

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Contending with the Coloniality of Feminist Foreign Policy: A Perspective from Africa

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Introduction

For nearly a decade, the concept of feminist foreign policy¹ (FFP) has garnered global attention, with numerous countries adopting or expressing the intent to adopt such policies. However, the roles of Africans within these discourses, as both target and agents of FFP, has been uncertain. The particular attention paid by FFP to the Global South makes the exclusion of African knowledges especially jarring.

In this Note, I explore how these absences, together with the emerging practices of FFP, reproduce gendered and racialized knowledge hierarchies with implications for the uptake of feminist-informed foreign policies in practice. My perspective is rooted in work I have been engaged in over the past decade in both academic and practitioner spaces. It is particularly informed by my role and experiences in the African Feminist Collective on Feminist Informed Policies (AfFiP Collective), which I cofounded in 2022, and together with a group of African feminists seeking to find an opening for substantive African feminist engagements in the FFP space.

What Does FFP Offer?

The emergence of FFP has offered the possibility of a progressive framework for foreign policy practice. FFP is generally seen as embedding feminist principles, such as gender equality, social justice, and intersectionality, into what states do internationally, as well as into global governance and diplomatic practices broadly. In addition to providing an opening for a normative shift in foreign policies, FFP has also opened a door to civil society participation in foreign

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policymaking. Usually excluded from this sphere, civil society actors have pushed for a whole-of-foreign-policy approach that challenges the status quo of an unequal international system.

Since 2014, a growing number of states have adopted FFPs, signaling an emerging global governance agenda. For example, actors within the European Union (EU) are advocating for the possibilities of a feminist EU foreign policy, while at the United Nations (UN) level interested states have established the FFP+ Group. The purpose of the FFP+ Group is to bring FFP into the multilateral domain. Initiated in 2021 by Sweden and Spain, the group includes states both with and without FFPs, the latter being countries such as Albania, Argentina, Belgium, Costa Rica, Israel, Liberia, Mongolia, Rwanda, and Tunisia.

Despite the transformative potential of feminism in foreign policy (and therefore FFP), however, the conceptualization and implementation of FFP has faced critical scrutiny, particularly from scholars and activists from the Global South, including in Africa. Their critiques center on the coloniality embedded within FFP, suggesting that its origins, assumptions, and practices often reproduce hierarchies of power and knowledge.

This Note explores the coloniality of FFP through an African lens. It highlights how FFP, while ostensibly feminist, can co-opt emancipatory feminist logics, reinforcing — rather than mitigating — global inequalities. I articulate an alternative African perspective on feminist approaches to global politics and policymaking, drawing on a (pan)African feminist theorizing that engages African feminists.

Understanding Coloniality and Feminist Foreign Policy

Coloniality refers to the enduring patterns of power, knowledge, and exploitation established during colonialism that persist in contemporary global structures (see Dieng, Hastrup, and Kang 2024; Guerrina, Hastrup, and Wright 2023). Coloniality operates through epistemic, economic, and cultural domination. It privileges Eurocentric ways of knowing and organizing the world while marginalizing or erasing non-Western systems of thought and practice.

FFP, as articulated by proponents, seeks to challenge traditional, patriarchal power dynamics in international relations. It prioritizes gender equality, human rights, and the inclusion of marginalized voices in global politics. Yet, the frameworks of FFP, still, often reflect the priorities and worldviews of the Global North. This is despite the fact that some Global South countries have also adopted versions of FFP, and various FFP policy documents explicitly acknowledge the impacts of racism and coloniality in the current world order. Enduring patterns of interaction and privilege the Global North raise critical questions about whose feminism is being centered in FFP and whether it adequately addresses the realities of women and marginalized communities in the Global South, especially in Africa.

For the most part, African states have eschewed FFP, and many African feminists remain skeptical about the value of this approach. At the same time, some African feminists, including me, have engaged in this space, even informing the formulation of FFPs in the Global North (see Amayi 2023; Hastrup 2022).

The inclusion of our perspectives has been due to civil society advocacy against racism. African feminists, moreover, have argued that intersectionality is important to developing a feminist conception of foreign policy, ensuring attention to and a space for historically excluded and minoritized people as part of a more inclusive global politics (Bhambra et al. 2020).

Despite skepticism at the change of global ordering, African feminists cannot be silent on FFP. For one, gender concerns highlighted by feminists are and have always been a concern of African states and institutions, including in practices of foreign policies (see Haastrup 2020). Further, a key critique of dominant FFP is that it orients the Global South as the *subject* of implementation. As such, Africans should have a voice. Where African countries have shown an interest in FFP, they are hampered in their ambitions by the sheer inequality of the international system itself. Consequently, an African feminist vision of foreign policy is essential to reflect the ambitions and priorities of Africans in foreign policy approaches including FFP.

African Feminisms and Foreign Policies

Where FFPs exist, advocates often leverage country histories and national identities as justifications for their policies. Yet, this is rarely the case for African countries who rarely get recognized as having foreign policies in the first instance — foreign policy, instead, is “done” to Africa. FFP has tended to follow this trajectory too. Thus, it is a level of frustration that informs new African feminist mobilizations around FFP.

Like most practices of global politics, the priorities and visions emerging from the Global South are often missing, silenced, or co-opted (see Ali and Chebbi 2023). And consequently, when it comes to FFP it is easy to dismiss as a foreign import. But this ignores the work and ambitions of African feminist visions of global politics, which ultimately envision a *different* world rather than simply a reformed one.

African feminists argue that true emancipation requires a deep critique of historical and systemic power structures — namely, those rooted in colonialism and economic exploitation — that continue to shape the global order (see Tamale 2020). From this standpoint, incorporating the values and priorities of African feminisms could pave the way toward transformative foreign policy models (see Haastrup 2025a; 2025b; Nyaruwata 2025). Such models would not only critique, but also seek to dismantle, the colonial, racist, and patriarchal underpinnings of the existing global system.

African feminists have been on the forefront of resisting various forms of power hierarchies within and outside of their own national contexts (see Ossome 2020). Over the last decade, African feminists have been central to challenging the same things FFP has identified as problems that need to be addressed (Dieng, Haastrup, and Kang 2024). Consequently, in principle, there is a natural alignment with the broader aspirations of what an FFP would demand.

It is however the dominance of Western feminisms within FFP that gives us pause. Western feminisms have historically overlooked the unique contexts and

experiences of women, and especially feminists, in non-Western societies. Western feminism has, however, wised up in response to these critiques. As such, FFP discourses rhetorically confront racial injustice, advocate Black feminist concepts of intersectionality and, in my experience, have been ready to include Black bodies in various fora of discussion.

Yet, there is a tension within this FFP that is deployed from two sources: the FFP state apparatus itself and the civil society activism that has mushroomed in its wake. With respect to the state, countries in the Global North that adopt feminist policies can reproduce paternalistic attitudes reinforcing global power asymmetries that subordinate the already marginalized. Germany's response to Israel's genocide against Palestine is case in point. The German government that introduced FFP acknowledged the harm of colonialism and its lasting impact in its FFP framework document, yet it undermined efforts to undo the impacts of colonialism in its unyielding support of Israel. In this case, FFP served to promote enduring colonial agendas, perpetuating existing power hierarchies.

Beyond the state, FFP has also been subject to NGOization: the professionalization of emancipatory feminist agendas with negative implications for the activism, funding, and autonomy of feminist movements (Alvarez 2009). NGOization has two types of effects on FFP. First, FFP can be stripped of its radicality, making it a depoliticized tool that fails to highlight systemic injustice. While FFPs can embrace gender mainstreaming, they may also avoid addressing oppressive structures of power like militarism, colonial legacies, or economic exploitation.

The second way in which FFP professionalization impacts on a liberatory feminism is via funding. NGOization requires aligning with donor funding patterns and priorities, reproducing the domination of the Global North while also reproducing the hierarchies around who gets access to resources. At the same time, funding opportunities may enable organizations without internal feminist credentials to claim they are working on FFP.

As an African feminist, my own work on FFP has continually grappled with ambiguities about FFP and its utility for African lives, especially when the demands being made are not aligned to local feminist priorities or a liberatory feminism. At the same time, the last decade researching and engaging in this space has shown that the discourses and practices that inform the practices FFP provide an opportunity for crafting and supporting feminist informed policies that rely on African feminist ontologies (AfIP Collective 2023; see also Gatwiri, and Tusasiirwe 2022 on Afrocentric feminism).

Founding the Africa Feminist Collective on Feminist Informed Policies (AfIP)

In 2022, together with a couple of African feminists, I cofounded the African Feminist Collective on Feminist Informed Policies (AfIP Collective) to find an opening for substantive African feminist engagements with FFP. Taking advantage of the rise in digital organizing and connections that the COVID-19 lockdowns afforded, we started meeting online to share experiences. The AfIP Collective is the culmination of conversations, encounters, and observations

related to the FFP space. It is a transnational collective of African feminists on the continent and diaspora setting a pan-Africanist agenda for feminist-informed policies, domestically and internationally. Importantly, it was formed as a collective to avoid that NGOization trap.

We have since grown. The AfIP Collective is positioned as an alternative feminist platform that constantly interrogates hegemonic narratives, approaches, practices, and policies informing global politics. The AfIP Collective seeks to play a role in educating a broader range of African audiences about FFP beyond a binary of good or bad. At the most fundamental level, we ask: what does, or can, FFP mean when refracted through African feminist lens?

In articulating an African feminist alternative, the AfIP Collective is clear that “FFP is an oxymoron since African feminisms reject the global power hierarchies that characterize the definition and function of foreign policies” (AfIP Collective 2023). The collective embraces feminist messiness including within the FFP universe, zeroing in on its many contestations. At the same time, by drawing on African feminist ontologies, it articulates a specific vision of feminism that is typically missing from the emergent literature on FFP. As Tamale notes, “Colonialism maintains a stranglehold on knowledge production through an elaborate publication infrastructure largely based in the global North which plays the role of gatekeeping on what qualifies as ‘legitimate’ [publishable] knowledge” (2020, 281).

The exclusion of African knowledges from what is produced about FFP is not because African feminists are not writing or speaking about foreign policy. Rather, this knowledge simply does not factor as legitimate. Thus, while non-African feminist scholars and activists produce knowledge about FFP, the continuing exclusion of African feminist knowledge from dominant discourses reproduces coloniality within FFP. As the AfIP Collective has argued, evidenced based policymaking is essential to the success of feminist informed policies and, for Africa, this demands the embrace of African feminist knowledges (AfIP Collective 2023).

African feminists, including the AfIP Collective, seek to center the Global South in these emerging discourses, with a starting point in Africa (see Mumala and Makamure, 2024). In this context, this means prioritizing the voices, experiences, and struggles of women and marginalized communities in the Global South across areas of practice and knowledge making. This is informed by African feminisms that provide a powerful critique of global power hierarchies (Dieng, 2023). Power hierarchies of global politics perpetuate unequal power dynamics wherein African countries are subordinated to the priorities of the Global North. This dynamic is evident in trade agreements, development cooperation, political interventions, and debt arrangements, making foreign policy in and toward Africa ripe for feminist interventions.

Challenges to these bigger concerns of global politics, however, remain missing from most approaches to FFP. For instance, even when debt injustice is acknowledged and FFP commits to poverty reduction, the global political economy remains hierarchical. In this age of FFP, the lack of consideration for African perspectives has been further underscored by geopolitical rivalries that has culminated in the increasingly acceptance of militarism further undermining the possibilities of feminist informed foreign policy. Through “increases in

defense spending, apportioning more resources to military means of conflict resolution, increased purchase of lethal weapons, and converting military assets for use in civilian contexts” (Achiello-Sarll et al. 2023), the transformative feminist governance including through FFP cannot be realized.

Conclusion

For many African feminists, including myself, FFP, rightly, is a source of contestation. At the same time, my experience is that its emergence has provided a space to reimagine global power dynamics. At present however, it does fall short. This is partly due to co-optation, but mainly because of the context within which it has been developed. For African feminists, the challenge is twofold: challenging the persistent of coloniality in FFP while also engaging with it given its vital implications for African lives.

AfIP Collective, if nothing else, demonstrates the importance of articulating an African feminist position on foreign policies that center local knowledges and priorities. Such a position not only challenges global hierarchies but can also advance a liberatory agenda grounded in feminist and pan-Africanist principles of solidarity (Hastrup 2025a; 2025b). As global politics increasingly contend with the intersections of militarism, economic exploitation, and other systemic inequalities, the contributions of African feminists are indispensable, especially to action the aspirations of feminism in foreign policy.

Note

1. Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) refers to the established policies of states and increasingly international organisations often championed by powerful advocates. I distinguish this from feminist informed policies, acknowledging that the state by its nature cannot be feminist inasmuch as it reproduces hierarchies of power antithetical to a liberatory feminism.

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