

# Germany's Feminist Foreign Policy: Genuine Change or Symbolic Gesture?

Written by Sophie Domres

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2024/07/07/germanys-feminist-foreign-policy-genuine-change-or-symbolic-gesture/>

SOPHIE DOMRES, JUL 7 2024

In 2023, Germany unveiled its Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) guidelines, prompting a debate about the extent to which this move signifies a genuine transformation in the country's foreign policy. Some argue that it is merely a symbolic gesture aimed at enhancing international legitimacy. As the world grapples with a multitude of challenges, including military conflicts, climate change, and rising extremism, Germany's commitment to multilateralism, de-escalation, and cooperation is put to the test. These principles align with Germany's historical identity as a "civilian power," yet questions remain regarding the extent to which they will be implemented in practice. The question thus arises as to whether the FFP truly addresses global challenges or whether it is a strategic move designed to bolster Germany's global standing. This article examines the potential of Germany's FFP to effect real change or to serve as a mere diplomatic façade.

Feminist Foreign Policy advocates a reorientation of foreign policy priorities away from state-based security and militarisation. It challenges the dominant realist theory, which equates security with military power and nuclear weapons. Realism posits an anarchic international system in which states ensure their survival through military dominance, often sidelining international organisations and non-state actors. In contrast, the FFP seeks to engage civil society through a power-critical, rights-based approach that challenges traditional foreign policy assumptions and aims to dismantle oppressive structures.

While FFP challenges the principles of realism in international relations, it has also been criticised for portraying states as purely self-interested and power-driven actors. Although realism highlights important trends in international relations, some IR scholars argue that the international system cannot be understood solely through a realist lens. The role of international organisations such as the United Nations (UN), the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the European Union (EU) has demonstrated that states are influenced by collectively established norms within international institutions, including the partial relinquishment of sovereignty as evidenced by the primacy of EU law. This principle states that in case of conflict between an aspect of EU law and an aspect of national law in an EU member state, EU law takes precedence. In parallel, civil society is increasingly influencing policy-making. For example, the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) resolutions of the UN Security Council would not have been adopted without years of targeted lobbying by various feminist NGOs. These resolutions represent a significant milestone in the recognition of the gender dimensions of conflict and sexual violence in war. The WPS agenda marks the first time that an international security body has recognised the particular vulnerability of women in conflict situations and the gender-specific security risks they face. The agenda has been significantly shaped by transnational feminist NGOs and their dedicated lobbying efforts. Over the years, the resolutions have deepened, embedding the human security approach and the participation of NGOs in peace processes.

Critics argue that FFP is a construct rooted in the Global North that often misunderstands and misrepresents the complex realities of crisis and war zones by viewing them through a 'peace bubble' lens. Postcolonial feminist scholars and activists highlight the urgent need for FFP to avoid the pervasive risk of Eurocentrism. This requires a genuine and nuanced consideration of the needs, experiences and voices of people in the Global South. To be genuinely transformative, FFP must engage in an ongoing, critical examination of its own power dynamics and assumptions. While the criticisms of FFP should be borne in mind, particularly in the latter stages, when it comes to

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the potential impact of FFP on German interests, FFP has the distinctive capacity to illuminate power structures that jeopardise peace processes. For example, it elucidates the profit-driven nature of war within our capitalist system, where the interests of influential individuals impede the path to peace. Furthermore, FFP illuminates the enduring consequences of post-colonialism, whereby former colonial powers retain control over their former colonies, frequently at the expense of local communities. Furthermore, the report illuminates the male-dominated landscape of political decision-making, which marginalises the perspectives and contributions of women and marginalised groups. This exclusion is also evident in peace negotiations, where women and civil society are often marginalised, resulting in agreements that fail to address the needs and rights of the entire population.

Germany is confronted with the challenge of safeguarding its national interests in the context of a multitude of geopolitical crises, while concurrently pursuing an ethical and just foreign policy. The introduction of the FFP in 2023 has served to exacerbate this tension. The opposition leader Friedrich Merz (Christian Democratic Party) has expressed concern that the FFP represents a misstep in a conflict-ridden world, arguing that it may dilute Germany's ability to respond to security threats. Conversely, feminist activists argue that the Foreign Office's symbolic use of feminist ideals highlights a tension between ethical commitments and pragmatic security concerns. This scepticism underscores the necessity to assess the extent to which German foreign policy interests have changed with the introduction of the FFP. The FFP is designed to address systemic inequalities and to promote inclusive participation in peace and security processes, in accordance with broader ethical commitments. Nevertheless, critics contend that this shift could potentially compromise Germany's capacity to respond effectively to immediate security threats and geopolitical challenges. The challenge of reconciling feminist principles with the demands of realpolitik represents a significant shift in Germany's approach to foreign policy.

Germany is often described as a "civilian power" in terms of its foreign policy. As a civilian power, Germany attaches great importance to freedom, democracy, human rights, and social market economy structures. This is reflected in its strong commitment to building and strengthening regional and international institutions, including supporting multilateral cooperation and promoting disarmament initiatives. An example of this is the Alliance for Multilateralism founded by Annalena Baerbock's (The Greens) predecessor Heiko Maas (Social Democratic Party) and his emphasis on a values-based foreign policy. These initiatives underline Germany's efforts to promote a cooperative and rules-based international order.

Germany has a liberal and constructivist approach to foreign policy. While realism prioritises state self-interest and security, liberalism sees international relations as cooperation, democratically regulated societies, and shared institutions. Consequently, Germany values not only interstate relations but also the role of international organisations and civil society actors in shaping the global order. Moreover, liberalism recognizes the relevance of civil society for international relations. Involving and strengthening civil society at home and abroad has been an important element of German foreign policy, especially in the last decade. The constructivist approach to international relations posits that the identities and interests of actors are socially constructed and subject to change. A case in point is Germany's commitment to multilateral cooperation, which is informed not only by objective interests but also by constructed norms and values. These norms are comprehensive and prescriptive statements that entail obligations to act in decision-making situations. Constructivist research places a strong emphasis on the role of norms in international politics and their influence on state behaviour. In practice, interests and identities interact with social norms and values, and this interaction can result in changes to both. The German foreign policy objective is to promote multilateralism, democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and economic development as the basis for a peaceful and stable world. This is evident from an analysis of the organisational charts and publications of the Federal Foreign Office. These values constitute the fundamental tenets of Germany's foreign policy and inform its stance in international crises and conflicts. Participation in multilateral cooperation and commitment to international institutions such as the United Nations and the European Union serve to create shared norms, interests, and values as part of a rule-based system based on consensus and cooperation. The German government's support for international norms such as good governance, human rights, the rule of law, and the importance of international organisations such as the EU and the UN represents a key aspect of its foreign policy interests. These norms thus serve as the foundation for Germany's engagement in the global community and its contribution to international stability and security.

Germany's FFP guidelines emphasise the need to protect and promote the rights of women and marginalised groups

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in conflict situations, in line with UN Security Council resolutions on Women, Peace and Security. This represents a significant advance in integrating gender justice into foreign policy and addressing the distinctive challenges women face during conflicts. Furthermore, the FFP fails to provide a clear definition of feminist foreign policy, which leaves room for ambiguity regarding the translation of feminist principles into tangible policy actions. This ambiguity may result in a superficial approach of merely including women without effecting substantial changes. Moreover, from a feminist perspective, while the guidelines advocate for dialogue with civil society, the focus remains primarily on protecting women, especially from gender-based and conflict-related sexual violence. A comprehensive strategy for enhancing civil society engagement and bolstering existing grassroots initiatives to foster a sustainable 'bottom-up' peace process is conspicuous by its absence. While the safeguarding of women from gender-based violence is of paramount importance, the framework's scope should extend beyond this to encompass a broader range of dimensions of human security, including economic stability, access to education and healthcare, and safeguards against environmental degradation and climate change. The framework is yet to provide a clear explanation of how gender-based violence can be eradicated and the patriarchal structures that underpin it. While the protection of women and marginalised groups is undoubtedly a crucial aspect of any framework, it is equally important to include measures that address the underlying structures that perpetuate these forms of violence.

A significant issue is the discrepancy between the absence of a feminist domestic policy and the objective of a feminist foreign policy. The feminist approach is not yet mainstreamed in all areas of German policy, which raises questions about the sincerity and effectiveness of the FFP. For instance, while the FFP guidelines emphasise women's participation and gender equality in foreign policy, they do not address similar issues in the domestic security and military sectors. This renders the German FFP somewhat ineffective. Ultimately, there is a lack of clear, measurable targets and evaluation criteria that indicate what should be achieved within a given timeframe. In the absence of clearly defined objectives and evaluation methods, there is a risk that the policy will not be effectively implemented and its impact will not be adequately assessed.

The dynamics of foreign politics are not defined by the items on the agenda, but rather by those that are not. The absence of migration as a key consideration within Germany's FFP guidelines is a significant omission, indicating a systemic neglect of dynamics around the world. The topics of migration and flight are not only actively employed in election campaigns, but also present challenges for individuals and countries due to wars, conflicts and the increasing effects of climate change. This omission not only demonstrates a failure to address significant global challenges but also indicates a disregard for a dynamic that has the greatest impact on already marginalised groups, particularly women and children. Furthermore, an often overlooked but crucial aspect is the reappraisal of colonial legacies. While German FFP guidelines emphasise the dismantling of historically entrenched power structures, they frequently fail to explicitly address the lasting effects of German colonialism and the broader global inequalities and dependencies that persist today. This oversight significantly impairs FFP's capacity to address the root causes of global conflict and systemic injustice. In order for FFP to fulfil its potential, it must explicitly confront and address the colonial histories and contemporary power imbalances that continue to shape international relations. It is only by addressing these issues that FFP can move beyond a superficial commitment to equality and justice and contribute to genuine global transformation.

Germany has historically been perceived as a country with a relatively restrained military policy. However, this image is at odds with the country's thriving arms industry and arms exports. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Germany was the world's fifth largest exporter of arms between 2018 and 2022. In the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the German federal government allocated a one-time special fund of €100 billion for the Bundeswehr in the 2022 budget, signifying a notable surge in military spending. Furthermore, the 2023 Annual Report of the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces indicates that Germany intends to continue investing in the procurement of equipment, military infrastructure, and personnel. The arms industry represents a significant proportion of the German economy, and the German government has been accused of prioritising economic interests over human security. Furthermore, despite its stated commitment to a feminist foreign and development policy, Germany has yet to develop guidelines for a feminist defence policy, and it seems unlikely that this will occur in the near future. This is in stark contrast to the commitment to disarmament in the FFP guidelines.

Germany's foreign policy is founded upon a long-standing tradition of pursuing peace, stability and prosperity within

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the international community. Concurrently, Germany is engaged in the active promotion of democracy, human rights, and multilateral cooperation. Germany's status as a civilian power is reflected in its self-perception as a leader in the shaping of a rules-based international order based on cooperation, diplomacy and robust civil society institutions. Despite the self-definition of Germany as a civilian power and its commitment to peace and cooperation, the reality is more complex. The continued high level of German arms exports raises questions about the nature of foreign policy, which is not a binary concept but rather a complex dynamic in a globalised and interconnected world.

FFP offers a fresh perspective on international relations, challenging traditional security approaches. However, its introduction has sparked debate about Germany's true foreign policy objectives. While FFP brings new rhetoric, it seems to have had minimal impact on altering Germany's longstanding foreign policy interests. Instead, it appears to continue existing efforts rather than marking a radical shift. Amid heightened geopolitical tensions, FFP underscores Germany's commitment to a peaceful and just world order, yet the core nature of German foreign policy remains largely unchanged. Germany's FFP represents a progressive shift in rhetoric, aiming to integrate gender justice and human rights into foreign policy. However, its practical impact remains uncertain due to potential Eurocentrism, lack of clarity, and omissions of critical issues like migration and colonial legacies. The success of FFP will depend on its ability to translate feminist principles into concrete actions that address both immediate security challenges and long-term structural inequalities, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and equitable global order.

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## About the author:

**Sophie Domres** is an advocacy advisor for humanitarian action at SOS Children's Villages International in Germany. She holds Bachelor's and Master's degrees in International Relations from the universities of Berlin, Potsdam and Kleve, as well as an additional degree in Interdisciplinary Gender Studies. During and after her studies, she worked for the United Nations in New York, the Goethe Institute in Chile, the German Foreign Office, the German parliament, and international NGOs. As a former Sylke Tempel Research Fellow (2023/24), she is researching feminist approaches to foreign policy.