Germany's Feminist Foreign Policy in Crisis

27 FEBRUARY 2025

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The world is currently experiencing the highest number of conflicts since the Second World War. Arms proliferation and increasing militarization exacerbate the vulnerability of marginalized groups, highlighting the need for policies that prioritize peace and inclusion. In response, several countries, including Sweden, Canada, and Mexico, adopted Feminist Foreign Policies. Following their example, the German government adopted its own Feminist Foreign Policy in 2021. Four years after its implementation and amid governmental change, it is time to draw some conclusions on the German feminist foreign policy.

But what constitutes the "feminist" in the context of Feminist Foreign Policy? There is no universal definition for the concept of feminism, as it differs depending on the context and actors involved. Thus, the implementation of feminist foreign policy varies among countries practicing it. However, there is a consensus on its core principles. At its core, feminist foreign policy emphasizes human security over military strength, constituting a human rights-based peace policy. This policy views gender justice and the dismantling of existing violent structures and power relations in the international system as a prerequisite for peace. Global disarmament is, inherently, a long-term goal of feminist foreign policy. Furthermore, feminist peace is a form of positive peace that goes beyond ending direct physical violence and war, requiring the elimination of structural violence, particularly discrimination. Its intersectional understanding accounts for the interaction of mechanisms of oppression based on gender, sexual identity, race, and religion, among other factors.

The German feminist foreign policy is based on the 3R+D model – Rights, Representation, Resources, and Diversity – covering six foreign policy areas, including peace and security policy, humanitarian aid and crisis management as well as human rights policy. In its guidelines, the Federal Foreign Office stresses three main areas of action. First, gender budgeting; second, internal diversity aiming to boost the representation of women in senior roles and advance non-discrimination; and third, gender mainstreaming in different areas of external engagement, such as ensuring equal participation in inclusive peace processes, combatting gender-based violence in armed conflicts, as well as "gender-sensitive approaches to arms control and arms export control."

While the German Federal Foreign Office recognizes that its Feminist Foreign Policy won't be the solution to all obstacles, it describes it as a first step in the right direction of a more peaceful and prosperous society. However, critical voices regard the guidelines as a liberal-feminist understanding of feminist foreign policy, lacking acknowledgment of (post)colonial and patriarchal power structures and thus, transformative character. Leftist Feminists like Rosa Burç and Helin Dirik take a more critical stance, arguing that Germany's Feminist Foreign Policy as a performative act intended to award German advocacy a progressive image.

Recognizing that foreign policy transpires within capitalist and racialized structures, the question arises: How can the foreign policy of Germany as a capitalist and imperialist state be feminist? The most striking example of why this seems impossible is German militarism. To quote the Federal Foreign Office, "Feminist foreign policy aims at arms control and disarmament. Human security and the protection of the civilian population, [...] are among its central concerns." Yet, instead of disarmament, Germany has been setting records for arms exports every year since the governing coalition of Chancellor Olaf Scholz took office.

In 2021, Germany authorized the export of €9.35 billion in defence articles, and two years later, that number increased by €2.85 billion. In 2024, that trend continued with €3.85 billion more than in 2021, including €8.1 billion for weapons and €5.1 billion for other defence equipment. As the second-largest arms supplier to Ukraine, this upsurge can partly be explained by the ongoing war in Ukraine. However, as its fifth-largest destination, €230.9 million was authorized for export to Turkey, where the AKP/MHP government has launched repeated military operations against the Kurdish liberation movement and the women's revolution in Rojava, displacing thousands of people.

This is an example of the Federal Foreign Office's rhetorical commitment to human security, while it still supports the marginalization of local movements fighting against inequality in favour of capitalist interests. Another recent and very prominent example is the war in Gaza, where nearly 70 percent of verified deaths were women and children and almost 1 million women and girls have been displaced. Moreover, records reveal that on average, Israeli explosive weapons struck homes every four hours, tents and temporary shelters every 17 hours, schools, and hospitals every four days, and aid distribution points and warehouses every 15 days.

German foreign minister Annalena Baerbock justifies this position by stating that," civilian places can also lose their protected status because they are abused by terrorists." In addition to unwavering rhetoric support, Germany is the second-largest arms supplier to Israel, accounting for 47% of Israel's total imports of conventional arms. Considering that the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, alongside countless human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, called for an immediate ceasefire and protection for civilians since the beginning of the war, the Federal Foreign Office's continuous military support for Israel makes statements like "Human security and the protection of the civilian population, [...] are among its central concerns" very inconsistent.

On the contrary, we are once again witnessing Germany's support for military intervention under the preface of fighting terrorism, maintaining a progressive image, but completely disregarding existing violent imperial structures. Historically, this has not led to sustainable peace and social justice for women and marginalized groups. In Afghanistan, an example mentioned in the guidelines for Germany's foreign policy in practice, women have lost every bit of freedom they once had, yet, Germany takes no accountability for its role in this crisis despite its continuous military presence during the 20 years of war.

In conclusion, the Kurdish liberation movement, the war in Gaza, and women in Afghanistan are cases that validate leftist feminist critique in that Germany as a capitalist and imperialist state cannot practice intersectional feminism. Thus, it is out of question whether Germany's Feminist Foreign policy can have a transformative effect on existing violent structures and power relations.