

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) adopted by Sweden in 2014, sixteen countries have either published an FFP or announced their intention to do so. While these FFPs could help revitalize the multilateral system and ground it in feminist principles, debates have emerged over what FFPs 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.

Multilateral institutions are facing both growing hostility toward principles related to gender and human rights and a broader loss of faith in multilateralism. Considering that all FFPs emphasize the importance of multilateralism, some proponents of FFPs have indicated that these policies can be a way to democratize and transform multilateralism. FFPs could help integrate feminist approaches and principles into multilateral institutions, leading to more inclusive and equitable outcomes. This requires seeing FFPs as not just a “women’s issue” but rather as a way to reinvigorate an outdated and inequitable system through transformational change and the interrogation of entrenched power dynamics, including in areas such as trade, climate,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. FFPs share some common principles, including advancing gender equality and human rights, broadening the definition of “security,” amplifying diverse voices, and confronting unequal power structures. Beyond these basic

principles, however, there are competing visions for what FFP should aspire to achieve. Part of the challenge is that there are many interpretations of feminism, some of which reflect a more transformative, systemic approach than others. As a result, states have different ways of interpreting the term “feminist” and mainstreaming the concept in their foreign policy. In general, states tend to have a less transformative interpretation than civil society advocates. 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.

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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, as with all policymaking, 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: (1) debating demilitarization and disarmament, (2) learning from global perspectives and postcolonial critiques, (3) balancing between branding and substance, (4) domesticating FFPs, and (5) holding member states accountable for implementing transformative feminist approaches.

To read the full policy paper visit: <https://bit.ly/43WMDGx>



Debating Demilitarization and Disarmament

One debate has been whether FFPs are compatible with militarization, including high military expenditures and international arms transfers. Feminist civil society organizations have long questioned the assumption that militarized responses improve security, including in their original vision for the women, peace, and security agenda. Instead, they have called for a shift toward conflict prevention and “human security” as a core principle of FFPs. Member states also differ on how they address militarization under their FFPs. International crises such as the 2022 invasion of Ukraine have brought these differences to the fore. For example, Germany’s FFP guidelines emphasize pragmatism, noting that “FFP is not synonymous with pacifism,” while Colombia announced that it is developing an FFP centered on the values of pacifism, participation, and intersectionality. These differences reflect disagreements over whether FFPs should entail incremental reforms or more radical change.

Learning from Global Perspectives and Postcolonial Critiques

Another critique of FFPs is that they are being “exported” to the Global South without emphasizing context-specific approaches and knowledge. This reflects postcolonial criticism of racialized foreign policies in the Global North that tend to view women in the Global South as lacking agency or as “other.” The dominant narratives around FFP have often erased perspectives from the Global South and overlooked these contexts’ long history of feminist engagement with foreign policy without the label of “FFP.” While foreign policies may never fully represent transformative feminist principles, there are ways to decolonize how we understand FFPs and to incorporate this history of feminist engagement. As more FFPs emerge in the Global South, there are also opportunities to learn from innovative approaches and disrupt the idea that FFPs are exclusively for wealthy nations. Toward this end, the FFP+ Group endeavors to induct new members in pairs from the Global North and Global South. As FFPs continue to gain traction in diverse regions, the focus should be on co-creation and lessons learned rather than on prescribing a universal approach.

Balancing between Branding and Substance

There is an ongoing debate around the importance of the “feminist” label and its vulnerability to co-optation. Some states have been accused of adopting an FFP as more of a branding exercise than a substantive commitment and without necessarily acting in line with feminist principles. While branding and substantive commitments can coexist, merely “checking a box” without meaningfully implementing feminist policies could diminish the transformative potential of FFPs. On the other hand, adopting the FFP label could eventually facilitate a normative shift and signal political commitment to feminist principles amid a global right-wing backlash. Even for states that already mainstream gender equality in their policies, labeling these policies as “feminist” can imply a deeper, aspirational commitment to disrupting power structures.

Domesticating Feminist Foreign Policies

While it may seem counterintuitive to focus on the domestic side of a foreign policy, internal dynamics can affect foreign relations, and states may face criticism if they are proponents of gender equality abroad without addressing similar challenges at home. Many FFP documents do include domestic measures or emphasize an alignment with domestic policy. However, states often formulate their FFPs with little input from domestic civil society. Feminist civil society organizations have called on states to recognize a “local-global continuum” and acknowledge their expertise in addressing global challenges such as armed conflict and the climate crisis. By developing their FFPs in a more transparent and consultative way, states can better align domestic and foreign policy measures.

Ensuring Accountability and Sustainability

As all FFPs are less than a decade old, it remains to be seen how they will be assessed and how states will be held to account for their implementation. Accountability mechanisms could include publicly available action plans developed with civil society engagement, as well as transparent reporting on implementation and financing. Engagement with local civil society organizations could also hold states accountable while strengthening implementation and ensuring that FFPs are grounded in their own cultures and contexts, particularly in the Global South. In addition, greater civil society involvement could help the feminist principles espoused in FFPs survive transitions. However, the top-down, state-centric nature of foreign policy makes it challenging to hold states accountable for their FFPs.