



Photo: Petterik Wiggers

A REALITY CHECK OF DUTCH FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY IN AFGHANISTAN & SOUTH SUDAN

NAVIGATING TRADE-OFFS AND LEVERAGING OPPORTUNITIES IN FRAGILE SETTINGS

Written by

Anne Kwakkenbos, Helen Kezie-Nwoha, Rojan Bolling and Ruth van de Velde

FUNDED BY KPSRL



Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law



ABBREVIATIONS

ARTF	Afghanistan Resilience Trust Fund
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women
DFA	Defacto Authorities
EKN	Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands
FFP	Feminist Foreign Policy
KPSRL	Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law
LGBTIQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer persons and persons of another gender and sexual orientation
MoFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MOU	Memorandums of Understanding
ODA	Official Development Assistance
SCBV	Sexual gender-based violence
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
WASH	Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene
WHRD	Women Human Rights Defenders

INTRODUCTION

The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) is working to operationalise its Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP). This research aims to understand the practical implications, unintended consequences, and potential trade-offs associated with implementing FFP, especially in fragile settings such as South Sudan and Afghanistan.

In fragile settings in particular, the operationalisation of a FFP can be challenging. While there is potential for addressing gender disparities and promoting women's participation in governance and security processes through FFP, attempts to infuse social contracts with feminist principles and policies may encounter various risks and challenges, such as cultural backlash. To aid the operationalisation of the Dutch FFP, this research particularly focuses on its realisation in countries affected by conflict and fragility, specifically South Sudan and Afghanistan.

At the start of the research, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs was working on a Handbook to provide a detailed guideline for the implementation of the FFP. To date, the degree to which this policy will be faced with trade-offs in relation to other policy objectives, and to what extent it is possible to operationalise it for local realities (specifically in fragile settings) remains unclear. This research aims to address these critical gaps by conducting a comprehensive 'reality check' of Dutch FFP in fragile settings. The focus is on understanding the practical implications, unintended consequences, and trade-offs associated with implementing FFP in such challenging environments. By doing so, the research seeks to inform and improve future interventions and policy decisions related to FFP, ensuring that it remains relevant, effective, and responsive to the realities in the countries where the Netherlands aims to implement its FFP objectives.

This research is guided by the following questions:

- What are the underlying assumptions and principles that inform feminist foreign policy and how do these relate to social contracts?
- How do the social, cultural, and political dynamics of fragile contexts limit and provide opportunities for the realisation of feminist foreign policy?
- How can feminist foreign policy approaches be adapted and contextualised to enhance their effectiveness and relevance in supporting gender equality and women's empowerment in fragile contexts?

The research utilised desk research, expert consultations, and workshops to analyse Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) in relation to social contracts within fragile settings. It began by exploring the concept and relevance of FFP, followed by an examination of Dutch FFP objectives, principles and approaches to identify initial trade-offs, assumptions, synergies, and leverage points. A kick-off workshop held during the FFP community festival, preceding the Netherlands Shaping FFP Conference, refined initial findings and approaches, with a focus on implementing FFP through existing policy instruments. Subsequent country workshops in Afghanistan (online) and South Sudan (Juba) further contextualized FFP understanding and identified implementation insights based on local realities and contexts, leading to actionable recommendations discussed with policymakers to inform decision-making processes. The analysis and recommendations were tested in presentations to and discussions with policymakers at the MoFA team on FFP, as well as embassies.

We sincerely thank all participants from the Shaping FFP conference in The Hague, the country workshops in South Sudan (Juba) and Afghanistan (online), and the research presentations in The Hague (online) with policymakers and practitioners. Your invaluable insights have significantly enhanced our understanding of implementing FFP in fragile settings, relevant not only to the Netherlands but also to other countries with FFPs. Finally, we would like to thank KPSRL for making this research possible.

Reading the report

This report presents key insights from Dutch Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) initiatives in South Sudan and Afghanistan, synthesising challenges and opportunities. It begins by defining and exploring the concept of FFP and its relevance to social contracts in fragile settings. Subsequently, it examines Dutch FFP objectives and critical assumptions. The report then delves into the specific contexts of South Sudan and Afghanistan, outlining Dutch FFP ambitions, assessing current efforts and needs, and identifying implementation opportunities. It is structured into two main sections focusing on each country's context and needs, followed by insights from SWOT analyses from the workshops with policymakers and practitioners informing actionable recommendations for enhancing FFP strategies.

FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY

What is FFP?

Feminist foreign policy (FFP) is an evolving concept characterised by a commitment to gender equality, women's empowerment, and the integration of a gender perspective into foreign policy decision-making. Various countries, including Sweden (which abandoned their FFP after their last elections), Canada, France, Mexico, Spain, Norway, Luxembourg, Finland, Argentina, the Netherlands, and Costa Rica, have adopted FFPs with tailored approaches reflecting their specific contexts and priorities. While these policies share common goals, such as promoting women's rights and challenging gender-based discrimination, they vary in their emphasis and implementation strategies. Overall, FFP aims to create a more inclusive and equitable world where the rights and contributions of women and girls are fully recognised and valued in international relations.

The principles of FFPs include a range of common themes aimed at promoting gender equality, women's rights, and inclusive decision-making in international affairs. These principles include promoting gender equality, advocating for women's rights, ensuring inclusivity for marginalised groups, integrating a gender perspective into all policy areas, combating discrimination and violence, supporting women's participation in decision-making processes, prioritising sexual and reproductive health and rights, promoting economic empowerment, addressing gender-based violence, recognising humanitarian concerns, fostering international solidarity, and holding governments accountable for their commitments to gender equality. While these principles may vary in emphasis and approach across countries, they collectively reflect a commitment to addressing gender disparities and advancing women's rights on a global scale. FFP seeks to apply feminism as a disruptive analytical tool that identifies entrenched power structures and takes a transformative, intersectional approach to overcoming them (Federal Foreign Office, Government of Germany, 2023).

FFPs are built on several assumptions which shape their approach to international relations. Firstly, these policies recognise gender inequality as a pervasive global issue and acknowledge the discrimination and marginalisation faced by women and gender-diverse individuals worldwide. Secondly, they embrace intersectionality (UN Women 2023), the understanding that gender discrimination intersects with other forms of inequality based on race, ethnicity, class, and other factors. FFPs also challenge systemic gender biases entrenched in political, economic, and social systems, and advocate for comprehensive approaches that address gender issues across various areas of foreign policy (Thompson, 2023). In addition, FFPs recognise that violence against women is a barrier to achieving peace and emphasise the agency of women as active participants in diplomacy and conflict resolution. Furthermore, FFPs assume that inclusive decision-making processes yield better outcomes and that empowering women benefits society as a whole. They prioritise accountability, transparency, collaboration, and solidarity in advancing gender equality and women's rights on the global stage. These assumptions collectively inform and guide the commitment of FFPs to challenging gender-based discrimination, promoting women's rights, and integrating a gender perspective into all aspects of foreign policy (Thompson, 2023).

Social contracts in the context of fragility

As FFPs target equality, inclusion and accountability they aim to reshape both societal relations and state-society relations, also known as social contracts. In fragile settings, social contracts are marked by uncertainties and complexities, often with limited state intervention and limited prioritisation of citizens' human security by autocratic states. State responsibility in social contracts is often unclear, leading to a lack of prioritisation of basic needs and rights, especially for women and marginalised groups. Often these settings are characterised by strong patriarchal systems defining social contracts within and beyond the state. International development actors are often relied upon for these provisions, but this approach neglects the specific vulnerabilities faced by women and girls, particularly regarding basic needs and protection. In the absence of state protection and social accountability mechanisms, dominant social contracts are often not inclusive, women's and girls' rights are frequently neglected, highlighting layers of vulnerabilities that citizens cannot address or hold the state accountable for (Kezie-Nwoha, 2022).

FFPs have the potential to shape social contracts in fragile settings, given their influence on aid allocation to countries. Beyond supporting governments in meeting citizens' basic needs, aid frameworks must adopt a feminist approach to promote inclusivity, accountability and address intersecting inequalities. By actively interrogating power dynamics and amplifying marginalised voices like those of women, people with disabilities, and refugees (Kezie-Nwoha, 2022), FFPs can facilitate a more inclusive social contract, bridging divides between the state and its citizens as well as within society. Embracing a human rights approach ensures accountability and safeguards the rights of all citizens while involving those living in fragile contexts in developing interventions for effective and sustainable solutions.

A Policy Theory for the Dutch FFP

In 2022, the Netherlands announced its Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP), citing the first article of the Dutch Constitution on equality as well as the lesser known 90th article, obliging the government to promote international law. The policy aims to address global gender inequality, emphasising not only women's rights but also striving for equal standing among men, women, and non-binary individuals, with specific attention to LGBTIQ+ persons. Building on previous efforts, such as establishing a taskforce for women's rights and gender equality within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) since 2014, and integrating gender mainstreaming into MoFA policies, the Netherlands positioned itself as a global advocate for gender issues. In the policy letter announcing its FFP, the government states that a key reason to adopt a more prominent feminist framework in foreign policy is to enhance overall policy effectiveness. Expanding the rationale not only to equality and human rights arguments but also to more effectively reaching economic and security objectives.

As part of our research we have attempted to construct a policy theory (Theory of Change) on the Dutch FFP, inspired by ex-ante policy evaluation methods, to make the discussion around effectiveness and operationalisation of FFP more evidence informed. This attempt was informed by the letter to parliament and engagements with stakeholders involved in the development of a handbook that operationalises FFP. As an official handbook has not been released [1], our findings rely on limited resources. During the research process we concluded that with this limited information, developing a comprehensive policy theory is not feasible.

The current formulation of the feminist foreign policy as it is available presents it as both a method and a goal for achieving a more inclusive and effective foreign policy. We see that FFP is described as a method, because it aims to operationalise a foreign policy approach guided by feminist principles to address global inequality. At the same time, it is portrayed as a goal, where the ultimate aim of adopting a FFP is to achieve a more inclusive and effective foreign policy overall. This dual role complicates its theoretical framework as the first perspective aims to have an impact on foreign societies, while the second perspective mainstreams a feminist approach to impact the various parts of Dutch foreign policy itself.

Looking beyond this foundational tension. The Dutch FFP approach centres on four key principles represented by the '4Rs' — rights, representation, resources, and reality checks. Implementing these principles aims to ensure that foreign policies prioritise the needs, rights, and representation of women and marginalised groups. These Rs come closest to a Theory of Change underlying this policy. However, the 4Rs operate at different levels within this policy theory, where resources (means) are distinct from rights (impact). While activities using resources can contribute to the 4R objectives, the realisation of fundamental principles like rights and representation requires broader and sustained efforts beyond immediate project outputs, taking into account resource availability and contextual nuances.

Moving forward, refining these principles will be crucial for effectively translating policy objectives into tangible outcomes and actions. Different strategies and approaches and even multiple policy theories may be needed to achieve desired outcomes across various sectors and regions. Since at this time it is not possible to define these different policy theories, related to the different aspects of the Dutch foreign policy (e.g. trade relations, security objectives), we can only analyse the critical assumptions underlying the overall policy framework. Testing these assumptions will be instrumental in establishing how a feminist foreign policy can strengthen the Netherlands' overall foreign policy framework.

1. At the start of this research, the Dutch government announced the development of a handbook for FFP. During the writing of this research, the handbook was developed into an online tool. At the moment of the finalisation of this research, there is no information available regarding the content or implementation of this online tool.

Critical assumptions at the overall policy level

In discussions, tensions seem to exist around the ownership of FFP throughout the MoFA as well as to what extent it will be a guiding framework for all policies and strategies. To create clarity on how FFP can strengthen the Netherlands foreign policy it is therefore important to create a common understanding around the following assumptions:

The policy theory assumes that ownership and budget to realise FFP can be equally applied at all different levels, departments and posts and missions of the MoFA.

- The policy theory assumes that FFP can be mainstreamed in other strategies and policies of the MoFA (e.g. Africa strategy, trade agreements) and that clarity on how to do this can be created together with the various departments of the MoFA – creating policy coherence.
- The policy theory assumes that there can be a common understanding of FFP throughout its levels of implementation (global, country, community, household). With streamlined objectives, indicators, and a monitoring framework. That a reality check only has to take place at the country level, rather than taking into account regional dynamics and policies.

Critical assumptions at the level of fragile settings

The current state of the policy theory still misses an operationalisation in implementing a FFP in fragile settings regarding potential challenges this brings. The effectiveness of FFP beyond the Netherlands is still unclear and the policy theory is missing a clear approach to potential backlash related to cultural differences, political systems, economic conditions, and societal norms in other and especially fragile countries.

- The policy theory assumes there is sufficient capacity (time, resources, and expertise) at local (implementing) partner organisations to mainstream gender in economic, humanitarian, social, and other programming, without doing harm or creating backlash.

RESULTS OF COUNTRY-FOCUSED DISCUSSIONS

This section discusses the results of the country-focused discussions. In both cases the needs and context analysis is based on literature review of the multi-annual country strategy and other relevant literature, focus group discussions with civil society organisations (in Juba, and for Afghanistan, online). The outcomes of these discussions have been translated by the research team into a SWOT analysis, that has been further refined and validated in conversations with civil society and policymakers at the MoFA FFP team, as well as both country embassies to come to concrete recommendations. The SWOT analysis applied a lens of the ‘seven principles’ of FFP to Dutch policy, examining each in turn, while focusing on socio-economic, political and cultural aspects of the context.



Context

Findings indicate that despite ongoing recovery efforts from economic challenges exacerbated by the civil war and the COVID-19 pandemic, South Sudan continues to experience sporadic violence/conflict, chronic food insecurity, and flooding which often derail humanitarian efforts. Poverty, social norms, gender biases, and a culture of impunity continue to perpetuate gender inequality. In addition, South Sudan still lacks the constitutional framework, democratic institutions, or open civic space [2] needed to build accountable and transparent governance structures and complete the transitional period with free, fair, and peaceful elections proposed in late 2024.

In line with the revitalised peace agreement, there are policies promoting gender equality, such as the 35% provision for women's participation, but the meaningful implementation of this provision remains a challenge. The Ministry of Gender, which is responsible for advancing gender equality, is underfunded. Additionally, the country faces deep-rooted psychosocial challenges that emanate from historical trauma, contributing to cycles of violence and (sexual gender-based violence (SGBV)). Addressing these issues requires a shift in social and cultural norms perpetuating gender inequality, necessitating awareness campaigns and a do-no-harm approach to ensure local communities interpret women's rights and gender equality messages positively.

There is an increased attack on women human rights defenders (WHRDs), and protecting WHRDs and female politicians from attacks is crucial in a context where civic space is shrinking. While South Sudan recently ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), concerns persist regarding the prioritisation and implementation of its provisions, given previous experiences with unfulfilled policies and agreements. In addition, local women's organisations face barriers to accessing decision makers, this calls for capacity strengthening in documentation, advocacy, and lobbying strategies.

SWOT Analysis: Opportunities and threats arising from the South Sudanese context

Context	Opportunities	Threats
Socio-economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media in South Sudan, like radio, have the ability to voice the needs of women & gender issues. • I/NGOs have relationships with communities and presence to reach many people throughout the country. • Working to build social cohesion requires the participation of women. • Women are eager to participate in humanitarian programming. • There are women-led businesses operating in South Sudan that could be leveraged to ensure economic empowerment. • In the push for localisation more local organisations are able to access humanitarian funds and fora, they may push for further inclusion of women's issues (e.g. dignity kits). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a general lack of services, lack of access to clean water, food insecurity, high illiteracy. • Infrastructure is lacking so there is limited and difficult mobility. • Women do agricultural work, but do not benefit from value addition. • Women cannot access land, agricultural loans, and rent subsidies. • High taxes limit ability to start up businesses. • There is a lack of financing for gender equality work, the criteria for women to access funding are complex and there is competition among I/NGOs to access funding. • UNOCHA programming does not have specific funding for women's rights focused projects and organisations. • Humanitarian funding is focusing on food and shelter first, dignity and reproductive rights usually come last.
Political	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The second National Action Plan on UNSC Resolution 1325 (Women, Peace and Security) is coming up. • The CEDAW convention was recently ratified. • The peace agreement includes 35% affirmative action for women's participation in decision-making. • The peace agreement provides an opportunity for the government to be accountable to citizens through the set up of hybrid courts (Chapter 5). • Gender Based Violence courts are operational. • There is political will for reconciliation and healing. • The government shows much interest in humanitarian programming. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is still insecurity and violence in many places. • Customary law does not take into account the rights of women. • The Ministry of Gender is the least financed ministry, gender policies are not implemented meaningfully. • South Sudan has no constitution, making it more difficult to enforce addressing rights. • Women's organisations struggle to get access to decision makers. • Women human rights defenders, activists, journalists, lawyers and politicians are attacked, disappear, are arrested; civic space is shrinking. • There is little government appetite for the hybrid courts. • Some women in political leadership are only figureheads for powerful men, while women politicians fight amongst themselves instead of supporting each other. • Donor fatigue.
Cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women officers engaged in Security Sector Reform processes understand perspectives of women in relation to Gender Based Violence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Widespread support for & strong feelings about traditional gender norms. Changing these norms is a long term process, falls outside scope of projects. • Using the word 'feminist' has a negative connotation. • It is easy to be misunderstood in communication around sexual health, reproduction and gender. • Men feel left out in community structures created to support women. • There is little support to heal from the trauma of war and violence.

Barriers to gender equality include socio-economic, political, and cultural factors, perpetuating financial disparities and reinforcing traditional gender roles that limit women's participation in decision-making. Bureaucratic hurdles and insufficient funding for gender equality initiatives exacerbate these challenges. Overcoming these barriers requires sustained efforts to challenge societal norms, coupled with institutional reforms to empower women and facilitate their inclusion across all levels of society.

Dutch policy

The focus of the Netherlands Embassy is to support South Sudan's transition from a country affected by conflict and fragility, reliant on humanitarian aid, to a peaceful, inclusive, and resilient democracy [3]. Their vision is to expand bilateral relations to encompass trade and investment, ultimately contributing to stability in the Horn of Africa, with a strong emphasis on prioritising the inclusion of vulnerable and marginalised groups in development efforts.

To facilitate South Sudan's transition to a peaceful, inclusive, and sustainable state, the Netherlands advocates for an integrated approach, emphasising interconnectedness between humanitarian, peacebuilding, and development (triple-Nexus) efforts, aiming to address root causes of conflict, reduce aid dependencies, and promote inclusive development while advocating for coordinated triple-Nexus programming and improved government relations at various levels. More specifically the Dutch Embassy in South Sudan focuses on the following themes; women's rights and gender equality, access to water and sanitation, triple nexus approach, private sector development, rule of law, food and nutrition security, humanitarian and human rights and cross-cutting issues including gender, youth, climate and conflict sensitivity [4]. Under the strategic partnership framework, several civil society actors are receiving support through programmes such as Just Future Alliance, Count Me In, and We Cannot Wait, among others.

The Netherlands has already committed to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in South Sudan through a feminist foreign policy approach [5]. The idea is to integrate gender sensitivity and responsiveness into all aspects of development cooperation and diplomatic engagements, emphasising the importance of including both women and men in efforts to advance gender-specific rights, decision-making, and protection from Sexual and Gender-Based Violence. These are aimed to be applied consistently across the Dutch aid and diplomacy portfolio allowing for opportunities to mainstream FFP in different sectors e.g. including economic sectors and productive sectors, security and rule of law as well as humanitarian aid. The Dutch Embassy in South Sudan employs an inclusive and partnership approach in its engagement, regularly consulting with civil society organisations and the government.



Photo Anne Kwakkenbos

3. <https://www.netherlandsandyou.nl/web/south-sudan/themes>

4. Multi-Annual Country Strategy 2023-2026 South Sudan - cross-cutting priorities

5. Waake Simon Wudu. South Sudan's Liberation Struggle Supplanted by Autocracy. https://www.voafrica.com/a/africa_south-sudan-focus_south-sudans-liberation-struggle-supplanted-autocracy/6208074.html

SWOT Analysis: Strengths and weaknesses of the Dutch policy engagement with South Sudan

Policy	Strengths	Weaknesses
Gender diplomacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands (EKN) Juba works with UN and other embassies to promote gender issues. EKN Juba has a gender advocacy strategy, mainly focused on the political landscape in South Sudan. EKN Juba does constant mapping of stakeholder landscape, tracking key people in policy positions, embassies, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> International discussion on intersectionality / LGBTIQ+ is not well accepted in the South Sudan context. Cannot use the words 'feminist' or 'feminism'. Donor perspectives differ, expectations in HQs in the area of FFP vary for different donors which complicates embassy collaboration. Need for harmonisation.
Gender analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender is a cross-cutting priority of EKN Juba Multi Annual Country Strategy. EKN Juba has a strong focus on conflict sensitivity, gender analysis is integrated in conflict analyses. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender analysis is often done after programmes have already started.
Policy evaluation & MEL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There exists a framework with objectives for engagement, clearly indicating the focus on gender. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficult to measure the impact of gender mainstreaming if analysis starts later on in projects.
Gender budgeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Central & decentralised funding available with programming on various areas such as WASH, food security and economic empowerment. Forty per cent of funding goes into development activities. Gender-specific goals included in Security & Rule of Law programming, focused on transitional and informal justice. Central & decentralised funding for women's rights programming (e.g. WPS, strategic partnerships). The Netherlands is the biggest donor to the South Sudan Humanitarian Fund, currently also a board member of the fund. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Much of the funding available goes into multilateral humanitarian funds — the funding is unearmarked. EKN Juba cannot have direct project relationship with South Sudanese government.
Root causes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EKN Juba requires (overall) analysis of power and stakeholders in programme design, with specific gender aspects. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Funding is often ad-hoc and for the short term (1-3 year projects) while the objective is long term. EKN Juba lacks access to validated good practice guidance to address the root causes of gender inequalities, specifically for South Sudan. Tacitly present, but not captured well.
Meaningful participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EKN Juba requires (overall) analysis of power and stakeholders in programme design, with specific gender aspects. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EKN Juba lacks access to insights on approaches that ensure meaningful participation after projects end
Own organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EKN Juba has a gender focal point expert. Tools are available for policy officers to mainstream and discuss gender issues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is a lack of clarity on what is expected from embassies to realise Feminist Foreign Policy. FFP and how it should be implemented is still in development. International staff have two year placement limits. Staff operate in their own thematic silos.

Reality check

South Sudan's deeply patriarchal society, reflected in the autocratic nature of its government, requires efforts to ensure that support through ODA effectively promotes economic development, good governance, humanitarian aid, and enterprise development that benefits women and other marginalised groups. This demands matching interventions with intersectional gender analysis, gender transformative policies/approaches, gender budgeting, and the establishment of gender funds.

The majority of interventions supported by the Netherlands primarily focus on humanitarian aid, economic development, and strengthening the rule of law. Even though these interventions are important for a fragile settings, there is limited focus on reducing inequalities, breaking down unequal power relations, and addressing the root causes of inequality within this programming. Positively, for development programming, a power and stakeholder analysis is required by the Dutch embassy, which includes a gender focus; yet, it was also reported that gender analysis was often done after the start of programming which hampers the ability to monitor impact. Moreover, while achieving gender transformative impact is a long term ambition, most funding is short term (1-3 year projects). Such limitations come from the fragile nature of the context, also reflected in the humanitarian approach upon which the Netherlands has limited influence to integrate a gender perspective. Most of the humanitarian funds are unearmarked, pooled funding where food and shelter is often prioritised before providing dignity kits, while UNOCHA programming was reportedly lacking specific funding for women's rights focused projects. Gender is a sensitive topic, reflected in the fact that words like 'feminist' or 'feminism' are viewed negatively. Any communication around gender issues therefore needs to ensure it does no harm. This applies in particular to LGBTIQ+ issues. While there is support for working on women's rights, linking these to LGBTIQ+ was reported as counterproductive, immediately disqualifying the efforts. Additionally, while the Netherlands' ODA includes support to civil society through the strategic partnership framework, there are limitations in addressing the root causes of conflict, while the nature of the government contributes to ongoing violence in some parts of the country.

Despite these challenges, in South Sudan there are opportunities to effectively implement FFP and achieve FFP objectives, such as by: building on existing programs on gender equality, women, peace and security programs, working with men, boys and people (women) living with disabilities. There exists political will to work with humanitarian actors and development partners, as well as on reconciliation and healing into which a gender perspective can be mainstreamed. The presence of women's rights organisations and the ongoing implementation of the peace agreement, despite delays and calls for extension, present opportunities to ensure the inclusion of gender provisions in laws and policies, such as the permanent constitution. Moreover, South Sudan has recently ratified the CEDAW convention; the women enterprise bill will also come into effect, which will allow the Ministry of Gender to access resources from the peace agreement.





Context

At the moment of writing, the world is monitoring the situation in Afghanistan closely. With the Taliban being the de facto authorities (DFA), there is a new daily reality for women, men, girls, and boys in Afghanistan. With especially strict restrictions for women's and human rights. At the same time, the country and population are faced with an enormous humanitarian crisis. The Taliban is seeking recognition from international actors, and a majority of these international actors put a lot of emphasis on improving the situation for women and girls in Afghanistan as a prerequisite for continued dialogue. Despite efforts to engage with the DFA, rules have only become more restricted. The lack of safe public spaces hinders women's participation and influence in decision-making. The complexity of the situation requires different approaches to engage with women without harming government policies. This means accepting the realities on the ground, and tailor-made policies to address the varying needs of women in the different regions of Afghanistan.

Findings from the workshop on Afghanistan highlighted the need to support capacity strengthening of women at the grassroots level, especially since formal education is limited. Reaching and engaging women remains complex and needs continued attention. At the same time, the prevalence of multiple crises such as earthquakes, flooding, drought, and decreased agricultural production complicates prioritising women's rights as the primary objective amidst humanitarian challenges.

Dutch policy

The Netherlands' efforts in Afghanistan focus on providing basic needs and supporting livelihoods to increase stability and relieve humanitarian needs, implemented through the United Nations and the World Bank. The Dutch primary focus is on providing Humanitarian Aid with an emphasis on basic needs, aiming to remain apolitical. They term this approach as 'Humanitarian Aid ++', leaning towards development as much as possible without explicitly labelling it as such due to political sensitivity. The efforts target healthcare, education, agriculture, livelihoods, and occasionally climate change. Funding primarily flows through the Afghanistan Resilience Trust Fund (World Bank) and the Special Trust Fund for Afghanistan (UNDP). Beyond this funding, there are also a small number of bilateral programs that, due to sensitivity, cannot be named specifically.

In terms of gender and women's issues, the Afghanistan Resilience Trust Fund (ARTF) administered by the World Bank mandates projects to follow a 'principled approach', particularly emphasising women's involvement and access. The prioritisation of a gender lens is underscored, when programmes do not adhere, funding will be stopped. The World Bank's oversight includes a monitoring framework, though it limits innovation due to strict adherence to established methods. Despite efforts, there are concerns regarding tokenism and ensuring genuine participation. The Netherlands, like other organisations and the UN, frequently find the need to reframe their (project) focus and objectives from addressing women's issues due to the necessity of Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) with authorities. The significant mistrust between local authorities and the international community, largely stemming from a lack of transparency regarding project goals and outcomes, exacerbates the challenges of implementing a FFP.

SWOT Analysis: Opportunities and threats arising from the Afghan context

Context	Opportunities	Threats
Socio-economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are still women who have internet access which provides opportunities for education and skill development, remote work (and entrepreneurship), access to information and resources, as well as advocacy and consultation. • Some women still have access to bank accounts and there are still women-only markets which provide opportunities for women's economic empowerment and financial inclusion. • There are programs aiming to set up/work with Shura councils as informal justice systems that provide a platform towards increased access to justice for women. • Through the private sector, women engage in agriculture in some regions of the country where women are allowed to work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ongoing gender disparity in accessing resources (such as education, healthcare, employment opportunities, and financial services) restricts women's ability to reach their full potential and participate equally in society and the economy. • The inability of women and girls to access formal education due to various barriers (including cultural norms, economic constraints, or lack of educational infrastructure) undermines their opportunities for personal growth, economic independence, and participation in decision-making processes. • The emigration of skilled women from their home countries ('brain drain') reduces the pool of talented individuals available to contribute to local development and leadership. • Insufficient and inflexible funding to address the evolving needs of women and girls limits the effectiveness of programs and initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality and women's empowerment.
Political	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local authorities are more flexible which can open doors to innovative solutions and opportunities. Some local authorities allow women to work. • Locally, the Taliban sometimes sees benefits for women's inclusion. Opportunity to show that women contribute and that you need women to help women • There is some sympathy from the Taliban for women working in social enterprises or the private sector, as long as it is not in the open. • There are cases of temporary suspension of some of the bans allowing, for example, women to work for NGOs when needs are too high in disaster areas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There remain strict decrees on female staff in NGOs. Activities are being stopped by the DFA when there are women on the payroll. • Despite efforts to engage with the DFA by (local) civil society, DFA rules have only become more strict. • Lobby & advocacy courses, and peacebuilding activities are being banned by the DFA.
Cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The diaspora represents a significant resource of people who are advocating for and potentially investing in the development of Afghanistan. Their knowledge, skills, networks, and financial resources can be harnessed to contribute positively to Afghanistan's development. There is a huge Afghan diaspora advocating for development in Afghanistan . 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty in engaging men and boys, especially those attending Taliban-affiliated schools, poses a barrier to promoting gender equality and women's rights. • Terms associated with women's rights, such as 'gender equality' or 'feminism', are deemed offensive or controversial. • Uncertainty surrounding whether or not the diaspora fully understands the situation and dynamics in Afghanistan, and how their biases may influence their perspective.

Reality check

The fragility of the context, reinforcement of traditional power dynamics (patriarchal consolidation), multiple ongoing crises, and increased restrictions by the Taliban, present significant challenges. These challenges may make it difficult to prioritise and implement a Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) in Afghanistan as described in the current Dutch FFP. Therefore, Afghanistan's current socio-political landscape highlights the need for strategic decision-making and nuanced approaches in policy formulation and execution.

There is a lot of uncertainty about what is feasible both formally and informally in the current context. However, enhancing the space and agency for women is crucial. International actors, including the Netherlands, are closely monitoring the situation in Afghanistan, particularly concerning women's rights. This demands a pragmatic acceptance of the current reality on the ground, and tailored approaches to support and engage with women within the limited space there currently is. While at the same time, women's issues and rights need to be continuously promoted and brought to the attention of the DFA.

There is currently no Dutch Embassy in Kabul [6], which means the Dutch government is operating from a distance, with limited on-the-ground presence. In addition the funding structure of the Dutch ODA which flows primarily via the large funds, limits direct impact on reducing inequalities, breaking down unequal power relations, and addressing the root causes of inequality within this programming. This also means that the Netherlands mainly depends on other donors for gender analysis and PMEL. For the bilateral programming, the duration of these projects, currently lasting between 1-2 years, poses a challenge in fully addressing complex issues which, in general, need longer time-spans for gender transformative changes. However, it's worth noting that within the Afghan context, this time frame is comparatively longer than in many other donor countries where interventions are often even more short-lived. In addition, the Dutch EKN does acknowledge the complexity on the ground and the difficulty for local implementing partners to obtain the MoU's with the DFA. In response to the challenges faced by local implementing partners, the Dutch EKN is allowing non-cost extensions for about 6 months to provide more flexibility.

Despite the challenges there are opportunities for implementing an FFP. However a dual approach is needed, including nuanced language and creative framing in project descriptions to navigate sensitivities surrounding women's rights issues and ensure accessibility locally. At the same time, there is a pressing need for continued engagement (where possible) with the DFA to keep emphasis on the needs of women and citizens at large. Additionally, fostering partnerships between women in Afghanistan (and the diaspora and exile) is essential for mutual support and empowerment. Leveraging the recognition and flexibility of local leaders [7] amidst Taliban-imposed restrictions can enable effective advocacy for women's participation in the workforce, especially in disaster relief efforts and healthcare. Since formal education for women and girls is not possible, tailored education and skill-building initiatives, including online programs, can bridge educational gaps, empower women economically, and foster gender equality. In doing so, establishing a structured framework for regular consultation with women both inside and outside of Afghanistan is essential to ensure their meaningful participation. Additionally, conducting regular gender analysis of the contextual dynamics is crucial in order to address the evolving needs of women and girls and to better understand the ground realities.

6. During the workshop there was a discussion about reopening the Dutch embassy in Kabul, and representing the Dutch government in the country; this however is and remains a sensitive issue which raises concerns about potential misinterpretations of support for the DFA. The need to engage with non-Taliban actors, such as civil society organisations and citizen groups, was emphasised to broaden the support base. In doing so, it is paramount to consult women as much as possible.

7. There are local DFA leaders who have shown sympathy for women to continue work behind doors, as well as temporary suspension of some of the bans (mahram) allowing, for example, women to work for NGOs since needs are too high in these disaster areas and there is a need for women to be able to help other women. At the same time, for women's health, ensuring safe childbirths can provide opportunities to advocate for women's involvement to be able to help women.

SWOT Analysis: Strengths and weaknesses of the Dutch policy engagement with Afghanistan

Policy	Strengths	Weaknesses
Gender diplomacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Netherlands strategically allocates funds to the large scale funds by the World Bank and UNDP. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender diplomacy is extremely sensitive because of the Taliban DFA. There is no direct engagement with the DFA. Not all donors that fund the large scale funds have FFP themselves.
Gender analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Humanitarian programs actively monitor the participation and access of both men and women, ensuring gender inclusivity. These large programmes, and the Netherlands in bilateral programmes, use the insights from the UN Women reports on women's rights & women peace and security. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dependency of the Netherlands on other donors for data and analysis due to limiting factors within the context.
Policy evaluation & MEL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comprehensive and accessible data are made available as part of the implementation process, by World Bank/UNDP in these large-scale funds. 	
Gender budgeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Netherlands acknowledges the complexity of the situation on the ground and is already giving partners the option of obtaining no-cost extensions if it takes a long time to secure Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs), allowing for greater adaptability in project timelines. 	
Root causes	<p>Through its own programs, local partners and (Dutch) NGOs, the Netherlands remains connected with Afghanistan and its civil society, staying informed about developments that impact root causes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The weakness in addressing root causes lies in the necessity to prioritise immediate access and comply with DFA restrictions and procedural agreements, such as MoUs, over addressing underlying issues. This can cause tension between addressing root causes and accessing help to address multiple crises.
Meaningful participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EKN promotes the principled approach, an approach that wants to ensure programming is designed and implemented by women, for women. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is a tension between meaningful engagement of women and 'do no harm'. There is a risk of tokenism, wherein the involvement of women may be superficial or symbolic rather than substantive and meaningful.
Own organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is currently extensive expertise on gender within the Embassy team, with staff members who possess expertise in this area. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is no embassy in Kabul.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

Throughout this research project we have seen the value of discussing the policy with stakeholders operating from different realities (perspectives from the field, at country level and within the Netherlands). Conversations with policymakers and practitioners underscore the gap between policy theory and local realities in implementation. Integrating this ‘reality check’ into policy development helps align actions with local contexts, facilitating effective implementation. Balancing multiple policy objectives, especially concerning economic and security interests, may present challenges for feminist foreign policy implementation. Therefore, the successful implementation of a FFP will require thoughtful navigation of complexities, and strategic decision-making by policymakers to be inclusive, ultimately ensuring that policies are both responsive to local contexts and aligned with the principles of feminist foreign policy.

We see the following specific struggles:

- In fragile contexts, or regions where liberal values may not align with local cultural norms or political realities, there is a tension between promoting gender equality based on liberal ideals and respecting local customs and traditions. Implementing policies that prioritise gender equality in such contexts may face resistance or backlash from local communities or governments, leading to challenges in effectively promoting gender equality.
- Additionally, there may be tensions between promoting gender equality and advancing national interests. Some policies aimed at promoting gender equality may conflict with broader geopolitical or economic objectives, leading to prioritisation of national interests over gender equality concerns. This tension highlights the need for policymakers to balance competing priorities and interests when formulating and implementing gender equality policies.

Addressing these challenges involves making informed choices to integrate gender equality into foreign policy, mindful of local contexts and national interests. Below, we provide country specific recommendations that try to take into account achievability, effectiveness and potential for sustainability of interventions. We also offer considerations for opportunities in the context and for stakeholder support.

South Sudan

In line with the objectives of a FFP in South Sudan, there is a need to address deep-rooted inequalities and power imbalances to make progress towards gender equality. This includes enforcing the 35% affirmative action policy for women's participation in decision-making and building the capacity of women politicians. Ensuring the safety of WHRDs and female politicians is crucial, along with protecting and expanding civic spaces. Moreover, women's rights organisations should have access to policymakers, while effective (implementation of) gender laws and a comprehensive constitution are needed. We therefore recommend that a FFP:

- Supports civil society in trying to hold the government accountable for implementing laws on gender equality, the CEDAW treaty and the peace agreement.
- Supports the creation of constitutions for political parties that ensure meaningful participation of women.
- Analyses existing legal frameworks from a gender perspective.
- Develops a vision on changing power relations and root causes, co-created with South Sudanese civil society through joint analysis and creates accountability through this joint work.
- Provides a space for women advocates and CSOs at the embassy in Juba to discuss key issues, including politically sensitive conversations as well as shared learnings and experiences.
- Brings South Sudanese women to decision making forum such as the Human Rights Council, the UN Security Council, the EU, as briefers.
- Makes use of the upcoming second National Action Plan (NAP) for UNSCR 1325. The Netherlands can fund its implementation, possibly on the model of the Natural Resources Working Group, bringing together national policymakers, donors, and civil society experts.
- Promotes support of key opportunities (like the GBV courts) towards other donors through the embassy, for example the upcoming review of the land policy.

There is a lot of interest by the Government of South Sudan for international support to humanitarian programming and women are interested in participation in these programmes. However, much of the funding flows into multilateral funds. The Dutch government could work to better understand how promoting gender equality can be realised through such humanitarian programmes and use their leverage as a donor to implement this. For instance, interlinking humanitarian programming with women, peace and security (WPS) programming that promotes social cohesion (requiring the participation of women), protection, participation, prevention and trauma healing. Existing political will for reconciliation and healing would support this approach. Additionally, women in agriculture require access to land, financial resources, and markets in a broader context where access to essential services like education, clean water, and infrastructure is vital. We therefore recommend that a FFP:

- Mainstreams trauma healing in all programming.
- Mainstreams women's rights focus in economic programming, integrating the approach with rule of law programming to support women-led businesses, enable women's access to land, subsidies, loans and ease the cost of starting up a business.
- Uses the leverage of the Dutch as biggest donor and board member to the South Sudan Humanitarian Fund to explore how WPS programming and other women's rights objectives can be integrated into humanitarian programmes.
- Learns together with practitioners about the benefits of mainstreaming a gender perspective in programming and invests in understanding how to best measure the impact of this.
- Uses the tools available to create awareness about gender among rotating embassy staff, invest in live trainings and workshops beyond the online materials.

There is value in implementing FFP in a fragile context like South Sudan, however, due to the patriarchal nature of the society, it is important to articulate the vision and goals of FFP clearly to prevent misinterpretation that could result in rejection. Drawing lessons from the region can enhance adaptability of the policy and the formulation of realistic outcomes for interventions. Shifting harmful social and cultural norms through awareness campaigns is essential, all while employing a do-no-harm approach to ensure positive community reception of gender equality efforts. We therefore recommend that a FFP:

- Based on a do no harm approach, works with South Sudanese civil society and researchers to better understand local communities interpretation of women's rights and gender equality messages to identify good practices. These can be used to strengthen the capacity of civil society programming.
- Provides scholarships to teach young boys and girls about gender equality.

Finally, in this fragile and autocratic context flexibility to respond to (and make use of) emerging issues and opportunities is needed. Establishing a dedicated fund tailored to address emerging issues would significantly enhance the effectiveness and impact of FFP, particularly for women and marginalised groups. Currently, the embassy faces funding ceilings that sometimes block its ability to invest strategically on emerging issues. On the other hand, women face difficulties in accessing funding due to complex requirements. We therefore recommend that a FFP:

- Funds and strengthens the capacity of civil society advocating for gender equality.
- Provides longer term funding to match the long-term objective of changing gender norms.
- Works with civil society to decrease complexity for women to access funds.
- Provides the embassy in Juba with the possibility to use flexible funding to respond to emerging issues and opportunities.



Photo Anne Kwakkenbos

Afghanistan

In the case of Afghanistan there is a clear need to protect human rights (and specifically women's rights) and promoting meaningful participation in decision-making by women, which aligns well with the objectives of the Feminist Foreign Policy. However in this complex situation it is crucial to carefully think about the implementation and adopt a flexible and tailored approach to support women's rights and empowerment in Afghanistan, especially considering the challenges posed by the Taliban's restrictions and the ongoing humanitarian crises. It is important to keep supporting women and girls through a.o. local women's groups and civil society organisations dedicated to advancing women's rights, while doing no harm. We therefore recommend that a FFP:

- Ensures that Afghanistan remains a priority on the international agenda and that political support continues to be provided for efforts focused on advancing women's rights in the country. This can be a.o. at UN level, as part of conversations between the DFA and the international community, as well as public and covert support of Afghan women activists.
- Recognises and supports (in particular) women-led initiatives through engagement with local actors and communities. There are opportunities to continue channelling funds through informal (feminist) networks and various innovative (also online options) ways to keep supporting capacity strengthening and skill development. But also, for example, by strategically looking into opportunities to work with men and boys who are allies.

While there are significant barriers to women's involvement and empowerment imposed by the patriarchal power dynamics of the Taliban, there are proactive steps that can be taken to address these challenges within the framework of feminist foreign policy. We therefore recommend that a FFP:

- Establishes regular consultations with women to gather insights and conduct context-specific gender analyses, facilitating a deeper understanding of evolving needs. As the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands (EKN), prioritise sustained commitment to addressing diverse local realities and changing women's needs, conducting continuous reality checks to ensure responsiveness to evolving circumstances.
- Invests in online education tailored for women and girls to bridge educational gaps and provide skills training for accessing remote job opportunities.
- Takes into account the changing context and possibilities of further restricting the space there is for women. For example, what to do when women no longer have access to internet or bank accounts and look into ways to overcome these barriers such as preparing structures for women's saving groups.

In the context of Afghanistan, certain terms and objectives associated with feminist foreign policy may encounter resistance or backlash from the Taliban. Strategic adjustments are necessary in how feminist foreign policy is approached and communicated in Afghanistan. We therefore recommend that a FFP:

- Allows for reframing efforts to ensure access, while promoting a feminist foreign policy lens. This would, for example, mean the redistribution of and establishment of flexible funds to focus on sectors that we can still work in (e.g. health, humanitarian aid, private sector).
- Sees that the Netherlands has to collaborate with other donors active in the Afghan context, facilitating an exchange to learn about reframing activities, identifying effective strategies, and understanding which terms and approaches may face obstacles to addressing gender issues.
- Next to promoting the rights-based perspective, seek what opportunities there are from the perspective of the Taliban and define problems through their eyes, e.g. promote the need for women's involvement coming from the perspective of how to deliver medical care to women without women doctors.



Photo SAW Afghanistan

REFERENCES

1. Federal Foreign Office, Government of Germany. 2023. Shaping Feminist Foreign Policy: Federal Foreign Office Guidelines. <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2585076/4d2d295dad8fb1c41c6271d2c1a41d75/ffp-leitlinien-data.pdf2>
2. French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs. 2018. France's International Strategy on Gender Equality (2018-2022). www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/
3. Global Affairs Canada. 2017. Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy. chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/assets/pdfs/iap2-eng.pdf?_ga=2.245298245.1534191162.1627974389-1896573529.1627401039
4. Government of Chile Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2023. Feminist Foreign Policy
5. Handbook: Sweden's Feminist Foreign Policy
6. Kezie-Nwoha, H. 2022. Reimagining a feminist Social Contract in Fragile and Conflict Setting. <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/news/policy/reimagining-feminist-social-contract-fragile-and-conflict-setting>
7. Luxembourg's Foreign Policy Address. 2019. chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://mae.gouvernement.lu/content/dam/gouv_mae/minist%3c%a8re/d%3c%a9clarations-de-politique-%3c%a9trang%3c%a8re/2019/EN-Declaration-de-politique-etrangere-2019.pdf
8. Mexico Feminist Foreign Policy. <https://issuu.com/idealbas.sre/docs/feminismosingle>
9. Multi-Annual Country Strategy The Netherlands and South Sudan - policy goals and strategy 2023-2026 South Sudan
10. Spain's Feminist Foreign Policy: Promoting Gender Equality in Spain's External Action. <https://www.exteriores.gob.es/es/PoliticaExterior/Paginas/PoliticaExteriorFeminista.aspx>
11. The Netherlands in South Sudan. <https://www.netherlandsandyou.nl/web/south-sudan/themes>
12. Thompson, L. 2023. Sound the alarm-Sweden drops "feminist" and returns to mere "foreign policy." Ms. Magazine. 2023, January 19. <https://msmagazine.com/2023/01/19/sweden-feminist-foreign-policy/>
13. UN Women 2023. Gender Responsive Approaches to Foreign Policy and the 2030 Agenda: Feminist Foreign Policies. In Brief. <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/gender-responsive-approaches-to-foreign-policy-and-the-2030-agenda-feminist-foreign-policies-en.pdf>
14. Waake Simon Wudu. South Sudan's Liberation Struggle Supplanted by Autocracy. https://www.voaafrica.com/a/africa_south-sudan-focus_south-sudans-liberation-struggle-supplanted-autocracy/6208074.html

CONTACT

Anne Kwakkenbos

Gender Expert
ako@cordaid.org

Cordaid

Grote Marktstraat 45,
2511 BH Den Haag
+31(0)70 31 36 300
www.cordaid.org/en

Ruth van de Velde

Knowledge Broker
ruth@thebrokeronline.eu

The Broker

Van de Sande Bakhuijsenstraat 4
1061 AG Amsterdam
+31 (0)20 2446 901
www.thebrokeronline.eu

Helen Kezie-Nwoha

Executive Director
khelen@wipc.org/hnwoha@gmail.com

Women's International Peace Centre

Plot 1467 Church Road, Bulindo,
Wakiso, Kira
256(0)414 698 684
www.wipc.org

