



feminist dialogue series

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Feminist Foreign and Development Policies: A Reflection from a Rwandan Feminist

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On March 1, 2023, the German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock launched a new feminist foreign policy, followed by the launch of guidelines for a new feminist development policy by the German Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development Svenja Schulze. The policy and guidelines aim at anchoring gender equality in Germany's foreign diplomacy and development work by promoting and strengthening rights for women, girls and other marginalised groups around the world, lobbying for better representation of women in leadership, the allocation of more resources to address gender inequalities and changing powers and structures that continue to reinforce gender inequalities.

Germany joined a growing number of governments that adopted feminist foreign policies (FFP). In 2014, Sweden was the first to adopt such a policy, and this set precedence to other countries including Canada in 2017, France in 2019, Mexico in 2020, Libya, Luxembourg and Spain in 2021, and more recently Chile in 2022.

So, what are feminist foreign policies, and what role should governments play in promoting feminist principles in their foreign diplomatic engagements? Are these policies truly designed and implemented to address the most pressing issues of our times?

Do they recognise and build on all the amazing work done by feminist movements and activists who work tirelessly to bring about change in their communities? What impact do they have on the lives of the most marginalised groups, especially women and girls in all their diversities in my beloved country Rwanda, and in other developing nations? Or are these policies business as usual, if not simply extension of patriarchal and colonial power structures that continue to dominate the global political and economic order?

While I agree with German Minister Baerbock that feminist foreign policies are not meant to be 'a



missionary pamphlet to naively improve the world’, African feminists like me have high expectations placed on these policies. In the past, FFPs have generated political debates about their relevance, with countries taking different approaches to defining their focus and approach. There is no agreed definition of FFP and what they should entail, however the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy (CFFP) highlights five principles that should guide all FFPs; namely peace and security, anti-racism, climate justice, human rights and international cooperation. Indeed, there is growing global recognition that gender equality is a prerequisite in achieving sustainable development, but I believe FFPs offer an opportunity for nations to re-evaluate their political priorities and radically redefine their foreign diplomacy engagements in all sectors including trade and investment, global health, migration, and so on. It is no doubt that foreign relations have always been rooted in structures built on patriarchy, colonialism, imperialism and racism, which continue to exacerbate global inequalities.



A lesson from the pioneer Feminist Foreign Policy

In 2014, Sweden was the first to adopt a FFP, which was considered to be more comprehensive than other policies that followed. It sought to address persisting gender inequalities and challenge systems that perpetuate global inequalities around the world. This move sent a clear message to feminists around the world: a message of hope and solidarity. The policy led to an increase in Sweden’s foreign aid spending on gender equality from \$2 billion in 2016 to almost 2.7 billion in 2019¹. In addition, the Swedish government

argues that the FFP has contributed to influencing positive global policy outcomes that address issues like women in political representation, sexual and gender-based violence and the peace and security agenda. While the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on women, peace and security was adopted in 2000, the Swedish government played a key role in broadening the agenda and influencing countries in conflict and post-conflict settings to adopt context-relevant National Action Plans (NAPs). These efforts are commendable. I have seen firsthand the evolution of Rwanda’s NAP since the first was adopted in 2009. The initial plan focused on increasing the number of women in leadership positions at all levels; while the second NAP adopted in 2018 built on the gains made and emphasized the need for meaningful representation of women in their diversities while also tackling underlying causes of violence and conflict.

A deeper analysis of the Swedish policy and other subsequent policies, however, indicates that these policies failed to uphold intersectional feminist principles in other important and pressing issues, such as migration and human security. These policies lacked a clear understanding of how patriarchal and neocolonial power structures shape human security and politics, and what is needed to transform these structures. African feminists can no longer praise powerhouse countries in the Global North for championing progressive human rights issues such as the right of LGBTQIA+ people, safe and legal abortion, and women in peacekeeping missions, while on the other hand pushing for policies that are counter-productive, if not inherently harmful, exploitative and extractive in nature. Many of the countries that adopted FFPs also push for policies that contribute to the destruction of the environment and the resources that communities rely on, policies that finance and support militarized and violent security structures, and hugely profiting from the production and proliferation of weapons of war around the world.



In 2022, the new Swedish government dropped the F word from its foreign policy, arguing

¹ Donor tracker, an initiative by SEEK Development: https://donortracker.org/donor_profiles/sweden/gender



that the label was less important than the content and that it will not affect the country's commitments to gender equality. While this did not come as a shock from a right-wing government, it is cause for alarm. Naming a policy feminist is not just a label, it is about taking the necessary steps to pursue a transformative agenda and build a more equitable and just world. I take great inspiration from the Charter of Feminist Principles For African Feminists of 2006 which stipulates *"We define and name ourselves publicly as Feminists because (...) we recognize that the work of fighting for women's rights is deeply political, and the process of naming is political too (...). By naming ourselves as Feminists we politicise the struggle for women's rights, we question the legitimacy of the structures that keep women subjugated, and we develop tools for transformatory analysis and action"* (Page 4).



So what does feminist transformation look like?

Past experience has shown that when gender equality policies fail to address structural and systemic factors that continue to reinforce inequalities, such as hegemonic masculinity² in both informal and formal structures, then we are doing more harm than good. In my experience working with women's rights organisations in Rwanda; I have seen first-hand the unintended negative impact of programs that seek to enhance women's economic resilience using savings groups or access to productive assets like land, without actively challenging and changing the

² Hegemonic masculinity is a term used by gender experts to explain a practice that legitimizes masculine norms and men's dominance in society over women and other subordinate groups.

power and control that men hold over women and resources, or without transforming gender roles and relations. These programs are not sustainable, in fact they place more burden on women who now, thanks to 'empowerment', have to divide their time between working outside and in the home.

The World Health Organization estimates that 33% of all African women will be abused by a partner or ex-partner in their lifetime³, while 37% of women and girls aged between 15-49 in Rwanda have ever experienced gender-based violence in their lifetime.⁴ The Government of Rwanda is known to promote gender parity in leadership, education, health, and other sectors of development. However much remains to be done. Gender equality is not just about numbers, it is about changing where power lies, such as rigid gender norms and practices that place able-bodied cis-hetero men⁵ at the top of the power chain while everyone else is accorded less value and opportunity. Rwanda is the first country in the world with female majority in parliament with 61.3% in the Chamber of Deputies, but this has not necessarily translated into laws that promote inclusiveness. Recently, Members of Parliament rejected a bill that could have allowed adolescent girls below 18 to access much needed contraceptives simply because majority of parliamentarians felt the bill goes against Christian and cultural values that Rwanda holds dearly. Over the past seven years alone, the country has recorded all time high numbers of teenagers becoming pregnant, because they do not have access to accurate information and services to enable them to have autonomy over their bodies and make informed choice about their lives. Similarly, maternal mortality is still the leading cause of death among women in Rwanda; where nearly half (47%)



³ World Health Organisation (2021): Violence Against Women, key facts; <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>

⁴ National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (2021): Rwanda Demographic and Health Survey 2019-20 Final Report. Kigali, Rwanda.

⁵ Cis-hetero - short for cisgender heterosexual. Cisgender means a person whose gender identity matches their sex assigned at birth, while heterosexual means a person who is sexually or romantically attracted exclusively to people of the opposite sex.



of all pregnancies are unintended while 22% end in induced and unsafe abortions with no proper medical care.⁶ Although the current national laws for abortion have been reformed, they are rooted in post-colonial and religious rhetoric that clearly criminalizes women, girls and pregnant people's access to much needed healthcare.

In recent years, young people from intersectional movements in Namibia have been campaigning for the reform of the abortion law under the hashtag #LegalizeAbortionNA. This law was inherited from apartheid era in South Africa in 1975. The law is very restrictive and considers abortion to be illegal except in cases of incest, rape, or where the mother or child's life is in danger. In 1996 South Africa reformed its abortion law, and young Namibians have been campaigning for the same. They consider this law to be outdated, colonial in nature and unable to meet socio-economic needs of young women and other pregnant people today. Few who can afford it have to pay hefty prices to get an illegal abortion locally or are forced to travel to South Africa. Therefore, it is safe to say that such laws perpetuate social and economic inequalities affecting poor and marginalised groups. Even though law reform demands have faced backlash from Parliament, cultural and religious leaders, what inspires me, and most certainly many other African feminists, is the unified voice of diverse groups of people and the centering of needs and voices of young feminists and LGBTQIA+ within the abortion movement.

Finally, there is growing evidence that feminist movements are key drivers to social transformation, and their power can no longer be ignored. However, only less than 1% of global gender equality funding reaches women's grassroots organisations, according to the Association for Women's Rights in Development, AWID in 2021.⁷ In the same year, the United Nations Generation Equality Forum promised more than \$40 billion to advance gender equality, but these promises

are yet to be realized. The current trend is that donors commit to address gender inequalities but fail to match their commitments with substantial funding, without which these commitments would never be realized. In addition, there is growing transnational anti-gender, anti-feminist movements fueled and funded by authoritarian governments, multinational corporations and religious groups based in the Global North, primarily the United States of America, as seen by recent campaigns to push for anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation in Uganda, Ghana, Kenya to name but a few African countries. So, what is needed?

"You have these relationships with donors... and they say, 'Yes yes yes', but then they expect you, in terms of the actual way the relationship works, to quickly adjust to a very colonised way of doing things." - Mr. Chernor Bah, Co-Founder and Co-CEO of Purposeful, an Africa-rooted global hub for girls' organising and activism based in Sierra Leone.

States promoting feminist foreign policies should take bold steps to revisit their funding modalities, because the distribution of resources has always been tied to the norms and conditions imposed by Western funders. This requires building partnerships with feminist organisations based on trust and dialogue, providing direct and flexible financial support to grassroots women and gender expansive movements that respond to their needs, and moving away from one-off or short term funding that does not take into consideration the evolving, long-term nature of feminist activism. In Rwanda for instance, while many non-governmental organisations receive funds for gender equality programs, these funds are limited to short-term projects which perfectly tick donor accountability boxes but fail to bring about the change that is truly needed. Many young women are finding new ways of subverting traditional corridors of power to build collective voice and demand for change using social media platforms for instance, but they lack funding to build long-term sustainable movements. These are the types of innovative efforts that need to be supported by donors, especially



⁶ Guttmacher Institute (2013): Abortion in Rwanda: Factsheet.

⁷ <https://www.awid.org/news-and-analysis/only-1-gender-equality-funding-going-womens-organisations-why>



champions of feminist foreign policies. The German government for instance, announced plans to allocate more than 90% of newly committed project funds towards advancing gender equality globally. It remains to be seen whether feminist principles articulated in their foreign policies will indeed translate to practice that ultimately changes the course of foreign diplomacy.



Feminist Foreign Policies as an accountability tool

“Dismantling power has always been at the heart of feminism. Making sure hegemonic powers are questioned and held accountable especially that foreign policy is silent on a pertinent issue like racial justice is not going to fly”- Ms. Rosebell Kagumire, Writer and Editor at AfricanFeminism.com, speaking at a webinar on the sidelines of the Commission for the Status of Women in March 2023.

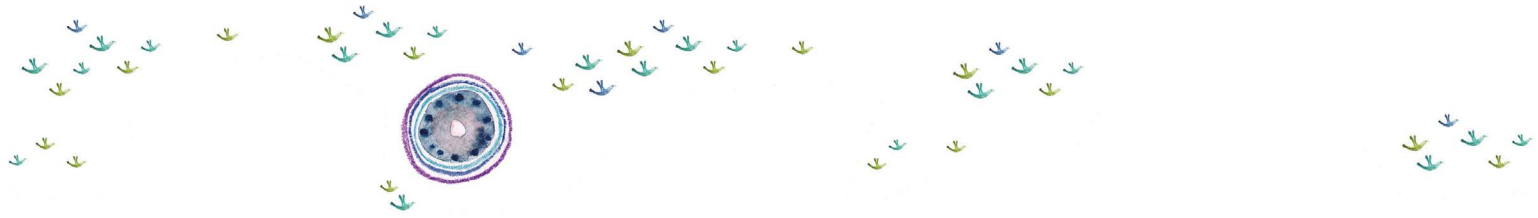
So how can the commitments under FFPs be translated into practice? How can they achieve desired changes? I believe that accountability should be at their core. Without accountability we cannot account for much progress. So, establishing mechanisms for planning, implementation and regular review of policy plans should be prioritised. These mechanisms not only apply to government bodies responsible for implementing foreign policies, but they should also apply to other non-state actors like multinational corporations and organisations responsible for delivering public policy.

Furthermore, FFPs provide opportunity to feminists both in the Global South and Global North to work together to demand for accountability in the implementation of gender commitments, as well as to governments to deepen their analysis of intersectional feminist issues in order to adapt to new and emerging issues.

Conclusion

The rise of fundamentalism and anti-gender movements around the world is one clear indication that a new and radical approach to foreign diplomacy is needed more than ever. Feminist diplomacy should be centered on the promotion of human security, trust and mutual cooperation of all nations. Without challenging and seeking to transform eurocentric, colonial and patriarchal power structures that continue to dominate the world order, FFPs fail to address the most fundamental challenges we face today. What is needed for Germany and other champions of feminist foreign policies, as some feminist scholars have termed it, is a renewed commitment, or FFP 2.0. if you like, where countries should reassess their political priorities and seek to promote bold, feminist transformative policies and practices with human rights at the centre; policies which transcend gender parity rhetoric to focus on disrupting and dismantling systems and structures that reinforce inequalities and discrimination on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion, and so on.





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The Feminist Dialogue Series

The Idea of the Feminist Dialogue Series was born during an International Workshop on Political Feminism in Africa organized by the Mozambican Feminist Platform Forum Mulher and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) in October 2016 in Maputo. The gathering brought together over 50 feminist activists and scholars from all over the continent. Inspired by the stimulating discussions and interventions at the workshop, this series is intended as a platform to share important feminist reflections. In this way the series wants to contribute to the development and spreading of African feminist knowledge to transform political and economic conditions on the continent towards social and gender justice.

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