

## **A Green Feminist Foreign Policy for the EU**

**Article by Juliane Schmidt**

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From Sweden to Mexico, an avant-garde of countries is pioneering feminist foreign policy. The European Union has made progress in promoting gender equality in its external action, but much remains to be done before it will deliver structural change. Juliane Schmidt calls for a green feminist foreign policy rooted in intersectionality that will enable the EU to live up to its values of freedom and equality.

In April 2021, gender equality entered the spotlight after European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen was left without a chair at a summit in Turkey. Whether or not “sofagate” was blown out of proportion, the incident demonstrated just how much remains to be done across the EU, its institutions and member states to raise awareness of gender-related issues. For many, the incident was just another drop in the ocean of the male-dominated world of foreign policy.

World politics today are increasingly complex and adversarial. The EU is struggling to find its place while not betraying its fundamental values of freedom and equality and its commitment to human and minority rights. Adopting a green feminist foreign policy would enable the EU to keep these values front and centre.

### **Challenging EU structures and power dynamics**

Feminist foreign policy seeks to mainstream gender equality in foreign and security policy. Fundamentally, it is about protecting the human rights of women and girls and recognising that this is a prerequisite to achieving broader foreign policy goals such as peace, security and sustainable development. It most often focuses on combating sexual violence and promoting women’s education, economic empowerment, and representation in politics and decision-making (including in peace negotiations).

Green feminist foreign policy goes a step further. It is deeply rooted, acknowledging that gender is a social construct and that global challenges such as conflict, climate change and natural disasters have gendered impacts that exacerbate intersecting forms of discrimination. It questions the status quo, calling for a rethink of inequitable gender norms and patriarchal power dynamics. Importantly, a green feminist foreign policy takes an intersectional approach, aiming to achieve equality for all people and genders (not only white, heterosexual, able-bodied and cisgender women). It promotes change based on rights and inclusive, non-discriminatory interactions through a multidimensional approach across all policy areas with an external dimension. Security, human rights, migration, trade, development aid, humanitarian assistance, and climate change: these must all be addressed in an interconnected way.

What does all this mean in practice? Firstly, addressing unequal structures and power

relations within the EU institutions to improve the presence of women and marginalised groups in policy-making and to raise awareness of gender-related issues. Starting at the top level, a series of measures should be implemented across EU institutions and services. Among others, these should include mandatory training for EU staff; a zero-tolerance policy on sexual harassment and gender-based violence; guidelines on diversity, equity, and inclusion; and gender-responsive recruitment procedures. These must all be underpinned by specific, measurable targets (including diversity targets for EU institutions, delegations and missions) as well as monitoring and follow-up.

In terms of policy content, a green feminist foreign policy implies a rethink of several fields. In security policy, it means leaving behind an androcentric understanding of security with its strongmen figures and images of masculine power. This should be replaced by a long-term view of security and stability that is feminist and inclusive. Research has shown that policies that do not strive to end inequality and injustice will not be successful in bringing lasting peace. Similarly, EU development policy should move from a neo-colonial approach based on aid dependency and resource extraction to one focused on empowerment and rights. In part, this requires gender-responsive EU humanitarian action and changing the narrative around women and marginalised groups to acknowledge them as agents of positive change rather than simply beneficiaries of support.

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It also means harnessing the EU's power as an actor in global trade by including specific and binding gender chapters or due diligence requirements in all EU trade agreements. The EU should establish a clear commitment to promoting LGBTQI+ rights in its foreign policy, and it should seek to ensure that women and marginalised groups are included in international decision-making on climate action.

A green feminist foreign policy must rely on close cooperation with civil society, in particular women human rights defenders and advocates for marginalised groups. They should be natural allies when it comes to fostering inclusive research strategies with an intersectional perspective, something which is still relatively absent in EU policy-making. Rigorous intersectional analysis and systematic impact assessments should be the basis for all EU policies, with specialised advisors to monitor progress and dedicated resource and budgeting to fund these changes.

In spring 2021, the Greens/EFA group in the European Parliament took a step in this direction by releasing a strategy calling for a feminist foreign policy and detailing how to get there. The strategy puts forward a four-pronged approach: representation of all genders and participation in decision-making processes; a rights-based approach that ensures the fundamental freedoms of all people, not just the privileged few; dedicated funding and resources; and the use of data, research and inclusive consultations to inform and shape solutions that address multiple and overlapping forms of discrimination.

## **Slow progress towards gender-equal EU foreign policy**

A global trend towards a new approach in international politics has been emerging over the past two decades. In 2000, the [UN Security Council adopted its landmark resolution on women, peace and security](#). In 2018, the EU adopted its Women, Peace and Security Agenda including its [strategic approach](#) and [2019-2024 action plan](#). In 2020, it also launched its [Gender Action Plan III \(GAP III\)](#), setting out its agenda for gender equality and women's empowerment in EU external action. All of these have contributed to gender mainstreaming in the EU's foreign policy and could form the basis of an EU feminist foreign policy. However, several countries are ahead of the EU when it comes to establishing a feminist foreign policy.

Sweden has been a pioneer in this field, being the first country in the world to announce the [adoption of a feminist foreign policy in 2014](#). In 2018, the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs published a [handbook](#) based on its approach as a resource to inform and inspire further work in the area of feminist foreign policy. As part of its framework, Sweden has a coordinator of feminist foreign policy, focal points across services, and an annually updated action plan. Sweden also earmarks 90 per cent of its development aid for gender equality. Swedish feminist foreign policy is part and parcel of a larger gender equality agenda in the country and the government has even defined itself as feminist.

Following in Sweden's footsteps, several EU countries have announced their adoption of a feminist foreign policy, including [Luxembourg](#), [Spain](#) and [Cyprus](#), while France established a [feminist approach to diplomacy](#). Since 2014, 79 other countries have created national action plans to improve the inclusion of women in foreign and security policy. Beyond the EU, [Canada](#) launched a feminist development policy in 2017. In 2020, [Mexico](#) became the first Latin American country to adopt a feminist foreign policy and [Malaysia](#) indicated it would pursue one.

The reality today is that women and marginalised groups are still in the minority in high-level positions in the political systems, diplomatic services and militaries of EU member states. At the current rate of progress, they will remain so for a long time. GAP III is a big achievement, but it does not go far enough to promote structural change. Like most EU documents, its language is not inclusive enough, being based on a binary notion of gender. GAP III lacks gender-responsive budgeting, and, despite how it identified gender mainstreaming as a "responsibility for all", there has been insufficient implementation of existing action plans and policies – including those which are part of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda. Moreover, many EU policies remain gender blind, insufficiently gender-sensitive or inconsistent in terms of intersectionality. For example, shortly after GAP III was published, the European Commission released its [strategy to renew multilateralism](#), which completely lacked a gender or intersectional dimension.

GAP III also fails to sufficiently address an increasingly challenging international context which, in recent years, has seen backlash against the rights of women and marginalised groups and a shrinking space for civil society. This has been witnessed in the severe funding problems faced by civil society organisations, the [reinstatement of the global gag rule under Donald Trump](#), increased resistance to the Istanbul Convention on combating gender-based violence (including among EU member states), and a growing anti-gender discourse internationally. The latter can be observed in the difficulties in passing the latest

UN resolution on women, peace and security. Within the EU, its effects are seen in the European Council with the lack of conclusions on GAP III, as well as the contestation by some member states of almost any text that refers to gender equality or LGBTQI+ rights.

## **EU diplomatic service fails to walk the talk**

In terms of EU structures, the biggest challenges for green feminist foreign policy are found in the management of the European External Action Service (EEAS) led by the High Representative Josep Borrell. Men hold almost 80 per cent of senior- and almost 70 per cent of middle-management posts in the EEAS (the latter is the only indicator where women's representation has improved since Borrell took office in December 2019). The [action plan to address gender imbalance in EEAS management](#) is a good start, but it has a long way to go in terms of implementation, ensuring inclusion and work-life balance, addressing the lack of applications from women and marginalised groups, and integrating an intersectional perspective in job descriptions and performance reviews. Beyond the usual rhetoric, Borrell does not stand out as an advocate for gender equality and intersectionality. [Politico](#) recently reported EEAS employees describing a male-dominated work culture in which gender equality is not taken seriously by leadership and mostly left up to women.

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The recent reappointment procedure for the post of EEAS Principal Advisor on Gender and Women, Peace and Security was also a concerning indication of how inclusion is seen as a low-priority issue among the EEAS leadership. After the post expired at the end of 2020, the procedure to appoint a replacement was only launched after several complaints by MEPs and civil society. The Dutch diplomat Stella Ronner-Grubacic was appointed as Adviser to the Secretary-General for Gender and Diversity in April 2021, but the changed job title suggests that the role will have new tasks, a lower profile and limited resources. Merging the responsibility for general diversity and gender equality does not point to both issues being granted the necessary attention and resources.

Another problem is the EEAS's lack of cooperation with civil society. A notable example of this was when Miroslav Lajčák, the EU's Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue, was called out for failing to meet with any women's rights organisations on his trip to Kosovo in November 2020. In response, he claimed that he did indeed meet with "Kosovo's women", thereby failing to recognise the issue at hand. There are also reports that EU delegations are outsourcing work related to GAP III, including consultations with civil society, resulting in extremely limited ownership of these processes and very little contact with grassroots experts. In addition, this exposes a lack of expertise and resources to carry out this work internally.

## **Green feminist foreign policy: from concept to reality**

Green feminist foreign policy is not a tick-box exercise. To be successful, it demands real systemic change within the EU. Europe's foreign policy is currently made mainly by older

white men who tend to make policies for older white men. Unless we change the face of EU foreign policy, it will remain male, pale, and stale. But representation alone – the “add-women/minorities-and-stir” approach – does not automatically translate into more inclusive and transformative policies. The implementation of a green feminist foreign policy requires a comprehensive approach and progressive leadership that takes ownership of these processes across the board. Change within the EU’s institutional culture will be important, and awareness campaigns, guidelines, and training can all help shift mindsets.

*Intersectionality must be a fundamental principle that guides EU feminist foreign policy.*

Feminist foreign policy is not a new concept, and many experts in the field have emphasised the need for an intersectional approach. However, examples of feminist foreign policy in practice, including in Sweden, have been criticised for failing to pay adequate attention to other marginalised groups, including LGBTQI+ and racialised people. Intersectionality must therefore be a fundamental principle that guides EU feminist foreign policy. This needs to be backed up by appropriate measures (including policy documents, strategies, action plans, public statements, and dedicated resources) as well as the support of all EU member states.

Given the resistance to gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights that is growing in some member states, such a paradigm shift still seems far away. While there is an avant-garde of countries that is moving forwards with feminist foreign policy, there are also countries where this is still unthinkable. A similar divide can be observed between conservative/right-wing and liberal/left-wing parties in the European Parliament, where introducing progressive language on gender in any text remains a challenge. But since the EU is based on compromise and consensus, it may still become a front-runner on the issue.

To achieve this, it will take people who are courageous enough push for transformative change rather than small reforms here and there. When the Swedish Foreign Minister Margot Wallström first declared her country’s feminist foreign policy in 2014, she was met with ridicule. Several years later, this idea has entered the mainstream and there is increased awareness and action. Looking to Germany ahead of the September 2021 federal election, there are hopeful signs as the Greens support a feminist government and foreign policy [read more on the [German Greens](#)].

Green feminist foreign policy is part of the wider debate on reconciling fundamental EU values with foreign policy. Equality is enshrined in the EU treaties. Implementing a green feminist foreign policy would effectively mean carrying this value through to foreign policy practice. The EU needs to stop treating rights and values as a low-priority issue in foreign policy. It has set itself the standard of putting equality and universal rights and opportunities front and centre. Now, it should fight for this with all means available.

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Juliane Schmidt is an advisor for the Greens/EFA Group in the European Parliament, covering gender equality in EU foreign policy among other topics. She is vice president for development at The Brussels Binder, an organisation that strives to amplify women's voices in EU policy debates.

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