

Findings from Interviews on a Feminist Approach to Foreign Policy: Final Report

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Acknowledgements

We would like to extend our gratitude to all interviewees who took part and shared their views with us.

Acronyms

FFP – Feminist Foreign Policy

M&E – Monitoring and Evaluation

NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation

Executive Summary

In the [2021-22 Programme for Government](#), the Scottish Government reiterated our commitment to ensuring that our policies and actions abroad are consistent with our focus on fairness and inclusion at home, ensuring that our international work reflects a feminist approach to policymaking. We have since been working on what such an approach could look like for Scotland.

As part of developing a feminist approach to foreign policy, the Scottish Government is committed to learning from and listening to others, and has therefore been engaging with stakeholders – and will continue this engagement going forward. This report summarises key findings from an initial phase of engagement which involved conducting interviews with individuals who have knowledge of and experience in the field of feminist foreign policy. Scottish Government analysts conducted a total of seven interviews between May and June 2022. Interviewees were identified as part of a literature review and were selected due to their knowledge of FFP. Participants include academics, researchers, and NGO workers.

The main issues discussed by participants during the interviews were as follows:

- Participants regarded **safeguarding peace, justice, equality, wellbeing, and the environment as core priorities** of a feminist approach to foreign policy. Marginalised groups were seen as the key focus of the policy.
- **Intersectionality**¹ was seen as an important part of a feminist approach to foreign policy, although participants noted the difficulties in operationalising it due to its complexity. Taking an intersectional approach brings into view people who might have otherwise been missed.
- Participants emphasised **policy coherence both externally and internally**. This means ensuring that different policies across government portfolios are aligned, and that governments are observing the same standards in domestic policy as they espouse in their international work.
- **Collaboration, participation and representation** are important elements in policy development, and governments should seek to engage broadly and especially with those impacted by the policy. However, representation is not enough – the **transformation** of harmful and oppressive structures and institutions was flagged as a key focus of feminist work.
- Governments should undertake **self-reflection** regarding what a feminist approach to foreign policy means for the government's work internally, and

¹ Intersectional approaches recognise that people are shaped by simultaneous membership of multiple interconnected social categories and that the interaction between multiple social categories occurs within a context of connected systems and structures of power. See: The Scottish Government (2022) [Using intersectionality to understand structural inequality in Scotland: evidence synthesis](#)

governments should reflect on and acknowledge the power they possess (and consider how it can be shared).

- Participants noted various **challenges** regarding developing, adopting, and implementing a feminist approach to foreign policy, including **negative public perceptions** of feminism, **insufficient resourcing**, **power imbalances** in trans-national engagements, and experiencing **pushback**.
- **Monitoring and evaluation** is important for accountability and transparency, and demands the active participation of stakeholders. Coming up with measurable commitments, smart goals, timelines, and clear roles and responsibilities is crucial. Rather than adopting existing or popular measurements, it is important to consider these carefully in relation to your own priorities.

Introduction

In the [2021-22 Programme for Government](#), the Scottish Government reiterated our commitment to ensuring that our policies and actions abroad are consistent with our focus on fairness and inclusion at home, ensuring that our international work reflects a feminist approach to policymaking. We have since been working on what such an approach could look like for Scotland.

As part of this development, the Scottish Government is committed to learning from and listening to others, and has therefore been engaging with stakeholders – and will continue this engagement going forward. This report summarises key findings from an initial phase of engagement which involved conducting interviews with individuals who have knowledge of and experience in the field of feminist foreign policy.

Based on the outcomes of this engagement as well as a literature review of feminist foreign policies around the world, [the Scottish Government also developed a background note setting the scene for its next stage of stakeholder engagement](#).

The next chapter will explain the research methodology, followed by a summary of key findings from the interviews.

Methodology

A total of seven interviews were conducted with individuals who have knowledge of or experience in the field of feminist foreign policy. The interviews took place between May and June 2022. The rationale for the interviews was to identify and fill gaps in knowledge, as well as identify key themes for work going forward. We also wanted to get participants' views on how best to proceed with further stakeholder engagement.

Interviewees were identified as part of a literature review and approached via email. They were selected due to their knowledge of and experience in FFP. Participants who agreed to take part also suggested further people to contact. In order to speak to a varied group of people, we took geographical location, policy area expertise, and line of work (e.g. academia, NGOs) into account when approaching potential participants. Out of the seven interviewees, two work in academia, two in research, two for NGOs, and one in activism. Two participants are UK-based, one is Europe-based, and four are based outside Europe.

A topic guide was developed based on key issues identified in the literature review, and this was shared with participants prior to the interview (see Annex 2). During some of the interviews a few of the questions had to be skipped due to time constraints. The interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams, and were led by a social researcher who was accompanied by a note-taker. The notes were shared with participants following the interview, and they had the opportunity to clarify their responses. Participants were asked if they were content to being named in the report – a list of participants can be found in Annex 1. The research was granted ethical approval.

The notes were imported to qualitative data analysis software NVivo, and a Scottish Government social researcher conducted a thematic analysis of the data. This report summarises the key themes identified.

Findings from Interviews

This chapter will provide an overview of key themes identified across the seven interviews.

Policy Focus and Priorities

When asked about the **core priorities** of an FFP, participants discussed peace, justice, equality, wellbeing, and environmental or planetary safety. One participant expressed their desire to see meaningful participation in economic, social and political decision-making extended to those usually excluded from decision-making processes. Another participant called for broader conversations about reforming the current multilateral system and addressing its democratic deficits and power imbalances so that we can create a space where countries can speak equitably.

Key policy areas discussed by participants in relation to FFP included health, international development, migration, justice, climate, peace and security, economy, and trade.

The majority of participants argued the focus of an FFP should go beyond merely women and girls by focusing on **marginalised groups** more generally. In relation to this, three participants drew attention to feminist analysis's focus on power dynamics and the transformation of structures that drive inequality. As one put it, feminist analysis is different than gender analysis in that it looks at power and asks who is oppressed – while this is often women and girls, it is not only them. Another participant cautioned that focusing on women and girls also often leads to limiting the focus on issues 'traditionally' viewed as gendered (e.g. discrimination and inheritance laws, health, sexuality) while others (e.g. mining, extractive industries, fossil fuels) are often not viewed in relation to women and girls.

Intersectionality

Participants regarded intersectionality² to be an important part of FFP, especially as it allows **different forms of marginalisation and layers of oppression** to be accounted for.

² Intersectional approaches recognise that people are shaped by simultaneous membership of multiple interconnected social categories and that the interaction between multiple social categories occurs within a context of connected systems and structures of power. For further discussion of the concept of intersectionality, please see The Scottish Government (2022) [Using intersectionality to understand structural inequality in Scotland: evidence synthesis](#)

Using an intersectional approach, one participant explained, **broadens the focus of FFP** and brings into view people who might have otherwise been missed by the policy.

Three participants emphasised the importance of **structural, institutional or systemic change** in relation to intersectionality – as one of them put it, it is important to go beyond seeing intersectionality merely at the individual level (i.e. how an individual is situated at the axes of oppression) and look at how structures driving inequality also intersect (e.g. how militarism and capitalism drive violence and ecological breakdown). Another participant noted that through institutional reform justice can be brought about for people who experience multiple forms of discrimination.

Participants nonetheless noted the difficulties in operationalising intersectionality due to its **complexity**. Further, one participant noted that it is crucial to understand the local context and how different forms of oppression operate in those societies governments and other actors engage with (e.g. regional, caste, linguistic, ethnic differences).

Policy Development and Engagement

Participants emphasised the importance of **collaboration, participation and representation** in policy development. They noted that feminist movements, feminist civil society, as well as diverse social movements operating at different levels (grassroots and above), should be brought to the table. One participant noted governments should involve as many different communities and organisations as possible to ensure intersectionality is present. Multiple participants flagged the importance of directly engaging with those affected by the policy – this helps governments identify the most appropriate policy tools as well as people's and communities' needs. Multiple participants flagged the importance of access to translation services and offering compensation to contributors for their time as this will open doors for those whom they were closed before.

Coherence between domestic and international policy was seen as key by participants, and where these did not align was seen as hypocritical. They noted that there are issues that states, who have adopted an FFP, are not addressing on the domestic front. At the same time, these states are making such issues the focus of their international work (e.g. violence against women and girls). As one participant put it, 'are you walking your talk?'. Four participants also noted the incompatibility of nuclear arms and/or arms trade with FFP. Internal policy coherence was also brought up – for one participant a key issue was that government policies between departments are not in sync or are at odds with each other, and they are not complementing each other. In practice, they had seen examples of trade and development aid policies undermining each other.

Two participants also noted the importance of considering and clarifying **the meaning of the concept of feminism itself** – it is important to understand what feminism means to the different people being engaged with during policy development, and to clarify how feminism is defined within the policy.

Policy Tools

As discussed previously, participants emphasised the importance of **collaboration** – both internally between government departments, as well as externally with organisations and movements, and with those on the ground who are impacted by the policies.

The importance of **feedback loops** was highlighted by two participants. On the one hand this ensures continued, rather than one-off, engagement with those impacted by the policy, and on the other it helps the government to ascertain that implementation is working.

Participants noted that while **representation** is important, it is not enough. Rather than merely adding women (or marginalised groups generally) into existing institutions and structures, one participant argued we need to consider how structures that drive inequality, war, and ecological harm could be **transformed**. As one participant put it: ‘don’t call it feminism if it does not change anything’. However, another participant noted that hierarchical structures of power (such as patriarchy) that we are deeply embedded in will continue to exist and, therefore, it is through representation and participation that space can be created for constructive engagement. Finally, one participant highlighted ‘non-reformist reform’ as an option for more gradual change whereby system transformation remains as the ultimate goal but at the same time policies are developed that are actionable in the here and now.

Participants flagged the importance of institutional reform internally and the importance of **self-reflection** within government. One participant noted that ownership and buy-in are important for implementation in order to get change in motion in different teams. A degree of autonomy is required here, the participant noted, in order for teams and department to work out what FFP means for them in practice. Part of this governmental self-reflection, two participants argued, is acknowledging and reflecting on the power a government has, how power imbalance plays out in the spaces it operates in, and how power can be devolved to people on the ground.

Participants also suggested the following tools that the Scottish Government could use in its feminist approach to foreign policy work: lobbying or influencing nationally and within the UK on particular issues (e.g. global economic transformation); using influence and advocacy in multilateral coalitions and conversations; divesting from harmful activities; legislation; and building trust and communication with governments.

Challenges

A key challenge identified in relation to FFP was **perceptions around feminism** itself. Participants noted that feminism can be a challenging word that encounters resistance either due to feminism's challenge to existing structures or because it is seen as 'too right-on'. Participants wondered if more could be achieved without explicitly using the feminist label. One interviewee noted that while in some contexts the word 'feminism' can help, in others it may close doors. Another interviewee also noted this in relation to different national or local contexts – that is, there may be more discomfort around speaking of feminism in some places than others.

Relatedly, participants noted that there are **different strands of feminism** – so feminism is not one homogenous entity – and one participant cautioned that there is a risk of having a too narrow understanding of feminism. Further, a participant remarked there are misunderstandings around what feminism in relation to foreign policy means. Some will view it as being 'gentler' and it is therefore perceived as more 'wishy washy' or not as a serious approach.

Interviewees noted that there are various vested interests that are not necessarily compatible with FFP principles. As one participant noted, there may therefore be **pushback** to systemic change.

Another key challenge identified by participants was **resourcing**. This was seen in terms of struggling to secure sufficient resourcing for the agenda on the hand, and 'throwing money at an issue without resolving it' on the other.

Participants flagged **tensions and power imbalances in inter-state and trans-national engagements** around FFP. Specifically, one participant said there is an underlying assumption by western states regarding how gender equality should be done. Thus, they explained, a hierarchy is created where normative whiteness and elite voices are privileged in terms of FFP, and regarding who claims expertise and resources in relation to FFP. Rather, the participant notes, FFP should be approached on a more equal footing.

Finally, considering Scotland specifically, six participants mentioned the current **constitutional settlement** as a key challenge for Scotland in terms of devolved and reserved issues.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Participants noted the importance of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in terms of **accountability, transparency**, and having checks and balances in place regarding implementation. With this in mind, one participant emphasised the importance of

having an independent or external party conduct the evaluation. One participant noted that having an annual publication would be ‘huge’.

As discussed in relation to policy development and implementation, the **active participation** of those who are impacted by FFP is also critical at the M&E stage. Participants also noted the importance of including the civil society and other stakeholders in M&E conversations.

Looking **internally**, two participants advised that the Scottish Government should ensure internal training on M&E is available on the one hand, and that structures for responsibility over M&E are in place on the other.

Participants emphasised the importance of having **measurable commitments**, smart goals, as well as clear timelines and roles and responsibilities. One participant cautioned that M&E can lead to the ‘watering down’ of more radical change as systems of measurement often lead to unambitious goals. Thus, the participant notes we need to come up with tools that do not make our goals more limited, and points out that feminist thinkers have focused on working through issues like how to measure and evaluate women’s empowerment, for example. Another participant cautioned against merely adopting existing measurements; rather, Scotland should consider where its closest relationships are, and what its feminist approach to foreign policy means with regard to the countries Scotland engages with. Thus, Scotland needs to develop a criteria for assessment that is based on Scotland’s priorities.

Next Steps

Please see [the background note setting the scene](#) for the next stage of stakeholder engagement.

Annex 1: List of Interviewees

We would like to thank the following individuals for taking part in the research (all have agreed for their names to be published):

Marissa Conway, The FFP Collective

Dr Claire Duncanson, University of Edinburgh

Dr Alice Musabende, Researcher, International Affairs

Dr Swati Parashar, University of Gothenburg

Lebogang Tisane, Agang Africa Network for Marginalised Groups

Lyric Thompson, International Center for Research on Women

Diyana Yahaya, Feminist Activist and member of the Gender Trade Coalition

Annex 2: List of Interview Questions

1. Could you tell me about your background in and engagement with feminist foreign policy (FFP)?
2. Different countries implementing FFP have taken different views on who should be the focus of the policy – women and girls specifically, or marginalised groups in general (including women and girls). What are your views in relation to this question around the scope of FFP?
3. What are the impacts and implications of focusing on women/girls only, or taking a broader approach?
4. What are the impacts and implications of adopting an intersectional approach? How do you successfully adopt an intersectional approach?
5. What issues need to be considered at the different stages of the policy (development, engagement, implementation)?
6. What do you see as the core priorities of an FFP?
7. What are the core elements of a feminist approach to foreign policy, which could be adopted now by Scotland, given the international reservation?
8. What do you see as the key policy tools to use in delivering FFP? That is, how can we affect change in practical terms?
9. What are the key take-away learnings from countries already pursuing FFPs (both in terms of what to do, and what not to do) with relevance to Scotland?
10. What are the main challenges of developing an FFP? What are the main challenges for Scotland specifically?
11. What are the main challenges regarding policy implementation?
12. Addressing issues around power, and power imbalance in particular, is traditionally a key consideration for different strands of feminism. What does this mean in practice? How can this be done on the ground?
13. The Scottish Government is looking to conduct broader stakeholder engagement workshops which will help us develop our policy approach – we have not decided on a final structure for these yet and are interested in your views on what we should take into account when planning and running them. How can we make the most of the engagement activities?
14. Which stakeholders do you think we should engage with (individuals; organisations)? [Also fine to send suggestions via email following the interview.]
15. How can an FFP be monitored and evaluated effectively? Would this also work for Scotland's feminist approach to foreign policy?



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This publication is available at www.gov.scot

Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at

The Scottish Government
St Andrew's House
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

ISBN: 978-1-80525-113-2 (web only)

Published by The Scottish Government, October 2022

Produced for The Scottish Government by APS Group Scotland, 21 Tennant Street, Edinburgh EH6 5NA
PPDAS1179642 (10/22)

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