



Essay

## Applying Feminist-Informed Foresight to Feminist Foreign Policy: A Reflection on Potentials and Challenges

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### Abstract

*This article examines the potentials and challenges of applying feminist-informed foresight to the future of Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP). It first situates a feminist vision for foreign policy within its historical and theoretical foundations, framing it as a eutopian aspiration grounded in feminist activism, peace studies, and international relations. It then analyses state-led implementations of FFP, highlighting contradictions, geopolitical constraints, and feminist civil society's efforts to reclaim and reshape these policies. Finally, the article explores feminist-informed foresight as an interdisciplinary research framework for exploring futures of FFP and envisioning alternatives. Drawing on insights from qualitative research, it reflects on the potential of feminist-informed foresight to enhance feminist agency and foster strategic, long-term thinking amid the uncertainties surrounding FFP. "*

### Keywords

Feminist-Informed Foresight, Feminist Foreign Policy, Feminism, Futures Studies

### Introduction

This article explores the potentials and challenges of applying feminist-informed foresight to explore the futures of Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP). It developed from the context of my master's thesis research on future perspectives on FFP and the "Women Who Future(s)" online event on "Feminist Futures and Beyond" led by Ivana Milojević. Aimed at researchers and practitioners working at the intersection of feminism and foresight, as well as those with an interest in doing so, it echoes the fundamental idea of *"The Hesitant Feminist's Guide to the Future"* - that foresight can be productively employed to envision feminist futures, including within the domain of foreign policy.

The article begins by contextualising a feminist vision for foreign policy within its historical and theoretical foundations, linking it to the concept of eutopias. It then examines states' current implementation of FFPs and the ongoing efforts of feminist civil society to reclaim and reimagine these policies. Finally, the article discusses how feminist-informed foresight can serve as an interdisciplinary framework for exploring the futures of FFPs, supported by two examples and reflections drawn from my qualitative research.

### A feminist vision for foreign policy: A Eutopia?

A feminist vision for foreign policy is deeply rooted in the historical activism of women's movements and the contributions of feminist scholars in fields such as peace studies and international relations (e.g., Enloe, 2014; Pettman, 1996; Tickner, 1997; Wibben, 2016). Rather than one singular vision, it encompasses a collection of diverse and sometimes opposing feminist perspectives, reflecting the idea that "visions for feminist futures are multiple, both spatially and temporally context dependent" (Milojević, 2024, p. 50). Evolving over several centuries, it has been notably advocated in the last century by feminist organisations, including the Women's International

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League for Peace and Freedom, or grassroots movements like the Women in Black (Aggestam et al., 2019; Milojević, 2013). Also, some feminist perspectives have been integrated into mainstream politics, as evident, for example in the adoption of the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda. The Agenda refers to UN Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted in 2000, and the nine subsequent resolutions that emphasize the crucial role of women in conflict prevention, resolution, peace negotiations, peacebuilding, and humanitarian efforts. Notwithstanding, the fundamental feminist critique of foreign policy remains highly relevant. This critique underscores the exclusion of women and marginalised groups from international political spheres and decision-making and challenges traditional security paradigms focused on the nation-state, militarised masculinities, the perceived inevitability of war, arms proliferation, colonial and imperial practices, and one-size-fits-all peacebuilding solutions (Enloe, 2014). Ultimately, it highlights the overlooked link between patriarchy and violence, with war as its most extreme manifestation (Pettman, 1996).

In contrast, a feminist vision proposes an alternative approach to foreign politics. It challenges the notion that war is inevitable and that weapons equate to strength, arguing that arms proliferation exacerbates and does not prevent conflict (Enloe, 2014). This perspective advocates for disarmament, abolishing military forces, and emphasises addressing the root causes of conflict, including poverty, racism, imperialism, and gender inequality (Pettman, 1996). Further, it recognises that security extends beyond the absence of conflict to the absence of gender-based violence (Wibben, 2016). Consequently, a feminist peacebuilding approach aims to tackle structural inequalities along intersectional dimensions, emphasising inclusivity and the positive impact of women's participation in peace processes (Cheung et al., 2021). Overall, feminist principles such as non-violence, the ethics of care and well-being, and non-hierarchical gender relations further underpin this vision (Milojević, 2013, 2022). This vision aligns with some of the core elements described in *“The Hesitant Feminist’s Guide to the Future”*, such as gender equality in private and public spheres, more peaceful societies overall, and the minimisation of all forms of violence (Milojević, 2024, p. 50). It also resonates with various longstanding feminist peace visions, such as Boulding’s (1995) “baseline future” and Eisler’s (2000) “partnership model.” Collectively, these aim to transform the narratives surrounding gender, war, and peace.

While this vision is inherently normative, it is grounded in empirical evidence. For instance, studies show that peacebuilding efforts involving women often lead to sustained peace and that the proliferation of weapons is linked to increased violence, including domestic violence (Criado-Perez, 2019). Though some feminist scholars contend that states can never fully realise this vision because the nation-state itself is founded on power structures antithetical to feminist ideals (e.g., Haastrup, 2022, cited in Lunz, 2022), many view it as a tangible possibility, one that can be as real as our current reality (e.g., Cheung et al., 2021; Thompson et al., 2023). Thus, a feminist vision for foreign policy can be seen as eutopia, “imaginings of good and improved rather than perfect societies” (Milojević, 2024, p. 56).

Having established the foundational principles of this feminist eutopian vision, the following paragraphs will explore how state actors interpret and implement these principles and the role of feminist civil society in reclaiming and preserving the original vision.

### **State Feminist Foreign Policies vs. Feminist Visions**

Since 2014, sixteen countries have adopted “Feminist Foreign Policies”. These include Sweden, Canada, Luxembourg, France, Mexico, Spain, Libya, Germany, Scotland, Chile, Colombia, the Netherlands, Liberia, Mongolia, Argentina, and Slovenia; however, Sweden and Luxembourg abandoned their FFPs just a few years after their adoption (Whipkey et al., 2024). While these FFPs vary significantly in their articulation, scope, and implementation mechanisms, they share certain commonalities, such as aiming to promote women’s rights, advance women’s representation, and ensure access to resources (Thomson, 2024). All these policies are pursued under the banner of feminism, aligning themselves rhetorically with feminist values and visions.

However, while states have adopted the terminology and rhetoric of feminism, they have reinterpreted FFPs to fit their own agendas. Rather than adopting a gender-transformative approach, one that challenges the structural foundations of gender inequalities, these policies often prioritise gender mainstreaming while neglecting structural, intersectional, queer, decolonial, or pacifist perspectives (e.g., Achilleos-Sarll, 2018; Mukalazi & Habte, 2024;

Zhukova et al., 2022). However, geopolitical momentum undermines even these inauthentic versions of FFPs. For example, due to the ongoing war in Ukraine, Sweden, who was once a prominent proponent of FFP, joined NATO, first abandoning the ideals underpinning its FFP and subsequently renouncing the policy altogether (Wright & Rosamond, 2024). Similarly, the war in Gaza has highlighted glaring contradictions in FFP implementations; for instance, Germany's support of Israel's military actions in Gaza can be described as "arming the deadliest war on women and girls this century" (Berger, 2024, para. 1). In light of these contradictions, FFP is increasingly viewed by many feminists as a paradoxical and failing project; as ideological imperialism masquerading as progressive, value-based policy-making - "a wolf in sheep's clothing" (Conway, 2024).

Feminist civil society faces a complex dilemma in navigating this paradox. On the one hand, FFP offers opportunities to collaborate with governments and embed feminist perspectives and policies within state structures (Partis-Jennings & Eroukhanoff, 2024). On the other hand, its shortcomings necessitate maintaining a critical and uncompromising stance, using research, analysis, and joint action to rigorously critique state practices and challenge the hypocrisies in FFP (ibid.). These approaches can coexist, as seen in the concept of the feminist critical friend, which entails engaging both within and outside state systems to influence feminist policymaking (Chappell & Mackay, 2021). Nevertheless, growing disillusionment has led many feminists to withdraw from the FFP discourse altogether, with the war in Gaza marking a significant turning point (e.g., Conway, 2024; Knull, 2024). Compounding this, controversies have arisen around a key organisation, the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy (CFFP), facing allegations of embodying White feminism by silencing voices critical of Israel's military actions and marginalising employees of colour (Knull, 2024). Ultimately, feminist civil society finds itself at a crossroads. On one side is disillusionment with state-led FFPs and the risk of disengagement from the debate entirely; on the other is the necessity of continued advocacy for the feminist vision that originally inspired these policies to prevent states from monopolising the interpretation of FFP.

Against this complex backdrop, the future of FFPs remains uncertain. While some scholars assert that more or less authentic iterations of FFPs are "here to stay" (Thomson, 2024, p. 105), others warn that geopolitical shifts and the rise of right-wing populism may lead to their eventual abandonment (Seitenova et al., 2024). Similarly, the role of feminist civil society in shaping these futures is uncertain. Increasing disillusionment and decreasing funding for feminist organisations globally complicate efforts (UN Women Fund for Gender Equality, 2019). Additionally, feminist scholars and activists often find themselves in firefighting mode; needing to find solutions to urgent problems and unable, time-wise nor capacity-wise, to contemplate feminist long-term futures, including those of FFPs (Munro, 2023). At the same time, there is increasing advocacy, research on FFPs, and efforts to build feminist networks under the FFP umbrella (Partis-Jennings & Eroukhanoff, 2024).

Considering these uncertainties, alongside both challenges and sparks of hope, foresight could serve as a tool for exploring possible and desirable futures of FFPs, particularly in connection to a feminist eutopian vision for foreign policy and the feminist civil society as its advocate. The following paragraphs will illustrate how this approach can be applied, including examples from my own research, which is explicitly feminist-informed.

### **Exploring futures of Feminist Foreign Policies via Feminist-Informed Foresight**

Foresight has historically been closely tied to foreign policy and remains widely applied in the field (Munro, 2023). However, its application in relation to feminism, particularly to the topic of FFP, has been relatively rare, with only a few exceptions. For instance, the "Feminist Foreign Policy Futures Lab" workshop series, initiated by Kirithi Jayakumar from "The Gender Security Project" and supported by Kushal Sohal from "The School of International Futures", explores the futures of FFP from feminist civil society perspectives through several workshops that are designed to collectively imagine (The Gender Security Project, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). Another notable example is the policy brief "Embracing Feminist Foreign Policy within EU Strategic Foresight Capabilities: Bringing Feminist Futures into Reality" (2024), authored by Anastaesia Mondesir and published by the Foundation for European Progressive Studies. This brief addresses the integration of FFP within the expanding European foresight landscape and provides policymakers with a feminist foresight framework that offers actionable and easy-to-apply guidance. These projects demonstrate that foresight, especially when approached from a feminist perspective, can be successfully applied to FFP, yielding both academic insights and practical impulses.

While these works inspire my research, it focuses on a distinct aspect: exploring the futures of FFPs in relation to a feminist eutopian vision for foreign policy and the role of feminist civil society as its advocate. My study specifically aims to examine feminist civil society experts' perspectives regarding possible and desirable futures for FFPs and their perceptions of their impact and capacity to shape these futures. To achieve this, I conducted qualitative interviews with nine experts from feminist civil society and analysed patterns, differences, and contradictions. Feminist-informed foresight, the theoretical framework for this study is grounded in established feminism and foresight scholarship (e.g., Inayatullah & Milojević, 1998; Masini, 1987; Milojević, 2018) and closely related to concepts like the “feminist futurist principles” by Milojević (2024), the “feminist foresight framework” by Mondesir (2024), or the “feminist approaches to futures studies” by Abdullah (2024). Here, the term “feminist-informed” emphasises the integration of insights from diverse feminist theories (Ackerly & True, 2010). This approach goes beyond applying foresight to a feminist topic but also shapes research questions, data collection, and analysis, recognising foresight as a tool for feminist advocacy.

However, interdisciplinary research at the nexus of feminism and foresight presents challenges (Bergman et al., 2014; Jöster-Morisse, 2020). This became evident in my research when I introduced a foresight perspective to the feminist experts I interviewed; most were unfamiliar with foresight and its concepts. Several challenges identified by scholars in similar research settings were equally evident in my findings: feminists' unfamiliarity with foresight tools and terminology often led to misunderstandings, foresight's military and corporate origins caused general scepticism, and their knowledge of the multiplicity of feminisms led to hesitancy to articulate future visions (An, 2017; Gunnarsson-Östling et al., 2012; Schönfeld, 2020). Additionally, I encountered one critical challenge specific to applying feminist-informed foresight in the context of FFP: feminist experts were deeply focused on critiquing FFPs and their inherent contradictions, often appearing hesitant to discuss potential futures for FFP at all. One interviewee remarked, “I don't think there is a shared understanding even of what feminist foreign policy is, let alone what it would look like in the future”. This reluctance may stem from concerns that engaging with future possibilities could undermine the impact of their current critiques, reflecting the disillusionment previously mentioned.

Further, many experts expressed interest in foresight and its tools, recognising that a strategic, long-term engagement with the future could significantly enhance their advocacy for FFP. They particularly emphasised the importance of visioning and imagination, which provide strength and momentum for their activism. As one expert noted, “It's so important to have this utopian goal and be like, that's kind of my purpose, that's what I'm fighting for”. While there was some disagreement among experts regarding their visions for the future - from preferring no FFP over inauthentic versions to imagining a world with genuine FFPs - many shared a common hope. One interviewee highlighted, “We need to move forward and create a more feminist world, implementing (...) feminist policies, because our societies' future well-being depends on incorporating more feminist elements into our politics”. Reflecting on the roots of feminism as an imagination-driven movement, another expert observed, “Imagination is inherently a feminist activity because the very fact that feminism originated in a system that had no place for it shows that people were imagining realities we were deprived of”. These reflections highlight foresight's potential in strategic, hands-on advocacy planning and imagining eutopian futures.

In addition, these interviews may contribute to a feminist normative research goal: they represent an opportunity to build futures literacy within feminist civil society, offering a toolbox for reimagining and reclaiming their vision for foreign policy. Just as Boulding's “Picturing a World Without Weapons” workshops in the 1980s were based on the hypothesis that imagining desirable futures can positively influence and shape activism, feminist-informed foresight may be capable of addressing complex academic questions but, at the same time, can serve as practical exercises in the “image-action nexus” (Boulding 1995, p. 114). It provides an opportunity to step away from the firefighting mode and should be embraced as such.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, applying feminist-informed foresight to explore the futures of FFP reveals significant potential as a powerful tool for envisioning possible and desirable futures. However, challenges arise due to the unfamiliarity of foresight methods among feminist experts and the tension between critiquing current policies and imagining future

possibilities. Nonetheless, this interdisciplinary approach can empower feminist civil society to reclaim and reimagine FFP, enhancing their capacity to influence and shape these policies. Much work remains to be done, structures to be dismantled and wars to be ended to create pathways towards realising feminist visions for foreign policies.

Questions for researchers and practitioners at the intersection of feminism, foresight and FFP that continue to emerge include: How could/should FFP survive in the future? What role could/should feminist civil society play in shaping FFP's possible and desirable futures? How can we use foresight to navigate the challenges and leverage the potential for interdisciplinary feminist-informed research in this field?

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