

Feminist Foreign Policy in Action Must (also) be Inclusive, Realistic and Robust

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Context

Western ideas about foreign policy and its relation to war have evolved significantly in the past 200 years. Initially war was considered a legitimate instrument, or, as Carl von Clausewitz said, as “the continuation of policy by other means.” Rulers who could not win power, wealth, or territory by other means, launched wars – with World War I as the zenith of these traditions. Not uncoincidentally, it was in response to this war that the international women’s peace movement was born and codified at the International Congress of Women conference, held in the midst of the great war at The Hague, Netherlands in April 1915. With this and similar protests, an idealist movement was born to counter Western realist/militarist traditions. War was not a legitimate instrument of policy, it was a failure of policy, a sickness to be cured. This thinking led to the League of Nations and the Kellogg-Briand Pact signed by Germany, France, and the United States in 1928, whose leaders agreed to “condemn recourse to war for the solution of international controversies and renounce it as an instrument of national policy....” Yet only a few years later, Western idealists in France, the UK, and the United States would confront the fact that not every ruler can be persuaded by peaceful bargaining to abandon aggressive plans – even when one is willing to sacrifice the freedom of vulnerable nations in the name of pacification.

The struggle to find the right balance between realism and idealism remains a central challenge of progressive foreign policymakers today. While activists can and should push the public and policymakers toward ideals, policymakers must make decisions in a very imperfect world, where choices are seldom simple or one-dimensional.

A strength of a feminist approach is that it forces more inclusive and complex thinking by placing the focus on those vulnerable to the worst effects of policies. One important throughline of feminist thought is to focus on policies that increase equality and make life better for women and girls – as a goal in itself, but also as a means toward the goal of a more just and peaceful world.

A few key principles should guide Germany’s adoption of a feminist-informed foreign policy.

Diverse Feminism - The government has already announced that it will pursue an inclusive approach, broadening Sweden’s 3 Rs with a “+D”. This is an important policy evolution; feminism in 2022 must be explicitly “intersectional”. In translation, this jargon term only means that today’s feminism understands that the gender divide is not the only important barrier in German and other societies. Put another way: we need policies that understand the realities of *all* women, including queer women and women from minority communities, and policies that support them, too. For Germany it is especially appropriate to adopt an approach that focuses not only on women and girls but also vulnerable and marginalized groups (ethnic or religious minorities, LGBTQ* communities). The point is not to take the focus off women, but to ensure that women in their full diversity enjoy equal rights and find representation in policy making.

In practice this means adapting the gender-specific dichotomy to focus on the question of who is empowered and who is (how) disempowered, with a focus on rights, representation, and resources. Who is demanding or lacking rights or unequal protected by the law? Whose voices and perspectives are missing in the room where decisions are taken? Which communities or specific needs are under resourced? A country-by-country analysis of the local exclusions will provide a start to an inclusive feminist approach to foreign policy toward that country.

To make its diverse feminist foreign policy credible, Germany must lead by example with a strong “3R+D” approach at home. What proportion of people serving in the Auswärtigen Dienst and especially the höhere Dienst are women, but also how many are not the children of academics? Is there adequate representation of Germany’s largest minorities? Adequate AA resources need to be allocated to achieving more diverse personnel across all levels, with clear benchmarks, targeting hiring, and evaluations.

This is not only the right thing to do, it makes for smarter, more informed, policies. Those representing Germany should better represent a full picture of Germany. In addition, the data tells us that more diverse teams make better decisions.¹ Policymaking teams or negotiating tables that are diverse in both gender and background, will think sharper together because a broader reality is included, which challenges stale thinking.²

Feminist foreign policy in practice needs a more differentiated approach to military force. Here it is the theorists that need to catch up to policymakers.

Classic feminist theory was shaped by its creators: white, Western women. As a result three biases are built into the original and still dominant feminist conceptualizations of war and peacemaking: 1) Conflict is about domination and conquest, not about fighting for basic human rights; 2) Agency is assumed (wars are started by “our men”) and hence the default concept is a war of aggression, not a choice about whether to defend by force one’s community or life (a peaceful resolution to WWI in 1915 would not have ended the self-determination of the French or Germans, nor meant the total subjugation of Germans to French, or vis-versa) 3) Men make and wage war; women suffer from war and are engaged in prevention and peacemaking.

All of these assumptions fit the situation addressed by peace activists at the Hauge in 1915, but cause misapprehensions when applied to the people in, for example, Kharkiv, Ukraine today.

Certainly, the avoidance of war, or conflict prevention, is both a wise and noble goal for German foreign policy – and it should continue to be emphasized and well-resourced – more inclusive policy teams and aims will help. But German foreign policy must also

1 [Diversity Matters](#), McKinsey Report, February 2015. See also the summarizing article: <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/why-diversity-matters>

2 “Why Diverse Teams are Smarter”, Harvard Business Review, November 4, 2016, <https://hbr.org/2016/11/why-diverse-teams-are-smarter>

have answers in a world where conflicts can be initiated by one third party against another – including answers not provided by the UN's article 2 or NATO's article V.

In a recent interview Judith Butler said that she “would hope” the Russian war on Ukraine would be ended by internal peace movements. “I would hope that there could be a democracy movement within Russia and that people themselves would insist that they do not want this war...I would hope that the military falls apart ...or lays down its weapons in a velvet revolution.”³ Understanding that this can be viewed as a naïve or unrealistic, Butler adds: “but it would be nice if this idea, this unrealistic idea became popular...Sometimes we get so realistic and strategic ...that we forget that there are ideals.” A realistic form of feminist foreign policy can help as a framework to institutionalize a place for ideals within strategy to create a more peaceful and just world.

Though there is nothing that can provide as easy a blanket solution in this complex world, there is a simple guiding principle to start: *there is a difference between offense and defense*. Butler did not suggest that a democratic peace movement in Ukraine will bring peace – because it cannot. Ukrainians can only decide to end the fighting and accept subjugation – this is not the same as peace (as feminist theorists who have long argued that lack of war does not equal security should know).

A thoughtful reluctance to employ force is crucial, as is vigilance against conflation between aggression and protective/responsive measures (via “preemptive” assaults, for example). But a blanket rejection of force capabilities can aid subjugation as much as peace.

Being on the side of allies (or others) defending themselves from or fighting against subjugation must be compatible with a modern feminist foreign policy. How would this work in practice?

To the principle of Bündnistreue, one could capture a framework for Germany military force that is compatible with a pragmatic feminist approach also with 3Rs. Ready, Reluctant, Resolved: Germany needs to be ready (also equipped) to defend itself and others also in conventional (and cyber) military terms – while remaining reluctant to escalate or enter conflict. Germany's reluctance can serve as a useful check to allies who may occasionally resort to quickly to force (certainly Washington has been guilty of this). Yet, when there is a clear act of aggression and attempt to subjugate a people/group who are willing and able to mount a defense – Germany should be resolved to aid in this defense, together with allies, as robustly as its partners do.

³ [Judith Butler: "I am hopeful that the Russian army will lay down its arms" \(ara.cat\)](#)