



Towards A Feminist Foreign Policy For Scotland

A Scottish Council on Global Affairs Insight

Partners, Pitfalls, Possibilities

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About Us



The **Scottish Council** on **Global Affairs**

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The Scottish Council on Global Affairs (SCGA) is the first all-Scotland international relations institute providing a hub for collaborative policy-relevant research and a home for informed, non-partisan debate on all areas of international relations and global politics broadly defined.

The Founding Partners are:

- The University of Edinburgh
- The University of Glasgow
- The University of St Andrews

The Council provides a convening space to bring together the public, private and not-for-profit sectors

with civil society and academic expertise to encourage dialogue, debate and the dissemination of expertise on issues of global importance.

It looks to forge new relationships and deepen existing ties with universities and civil society in the rest of the United Kingdom as well as with centres of expertise in Europe and across the world.

Insight Summary

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The Scottish Government has been developing a feminist approach to its external relations over the last few years, aligning itself with countries such as Canada, Chile, Mexico, France and Germany.

In recent years, Feminist Foreign Policies have gained momentum as a transformative approach in international relations. The Scottish Government has been developing a feminist approach to its external relations over the last few years, aligning itself with countries such as Canada, Chile, Mexico, France and Germany.

The priorities of such a policy, and the various pitfalls and possibilities, are very much matters of live debate. Scotland may be a sub-state, with a small influence on the rest of the world, but how it approaches its external relations still matters, especially as part of a coalition of states pioneering feminist foreign policies.

This SCGA Insight reports on a roundtable held in June 2023, at the British International Studies Association conference in Glasgow, sponsored by the SCGA. Panellists addressed questions on what the priorities of the Scottish Government should be, the main obstacles it might face in developing a feminist foreign policy, the challenge of fostering equitable partnerships with Global South states, the prospects for backlash and how to limit it, and the scope for involving citizens.

Panellists did not always agree with each other, but definitely made progress towards identifying both pitfalls and possibilities.



“In recent years, Feminist Foreign Policies have gained momentum as a transformative approach in international relations.”

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Key Findings and Recommendations

1. What constitutes feminist foreign policy is still contested, but its ambition is an approach to foreign policy that seeks systemic transformations: from a system of nation states that compete against each other toward a security community based on the recognition of our interdependence and shared needs—toward a just, inclusive, and sustainable economy that respects planetary boundaries.
2. Some feminists express doubts that feminism can ever be compatible with foreign policy, given the risks of reifying the very boundaries we ought to be challenging; others maintain it is worth using a feminist approach to push for a transformation in how foreign policy is conceptualised and enacted.
3. As a sub-state, Scotland has the opportunity to experiment and be bold with its feminist approach to foreign policy; it can also increase its impact by taking a collaborative approach, working in equitable cooperation with partner states, and with civil society organisations.
4. The Scottish Government should actively engage citizens in building a sense of ownership and support for its feminist approach, highlighting that feminism is about system transformation to address inequalities and insecurities; this will also enable it to counter backlash.
5. Further research is required to refine and clarify what is meant by a feminist approach; learn from other states adopting feminist foreign policies through cross-country comparative studies; and develop indicators that would capture whether feminist foreign policies are successful in meeting their goals of systemic transformation.

Recent Momentum



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Transformative approach to international relations.

In recent years, 'feminist foreign policy' has gained momentum as a transformative approach to international relations.

What constitutes feminist foreign policy is still contested; but its ambition is an approach to foreign policy that seeks "systemic transformations" - from a system of nation states that compete against each other toward a community of security based on the recognition of our interdependence and shared needs; and "from an extractivist, destructive, inequality-driving economic system" towards "just, inclusive, and sustainable economies, aimed at human and planetary flourishing."

The Scottish Government recently pledged to establish a fresh "global affairs framework ... to steer Scotland's international involvement, firmly rooted in a values-based and feminist foreign policy approach."

By taking this step, Scotland aligns itself with countries like Sweden, Canada, Chile, Mexico, France, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and others that have also embraced a feminist approach to foreign policy.

The Roundtable

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Towards a Feminist Foreign Policy for Scotland: Partners, Pitfalls, possibilities

To promote engagement and to deliberate the priorities, challenges, and potential of adopting feminist foreign policies in Scotland, the SCGA sponsored a roundtable titled “Towards a Feminist Foreign Policy for Scotland: Partners, Pitfalls, Possibilities” on 22 June 2023 at the British International Studies Association conference in Glasgow.

Invited speakers included [Claire Duncanson](#) (University of Edinburgh), [Toni Hastrup](#) (then

University of Stirling), [Khushi Singh Rathore](#) (Jawaharlal Nehru University, India), [Annika Bergman Rosamond](#) (Lund University, Sweden; University of Edinburgh), [Laura Sjoberg](#) (Royal Holloway, University of London), all leading scholars on feminist foreign policy. [Cherry Miller](#) (University of Glasgow) and [Malte Riemann](#) (University of Glasgow) moderated the discussion.



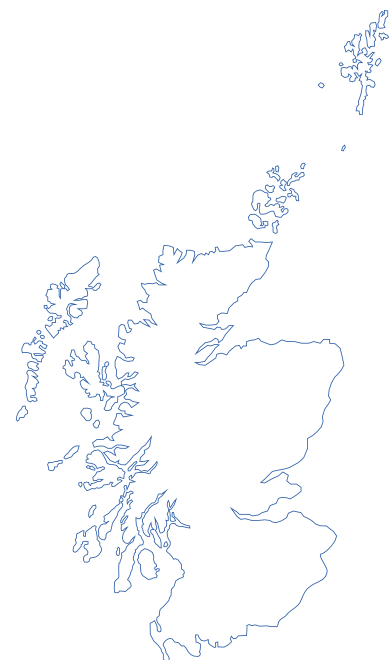
06. Roundtable Questions

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The roundtable addressed a series of questions:

- **What should the priorities of Scottish Feminist Foreign Policy be and why?**
- **What are the main obstacles and pitfalls of FFP formation in Scotland and beyond?**
- **What can Scotland learn from other states' experiences of FFP and what partnerships could be developed?**
- **Can Scottish Feminist Foreign Policy be developed in equitable cooperation with partner states in the Global South? What are enabling and disabling factors in the effort of doing so?**
- **How does the anti-feminist backlash impact FFP and how could such backlash be limited?**
- **How can the Scottish government generate citizenry, third sector and business support to ensure the success and longevity of its Feminist Foreign Policy? What can citizens do?**

The ensuing lively debate provided valuable insights into how Scotland can reshape its foreign policy through a feminist lens.



07. Debate & Discussion

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Claire Duncanson's opening remarks highlighted the urgency of adopting ambitious feminist foreign policies. This is a priority in the face of ecological breakdown, humanitarian crises and systemic failures which highlight that the way we have organized economic and social life on this planet is failing the majority.

Prioritizing a feminist approach to Scotland's foreign policy could lead to impactful changes on the global stage, especially if enacted through strategic coalitions with like-minded states and organizations.

However, Laura Sjoberg and Annika Bergman Rosamond expressed doubts about feminist foreign policy. Despite the consistent use of the feminist label in related policy declarations, the concept of feminism is understood differently across contexts and actors.

These diverse interpretations significantly influence the formulation of written policies, which, in turn, set the boundaries for feminist foreign policy and ultimately shape its potential outcomes. Moreover, the official articulations of feminism by states

often differ significantly from the broader and potentially more transformative understandings advocated by civil society. Two key concerns emerged.

First, 'feminism' might be incompatible with 'foreign policy', which to a large extent rests on drawing boundaries. Adopting a feminist foreign policy might run the risk of reifying such distinctions instead of challenging assumptions and pushing the discourse beyond traditional state boundaries.

A second concern is about the fuzziness of the concept. What is feminist foreign policy? Is it a goal, a method, or an ethical approach?

This ambiguity raises an important concern that Scotland must navigate: ensuring that feminist foreign policy is not reduced to a mere buzzword - but an authentic and transformative approach to foreign policy.

07. Debate & Discussion (cont.)

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From here the discussion moved on to a further challenge that Scottish feminist foreign policy faces: the lack of full sovereignty over foreign policy. Toni Haastrup therefore raised the question what actions to take if the UK government does not support such policies? However, the lack of complete control also offers a unique opportunity for experimentation and learning from other regions, such as Catalonia, which has pursued its own unique foreign policies within the constraints of the larger state.

Indeed, learning from other states' experiences in implementing feminist foreign policy emerged as an important consideration. The Scottish government can shape its approach more effectively by studying successful models and engaging with lessons learned from other states' experiences.

This should also include how feminist foreign policy can be developed in equitable cooperation with partner states in the Global South.

In this regard, Khushi Singh Rathore emphasized the importance of not viewing the Global South as a homogenous entity. Scotland should rather listen to diverse voices and address specific needs and concerns, such as helping countries to better adapt to climate-related losses and damages or promoting fair and equitable trade. Furthermore,

developing equitable cooperation with the Global South requires avoiding the paternalistic “white savior” approach. Scotland should therefore focus on building genuine partnerships with people in the Global South, respecting their agency, and acknowledging the intersectionality of their struggles, including issues of class and other identity-based disparities.

Panel members and audience members also engaged with the issue of accountability. What does accountability look like? How can accountability be achieved, and impact be monitored? To ensure the success and longevity of feminist foreign policy, the Scottish government should actively engage citizens, civil society organizations, and businesses in policy discussions. Public awareness campaigns could educate the public about the importance of feminist foreign policy, while educational programs can foster a better understanding of feminist principles and their application to international relations.

Engaging with citizens and stakeholders could help to build a sense of ownership and support for related initiatives. Building and strengthening such partnerships would allow Scotland to pool resources, amplify its impact, and create a stronger global network focused on advancing feminist principles.

07. Debate & Discussion (cont.)

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These actions would also address another challenge: anti-feminist backlash. As the discussion highlighted, anti-feminist backlash poses a significant threat to the advancement of feminist foreign policy.

Scotland must be prepared to address and counter such opposition effectively. This can be achieved through challenging misconceptions about feminism and highlighting the positive impact of feminist foreign policy.

Building alliances with peace, social justice and environmental civil society organizations, feminist activists, and like-minded countries can create a united front to withstand regressive forces seeking to undermine the efforts of building more equitable societies.

Based on the discussions, we identify three directions for future research to further explore and advance the understanding of feminist foreign policy.

The first pertains to clarifying concepts, which would involve refining and enhancing the concept of feminist foreign policy (FFP) by delving deeper into the core principles of this policy.

Second, research could focus on promoting cross-country comparative analysis to analyse how different countries have embraced and incorporated feminist foreign policy into their diplomatic practices and international relations.



07. Debate & Discussion (cont.)

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As recently put by Columba Achilleos-Sarll and Jennifer Thomson, “few studies compare its uptake across different countries, examine its connections to longer histories of ideas around women and gender, or unpack the policy intersections that [feminist foreign policy] (tentatively) engages.”

Third, studies could evaluate feminist foreign policy in practice by investigating how (well) governments translate feminist foreign policy into concrete policy

actions, diplomatic relations, and international partnerships.

This may involve developing indicators to measure the success of feminist foreign policy against its goals of tackling the root causes of inequalities and insecurities, and to identify best practices, potential pitfalls, and strategies for enhancing feminist foreign policy implementation on a global scale.

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