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**Policy Brief:  
A Feminist  
Foreign Policy  
Response to  
COVID-19**

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Policy Brief: A Feminist Foreign Policy Response to COVID-19  
July 2020

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# List of Abbreviations

AAH - Action Against Hunger  
AFD - Agence Française de Développement  
AU - African Union  
CEDAW - Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women  
CFFP - Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy  
EU - European Union  
FAO - Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations  
FFP - Feminist Foreign Policy  
FIAP - Feminist International Assistance Policy  
GBV - Gender-Based Violence  
ICAN - International Civil Society Action Network  
ICRC - International Committee of the Red Cross  
IDP - Internally Displaced Person  
IFI - International Financial Institution  
IOM - International Organisation for Migration  
LGBTQI - Initialism that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex  
MPTF - Multi-Partner Trust Fund  
NATO - North Atlantic Treaty Organisation  
NGO - Non-governmental organisation  
NRC - Norwegian Refugee Council  
ODA - Official Development Assistance  
OECD - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development  
OP - Operative Paragraph  
SALW - Small Arms and Light Weapons  
SRHR - Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights  
UN - United Nations  
UNDP - United Nations Development Programme  
UNFPA - United Nations Population Fund  
UNHCR - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees  
UNICEF - United Nations Children's Fund  
WASL - Women's Alliance for Security Leadership  
WHO - World Health Organisation  
WHRD - Women Human Rights Defenders  
WILPF - Women's International League for Peace and Freedom  
WFP - World Food Programme  
WPS - Women, Peace and Security

# I. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic knows no borders. It further knows no gender, class, or race. This virus does not discriminate, but our societies do. Around the world we have historically built systems and structures that privilege the few and disadvantage the many. When a crisis as unprecedented as the current pandemic hits, inequalities are exacerbated. This holds particularly true for gender equality which, despite encouraging steps forward, no country is on track to achieve by 2030.<sup>1</sup> This not only fails politically marginalised groups, in particular women, girls, and gender nonconforming people, but also greatly hinders the international community's commitment to foster peace and security. Research shows that the most significant factor in determining a country's peacefulness (within its borders and towards other countries) is its level of gender equality.<sup>2</sup> Already in early April, the UN warned in its policy brief, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Women", that the limited "gains made in the past decades [towards gender equality] are at risk of being rolled back."<sup>3</sup> Governments and foreign ministries must apply a feminist perspective to their COVID-19 response in order to prevent a set-back, safeguard existing progress, and advance more quickly toward their goals: A 'gender-blind' approach would counteract all previous efforts not only in the area of gender equality, but also in conflict prevention and the pursuit of international peace.

Actors including civil society organisations, governments, and international organisations such as NATO, OECD, the AU, and the UN have already acknowledged and drawn attention to the gendered and multi-layered impacts of the pandemic. In the aforementioned UN policy brief, UN Secretary General António Guterres urged all member states to "put women and girls at the centre of efforts to recover from COVID-19", acknowledging the disproportionate impact they face due to patriarchal mechanisms of exclusion and oppression. His global call for ceasefires was further welcomed by feminists around the world.<sup>4</sup> The German government has also called for a gender-responsive approach to the pandemic in a joint statement by the *Alliance for Multilateralism*, which was co-initiated by the German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas in 2019. The statement calls "on all governments to strictly

ensure that any measures taken to counter the pandemic must be necessary and proportionate, pursue legitimate purposes, be limited in time, non-discriminatory and respectful of international law, including human rights law”, and further insisted that “[a]dopting a gender-responsive approach will be essential.”<sup>5</sup>

Addressing mechanisms, norms, and structures of exclusion and oppression as well as focusing on human security is a priority for countries that have adopted a Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP), including Sweden, Mexico, Canada, and France.<sup>6</sup> Analysing those countries’ responses to the pandemic can be useful for states to ensure their responses are in line with these commitments.

Thus, this policy brief offers the following: In a first step, it provides a brief overview of the FFP frameworks from Sweden, Mexico, Canada, and France, before discussing the main gendered impacts of the crisis. In a second step, it outlines how those four countries with FFPs have been responding to the pandemic (differently). Finally, it identifies concrete policy recommendations for a feminist response to COVID-19. Further to this, this policy brief will provide additional recommendations for a more comprehensive feminist approach towards foreign policy which goes beyond the immediate emergency response. We have included these long-term recommendations as this crisis can and should be seen as an opportunity to consider how foreign policy institutions and policies have historically excluded the needs and lived experiences of large parts of society. Ensuring equality is the best way to guarantee that future pandemics or other crises do not exacerbate existing inequalities. And the best way to ensure equality is to adopt a Feminist Foreign Policy.

While we hope that all governments around the world will find this paper useful, we have written it specifically with those in the Global North in mind, acknowledging that many of the inequalities we speak about in this brief originate in our unequal international system which largely benefits Global North governments. We thus see a specific responsibility for these governments to address the pandemic in a meaningful and feminist way.

# I. Overview: Existing Feminist Foreign Policy Approaches

In the following, we provide a brief overview of the existing feminist approaches to (parts of) foreign policies. These analyses serve as background information to the next section, which will highlight the countries' responses to the pandemic, and should thus not be understood as a comprehensive analysis of the various FFP approaches.<sup>7 8</sup>

## Sweden

Sweden introduced its FFP in 2014. In its 2018 *Handbook - Sweden's Feminist Foreign Policy*, the Swedish government defines its FFP as a working method and a perspective that uses four Rs: the promotion of all women's and girls' full enjoyment of human **rights**, women's participation and influence in decision making processes at all levels (**representation**), the allocation of **resources** to promote gender equality, all of which is grounded in the **reality** in which they live.<sup>9</sup>

Besides having the accolade of being the first country to adopt an FFP, Sweden has been praised for ensuring that its announcement in 2014 was followed by a definition of concrete objectives and measures.<sup>10</sup> It also has demonstrated a commitment to ensure that its own internal structures and capacities reflect the vision of its FFP, as Sweden declared its entire government a feminist one. Stockholm has a dedicated *Minister for Gender Equality*, who has the overall responsibility for its gender equality policies. Moreover, each ministry has a designated staff member responsible for its gender equality work. Sweden has further put its money into its commitments: 90% of Sweden's ODA is earmarked for gender equality.

Amongst the four countries consulted, Sweden not only has the most comprehensive FFP but has further applied the most comprehensive feminist response to the crisis. Despite the positive responses, there has also been substantial criticism towards Sweden's FFP, most of which centres around the lack of accounting for the needs and perspectives of LGBTQI, the continuous export of arms, and its migration and asylum policies.<sup>11 12</sup>

## Canada

In June 2017, Canada adopted its Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP), which aims at contributing to eradicating poverty by addressing inequality.<sup>13</sup> As part of this approach, Canada committed to a 95% benchmark for gender equality, with 15% as the principal target, according to OECD standards.

In addition to its FIAP, Canada has introduced a series of other gender equality initiatives as part of their foreign and security policy, including an inclusive approach to trade which forms part of its Trade Diversification Strategy. Canada has also appointed an Ambassador for Women, Peace and Security, Jacqueline O'Neill.<sup>14 15 16</sup>

Given the need for an FFP framework to be accountable to those it impacts, it is welcomed that Canada has also applied gender-based analysis to all of its policies and programmes using Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA+).<sup>17</sup> GBA+ is an analytical tool used to assess how diverse groups of women, men and non-binary people may experience government policies, programmes and initiatives. Canada is committed to promoting a feminist perspective to all of its foreign policy, but has yet to publish a comprehensive approach. However, in February 2020, the Minister of Foreign Affairs announced a dialogue process with civil society to launch a white paper on its FFP. The commitment to FFP is also reflected in Canada's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The decision to resume approving arms exports to Saudi Arabia (which had been paused because of the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi) strongly contradicts this commitment, however.

## France

The French government announced a feminist approach to their diplomacy in an op-ed on International Women's Day in 2019.<sup>18</sup>

This was the first time France's foreign policy was labelled 'feminist' despite gender equality strategies having been in place for several years. However, despite deliberately using the term 'Feminist Foreign Policy' in the op-ed, the text itself focuses only on allocating resources to the French Development Agency (AFD). This includes delegating 120 million Euros to feminist organisations and announcing that by 2022 the budget for initiatives primarily



## **France (continued)**

aimed at reducing gender inequality is expected to reach a total of 700 million Euros annually.

Nevertheless, as stipulated in France's International Strategy On Gender Equality (2018 - 2022),<sup>19</sup> the French government acknowledges that gender cannot be limited to development cooperation but must be mainstreamed throughout all areas of foreign policy in order to be effective. Despite acknowledging this, France has so far not done so. This raises questions to what extent labelling its diplomacy 'feminist' has led to substantial changes, in particular as important issues, such as France's possession of nuclear weapons, have not been addressed. This limited understanding is further visible in France's COVID-19 response, which has a strong domestic focus and has barely been applied to their international work.

Hopes are high that France will map out a comprehensive approach to their FFP in the near future as a feminist approach needs to be applied to all areas of foreign policy.

## **Mexico**

In January 2020, Mexico announced its FFP, becoming the first country in the Global South to adopt such a framework.<sup>20</sup>

Similar to the Swedish approach, Mexico's approach to FFP is also very detailed and comprehensive. It consists of five main elements: promoting a foreign policy with a gender perspective and feminist agenda; achieving gender parity within the Mexican foreign office; combatting gender-based violence, including within the ministry; making equality visible; and practicing intersectional feminism.

Additionally, Mexico's FFP has charted precise timelines by which they aim to achieve an ambitious number of immediate actions across these five areas of engagement. This is crucial, as it allows for civil society actors to follow the government's work and hold them accountable. As the announcement has been made only six months ago, it is difficult to assess its impact on Mexico's foreign policy.

## II. Why COVID-19 is a Feminist Issue: A Brief Overview

Since the beginning of the pandemic, many feminist organisations have been highlighting its gendered implications and have detailed why this is a feminist issue.<sup>21 22</sup> Here are some of the key considerations:

- 1 Gender-based violence (GBV):** Many reports suggest an alarmingly high increase in intimate partner violence amongst all social classes since the outbreak of the pandemic. In some countries, cases of GBV have increased by 30%, and in others cases even have doubled.<sup>23 24</sup> The pandemic is expected to set back the global response to GBV significantly, with as many as 31 million more women expected to experience violence as a result.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, support services to survivors of GBV have been limited during the crisis or have been more difficult to access, in particular for people facing financial challenges and physical disabilities.<sup>26</sup> In light of 'horrifying global surge of GBV', UN General Secretary Guterres has called for a domestic violence ceasefire.<sup>27</sup>
- 2 Gender-blind policies and decision-making:** Politically marginalised groups and their perspectives are not adequately represented in decision-making on pandemic responses.<sup>28</sup> Gender-transformative budgeting is overwhelmingly looked over as corporate bailouts for industries where men are overrepresented are favoured.
- 3 Gendered division of labour:** Women represent 70% of the (often severely underpaid) global health workforce and health facility service staff, meaning women are disproportionately on the frontline and thus more exposed to the virus. Moreover, most unpaid care work in the home is still largely carried out by women, which has forced many to reduce their work time or quit their jobs. This triggers severe consequences for women's participation in the labour market and hinders women's abilities to provide for themselves, and advance their careers.

- 4 Humanitarian and low-income settings, and the intersection of vulnerabilities:** The pandemic has increased the quantitative and qualitative need for humanitarian assistance. An unprecedented number of displaced people live in the most vulnerable conditions, and low-income countries are hit hardest by the pandemic.<sup>29 30</sup> A feminist analysis recognises that marginalised groups experience this crisis even more profoundly.
- 5 Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR):** By diverting attention and critical resources away from reproductive health services, the rates of maternal mortality and morbidity, unintended pregnancies, and sexually transmitted diseases will increase. In many countries, like the US, the current pandemic is used as a political opportunity to restrict women's access to reproductive services by declaring them 'non-essential.' On the international stage, the US is threatening decades of agreed human rights standards by demanding the removal of SRHR language from COVID-19 responses like the UN's *Global Humanitarian Response Plan's* (HRP) guidance on COVID-19.<sup>31 32</sup>
- 6 Fund allocation for security:** From personal protective equipment to intensive care beds and ventilators, governments across the globe are struggling to provide their citizens with appropriate medical care. At the same time, 2019 saw the greatest annual growth in military expenditure globally in a decade.<sup>33</sup> Funding a militarised approach to national security without taking human security (including health and economic security) into account will leave countries around the world particularly vulnerable to crises like this pandemic, leaving their citizens in a state of perpetual insecurity.<sup>34</sup>
- 7 Power grabs by authoritarian leaders:** Over the last few years we have seen authoritarian leaders and autocrats become some of the biggest threats to human rights, and in particular, to the rights of women and gender nonconforming people. The pandemic has seen this restriction of basic rights in democratic countries too, including in Europe, where states are using COVID-19 as an opportunity to augment their power and limit civil liberties and rights.

Many of these outcomes were predicted by various feminist organisations, who published analyses and recommendations at the onset of the crisis. These groups include the collective behind 'Feminist Covid Response'<sup>35</sup> as well as the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security towards the work of the UN Security Council.<sup>36</sup>

# III. Feminist Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic

This section will provide an overview of the measures taken by the governments of Sweden, Canada, France, and Mexico since the outbreak of the pandemic to mitigate its gendered impacts. The measures have been organised in relation to six essential themes, each of which corresponds closely to the key considerations outlined in section II and are considered crucial in the formulation of a FFP. However, whilst this overview's main objective is to provide inspiration for possible feminist responses, it is by no means to be understood as a comprehensive feminist approach to the pandemic.

Of the four countries studied, two have responded to increased pressure on sexual and reproductive health services by increasing their support for SRHR in areas where it is most needed. In order to mitigate the harmful effects of the pandemic in fragile and low-income contexts, these governments have also invested in immediate feminist humanitarian assistance as well as additional development programmes with recovery and long-term objectives in mind. Moreover, gender impact assessments and gender budgeting have allowed some governments to take steps to reduce gender-blind policies and decision making, and to consider the gendered division of labour and other economic considerations in the context of COVID-19. We have also seen positive engagement with feminist civil society overall as governments recognise their value in responding to human security crises.

## **Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights and Gender-Based Violence**

SRHR constitutes a central pillar of any FFP. The right to bodily autonomy acts as a precondition for the enjoyment of any other right, for the achievement of gender equality, and for international development. The COVID-19 pandemic has already had a significant impact on the delivery of sexual and reproductive health services, with disruptions in global supply chains causing shortages of contraceptives and essential medications such as antiretrovirals for HIV/AIDS and antibiotics to treat sexually transmitted diseases. The current lockdown situation is therefore predicted to have devastating consequences for women

and people with uteruses, in particular, leaving around 47 million in low and middle-income countries without access to contraceptives thus causing an estimated 7 million additional unintended pregnancies.<sup>37</sup> In addition to this, we are seeing a trend of governments actively exploiting the crisis in order to restrict SRHR by characterising these services as 'non-essential'. States committed to gender equality must therefore take urgent action to prevent an increase in gender-based violence, unintended pregnancy, unsafe abortion practices, and sexually transmitted diseases.

- The **Swedish** International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) has allocated an additional SEK 20 million (€1.9 million) for DKT International, a non-profit organisation working to promote family planning and HIV/AIDS prevention, to support SRHR in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Uganda, and Tanzania. This funding will be used to purchase contraceptive pills, condoms, emergency contraceptives, and medical abortion products during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>38</sup>
- **Sweden** has also donated SEK 1.2 million (€113,000) to UN Women in Ethiopia to support the national COVID-19 response plan and work with the Ethiopian Network of Women Shelters and other actors. The aim is to create temporary shelters in Addis Ababa and provide full services for survivors of gender-based violence.<sup>39</sup>
- **Canada** has donated Can \$1.5 million (€0.9 million) to UNFPA in response to their global appeal for \$67.5 million (€62.5 million) to ensure the delivery of vital sexual and reproductive health services, as well as to address violence against women where these services are most needed.<sup>40</sup>

## Feminist Humanitarian Assistance

Early on, humanitarian organisations including CARE International warned that “COVID-19 outbreaks in development or humanitarian contexts could disproportionately affect women and girls in a number of ways, including adverse effects on their education, food security and nutrition, health, livelihoods, and protection. Even after the outbreak has been contained, women and girls may continue to suffer from ill-effects for years to come.”<sup>41</sup> In order to mitigate these risks, donors need to apply an intersectional feminist approach to humanitarian aid, which is designed and delivered based on an understanding of the overlapping structural inequalities that affect the experience during a global health emergency.<sup>42</sup>

- **Sweden** has reallocated a total of SEK 100 million (€9.4 million) from its humanitarian reserve towards mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on/in low income countries.<sup>43</sup>
  - Of this funding, Sida has earmarked SEK 30 million (€2.8 million) for UNHCR in order to maintain health care and access to clean water and hygiene in refugee camps, to provide protective equipment for healthcare professionals and those caring for the ill, to grant cash support, and to make temporary housing available to infected refugees.<sup>44</sup>
  - In order to mitigate the harmful effects of the pandemic on children, Sida has also allocated SEK 40 million (€3.8 million) to UNICEF. These funds will be utilised to strengthen risk communication, to increase access to education and social protection for families, and to provide protective equipment for healthcare professionals.<sup>45</sup>
  - For the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Sweden has allocated SEK 30 million (€2.8 million) in order to support hospitals and health care facilities with adequate equipment and to provide access to clean water, hygiene, sanitation, psycho-social support for people already traumatised by violence and conflict, and information and training to stop the spread of infection.<sup>46</sup>
  - SEK 3.9 million (€365,000) has been allocated to the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) to provide improved access to hygiene and sanitation in refugee camps in Jordan.<sup>47</sup>
  - SEK 6 million (€563,000) has been allocated to Action Against Hunger (AAH) to improve access to healthcare, psycho-social support, water, and sanitation in Liberia and Sierra Leone.<sup>48</sup>
  - SEK 3 million (€281,000) has been allocated to Save the Children to provide mobile clinics and information campaigns in Afghanistan.<sup>49</sup>
  - And lastly, SEK 2.3 million (€216,000) has been allocated to Plan International to work with water, sanitation, and information on COVID-19 in two informal settlements in Harare, Zimbabwe that are particularly vulnerable due to high population density and low incomes.<sup>50</sup>

- **Sweden** has also contributed SEK 40 million (€3.8 million) to the WHO Contingency Fund for Emergencies.<sup>51</sup>
- **Canada** has provided Can \$2 million (€1.3 million) to the World Health Organization (WHO) to help vulnerable countries prepare and respond to COVID-19 events.
- At the beginning of April, the **Canadian** government announced the allocation of Can \$159.5 million (€105 million) in funding to support international efforts against COVID-19.<sup>52</sup>
  - Of this funding, \$84.5 million (€55.5 million) has been earmarked for international partners supporting humanitarian appeals including:
    - Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations to support vulnerable households affected by the ongoing pandemic, and to help minimise disruptions to the food supply chains.
    - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to address refugees' immediate public health needs as prompted by COVID-19.
    - UNICEF to support children and families affected by COVID-19 by providing life-saving information about hand washing and sanitation, supplying personal protective equipment, and distributing emergency education kits.
    - International Organization for Migration to focus on the need for a migrant-inclusive response to COVID-19 by closely working with the WHO and other UN Migration Network member agencies and partners and working to ensure the integration of migration health concerns across the UN system.<sup>53</sup>

## Long-Term Development Policy

The COVID-19 pandemic poses a serious threat to the realisation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Due to the size, scope, and pace of the pandemic, there is a significant risk that resources will be absorbed by the

emergency response and diverted away from sustainable development efforts. In this context, politically marginalised groups like women, the elderly, and informal workers will be hit the hardest. It is vital that in the response to this crisis, states keep Sustainable Development Goals in mind in order to safeguard previous progress and to continue working towards a more inclusive and sustainable future for all.<sup>54</sup>

- The **Swedish** government has approved a new allocation of SEK 50 million (€4.7 million) to the UN's COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund (COVID-19 MPTF). The fund will provide support to low and middle income countries in overcoming health and development issues caused by the pandemic and aims to focus on those most vulnerable to economic hardship.<sup>55</sup>
- **Sweden** has also allocated SEK 4.3 million (€403,000) to HelpAge International to address the needs of elderly persons affected by COVID-19 in low income countries as well as SEK 5 million (€469,000) to WaterAid Bangladesh in order to install additional hand washing facilities in urban slum areas and to increase the general public's access to information about hygiene.<sup>56</sup>
- On 17th April, 2020 **Canada's** Minister of International Development, Karina Gould, convened a virtual meeting of the UN's Group of Friends on Food and Nutrition Security. At the meeting, UN members and international organisations discussed strategies for mitigating the impacts of COVID-19 on food access in low-income countries. As part of Canada's previously announced global funding for COVID-19, US \$11 million (€10.1 million) has been allocated to food security and nutrition. \$10 million (€9.2 million) will go to the World Food Programme and \$1 million to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN.<sup>57</sup>
- On 12 May 2020, **Canada** and Uruguay, as co-chairs of the 'Women, Peace and Security' (WPS) Focal Points Network in 2020 hosted an online session with the Focal Points representing 87 countries and regional organisations to discuss the intersection between WPS and the COVID-19 response.
- **France's** Agence Française de Développement (AFD) announced the launch of the €1.2 billion initiative 'COVID-19 Health-in-Common' to support developing countries during the global health crisis. As part of this commitment, AFD will provide €12 million to finance six new projects focused on Sub-Saharan Africa and countries in the Indian Ocean. This support



responds to the urgent need for research, testing, monitoring, effective health policymaking, and patient treatment. AFD has also pledged to uphold its mandate by ensuring that supported projects promote gender equality and help to empower women.<sup>58</sup>

- On 26th March 2020, **Mexico** proposed a UN resolution that called for fair, transparent, and equitable access to essential medical equipment and future vaccines developed to fight COVID-19.<sup>59</sup> The resolution, which was adopted on 20th April, calls on member states and other relevant stakeholders to take immediate steps to prevent, within their respective legal frameworks, speculation and “undue stockpiling” that could hinder access to safe, effective, and affordable medicines, vaccines, and equipment.<sup>60</sup>

### **Institutional Capacities: Gender Impact Assessments, Gender Budgeting, and Mainstreaming Gender into Emergency Policy Response**

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted immediate fiscal policy responses by governments to account for additional pressure on the health sector and to address economic decline. In order to ensure success, a gender lens must be incorporated into the design and implementation of emergency policy responses. Governments benefit greatly from having an effective gender-transformative response system in place, including gender budgeting, gender impact assessments, access to quality sex-disaggregated data as well as skills and capacities to apply a gender perspective.<sup>61</sup>

- **Canada** has a long standing tradition of using gender impact assessments and has quickly mobilised contingency measures for gender equality in the context of COVID-19. Passed in 2018, Canada’s gender budgeting legislation requires governments to apply a gender and diversity lens to all existing and proposed policy. Last year’s federal budget presented the most detailed gender analysis to date, including an update on Canada’s gender equality goals and a separate “Gender Report”, which applied a Gender Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) to every budget measure. As a result of such analysis, federal departments were able to develop strategies to compensate for or offset the negative impacts on women for 15% of the measures announced. In another 8% of cases, departments proactively took steps to reduce barriers to women’s equal participation in the programme. Canada has attributed its rapid gender-sensitive response to COVID-19 to these existing gender mainstreaming strategies and frameworks.<sup>62</sup>

## Supporting Feminist Civil Society

Strengthening engagement with feminist civil society is fundamental to any FFP: In the context of COVID-19, the support and inclusion of feminist organisations is even more critical because feminist and women's movements are often the first and in the best position to respond to crisis. Moreover, they are most effective in transforming societies, challenging oppressive structures, and challenging autocratic structures and leaders.<sup>63</sup> Governments should take active steps to involve civil society in all decision-making processes and emergency response planning.

- The **Swedish** Government intends to adopt an ordinance on government grants in order to allocate SEK 100 million (€9.4 million) to non-profit organisations addressing increased vulnerability due to the outbreak of the pandemic. The money will go to organisations that work with children at risk and with women, children, and LGBTQI individuals who are victims of violence. It will also go to organisations working to end domestic violence and 'honour-based' violence and oppression.<sup>64</sup>
- On 7th May 2020, **Sweden's** Foreign Minister Ann Linde hosted a meeting with Women's Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL). The discussion focused on the effects of COVID-19 on the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda, peace building processes, and women's participation. It was attended by women peacebuilders from more than 30 countries including Afghanistan, Yemen, Colombia, Syria, and Sudan.
- As part of their 'COVID-19 Economic Response Plan,' the Government of **Canada** has allocated Can \$50 million (€32.8 million) to women's shelters and sexual assault centres in order to support women and children fleeing from violence. Of this funding, up to \$10 million (€6.6 million) will be provided to Indigenous Services Canada's (ISC) existing network of 46 emergency shelters on reserves and in Yukon to support Indigenous women and children. Up to \$40 million (€25.2 million) will go to Women and Gender Equality Canada (WAGE), of which \$30 million (€19.7 million) will address the immediate needs of shelters and sexual assault centres.<sup>65</sup>
- In May, **Canada** hosted a roundtable discussion with 14 feminist civil society organisations in order to gather recommendations on how the government can apply a feminist lens across all areas of their COVID-19 response.

- Through AFD, **France** is continuing and adapting its support for French civil society organisations that have been impacted by the health crisis. Since the onset of the pandemic, French NGOs have benefited from €31 million of grant support. The government also announced an extra €1 million of funding for anti-domestic abuse organisations to help them respond to increased demand for services.<sup>66</sup>
- In April, **Mexico** provided additional resources for 21 shelters and 20 care centres across the country through its “Shelter Support Programme”, financed by the Ministry of Finance and the National Institute of Social Development (INDESOL).<sup>67</sup>

## Leadership in Communication and Rhetoric

The inclusion of gender-responsive language and references to gender equality aspirations in statements, speeches, and external communication materials constitutes an important step towards changing the dominant narrative of foreign policy formulation. By advocating for the inclusion of such language in multilateral fora, governments can begin to normalise and legitimise the use of feminist frameworks in these contexts and push for concrete action to advance these goals.

- **Sweden** has released several articles highlighting the gendered impacts of COVID-19. On 13th April 2020, Sweden’s Foreign Minister Ann Linde and UN Women Deputy Executive Director Åsa Regnér published a piece detailing areas in which women are particularly vulnerable during the pandemic and where efforts for women’s rights must be strengthened.<sup>68</sup> This was followed by a call to action to defend women’s rights during and after the crisis by Åsa Lindhagen and Peter Eriksson, Sweden’s Minister for International Development.<sup>69</sup>
- At the multilateral level, **Canada’s** works to systematically underscore the critical need of adopting gender responsive approaches to address the impacts of COVID-19 in initiatives and statements. The Canadian Government has promoted this approach with partners in the Alliance for Multilateralism, Freedom Online Coalition, and in G7 and G20.
- Following the High-Level Meeting of the Group of Friends of Food Security

and Nutrition on the impact of COVID-19 on food availability and supply, **Canada** issued a statement with Brazil, Italy, and Egypt emphasising the need to invest in women and ensure they have access to land, credit, and digital information.<sup>70</sup>

- **Canada** also released a statement on the importance of safeguarding peace during the pandemic with specific reference to the circumstances of women, girls, and gender nonconforming people in fragile or conflict-affected areas.<sup>71</sup>
- On 18th April 2020, representatives from the Government of **Mexico** participated in Global Citizen's 'Together at Home' fundraiser concert to express their commitment to gender equality and the eradication of violence in the country.<sup>72</sup> Secretary of the Interior, Olga Sánchez Cordero, and the undersecretary for Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (SRE), Martha Delgado Peralta, spoke of the development of tools to keep women safe during the pandemic and further promotion of Spotlight Initiative actions.<sup>73 74</sup>

### Additional Measures

- The **Mexican Government** is particularly concerned by the circumstances of many undocumented Mexican women living abroad. As Cristopher Ballinas Valdé, General Director of Human Rights and Democracy at the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs, expressed, these women (who are living predominantly in the USA), are frightened by the prospect of going to the hospital to seek the vital medical attention because they lack the correct papers. Mexican consular teams are therefore working to design initiatives that will protect these women in the context of the current global health emergency, such as the *Mujer Mentora Migrante* Initiative (Migrant Women Mentors) at the Mexican consulate in Houston, USA. This initiative is designed to act as a "solidarity network" for Mexican women abroad and to strengthen the actions of the *Ventanilla de Atención Integral a la Mujer* Programme (Window of Integral Attention to Women).<sup>75</sup>

# IV. Recommendations: How to Respond to the COVID-19 Crisis

## A. Recommendations for Foreign Ministries

Taking into account the key challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic as outlined in section II and the measures taken by those countries pursuing an FFP, this section outlines concrete policy recommendations for foreign ministries.

While certain measures and policies should be implemented immediately for the short- and medium-term in order to mitigate the crisis' most urgent impact on existing inequalities, others go beyond that and aim at building more resilient societies and institutions in the long-term.

### Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights and Gender-Based Violence

*Immediate:*

- Allocate additional funds for reproductive health services (in particular maternal health care, provision of free and prescription-free contraception as well as emergency contraception, and safe abortion and post-abortion services) especially in humanitarian conflict and post-conflict settings, as well as for support services for survivors of gender-based violence.
  - Ensure that all of these resources go to organisations which fully support the right to safe and legal abortions and work with gender non-conforming people and people of all sexual orientations.<sup>76</sup>
  - Ensure that at least 50% of these additional funds aimed at supporting survivors of gender-based violence go to experienced constituency-led women's rights, girl's rights, and feminist organisations and networks.<sup>77</sup>
  - Ensure that women's rights and feminist organisations are included in the decision-making processes, including on how these funds are being allocated.<sup>78</sup>

- Defend and support SRHR on the international stage, and support civil society organisations who urge the international community to continue to promote a response to COVID-19 that upholds long standing commitments to health, human rights, and gender equality.
- Acknowledge the interlinkage between small arms and light weapons (SALW) and gender-based violence, in particular domestic violence, and cease exporting small arms and light weapons, as well as ammunition for these weapons to any country, including to like-minded states and lobby for an UN wide embargo of SALW.<sup>79</sup>
- Reiterate in public communications that reproductive rights are an essential part of women's rights and that reproductive health services cannot be suspended. Reemphasise that any response to COVID-19 must be human-rights based.
- Advocate in bilateral discussions as well as multilateral fora for measures that secure safe abortion care during the pandemic, such as legalising tele-consultations, use of early medical abortion at home, and mobile clinics, which should be equipped for all physical capacities.

*Beyond:*

- Criminalise and advocate for the prohibition of intimate partner violence ('domestic violence'), including marital rape, gender-based violence, and femicide in line with the Istanbul Convention and the CEDAW framework.
- Ratify and advocate for the ratification and implementation of the Istanbul Convention as well as the drafting and implementation of National Action Plans on Preventing Gender-Based Violence.
- Fund trainings for health care workers, security officials, and local government, so they can properly identify GBV and cases of intimate partner violence, handle disclosures in a compassionate, non-judgmental way, and know to whom they can refer patients for additional care.<sup>80</sup>
- Address the root causes of gender-based violence, in particular the interconnectedness between violence against women and social and economic inequalities (the 'political economy of violence against women') and cultural norms including gender stereotypes, in particular destructive masculinities.

## Feminist Humanitarian Assistance

### *Immediately:*

- Provide immediate flexible and additional funding to ensure that existing development and humanitarian operations can rapidly adapt to the risks posed by COVID-19, in particular in conflict-affected situations. Ensure that these additional funds do not divert funds from existing humanitarian aid that support women, girls, and gender non-confirming people in emergency settings.<sup>81</sup>
- Re-evaluate humanitarian aid responses to ensure that services are based on intersectional gender analysis, including gender-disaggregated data.
- Ensure that humanitarian aid continues to be accessible, even during times when movement is restricted, and that asylum seekers, IDPs, and refugees are included in national surveillance, preparedness, and response plans, and activities.<sup>82 83</sup>
- Ensure the full participation of women's rights and feminist organisations in the design and implementation of immediate and long-term humanitarian responses and at all stages of transitional justice processes for survivors of sexualised violence.<sup>84</sup>
- Advocate on an international level, that all national governments grant aid and health care workers access to all populations in need, including across borders, conflict zones, and contested areas.

### *Beyond:*

- Commission an independent analysis of the extent to which intersectionality has been integrated into humanitarian aid.
- Assess the indirect consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in collaboration with feminist humanitarian aid organisations, such as outbreaks of other infectious diseases because of postponed vaccinations, and their gendered dimensions.

## **Institutional Capacities: Gender Impact Assessments, Gender Budgeting, and Mainstreaming Gender into Emergency Policy Response**

*Immediately:*

- Include experts on intersectional feminist analysis and gender-responsive policymaking in emergency response teams and appoint gender focal points in all relevant ministerial units.
- Establish a small and informal advisory group consisting of femocrats (individuals within foreign ministries who support feminist responses to the pandemic), feminist civil society organisations, and epistemic communities (professional experts with recognised expertise in a particular foreign policy area) to advise on policymaking.<sup>85</sup>
- Ensure that all policy decisions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic are based on gender-transformative policy analysis reflecting gender-aggregated data, gender-impact assessments and as well as gender-sensitive evaluation, and aim to foster gender-equality.
- Collaborate with and support women peacebuilders in crisis settings. Women peacebuilders are often the first to respond on the ground when crises happen. Conflict prevention work must be informed by the advice of women peacebuilders.<sup>86</sup>

*Beyond:*

- Introduce and institutionalise gender-budgeting in foreign ministries.
- Ensure that all context, conflict, and situation analyses such as diplomatic correspondences are based on a feminist analysis.

## **Supporting Feminist Civil Society**

*Immediately:*

- Request that all embassies provide an intersectional analysis of the situation of feminist civil society, women's and LGBTQI human rights, women human rights defenders (WHRD), women journalists, as well as women



peacebuilders in their respective countries.

- Organise regular (digital) roundtable discussions with feminist civil society actors within national borders and in those countries receiving development and/or humanitarian aid.
- Ensure additional flexible and easy-to-administer funding for national and international civil society organisations addressing increased vulnerabilities of women, girls, and gender nonconforming people and sexual minorities.

*Beyond:*

- Establish a system that values and prioritises advice from feminist civil society and women human rights defenders (WHRD), as well as one that prioritises their protection of physical security and rights.
  - Ensure WHRDs' active participation in policy decision-making processes.
  - Ensure integrated protection, including through international and regional protection mechanisms (including CEDAW, the WPS UN Security Council Resolutions, the UN's Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders, and the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders), that assures there are no reprisals or additional risks as a result of their participation.
  - Ensure long-term, flexible, and easy-to-administer funding for these WHRDs, their work, and their integrated protection.
- Commission a comprehensive analysis of their own response to COVID-19, and the extent to which it has accounted for the gendered impacts of the crisis.

## **Leadership in Communications and Rhetoric**

*Immediately:*

- Ensure the inclusion of human security-focused and gender-sensitive language in any statements made on COVID-19 and resist other governments attempts to undermine the rights of women, gender non-conforming people, and people with diverse sexual orientations.

- Raise awareness of the gendered impacts of the crisis, and communicate clearly why the pandemic is a feminist issue in all media work (e.g. in op-eds, interviews or on social media), diplomatic correspondences, trips, and visits.
- Raise awareness of and address the racist and classist impacts of the crisis and its interlinkages within societies.<sup>87</sup>

*Beyond:*

- Change the narrative on peace and security and acknowledge in all communications that, based on research, inequalities, in particular gender inequality, are key drivers of conflict and violence.

## Political Leadership

*Immediately:*

- Raise awareness of the interlinkages between the 'Women, Peace, and Security' agenda and the COVID-19 pandemic and advocate within the UN system for the measures suggested by the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security:<sup>88</sup>
  - Ensure that all COVID-19 decision-making bodies are inclusive, gender-balanced, and include gender expertise and feminist civil society.
  - Require rights-based and age-, gender-, and disability-sensitive pandemic response.
  - Prevent and respond to gender-based violence.
  - Protect civilians and ensure principled humanitarian access to all people in need.
  - Maintain essential health services.
  - Defend civil society space and call on all member states to uphold international human rights and humanitarian law and refrain from enacting indefinite or disproportionate emergency measures that limit or entirely curtail the right to movement, assembly, and information, or

impose undue restrictions on civic space or the work of civil society and human rights defenders, including women's rights organisations, as part of pandemic response.

- Promote community engagement and leadership and encourage the use of lessons learned from Ebola and cholera responses, which emphasise how critical meaningful community engagement and leadership are to effective public health responses.
- Support and advocate for gender-transformative international response funds, which includes inter alia gender impact assessments and gender budgeting for recovery funds which have already been proposed, including for the EU Recovery and Resilience Instrument.
- Support and advocate in international fora that all international economic recovery plans and funds are in line with the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.
- Support the initiative launched by former President of USSR Gorbachov to convene an emergency special session of the UN General Assembly to secure an immediate reduction of 15% on military expenditure by all States and the redirection to health care and responses.<sup>89</sup>
- Call for a UN General Assembly resolution to create a post-COVID consensus on international cooperation and solidarity, as well as economic and systematic reform based on human rights.
- Within the framework of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, call for a cancellation of debts of Global South countries, reject neoliberal responses to the crisis including loans linked to structural adjustment policies, and call for a global stimulus package for countries in the Global South.

*Beyond:*

- Step up the already existing efforts toward (nuclear) disarmament and start advocating for nuclear free zones as well as a redirection of funds from military spending to human security.

## **B: Recommendations: Building Resilient and Equal Societies**

In addition to the outlined recommendations, governments should contribute to building resilient and just societies and structures as this is the only way to prevent crises like COVID-19 from exacerbating existing inequalities. This means nothing less than addressing the root causes of injustice, including patriarchy, racism, militarism, unilateralism, and the current economic practices of neoliberalism and capitalism, which have created not only a highly unequal environment but have also led to inadequate responses to the pandemic. Human rights and gender equality need to be prioritised. Policies which pursue these goals should formulate appropriate strategies and take respective actions, drawing on knowledge and experiences of peace processes, and include a transition out of the pandemic which must be politically, economically, and socially transformative.

There are several actions foreign ministries should take in this regard.

In general terms, the prevention and cessation of crisis or conflict and the transition to sustainable peace must be prioritised in all foreign and security policies. This requires addressing the gender binary (men vs. women), gendered stereotypes, gender inequality (particularly as a driver of conflict), and the protection of human rights.

An approach which can be applied in the pandemic and more generally is looking to and aligning policies with the vision, principles, objectives, and laws outlaid in the 'Women, Peace, and Security' (WPS) agenda, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), methodologies around transformative justice, and international human rights law and frameworks.

The value of inter-state cooperation aimed at mitigating the gendered impact of this crisis cannot be overstated. There are several specific commitments within the WPS Agenda, for example, which Ministers for Foreign Affairs can use not only to frame COVID-19 responses within international and regional organisations but also as overarching policy objectives.<sup>90</sup>

Putting this in more specific terms and by way of an example, in Security Council Resolution 1889 (2009), operative paragraph 1 (OP1) urges international and regional organisations to:

“take further measures to improve women’s participation during all stages of peace processes, particularly in conflict resolution, post-conflict planning and peacebuilding, including by enhancing their engagement in political and economic decision-making at early stages of recovery processes, through inter alia promoting women’s leadership and capacity to engage in aid management and planning, supporting women’s organizations, and countering negative societal attitudes about women’s capacity to participate equally.”<sup>91</sup>

This single operative paragraph houses several commitments which can be pursued as individual policy objectives as well as serve as the foundation of foreign policy objectives around multilateralism. These policies can be very useful in responding to our key feminist considerations of the pandemic as outlined under section II and should consequently be connected to the need to strengthen the participation of women in the design of policies that address the pandemic; the implementation of the UN Secretary-General’s call for a global ceasefire; and the prevention of and responses to domestic violence, including the recognition of the seriousness of domestic violence, gender-based violence, and child abuse and assurances of accountability of perpetrators and justice for survivors (including through transformative reparations).

States aiming to build more equal societies must pursue disarmament and demilitarisation. Current expenditure on weaponry has diverted resources away from human security, particularly adequate health care, and has facilitated the spread of the pandemic. Supporting the UN Secretary-General’s call for a global ceasefire necessitates an immediate moratorium on all arms transfers and sales. This includes cutting military spending within the regional and international institutions with which governments engage, re-directing these funds to pandemic relief, and moving forward on programmes supportive of disarmament, human rights, and environmental protections. States must also address the economic and political incentives for arms manufacturing.

Moreover, governments must also secure funding for women’s organisations as well as end and reverse neoliberal austerity measures. This includes applying pressure for the reform of International Financial Institutions (IFIs) based on feminist economic analyses, removing the fiction that IFIs have no responsibility

for human rights, and including the imperative of human rights and environmental impact assessments. To meet the immediate impact of COVID-19, loans must proactively be conditioned so as to ensure that states apply approaches which prioritise investments in health, education, natural resources, a green economy, and wellness which are grounded in the realisation of economic and social rights and environmental preservation.<sup>92</sup> Strategies for the restoration of civil and political rights violated or legally derogated from during the pandemic must also be included as an element of a conditionality.

# V. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a global crisis of an unprecedented scale. However, it also constitutes an opportunity for reflection, for action, and for meaningful change. By drawing on the examples of the governments included in this brief, governments can implement inclusive, gender-responsive emergency policy responses in order to mitigate the unique and disproportionate effect of the pandemic on already marginalised groups and to ensure that decision-making is in line with their own commitments. In the long term, more action is required. A feminist response to COVID-19 is one that endeavours not only to minimise the harmful effects of oppressive structures but to catalyse action that will build more equal societies in general. By taking advantage of this opportunity to inspire change, states can initiate a process of international recovery that tackles the root causes of long-standing inequalities, both between people and between nations, and hence ensure that there will be greater resilience in the context of future crises.

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7. Whilst Spain and Luxembourg have also announced their intention to launch a FFP, they are not included in this analysis as a more articulated approach to their foreign policy has not been made public yet.
8. At the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy (CFFP), we define FFP the following way: "A Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) is a political framework centred around the wellbeing of marginalised people and invokes processes of self-reflection regarding foreign policy's hierarchical global systems. FFP takes a step outside the black box approach of traditional foreign policy thinking and its focus on military force, violence, and domination by offering an alternate and intersectional rethinking of security from the viewpoint of the most vulnerable.



It is a multidimensional policy framework that aims to elevate women's and marginalised groups' experiences and agency to scrutinise the destructive forces of patriarchy, colonisation, heteronormativity, capitalism, racism, imperialism, and militarism. CFFP believes a feminist approach to foreign policy provides a powerful lens through which we can interrogate the violent global systems of power that leave millions of people in perpetual states of vulnerability." The Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy. 2020. Feminist Foreign Policy. [online] Available at:

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88. Because the pandemic is being framed and discussed as a conflict, the WPS Agenda is referenced throughout. CEDAW General Recommendation 30 can and should be similarly drawn from in order to inform how a FFP framework responds to the pandemic.



89. There are other operative paragraphs within the WPS UNSCRs to which the Ministers for Foreign Affairs regarding feminist engagement of international, regional, sub-regional and intergovernmental organisations including but not limited to: S/RES/2122(2013), OP15; S/RES/2242(2015), OPs 2 and 15; and S/RES/2467(2019), OP33.
90. Support for this can be found in, for example, S/RES/1820(2008), OP13 and S/RES/2122(2013), OP1.