

Beyond Women Peace and Security: Developing a Feminist Vision of Foreign Policy

Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP), as a concept or framework, has been receiving increased focus across the globe, as well as in the UK. A handful of states are beginning to make commitments to centring feminist principles in their approaches to foreign policy. Many across civil society advocate for this approach, and use FFP as an opportunity to engage with the state on a diversity of topics from a new standpoint. However, what is Feminist about Foreign Policy in practice?

There is no singular definition of FFP although there have been attempts to define it in its ideal by advocacy groups like the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) and Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy. Moreover, different states approach it from a range of perspectives underscoring its resistance to definition. Therefore, it is best to think of it as a framework or set of guidelines for action. Within most civil society advocacy groups, there is nevertheless agreement that FFP should extend beyond women and girls' rights even when gender equality is a core element.

To take the 'feminism' in this new approach to foreign policy seriously also means to be serious about dismantling entrenched structures and systems of power. A meaningful feminist take on foreign policy must confront the racist logic of global politics and the persistence of colonialism, militarism, patriarchy and should prioritise sustainable and inclusive peace. In line with the ICRW definition of FFP, this approach would also mean the allocation of **"significant resources including research, to achieve that vision"** at home and abroad. This approach provides a starting point for a foreign policy to tackle inequality.

However, is it ever truly possible for the state, as the arbiter of power, to be a feminist institution? This question is especially relevant for the UK, given its ongoing history of colonialism, extraction of global resources, and geo-political position of power.

FFP and Women, Peace and Security are both frameworks used to engage with the topics of gender equality, peace and security. The potential connection and synergies between them, as well as tensions, are also dependent on conceptualisations of WPS. At its core, WPS is a feminist approach that aims to challenge the structures of power in peace and security architecture, take a gendered approach to conflict prevention, and be led by those in affected communities. If a feminist approach to foreign policy is to be taken, it provides an opportunity for WPS to re-centre structural transformation as a core tenant. Both frameworks, if truly approached from a feminist perspective, will collaboratively contribute to achieving an inclusive and sustainable peace for all at both the personal and political levels.

The promise of a feminist-informed foreign policy approach in the UK requires an understanding of the global and local context for action. Globally there is a growing backlash on feminist gains on women and girls' rights and the concept of gender itself. This rollback on women and girls rights can be seen in the attack on sexual and reproductive health and rights in the [United States](#), the near erasure of women and girls rights in [Iran](#) and [Afghanistan](#) including the denial of education, employment and public spaces, as well as other freedoms, and an [increased backlash](#) on women's rights and feminism in international fora, particularly in UN spaces. There has also been a global growth in 'anti-gender' movements, which have consistently identified and attacked feminism including gender equality, wider LGBTI+ but specifically transgender rights and anti-racism as a means of [garnering support for right-wing agendas](#). Yet at the same time, there has been an embrace of feminism via FFP across a number of countries. [By July 2022](#) Sweden, Canada, France, Mexico, Spain, Luxembourg, Germany, and Chile had all committed to FFP, with Scotland [committing](#) to a feminist approach to foreign policy. In [Benin](#), feminist activism led to new protections around reproductive rights, while [Sierra Leone](#) recently passed the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act. Despite [Sweden](#) retreating from the feminist foreign policy label following a right-wing change in leadership in 2022, it claims to continue its commitment to gender equality.

While there is a push and pull around gender equality globally, aspirations for FFP seek to challenge structures and systems of power that maintain the status quo. In that sense, FFP must be disruptive, challenging the mechanisms, approaches and conceptualisation of what foreign policy is and place justice and reparations at its heart.

Given this demand, the UK is not in a position to situate its foreign policy approach within a feminist framework. It is true that the current Conservative government has committed to women and girls' rights, as seen through the recently released Women Peace and Security (WPS) [National Action Plan](#) (NAP), which recognises and responds to the experiences of women and girls in conflict contexts. Further, the [Women and Girls Strategy](#) recognises there is a need to drive commitments to gender equality and reverse the rollback on women and girls' rights. However, this approach does not extend to a feminist approach as it lacks a holistic and structural perspective that addresses the systems and norms that (re)produce inequality and insecurity. This can be explicitly seen in the lack of policy coherence across multiple issues.

For instance, if peace is taken seriously, the Arms Trade must be paid attention to. Despite decades of evidence that demonstrates a clear link between the arms trade and gender-based violence, the UK remains an unabashed major global exporter of arms including to sites of violent conflicts. The UK's National Action Plan on WPS still does not contain a dedicated budget, whilst at the same time, the UK's arms spend continues to increase, for example £2.3bn was committed in military assistance to Ukraine so far and the UK has [pledged to match that assistance](#) in 2023.

Feminist concerns for justice are also not reflected in the UK's approach to migration. This is reflected in the UK's domestic policy, including the so-called compliant environment - previously known as the hostile environment, which has entrenched a two-tier asylum system recently encapsulated in the Rwanda Asylum plan. This approach normalises the detention of survivors of gender-based violence. It further and restricts family reunification for refugee women and girls, which is in direct opposition to the foreign policy aspirations and stated commitments on promoting and upholding women and girls' rights globally.

The tenets of FFP are certainly missing at home as evidenced by [a recent report](#) into the main law enforcement agency, the Metropolitan Police Force (Met), which found the UK's capital's police force to be institutionally racist, misogynistic and homophobic. Meanwhile, the Conservative government

recently **blocked Scotland's Gender Recognition Act**, which intended to improve the legal process for the recognition of a Trans person's identity.

While a previous iteration of the Labour opposition led by Jeremy Corbyn made an explicit commitment to a **"feminist approach to development,"** the current opposition leader Keir Starmer has been less forthcoming with his vision for foreign policy. It is nevertheless worth noting that David Lammy, Labour's Shadow Foreign Secretary, briefly mentioning feminist approaches to development policy in **a speech in early 2023**, which suggests at least an awareness of the framework.

A feminist informed approach to foreign policy often described, as FFP requires states, including the UK, to reimagine their role and commitments at home and abroad by challenging oppressive systems and structures. This then means moving beyond a focus on women and girls' rights, to taking an intersectional gender perspective across all its work. As it currently exists, there are limits to the current iterations of FFP. It is open to co-optation, which can jeopardise its transformative potential and the hard-won gains of Women's Rights Organisations and Civil Society. At the same time, pushing towards FFP can provide a framework for holding Government to account in the aspiration towards sustainable and inclusive peace, and security at the personal, and societal level.

In any event, and specifically the UK context, FFP demands of foreign policy stakeholders that these five standards are met:

- **Challenge the imperialist, capitalist and militaristic status quo:** reflect on and address the relations of power produced by the UK's colonial history that directly informs global geopolitical relations and has contributed to gendered insecurity and conflict across the world. Centre decolonisation and reframe approaches to 'development' and 'aid' as reparations.
- **Make foreign policy decisions based on feminist principles** that place people over profit and peaceful solutions over military accumulation and intervention. Challenge and move away from traditional militarised notions of security at the state level and approach understandings of security from the personal level, accounting for diverse and intersecting factors that contribute to insecurity and address root causes.
- **Disrupt gendered relations of power:** Centre an intersectional gendered approach to understanding and responding to the patriarchal structures and systems of power that contribute to insecurity, explore, and address how this is embedded in traditional approaches to foreign policy.
- **Ensure policy coherence across foreign policy and domestic contexts:** Ensure that the UK's domestic policy is fully in line with the principles of feminist foreign policy addressing the structures and systems of power that (re)produce inequality and violence within and at its own borders, with an awareness of how these are shaped by the UK's role globally.
- **Interrogate and re-distribute (state) power through meaningful partnerships:** Commit to the redistribution of power through holding space, re-distributing funds and working through meaningful partnerships that relocates decision-making power to those who are directly affected.

This think piece is the first part of a series exploring the linkages between Feminist Foreign Policy and Women, Peace and Security and how to understand and realise the vision outlined in this initial piece in thematic contexts. We would like to thank Dr Toni Hastrup of the University of Stirling for engagement with this project and comments on a draft of this briefing.