

Insight report on the conference on understanding feminist foreign policy

The conference on Advancing Gender Equality through (Feminist) Foreign Policy convened by Minister for Foreign Affairs of Finland Pekka Haavisto was held in Helsinki, Finland on 16 November 2022. The conference took place at a time that challenges the rights of women and girls on many fronts. Simultaneously, more countries are adopting feminist foreign policy. This report summarizes the main themes that rose in the discussions at the conference.

Feminist foreign policy – a tool or a label?

To name or not to name?

The conference provided an opportunity to discuss the importance and effect of labelling or branding foreign policy as feminist. Some see that the name itself has meaning, that labelling in itself has value, as the world is created through words. Naming can help create identity and give agency. Some pondered if the word feminist could be replaced, but the general conclusion seemed to be that there is no alternative that would be politically or linguistically good enough.

On the other hand, some regard the substance and actions more important than labels. Foreign policies can contain strong support and strong wording on gender equality, even though the term ‘feminist foreign policy’ is not included in it. The concept of feminist foreign policy can also be seen as a tool. According to many, an explicitly feminist foreign policy can help institutionalise gender consciousness into foreign policy as a whole. A clearly outspoken goal can provide leadership and a means to measure progress. Adopting feminist foreign policy is considered to show a higher ambition to move beyond of what a country is currently doing and help mainstream gender perspective. The main value added in feminist foreign policy would be to have a clear strategy in foreign policy on gender equality. Countries that do not have explicitly feminist foreign policy risk to be excluded from some tables. However, the question of whether the label needs to become a divider could be posed. For the benefit of all, the group should be inclusive, not exclusive.

There is still doubt and misunderstanding related to the concept of feminist foreign policy among policy makers and the general public. Sometimes it is seen as a radical concept. Thus, there is a need to explain and justify what feminist foreign policy is and why it is needed, and to communicate how this is done.



Defining feminist foreign policy

There is a certain common baseline of understanding feminist foreign policy, despite the lack of a clear universal definition. In the policy world, feminist foreign policy is defined in terms of three R:s, rights, representation and resources, as established by the Swedish model. Germany has added D for diversity, there could also be D for data (in terms of monitoring) and in 2019, Sweden added a fourth “R” for reality; adapting to different realities.

There is a difference in how civil societies and government officials look at the definition of feminist foreign policy, according to **Rachel Tausendfreund** from the German Marshall Fund. The civil society definition, which draws from academic work, strives for peace, holistic security, equality and human rights for all as well as seeking to dismantle male centric (patriarchal) power structures. Today the dismantling of colonial and racist structures is usually explicitly included in an intersectional approach. Across the discipline there is a strong emphasis on demilitarization. The policy maker definition, on the other hand, prioritizes human rights and gender equality in a way that seeks to be incrementally transformative. Less emphasis is placed on demilitarization and more on equity and equality through the method of integrating gender equality and gender analyses (or power analyses) across all aspects of foreign policy.

Often, policy makers and politicians consider the gender equality aspect to be something separate from other policy areas. Questions of international order and security are seen to be of higher priority. No one intentionally decides that policies should be gender-blind. It just happens, unless habits and practices are well-established, as seemingly more important matters take over, especially during different crises. Feminist foreign policy should be seen as striving to create structural change even, and maybe even particularly, within the departments and countries themselves. Coherence between internal and external work is key for credibility. Feminist approach should be integrated in the form of a lens on all of the policies, rather than just isolating parts of policies and calling them feminist. Additionally a feminist lens (as well as women and important minority views themselves) needs to be included in all steps of policymaking and politics.



Challenges

Transformative changes always meet resistance, because of discriminatory structures, social norms and gender stereotypes. There is urgency in getting gender and diversity to be consistently integrated in foreign service. At the moment, gender tends to be an add-on or a side-event. The missing piece of the puzzle is gender-responsive leadership. Advancing gender equality should be an important part of managers' work and they should be held accountable for it.

The foreign and security policy environment has changed radically. It is crucial to ensure the agency and visibility of women in all foreign policy, including 'hard' security policy.

Finland

The Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland commissioned an independent study on gender equality work in the Finnish foreign policy that was published at the conference. The study can be [found on the Ministry's website](#). According to the study, gender equality is considered a self-evident value and goal, part of Finland's story and DNA. The government program has a very strong commitment to promoting equality. For example, 85 per cent of new development cooperation projects must include goals promoting gender equality. In addition, Finland is an important funder of UN Women and UNFPA and a member of the UN Human Rights Council in the term 2022–2024. There are also challenges. Firstly, taking gender equality goals as granted can lead to a lack of discussion and strategic thinking. Secondly, there are also challenges in implementing the commitment to gender equality in matters of so called hard security. For example, gender equality was not mentioned in the official preparation to Finland's NATO membership.

How is feminist foreign policy implemented?

Many of the countries currently endorsing feminist foreign policy have adopted it quite recently and are currently creating their strategies and toolkits. In some cases, the decision to adopt feminist foreign policy is built on years of work on advancing gender equality through foreign policy. Thus, there is already a pool of useful practises and tools to advance gender equality. However, as discussed earlier in the report, feminist foreign policy as a tool itself means striving for a more comprehensive gender conscious outlook on foreign policy as a whole, which requires a cultural change and renewed practices and tools to follow. The challenge lies in adopting a fully gender conscious foreign policy, and not only adopting certain policies that are feminist. To institutionalise the change, experts and resources are



needed in ministries. Training of civil servants is crucial. Women's agency and representation in high positions as foreign policy makers is a key aspect in implementing feminist foreign policy and advancing gender equality. While having women in decisive positions does not directly translate to feminist foreign policy, it does contribute to a more equal distribution of power that leads not only to strengthened gender equality but also to more balanced policies and more sustainable outcomes.

Countries try to find transformative measures together, incremental change is not enough. One reason for slow progress is insufficient funding and lack of political will. There is already a lot of data on what works.

As the first country to adopt feminist foreign policy, Sweden has left quite a heritage. Although Sweden no longer advocates feminist foreign policy, it gained a reputation as gender equality pioneer. In the study commissioned by Finland's Foreign Ministry, assistant professor **Leena Vastapuu** and research assistant **Minna Lyytikäinen** state that all of the countries currently following feminist foreign policy have based their policies on the Swedish model or have drawn from it.

In addition to states, key actors such as the United Nations and especially UN Women can support the process by inventing tools for feminist foreign policy. In promoting gender equality, working systematically and based on data is part of the solution. During the pandemic, the UNDP developed a gender response tracker with which it has followed the governments' response to COVID-19 from a gender perspective. It turned out that in countries that are strong on gender equality the response to COVID-19 was also stronger.

The Istanbul convention

The Istanbul convention is the most advanced treaty against violence against women in the world. The number of states parties is currently 37, but it needs to be bigger. The main challenge, at the moment, is the attacks by populist and anti-gender movements. When Türkiye left the convention there was a fear that others might follow, but the opposite happened: four new countries, including Ukraine, have since joined. The hope is for the convention to establish itself even outside of Europe. The convention could become universal, as it is the most advanced convention on this topic.

Finland, among others, has worked hard to advance the Istanbul Convention. Despite its successes, the agreement also faces opposition: for example, the EU's accession to the convention has not yet been possible. However, the convention has proven to be an efficient tool for the states in their work against



violence against women. In Finland, a major development has been the creation of support centers for victims of sexual assault.

Women, peace and security agenda

Effective implementation of the Women, peace and security (WPS) agenda requires long-term and dedicated work. As an example of this is the Crisis Management Centre of Finland. The organization has achieved near gender parity in experts deployed on civilian crisis management missions. Political will has had a pivotal role in the success.

Long-term policy and commitment is crucial for increasing women's participation in civilian crisis management. Strategies are important to advance gender equality, but sometimes their implementation is a challenge. Dismantling power structures is at the heart of feminist foreign policies and it is also crucial for enhancing women's agency and increasing the inclusiveness of participation.

Finland has also been very active in promoting the Women, peace and security agenda. One example is the Commitment 2025, where Finland cooperates with Spain. Gender equality and inclusion are at the core of Finland's peace mediation principles, and Finland has also allocated significant amounts of funds for this. In the United States, women, peace and security strategies are based on law enacted under the Trump administration. Under the Biden administration a new Gender Policy Council has been established at the White House.

Technology and online gender based violence (OGBV)

Societal and political participation is happening more and more online. Simultaneously, online harassment has increased notably, and threatens free speech and followingly even the legitimacy of democracies. Online harassment and hate speech directed to women and girls has grown drastically. This directly affects the opportunities and interest women and girls have in participating politics and public discussions.

Generation equality (GE) is a UN Women led five-year campaign aiming to accelerate especially those gender equality objectives that have suffered from slow global development. Finland leads the Technology and Innovations for Gender Equality Action Coalition together with Tunisia, Armenia, Chile, Rwanda and other actors. The goal is to increase the number of women and girls in technology and invest in gender-transformative technology.



It needs to be remembered that technology is merely a platform. Our offline world and culture translate into the online world. Thus, diversity in the tech industry is crucial for representation.

Diversity in feminist foreign policy

Feminism is much bigger than women, it concerns everyone. At the conference there were discussions on the nature of feminism and feminist foreign policy. A more critical approach is needed as to what feminism is. If gender equality is advanced in a patriarchal and colonial manner, great harm can be caused. It is important to keep the countries of the global South involved in the spirit of true partnership. True partnership is built together. Feminism or feminist foreign policy cannot be based only on Northern or Western views.

Intersectionality

It is important to consider the diversity of women. Gender intersects with other personal characteristics, such as age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, etc. Women facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination are often excluded and not visible even within the women's movements. For example, women with disabilities are more likely to experience violence and there are deep rooted prejudices against them. Creating space and support for diversity is key in allowing women and girls to exercise their full rights and make autonomous decisions concerning their own bodies free of violence and discrimination.

Push back the pushback

Research has shown that the anti-gender movement is very organized and well financed. There are legal limitations and challenges in terms of SRHR all over the world. Civil society actors have faced full prohibitions of their work, losing funding and delegitimization. Anti-gender actors have the advantage of narratives, that rely on traditions, religious values and established societal concepts. These are used against rights of different groups. Having access to science-based, age-appropriate, comprehensive sexuality education is a precondition to the enjoyment of not just SRHR, but also other rights.



Role of civil society

Including civil society in the process of shaping feminist foreign policy was considered crucial. Civil society should be a central partner for governments. *“I don’t think we could call ourselves feminists if we didn’t include civil society in all deliberations and development policies that we do”.*

Civil society actors are more vulnerable than multilateral organisations. Capacity building is important, and the civil society actors need to be protected. There are big gaps in the funding of civil societal actors and organisations. Donor countries were criticized for having too low risk-taking capability. The smaller the organisation, usually the higher risk is attached to it. Donor countries should shape their risk profile, and accept the higher risks that come with smaller organisations, keeping in mind that sometimes higher risks pay also greater rewards.

Civil societies in many countries function in diminishing spaces. In countries with human rights violations, also work carried out by civil society organisations is being attacked. For this reason it is important to work in a politically tactical manner, and strategize to keep functioning and reach people that need help. Strategic work needs planning and data. In addition, communication campaigns need to be used to challenge harmful local narratives. *“Sometimes if you go in with a hammer, you are going to be thrown out and then you are not going to reach anybody.”* It is important to have allies in the governments and create common ground where possible.

Finally

There is still a need to explain feminist foreign policy and communicate why it is needed. Gender blindness is often unintentional, but work is required to correct it. A transformative approach is needed to mainstream gender.

In addition to the three R’s definition (rights, representation, resources), D could be added for data as well as diversity. Data is needed to allow better strategies and policies. However, data alone is not enough; it needs to be utilized in an efficient manner to gain results.

It is paramount to continue close cooperation between countries advancing gender equality through (feminist) foreign policy.