements, commitments related to gender are often among the first to go during the drafting process.⁹³ For example, in the ongoing negotiations on a pandemic agreement, language on gender has been removed as a “trade-off” to secure agreement on other issues.⁹⁴

Nonetheless, in their most aspirational form, FFPs represent an avenue for multilateral transformation through the application of feminist principles to a wide variety of issues. Member states can use FFPs to integrate feminist approaches into the multilateral system rather than

through “a parallel track of conversation.” This, in turn, could lead to more inclusive and equitable outcomes.⁹⁵ Because FFPs cut across many issues, member states can use them to bring feminist approaches into “non-gender” fora on issues such as trade, climate, migration, and disarmament. For example, Canada has developed a feminist trade policy that includes the promotion of gender-related issues in multilateral trade dialogue.⁹⁶ Applying feminist approaches to issues such as climate change also necessitates going beyond analyzing the gendered impacts of crisis, to questioning how feminist values can better inform (and transform) policy overall.⁹⁷ For FFPs to play

87 International Peace Institute (IPI) and Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), “Multilateralism Index: Pilot Report,” September 2022.

88 “The Summit of the Future is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to enhance cooperation on critical challenges and address gaps in global governance, reaffirm existing commitments including to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the United Nations Charter, and move towards a reinvigorated multilateral system that is better positioned to positively impact people’s lives.” See: United Nations, “The Summit of the Future in 2024,” available at <https://www.un.org/en/common-agenda/summit-of-the-future>; United Nations, “Pact for the Future: Zero Draft,” January 26, 2024, available at <https://www.un.org/en/summit-of-the-future/pact-for-the-future-zero-draft>.

89 FFP+ Group, “Political Declaration on Feminist Approaches to Foreign Policy.”

90 Política Exterior Feminista, “Feminist Foreign Policy,” available at <https://politicaexteriorfeminista.minrel.gob.cl/home>; Thomson and Färber, “The Emergence and Development of FFP.”

91 Ambika Vishwanath and Aditi Mukund, “Feminist Foreign Policy Approaches to Strengthen Multilateral Cooperation,” *Journal of International Affairs* 75, no. 1 (2022).

92 Insight from retreat, July 2023.

93 Vishwanath and Mukund, “Feminist Foreign Policy Approaches to Strengthen Multilateral Cooperation.”

94 Sara E. Davies and Clare Wenham, “Gender Inclusion in the Pandemic Agreement: A Growing Gap?” International Peace Institute, March 2024.

95 Vishwanath and Mukund, “Feminist Foreign Policy Approaches to Strengthen Multilateral Cooperation.”

96 Erin Hannah, Adrienne Roberts, and Silke Trommer, “Canada’s ‘Feminist’ Trade Policy?” in *Canada and Great Power Competition: Canada Among Nations 2021*, David Carment, Laura Macdonald, and Jeremy Paltiel, eds. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

97 Carol Cohn, “What Does the ‘Feminist’ in FFP Mean, and How Does that Constrain FFP’s Approach to the Climate Crisis?” in Achilleos-Sarll et al., “The Past, Present, and Future(s) of Feminist Foreign Policy.”

this role, they must be seen not just as a “women’s issue” but as a way to reinvigorate an outdated and inequitable system through meaningful commitment to transformational change and the disruption of entrenched power dynamics.

Since FFPs are relatively new and many are still under development, multilateral fora also offer opportunities for collaboration among member states and sharing of best practices across regions. The FFP+ Group is one forum for doing this at the UN. Member states can also use “minilateral groupings” such as the G20 to incorporate gender as a cross-cutting consideration.⁹⁸ In addition, multilateral fora could present opportunities for member states and civil society to strengthen collaboration on FFPs and ensure marginalized perspectives are represented. In this vein, some feminist civil society activists have indicated that FFPs can be one way to democratize multilateralism.⁹⁹

Conclusion

There are many competing definitions of FFPs and visions for what they should encompass, particularly between states and feminist civil society actors. On issues such as demilitarization, states’ pragmatism often conflicts with the more transformative vision of some feminists.

Additionally, while some feminists initially criticized FFP as a tool for countries in the Global North to export their values abroad, the growing geographic range of FFPs, along with the recognition that feminists across many contexts have long

been advocating for the same priorities under different terms, is allowing for increased global partnership and the valuation of diverse perspectives. Terminology has also been contentious in debates over the use of FFPs as a branding tool and over how language can be used strategically to advance feminist principles. Greater collaboration between states and civil society in developing and implementing FFPs can be a way to overcome some of these divides and ensure that FFPs are contextually relevant and linked to domestic policies. Finally, as FFPs transition from a novel idea to a more established norm, it remains to be seen how they will be assessed, whether they will survive changes in government, and how states will be held accountable for implementing them.

Ultimately, there is no single way to “do” feminism, and approaches to FFP should, and will, be varied. If FFPs are to survive and grow, they will encompass contradictions and compromises, as with all policymaking. While FFPs present a potential avenue for addressing the crisis of the multilateral system, this cannot happen without overcoming the challenges outlined above. It is necessary for FFP-interested states to meaningfully engage with these debates to ensure that they are implementing transformative feminist approaches. As argued by Jennifer Thomson, although FFPs have potential, their “continued spread should not necessarily be celebrated, but carefully judged at every turn to assess what changes are really being implemented.”¹⁰⁰ Amplifying civil society perspectives, prioritizing civil society collaboration, and better connecting domestic and global policymaking are key to realizing the transformative vision of FFPs.

98 Vishwanath and Mukund, “Feminist Foreign Policy Approaches to Strengthen Multilateral Cooperation.”

99 Retreat on “Feminist Foreign Policy and Multilateralism,” July 2023.

100 Thomson, “Gender Norms, Global Hierarchies and the Evolution of Feminist Foreign Policy.”

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