

Initial reflections on German feminist foreign policy

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Since Sweden's adoption of a feminist foreign policy (FFP) in 2014, several other countries in Europe and beyond have followed suit. While each of these countries has developed a distinct variation of an FFP, gender equality has emerged as a core element of commonality, increasingly with a broader focus on a spectrum of gender identities rather than a binary categorization of men and women. The term feminism has been broadly interpreted as being interchangeable with a gender perspective, or gender lens. Feminism is far more complex, however, with different conceptions and focus areas, drawing attention to other sources of inequality, for instance based on gender/race or gender/class intersections. Moreover, many diplomats and policy-makers have reduced both 'feminism' and 'gender perspectives' or 'gender lens' in policies, to requiring an improvement of representation and participation of women. Yet, equal representation of women is only one dimension of 'feminism'.

The following definition of feminism both highlights the intersectional aspect of other dimensions of inequality, and underscores the dual character of analysis and transformation, i.e. desired change of the status quo:

"Although any general definition of feminism would no doubt be controversial, it seems undeniable that much work in feminist theory is devoted to the tasks of critiquing women's subordination, analyzing the intersections between sexism and other forms of subordination such as racism, heterosexism, and class oppression, and envisioning the possibilities for both individual and collective resistance to such subordination".²

In fact, in line with the focus on respect for diversity that underpins a policy based on gender equality, it might be more appropriate to use the plural term and refer to 'feminisms'.³ Different approaches include intersectionality (which has been incorporated into Spanish FFP) and also other types such as post-colonial feminisms. In this, thought should also be given to how best to communicate the underlying ideas to a broader public, for instance by drawing on language such as DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion).

This thought piece seeks to unpack some of the key terms in the German discourse on an FFP and explore options for operationalizing it internally and externally, with a focus on arms control and disarmament.

¹ This reflection paper is based on past and current engagement with various stakeholders including government officials and researchers. The author's approach to FFP is therefore constantly evolving with continued engagement and research.

² Amy Allen, [Feminist Perspectives on Power](#). In: Edward N. Zalta (Ed.), [The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#).

³ Tarja Väyrynen, Swati Parashar, Élise Féron, Catia Cecilia Confortini (Eds), [Routledge Handbook of Feminist Peace Research](#), 2021.

The German Foreign Ministry's website on the FFP adopts the Swedish concept of the 3 R's (rights, representation and resources), and adds diversity as a fourth pillar. Each of those terms can be implemented in many ways, depending inter alia on the policy area.

The allocation of *resources* begs the question of 'what types of resources' and 'for whom'? Taking the underlying concept of gender equality as a starting point, it could be translated into equal access to resources by all gender identities. It could also mean properly resourcing the implementation of FFP; as well as taking a gender perspective when allocating resources across the full spectrum of arms control and disarmament issues, and more broadly, in terms of security. In doing so, it would be useful to develop specific objectives based on German priorities, i.e. identify which areas require policy intervention for gender perspectives in arms control and disarmament, and how FFP can be used as a tool to address these. For instance, Mexico's FFP outlined the elimination of gender-based violence (GBV) as a key focus area, which could then be translated into providing means of addressing GBV through bilateral, regional and multilateral arms control and disarmament policies.

An example of low-hanging fruit with real impact would be the creation of a diversity travel fund, enabling the participation of those with less access to travel budgets, such as next generation and 'Global South'. The traditional approach of only sponsoring speakers tends to reinforce current power structures, and thus contradicts FFP goals. Such a fund would also support the operationalisation of equal *representation*.

UN General Assembly resolution 65/69 (2010) on Women, Disarmament, Non-Proliferation and Arms Control and subsequent resolutions, seek to achieve women's equal, full and effective participation in all disarmament and security decision-making. UNIDIR has done pioneering research by providing data on the underrepresentation of women in the field of non-proliferation, arms control and disarmament. While representation has since improved in some issue areas and at some levels, there is still plenty of scope for fully implementing this ambition, as reflected in the Presidents of Conferences of States Parties to treaties in the field of arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament. A concrete indicator of change would be gender parity across all weapons and technology areas. The percentage of women also varies considerably across issue areas and is particularly low when for instance missiles are discussed. In addition to collecting more data, a meaningful FFP would also analyse them by exploring the question of 'why' rather than getting stuck with identifying the problem, and subsequently pursue ways to tackle the underlying issues. This indicates the need for a possible fourth 'R' that has been suggested, *research*, since the specific area of FFP, and the broader area of a gender lens on arms control and disarmament issues, is very much under-researched.⁴

Rights is perhaps the most developed pillar since the focus on equal rights and opportunities has been a focus of gender perspectives for some time. This is also reflected in the German MFA's institutional home of the FFP being the human rights department, and the Human Rights Commissioner playing a key role in the 12 September 2022 FFP event.

⁴ Two further R's have also even been proposed, Reporting, and Reach. [Lyric Thompson, Spogmay Ahmed and Tanya Khokhar Defining Feminist Foreign Policy: A 2021 Update.](#)

Other ways to operationalize FFP in an accessible way could be framed around other letters, for example 3 S's: sustainability, spaces and security. Most if not all current conceptions of an FFP emphasise, or are compatible with, *sustainability* and long-term thinking. Creating *spaces* for all gender identities aligns nicely with the goal of representation, but also makes it easier to visualize. In terms of *security*, the feminist approach lends itself to the holistic human security concept, balancing long-term and short-term goals, and integrating the three D's of the German coalition treaty into a coherent package: defence, development and diplomacy as a triangle of achieving security in a single security space. This also implies redefining strength, beyond military strength, to encompass aspects of resilience, for example, as well as strength through partnerships and alliances. In this context, one could consider a revival of Olaf Palme's concept of a common security.

An interesting question to explore in this regard is what constitutes feminist military spending? I see it as focusing not just on input (as reflected in what can be almost categorised as an obsession with percentages) but on output (what capabilities do we get?) as much as process: Who gets to decide how security is achieved? Who participates in or makes arms procurement decisions? These questions could be tied to an inclusive process of developing a national security strategy, considering gender balance of the participants involved and using gender perspectives to answer these questions. Inclusiveness could also be achieved through what has been called strategic empathy – making an effort to put oneself in someone else's shoes. Feminist military spending could also support transforming the military into a more inclusive institution, where everyone has equal access to training and career development opportunities and policies against harassment are enforced.

Complementing the 3 S's are C's: complexities, connections and creativity. An FFP would move beyond dichotomies and towards full appreciation of *complexities* that tend to be better captured in terms of a spectrum – not just for gender identities, but for example the more comprehensive human security approach, rather than opposing soft and hard security. The concept of security could even be further expanded to also include the environment. And rather than starting from scratch, it is important to *connect* to different multilateral documents and processes, from the Women Peace Security (WPS) agenda to the Sustainable Development Goals. The WPS and arms control/disarmament communities have not connected well to date, but much could be gained from bringing them together in terms of policy momentum, knowledge creation and synergies. And diversity and inclusivity in terms of gender, age, geography, academic discipline and institution would necessarily result in more *creativity* in terms of solutions, making new pathways of change visible.

FFP opens itself to criticism by those who self-identify as feminists but disagree with certain policies or practices pursued by a government that has adopted an FFP. An old discussion which resurfaces and plays out in current German debates is centred on the question of whether women are more peaceful than men. This is reflected in assumptions – sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit – that increasing the percentage of women in decision-making fora will necessarily lead to more peace, or less militaristic approaches. Within this school of thought, one can distinguish between those who claim that women are more peaceful than men for biological reasons (essentialist perspectives), and those who believe this is the case

because women have been socialized into more peaceful behaviour. A third category rejects the assumption that women are more peaceful than men.

Since FFP is inherently value based, the question of consistency is core to its credibility. This includes internal and external consistency. Similar to the tenet that the personal is the political and vice versa, it places demands on oneself and the institution, in this case the ministry's procedures, policies and priorities. In other words, seeking external change without reflecting on the needed internal change undermines credibility.

An event organized by SIPRI on behalf of the EU Non-proliferation and Disarmament Consortium on 'Strengthening the Gender Focus in Disarmament and Non-proliferation' was designed to be both inward and outward looking. It sought to produce data and analyse trends in policy, but also examined how self-analysis could be enhanced by collecting data on ourselves in terms of gender equality and diversity of speakers, moderators, participants, and those who ask and respond to questions; as well as by designing standards and developing good practices we should ourselves adhere to.⁵ This requirement of constant internal reflection, self-analysis, and acknowledging that being ambitious is worthwhile even if, or in fact because, it is difficult, might be one way to address the dilemma of internal and external consistency under FFP.

One approach that has been adopted by the Swedish MFA to increase ownership within the ministry has been to invite departments and embassies to submit their contributions to FFP, and to make contributions to FFP a criterion for career advancement. Formal internal policies such as avoidance of hosting or accepting invitations to single-sex panel events, are also helpful. The use of such pledges in the field of academia and think tanks has led to a number of initiatives gaining momentum and popularity, such as Gender Champions in Nuclear Policy.⁶

So, what can FFP accomplish in the field of arms control and disarmament? First, on a very practical level, it provides a diplomatic platform and a common framework for governments to connect across states and continents in the promotion of gender equality, diversity and inclusion. It highlights the issue and puts it on the international agenda. Second, it can mobilise human and financial resources for a gender perspective, which has been under-resourced so far.⁷ Third, the gender lens means we see things we did not see before, by making women and other gender identities visible. Sweden sought to apply this during their UN Security Council membership by giving a voice to diverse perspectives, mindful of the question of who is invited to tell the story?

To conclude, Germany has the opportunity to utilize FFP in arms control and disarmament to achieve major advances in gender equality and broader gender issues.

⁵ Laura Dunkley, Marissa Conway and Marion Messmer, *Gender, think-tanks and international affairs: a toolkit* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy and British American Security Information Council, 2021).

⁶ Nuclear Threat Initiative, *Gender champions in nuclear policy, tested by crisis: impact report 2020, 2021*.

⁷ Laura Rose Brown and Laura Considine, Examining 'gender-sensitive' approaches to nuclear weapons policy: a study of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, July 2022, Special issue of *International Affairs* 'Feminist interrogations of global nuclear politics'.