

FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY IS ABOUT JUSTICE AND PARTICIPATION

We are talking about feminist foreign policy at a time when anti-gender and anti-feminist movements are gaining strength, visibility and allies. Have we missed the boat?

On the contrary.

Forty years ago, author Audre Lorde wrote: “I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own.”¹ The word and notion of feminism come with heavy baggage, yet they simply envision a different, fairer world – in which women and men of many diverse identities can be true to themselves and can therefore create healthier societies and a survivable planet in light of the climate crisis as well as crises of poverty, displacement, or public health.

Gender in its current form can be seen as a social and cultural system of oppression (side by side with other systems, such as class). A case in point: There are slightly more women than men in the world, yet most positions of power and prestige are held by men. In our core field of peacebuilding and conflict transformation, only 6% of high level mediators are female.²

BENEFITING SOCIETY AS A WHOLE

Feminism does not imply that women are better people – it points to a particular type of power asymmetry and imbalance. Feminist foreign (as well as security, development, etc.) policy therefore needs to subscribe to the key principle of shifting this and other injustices and imbalances. Feminist foreign policy must be sensitive to the historical trajectories of injustices, exclusion and deeply entrenched root causes of power imbalances.

From a conflict transformation perspective, we add the principle of doing this non-violently and for the benefit of society as a whole. Feminist policies must be guided by the transformative potential of a human rights based approach to promote deep societal change and achieve economic and social justice.

SYSTEM ANALYSIS AND LISTENING SKILLS

Such principles call for “unsettling” action. Unsettling action is uncomfortable, and will meet with resistance. Any feminist policies will demand deep changes, and a joint, hard conversation about justice.

Against this backdrop and in the context of my work for conflict transformation at the Berghof Foundation, any action therefore needs to begin with a joint analysis of power, power asymmetries and imbalances, structural causes of conflict and legacies of historical violence. This results in a systemic reflection of both intended and unintended, immediate and delayed consequences of equalizing shifts in these power relations – between men and women, elite and working class, urban and rural citizens, broadly between those customarily excluded from decision making and those at its centre. This includes, but is not limited to, reflecting how LGBTQI people are included in the Women, Peace and Security agenda; or what role female ex-combatants can play in reintegration and reconstruction, according to their own visions.

¹ SOURCE: Audre Lorde, *Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism*, Essay 1981.

² <https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/>

ACT TOGETHER AND ALLOW FOR ERROR

Our work in conflict transformation starts with listening and continues with acting together – this is what we aim for when doing participatory research and why ownership of local project partners is an essential part of our work. This also entails constant, critical reflection of our approaches and instruments: to be flexible and creative in developing ways of meeting the needs of our partners, for example, when female mediators in the MENA region tell us that what they would need much more than capacity-building, are protection and security to develop their own processes and methods.” Feminist foreign policy, with its greater space for new power actors, must not make the mistake of measuring them with unreasonable yardsticks – our colleagues say: “give us the space and allow us to do things differently, also allow us to make mistakes”.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For feminist foreign policies to succeed, I offer five core recommendations:

1. Education is central: “Culture does not make people, people make culture” (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie³). Culture preconditions systems of inclusion and exclusion, of expertise, of power. For more equal gender and human relations, peace education on human rights, historical legacies of violence, justice and power sharing must be strengthened from an early age and throughout.
2. All instruments and actions must create space for participation, inclusivity and shared ownership and responsibility. For example, the empowerment of women must be accompanied by attention to their diversity e.g. in terms of race, class, gender, ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation, and a focus on strengthening peaceful masculinities at the same time.
3. The internationally practiced concept of Feminist Foreign Policy is not undisputed. One point of critique is the fact that FFP is often seen to mainly serve for window dressing (for example by not addressing militarism adequately). Additionally, the concept itself still too often suggests that the problem with patriarchal structures is “out there”/ in the Global South, while glossing over domestic issues. Feminist (foreign) policy must be applied at home as much as abroad in order to have integrity.
4. Feminist foreign policy can build on achievements and experience, and must build bridges between diverse actors domestically. It should refer to and improve existing policies, such as the German Guidelines, the interministerial strategies and particularly the 3. NAP 1325. Establishing synergies between policies and programming of different agencies and Ministries (for example the feminist foreign policy under development by the Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development) will be a litmus test for applying a feminist policy framework.
5. Feminist foreign policy requires great ambition *and* humility. For its success, it needs to be planned in a step-by-step and tailored approach (“incrementalism”); needs to be understood in interaction with different, overlapping systems of privilege and exclusion (“intersectionality”); and be implemented with honesty, allowing for mistakes and learning.

³ SOURCE: [Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: We should all be feminists | TED Talk](#), accessed 29 July 2022.