

Report of a consultation meeting on Feminist Foreign Policy for the Netherlands

Online meeting, 8 July 2021

Background

The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) is currently investigating the added value of Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) for the Netherlands. The launch of the EU's third Gender Action Plan (GAP-III)¹ has prompted the D66 fraction in the Senate to ask the government to investigate what lessons can be learned from those countries that implement FFP, such as Sweden, France, Canada and Mexico.² The government has agreed to explore the opportunities and possibilities, as well as challenges, of developing and implementing a FFP for the Netherlands.

To collect input for this process, the MFA reached out to WO=MEN Dutch Gender Platform to collaborate in organising a consultation with civil society partners and experts in the Netherlands. Please find the most important suggestions and conclusions of this consultation below.

Summary

No government in the world has achieved a true Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP). Although there are already elements in place for a FFP for the Netherlands, it is important to be realistic and honest. If we really want to tackle inequality, poverty, the climate crisis etc., applying feminist principles is crucial and should be a starting point, not an add-on to existing policies. FFP should not be window dressing. **Root causes of inequality and unequal power relations need to be addressed and this requires a long-term political commitment, an intersectional and gender transformative approach that cuts across ministries, within international and domestic policies.**

There was much appreciation for this consultation from civil society. There is clear interest and urge to continue to be engaged in further dialogues and processes related to FFP. Suggestions were made to also consult other actors, including civil society in Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs). There are doubts and concerns about how realistic FFP is in the Netherlands, considering the current political climate. Even if a commitment is made at the highest level, would it be credible? On the other hand, there is clear international and a potential national political and societal momentum. Perhaps the main question should really be reversed: **what arguments does the (future) Dutch government have to not adopt a Feminist Foreign Policy?** The key advice is to ensure that the development of a FFP for the Netherlands is a co-creation process between government, civil society (including in-country civil society), academia and private sector.

What can be the added value of Feminist Foreign Policy for the Netherlands?

An international signal of political will and commitment to system change

- The adoption of a Feminist Foreign Policy would be a **strong signal of political will and commitment to system change and to build back better post COVID-19**; to include everyone, to adapt an intersectional and gender transformative lens and to be accountable.
- The Netherlands already is a strong supporter of women's rights, LGBTI+ rights and gender equality, and is an important international player in relation to the Social Development Goals (SDG's) and gender diplomacy (e.g., the Commission on the Status of Women). Being more

¹ EU Gender Action Plan III: https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/join-2020-17-final_en.pdf

² See page 10 (question 11):

https://www.eerstekamer.nl/behandeling/20210419/verslag_van_een_nader_schriftelijk/document3/f=/vli4cb11pxyi_opp_emaakt.pdf

intentional and explicit in calling these efforts ‘feminist’ could strengthen already existing actions and stimulate more coherence between policy areas.³

- FFP could be an **instrument to push for change**. No country has achieved a true FFP yet. It is important to recognise that it’s a process, not a state of being. Feminist Foreign Policy can be a promise to reflect, to be responsible, to be critical and introspective, to invite feedback, allowing the Netherlands to continuously change and improve its work.
- FFP gives us an **opportunity to be a frontrunner** again in the international arena. The Netherlands should align with others and push for the adoption of FFP in international spaces. One country alone cannot shift international politics, but the Netherlands can contribute to the global shift towards more gender transformative policies and actions by joining the group of countries that explicitly commit to FFP.
- FFP offers the opportunity to **successfully counter the continuous shrinking of civic space**, which disproportionately negatively affects gender equality and women’s rights organisations and activists. The Netherlands must pro-actively counter the current anti-gender movement; we shouldn't bow for the accompanying rhetoric or let ourselves (also in EU-context) be pushed back to existing red lines on progressive language and policies.

Changing unequal power structures through a gender transformative approach

- A Feminist Foreign Policy would address the **root causes** of gender inequality and work towards structural and true **system change**. FFP does not only focus on gender sensitive and responsive policies, but especially on **gender transformative policies**. It should have the ability to disrupt existing power structures and focus on transforming existing power relations (shifting the power), not only between women and men, but also regarding other persisting inequalities.
- FFP must have an **intersectional approach, and this should be demonstrated explicitly and consistently**. For instance, a frequent heard criticism about GAP-III is that while it calls for an intersectional perspective in gender equality policies, it does not include any specific measures or guarantees to ensure policies will be intersectional.
- FFP provides an opportunity to share all the important insights that feminist theory has to offer, **build allies** as well as expand feminism. Whilst making sure to acknowledge different forms of feminism. Feminism is about addressing the **patriarchal system**. Even critics might become allies, if we make clear that feminism is about everyone. People often misinterpret feminism, as they believe it is about women and girls. It is about existing norms of femininity and masculinity that negatively impact women, girls, men, boys, and people who do not identify as male or female. People of all genders need to get on board and understand that it’s about the progress of humanity and for the benefit of all.

Stronger policy coherence and consistency

- A Feminist Foreign Policy goes **beyond Official Development Assistance (ODA) and MFA policies**. FFP should include all elements on foreign relations, all systems that create unequal relations around the world, including arms trade, the climate crisis, taxes, extractivism etc. FFP needs to be **bold and coherent across ministries**⁴ and international institutions. Applying feminist and LGBTI+ inclusive principles also implies analysing and improving for example trade and debt programmes.
- FFP involves looking at and including the most marginalised, reconsidering our trade policies through a feminist lens, and considering our colonial past and how it influences our policies.
- FFP requires **policy coherence and consistency** also in domestic policies. Including for instance on sex work.⁵ This also means addressing recommendations coming out of **international processes**

³ Example Mexico: Mexico uses Feminist Foreign Policy to push the domestic agenda and policies.

⁴ Including the Ministries of Defence, Justice & Security, Economic Affairs & Climate Policy, Education, Culture & Science, Social Affairs & Employment, Finance and General Affairs.

⁵ Current Dutch foreign policy focuses on decriminalisation of sex work and is more feminist than Dutch national policy, which continues to focus on repressive legislation, which has also been called backdoor criminalisation.

and agreements, such as CEDAW, UPR, etc. in our policies. Inconsistences between domestic and international policies can be damaging to the implementation and credibility of a country's FFP, particularly when it's also used as a lobby or advocacy instrument towards other states.

- **For a credible Feminist Foreign Policy, we must 'walk the talk' on all these matters.** Despite the Netherlands being a strong supporter of gender equality, currently this isn't structurally the case.
- We would have more effective and successful interventions and policies if feminist and LGBTI+ inclusive principles would be integrated. This is crucial if we want to reach the SDGs in 2030.
- Government, together with civil society and other partners must seize the existing space for strengthening current policies as well, as a true FFP will not be achieved immediately. The Netherlands is already committed to **GAP-III which requires additional work on gender mainstreaming across MFA policies** (not merely ODA). However, note that the implementation period of GAP-III is 2020-2025, whereas FFP needs a more long-term approach.

Sustainable and meaningful engagement of civil society, academia and private sector

- **"Nothing about us without us"** – the meaningful engagement of civil society and other partners is a crucial element for a successful FFP. Its added value is a **co-creation process and cooperation** between government, CSOs, academia and private sector. Regarding civil society, not only Dutch CSOs must be part of this, organisations and activists based in LMICs need to be involved as well. **Structurally excluded people should be at the centre of these policies.**
- **Increased funding of feminist, women and youth led organisations** is an important element. Not only within ODA, but also on other policy areas that impact women's lives and need transformative change, such as the climate crisis, trade, extractivism or defence.
- Finally, FFP provides a measuring framework for civil society to hold the government to account.

A new approach to both Dutch society and politics

- A Feminist Foreign Policy requires a **long-term strategy and political commitment**, transcending governments. Also, local authorities should be included/involved in awareness raising on feminist and LGBTI+ inclusive principles as there is a lack of gender awareness at local government level.
- There was some discussion about the terminology (as the word 'feminist' in the Netherlands undeservedly has a negative connotation). If this stands in the way of systemic change the term may need to be reviewed; on the other hand, the term has been adopted by other countries and the Netherlands would then become part of a global movement. **What is needed in broader society and what FFP can offer is an understanding that: "this is benefiting me as well".**

What is needed to implement a credible Feminist Foreign Policy? What criteria should be met?

General principles

- A credible Feminist Foreign Policy has binding objectives, abides **by feminist and LGBTI+ inclusive principles**, is coherent, intersectional, transformative, and goes beyond ODA and MFA policies.
- It needs to bring together all elements: a gender transformative lens, shifting power, representation, collective action, learning & reflection, training, accountability, and transparency.
- The principles of a true FFP are about **facilitating a process that contains several essential steps and not a linear plan**; part of the process is a regular assessment and reassessment in collective reflection. In other words, we don't need to have everything in place before launching a FFP, but we do need a clear and **credible implementation plan** (process) and commitment to start.
- Suggested core components of FFP referred to as the **"five Rs"**: (1) rights, (2) resources, (3) representation, (4) research and reporting and (5) reach.⁶

⁶ International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), 2020:

https://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/FFP_Framework_EN_June2021update.pdf

Sustainable and meaningful engagement of civil society, academia and private sector

- FFP obliges the Dutch government to continue to take the responsibility to achieve the SDGs in an inclusive way, to comply with international human rights principles and to strengthen the social contract between government and citizens.
- **Based on the “Nothing about us without us” principle** the meaningful engagement of civil society and other partners is crucial in the process of developing a FFP. Not only Dutch organisations but organisations and activists based in LMICs as well. **Structurally excluded people should be at the centre of these policies and consultations.** A Dutch FFP should be a **co-creation process** between government, CSOs (including in-country CSOs), academia and private sector.
- Throughout implementation the meaningful engagement of civil society should consist of shadow reporting, consultations, debates across themes, programmes and ministries, and the sustainable support of organisations, activists and movements.
- This also necessitates additional structural investment (including long-term, flexible, core funding) in feminist, women and youth led organisations.

Measurement framework

- Reconsider targets used and **what is being measured**; there often is a disconnect between what is said and what is being measured. The measurement framework needs to go beyond self-assessments. Transparency and reporting are essential for accountability.
- We need a set of **minimum criteria**, to avoid window dressing. Such criteria should relate to the ‘how’, namely using the right ingredients for developing this policy (intersectionality, inclusivity, accountability, etc.). If we get the ‘how’ right, then the ‘what’ will follow. The ‘what’ needs to be procreated with civil society and other partners (see above).
- Minimum criteria should include indicators and lessons learned from the GAP-III framework. This includes the (minimum of) 85% target for all (new) external actions to have gender equality and women’s and girls’ empowerment as a significant objective or as a principal objective.¹
- **Use gender-responsive budgeting** and budget allocation as instruments.
- **Data is of the essence.** For example, Atria investigated gender budgeting for Amsterdam. But they lacked gender disaggregated data, which is a precondition for gender responsive budgeting.

Political commitment at the highest level

- A FFP should reflect what we strive to be as society; egalitarian and inclusive.
- **A statement at the highest level (Prime-Minister)** is needed to show the Netherlands is truly committed to implementing FFP. Also, all involved cabinet ministers and ambassadors need to be outspoken supporters and present themselves as proud feminists, able to defend the policy. The upper regions of management within all relevant ministries need to be on board.
- The real crux is **long-term political commitment** to implement FFP. And the political pressure to demand that. CSOs have a role in that political process as well.
- **Culture changes within (all) ministries** will be needed and this needs to be included in development and implementation plans. This should include ensuring more inclusive staffing and gender and inclusion training programmes for all staff. Feminist principles should also lead in internal policies. Make gender performance/gender expertise a core competence of job descriptions and performance reviews.

During the closing, Pascale Grotenhuis, the Dutch Ambassador for Women’s Rights and Gender Equality, committed to draft an advice based on the research and consultations the MFA is conducting. Ultimately, it will be up to the new government to decide what to do with it. The Gender Taskforce commits to host another session in September to present the findings of this process.

Annex I: Programme

09.55h Digital doors open

10.00h Welcome and introduction consultation process on the added value of a Feminist Foreign Policy for the Netherlands

Pascalie Grotenhuis, Ambassador Women's Rights and Gender Equality, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

10.10h Discussion in two groups with representatives from civil society

Moderated by Anne-Floor Dekker, Programme Manager Gender, Peace & Security WO=MEN Dutch Gender Platform & Nadia van der Linde, Programme Manager International Processes WO=MEN Dutch Gender Platform

11.25h Plenary closure

Edith van der Spruit, Interim CEO WO=MEN Dutch Gender Platform