

Leading debates for a feminist foreign policy

Renata A. Giannini¹

Summary

This document intends to provide thoughtful insights to the German Feminist Foreign Policy, taking under considerations key principles that the researcher consider fundamental for an inclusive and effective feminist foreign policy. For this purpose, this document is organized in three main sessions. The first provides an overview of the contributions of feminist approaches to foreign policy and how it has evolved in recent years. The second will specify the guiding principles of a feminist foreign policy and which are its expected results. The third session discusses central themes that must be taken into account by a feminist foreign policy. A final session brings to light the case of Latin America.

Background

Traditionally, foreign policy has been focused on international relations, that is, how states interact with other states, international organizations and others in the international realm. While several theories regarding state behavior internationally have been formulated to date, limited scholarship has been focused on the interlinkages between foreign policy and individual wellbeing. In fact, most models focus on states as a self interested rational actor, making choices according to national security. Interestingly, national security is often focused on the state as an entity and less on its nationals.²

The rise of liberalism and international organizations concerned about international peace and security in the early 20th century, enabled actors other than the state, to be part of international politics. At the same time, the rise of intrastate wars and its impact on civilian populations along with the increasing importance of human rights contributed to bringing individuals safety and security as a central tenet of international peace and security, as illustrated by the rise of the human security concept.

¹ Renata Giannini is a senior researcher at the [Igarapé Institute](#) and oversees the implementation of women, peace and security projects. She holds a PhD in International Studies, specializing in gender studies.

² Keohane, R. O. (1998). Beyond dichotomy: Conversations between international relations and feminist theory. *International Studies Quarterly*, 42(1):193-197

Along these lines, feminist theorists³ portrayed states as self interested black boxes. Their contributions were fundamental to bring individuals to the forefront of international conversations, particularly women, and reinterpret several international practices with gender lenses. Their contributions⁴ highlight women's participation in international efforts and the reframing of international relations as a gender construct, whereby certain individuals, particularly women, are marginalized and subjected to specific vulnerabilities that are often taken for granted.

The concept of peace is questioned while the idea that there is a continuum of violence that exists prior, during and after conflicts is advanced. Gender inequality is a central framework to understand this continuum and how violence affects women throughout. Most peace agreements, however, fail to address the continuity of violence and do not include specific actions to address it.⁵ The participation of women in conflict resolution efforts, thus, is paramount, as they tend to address issues that are related to the root causes of conflicts and inequality that go well beyond the more immediate needs of ceasefire.⁶

The rise of a feminist approach to foreign policy is hence most welcomed and can effectively promote sustainable peace as it attempts to promote a transformative agenda of inclusion and human security.

Guiding principles

First and foremost, a feminist foreign policy dislocate the centrality of the state in international politics and call attention to the individuals, particularly those that have been traditionally marginalized, especially women. It questions the hierarchy of global systems and discusses the negative impact that they may cause on people more broadly. For this purpose, it implements an intersectional approach to international politics, leaving aside traditional concepts such as national security and defense, while elevating the importance of women and other marginalized groups to bring about change on how the system operates, including the oppression and discrimination that it often generates.

Below, the key principles that should guide a feminist approach to foreign policy:

³ Butler, Judith (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and London: Routledge; Enloe, C. (2004), III "'Gender' is not enough: the need for a feminist consciousness". *International Affairs*, 80: 95–97.

⁴ Laura J. Shepherd (ed.). *Gender Matters in Global Politics: A Feminist Introduction to International Relations*. New York and London: Routledge

⁵ Bell, C.; O'Rourke C. (2010), "Peace Agreements or 'Pieces of Paper'?: The Impact of UNSC Resolution 1325 on Peace Processes and their Agreements," *International and Comparative Law Quarterly*

⁶ Paffenholz, T. (2015), "Beyond the Normative: Can Women's Inclusion Really Make for Better Peace Processes?," *CCDP Policy Brief*

[Inclusion](#): seen as a universal human right, it aims to guarantee that all people, irrespective of race, ethnicity, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and any other issue are considered and are given equal access and opportunities, including eliminating discriminatory practices and intolerant behavior in the public sphere.

[Intersectionality](#): refers to the intrinsic power relations generated by overlapping identities that have traditionally been expressed or denied—race and ethnicity, religion, age, rurality, ability, gender identity, sexual orientation and more. An intersectional approach means that one is aware of power disparities between different identities, that they are frequently overlapping and that actions to overcome the structural impact of power relations must be carried out in order to effectively overcome it.

[Rights-based](#): any action, including [development assistance](#) and cooperation contributes to the realization of human rights in recipient countries, it also assumes that the state is the ultimate duty-bearer for the realization of human and economic rights.

[Human security](#): an approach to identify and address widespread and cross-cutting challenges to the survival, livelihood and dignity of people. It calls for people-centered, comprehensive, context-specific and prevention-oriented responses that strengthen the protection and empowerment of all people.

[People-centered](#): means that people's interest and well being should guide any policy.

[Non-violence and demilitarization](#): feminist approaches highlight the relationship between patriarchal gender relations and wars and how both reinforce militarization. Within this perspective, violence against women is the product of a continuum rooted on gender inequality and not exclusive of times of war, although war exacerbates violence during and after conflicts.

Central themes

Taking under consideration the above mentioned principles, there are a few thematic areas that should be prioritized by a feminist foreign policy, particularly as they will reinforce women's rights, safety and contribute to gender equality. They also depart from the view that promoting gender equality positively impacts prosperity, stability and sustainable development.

Women, peace and security

Despite the focus on the special needs and particular effects that conflicts have on women, the WPS agenda also invokes the participation of women in conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts as fundamental to sustainable peace. In fact, the 21 year old agenda has shown through practice and research that promoting gender equality may be the key ingredient to successfully end conflicts. Several scholars argued about how the increased participation of women

contributed to lasting peace agreements, due to the focus they usually put on addressing the underlying causes of the conflict, rather than on immediate ceasefire.⁷ What is more, addressing gender inequality has proved to be correlated to increased prosperity and stability.⁸

A feminist foreign policy considers women's security as multidimensional and that although conflicts exacerbate insecurity, there are other factors, including global health crises and autocratic governments that can undermine women's rights and safety. Several policies oriented towards peace time are likely to have long term effects to avoid war in the first place.

Decarbonized economies and climate change

Despite women's protagonism promoting green economies, [they are disproportionately affected by climate related risks](#). In certain areas, including in the Amazon basin, the limited state presence and the development urge that pits the forest exacerbates vulnerability to environmental crimes.⁹ The impact of these illegal economies is not evenly distributed and are gendered, affecting women from specific ethnicity and race more than others. As a result, a feminist foreign policy is aware about the impact that carbon based economies have on the environment - and on women specifically - and promotes sustainable policies to reverse climate change and revolutionize carbon based economies.

Sexual and reproductive health rights

Women's rights have advanced considerably since the 20th century. However, setbacks caused by the capture of the state apparatus by misogynist autocratic governments have been observed in many parts of the world.¹⁰ In this context, sexual and reproductive health rights are the most attacked of women's rights. Narratives and actions against the advancement of women's sexual and reproductive rights are based on the traditional values associated with the family and have little concern over women and girls welfare. A feminist foreign policy advances sexual and reproductive health rights through renewed commitments in international fora, development projects and international cooperation.

Women economic empowerment and political participation

Women's empowerment is central to reverse inequalities worldwide, it is also a fundamental prevention strategy when it comes to promoting a life free from violence to women and girls

⁷ Stone, Laurel (2014), *Women Transforming Conflict: A Quantitative Analysis of Female Peacemaking*. Paffenholz, T. (2015), "Can Inclusive Peace Processes Work? New evidence from a multi-year research project," CCDP Policy Brief. O'Reilly et al (2015); O'Reilly, M. Suilleabhain, A. Paffenholz, T. (2015). "Reimagining Peacemaking: Women's Roles in Peace Processes." *International Peace Institute*.

⁸ Hudson, V.; Ballif-Spanvill, B., Caprioli M., and Emmett C.F. (2012), *Sex and World Peace*. New York: Columbia University Press

⁹ Pereira, J., & Viola, E. (2020). Close to a Tipping Point? The Amazon and the Challenge of Sustainable Development under Growing Climate Pressures. *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 52(3), 467-494.

¹⁰ Szabó, I (2021). "[The Agora is under attack: assessing the closure of the civic space in Brazil and around the world](#)". Igarapé Institute Strategic Article.

around the globe. A feminist foreign policy promotes women's empowerment and enhances women's political participation.

The case of Latin America

Recently, Latin America has lived through a period where autocratic governments were under control, curbing civil liberties, harassing and intimidating critics and censoring freedom of speech and expression. While some countries have elected governments that are seemingly committed to democratic values, many continue to be ruled by populist authoritarian governments that have a chilling effect on civil society, particularly women and LGBTQIA+ groups. In this context, the state apparatus has been used to advance private interests and core public policies in key developmental areas, including the environment, have been dismantled.

What is more, the region is plagued by situations of undeclared armed conflicts, caused by criminal activities in urban and rural settings¹¹. Despite being unrecognized they have devastating effects on the lives and safety of local women and girls, and lack an adequate normative framework to address them. One of such conflicts is driven by resource competition and climate change and is currently taking place in the largest rainforest in the world, the Amazon.

Environmental crime in the Amazon is rampant and violence is spiraling.¹² The region ranks top when it comes to the killings of defenders, including women. Moreover, women defenders suffer [multiple forms of violence](#) that are not captured by most organizations supporting their work. They are frequently subjected to increased domestic violence, loneliness, isolation, invisibility, forced displacement, threats to family members and sexual violence.

A feminist foreign policy should look into ways of supporting local communities to fight back, accelerating resilience among women defenders and addressing the normative framework gap that currently exists when it comes to undeclared armed conflicts.

¹¹ Giannini et al (2018) "[A agenda sobre mulheres, paz e segurança no contexto latino-americano: desafios e oportunidades](#)" [The women, peace and security agenda in the Latin American context: challenges and opportunities]. Igarapé Institute Strategic Article.

¹² Waisbisch et al (2022). "[The Ecosystem of environmental crime in the Amazon](#)". Igarapé Institute strategic article.