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Women in Wartime Ukraine

How Feminist Foreign Policy Can Strengthen
Political Minorities in Humanitarian Crisis

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Abstract

Wars hold a gender dimension – a facet that can also be found in the ongoing war in Ukraine. Therefore, especially in conflict scenarios, support for women and political minorities is needed from outside to counteract reinforced inequalities and tackle gender-specific consequences of war. Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) is an approach that highlights gendered discrimination and works to improve women's rights, participation, and access to resources. In the following AIES Focus Paper, FFP is used to analyse the humanitarian situation in Ukraine and identify a foreign policy strategy targeting existing challenges for women and political minorities.

Introduction

When the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women and Peace and Security was introduced in 2000, women's inclusion in the field of peace and security first became a target.¹ While this was an essential step towards promoting women's rights and empowerment, the implementation of Resolution 1325 varies from country to country and progress is slow.² Furthermore, women's rights cannot only be tackled at the level of international organisations. Since global politics is primarily based on the interaction of national states, their individual preferences, and interests, the situation of women

worldwide also depends on the national and foreign political agenda of their respective countries.³ The FFP approach, first introduced by Sweden's former Foreign Minister Margot Wallström explains how foreign policy can influence and improve the inclusion, rights, and access to resources for women and girls.⁴ Kristina Lunz – founder of the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy (CFFP) – describes FFP as an approach which advocates for a global security policy that puts people – not states – at the centre and gives a voice to hitherto marginalised groups that is rooted in intersectional feminism.⁵ This inclusive and participatory perspective is still widely missing, especially in International Relations (IR), and the fields of security and peace.

The ongoing Russian full-scale invasion since the 24th of February 2022 has caused great atrocities and destruction, resulting in a sharp increase in refugees outside and inside Ukraine.⁶ As the interstate war between the two countries illustrates, conflicts have a gender dimension.⁷ During wars, traditional gender roles and inequalities are reinforced and women as well as political minorities struggle under group-specific consequences.^{8,9} The Rapid Gender Analysis of Ukraine published by UN Women and CARE International highlights the gender dynamics of the humanitarian crisis and

calls for further international attention.¹⁰ As Western states are heavily involved in this conflict¹¹, it is essential to look at the consequences of the war from an FFP perspective and stress the impact Ukraine's partners could have on those neglected. Considering that the main problems faced by women in Ukraine – the lack of representation, rights, and resources – can be addressed by the foreign policy of the cooperation partners¹², a great responsibility lies with the West and EU member states. Since a great deal of countries, including Sweden, Canada, and Germany, have already introduced an FFP agenda, it is now time to apply it to the Ukraine conflict and thereby help improve women's situation in the short and the long term.

Concept and Applications of Feminist Foreign Policy

Feminist Foreign Policy brings together two different political fields that are mostly thought of separately. The term follows up on the ideas of contemporary feminism as a theory, a movement, and a tool to question existing power relations.^{13,14,15} The central objective of feminism is to create equality and enable people to live free from power hierarchies, sexism, racism, colonialism, and classism.¹⁶ Increasingly, the gender equality discourse is integrated at an individual, organisational, and state level. However, feminism and the actions derived from it are

understood and applied in very different ways.¹⁷

In a traditional sense, IR theory defines foreign policy as the relationships between states and the organisation of a government concerning its foreign affairs.¹⁸ Several theories have emerged in the field that attempt to explain the prevailing dynamics and interactions at the global level. By creating certain definitions about the nature of the international system, the theories impact the general understanding of international relations, political decision-making, and research. Classical realism, for example, views states as actors who are principally concerned about self-help, survival, security, and their maximisation of national interests defined in terms of power. Neo-realists furthermore emphasise the distinct structures of international politics, with the domestic and international characteristics of states receding into the background.¹⁹ While institutionalism focuses on the interaction between states and the influence of international organisations and institutions²⁰, liberalism, on the other hand, highlights the rights of an individual person and political participation.²¹ In the IR context, liberalism among others means civilian control over the military, allowing for a free market as well as the possibility for states to protect themselves from foreign threats without undermining the liberties of their citizens. Finally, constructivism emphasises the actions of people and asks how actors, such as state leaders

and influential citizens, shape international relations.²² To varying degrees, all these grand IR theories have their origins in Eurocentrism, patriarchy, and racist foundations that legitimise white imperialism and ignore diverse needs and perspectives.^{23,24} For this reason, the theories are fundamentally subject to several biases. Moreover, many existing worldviews, political processes, and structures are based on misogyny (hostility towards women) and androcentrism (men-centricity) and are determined by the West.^{25,26} Therefore, gender- and group-specific challenges such as lacking representation and resources, gendered war roles, and wartime rape do not find attention.^{27,28} These perspectives and mechanisms in foreign relations are manifested through a path of dependency and time. Thus, they cannot be easily adapted but need to be dismantled and newly constructed.²⁹

During wars ... women as well as political minorities struggle under group-specific consequences.

This is precisely the aim of FFP. As a relatively new approach in IR, FFP places gendered discrimination, structural violence including poverty, hunger, social injustice, and inequality, as well as the lack of representation of women and other marginalised groups at the centre of its analysis.^{30,31} In addition to advocating for human rights for all women and girls, FFP promotes the inclusion of political minorities in

decision-making processes, so that their realities and needs are heard, and sufficient resources are distributed to them.³² To achieve these changes, existing IR theories such as realism need to be challenged and the understanding of violence, war, states, security, and peace reconceptualised.³³ As FFP recognises the importance of structural changes for sustainable peace, the approach does not apply a negative definition of peace, i.e. the absence of war. Rather, there is a focus on the long-term transformation of society, the so-called positive peace-making. Moreover, FFP criticises the militarised understanding of security since it does not include or protect various groups of society such as women, children, civilians, and migrants, neither during conflicts nor in peace.³⁴ Therefore, Scheyer and Kumskova define individual safety and well-being as significant indicators of FFP. Additionally, the two indicators "Inclusion and Intersectional Approach" and "Political Dialogue" call for inclusive representation in diplomacy, trade, conflict prevention, and conflict resolution and prioritise dialogue on militarisation. The "Empathetic Communities" indicator focuses on building up networks which are not about military and power but rather work on goals like peace, trade agreements, and disarmament. In contrast, the last indicator, "Gender Analysis," overarches all FFP demands by aiming for a critical examination of power and giving room to gender-neutral social and political

norms. This framework of practical indicators can be used as guidance to apply the main FFP principles.

Initiated not least by the UNSCR 1325 on women, peace, and security, FFP approaches have already been applied in various countries.³⁵ A prominent pioneer is Sweden, which presented the first FFP strategy under former Foreign Minister Margot Wallström in 2015.³⁶ She introduced a practical toolbox of three Rs to structure and implement an FFP approach: the promotion of human rights of all women and girls (*Rights*), the equitable political participation of women and girls in all decision-making positions (*Representation*), and the provision of sufficient resources to achieve equality (*Resources*) are at the centre of her strategy.³⁷ The toolbox is complemented by a fourth R, which stands for "*Reality/Research*" and emphasises the importance of empirical and factual evidence and at the same time takes into account the perspectives of the civilian population.^{38,39}

Under Wallström, Sweden applied the FFP strategy in various areas: to implement feminist analyses and measures in the Swedish foreign service, new structures such as a coordination office for feminist foreign policy and an ambassador for gender equality were appointed as well as a handbook and concrete action plans were developed.⁴⁰ Furthermore, Wallström prioritised feminist values over political profit by for instance publicly criticising the women's

and human rights situation in Saudi Arabia instead of cultivating the political relation. Sweden also initiated a network to increase the participation of women in peace processes and strongly supported the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda in the UN. These are only some examples of how FFP can be realised.

Besides Sweden, other countries such as Canada, France, Mexico, and Germany are increasingly pursuing FFPs.⁴¹ Comparing the Swedish and Canadian FFP strategies, it is noticeable that very different action maxims are derived from the word "feminist": While Sweden focuses on domestic and foreign policy commitments, the Canadian methods are more centred on the private sector.⁴² Germany adopted the FFP approach in 2021 and built its subsequent strategy on earlier methods, notably drawing inspiration from the Swedish three R concept. The German Foreign Ministry has derived ten guidelines that aim to include the perspectives of women and marginalised groups and their political participation, recognise gender-specific vulnerabilities and inequalities – especially concerning the climate crisis – and promote the development of inclusive international economic networks as well as inclusive working structures in the foreign service.⁴³

As can be seen from the German FFP Strategy and the indicators established by Scheyer and Kumskova^{44,45}, the concept of FFP is constantly evolving, being refined, and adapting to new

contexts.⁴⁶ More and more countries are embracing this approach, learning from each other, and working together to bring greater awareness to gender-inclusive foreign policy. Particularly, the three R approach is recognised in the field and often used as the basis for developing a national strategy.⁴⁷

Gender Dimensions in the Ukraine War

When examining communication on the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine, the dominance of gender stereotypes, hierarchies, and narratives in discourse becomes apparent.⁴⁸ In his rhetoric and actions, President Putin feminises Ukraine and the West, portraying Russia as a strong state invading its weaker neighbour ruthlessly and aggressively. Although showing different appearances and characteristics, the Russian and the Ukrainian presidents are in a battle between two strong leaders and thereby embody competing masculinities. Putin, on the one side, represents himself as relentless, mighty, and possessing hyper-masculine strength, while Zelensky, on the other side, acts kindly and gently while taking on the role of a protector.

In the context of gender-specific consequences of war, the tactical use of war rape, which is mainly directed against women and girls, also needs to be highlighted.⁴⁹ The result of a survey reveals that a significant portion, approximately 93%, of Ukrainians are aware of incidents involving rape or sexual assault perpetrated by Russian or pro-

Russian forces.⁵⁰ Additionally, 20% of respondents indicate that they have personal knowledge of individuals who have experienced rape or sexual assault at the hands of Russian or pro-Russian troops since the full-scale invasion commenced. For the victims, the consequences of rape range from shame, trauma, and humiliation to the possibility of becoming pregnant or physical and mental health risks.⁵¹ Moreover, sexual assault symbolises power and hierarchy. During the Russian war of aggression, the rape of Ukrainian women and girls is not only a by-product but also a strategic tool and common practice, showing the gender-specific dimension of the war.

With the war, a humanitarian crisis has spread in Ukraine, resulting in approximately 17.6 million people requiring humanitarian assistance until this year.⁵² In addition, by the summer of 2023, almost 5.1 million people had been displaced within Ukraine and more than 6.2 million refugees from Ukraine were registered worldwide. Of the war-related refugees, women and children make up 90%. Moreover, of the internally displaced adults, 60% are female.⁵³ The Rapid Gender Analysis carried out by UN Women and CARE International highlights three main challenges for women arising from the war in Ukraine⁵⁴:

1. Women are actively participating in the humanitarian response, yet they are only marginally involved in related decision-making processes.

2. The crisis is intensifying pre-existing gender and intersectional disparities and biases.
3. The conflict is disproportionately impacting women due to its multi-sectoral and compounded effects.

The lack of participation in formal decision-making processes, e.g. about the access to and distribution of resources, and the decreasing overall participation of women are not only causes of gender inequality but also influence the overall social development of the country.⁵⁵ Decisions are often made hastily and the needs and preferences of different groups of people, both women and men, are not adequately taken into account. The groups that are not consulted include those who are most vulnerable and marginalised. A second serious consequence of the armed conflict is the reinforcement of gender inequalities. Women and political minorities are affected by unemployment, are therefore forced to work in the unprotected informal sector of the economy, live in poverty, and are consequently dependent on social benefits. Marginalised communities, such as households led by women, internally displaced persons, Roma communities, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and those with disabilities, bear an especially unequal burden. When trying to access humanitarian assistance, women experience intersecting forms of discrimination, encounter specific obstacles, and exhibit a need for protection. Lastly, there is also a gender dimension in how people are affected by violent conflict. On the one hand,

although 42,000 women are serving in the Ukrainian army and thereby constitute a significant part of the armed forces⁵⁶, it is men who are affected by the conscription regulations, make up 94% of the armed forces, and are therefore more exposed to the dangers on the battlefield.⁵⁷ Another consequence of the male-dominated military sector is patriarchal structures and norms that lead to discrimination in combat positions and sexual harassment of women.⁵⁸ On the other hand, the multisectoral repercussions of the crisis caused by the full-scale invasion are affecting women disproportionately. Women are the majority among those displaced within and outside the country, causing increased safety risks. Gender-based violence, especially the number of domestic and conflict-related incidents, is growing, yet support services for survivors remain insufficient. In general, the police response to domestic violence cases is diminishing in parts of Ukraine, leaving those affected without access to immediate help. Thus, women struggle to access essential services and their standard of living is plummeting. However, they are still under pressure to provide for their families while the male members are engaged in defence activities.

These cumulative challenges underline how the crisis in Ukraine has a gendered dimension and that the multi-layered toll of the violent conflict on women demands greater attention and support.

Discussing FFP in the Face of the Current War

All these gender-specific consequences of war and conflict are recurring themes that have long been identified by academia.⁵⁹ FFP addresses these issues and develops approaches to counteract them. The three plus one R approach provides tools for action which could enable to counteract the gender inequalities existing in Ukraine.^{60,61} While in Ukraine women are mainly excluded from political decision-making, the FFP stresses the importance of developing inclusive and participatory structures for political minorities (*Representation*). Existing traditional roles and gender-related inequalities are increasing during wartime in Ukraine and should be tackled by strengthening the *Rights* of women. Finally, the disproportional consequences of war for female Ukrainians could be addressed by giving women access to essential *Resources*. As the Rapid Gender Analysis shows, it is necessary to reveal gender-related inequalities by using data and research.⁶² Based on monitoring, gender-specific developments within a country can be evaluated and the effects of measures can be captured.

Even though FFP addresses existing conflict-related challenges for women and political minorities, there is a great debate and criticism sparked by the war in Ukraine not only of the foreign policy implemented so far but also of feminist goals and visions. For instance, the feminist demands for disarmament and the dismantling of war-supporting structures⁶³, which were

formulated before the Ukraine war, have been discussed once again since February 2022.⁶⁴ Various movements can be identified in this discourse:

Maria Cernat, Associate Professor at the University of Bucharest, identifies two main streams of thought in feminist discussions: liberal feminism, which prioritises human rights and equal opportunities, and radical feminism, which focuses on economic and class dynamics.⁶⁵ Liberal feminism strives to incorporate women into the existing societal framework, whereas radical feminism seeks profound societal transformation by addressing and altering the root causes of gender violence, inequality, and oppression. The war in Ukraine contributed to a polarisation of positions in the feminist movement, even within Ukraine. While some feminists have reconsidered their relationship to militarism and feel the need to put pacifist ideals aside, others criticise the increased militarisation and use of violence in Ukraine since 2014. Therefore, feminist discussions align with either liberal or radical positions, reflecting two stances regarding the Ukrainian conflict: one group advocates for providing arms to Ukraine as the sole solution, while the other calls for negotiations to end the firing as soon as possible.

In Germany, too, different positions have emerged regarding FFP in Ukraine.⁶⁶ The normative-activist faction, influenced by critical feminist theory, advocates for an FFP that aims to achieve a utopian vision of a vio-

lence-free world. They are sceptical or opposed to issues like arms exports and military deterrence, viewing them as manifestations of deep-seated patriarchal structures. This perspective tends to align with the radical feminist stream. The pragmatic FFP faction, which includes the German government, believes in aligning FFP with practical measures such as supplying arms for immediate defence. However, they have not clearly defined how and why these measures should be implemented. Determining suitable short-term actions for FFP in crises remains a challenge. This feminist stream is closely linked to Cernat's category of liberal feminism. A conservative, FFP-sceptical faction, often associated with political "realism," rejects FFP as a mere approach. They view FFP as an unrealistic utopian concept promoted by disconnected foreign policy elites in Germany. This group criticises the normative-activist faction for not addressing the immediate situation in Ukraine and the pragmatic FFP faction for failing to make meaningful contributions to the arms debate or garner support. Since ignoring the gender dimension and feminist demands in the Ukrainian war has fatal consequences for women and political minorities, this last conservative stance does not bring about any improvement for the neglected political groups in Ukraine and does not acknowledge the importance of FFP. The other two positions in the feminist discourse are presented as mutually exclusive. However, taking a closer look at their demands and

putting them into a temporal context is necessary.

Since the beginning of the war, Ukraine has been faced with the decision to defend itself against Russian aggression or to surrender. The latter would most likely stop direct fighting, but Russian repression would follow, which would then have drastic consequences, especially for women and political minorities.⁶⁷ For this reason, it is also essential from a feminist perspective to support Ukraine's defence efforts.⁶⁸ This approach is also followed by Sweden, among others. Military decisions must be subject to a gender-based analysis so that the human security environment in Ukraine is best protected and the negative impact on civilians can be largely prevented.⁶⁹ Another important task of FFP is to address the concrete and current challenges of women and political minorities and to act with the tools at their disposal.⁷⁰ This should be complemented but not opposed by a long-term feminist agenda and vision for Ukraine including a transformative approach to positive peace. The author, activist, and co-CEO of CFFP, Kristina Lunz, also distinguishes between feminist maximal demands that will bring transformative change and compromises that lose their transformative power but still bring about some change in the current situation.⁷¹ Even though the ideals and visions are essential to follow up on, pragmatic solutions need to be implemented to improve the situation for women

under the current circumstances.

Applying the FFP Approach to Ukraine

When talking about applying FFP to the context of Ukraine, both, a short- and a long-term approach are needed: Firstly, a response to the current needs of neglected groups must be initiated to tackle the immediate consequences of the full-scale invasion. Secondly, a durable feminist approach and vision for Ukraine should be established to enable a more inclusive transformation in the post-war period. Both approaches, however, need to be in line with the feminist demands in Ukraine and the FFP strategies should complement the national developments and efforts.

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A poll conducted by the Peace Research Institute Oslo in the spring of 2022 shows that the participation of Ukrainian women in peace talks is supported by 43% of Ukrainians while 13% are against it.⁷² Thus, having more women involved in the future peace process is mostly supported and therefore should be further focused on. Previous studies already indicate that the inclusion of women in peace negotiations leads to more durable agreements.⁷³ This does not imply that women are inherently more peaceful than

men; rather, it underscores their ability to introduce novel perspectives into negotiations and focus on aspects that may be less significant to men. Despite the current state of war and the lack of widespread knowledge about FFP in Ukraine, it is essential to establish strategies that ensure women's rights and integrate feminist views into the country's long-term development.⁷⁴ Since 2019, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Ukraine has followed gender issues more closely. However, most female diplomats continue to highlight a persistent stereotype regarding the role of women in the diplomatic service. This stereotype encompasses various aspects, including the allocation of responsibilities and the choice of thematic areas for their work.

Therefore, working on a feminist national strategy and an FFP strategy should become a priority for Ukraine and gender equality as well as inclusion need to be integrated into the country's post-war recovery programmes. While it is difficult for Ukraine to engage in a broad feminist transformation during the war, support from abroad is necessary to tackle short-term challenges for women and lay a foundation for inclusive participation as well as the possibility of contributing to the country's reconstruction after the war.

There are several crucial reasons why Ukraine must work through persistent structural hurdles and start understanding and implementing elements of FFP⁷⁵: not only would this help to align with democratic values,

support Ukraine's European and Euro-Atlantic integration, and serve as a tool for diplomacy during conflict and justice restoration, but FFP would also be relevant in terms of receiving international aid and post-war reconstruction. FFP could enhance Ukraine's soft power and can serve as a model for successful transformation and a tool for nation-building. The declaration of a Ukrainian FFP has the potential to highlight the importance of safeguarding human rights, fostering inclusivity, and promoting gender equality. It can also address critical issues like sexual and gender-based violence, protect marginalised communities, and tackle systemic disparities.

Since the ongoing war causes a lot of atrocities and devastation, Ukraine needs support, resources, and partners to take care of the neglected groups and establish a feminist approach. For this reason, the international community should feel responsible for supporting the feminist movements in Ukraine. By adapting their foreign policies, Ukraine's partners greatly influence developments in Ukraine. So far, the supply of weaponry, debates about energy and economic consequences, military strategies, geopolitics, and war developments dominate the political discourse.⁷⁶ The humanitarian consequences, especially for women and political minorities, do not receive attention in the public discourse alongside these issues and some experts fear a "refugee fatigue" leading to decreasing emergency support.⁷⁷ Therefore, countries like the EU member states should

follow an FFP-oriented agenda and give more active support to the neglected groups.⁷⁸ On the one hand, basic supplies, shelter, support, counselling, and care structures are needed in the short term.⁷⁹ These structures should focus on issues like war rape, violence, and flight, and need to be implemented inside and outside Ukraine. On the other hand, it is particularly important for the EU to support Ukraine's long-term feminist development.⁸⁰ Those EU countries already committed to FFP, like Sweden, France, and Germany, should be leading in the development of a European FFP and applying it to Ukraine. Furthermore, assistance in Ukraine's reconstruction and support for its EU membership should be contingent upon conditions related to women's rights. Ursula von der Leyen, as President of the European Commission, as well as other female leaders and women in power, can be role models and increase the pressure for more women's participation in decision-making processes. In designing an FFP strategy for Ukraine, the three Rs can be used as a guideline⁸¹: especially during the war as well as for the subsequent peace process and reconstruction of the country, equal access to *Resources*, inclusive participation in decision-making processes (*Representation*) and ensuring the *Rights* of women are essential not only for women but also for Ukraine's general development. Especially since gender equality and inclusion contribute to the quality, success, and durability of peace⁸², there should be a special focus on the

three R approach and women's rights and participation should be the main elements of Ukraine's post-war recovery programmes.⁸³

Furthermore, the additional fourth R – *Research/Reality* – must receive more attention from scholars.^{84,85} Since problems only become visible when they are named, researched, summarised in facts, and published, more work is needed in this field to be able to accurately identify and serve the needs of Ukrainian women.⁸⁶ For example, only limited sources on the topic were available to write this article, which in turn weakens the validity of the work and only illustrates parts of the bigger issue. Further, with a broader base of facts, it is easier to steer the narrative and news coverage towards women in Ukraine and gendered perspectives of the war. While it is important to highlight the plight of neglected groups to increase pressure on decision-makers, the commitment and work of Ukrainian women, particularly in the humanitarian response, also needs to be recognised and appreciated.⁸⁷

Conclusion

As this publication shows, FFP is an important approach to improving the situation of women and political minorities in Ukraine. While it is necessary in the short term that cooperation partners – such as the EU – pay more attention to the humanitarian crisis and target access to essential resources to disadvantaged groups, structural changes need to be addressed in

the long term. In particular, the rights and participation of women in decision-making processes must be guaranteed, a process for which the first steps must be taken now. Once the West and EU member states start applying an FFP strategy, the feminist movement in Ukraine can be strengthened and the country will have a chance to develop its own feminist domestic and foreign policy in the future.

About the Author

Miriam Mandel is a current student of the Peace and Conflict Studies M.A. Programme of the University of Kent and the Phillips-Universität Marburg. Both in her studies and in her professional experience to date, she has focused in particular on feminist approaches, international environmental policy, peace and conflict resolution and the region of Central and Eastern Europe. As part of an internship, she worked for the AIES.

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