

Barbara Mittelhammer  
November 2025

# One step forwards, two steps back?

*German foreign policy after the abolition  
of the feminist guidelines*



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# 1. Introduction: gender justice after the end of feminist foreign policy

Germany is now the fourth country, after Sweden, the Netherlands and Argentina, to have introduced a feminist foreign policy only subsequently to abandon it again. What had been laid down in the 2021 coalition agreement as a policy innovation and accomplished in the Foreign Office Guidelines in March 2023 was brought to a sudden end by the new federal government. Foreign minister Johann Wadepuhl announced his decision even before taking office, offering as justification a desire to concentrate instead on the major flashpoints (n.tv.de 2025). But this line of argument gives rise to a contradiction between political realities and feminist foreign policy that scarcely deals adequately with the role of gender justice as the strongest indicator of a country's peaceableness, both internally and externally (Hudson, Bowen and Nielsen 2020). There is also mostly silence on the feminist development policy front. Nevertheless, the government has announced that it intends to carry on with Agenda 1325 »Women, Peace and Security« (WPS) (CDU, CSU and SPD 2025). But what does the end of the feminist foreign policy mean for the status of gender justice in German foreign policy?

This development is also taking place in a context in which not only the number and complexity of armed conflicts worldwide are at an all time high since the end of the Second World War (Rustad 2025), but a pushback against feminism, gender issues and gender justice is becoming ever more evident both in Germany and at international level. Across the globe sexual and reproductive health and rights, as well as the right to bodily self-determination are being undermined and put under siege (PAI.org 2025). Feminist civil society is under massive pressure, exacerbated by the systematic withdrawal of funding in the wake of the USAID cuts in particular and underfunding in general (Šišić and Binışık 2025). Indeed, a global trend can be discerned in the erosion of financial support, especially for diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) (Woroniuk 2025). In multilateral forums ever stronger alliances are forming whose aim is to dismantle achievements in gender justice both discursively and in terms of rights. And all this is playing out in a context in which the proportion of women affected by armed conflict, at least in geographical terms, is up 150 per cent on a decade ago (United Nations Secretary-General 2024); the number of women killed in such conflicts doubled in 2023, sexual violence is up 50 per cent (UN Women 2024) and gender dynamics are as intense as ever, even with regard to the most serious basic crimes, such as war crimes and genocide (Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory 2025).

This publication aims to develop approaches to strengthening gender justice within the framework of German foreign policy and international cooperation, given the fact that Germany has ended its feminist foreign policy and that its feminist development policy is much less prominent than before (BMZ 2023). For this purpose we shall first take a look at the features of Germany's feminist foreign policy. We then summarise its implementation and outline its possible »legacy«, before closing with some concrete recommendations.

## 2. What was Germany's feminist foreign policy? From aspiration to reality?

In his first speech on becoming foreign minister Johann Wadepful declared that his political benchmark would be results-orientated (Federal Foreign Office 2025), but without carrying out a consistent analysis of three years of feminist foreign policy and its possible effects, successful measures or learning experiences beforehand. Although the Foreign Office has commissioned some one-off evaluations, for example, on arms control, without a comprehensive evaluation they run the risk of fragmentation (Balbon and Färber 2025). The present study, by making a brief review, seeks to identify a number of possible ways forward.

Although the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), in contrast to the Foreign Office, continues to adhere to its structures and strategy document, the current federal minister, Reem Albali Radovan, has yet to formulate a public stance on her ministry's approach. Instead, she has emphasised the significance of the triad of development, foreign and defence policy for a sustainable security policy (BMZ 2025). Basically, while implicitly the BMZ's position assumes continuity with the feminist development policy the minister essentially finds herself on a kind of »glass cliff«, given the increasing centralisation of foreign policy decision-making in the CDU-led Chancellor's Office (Moreira and Conway 2025; Ryan and Haslam 2005). As a result, it is difficult to make a well-founded assessment of the future of feminist development policy. The present study will therefore focus on areas of foreign policy in which there is scope for development cooperation going forward. To kick things off, we shall review the implementation, features, strengths and weaknesses of Germany's feminist foreign policy, before looking to the future.

### 2.1 The ambitious aspirations of Germany's feminist foreign policy

Germany's guidelines on feminist foreign policy were ambitious at two levels. First, they made it clear that the approach was not a »foreign policy for women, but for all members of society« and thus was intersectional, going beyond binary gender categories, in sharp contrast to the first generation of feminist foreign policy. Although the Foreign Office basically took a pragmatic approach it also took historical responsibility for the colonial past. Similarly, German feminist foreign policy conceived of its agency as going beyond national perspectives, including in relation

to civil society structures and expertise. Second, it was noteworthy how comprehensively feminist foreign policy encompassed every area of the ministry's activities, ranging from peace and security to humanitarian aid, from cultural diplomacy to climate and energy policy, economic policy and international trade, but also to internal structures. But to what extent did the Foreign Office really manage to do justice to the Guidelines' aspirations?

Given the brief implementation period – two years from publication of the Guidelines to the abandonment of feminist foreign policy – it is difficult to draw reliable conclusions. However, an examination of structural factors may give us some idea of whether a longer implementation period might have led to more substantial feminist achievements.

### 2.2 Structural arrested development?

A number of structural weaknesses hindered a more comprehensive, sustainable and far-reaching realisation of Germany's feminist foreign policy. More specifically, an overarching policy prioritisation, binding objectives and resources were all lacking. Further problems arose from the rather opaque operationalisation and conceptual ambiguity.

From the start, implementation of Germany's feminist foreign policy was characterised by the lack of a cross-departmental government policy, even though the three government parties had agreed on a feminist foreign policy in their coalition agreement (SPD, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, FDP, 2021). Ultimately, this was the decisive factor in the lack of political cohesion and prioritisation. This meant that from the outset the policy scope was limited to only two departments, and key ministries, such as those governing the economy and finance, were not fundamentally committed to feminist principles. The upshot of this was, first, conflicting policy priorities between the federal government's feminist approaches and positions, whether in relation to arms exports, migration or climate policy. Second, for that reason the kind of structural possibilities that would have been necessary for successful implementation were limited, including, more specifically, the availability of financial resources or the possibility of inter-departmental cooperation on feminist foreign policy. This state of affairs is also evident in, among other things, the fact that documents such as the national security strategy

adopted in 2023 was virtually devoid of feminist aspects. Instead, the Foreign Office and the BMZ each developed their own approaches. Although both ministries followed the gold standard set by Sweden, involving the three R's – rights, representation, resources – their emphases differed (Thompson 2023). Looking at it now, the question arises of the extent to which such diversification across the board on one hand weakened this approach, but on the other hand perhaps made it more resilient in the event of a policy change. Such logic is only evident in retrospect, however. It is also familiar from other contexts, such as Sweden, how much a lack of political prioritisation can hamper successful implementation of a feminist foreign policy (Townes, Bjarnegård and Jezierska 2023).

Thirdly, the lack of overriding political prioritisation also gave rise to pitfalls with regard to the implementation of feminist foreign policy and the requisite instruments because there was insufficient institutional pressure.

The instruments laid down in the Guidelines include mainstreaming in all areas of foreign policy, cooperation with multipliers worldwide, the introduction of gender budgeting and monitoring of progress and challenges.

Although mainstreaming, on one hand, offered a certain freedom when it comes to implementation and promoted a creative approach and personal initiative across a broad front it also left too many uncertainties and insufficiently binding aims. In cross-section it was incumbent upon each department or foreign mission to get to grips with the substance of feminist foreign policy, apply it and then evaluate it. Successful implementation thus depended, horizontally, on personal initiative, but also the temporal and personnel resources of colleagues who were already overburdened. Even institutional innovations, such as the newly created »FFP focal points«, offered little relief because their new role came on top of their existing portfolio of tasks. The opportunity was missed to draw lessons from known weaknesses of WPS (Women, Peace and Security) and the Gender Focal Points. Although bottom-up approaches enhance freedom and creativity, they scarcely provide a ready-made recipe for success with regard to complex change processes in hierarchical organisations. Instead, a consistent gender transformative approach in line with the ambitious Guidelines should have laid down the removal of structural inequalities more emphatically as a central point towards which all levels of foreign policy thinking and action should converge.

Although the position of Special Representative (with the powers of the Commissioner for Human Rights in the Foreign Office) and a department for feminist foreign policy were created, these structures were provided with very limited staff resources and thus their scope for action was rather restricted. They were immediately dissolved or reassigned with the demise of the feminist foreign policy.

Accordingly, neither more resources nor a dedicated budget were allocated to the planned new structures and tasks. Although this is understandable in the overall long-term context of substantial budget cuts at the Foreign Office it is no less problematic for the successful implementation of a feminist foreign policy and indeed could have been avoided if the lessons from Sweden had been heeded (Townes et al. 2023). Compounding the problem, no monitoring or evaluation were put in place. Clear benchmarks and indicators were lacking with regard to the success of feminist foreign policy. Apart from its importance for the minister and her personal commitment there were few, if any binding objectives for the transformative and ambitious aspirations of the Guidelines and no clearcut metrics. Against this background the question arises of how far a strategy can really convey a particular practical orientation or transformative aspirations if its implementation is not operationalised consistently. Thus actual implementation fell short of the transformative intent underlying the Guidelines.

At the substantive level, this can be explained in terms of the pervasive conceptual ambiguity. There was no clearcut plan to convey a holistic understanding of feminist foreign policy within the meaning of the Guidelines at all levels of the Foreign Office. Such ambiguity became particularly evident where the feminist foreign policy deviated from WPS or gender-sensitive objectives. Feminist civil society and academia criticised the failure to translate FFP into a concrete transformative or structurally critical commitment to dismantle structural inequalities. This attitude was manifest among other things in the lack of consultation among the so-called »global majority« (Campbell-Stephens 2020) in the development process and of practical steps to undo structural power asymmetries in the context of postcolonial continuity in German foreign policy (Färber and Standke-Erdmann 2025). The grasp of roles and agency also remained somewhat ambivalent. Although the transformative power of civil society was acknowledged and apprehended as expertise practical implementation was reduced to selective and sporadic measures rather than systematic and strategic consultation.

### **2.3 Successes: internal dimension, feminist flagship projects and multilateralism**

Nevertheless, despite justified criticisms, progress could be made, above all at the following three levels: in structural terms, in the internal organisation of the Foreign Office and in general in terms of the levers and key instruments of feminist programme implementation, but also in relation to certain flagship projects and in strengthening multilateral forums.

Four out of Germany's ten feminist foreign policy Guidelines concerned internal aspects of strengthening diversity, equality and inclusion in the Foreign Office, including the Foreign Service. Gender parity, inclusion and diversity were prioritised at all levels of personnel management, namely

in recruitment practices, the shaping of career paths and staff appointments and promotions. Clear benchmarks for progress were also laid down. Although it's true that the overall proportion of women in leadership positions in the Foreign Ministry remained below the national average of 44 per cent, it was raised by 7 percentage points to 37 per cent during the period of implementation (Statistisches Bundesamt 2025). Furthermore, efforts were made with regard to organisational culture to prevent discrimination and diversify career paths. The Foreign Office also invested in training courses and the expansion of capacities in the areas of gender and WPS. This internal focus on reform was thus primarily an investment in long-term structural change, even though its transformational potential was curtailed by regulatory obstacles. Nevertheless, the above-mentioned factors did contribute to a sustainable process of reflection and the development of an in-house culture.

Germany's feminist foreign policy thus engendered adjustments, flagship projects and key instruments, even though it proved unable in so short a time to take the leap to establish a consistent programme or internalise the »feminist reflex« it was aiming for. On the way towards a feminist foreign policy many small adjustments were made that undoubtedly would have needed more than two years to unfold their full effects. However, one positive example is the discernible broadening of perspectives in the reports submitted by foreign missions. Although at first glance this may seem like a small enough step, more generally and over time it can be seen as a broadening of perspective on the part of the Ministry itself, and given a little more time it may even have found expression in its policies. It did prove possible to establish gender budgeting as a key instrument, for which an ambitious target was laid down in the Guidelines of making the disbursement of 85 per cent of project funding (100 per cent in the case of humanitarian aid) gender-sensitive and 8 per cent gender-transformative. At programme level the UN Fact Finding Mission to Iran is worth mentioning, which Germany together with Iceland was able to push through in the UN Human Rights Council in 2022 (UNHRC 2025). But such projects have been fairly sporadic and in the big picture scarcely represent the »feminist reflex« the Guidelines called for to realise the systematic mainstreaming of feminist foreign policy. Even so, a process of reflection was instigated that might have had even more impact with more political backing, commitment and time. Now the new policy stance of the Foreign Office will determine whether these successes can be built on.

Internationally, Germany has been able to establish itself as a leading force in multilateral spaces and to create important intergovernmental platforms. Not least after the end of Swedish feminist foreign policy expectations of and trust in Germany were high among international partners. Germany joined the Feminist Foreign Policy Group (FFP+ Group) (Government of the Netherlands 2023) and instigated feminist foreign policy conferences (Foreign Office 2022) that were subsequently continued in the Netherlands

and Mexico, as well as in Paris (Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères 2025a), from which both intergovernmental and civil society/academic exchange forums emerged. These activities developed into an effective soft power instrument with its own inertia and accompanied by expectations that continue to be upheld not only by state actors, but also in civil society. This gain in soft power has been at least partly counteracted, however, by double standards and the undermining of the universality of human rights in other policy areas. This has jeopardised Germany's long-term credibility in multilateral forums.

## 2.4 Summary: institutional and programmatic progress without policy transfer

We can therefore state that Germany's feminist foreign policy has made progress, albeit at the operational and institutional levels and with regard to internal ministerial structures and processes. Although two years are scarcely sufficient for a comprehensive transformation, some efforts have certainly been made. However, hopes of anchoring feminist foreign policy in such a way that subsequent governments would not find it easy to roll back have proved too optimistic. Under the new political leadership, there is as yet only one woman among the five ministers and secretaries of state. Given the new priorities it also remains questionable which of the newly established structures and competences have a long-term future.

At the programmatic level, concrete feminist instruments have managed to give rise to the first flagship projects, although these have not been translated into systematic mainstreaming and transformative approaches. New strategies, such as on humanitarian aid and crisis response, were still referred to as »gender« strategies and not as »feminist« ones. Nevertheless, they are basically related to feminist foreign policy and its associated obligations, which consist, for example, of a strengthening of the role of intersectional needs analyses in crisis and humanitarian aid contexts. Although this still seems fairly unambitious, looking back it may well have helped to ensure the continued survival of the relevant documents. But the lack of reporting, clear monitoring and evaluation have hindered not only an impact analysis, but also a constructive, if critical assessment in civil society and academia. Furthermore, the future of gender budgeting remains uncertain.

But the biggest implementation gap concerns transmission to the policy level. This is where German feminist foreign policy is most starkly affected by the discrepancy between feminist aspirations and the concrete practice of German foreign policy. Germany's boundaries when it comes to the implementation of feminist principles have been highlighted most starkly in crisis situations. The respective responses to the situations in Iran, Afghanistan and especially in Gaza have shown how quickly the practical application of feminist guidelines has failed at the interfaces between

domestic and foreign policy (Adebahr and Mittelhammer 2023; Mittelhammer, Stamm and Both 2024). Germany's stance and policies with regard to Israel and what UN institutions, academics and human rights organisations have categorised as genocide have been in extreme contrast to feminist aspirations (Amnesty International 2024; HRW 2024; Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967 2025; UN OHCHR 2025). These double standards have done lasting damage not only to the achievements of feminist foreign policy, but also to Germany's soft power, its international partnerships with state and civil society actors and its credibility in multilateral forums (Grimm and Schneider 2025). And it is not only in the international context that these stark contradictions and inconsistencies in the implementation of its own aspirations have helped to undermine the seriousness of German feminist foreign policy.

Another decisive factor was the still inadequate political attention paid to the destabilising effects of the global anti-gender and anti-feminist movement. The growing threat to democracy and peace should have been much more of a priority, especially within the framework of a feminist foreign policy (Datta 2025).

# 3. What remains after abandoning Germany's feminist foreign policy?

Despite all its weaknesses, contradictions and criticisms the abandonment of feminist foreign policy undoubtedly represents a setback for gender justice in German foreign policy. But while in some parts of it can be rolled back fairly easily to how things were before the advent of FFP, other structural elements have a lot more staying power (Towns, Jezierska and Bjarnegård 2024).

## 3.1 Back to square one? Reversible elements

Foreign minister Waidephul announced the abolition of the post of special ambassador for feminist foreign policy on the very day the new government took power. He thereby made it clear that personnel decisions and weakly institutionalised structures could be rapidly dissolved or replaced (Hecht 2025). The same happened to the feminist foreign policy unit. The Guidelines document was also taken offline only a few days after the government took office, which highlighted symbolically how quickly political priorities can be reformulated. But while strategy papers can be repealed or, to the extent they are not binding, ignored, it is less clear, at least so far, what the effects of the abandonment of feminist foreign policy will be on programmatic directives, guidelines or instruments, such as gender budgeting. We can nevertheless assume that the programmatic priorities of a feminist foreign policy will be reallocated or discontinued, at least in part. For example, gender mainstreaming or other elements can be easily revised by means of new directives. A new budgetary emphasis is already discernible in the new government with regard to overriding priorities, not least including investments in non-military security, and the promotion of democracy and civil society. The trend towards substantial cuts in funding for the Foreign Office and the BMZ is continuing (Bundesfinanzministerium 2025; Deutscher Bundestag 2025).

## 3.2 Persistence and resilience

Although some things can easily be reversed, especially after only two years, the feminist Guidelines have left some traces that cannot be erased so readily.

Capacity-building and staff development have had a lasting effect. Furthermore, training courses for Foreign Office employees on gender equality, diversity and

intersectionality have also to some extent wrought a change of perspective and developed people's skills. Despite certain structural challenges the feminist foreign policy focal points have helped to enhance competence and expertise, but also key networks. This knowledge – in part also these new perspectives – remain intact, even though during the short period in which feminist foreign policy was in place it was not possible to bring about sustainable cultural change.

Nevertheless, during this period norms and discourses did undergo development. For example, the desire to hold on, as far as possible, to basic principles is not confined only to isolated voices within the Foreign Office. Furthermore, this discursive development goes beyond the Foreign Office (and the BMZ). Foreign policy discourse in Germany changed after feminist foreign policy was introduced. Terms such as critique of power, intersectionality and structural violence have been taken up into political debate and are now anchored in the consciousness of civil society, media and diplomatic actors. Feminist work has also established itself in foundations, research and think tanks. In this way a fund of competences and knowledge has been accumulated in recent years, although it's also true that it has not been possible to mainstream feminist expertise and discourse in core foreign and security policy topics. Even so, a useful resource has been made available that has great potential.

Finally, expectations have been reinforced over the past two years, and not only in the Foreign Office and specialist discourse. Feminist civil society, which supported and promoted the introduction of feminist foreign policy, will also continue to work towards changing German foreign policy within a gender justice framework (Wittenfeld and Franken 2025). International and multilateral obligations also remain in place. Although scarcely formalised multilateral platforms such as the FFP+ Group could be abandoned relatively easily Germany's reputation as a supporter of feminist principles and as a partner for gender justice remains and in particular partner countries and platforms continue to voice their expectations (O 2025). Alongside such expectations there are both international norms, which require continuity, including the UN Sustainable Development Goals or the Beijing Platform, as well as legal instruments, ranging from the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, (CEDAW for short) to the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) (Towns et al. 2024). These norms remain a foreign policy obligation

for Germany and thus cannot be applied willy nilly. Not least the SDGs provide for the mainstreaming of gender justice at all levels of the 17 goals and thus represent a further point of reference and clear guidelines.

### 3.3 Foreign policy implications and the future of gender justice therein

What does the demise of German feminist foreign policy mean for its foreign policy and international cooperation? Besides a number of notable successes that are worth building on, gender justice has to be maintained as an objectively justified priority in the current political context, too (Stamm 2025).

First of all, the abandonment of feminist foreign policy does not signal the end of gender justice in German foreign policy. A clear framework for the future of gender justice in German foreign policy can be discerned in speeches and policy documents. The coalition agreement refers to UN Security Council Resolution 1325, as did the foreign minister in his inauguration speech. But restricting ongoing efforts to strengthen gender justice in German foreign policy to the WPS agenda risks its securitisation. After all, the coalition agreement also refers to the UN Women's Rights Convention and EU-wide ratification of the Istanbul Convention as a binding legal norm against violence against women (CDU et al. 2025). Johann Wadephul himself talks of the Women, Peace and Security agenda as a whole (in other words, including the other nine resolutions), as well as the protection of vulnerable groups worldwide (Foreign Office 2025). This reference to Resolution 1325 and its associated agenda represents something to work with. One advantage that results from this – although so do a number of challenges – is that decision-making on the National Action Plan (NAP), in contrast to the FFP Guidelines, is the task of the cabinet and therefore has to go through other decision-making processes. This could provide the Foreign Office and the BMZ with an opportunity to link up with feminist exchanges of views and experiences, identify common priorities and assert themselves in a challenging global context.

There is certainly a risk that gender justice will be marginalised and displaced from security policy and transformative approaches into areas stereotypically characterised as »soft«. In that case, its transformative potential and the apprehension of structural inequalities as a cause of conflict and insecurity would be lost. It remains to be seen, however, which priorities will emerge, not least given the centralisation of foreign policy decision-making in the Chancellor's Office and the Security Council, not to mention severe budget cuts in relation to long-term investments in conflict prevention and resolution. The fact that in his inauguration speech foreign minister Johann Wadephul shifted the focus to global conflicts and crises, while at the same time abandoning feminist foreign policy scarcely testifies to a pronounced awareness of the role of

gender justice in peace and security (Foreign Office 2025; n.tv.de 2025). After all, there is no contradiction between security, peace and prosperity and feminist goals. Besides legal obligations, gender justice is demonstrably crucial in economic development and sustainable peace, and continues to harbour untapped potential. But to date the foreign minister and other senior Foreign Office figures have yet to adopt a clear position on gender justice, which would send an important message within the ministry.

For many partner countries Germany is currently sending contradictory signals. States such as France, Mexico, Chile, Spain and Canada, which continue to work on feminist foreign policies, regard Germany's withdrawal as indicating a wavering commitment to gender justice. This has led to a weakening of alliances, particularly in the Global South. Depending on the future stance Germany adopts towards multilateral platforms such as the FFP+ Group at UN level it will become clear how the country has positioned itself internationally with regard to newly contested fundamental rights and on the question of gender justice. A key factor in all this will no doubt be the fact that while Germany has turned its back on feminist foreign policy the number of FFP countries is on the rise. Lagging behind on already formulated positions could lead to a further loss of soft power for German foreign policy, which is already increasingly being criticised by the »Global Majority«.

No doubt feminist aspects can be retained and gender justice promoted without talking explicitly about feminist foreign policy. But it is clear from the manner of implementing feminist foreign policy, its weaknesses and its abolition as the first act of the new administration that feminist, gender transformative and structurally critical approaches are not at the forefront. This should be the starting point, together with the matter of retaining what has already been achieved and how to keep spaces open. The fact is that work on gender justice is taking place in the face of an anti-feminist pushback. What starting points are available, what red lines can be maintained, and how can intersectional feminist work continue to be incorporated into academia and civil society?

## 4. Practical recommendations

Based on everything that has been said, in what follows recommendations are provided to make full use of the available opportunities in German foreign policy and international cooperation. These recommendations include: procuring systematic evidence; building on tried and tested elements and programmes, and continuing to fund gender justice; continuing to incorporate gender expertise in government work and building on it; continuing feminist discourse; strengthening networks and exchange forums; and meeting international obligations.

### 4.1 Generate systematic evidence

The starting point here should be a systematic evaluation of the instruments and programmes that have been developed to enable evidence-based decision-making within the framework of an outcomes-oriented foreign policy. This requires the courage for an honest inventory, but it also provides an opportunity to anchor gender justice more securely in German foreign policy and to continue to reap the benefits of recent successful innovations. Attention should be paid to the efforts in recent years of diplomats and Foreign Office staff at least to the extent that the outcomes of the instruments, programmes and measures they developed are thoroughly examined and proven instruments retained. The example of Sweden shows that such an evaluation can provide significant knowledge concerning the real effects of feminist foreign policy (Towns et al. 2023). In the case of Germany such an evaluation should be used to determine which changes have had positive outcomes, which programmes have made measurable improvements for the relevant target groups, and where efficiency gains and other advances could be achieved. In the process also unintended side-effects, such as the formation of new multilateral platforms or the development of unexpected deeper relationships with other FFP countries, such as Mongolia, Colombia and Panama, should be taken into account.

### 4.2 Build on tried and tested elements and programmes and continue funding

Precisely in the interest of such outcomes-oriented policy-making instruments, programmes and platforms that have proved effective should be continued. Without jumping the gun, this concerns in particular instruments such as gender budgeting, which has already proved its worth beyond an

explicitly feminist foreign policy and is practiced by the EU and 61 per cent of all OECD countries (as of 2023). It is thus a very good fit (European Commission 2020; OECD 2023). It is precisely when budgets are tight, when the Foreign Office and the BMZ are affected by substantial cuts, that it's important to ensure that the funding for gender-just budget planning is not reduced disproportionately. Germany should assume a leadership role in this respect, especially with regard to the fact that a regressive trend is all too evident in the promotion of gender justice worldwide (United Nations Secretary-General 2024). After all, such measures are key – and cost efficient – security policy investments.

### 4.3 Continue to incorporate gender expertise into government work and build on it

The expansion of gender expertise in the Foreign Office over the past three years should continue to be regarded as a resource, but also fostered and made good use of. Despite certain structural challenges, for example, the knowledge, skills and networks of the FFP Focal Points should also be utilised. Documented successes in gender-just approaches in conflict prevention, peacebuilding and development policy favour such an approach. While it is important to maintain a cross-cutting stance in this there should also be a particular focus on security policy issues because gender perspectives are marginalised particularly often in that regard (Pradela 2024; Ridge, Pradela and Gill-Atkinson 2024).

The aim here is to incorporate the relevant expertise and perspectives in all things gender-related, both systematically and continuously, for example, in conflict analyses, forecasting, peace missions and even decision-making on arms exports. With regard to networks and expertise the wide-ranging civil society and academic knowledge accumulated over the past four years can be used as a basis. Policymakers should take full advantage of this knowledge as a resource. Mechanisms should be developed in particular in the recently established National Security Council for the purpose of drawing on this expert knowledge. The still to be developed NAP on WPS can provide a framework here. Furthermore, it is important in this context to continue to regard civil society perspectives as a form of expertise, able to convey knowledge and contextual understanding. Accordingly, the systematisation of civil society

consultation is another aspect. Such approaches are by no means new or unprecedented. The UN Security Council has been providing corresponding consultation mechanisms since 1992 in the form of the Arria Formula meetings (UNSC 2025).

The systematic cooperation on gender justice between the BMZ – in continuation of feminist foreign policy – and the Foreign Office should also be continued and indeed expanded at all levels.

#### **4.4 Continue feminist discourse and strengthen networks and exchange formats**

Parliaments and experts also have a role to play. MPs should, also at the international level with regard to FFP partner countries, build up and expand parliamentary networks, and also continue to contribute ideas on gender justice, but also explicitly feminist impulses. This is particularly urgent in view of the twenty-fifth anniversary of WPS, the global, massively funded anti-feminist pushback, and the erosion of legally binding norms and commitments that have emerged in the context of other norms, separately from WPS.

The principal task of a critical expert community will presumably be to keep intersectional thinking in the debate, with a focus on structural inequalities as a cause of conflict. Against the background of an emerging narrowing of discourse to a binary understanding of WPS and an overemphasis on the protection of vulnerable groups rather than prevention it will remain an urgent task to communicate key elements of feminist analysis and translate them into practical recommendations. In the German context, that also entails putting the focus on how racism and postcolonial perspectives pervade thought and actions in domestic policymaking and thereby also in German foreign policy.

#### **4.5 Preserve international obligations and multilateral responsibility**

Clear guidelines for strengthening gender justice in German foreign policy may emerge from the consistent application of existing obligations with regard to human rights, women's rights and international law. The WPS agenda furnishes an important framework here. The German NAP should be reinforced as a key frame of reference for gender-just security policy, building on the findings of feminist work on the peacebuilding potential of gender-just and inclusive approaches. The NAP will thus go beyond the protection of vulnerable groups and a narrow conception of security. On top of that, the federal government should position itself clearly in the EU and multilateral contexts and pursue gender justice as an explicit priority. This should occur both in specific bodies, such as the UN Commission on the Status of Women, and also as a cross-cutting

perspective, for example, in the case of the SDGs. One concrete step might be a clear commitment to reproductive health and reproductive rights in the NAP in response to the fatal rolling back of development policy associated with the so-called »global gag rule«. In that way German foreign policy could send a clear signal, not least as a counterweight to the growing pushback against women's rights, LGBTQ+ rights and gender justice, not to mention the widespread dismantling of established rights. It is also important to understand gender justice as a cross-cutting perspective, for example, with regard to climate policy, AI and socioeconomic rights. Cooperation should be reinforced with other European countries and with progressive partners across the world in order to develop common standards and practices.

## 5. Where to next for gender justice in German foreign policy?

At the normative and political levels the demise of feminist foreign policy in Germany represents a step backwards. But not everything can be reversed so easily. The traces of feminist foreign policy remain discernible in people's minds, structures and expectations. Whether the underlying substance of all this will be pursued further or completely suppressed depends on how strong the social and political pressure is and what expectations international partners retain. Nevertheless, the forces of persistence and resilience make it clear that the end of German FFP will not be the end of gender justice in German foreign policy. Even without the umbrella of feminist foreign policy certain structures and obligations remain and programmatic and political work towards gender justice can continue. Nevertheless, the political framework and will are lacking to take gender justice as a basis and goal of foreign policy and to apprehend it not merely as an add-on, but intersectionally. Given such an absence what should be its transformative character and political ambition are reduced to merely symptom-correcting measures with limited effect. As a result, other political concepts, such as the WPS agenda – which concern more than the protection of vulnerable groups, as well as girls and women – are also weakened.

For feminist foreign policy itself ultimately this does not amount to cancellation. Precisely in the face of polycrises an approach is needed that is capable of tackling a complex reality, aims at sustainable solutions and foregrounds the capabilities of resilient actors. Thus the concept continues nevertheless, even without Germany (Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères 2025b). But it does represent a setback for German foreign policy, given the loss of soft power observable in recent years, and very much contradicts the appeal to the interests- and outcomes-oriented policy that Foreign Minister Waidephul framed in his inauguration speech.

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## Abbreviations

ATT	Arms Trade Treaty (Vertrag über den Waffenhandel)
BMZ	Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development)
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
FFP	Feminist foreign policy
FDP	Feminist development policy
NAP	National Action Plan
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
WPS	Women, Peace and Security

## About the author

**Barbara Mittelhammer** is an independent political analyst. She advises and works with ministries, parliamentarians, think tanks, foundations, international and civil society organisations. She works and publishes on the development and application of feminist foreign policy, including in relation to Iran and Syria, human security, gender and the role of civil society in foreign and security policy. She is also a trained mediator.

## Practical recommendations for gender justice in German foreign policy

In the wake of Sweden's renunciation of a feminist foreign policy (FFP) now the new German government has followed suit. A feminist foreign policy no longer features in the Grand Coalition's agreement and even the feminist Guidelines have been removed from the Foreign Office webpage. This demonstrative abandonment sends a demoralising signal, in particular in a period in which genuine Realpolitik would require a foreign policy that acknowledges complexity and aims at sustainable solutions.

This is occurring in a political context in which gender justice is coming under pressure worldwide. Nevertheless, the research is unambivalent. Gender justice is the strongest indicator of a country's peaceableness, both internally and externally. Countries with higher gender justice go to war less often and undergo more economic development. Instead of setting »crisis management« and »feminist policy« at odds with one another we need a genuine outcomes-oriented policy.

What is the outlook for gender justice in German foreign policy? In this strategy paper, first, the strengths and weaknesses of German feminist foreign policy are analysed before presenting practical recommendations for the federal government. The following questions are at the heart of it. What are the consequences of Germany's abandonment of a feminist foreign policy in terms of the government's new orientation? What elements can be restored to how they were before feminist foreign policy and what approaches cannot be reversed? How can Germany continue to pursue a gender-just foreign policy and help to improve gender justice internationally?

For further information on this topic see:

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