

7 In my view: Are feminist foreign policies translating to real action?

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In 2014, Margot Wallström, then the Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs, announced the world's first feminist foreign policy (FFP). It took another three years before another country, in this case Canada, announced its Feminist International Assistance Policy. In 2022, a total of 13 high-, medium- or low-income countries have launched or are developing FFPs.¹

Wallström later said that the initial response to her announcement tended to be “giggles” (Silverman, 2016^[1]). In the eight years since that groundbreaking policy announcement, the giggles may have died down significantly, but many of the questions – and a certain level of scepticism – remain. Just what is feminist foreign policy? How does it differ? Is it what could be called “pinkwashing” in the face of ongoing gender inequality? Just recently, Sweden implied it would step back from its feminist foreign policy, raising a further question of how durable such policies are.

Different states have produced varying definitions (and priorities) for feminist foreign policy. After studying many of these and consulting with a number of feminists working in foreign policy and development spaces, the International Center for Research on Women settled on the following:

Feminist foreign policy is the policy of a state that defines its interactions with other states, as well as movements and other non-state actors, in a manner that prioritizes peace, gender equality and environmental integrity; enshrines, promotes, and protects the human rights of all; seeks to disrupt colonial, racist, patriarchal and male-dominated power structures; and allocates significant resources, including research, to achieve that vision. Feminist foreign policy is coherent in its approach across all of its levers of influence, anchored by the exercise of those values at home and co-created with feminist activists, groups and movements, at home and abroad. (Thompson, Ahmed and Khokhar, 2021^[2])

This definition provides one answer to the questions of what feminist foreign policy is and how it differs from other foreign policies. But is it pinkwashing? In my view, that depends on how the policy is structured and how consistently it is implemented. In many ways, the trend reflects a wider recognition that gender equality, women's rights and gender justice are important elements of domestic, foreign and development policies and practice. Yet, beyond the rhetoric, there continues to be a gap between words and actions. While several OECD countries have adopted such policies, the share of official development assistance (ODA) funds principally earmarked for gender equality in 2020 remains at only 5%.²

In my opinion, feminist foreign policy becomes pinkwashing if it remains focused merely on promoting activities that include women and girls rather than on adopting feminist analysis and approaches that counter various and intersectional discriminations including, but not limited to, gender, racial, disability, economic and political injustices.

It is pinkwashing if resources continue to underfund initiatives designed to promote and advance equalities and justice. It is pinkwashing if the policy doesn't target shifting unequal power relations consistently

throughout the principles, practices and implementation of all aspects of its foreign policy – including analysis of and action on its own internal gender balances and decision-making processes and actors. It is pinkwashing if a state with a feminist foreign policy funds gender equality and at the same time supports exploitative trade activities that undermine the rights of populations and embed injustice.

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Let me be clear. These are not risks that are inherent only to inadequate feminist foreign policies: They are risks where rhetoric takes precedence over action, and we've seen that in many areas of domestic and international policies pursued by various actors.

However, I believe that the growing group of nations adopting feminist foreign policy are undertaking exciting journeys towards change. When the scope of the policy covers diplomacy, development assistance and trade, among other areas, and consistently integrates feminist perspectives and approaches across the full spectrum of work, the potential for comprehensive promotion of equality and consistent dismantling of systems of discrimination is enormous. For example, the proportion of Canada's bilateral allocable ODA with gender equality as a principal objective rose from 2.7% in 2015-16 to 21% in 2019-20 (OECD, 2022^[3]). A soon-to-be-published assessment of the impact of Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy shows a similar trend.³ Moreover, the share of ODA spending classified as having no gender component decreased from 40% of bilateral allocable ODA in 2013-14 to 12% in 2019-20.

At the same time, Canada's ODA going to women's rights organisations (WROs) increased from 0% of their bilateral allocable ODA in 2015-16 to 3.1% in 2017-18 and 7.1% in 2019-2020. Such support for local women's rights organisations has proven particularly important to disrupt unequal power relations and social norms and move towards sustainable change and gender equality. However, while Canada demonstrates that its policy can dramatically increase funding to women's rights organisations, the fact that Canada is a world leader with just this 7.1% share of its ODA is a cause for major concern about the inequalities both in ODA spends and in the focus and targeting of those spends. More feminist foreign policies need to result in greater support overall for local WROs.

Over the 2019-20 period, 45% of overall bilateral ODA flows had a gender equality as a principal or significant objective among OECD-DAC members as a whole (OECD, 2022^[4]). Three of the top six countries with the highest percentage of ODA focused on gender equality also have or are currently developing an FFP. And yet, gender equality remains a principle focus of a relatively small portion of ODA: In 2020, 55% of ODA flows still do not focus on gender equality and only 5% have gender as a principal objective.

A formal policy may not be needed to bring feminist analysis, approaches and processes to a country's foreign policy. Strong feminist principles have run through the work of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs for many years. Its willingness and ability to listen to feminist activists, acknowledge missteps and plan with rather than impose from the outside has led to initiatives such as the Voice programme⁴, SDG5 Fund and the Leading from the South partnership. Yet the Netherlands is only now developing a formal FFP,⁵ which could be a helpful step towards developing more consistent approaches to dismantling inequality across the full (and much broader) spectrum of its foreign policy work.

Mexico, the first Global South nation to announce a feminist foreign policy, is an example of how the impact extends far beyond ODA and funding. Mexico has focused on using its policy to leverage advocacy and international partnerships to combat intersectional injustices, including at the recent United Nations Climate Change Conference, or COP27.

All the countries that have announced feminist foreign policies have a way to go to truly integrate feminist approaches across all elements of their work, including applying those approaches and principles in decision making in their own institutions and implementing a more pronounced and consistent shifting of power in their internal and external processes and relationships. Yet, in my view, it is far better to have a way to go on a journey that has at least started than to not take on the challenges of change or not start those journeys at all. There are lessons to be learnt from each other, encouragement to be had, and impact to be multiplied in the strengthening and growing of feminist foreign policies. As Lyric Thompson, chief executive officer of the Feminist Foreign Policy Collaborative, eloquently stated in a recent email to me:

We are at the proof point for feminist foreign policies. Amidst conflict and pandemic, impending climate catastrophe and record inequality, a growing number of countries, from Luxembourg to Liberia, are choosing a framework that reconceptualises global goods as in the national interest. OECD countries are increasing funding ambition of gender equality and designing new models for principles-based multilateralism, seeking to disrupt racist, patriarchal and colonial norms by centring people, peace and planet in their foreign policy goals. It gives reason to hope for a better future.⁶

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Notes

¹ Sweden's foreign minister announced in October 2022 that the country will no longer label its foreign policy as feminist. Twelve other countries still have or are developing FFPs: Canada, Chile, Colombia, France, Germany, Liberia, Libya, Luxembourg, Mexico, the Netherlands, Scotland and Spain.

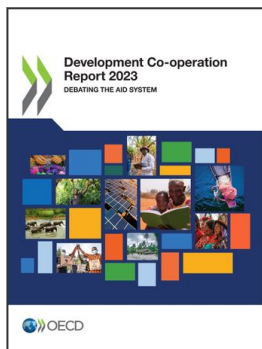
² The OECD released the most recent (2021) [data](#) on ODA for gender equality and women's empowerment at the end of January 2023, just as this report was going to print. Headline data show worrying drops in total bilateral aid with gender equality as a principal objective and in the amount of funding directly to women's rights organisations. It will be crucial to analyse and track this latest data against broader ODA trends and, specifically, the promises made by countries with feminist foreign policies.

³ Draft assessment report, *Canadian Gender Equality Investments: A Quantitative Assessment of Canadian ODA*, scheduled for publication in 2022 by the Equality Fund and University of Newfoundland and Labrador.

⁴ For further details, see: <https://voice.global/first-global-call-for-proposals>

⁵ For further details, see: <https://www.government.nl/latest/news/2022/11/18/feminist-foreign-policy-netherlands>

⁶ Lyric Thompson, in email to the author on 17 November 2022.



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