Key messages

**Articulate what ‘feminist’ really means for humanitarianism.** Governments, affected peoples and humanitarian actors (particularly in the Global South) should work together to delineate what feminist humanitarian response entails.

**Apply feminist principles to the ‘how’ of crisis response.** Feminist foreign policy (FFP) means new ways of working that are sensitive to both the restrictions facing humanitarian actors and dangers of creating interventions that lack sustainability. This is particularly the case for humanitarian funding, which should support grassroots and place-based organisations, and should be flexible, long-term and high-quality.

**Build policy coherence and collaboration across agendas.** Foreign policy is concerned not just with the humanitarian and development sectors, but also with peacebuilding, trade, diplomacy, climate and macroeconomic decision-making. A specifically feminist foreign policy should push internally for better collaboration and outreach across ministries, departments and divisions.

**Make FFP (and decolonisation) part of humanitarian reform.** System reform is needed to address the hierarchical and ultimately inefficient ways of working embedded in United Nations agencies and international organisations. By bringing FFP into the process of reform, real progress can be made on localisation and decolonisation.
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About this publication
This policy brief forms part of the ODI series, Where next for feminist foreign policy?, and was developed based on a closed-door roundtable with leading humanitarian and feminist experts.

It aims to bridge technical expertise, feminist advocacy and global scholarship, and delves into emerging aspects of feminist foreign policy. This series intends to advance understanding on intersecting agendas to establish potential directions for future research and policy.

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Graphic: Jessica Rennoldson
## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>CFFP</td>
<td>Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSO</td>
<td>civil society organisation</td>
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<td>DAC</td>
<td>(OECD) Development Assistance Committee</td>
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<td>GAPS</td>
<td>Gender Action for Peace and Security UK</td>
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<td>GBV</td>
<td>gender-based violence</td>
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<td>FFP</td>
<td>feminist foreign policy</td>
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<td>FFP+</td>
<td>governments that are inspired by feminist ambitions</td>
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<tr>
<td>IASC</td>
<td>Inter-Agency Standing Committee</td>
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<td>ICRC</td>
<td>International Committee of the Red Cross</td>
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<tr>
<td>INGO</td>
<td>international non-governmental organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>LGBTQIA+</td>
<td>lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, intersex and asexual</td>
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<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
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<td>SRHR</td>
<td>sexual and reproductive health and rights</td>
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<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<td>UNHCR</td>
<td>UN Refugee Agency</td>
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<td>UNRWA</td>
<td>UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East</td>
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<td>WPS</td>
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About this policy brief

This brief examines how states that have feminist foreign policies (FFPs) or are inspired by feminist ambitions, known as FFP+, can meaningfully apply feminist approaches to humanitarian action, which is a sub-sector of foreign policy that has received comparatively little attention in FFP debates thus far.

The recommendations offered throughout this paper come from existing literature on FFP and feminist approaches in humanitarian policy, practice and ways of working. They also build on a closed-door virtual roundtable hosted by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at ODI, the Feminist Humanitarian Network, and Gender Action for Peace and Security UK (GAPS) in June 2023, which was entitled, *What could feminist foreign policy mean for humanitarian response?*

This paper also draws on concepts and findings from *Remaking aid: ethics, politics and narratives* (see Saez and Bryant, 2023; Daigle, forthcoming), a project under HPG’s 2022–2024 Integrated Programme *People, power and agency* which includes a standalone case study on FFP and humanitarian response. As part of an ODI series on FFP, this paper should also be read alongside a background note on FFP (Michalko, 2023) that outlines some of the key tensions, challenges and opportunities presented by the growth and development of FFP.
Introduction

While more than a dozen governments have announced feminist foreign policies (FFPs) since 2014, in some cases like Canada and France these have been circumscribed to limited areas of foreign policy and especially aid spending (GAC, 2017; MEAE, 2018). Humanitarian response is both present and absent in this agenda – that is, most written FFPs explicitly apply to humanitarian response, but few have engaged meaningfully with tensions around what feminism means for humanitarian response or how to implement it effectively.

As this policy brief will explore, these tensions are due partially to the distinctiveness of humanitarian funding and programme cycles on the one hand, and perceived incompatibilities with humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality on the other. Proponents of FFP tend to centre the importance of rights, and especially the rights of women, girls and gender-diverse people (Achilleos-Sarll and Thomson in Achilleos-Sarll et al., 2023: 3), but rights-based approaches to humanitarian action are still not commonly accepted and may even be in retreat. Perhaps most critically, where humanitarian response has tended to treat gender as either a discrete or mainstreamed concern for women and girls, the most transformative models of FFP promise to encompass these as well as calls for systemic reform and structural change – areas where humanitarians are not yet accustomed to seeing the relevance of gender or feminism (see Thompson et al., 2023).

Thus, although most available FFP documents make explicit that humanitarian response falls within their remit, humanitarian responders and proponents of FFP alike remain uncertain of what FFP means for humanitarian action, how to implement it and track progress, or how the evident tensions and gaps in understanding can be overcome. Similarly, while there is now considerable research and commentary on FFP in general, especially on the policies of Sweden and Canada, very little of this broaches the relationship between FFP and humanitarianism.

Given that many of the most prominent donor countries for international humanitarian response have launched FFPs, including Germany most recently in spring 2023, humanitarians are confronted with an opportunity to advance long-overdue (and arguably stalled) commitments to gender-responsive humanitarian action. Women, girls and gender-diverse people are ‘differently and often disproportionately affected by both disasters and violent conflicts’ (Lafrenière et al., 2019). While the experience of crisis tends to exaggerate gendered inequalities and can cause gender relations to shift rapidly, as well as shape individuals’ ability to access humanitarian assistance, humanitarian response is not always (or even often) alert to these divergent experiences, risks and needs (Daigle, 2022). Gender-responsive humanitarian action is therefore needed to move away from shorter-term relief of the symptoms of crises and towards investment for community resilience against future crises, involving people of all genders in response planning, and better accounting for and even addressing root causes.
This paper will briefly discuss the genealogy of ‘feminist’ approaches in humanitarian response, within and beyond FFP, before laying out ideas for elaborating feminist humanitarian response for governments that are inspired by feminist ambitions (known as FFP+). These insights are built on a frank and open discussion amongst feminist activists and gender justice advocates working in humanitarian response around the world (see Annex 1), locally and globally, and they offer recommendations for developing a clearer conceptual framework, feminist ways of working, building policy coherence and bringing FFP into deliberations on humanitarian reform.
Context

FFP should be all-inclusive – people with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ communities, all minority people. [...] We need to realise it as a reality rather than a lip service.

*Workshop participant*

To date, little of the analysis and debate around FFP has centred on humanitarian response – and this is especially troubling given the current unprecedented scale of humanitarian need, which is stalling progress on international humanitarian commitments on gender equality. Globally, more than 108 million people are forcibly displaced as of late 2022 due to ongoing conflicts and instability in countries like Sudan, Yemen, Ukraine and Myanmar, up from 59.5 million only a decade ago (UNHCR, 2014; 2023). By now, it is well established that humanitarian crises and responses bring about impacts that are profoundly shaped by gender in terms of incidence of gender-based violence (GBV), including sexual violence; access to critical resources like safe shelter, nutrition and water; health, including sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR); and representation in response planning (see Holloway et al., 2019). In Afghanistan in early 2022, one woman was dying every two hours from pregnancy or childbirth complications that are mostly preventable (UNFPA, 2022a; b). One survey of women in Ethiopia’s Tigray region found that 43.3% had experienced GBV during the conflict there (Fisseha et al., 2023). Since October 2023, Israel’s collective punishment of civilians in Gaza has escalated to a humanitarian catastrophe, with particular impacts on the estimated 180 women giving birth each day (Walker, 2024).

This lack of conversation between FFP and humanitarian response is also notable in light of decades-long calls for humanitarian system reform, following a series of responses such as those for Darfur and the Indian Ocean tsunami that were deemed to be fragmented, low quality and marginalising to crisis-affected people (Bennett et al., 2016; Saez et al., 2021). FFP offers an opportunity to engage with the patriarchal nature of the system as part of this reform process, including its organisational cultures, hierarchical structures, and reliance on traditional divisions of labour, norms and stereotypes in designing and delivering responses (Vijfeijken, 2019; Daigle, 2022; Michelis, 2023). FFP therefore offers a potential mechanism for fomenting more inclusive and effective humanitarian response. It also overlaps with existing gender commitments in the humanitarian sector in their shared objectives of addressing the root causes of crisis and promoting stability through confronting social, cultural and economic power relations (visible and invisible) – both in the humanitarian system and in foreign policy discussions.

Civil society actors like Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy (CFFP) and the FFP Collaborative are also rightly linking FFP to decolonisation agendas and the need to address the colonial foundations of international assistance, which often go unquestioned in the humanitarian sector under cover of the urgency of crisis response. Nonetheless, colonial attitudes and power relations persist between humanitarian agencies and responders on the one hand and the populations they purport to serve on the other (James, 2022). Ample research has now shown how humanitarian
action followed a path laid by colonialism and imperialism, as western powers cemented their own necessity by turning the ‘emergency condition into a permanent mode of life’ in settings across the Global South’ (Keshavarz, 2023: 135; see also Barnett, 2023). Thus, while gender work is not necessarily seen as part of such reform conversations, feminist approaches – much like decolonial approaches – speak directly to questions of structural power and the functioning of systems like international humanitarian response, as will be further discussed below.

While a few governments – including Sweden – have since stepped back from their own policies due to a change in government, and many governments, agencies and other actors (including feminists) remain sceptical of the FFP project, the movement towards FFP is continuing apace. Its salience for funding, political will and decision-making in humanitarian response is on the rise, making it incumbent on humanitarian actors and governments alike to understand FFP’s potential and limitations for more inclusive, effective and accessible responses to crises.

**How does humanitarian response fit into existing FFPs?**

A review of existing written FFPs shows that the majority are explicit about humanitarian action falling under their remit. For example, Canada’s *Feminist international assistance policy* (GAC, 2017) lists six action areas, including ‘human dignity’, which includes health, nutrition, education and humanitarian action. Similarly, Germany’s recently launched *Shaping feminist foreign policy: Federal Foreign Office guidelines* (GFFO, 2023) includes a dedicated guideline on humanitarian action and crisis management. That being said, little in those policies engages with the specificities of humanitarian timeframes, funding models, or ways of working, which often diverge significantly from other areas of foreign policy, nor with the resistance to agendas that are understood as ‘political’ in humanitarian circles (see Box 1). Research and analysis on FFP are arguably still nascent, but the academic and grey literature that exists also has very little to say about humanitarian response (Bernarding and Lunz, 2020; CFFP, 2021; Cheung et al., 2021; Gill-Atkinson et al., 2021; Thompson et al., 2023). Not only is there a major gap around what the term ‘feminist’, or FFP itself, might mean in relation to humanitarian response, but there is also little awareness that this gap exists and should be filled.

This silence around humanitarian response within FFP debates, policy development and implementation is important because the international humanitarian system has long struggled to

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1 The ‘Global South’ is an increasingly common term used to categorise many countries around the world. Often it is employed as a substitute for referring to nations that have been historically exploited through colonisation. The authors would like to acknowledge current international debates on the usefulness of this term, which question whether another generalising and binary framework (Global North–Global South) is productive for reconstituting and challenging global power relations.

2 See Michalko (2023) for a discussion of feminist critiques of FFP, which focus variously on the polarising nature of ‘feminism’ and the need for ‘strategic (non)use of the label’ in order to more effectively pursue feminist objectives (Abdul Rahman and Bump, 2022); on the troubling co-optation of the label by governments (Scheyer and Kumskova, 2019; Rivera Chávez, 2022; Thomson, 2022; Zhukova et al., 2022); or whether states themselves can be feminist actors (Duriesmith, 2018).
meaningfully engage with questions of inclusion, not least among them being gender-responsive humanitarian action. Humanitarian efforts to account for gender have been described as ‘insufficient and not very ambitious’ (Abellán de Barberá et al., 2022: 1). A plethora of agreements and guidelines has been made over recent years, all acknowledging the gendered impacts of crises and calling for gender-responsive humanitarian action, but the reality in practice has remained patchy (see Holloway et al., 2019; Hart and Krueger, 2021; Daigle, 2022).\(^3\) Notably, the Grand Bargain – launched in 2016 at the World Humanitarian Summit as a five-year, flagship agenda to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian aid, and twice renewed since then – has remained largely gender-blind, a point that has been criticised in successive independent reviews (ActionAid, 2021; Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2021; GAPS, 2023).

These difficulties of bringing a feminist ethos, or even a gender lens, into the humanitarian sphere are echoed in similar efforts to put the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda on the radar of the international humanitarian system, which have been frustrated despite the ‘natural entry point’ in the agenda’s relief and recovery pillar (GAPS, 2023: 1; see also GADN, 2021). The WPS–Humanitarian Action Compact, launched at the Generation Equality Forum in 2021, represents an attempt to close the gap between these two arenas with a focus on addressing the root causes of instability and fomenting coordinated responses (UN Women, 2023). While these frameworks contribute to the goals and principles of humanitarian action, there is a limited understanding of how WPS commitments link with global humanitarian frameworks.

**What potential tensions exist between FFP and humanitarian principles?**

A key source of tension between FFP and humanitarian response is the perception that feminist approaches are necessarily political, and thus that they run counter to the humanitarian principle of neutrality (see Box 1). While humanitarian neutrality is held up as critical for maintaining access and the supply of assistance to crisis-affected populations, it has also led many humanitarians to understand their work as apolitical and to resist any perceived politicisation. It has also meant that humanitarians have been slow to query the extent to which the international humanitarian architecture itself perpetuates gendered injustices and patriarchal structures globally (Abellán de Barberá et al., 2022; Daigle, 2022).

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\(^3\) For examples of commitments to gender-responsiveness, see the World Humanitarian Summit Core Commitments, Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) policy and accountability frameworks and the IASC Gender Handbook, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Gender Equality Policy Marker, the G7’s Whistler Declaration on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls in Humanitarian Action, and the Generation Equality Forum’s Women, Peace and Security–Humanitarian Action Compact.
Box 1: Humanitarian principles and feminism

The core humanitarian principles of *humanity, impartiality, neutrality* and *independence* were first elaborated by Jean Pictet and adopted by the International Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent in 1965, and later affirmed by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly with a resolution entitled *Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian emergency assistance of the United Nations* (A/RES/46/182, 19 December 1991). They are understood to guide humanitarian response for those seeking to practise it on the model established by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Red Crescent and others (O’Callaghan and Leach, 2013).

In recent years, however, the principles – and especially narrow readings of the principles, and what activities, statements and positions they are understood to permit – have come under criticism. Neutrality especially has been challenged as being necessarily exclusive and colonial, as it is local humanitarian responders whose neutrality is challenged most frequently in practice (Adeso Africa, 2020 in James, 2022: 486). Neutrality is also frequently cited as a reason why humanitarian response cannot incorporate feminist principles, which are understood to be inherently political. Likewise, impartiality is frequently cited as an argument against targeted programming and services for particular population groups in crisis settings, including women and girls, but recent research has demonstrated that accounting for diversity is key to delivering a meaningfully impartial approach (Barbelet and Wake, 2020; Daigle, 2022; Lough et al., 2022).

As a result, until very recently, the promotion of gender justice in and through humanitarian programming has been considered ‘controversial’, with pivotal actors such as the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the ICRC and Red Crescent expressing concern for the impartiality and neutrality of responses (Olivius, 2016; Fal-Dutra, 2019). Recent HPG research has found that many field-based international humanitarians often cite principles as ‘inhibitors to engaging more meaningfully on gendered norms, roles and power relations’ (Daigle, 2022: 19). As we will discuss further below, humanitarian timescales and funding models as we know them are built on this reading of humanitarian principles, which positions crisis response as standing apart from the other elements of foreign policy, including development and peacebuilding as well as human rights, trade and diplomacy.

Nonetheless, crisis response is indeed part of the wider field of foreign policy and motivated by a range of factors – many very political – beyond the humanitarian imperative itself. These may include economic and security interests, questions of image and legitimacy on a world stage, and solidarity on the basis of shared faiths or histories (Willitts-King et al., 2018). The recent withdrawal of funding from the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near
East (UNRWA) by countries like Canada and Germany, in the absence of evidence for claims that its staff had participated in Hamas’s attack on Israelis on 7 October 2023, constitutes just this kind of political decision-making (Bennis, 2024).

It is also important to note that this is not a settled or singular interpretation of the principles, as others have argued that ‘challenging patriarchy is not only in line with, but also an essential component of, principled humanitarian action’ (Fal-Dutra, 2019; see also Mazurana and Maxwell, 2016).

The rights of women, girls and (increasingly) gender-diverse people are a critical component of FFPs without exception, especially as they relate to SRHR and combating GBV – as Jennifer Thomson (in Achilleos-Sarll et al., 2023: 21–22) highlights, this focus is ‘hardly boundary pushing’, but it is nonetheless significant in the context of backlash against these very categories of rights. That being said, rights and rights-based approaches are not universally accepted or supported as the basis of humanitarian response. In the last few years, humanitarian donors, policymakers and practitioners have even moved ‘back to basics’, refocusing on meeting immediate needs rather than fulfilling the rights of crisis-affected people. As a result, many humanitarians understand their particular mission as meeting immediate needs in the spirit of shared humanity or altruism, rather than fulfilling the rights to which crisis-affected people are entitled under international humanitarian law, international human rights law and other instruments. This is leaving them less aligned than ever with the objectives and motivations of FFP.

The opposition to needs and rights is a false one, as has been well elaborated in the field of SRHR, where it has been used to fragment the comprehensive agenda and complicate access to services deemed ‘non-essential’ or not ‘lifesaving’.

What this dichotomy ignores is that rights are merely the codification of needs, reformulated as ethical and legal norms and thus implying a duty on the part of those in power to provide all the means necessary to make sure those needs are met.

Petchesky, 2000: 21

This division may seem attractive in the midst of shrinking resources and calls to rationalise aid spending, but placing needs and rights in opposition in this way tends to subordinate some needs (especially those of women, girls and gender-diverse people) to others. That so many FFPs, under which humanitarian response falls, place rights at their very core is therefore a tension that merits much further engagement from governments, FFP advocates and humanitarians alike.

4 Important critiques of humanitarian neutrality also point to its colonial dimensions, wherein the international humanitarian system is positioned as neutral, while place-based and grassroots actors responding to crises in their own midst are seen as inherently partial (James, 2022).
What is feminist humanitarian response?

All of this means that the question of what constitutes feminist humanitarian response remains very much open. Forthcoming research from HPG, based on interviews with government officials and civil society in Canada and Germany (Daigle, forthcoming), will demonstrate that when asked what humanitarian response that is in keeping with FFP might look like, most interlocutors indicated that it should:

- Attend to the rights and protection of women, girls and (increasingly) gender-diverse and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, intersex and asexual (LGBTQIA+) people, although whether these efforts should be gender-sensitive, gender-responsive or gender-transformative remains a matter of contention (Box 2; see also Holloway et al., 2019; Daigle, 2022).
- Support women-led humanitarian response, especially by place-based and grassroots organisations, in the prioritisation, design and delivery of interventions.

Far fewer understand FFP as calling for structural transformation within the wider field of foreign policy or the humanitarian sector specifically, although this is a key component of FFP as defined by civil society movements and feminist activists (Daigle, forthcoming). Similarly, few spoke of engaging feminist and women’s movements, or centring women, girls and gender-diverse people in humanitarian decision-making and agenda-setting, beyond engaging women-led organisations to deliver services and programming. Questions around what is permissible or advisable within humanitarian timescales and mandates abound, both from sceptical humanitarians and feminists within the sector.

As a result of these ongoing tensions and debates, the international humanitarian system is notably behind sectors like development, peacebuilding and human rights when it comes to understanding, embracing and implementing a gender lens, much less FFP or feminist approaches that call for much wider and deeper change (Abellán de Barberá et al., 2022: 4). There is, however, a movement amongst major international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) like Oxfam and the International Rescue Committee to introduce feminist values and principles into their work. The formation of the Feminist Humanitarian Network, which is comprised of and led by women’s rights and feminist organisations based in crisis settings globally, also marks an important intervention in terms of better understanding what accessible, collaborative and participatory humanitarian response might look like. These moves are contributing to making this a critical moment for reflection, and for governments claiming the label of FFP to engage meaningfully with elaborating and implementing feminist approaches to crisis response.

Below, we offer ideas and recommendations arising from our own discussions for governments adopting FFPs to consider, in pursuit of humanitarian responses based in feminist principles of intersectionality and gender justice, and opposition to patriarchy and colonialism.
Box 2: Gender-responsive humanitarian action

Humanitarian policies and programmes that recognise and take into account existing gendered norms, roles and power relations in their design and delivery, but that do not seek to redress the root causes of those inequalities, can be considered **gender-responsive** (see Figure 1). Examples of innovative gender-responsive interventions include Fundación Mujer y Futuro’s *ruta de protección*, or ‘protection route’, which provides maps and information on risks of the journey, rights and available services in Colombia to women and girls who are migrating to Venezuela on foot as *caminantes* (walkers) (Sissons, 2019). Similarly, the National Transgender Network of Sri Lanka and the Family Planning Association of Sri Lanka developed tailored dignity and hygiene kits for transgender people following flooding in 2018, using human-centred design principles to better meet the community’s needs (Popple et al., 2021).

Whether humanitarian action should seek to be **gender-transformative** has been the subject of much debate in the sector, even amongst feminists, with some arguing that it is entirely compatible with crisis response (Fal-Dutra, 2019) while others point to risks of pursuing transformation in the context of short-term, prescriptive and top-down responses (Daigle, 2022). That said, it is important to note that these categories cannot be neatly separated, and gender-responsive activities may often have transformative effects in practice.

**Figure 1** A spectrum of approaches to gender

- **Gender blind**: Assumes gender is not an issue and thus not considered in the programme
- **Gender aware**: Considers gender but does not use it as an operational concept
- **Gender sensitive**: Uses gender to inform the project’s design and methodology
- **Gender responsive**: Uses gender in both project design and analysis, but does not extend to addressing the underlying structures informing gender inequality, such as norms and power dynamics
- **Gender transformative**: Not only attempts to respond to different power dynamics and needs based on gender, but also to transform those dynamics to be more equitable

Source: Daigle (2022), adapted from Butt et al. (2019)
1. Articulate what ‘feminist’ really means for humanitarianism

While most written FFPs are clear that humanitarianism falls under their remit, their engagement with it is broad-brush and avoids potentially thorny questions around how ‘feminist’ humanitarianism differs from what has come before. Participants called on governments espousing FFP to articulate their visions for feminist humanitarian response specifically, with reference to humanitarian principles, effectiveness and accountability, which would also entail a feminist definition of what constitutes a crisis in the first place.

Neutrality in particular needs to be understood in ways that do not amount to tacit acceptance of existing discrimination, inequalities and power asymmetries. This is especially important against the backdrop of a global backlash against women’s rights, bodily and reproductive autonomy, and LGBTQIA+ rights (Khan et al., 2023). Defining FFP with regard to humanitarian response is not a question of distilling any singular definition to sit across FFPs around the world – feminisms are and will remain global, diverse, plural and heterogeneous. Rather, it is a call for FFP+ governments to engage openly and explicitly with the tensions and disagreements that arise when introducing feminist approaches into the avowedly apolitical space of international humanitarian response.

A clear vision for humanitarian response as part of FFP is key, but equally important is who is defining that vision and the accessibility of the process by which it is elaborated. Many of the actors advocating for FFP are activists and networks in the Global North, who may or may not be in touch with their counterparts in the Global South. Given that foreign policy is necessarily applied to geographies and contexts beyond the borders of the state enacting it, participants demanded that FFP governments consult inclusively, meaningfully and globally – that is, not just with domestic civil society in their own countries but with women-led organisations, feminist movements and LGBTQIA+ groups based in crisis settings, ensuring that attention is paid to local contexts, priorities, voices and experiences. As noted in our workshop:

> You are defining something in Paris to be implemented in Juba. Did you take into consideration the context, the women-led organisations, the youth-led organisations, the minority groups – the South Sudanese people – when you are defining your feminist foreign policy?
> Workshop participant

Karoline Färber writes that consultation processes tend to ‘reproduce hierarchies of knowledge and power embedded in foreign policymaking’, dependent on connections to government ministries and officials, recognition of expertise that is highly conditioned by privilege, presence in national capital cities and affiliation to elite institutions (Färber in Achilleos-Sarll et al., 2023: 7). These exclusions and power differentials are all the more troubling in the context of acute risks and instability in crisis settings.
A feminist approach to humanitarian response should be one that works with, rather than on behalf of, crisis-affected people in all their diversity. It uses accessible, participatory language and processes and disrupts power within the international humanitarian system as much as within local communities.

By that measure, much remains to be done to elaborate what FFP offers to – and indeed what it asks of – humanitarian response. This kind of definitional work and accessible, participatory model are part and parcel of women-led humanitarianism, which is what many FFPs promise, and it could help humanitarians move closer to the urgent ambition of reducing gendered risks and realising gender justice in crisis response. In this respect, recommendations are aimed at how FFPs, humanitarian strategies and other areas should be developed rather than what they should specifically contain.

Policy recommendations that governments with FFP should consider:

• Ensure that emerging frameworks, agreements and commitments for humanitarian action are informed by feminist thinking, including support for women, girls and LGBTQIA+ people; their organisations; and gender justice broadly writ. This includes future iterations of the Grand Bargain and any new IASC guidelines, as well as humanitarian response plans.

• Support the representation of civil society actors, especially those based in crisis settings in the Global South, in FFP discussions, processes and mechanisms. This should include funding and facilitating visas for their attendance at global humanitarian and FFP-related forums.

• Make gender justice a cross-cutting (not siloed) priority, including within ministries’ and agencies’ own staff and culture. Require capacity-building on gender and feminist approaches among humanitarian staff, regardless of their area of expertise. Review policy coherence on gender equality across government foreign policy and domestic contexts.

• Prioritise better assessment, meaningful consultation and analysis that is participatory and gives affected people ownership over the process. Consult with affected people and inclusion-focused civil society organisations (CSOs) and women-led organisations, not only on the substance of interventions but also methods, mechanisms and forums for accountability and consultation. The Beyond Consultations toolkit is a useful starting point for thinking about how to do consultations better.5

2. Apply feminist principles to the ‘how’ of crisis response

A feminist approach is as much about the way humanitarian action is conducted as the substance of that work. Much of humanitarian work is centred on a crisis modality that positions humanitarian response as exceptional, standing apart from other areas of foreign policy. As a result, humanitarian funding models are designed to make pots of money agile, easy to deploy and responsive to emerging needs, which means that they are not always subject to the same rigorous levels of grading for gender sensitivity, vetting, reporting and evaluation as other areas of aid spending, and this makes both the scale and impact of spending opaque.

**Donor capacity within relevant ministries and humanitarian departments is a key obstacle here.** Many such departments lack the capacity to administer larger numbers of smaller grants and therefore rely on disbursing funds through umbrella actors or UN agencies to meet their humanitarian commitments. Given that many such intermediaries are not reliably transparent in terms of how they sub-grant funds to smaller organisations, this makes funding less accessible to place-based and grassroots organisations.

If FFP+ governments are to succeed implementing a feminist approach to humanitarian funding, they will need to **reconsider with which intermediaries they work and how.** They can do this first by demanding stronger reporting and accountability from UN agencies and major INGOs on how they allocate funds, how much goes directly to place-based organisations or targets gender-responsiveness or structural change, and the quality of that funding. Secondly, donors can shift more of their funding portfolio to intermediaries like the Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund and feminist funds like the Global Fund for Women, Equality Fund and Women’s Asia Fund, which are pioneering more flexible feminist funding modalities for reaching place-based actors.

A meaningfully feminist approach to humanitarian funding also means donor governments must **invest in capacity for analysis, risk assessment and mitigation, and oversight of funds,** especially as it relates to gender-responsive humanitarian action:

> Adding additional, foreign policy-related conditions to international aid will, almost by definition, require adding staff to ensure compliance. Governments should be willing to add additional human capacity to field and headquarters staff to ensure policy compliance.  
> *Mazurana and Maxwell, 2016: 22*

Similarly, and relatedly, humanitarian response is designed to respond to immediate, acute and time-bound crises by pushing large amounts of money out quickly. However, these short timescales also mean that humanitarians **struggle to implement programming that can make a real impact on power relations and inequalities** (including gendered ones) in the settings
where they operate, or to be present through any backlash or social tensions that may result. Furthermore, as crises become increasingly protracted, such atomised ways of working do not represent the reality of response.

These conditioning structures lead to short-termism and a belief that gender-transformative work cannot (or should not) be done in crisis settings. While this kind of work should not be done in a top-down, fleeting or prescriptive way, which can cause harm, crises of all kinds can create opportunities for place-based organisations and communities themselves to transform restrictive social norms and relationships (Levine, 2020; Holloway et al., 2022). While international humanitarian actors may limit their mandates to the ‘crisis’ period, they absolutely can cultivate awareness of the social milieux in which they operate and work hand-in-hand with development actors and peacebuilding actors, rights advocates and movements for social change in crisis settings. Such restrictive ways of working also create and entrench barriers to working with place-based, grassroots humanitarian responders and organisations, which often operate across ‘crisis’ and ‘non-crisis’ temporalities and may struggle to access funds through pots that are limited to orthodox humanitarian actors.

FFP+ governments therefore need to invest in building capacity within their own ministries and departments, providing longer-term support for interventions and reducing barriers to collaboration across mandates and funding streams. Part of thinking through what FFP means for humanitarian response therefore needs to be finding ways of working that are sensitive to both the restrictions facing humanitarian actors and the dangers of creating interventions that lack sustainability and sensitivity.

Policy recommendations that governments with FFP should consider:

- **Invest in capacity within humanitarian divisions and departments to properly understand crisis contexts and oversee grantmaking in keeping with FFP commitments**, including more direct grantmaking to and collaboration with grassroots and place-based organisations. Where direct funding is not possible, work with feminist funds and other intermediaries committed to flexible, long-term, high-quality funding.
- **Request reporting from international partners** (including UN agencies) on how they use grants to meet commitments to gender-responsive humanitarian action and feminist principles.
- **Ensure that a larger proportion of humanitarian funding supports feminist aims**, including women’s, girls’ and gender-diverse people’s rights, and is tagged and tracked as such using the IASC Gender Marker. This includes providing long-term, multiyear and flexible funding; earmarking funds for grassroots and place-based organisations led by women, girls and gender-diverse people; holding in-country advisory meetings to understand which funding mechanisms work best; and simplifying requirements, particularly in acute responses.
• **Make accountability to women, girls and gender-diverse people living and working in humanitarian emergencies a condition of grantmaking.** Require evidence of consultation, feedback mechanisms and follow-up as part of funding proposals and reporting processes. Ensure that funds are not used to support aims detrimental to gender justice or FFP.

• **Ensure programmatic work is long-term, flexible and set according to the relevant local organisations’ self-defined priorities**, in order to support increased and sustained participation in humanitarian response at a strategic leadership level and to allow for programmatic work to adapt to changing contexts and realities in a more resilient manner.

• **Invest in making humanitarian work safe for humanitarian workers.** This includes humanitarian workers of all genders working in international agencies and INGOs, place-based and grassroots organisations, and as activists in their communities. Efforts should include protecting human rights defenders; advocating for political space for CSOs; eradicating sexual exploitation and abuse, inside and outside humanitarian agencies; and building more egalitarian workplaces within humanitarian agencies.
3. Build policy coherence and collaboration across agendas

Although some countries (like Canada) have chosen to limit their FFPs solely to the development and humanitarian arenas thus far, foreign policy is also concerned with peacebuilding, trade, diplomacy, climate and macroeconomic decision-making. Moreover, global economic shifts and the impacts of climate change have a direct impact on the scale of crises, as seen in Lebanon where humanitarian need is driven by one of the worst socioeconomic crises since the 19th century, or in Mozambique where displacement stems from both conflict and the impact of cyclones (World Bank, 2021; Sturridge et al., 2022). A specifically feminist foreign policy should therefore see and act on the links across agendas and priorities, whether that be within the traditional sphere of foreign policy, across the foreign/domestic divide, or between international agendas, arguing for an integrated approach (Mazurana and Maxwell, 2016; Michalko, 2023).

For humanitarians, this most notably means the WPS agenda and the so-called ‘triple nexus’. Participants in our workshop called for FFP+ governments to ‘reimagine’ their international commitments in order to move beyond a superficial tick-box and towards a true justice-oriented approach. As noted above, advocates have long struggled to achieve traction and convey the relevance of the WPS agenda to humanitarian agencies despite clear entry points in the agenda’s ‘relief and recovery’ pillar. In this respect, FFP is an opportunity for governments to push internally for better collaboration and outreach across ministries, departments and divisions, and thus finally achieve meaningful progress on implementing WPS in humanitarian response (GADN, 2021).

Furthermore, FFP and the nexus share an underpinning commitment to more integrated approaches to elements of foreign policy, in recognition of the cross-cutting causes of crises, inequalities and instability that are not confined to any one sphere or sector (GAPS, 2023). Applying feminist principles and achieving meaningfully gender-responsive (or even -transformative) humanitarian action, participants highlighted, means putting in place longer-term and sustainable interventions that last beyond the crisis period.

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6 ‘Triple nexus’ indicates the overlaps and intersections between the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding sectors, as well as an agenda to promote better coordination and coherence across all three of these.
Policy recommendations that governments with FFP should consider:

- **Invest in policy and programming approaches that cut across the humanitarian–development–peace nexus** and address the underlying and interlinked drivers of conflict, crisis and gendered inequalities.

- **Become a signatory to and report on commitments made under the WPS–Humanitarian Action Compact** as part of a collaborative and cohesive approach to building long-term stability and peace.
4. Make FFP (and decolonisation) part of humanitarian system transformation

Participants in our workshop described a paternalist relationship that persists between international agencies, including INGOs and UN agencies, and the need for system reform to address these supply-driven, hierarchical and ultimately inefficient ways of working. Bringing FFP and feminist approaches into system reform debates, where they have been largely absent to date, is therefore an opportunity that can and should be seized by humanitarians and FFP advocates alike to advance reform.

Women-led organisations, feminist activists and gender-justice movements in diverse crisis settings have been part of humanitarian response for decades and generations, and they are often the first responders in their own communities, but they are very rarely recognised as such or given a seat at the table when it comes to humanitarian decision-making and response planning.

When crisis hits, international organisations come in and try to support – at what point do we engage the local organisations? Where do we place their knowledge? Who defines what they should do? We have been caught up in a situation where funding is restricted for local organisations. Who defines what capacity we are talking about?

*Workshop participant*

This makes it all the more troubling that FFP is generally painted as originating in the Global North with western governments, as another participant in our workshop argued:

Feminist foreign policy is based on work feminists have been doing for generations. It’s existed for a long time already. The language just changed – it’s become colonised.

*Workshop participant*

Making progress on the ‘localisation’ of humanitarian action and decolonising humanitarian responses is therefore intrinsically linked to delivering on FFP in humanitarian action. Most recognised humanitarian crises unfold in the Global South, where colonial histories persist in unequal power relations and inequalities – and contribute to inflaming crises alongside natural hazards, political unrest, armed actors and other factors. Participants listed recognising the skills, expertise and leadership of place-based organisations, combatting unhelpful competition between grassroots organisations and major INGOs, and centring non-traditional forms and sources of expertise as important steps. In keeping with the discussion of consultation, ways of working and collaboration above, then, FFP governments must address the exclusionary and gatekeeping effects of their own processes and practices. This means reducing barriers to bids, proposals, reporting and other areas for place-based and grassroots organisations, as noted in the workshop:
Due diligence processes [from international donors] are very unrealistic, very lengthy. You are spending all your time trying to document one project. You are spending all your time trying to justify that you can do this. Is this what we’re calling feminist humanitarian work? This is something we need to answer.

*Workshop participant*

The integrated and cross-cutting approach espoused by FFP also calls on humanitarians to be alert to the risks facing placed-based actors in their own settings, where shrinking political space and threats against humanitarians and human rights defenders (especially those advocating for women’s, girls’ and gender-diverse people’s rights) are rendering this work more and more precarious.

**But system transformation is about much more than just ‘localisation’ – it is the continued practice of recognising, making visible and addressing the historic and ongoing legacies of inequalities, power and hierarchies.** Likewise, a feminist approach that is top-down, prescriptive or reproduces the power relations seen in the orthodox international humanitarian response system is no feminist approach at all, as many civil society definitions of the term argue (CFFP, 2021; Thompson et al., 2023). Ultimately, therefore, while decolonisation and FFP should both be calls for long-overdue (and long-promised) structural change and transformation of the humanitarian system, it is important to note that current FFPs are still largely rooted in the Global North and are insufficiently ambitious in this regard. Governments espousing FFP should use their policies to argue for just this kind of change and bring FFP into perennial conversations on humanitarian system reform.

**Policy recommendations that governments with FFP should consider:**

- **Decentre international humanitarian response and shift funding and decision-making power to place-based CSOs and humanitarian actors working on inclusion**, as a core part of fulfilling commitments under the Grand Bargain’s enabling priority for localisation as well as wider and deeper decolonial ambitions.
- **Challenge aid delivery practices that replicate neo-colonial relationships/power structures.** Embed, institutionalise and enforce a commitment to partnership and meaningful consultation with local women-, girl- and gender-diverse people-led organisations across humanitarian responses. Require officials and partners working in or on humanitarian crisis settings to work in partnership with women-, girl- and gender-diverse people-led organisations.
- **Acknowledge the risks that place-based and grassroots women-, girl- and gender-diverse people-led organisations face** in their work advancing gender justice and ensure that donors are equally accountable to partners in terms of risk mitigation.
- **Invest in long-term change processes to equip women-, girl- and gender-diverse-people-led organisations to act as the intermediaries within the system**, rather than having INGOs that are largely managed in the Global North playing this role.
• Create and support opportunities for co-coordination of national- and international-level humanitarian decision-making platforms, including thematic clusters and sectors, inter-cluster coordination mechanisms and global-level coordination bodies like Grand Bargain causes.

• Specifically commit resources to initiatives like the Feminist Humanitarian Network, the Grand Bargain’s Friends of Gender Group, the WPS–Humanitarian Action Compact and feminist funds active in crisis response as spaces where the salience of gender and feminist approaches are being articulated.

• Critically assess how historic and ongoing foreign policy objectives contribute to the number, scale and complexity of humanitarian crises around the world.
Conclusion

Bringing FFP into humanitarian response in a meaningful way presents a number of promises and pitfalls. On the one hand, FFP offers an opening or lever, which can be used to achieve progress on inclusive, gender-responsive and accessible responses – and to break out of the silos that have plagued agendas like WPS. Advocates may therefore be understandably keen to push through policy changes and institutionalise FFP in the face of potential future electoral shifts and changes in government, with Sweden’s recent experience in mind. By promising a more inclusive and responsive model of humanitarian action, FFP also presents the possibility of more effective responses that reduce loss of life and improve outcomes for people living in crisis settings.

On the other hand, though, there are real dangers in the FFP agenda if it amounts to no more than a rebrand of existing work in humanitarian response, especially when that work may not go beyond a simple focus on women and girls as a vulnerable group in crises. To date, FFPs have tended to skate over humanitarian action, or to rubber-stamp existing efforts as ‘feminist’, while humanitarians have tended to disregard FFP or dismiss its applicability to their field. Where there is scepticism around the appropriateness and feasibility of feminist approaches, FFP advocates and governments must engage openly and convene meaningful conversations between FFP advocates, feminist humanitarians and other humanitarian leaders. In the meantime, participants at our workshop urged caution in too quickly applying the ‘feminist’ label to humanitarian response, without the good-faith reflection and willingness to transform ways of working where needed.

FFPs and the processes by which they are produced are therefore ‘sites of possibility’ (Tiessen and Smith, 2021: 118) for badly needed transformation in the international humanitarian sector, which can be operationalised in pursuit of a more inclusive, accessible and effective system to respond to crises. Engaging transparently with hard questions and recognising the limits of FFPs as they currently stand, especially in relation to principles and structural constraints on humanitarian response, can be the first step on the path towards a more feminist model of humanitarianism.
References


Annex 1 Partial list of participants

The table below lists those participants who attended the ODI roundtable, *What could feminist foreign policy mean for humanitarian response?* (29 June 2023) and agreed to include their names in this ODI policy brief. Please note: while the brief draws on the expertise and insights of the roundtable participants, they do not bear any responsibility for its content.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Role and organisation</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Director, Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS)</td>
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<td>Mmonbeydo Nadine Joah</td>
<td>Interim Co-Director, Feminist Humanitarian Network; Founder and Executive Director, Organization for Women and Children (ORWOCH)</td>
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<td>Founder, Community Empowerment for Peace and Development West Nile; Advocacy Committee Member, Feminist Humanitarian Network</td>
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