

From New York to Mexico City: Reconciling Institutional Challenges and Grassroots Demands for Women’s Rights and Feminist Foreign and Development Policy

During the 2024 Annual Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and the Feminist Peace Summit (FPS) in Denver, Colorado, discussions regarding women’s rights and feminist foreign policy took center stage. These events provided platforms for both institutional leaders and grassroots activists to engage in dialogues concerning the advancement of gender equality, the protection of women’s rights, and the implementation of feminist approaches in foreign policy. The Heinrich Boell Foundation’s Washington, DC Office supported the participation of three young feminists from Algeria, Pakistan, and Zambia to participate in the CSW in New York and supported Phoebe Donnelly and Evyn Papworth from the International Peace Institute in attending the FPS in Denver. We asked Phoebe and Evyn to share their experience of attending both summits, their assessment of the current challenges in the field and how they hope that the CSW and the FPS can influence the upcoming FFP Summit in Mexico City in July 2024.

You attended and participated in several discussions during CSW in New York and at the Feminist Peace Summit (FPS) in Denver. Despite the very different settings, questions around Feminist Foreign (and Development) Policy took center stage in both conferences. What does feminist foreign policy mean to you?

One thing that has come out very clearly from both IPI’s participation in these events and my previous research on feminist foreign policy is that there is no singular definition of what FFP is. This can present challenges and risks diluting the label of “feminist,” but it also opens up space for innovation. For example, it is interesting to see what issue areas different countries prioritize and how the development process is evolving, especially as more feminist foreign policies are coming out of the Global South, particularly Latin America. As I wrote in an issue brief that was published in March, I have also seen a lot of differences between civil society definitions of FFP, which tend to be more expansive and transformative, and state definitions, which can sometimes be more surface-level. To me, feminist foreign policy is an approach that puts equity at the heart of both foreign and domestic policy. Pursuing an FFP entails recognizing that gender (and other identity) dynamics at home shape those abroad and committing to dismantling oppressive systems such as militarism, colonialism, racism, and patriarchy. It entails applying this approach beyond areas typically seen as “women’s issues,” including to areas such as climate, disarmament, and care. However, in practice, I think this definition is more aspirational than how we have actually seen FFP being implemented.

(Assuming that your definition touches on many aspects that go beyond pure foreign policy) How can feminist foreign policy intersect or align itself



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with broader policy goals such as peacebuilding, climate justice, and sustainable development? Can feminist foreign policy contribute to advancing global efforts to address intersecting issues such as climate change, migration, and economic inequality?

Seeing feminist foreign policy as a way to advance feminist principles rather than an end in itself can help align it with broader policy goals. There's a piece by Carol Cohn that highlights how when it comes to gender analysis of issues like climate change, we often look at how women and girls are disproportionately impacted without thinking about what a transformative feminist climate policy would actually look like. I like to think of FFP as a way to ask those questions in different policy areas and question what a feminist approach to migration or economic inequality would be, and then how that can be incorporated into policy.

Looking back at your experience during CSW in New York and other institutional processes: What are some key challenges and obstacles faced in promoting feminist foreign policy within international institutions like the UN CSW? What strategies have you seen to overcome some of these challenges to implementation?

In my work on feminist foreign policy, I outlined five key debates and challenges related to implementation. I'll just focus on a few at the moment. One big challenge is that domestic and foreign policy are not always aligned in countries that have an FFP, and there are very valid critiques that countries promoting gender equality abroad may not be adequately promoting gender equality at home. This disconnect can undermine the reputation of a country's FFP and create tension with local civil society organizations. This critique really came through in Denver. The feminist activists in that space argued that there actually isn't really domestic and foreign policy—just “policy”—and that we should think beyond this false divide.

Another challenge that comes to the fore in civil society gatherings like CSW is the concern that feminist foreign policy is a branding exercise rather than a substantive commitment, particularly when governments may not be acting in line with feminist principles. This can create a lot of distrust towards the state and hesitancy within civil society movements to believe that feminist foreign policy can bring about meaningful change. Accountability for and sustainability of these policies is another major challenge from an institutional perspective. In recent years, anti-gender actors have also infiltrated spaces like CSW, which is a cause for major concern, particularly over how states might lose their feminist policies following transitions to more conservative governments.

In terms of strategies to combat some of these challenges, FFP isn't one-size-fits-all. However, greater collaboration between civil society and member states can help mitigate some of these issues, including by better aligning FFPs with domestic policy and helping create local ownership to improve accountability. For example, when Colombia developed its FFP it created a consultative mechanism to ensure civil society participation, which is a great step to take when designing these policies.

The FPS in Denver, on the other hand, was much more focused on civil society. From a grassroots activist perspective, what are the most pressing issues facing women globally, and how can feminist foreign policy address these concerns effectively?

Some of the most pressing issues currently are militarism and anti-gender backlash. We know from decades of feminist scholarship that armed conflict and militarization, as seen, for example, in increased military spending and arms trading, exacerbate gender inequality. But FFPs have taken very different approaches to pacifism. Countries that want to meaningfully commit to having a feminist foreign policy need to grapple with what this means for their ongoing military spending and to examine how they can prioritize human security approaches.

In terms of anti-gender backlash, we have been seeing growing pushback on women's and LGBTQ rights in both national and institutional settings. We have gotten the sense from speaking with member states that are allies in the effort to advance women's rights that they are struggling to push for more transformative language because they are having to defend previously agreed-upon commitments. Feminist foreign policy can be a way for member states to forge alliances around pushing for feminist principles within different multilateral fora. This requires seeing gender as something that cannot simply be "traded off" during multilateral negotiations to secure advancements on other topics.

In your opinion, what role do grassroots movements play in shaping feminist foreign policy agendas and influencing decision-making processes at the institutional level? (Do you see potential for intersections and collaboration between platforms such as the CSW in March and civil society convenings like the Feminist Peace Summit in May?)

Many FFPs have been very top-down and have come as a surprise to feminist civil society, so there is an opportunity for grassroots movements to play a much larger role in FFP decision making. Grassroots movements and institutional processes are often siloed—civil society might be hesitant to engage, or even be excluded from engaging, with government institutions. Even civil society-focused bodies like CSW can be inaccessible for grassroots organizations due to the cost of attending events in New York City. At IPI, we've tried to play a bridging role in bringing member states and feminist civil society together, as there often aren't enough spaces for them to meet and have more open conversations. Platforms like CSW and the Feminist Peace Summit have been really helpful in allowing us to connect with civil society activists who are imagining more radical and transformative policies and to help translate some of those ideas to member states.

As we are having this conversation, you are also gearing up for the third iteration of the FFP Conference in Mexico City in July this year. Unlike the CSW and the FPS, the FFP Conference is usually a very high-level ministerial meeting focused on exchanging best practices between countries that are either already pursuing or interested in developing a FFP. How can governments and international organizations ensure meaningful participation and representation of women, especially from marginalized communities, in the formulation and implementation of feminist foreign policy initiatives?

We are still seeing a divide between civil society and governments working on FFP. In the case of Mexico City, there is some civil society participation in the conference, while civil society networks are also organizing their own parallel events. It would be useful to have the parallel civil society events attended by high-level policymakers and for there to be meaningful conversation between civil society and policymakers. More generally, if governments want to meaningfully involve women and other marginalized communities in developing feminist foreign policy, they need to consult and support these communities at each step of the way. This can also help mitigate some of the concerns that FFP is a policy norm being exported from the Global North by ensuring policies are grounded in their local context and have input from local feminist civil society organizations.

Apart from the FFP Summit in Mexico City: What are your hopes and expectations for the future of feminist foreign policy, and what steps should be taken to further its integration into international policymaking and diplomatic practices?

With recent events, it has been really disheartening to witness hard security approaches and militarization being prioritized over humanitarian aid and accountability for crimes against civilians. My hope is that countries with an FFP or interested in developing one will seriously examine what advancing feminist principles in the multilateral arena and at home means for them, going beyond merely "adding women" to foreign affairs. I hope to see these principles applied to areas typically considered "non-gender issues" like

disarmament, climate, and more. For FFP to continue in any meaningful way, member states will have to engage in tough conversations. The Feminist Peace Summit in Denver was a hopeful space, and something that really resonated with me from one of the speakers was the idea that, as we work towards a vision of the future that is truly feminist and transformative, we need to avoid recreating the same problematic dynamics. We need to ask, "Who must we become to live in the utopia we are going to create?" The speakers at the Summit also prompted us to ask not only what we are against but also what we are for, and I think going into policymaking spaces with this mindset will be a key takeaway for me.

IPI Senior Fellow and Head of Women, Peace, and Security Phoebe Donnelly and IPI Policy Analyst Eryn Papworth at the Feminist Peace Summit in Denver in May.



IPI Policy Analyst Eryn Papworth and Cynthia Enloe, Research Professor in the Department of Sustainability and Social Justice at Clark University, at the Feminist Peace Summit in Denver in May. Cynthia Enloe was one of the plenary speakers at the Summit and she also included research by IPI WPS in her most recent book, the *Twelve Feminist Lessons of War*.