

Opinion – The Future of German Feminist Foreign and Development Policy

Written by Karoline Färber

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KAROLINE FÄRBER, APR 21 2025

Since 2021, Germany has belonged to the group of states with a feminist foreign and/or development policy. After the collapse of the traffic light coalition of Social Democrats, Greens, and Liberals in November 2024, an early federal election brought a change of government earlier this year. Winning the majority of votes, the Conservatives (CDU/CSU) have now formed a coalition with the Social Democrats. Their recently published coalition agreement does not explicitly refer to feminist foreign or development policy. Even though the coalition agreement is not a binding document and must still be ratified by the CDU and the Social Democrats, it gives an indication of the government's plans for the next four years – and these plans do not seem to include a feminist approach.

This mirrors broader global trends: Since 2022, at least four states have – more or less quietly – retracted their feminist foreign policies (Sweden, Luxembourg, Argentina, the Netherlands). Each time, this happened after federal elections that strengthened centre-right forces. Other states, like Canada, have been noticeably silent on the further development of their feminist foreign policies. Now, it seems that the new German government has dropped the feminist label.

What does that mean for the future of feminist approaches to German foreign policy? Will the policy content remain sticky, despite the apparent absence of the feminist label? Or can we expect that feminist foreign policy is being retracted in its totality?

Feminist foreign and development policy was adopted by the previous administration in December 2021, in the coalition agreement of the Social Democrat, Green, and Liberal political parties. The German Federal Foreign Office, led by the Greens, and the Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, led by the Social Democrats, were tasked with developing the policy. In March 2023, both ministries published strategy documents. The guidelines on feminist foreign policy follow the Swedish approach of the three R and commit to strengthening the rights, resources, and representation of women and marginalised groups across all areas of German foreign policy. They also include measures for increasing internal diversity in the ministry as well as funding objectives for humanitarian aid. The Feminist Development Policy is structured around the five elements of human rights, a gender-transformative approach, intersectionality, a post-colonial and anti-racist approach, and alliance-building. It similarly commits to promoting the three R across its portfolio.

Importantly, the feminist foreign and development policy were not government-wide policies. Instead, they were products of individual ministries, with each strategy referring to one department and its policy responsibility only. This maintains the siloing of German politics into discreet ministries, underlined by the fact that the Federal Foreign Office and the Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development are usually led by different political parties with different political priorities. This weakened the feminist approach and made it less coherent; particularly so because the previous German administration never understood themselves as a feminist government.

In addition, both ministries have had little time to embed feminist foreign and development policy, despite a longer German commitment to furthering gender equality in foreign affairs. In the two years after the publication of the strategy documents, there has been some progress, such as the introduction of gender budgeting and the expansion

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of gender-sensitive projects. However, feminist foreign policy in particular has had little impact on crucial foreign policy decisions. For instance, the German government continues to support Israel with weapons exports despite clear indications that Israel is committing a genocide against Palestinians in Gaza. Since the Hamas attack on Israel of 7 October 2023, more than 50,000 Palestinians have been killed, the majority of which are women and children. Germany also agreed to a reform of the Common European Asylum System in 2023, which is likely to significantly increase human rights violations, including gendered and sexualised violence as well as deaths, at Europe's borders. And even if the German government supports refugees, like in the case of Ukraine, measures often do not target the needs of women and queer folks specifically. The implementation of the feminist principles in foreign affairs appears to be already patchy.

This does not seem to bode well for the future of German feminist and development policy. Yet, a feminist approach will not necessarily disappear entirely. Whether feminist approaches remain depends on if and how the Federal Foreign Office and the Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development continue to implement at least some of their strategies.

The Federal Foreign Office will be led by the Conservative political party, which has previously indicated that it does not support a feminist label. For the first time since 1966, the same political party will also hold the Chancellery. As such, the Conservatives' influence on German foreign policy is likely going to increase. In this context, retaining at least some feminist principles may come down to implementing existing international law such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, both key ingredients of feminist foreign policy. Notably, the coalition agreement includes a commitment to strengthening both CEDAW and WPS. In addition, the Federal Foreign Office can rely on established working methods around equality, diversity and inclusion work as well as individual staff members' commitments to feminist principles. Given how complex and geographically dispersed the German diplomatic service is, diplomats may continue with at least some of their feminist work despite a change in government policy.

The Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development will remain in the hands of the Social Democrats. If Svenja Schulze retains her position as Minister, it seems likely that she would want to continue implementing the feminist development policy, given that it was initiated by her and discontinuing it may signal political failure. Nevertheless, upholding the feminist label for German development policy may not be easy in the current political climate. While the coalition agreement commits to supporting sexual and reproductive health and rights as well as women's rights more broadly, it also places much emphasis on security issues and German strategic interests, including economic cooperation, securing access to raw materials, and managing migration. Still, the ministry is likely going to continue applying a feminist approach to their work.

What happens next? After the coalition has been confirmed by the CDU and the Social Democrats' membership, the cabinet will be formed and the new government will begin their work. Whether to use the feminist label for German foreign and development policy then becomes a question of political will. If the label is scrapped from both policy areas, a gender equality agenda may still be retained, at least in those areas where there is binding international law or individual commitment to feminist principles. For instance, the Federal Foreign Office is set to develop a new WPS National Action Plan as the previous one expired in 2024. This opens up opportunities for maintaining or introducing feminist principles. Yet, the coalition's strong focus on the military, defence infrastructure, and migration management will also lead to cutbacks in other areas, including diplomacy, humanitarian aid, and development cooperation. Moving away from a distinctly feminist approach would therefore mean moving away from a commitment to social transformation.

About the author:

Karoline Färber, PhD AKC, is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Erfurt, Germany. As part of the KNOWPRO project, she researches knowledge production on German peace and security policy. She also works on

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feminist foreign policy as well as diplomacy and gender, race, and class. For a list of her publications, please visit her website.