

Feminist Foreign Policy in Times of Crumbling Liberal International Order

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Drawing on poststructuralist and feminist conceptions of narrative as a precondition for agency, Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) is examined in this essay as a political stance within the contested Liberal International Order (LIO). It is argued that dominant stories about both the LIO and FFP—typically centred on Western authorship and leadership—obscure the constitutive roles of actors from the Global South and East in advancing liberal norms, including gender equality. Existing accounts about the origins and support as well as contestations of the LIO and the FFP are shown. These narratives are expanded by tracing the co-production of the LIO and its gender equality commitments across regions, examining the emergence, variation, and contestation of FFPs, and highlighting contemporary Southern-led innovations and defences of multilateralism and gender equality in the face of intensified illiberal and anti-gender trends in the Global North. Such a retelling of the LIO and FFP stories is therefore both an epistemic and political act. The essay is concluded by proposing a mode of feminist engagement with both the LIO and the FFP as that of “critical friendship”, balancing the contradictory performances of support and critique, resisting illiberal dismantling while being attentive to structural exclusions.

Keywords: Liberal International Order, Feminist Foreign Policy, gender equality, Global South and East, narrative

I. Introduction

I can only answer the question “What am I to do?” if I can answer the prior question “Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?”
(MacIntyre 2007[1981]: 216).

The Scottish-American philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre is not a classic hero in feminist handbooks. Nevertheless, the above quote from his seminal 1981 book *After Virtue* will serve to guide my argument in this essay.

The focus of this essay is on Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP), a relatively new invention among

policy solutions aiming to promote gender equality in international affairs. I will position the FFP in relation to the Liberal International Order (LIO) and its contestations. Facing an uncertain future, and experiencing more challenges than ever, not only from the usual suspects of authoritarian illiberal states, but also from the autocratizing United States, it is a critical moment to revisit the “stories” about the LIO that undergird our sense of political agency. My claim is that the stories of the LIO and of the FFP can be retold so that the entrenched narratives about the Global West/East/South are questioned, and the contributions of non-Western states are foregrounded. This

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retelling comes with a call to action. The structure of my essay follows MacIntyre's quest – first trying to identify the stories we can be part of and later pondering how we can act upon them.

Poststructuralist and feminist approaches are applied in this essay, by treating narratives, or stories not simply as a rhetorical device but as a structure of agency (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Wibben 2010). The dominant LIO story organizes who appears as an agent, a passive recipient, or a problem to be solved. Retelling the story from feminist and postcolonial vantage points is therefore both an epistemic and a political act. Feminist scholars have repeatedly shown that dominant narratives about international politics obscure women, feminists, and actors beyond the West (Tickner 1992). These narrative silences reproduce material exclusions. Narrative correction, in its turn, is tied to material inclusion — who is named as a historical protagonist shapes who can set agendas (Enloe 2014). Here, the retelling decentres the West as sole author and legitimate authority on the LIO and the FFP, foregrounds co-creation across regions, and widens the range of legitimate agents in order-building.

The essay begins by discussing the origins and support for the LIO as well as its contestations, showing that gender equality has been central to both. It then turns to the FFP, tracing its emergence, variation, and criticisms, again highlighting the productive role of actors beyond the West. The conclusion draws two implications for how feminists might engage with the LIO and the FFP as “critical friends”.

II. The Promotion and Contestation of LIO (including gender equality)

The LIO refers to the post-World War II

constellation of norms, rules, and institutions related to political liberalism (human rights, the rule of law, and liberal democracy), economic (neo)liberalism, and liberal internationalism manifested in multilateral cooperation (Deudney and Ikenberry 1999; Risse 2024). The dominant narrative presents the LIO as originating and being maintained by the US and other Western states, and often as an expression of Western hegemony (Deudney and Ikenberry 1999; Acharya 2022). Indeed, the LIO has been backed by the US and European powers, and these states have had strong influence on the content of the LIO. However, this narrative is also marked by epistemic forgetting. Those who trace the history of the LIO point out that many other actors have co-produced the LIO, including newly independent and decolonized states (Risse 2024). For instance, Latin American and Asian delegations had a stark influence on the shape of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, pushing to include social and economic rights in the new international framework, and resisting attempts by the US and UK to narrow human rights language (Bhagavan 2013; Jensen and Sikkink 2025). In the 1960s, newly independent African states shaped peacekeeping practices and placed self-determination at the heart of multilateralism and Ghana contributed to legitimating non-alignment as a pillar of international order (Siaw 2025). Asian initiatives, from Bandung to the Group of 77, pressed the UN system to link development with justice and redistribution (Ahmia 2015; Umar 2019), later visible in the UN Conference on Trade and Development and the Sustainable Development Goals. Countries such as Costa Rica, Ghana, Malaysia, Mexico, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Vanuatu have played important roles in specific human rights initiatives in key international forums. Diplomatic initiatives from smaller

states such as Liechtenstein and The Gambia have been instrumental in advancing international justice (Human Rights Watch 2026: 6). These developments are not peripheral to the LIO, they helped constitute it. Multilateralism was built by states from all regions over decades. To quote Bajpai and Laksmna (2023: 1380):

Asians want a voice in the construction and maintenance of international order. They can all point to their contributions to order building, and in this sense the current international order is not a gift of the western powers: it is important to recognize that it is owned and operated by Asians and other non-western states as much as by the West.

A similar retelling can be performed in the case of gender equality and feminist ideas, which have influenced and been incorporated into global governance norms that are central to the LIO (Tickner and True 2018). Even here, it was not always the Western states who lobbied for the initial inclusion of gender equality in the LIO. Neither have Western states always acted as defenders and promoters of gender equality and feminist causes internationally. For instance, it was a coalition of NGOs and Latin American states as well as India and South Africa who successfully pushed for inclusion of women's rights into the UN Charter (Skard 2008; Dietrichson and Sator 2021), while the US delegates as well as delegates from UK and Canada opposed the inclusion of women's rights. We can find evidence that, for instance, the Soviet Union and its satellite states have promoted emancipation of women internationally (Towns 2010; Lerch and Ramirez 2024). Another example is the history of international policy diffusion of legal sex quotas, which points to the crucial role of non-Western actors in developing and adopting

this policy solution (Krook 2006). Legal sex quotas, promoting a more even representation for women and men in elected assemblies, were first introduced during the Cold War by state socialist countries. This policy solution was reintroduced in Latin America in the 1990s, followed by African and Asian states in early 2000s (Towns 2010). European states were rather late to adopt this way of promoting women's representation. Moreover, historical research on the Women Peace and Security agenda including the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and the follow-up resolutions, which are commonly treated as a Western export, shows substantive contributions of non-Western initiators, drafters, and strategists including states such as Bangladesh, Namibia, and Jamaica (Basu 2016). Scholars have also highlighted how Asian states have long been at the forefront of introducing feminist perspectives into thinking about the international system (Parashar and D'Costa 2017; Singh Rathore 2024). It should be abundantly evident that empowerment of women is not a Western or a European phenomenon (Towns 2010).

We currently witness numerous challenges to the LIO, some even talk about its decline or demise (Ikenberry 2018; Mearsheimer 2019; Steinberg 2022). While the LIO has always been marked by contestation from the inside and from the outside (Wiener 2014; Börzel and Zürn 2021; Wiener et al. 2026), to the extent that 'crisis talk' became internalized into the LIO (Peoples 2024), these contestations have intensified since the 1990s, disrupting the functioning of the LIO and questioning some of its foundations. Most recently, resulting from the international havoc that US President Donald Trump's second term has brought about, the crisis of the LIO has entered the wider policy discourse and public imagination. For instance, at the 2026 World Economic Forum

in Davos Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney spoke of the "rupture in the world order" (Carney 2026).

From the start, the LIO has been criticized for severe flaws in design and the uneven distribution of power it supports. A recurring critique has been that the LIO promotes neoliberalism and institutionalizes state inequality (Börzel and Zürn 2021 and the whole 2021 Special Issue on Challenges to the Liberal International Order in *International Organization*). Highlighting the hierarchical nature of the LIO, scholars have shown how the LIO works in favour of Western societies and its elites, and how imperial practices and power disparities have been central to the LIO (Parmar 2018; Long 2018; Benabdallah 2024). While there are good reasons for states in the Global South and East to criticize the LIO, it can be argued that the LIO is more severely threatened by developments in the West than challenges coming from the South and East (Ikenberry 2018). Mukherjee (2024: 1) contends that "while countries in the Global South have typically engaged in order-consistent contestation, it is the LIO's leading states that have engaged in order-challenging contestation." This has become abundantly clear with President Trump's ongoing upheaval of foundational norms, rules, and institutions of the LIO, including disrespect for human rights, the rule of law, and liberal democracy in the US; introduction of tariffs that hinder free trade; and withdrawal of funding and participation in multiple UN bodies and international agreements including UN Human Rights Council, the World Health Organization, and UNESCO, with the claim that they "operate contrary to U.S. national interests, security, economic prosperity, or sovereignty" (The White House 2026).

Gender is not incidental to these battles. Feminist scholars argue that attacks on gender

equality serve as proxies for attacking liberalism writ large. Gender equality norms symbolize cosmopolitanism, human rights, multilateralism, and the autonomy of the individual. Thus, to oppose gender equality becomes a way to reject the broader normative architecture of the LIO. Indeed, contestations of the LIO often invoke anti-gender equality stances (Cupać and Ebetürk 2020; Awondo et al. 2022), mobilizing supporters through appeals to anti-feminism and traditional gender roles, or the so-called family values. Complex transnational networks including Russian state funded NGOs and U.S.-based Christian conservative organizations have built alliances that span continents (Edenborg 2023; McEwen 2023). These networks strategically attack gender equality initiatives at multiple levels, with documented campaigns against sexual and reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ protections, and gender mainstreaming within the EU, as well as coordinated advocacy at the UN. Across these alliances, actors consistently frame gender equality and feminism as Western impositions or "colonial ideologies", positioning themselves instead as defenders of tradition and "family values". The intensity and spread of anti-feminism globally, including in the West, are undeniable (Graff and Korolczuk 2022); we are seeing a rise in states "expressing overtly misogynistic views and denouncing feminism as a foreign import" (Johnston and Meger 2025: 525-526). One telling example is the "Group of Friends of the Family", an alliance of 25 UN member states, which coordinates anti-feminist actions within the UN system.

Simultaneously, new defenders of the LIO have emerged in support for liberal rights and multilateralism in various locations globally, often in the Global South and East. Examples from 2025 include Barbados and other Caribbean states who have advanced climate justice and care within

multilateral fora, linking environmental rights to broader liberal norms (UN Women 2025); The Hague Group, currently led by South Africa and Colombia, who formed in “defence of international law” and in solidarity with the people of Palestine (The Hague Group, nd); and the signing of a joint statement defending multilateralism at the UN of over 70 countries from all regions (International Service for Human Rights 2025).

Hence, just as the origins and the support for the LIO, even the contestations of the LIO transcend the simple demarcation lines between West/East/South. Yet again, however, the epistemic dominance of the West has led to distorted narratives in which the West is portrayed as originator of the LIO and leader on gender equality initiatives while the contributions from the South and the East to the LIO and gender equality including its foundations and current defence are being obscured.

III. FFP as Taking a Stance

Here enters feminist foreign policy (FFP). In 2014, Sweden, as the first country in the world, adopted an expressly *feminist* foreign policy. Since then, 14 states have followed suit. Current and former FFP states include states in Europe: France, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Scotland, Slovenia and Sweden; in the Americas: Argentina, Canada, Chile, Colombia and Mexico; in Central Asia: Mongolia; in West Africa: Liberia; and in the Middle East: Libya. The FFPs of these states differ in many respects, even though they often focus on women’s participation in the public sphere including leadership positions, women’s empowerment in the labour market and eradication of sexual and gender-based violence. They aim both at bilateral and multilateral relations

of these states. While the FFPs of some states encompass all spheres of foreign policy – security, trade and aid (Sweden), other are limited to specific foreign policy domains (aid in Canada and Germany since 2025) or emphasis on bureaucratic mainstreaming and institutional transformation within ministries (France and Mexico). The first versions of the FFP formulated by Sweden and Canada were commonly viewed as expressions of liberal feminism (Parisi 2020; Zhukova 2026). Sweden operationalized “feminism” in its FFP through the so-called 3Rs: equal rights, representation, and resources for women and men, girls and boys (Swedish MFA 2016: 13). While some states adopted a similar framework (Germany), others elaborated their own working definition of feminism in foreign policy, inspired by other strands of feminist thought. For instance, Chile’s FFP stresses intersectionality, reflecting region-specific histories of colonial exploitation and Indigenous activism. The Colombian iteration of the FFP puts forth pacifism as one of its pillars, building on the 2016 peace accord, which is commonly assessed as being one of the world’s most gender sensitive (Bouvier 2016). What is more, Colombia’s FFP also explicitly links feminist principles to environmental protection. As is evident, the varieties of feminism in FFPs span liberal, intersectional, postcolonial and ecological approaches.

The FFP was obviously not the first attempt to incorporate gender equality goals in the domain of foreign policy. Especially in development cooperation, many states have had gender equality goals for decades, conditioning foreign aid with some gender equality measures (Richey 2000). Nevertheless, the launching of FFPs came as a surprise to many. The provocative move to add a feminist label to foreign policy could be seen in the light of the broader context of the LIO and

its contestations. FFP policy documents often explicitly refer to the spread of anti-genderism in the world as a reason for adoption of the policy. In the international polarization around gender issues (de Silva 2025), states with a declared FFP position themselves firmly and deliberately in the pro-gender equality camp and signal confrontation with states that oppose gender equality internationally (Towns et al. 2023). A state's declaration of an FFP can be read as a manifestation of adherence to the LIO (Thomson 2022) in the face of attacks on liberal ideas and institutions and especially attacks on gender equality. Signalling opposition to international anti-gender trends through an announcement of a FFP, however, does not necessarily mean that the states align with liberal feminism.

Beyond this signalling and identity marking, or nation-branding (Jezierska and Towns 2018), the level of elaboration of the policy framework for the FFP differs widely between states. Some states, like Sweden, Germany or Colombia, have developed policy documents and designed implementation instruments for this policy. In other states, like Mexico, Mongolia or Slovenia, the FFP currently lacks a policy document and concrete implementation measures, which practically leaves the policy a signalling tool. This does not diminish the significance of such commitments in the face of current attacks on gender equality. Besides, a declaration of the FFP might sometimes lead to a development of more concrete policy document at a later stage, as in France, which declared the adoption of an FFP in 2019 and issued its International Strategy for a Feminist Foreign Policy only in 2025 (Ministère de L'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères 2025), 6 years later.

Contrary to dominant narratives, FFP is not diffusing solely through Western emulation.

South-South exchanges have become increasingly prominent. Currently, it is mostly Latin American states that innovate solutions for feminist principles in foreign policy, including tightened regional collaborations at the state and non-state levels. Chile and Colombia actively collaborated through feminist civil society networks before adopting their policies; Mexico has convened regional forums specifically designed to challenge “Northern” feminist frameworks and articulate a Latin American vision of feminist multilateralism (Jezierska forthcoming). In a recent “Regional Manifesto. Feminist Foreign Policy Consensus and Common Agendas in LAC” (Red Mexicana de Política Exterior Feminista et al. 2025), civil society organizations promoting FFP in Mexico, Chile, Brazil, and Colombia joined forces to strengthen “the Latin American feminist voice that is articulated and influential on the global stage” explicitly reacting to “the advance of neoconservatism and the far right, anti-feminist and anti-rights groups” (p.4) as well as “the erosion of democratic institutions, the non-compliance with international law” (p.5). Hence, their articulation of the FFP for and from Latin America is clearly positioned in defence of the LIO. Following this initiative, during the Fourth Ministerial Conference on FFP held in Paris in 2025, 31 states from all regions adopted a joint political declaration to defend women's and girls' rights and gender equality, referring to the need to “reaffirm the commitment of the signatory States to existing international gender-equality frameworks [...] in an international context marked by a rise in anti-rights movements and broader opposition to multilateralism” (France Diplomatie 2025).

Just as with the LIO, the FFP is not without its critics. Initially it was ridiculed, but later also attacked by various anti-feminist state and non-state actors. We saw contestations of the FFPs

even within the states that had adopted these policies, which resulted in Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands as well as Argentina rescinding their FFPs, renouncing the feminist label under pressure of gender conservative parties in their governments (Towns et al. 2024). Apart from actors denouncing gender equality, FFPs have also been criticized by progressive feminist actors within academia and civil society, who are sceptical about how genuinely feminist these policies are, accusing states of gender-washing, as well as pinpointing inconsistencies in their implementation and gaps between domestic and foreign policy. One common argument is that the FFP promotes a (neo)liberal understanding of feminism (e.g., Parisi 2020; Bell and Wegner 2025; Zhukova 2026). Another recurring critique comes from feminist postcolonial positions (e.g., Achilleos-Sarll 2018; Cheung and Scheyer 2024; Zhukova 2023; Zhukova 2026; Special Issue in *Politics & Gender* 2025), usually portraying the FFP as a colonial project of saving the women out there without confronting colonial legacies of the states adopting such policies. These criticisms severely question the credibility of the FFP project.

However, yet again, just as with the LIO, it is important to consider what narrative about the FFP prevails. The FFP, just as the LIO, can be retold so that the contributions of Southern and Eastern states to feminist thinking and solutions in foreign policy come forth, including pushing beyond liberal feminist articulations of the FFP. Likewise, highlighting that the contestations of the FFP can be found both among anti-feminist and feminist actors placed in various locations around the world helps reposition the story.

IV. Concluding Reflection

There are two broader implications from this essay, both highlighting the type of engagement with the LIO and the FFP that is especially urgent in our current predicament.

First, as accounted for above, the West has never been the singular originator and promoter of the LIO. Global South and East have both been active in promoting and innovating various solutions for the LIO, including the incorporation of gender equality principles in domestic and international affairs. The FFP story should be understood in parallel. Feminist practices and objectives in foreign policy can be found in the South Asian and Latin American contexts long before the language of FFP was introduced. This does not deny the policy entrepreneurship of Margot Wallström, the former Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs, and Sweden who coined the term, but neither does it mean that the FFP is automatically “Western”. This essay aligns with the attempts at targeting the epistemic dominance of the West and rewriting the narrative about the FFP (and the LIO) and where it belongs. Recent initiatives in Latin America are a manifestation of such attempts, of grafting the FFP so that it suits the Latin American context, of redefining what feminism in the FFP could mean, and of taking international leadership. Especially when some European states retract their FFPs and the US retreats from the liberal norms and multilateralism, this opens up for creative alliances and leadership elsewhere.

Second, just as the LIO encounters contestations from various positions, both illiberal — aiming to dismantle its norms, rules, and institutions, and progressive — critiquing the LIO for its lack of sufficient inclusion and/or equality, so is FFP criticized from anti-feminist positions —

countering gender equality as a norm, and from feminist actors who are disappointed with the unfulfilled promise of feminist principles being incorporated in foreign policy. This cross-criticism from so widely disparate positions not only creates problems for the survival of the LIO and for the FFP project. It also creates uneasy entanglements. In the face of illiberal and anti-feminist forces gaining traction in the international arena, it poses a dilemma for progressive critics. Observing real problems with the project of LIO and the FFP, progressive actors feel obliged to put forth the critique, but by doing so, they risk inadvertently joining illiberals in bringing down the LIO and the FFP. This dilemma is not new in feminist thinking: how to critique (LIO) FFP without strengthening (illiberal) anti-feminist forces. Feminist scholars have long confronted this when critiquing institutions such as the International Criminal Court or UN peacekeeping missions (Holvikivi 2021; Dawuni 2025). Abandoning these institutions cedes ground to illiberals, but uncritical support risks reinforcing exclusionary, colonial and/or neoliberal patterns. The figure of the “critical friend” (Chappell and Mackay 2020) helps to navigate this tension. It calls for engagement that is supportive yet demanding, rooted in solidarity rather than cynicism. In practice, this might mean advocating for abolition of specific harmful practices while defending the broader institution from illiberal dismantling. A critical friend focuses on the balancing of contradictory performances of support and critique, here to find a productive way of engaging with the LIO and the FFP. Both these constructs undeniably need corrections, they need to be adjusted so that they deliver on their promises, and here the contributions from actors situated in the Global East and South are crucial. But these projects also need support, otherwise they risk giving way to illiberal and anti-feminist

actors. While some might argue that the LIO (and the FFP) does not deserve saving, the question remains what and who will fill the vacuum once the LIO and the FFP are depleted. Retelling the story of the LIO and the FFP, by recentring knowledge and practice contributions to these projects from actors in the Global South and East, is a starting point in this critical but friendly conversation. Next comes the challenge of reformulating the core rules and institutions so that they incorporate the critique from these voices.

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