

Priorities for a Feminist Foreign Policy towards Latin America and the Caribbean

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How to reconcile the well-being of the state with the well-being of its citizens? This complex and difficult question was the main issue raised by members of the Unidas network between Latin America, the Caribbean and Germany on October 20th, 2022, in a consultation that aimed to discuss which should be the guiding principles of a feminist foreign policy towards Latin America¹.

Indeed, the region is quite peculiar. There are very few traditional conflicts, but a lot of violence, in urban and in rural settings, where the state lacks control over its territory. In fact, large proportions of the national domain are dominated by organized crime, which is often the one responsible for providing services. The region is rich with natural resources. Home to the largest rainforest in the world, it also hosts the largest potable water reservoirs and a multitude of diverse flora and fauna. The traditional knowledge of how to live in harmony with nature is guarded by the traditional people who live within the vast green realm of its forests. All of which are under threat with the increase of environmental crimes and violence against human rights and environmental defenders. While the natural beauty of this region makes it an attraction to tourists, its wilderness also attracts criminal groups willing to use it as a route to carry out illegal activities. And what is worse, recently the region - along with the rest of the world - is confronting an authoritarian wave that is putting democratic principles, basic rights, and the environment under threat. From drug, human and wildlife trafficking to resource exploitation and widespread corruption in a context of inequality, the challenges that threaten the citizenry in Latin America and the Caribbean are not simple and cannot be overcome without seeking a coherence between foreign and domestic policies.

In this context, the participants of the seminar discussed which should be the priorities for a German feminist foreign policy, while also hearing from representatives of the Federal Foreign Office about its making and what is expected from it. This paper will analyse which priorities were indicated by members of the Unidas network. For this purpose, the paper is divided into three main sections. The first will highlight the process of building a feminist foreign policy in Germany, highlighting the aspects considered most positive by participants of the event. The second will highlight key results of a survey carried out among members of the Unidas network. The third will highlight the priorities according to the group discussion during the seminar. Concluding remarks highlight key takeaways for a German feminist foreign policy towards Latin America.

¹ The seminar was entitled "Perspectives towards a Feminist Foreign Policy". It was carried out on October 20th, 2022, and counted with the presence of at least 69 participants, mostly members of the network. In that opportunity, representatives from the Federal Foreign Office presented the elaboration process of the country's feminist foreign policy. In addition, the results from a survey focused on the members' take about the guiding principles of a feminist foreign policy were presented. The presentations were followed by a lively debate among members. Key takeaways are presented in this short paper.

Building a Feminist Foreign Policy in Germany

During the event, representatives of the Latin America and the Caribbean Unit as well as of the Feminist Foreign Policy Unit at the German Federal Foreign Office highlighted key issues deriving from the drafting process of the German feminist foreign policy.

First and foremost, it was highlighted that the drafting process was inclusive and participatory, not only involving individuals and civil society organizations from Germany, but also peer countries with similar experiences. As a result, the process was the result of several consultations and meetings among different stakeholders, including through a ministerial conference, and consultation with civil society organizations leading to the forthcoming publication of guidelines.

A key aspect, highly praised by members of the Unidas network, was the perception that rather than the end, a feminist foreign policy should be the means. As a result, the Federal Foreign Office was committed to FFP as a process and as a strategy. This perspective was welcomed by the seminar participants, who highlighted foreign policy, as a public policy, should aim for the well-being of citizens. The German feminist foreign policy can potentially be an instrument to promote human rights to all, and particularly vulnerable groups.

Also worth mentioning was the definition of priorities. While consultations to define these are underway, the main goal of a feminist foreign policy is to serve as a strategy to accomplish women's rights and promote gender equality. A central role is played by 3 Rs (strengthening rights, resources, and representation) and advocacy for social diversity. This way, the Federal Foreign Office is making sure that the full diversity of women and vulnerable groups and their specific contexts are taken into consideration. As a result, an intersectional and diverse approach is being used.

Some key areas of interest are already clear, including peace and security, crisis prevention and humanitarian assistance, human rights, climate and energy, external action with regards to economy, culture and society.

One more aspect is the focus on learning from other experiences, including from Latin American countries that have and/or are attempting similar endeavours, such as Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and others. This is fundamental as the reality in Latin America is considerably different and the kind of challenges confronted by the region are often absent from major international discussions, including for instance the women, peace, and security agenda. Latin America and the Caribbean do not fit either of those realities, however, it confronts several situations with war-like effects to its citizens, particularly women and girls living in affected areas, such as the forests or the periphery of urban centres dominated by organized crime.

Eventually, it was stated that feminist foreign policy was understood as a joint effort: At the same time that the guidelines were developed, the concrete application and feedback to them would be reached through mainstreaming through all the different units of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the case of Latin America and the Caribbean this would mean that it would be the respective unit as well as embassies in charge thinking about specific ways to implement feminist foreign policy principles in all the relevant activities.

Guiding principles of a feminist foreign policy: a Latin American and Caribbean perspective

Between August 5th and August 26th, 2022, 31 women from Latin America and Germany responded to a survey aimed at understanding what they consider as a priority to a feminist

foreign policy². While specific results will be highlighted below, it became clear that the respondents put an emphasis not only on human rights, but also on the preservation of the environment, indicating that the environment is a key aspect of women's rights as well. It is also worth noting that a less traditional approach to foreign policy was taken, as respondents focused on the individuals living in a country as the key priority of a feminist foreign policy, rather than the states themselves.

Main results can be highlighted below:

- 96,8% of respondents affirmed that the state has a very important role when it comes to guaranteeing the respect and promotion of women's rights as well as environmental rights.
- Gender equality was appointed as the main guiding principle to a feminist foreign policy (24,2% of respondents). Other key principles would be access to justice and rights-based approach (19,8%); economic justice and resource availability (16,5%); intersectional feminism (13,2%); equal representation in politics/leadership roles (13,2%); environmental Justice (6,7%); inclusion (4,4%); and diversity (1,1%).
- The understanding of national interest was somewhat broad. In fact, 16,9% of respondents affirmed that national interest refers to human rights. Another 25,8% related it to the well-being of the population; economic development (17,2%); safety (8,6%); the preservation of the environment (7,5%); sovereignty 7,5%) and the protection of the national territory (2,1%), were also indicated as conforming the national interest by members of the network.
- When asked about why a country should have a feminist foreign policy, four main issues appeared as the main reasons for respondents. To promote and guarantee the human rights of women and girls was indicated as the main reason by 16,8%; to redress inequality and advance in substantive equality was picked as the key reason for another 16,8% of respondents. Banishing all forms of oppression and exploitation of women and girls (14,6%) and complying with international commitments that protect and promote women's human rights (14,6%) were also highlighted by respondents. Other issues raised include putting an end to wars (7,9%); promoting economic justice (6,7%); promoting environmental justice (4,5%); strengthening the feminist movement (1,1%) and defending the national interest (1,1%).
- As per the priority themes, the absolute majority with 27,2% of respondents indicated that gender equality should be the number one priority. Other key issues raised by members were women's rights (15,2%); positive peacebuilding (14,1%); environment preservation (12%); human security (12%); Corruption (4,3%); organized crime (4,3%); demilitarization (3,3%); disarmament and non-proliferation (3,3%); inclusion (2,2%); UN peace operations (1%); visibility of women defenders (1%).
- Finally, regarding the state accountability mechanisms that should be incorporated to implement a feminist foreign policy, the congruence of its foreign policy with the promotion of and respect for women's rights ranked top among responses of interviewees, with 74,2%. Other mechanisms appointed by members were opening lines of funding for feminist organizations (19,3%); Monitoring of progress through the participation of civil society (3,2%); and financial support to business women (3,2%).

² The idea of carrying out a survey was raised in the group thematic discussions around feminist foreign policy on June 20th, 2022. The survey was jointly produced by members of this group. The survey was open to all members of the Unidas network and results were presented during the October 20th seminar.

Priorities for a German feminist foreign policy in Latin America

Stemming from the seminar carried out on October 20th, a major discussion among participants was **how to transform a feminist foreign policy approach into a state rather than a government policy**. The concern is that with changes in government, particularly in a context of democratic backsliding, several achievements related to women's rights suffered setbacks. As a result, a major question is how to guarantee that effective public policies are not changed in the aftermath of elections when new state authorities come to power. While this question was central to the debate among members, other related priorities were raised. They can be summarized as follows:

The relationship between the domestic and the international spheres

The need to harmonize foreign policy with the domestic sphere was present in most conversations raised by participants. They argued that traditionally foreign policy is concerned about the image of the state rather than the well-being of its citizens and that one cannot be achieved without the other. One concern raised was that there is an artificial separation between these two domains, which must be overcome. For instance, a participant from Argentina highlighted that the involvement of the ministry of women, gender and diversity with the elaboration of a feminist foreign policy by the ministry of foreign affairs is key.

Also stemming from this discussion is the need to support women's leadership. What can still be found in many Latin American countries is a structural misogynist approach to women's leadership, who confront discrimination and extra barriers in professional and political roles. As a result, there needs to be some thinking into the conditions that must be generated for women to effectively perform public roles. What is more, an ever-permanent theme defended by feminists was also raised by Unidas members: decreasing military expenditure *vis a vis* social and economic investments focused on women is a fundamental issue to be undertaken by a feminist foreign policy. As an example of incongruence between domestic and foreign policy, a participant from Mexico highlighted that despite the fact that Mexico declared itself as a feminist state, there is a lingering belligerence against the feminist movement, with local persecution of leaders. Another representative from Bolivia highlighted how, despite women comprising 50% of the legislature, the state still lacks adequate policies for inclusion and eradication of violence against women. As a result, feminist foreign policy is not only a label, but it needs to prove itself by implementation, including through promoting enhance cohesion between domestic and foreign policy.

Localizing the women, peace and security agenda

The women, peace and security agenda is often mentioned in discussions regarding feminist foreign policy. However, the specific challenges confronted by Latin American and Caribbean women are virtually absent from major debates on WPS. The landmark Resolution 1325 recognizes that women's security goes beyond the formal ceasefire of recognized conflicts. Women's security is grounded in a broader understanding of insecurity, whereby different levels and dimensions - including the household - should be considered.

For instance, the Covid-19 pandemic served as a multiplier of threats to humanity, and to women in particular. It undermined women's access to security and economic resources and overburdened them with unpaid care work. Democracy backsliding worldwide has had a toll on women's security and led to authoritarian policies with a strong gender component resulting in persecution, defamation, and political violence against women. On the other hand, violent extremism tactics showed that misogyny is the cornerstone of supporter's recruitment and serves to justify violence and determine individual radicalisation pathways.

The WPS normative framework should clarify that rising tensions stemming from challenges that affect women's security jeopardizes international peace and security. A participant from Bolivia highlighted the elevated number of femicides confronted by Bolivian women in their home. Another participant from Colombia highlighted how Latin American democracies are still in formation, and they spur debates, often violent ones. While democracy is about finding a consensus, it is also about changing the balance of power.

Preserving the environment and climate change mitigation is a feminist issue

There is a relationship between gender equality, climate change and insecurity. Women suffer the disproportionate effects of environmental harms, resource scarcity, and the resulting competitions and tensions. However, they are also in possession of the knowledge, skills, and capabilities essential for effective environmental protection and conflict mitigation.

Approaches to climate-related risks should include a gender perspective and a feminist foreign policy offers an opportunity to address the vulnerabilities of groups most exposed to environmental and security threats while also enhancing the efforts of women defenders.

The need for an intersectional approach

Another key point raised was the need for a feminist foreign policy to have an intersectional approach, because the different challenges confronted by women in Latin America and elsewhere are not the same, they differ not only with the context, but also in accordance with race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, etc. of each woman. An example raised from participants of the seminar highlighted how indigenous women are disproportionately affected by environmental change and violence in rural settings.

Embracing lessons learned from the global south

One final point worth mentioning is the need to value experiences from the global south and from Latin America and the Caribbean, more specifically. Even though the region has been slower advancing, for instance, the WPS agenda specifically, there is cumulative experience when it comes to advancing women's rights more broadly, including the self-identification as feminist governments. Most importantly, these experiences highlight the unique traits of the region, which are absent from mainstreaming global debates.

Argentina's advances regarding sexual and reproductive health, gender identity and LGBTQI+ was commended. Its strategy to generate inter-ministerial conversations to discuss a feminist foreign policy was highlighted as key to achieve congruence between domestic and international policies.

In the case of Bolivia, the novel regional experiment of advancing gender parity in the legislative branch was highlighted as a major case of success. However, it was also noted that it needs to be accompanied with further policies that enable women's leadership and specific public policies to be implemented.

Chile, on its part has been praised as the pioneer advancing the WPS agenda in the region and now for starting the process of elaborating a feminist foreign policy. One major aspect highlighted was the difference between a foreign policy based on a gender approach and a feminist foreign policy. The latter requires an intense participatory process in the making of the policy and an understanding that goes beyond simply defining thematic priorities and working on it, but a process that reflects upon feminism as a method and strategy.

Colombia, on its part, has a protracted conflict within its boundaries and a lot of expertise when it comes to promoting dialogue among different stakeholders and reaching consensus among

very diverse women groups. What is more, the country has recently announced that it will elaborate a National Action Plan on Resolution 1325. Considering the country's long-standing expertise in conflict resolution and violence prevention, that is a process that should be followed closely.

Mexico, despite recent shortcomings, was highlighted as a pioneer example of a feminist government in the region. The challenges resulting from being a federal state however should be a lesson learned as local policies tend to take longer to incorporate priorities dictated at the federal level.

The recent experiences of autocratization and democracy backsliding in the region were also highlighted by participants. A major impact of these experiences has been setbacks in the area of gender equality and women's rights, and the lingering impact that misogynist discourse can have on people's mindsets. One interesting contribution of feminist perspectives could be strengthening gender equality and democratic principles, particularly in young democracies. Indeed, the correlation between gender equality and peaceful societies has long been established by feminist scholars.³

One final point to be mentioned relates to the expectation that cooperation between Germany and the region may be carried out through a feminist and horizontal approach, valuing the work of feminist organizations and supporting the advance of feminist approaches at the local level. Participants highlighted how there are strong feminist organizations in the region advocating for women's rights, as a result, they should also be considered as partners, not only governments.

Key takeaways

In a context where democracy backsliding has become common place and women's rights are under jeopardy, discussing the pillars of a feminist foreign policy, its drafting process, how it is implemented, and key priorities is fundamental. Two major takeaways derived from the dialogue with Unidas members highlight i) the need to rethink the way a state policy is planned and executed; and ii) the need to unpack and stand by what security means for women and vulnerable/marginalised groups in all their diversity.

For instance, Germany's take on feminist foreign policy as a strategy was well received. However, participants highlighted the need to have a structure to support this novel approach. This includes an intensive participatory process, having women in leadership positions, policies to support their full equal and meaningful participation in all spheres of public and political life, and promoting better congruence between domestic and international affairs. Most importantly, it is fundamental that the core principles of feminism are incorporated into the policy, that means that a feminist foreign policy as a public policy should be concerned about the individual, rather than the state and that international commitments should be accompanied by internal progress towards achieving gender equality. Latin American and Caribbean participants highlighted that politics in most countries in the region are dominated and primarily executed by men. As a result, there is a need to involve them in efforts to achieve gender equality and that means that feminist foreign policies are concerned about all individuals in a society including men.

³ Stone, Laurel, *Women Transforming Conflict: A Quantitative Analysis of Female Peacemaking* (May 13, 2014). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2485242> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2485242>



The regional take on women's security illustrates the need for a careful look on what security means to women everywhere according to different and unique contexts. Women's security should be considered holistically, for instance food and health security and a life free from violence, including at the household level. When discussing foreign policy, states tend to think about wars and conflicts. While they disproportionately affect women, and they do have a say about that, it is the everyday and routine conflicts, tensions, and fights that most affect women's security and a feminist foreign policy should have that as a priority.

Implementing a feminist foreign policy goes well beyond advancing specific themes. It is also a strategy to promote a complex and multifaceted process that aims to accomplish societal change. It is, therefore, long-term, requires resources and the participation of multiple stakeholders. While international cooperation is key to advance this process, it also depends on political willingness and commitment of the individuals in position to support change, of civil society to pressure for change and media outlets to rewrite narratives.