

MEANINGFUL PARTNERSHIPS

Introduction

Conflict and crises disproportionately impact women and girls – particularly their access to power and decision-making. Policymakers and donors should embed meaningful partnerships as the foundation for future feminist approaches to foreign or development policy interventions. This approach would forefront the self-identified needs and priorities of local communities in fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS) and ensure resources are suited to the context-specific dynamics of communities advancing the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. Without embedding this approach, any declared feminist foreign policy (FFP) will have limited opportunities to ensure a radical departure from the status quo. It would also risk extractive practices of the knowledge and expertise of women’s rights organisations (WROs) in FCAS, to advance donor priorities and disregard holistic movement-building opportunities rather than valuing WROs as key experts of their own contexts who can advance gender-transformative change.

Meaningful partnerships are not homogeneous. They will emerge differently across contexts in future foreign and development policy interventions. Whether through relationships developed directly or fostered through intermediaries such as feminist funds or INGOs, there are feminist principles meaningful partnerships should have in common: flexibility, intersectionality, accessibility, transparency, accountability, an inclusive use of power, and fundamentally a focus on ensuring local WROs are co-creators of interventions – that they define their own agendas where their expertise and gender-transformative progress is prioritised. Meaningful partnerships guided by these principles offer an alternative to the dominant approach to international development in which Global North actors assume leadership positions and set standards that [often place Global South communities as ‘beneficiaries’](#). Led by local organisations meaningful partnerships shift away from this hierarchal, colonial approach to ensure that there is active and constant dialogue with those most affected by foreign and development policy.

Are meaningful partnerships with WROs trapped in policy rhetoric?

In the global women’s rights policy space there is a growing commitment to partnerships within FFP and feminist development policy. We can see this in [Canada](#) and also in [Sweden](#), where there are commitments to coalition-building and to scaling up partnership forums. This is also the case in [Germany](#): the German feminist development policy strategy includes a section on ‘rethinking power’ where partnerships with WROs are acknowledged as a route to not only dismantle power structures but also gender roles.¹ Within this policy climate, the UK government has published a handful of strategies that have implications for how it will meet its commitments to partnering with WROs and civil society organisations (CSOs), but what is missing across this policy development is the integration and acknowledgement of feminist principles.

Through its National Action Plan on WPS, the UK government made a commitment for collaborating with WROs to ‘support and champion women’s rights organisations, women peacebuilders and human rights defenders at all levels, from the community level through to international processes’. It made similar commitments across the [International Development Strategy](#).²

1. ‘For a feminist development policy, cooperation with civil society organisations, particularly women’s rights, LGBTQI+ and other human rights organisations, is key. They are drivers of change. They mobilise social engagement and work to dismantle power structures and gender roles. Local civil society organisations have a clear understanding and essential knowledge of the challenges and opportunities existing at the grassroots level.’ Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) (2023), ‘Feminist Development Policy For Just and Strong Societies Worldwide’.
2. Those who benefit from our work must have a voice in what we do, and how we do it. The difficult reforms and good policies that drive progress must be locally owned.’ Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (updated 2023), ‘Policy paper. The UK government’s strategy for international development’.

and the [International Women and Girls Strategy](#).¹ These prioritisations of strategic partnerships are a clear recognition of civil society's role in achieving locally driven sustainable change. However, these strategies imply that inviting diverse, locally led groups into pre-existing decision-making structures naturally leads to meaningful partnerships. In this context, the dynamics of partnerships are pre-determined, driven by donor priorities and reinforcing gendered, colonial, and hierarchical structures between the Global North and Global South. This is why it is vital that any future foreign and development policy is built on the foundation of feminist principles to acknowledge that [power is infused in all aspects of partnerships](#), from communication to decision-making to transition. This radical trajectory requires an intersectional, needs-based approach.

Opportunities for turning rhetoric into reality

Feminist principles can be used to enable the UK government and donors to fulfil their commitments to meaningful partnership and to ensure that their policies are aligned with WROs, to ensure WROs are adequately resourced, meaningfully consulted with, and situated as equal partners. An FFP framework offers an opportunity to bridge the current UK government implementation gap, and to use existing commitments to meaningful partnerships to bring about practical policy coherence.

Whilst momentum for an FFP-influenced partnership framework has gained recent traction in the UK, civil society has long been advocating for the integration of feminist principles and approaches within UK policy. In 2019, funded by the UK's Conflict, Stability and Security Fund, a consortium of [Gender Action for Peace and Security](#) (GAPS) members collaborated on a piece of research to explore ways to fund, support, and strengthen WROs working on peace and security issues. This research, titled '[The Key to Change](#)', used participatory research methodologies (guided by the [Beyond Consultations](#) tool) to outline specific recommendations for how the UK government and other donors can better partner with WROs, by investing in understanding the challenges and opportunities they face as they work on peace and security issues.

Following on from this, three of the Key to Change research consortium partners (Women's International League for Peace & Freedom, Saferworld, and Women for Women International) have been working to implement the research recommendations through the [Resourcing Change](#) project. This project is an example of how building and maintaining localised, meaningful partnerships with WROs works, not only for advancing the WPS agenda but also for strengthening feminist movements and fostering learning opportunities. WROs have the space to connect, organise, and build communities in a collective and intersectional way, creating changes that support the representation of diverse rights. Lessons learnt from Resourcing Change encourage the Global North-based sector to reflect on how embedding feminist principles and approaches into the delivery of our work contributes to transforming the systems within which we operate. This partnership model has also strengthened relationships and trust between the Resourcing Change consortium and WROs, as well as between participating WROs themselves.

Despite the successes that feminist funds, direct funding, and projects like Resourcing Change have achieved, challenges remain. For example, the only way that funding via intermediaries can work is when these mechanisms are guided by feminist principles and where direct, long-term funding reaches grassroots WROs. Where an intermediary is involved, administrative burdens and the bureaucracy of grant making must be consumed by global partners to ensure that WROs have the space to deliver projects where their communities' self-identified needs are prioritised.

Challenges in scaling up these approaches also exist. This is partly due to poor consultation practice that deprioritises WROs and cements the barriers that feminist movements face in achieving power redistribution to scale up their advocacy and programme implementation. It is also due to a declining funding landscape where WROs operating in FCAS are marginalised from accessing the resources they need to sustain their work on peace and security. Whilst the UK government has recognised the importance of global feminist funds by committing [£38 million to the Equality Fund](#), there is still a significant implementation gap exacerbated by a lack of long-term funding. Future meaningful partnerships within FFP interventions must prioritise resourcing before existing UK policy commitments can make it past the start line.

1. 'We will embolden and amplify the work of diverse grassroots women's organisations and movements, championing their role as critical agents for change and backing platforms to ensure they are listened to on the local, national and global stage.' Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (2023), 'International Women and Girls Strategy 2023–2030'.

Whilst funding is an enabler of meaningful partnerships, it is by no means the only signifier of success. Effective future FFP engagement must ensure that WROs and CSOs are recognised as co-creators of policy frameworks. This approach to equitable partnerships acknowledges the long-standing role that WROs have played in cross-movement work and reflects the context-specific expertise that local WROs hold. If meaningful partnerships are embedded into the fabric of future FFP, then WROs must be consulted at every stage of the design, implementation, and outcomes of interventions. Meaningful partnerships between local WROs, donors, and decision-making bodies have the potential to offer structural transformation, where power is redistributed across feminist movements driving the WPS agenda and where feminist principles are prioritised to address the root causes of conflict – to ensure no one is left behind.

Key recommendations

Future commitments to meaningful partnerships across foreign and development policy must start with a prioritisation of feminist principles and approaches. This will ensure that WROs and CSOs are recognised as co-creators, and that they define their own agendas where their expertise and gender-transformative progress is prioritised.

- Ensuring that any future FFP is underpinned by meaningful consultation and feminist principles and by approaches of intersectionality, accountability, transparency, and an inclusive use of power. This will guarantee that future partnerships redistribute power to prioritise WROs' context-specific expertise.
- Investing in approaches that build on previous learnings and existing mechanisms that have fostered meaningful partnerships (including Global South-based and led feminist funds), and ensuring that the process of strengthening these mechanisms happens in consultation with WROs and CSOs and recognises their important roles as co-creators of future FFP.
- In the context of a reduced budget for women and girls, allocating appropriate funding and resources to ensure the delivery of commitments to build meaningful partnerships with locally led WROs across both strategy and policy, and utilising the opportunities that meaningful partnerships with WROs offer to enable policy coherence.
- Ensuring that future FFP provides WROs with core, flexible, and accessible funding that allows them to make allocations for their self-defined priorities, including core organisational costs and essential programmatic work to advance gender equality and WPS priorities strategically, in recognition of their greater knowledge and experience. This funding should equally prioritise learning and feminist movement-strengthening opportunities to ensure sustainable, gender-transformative change.