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What a feminist approach to the Middle East conflict could look like

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Those navigating between different realities and discourses amidst the Israel-Hamas conflict and the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza are frequently left speechless. In Germany, politics and the media have placed Israel's security and right to self-defence at the centre of the debate following the 7 October Hamas massacre. At the same time, in the Arabic-speaking world and beyond, anger and grief are growing in the face of the almost incomprehensible suffering that the Israeli army is currently inflicting in Gaza.

The only thing uniting these two different sides is the lack of empathy of any kind for the other. The simultaneity of different realities and perceptions of both Israelis and Palestinians must be recognised and endured, and not delegitimised *a priori*.

Double standards

The German government's feminist foreign policy outlined in the coalition agreement, along with the feminist strategy of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), not only offers actionable guidelines but also provides a universal language applicable to all foreign policy crises. This framework could be employed as a useful instrument in addressing events such as the war in Gaza.

But where have these guidelines been applied since 7 October? Certainly not when German cooperation with the civil society in the Palestinian territories was automatically suspected of terrorism and therefore put to the test. How feminist was it to add in a second (far less audible) call that support for women and children was a priority and would therefore be quickly reviewed?

Nor did they apply when Federal Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock voted against a humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza in the EU, almost

reflexively but not very feminist, so as not to even be suspected of questioning Israel's right to self-defence.

Yet, one of the principles of feminist foreign policy is to lay down arms to enable humanitarian aid. Consequently, Germany's voting behaviour at the United Nations General Assembly caused disbelief and indignation among those in the Global South who had once enthusiastically followed the development of the German government's feminist foreign policy and its guidelines. Especially as all international organisations and the UN called for a humanitarian ceasefire early on, including UN Women with a special focus on women and children. Advocating for ceasefires now is overdue and will not help to preserve the last shred of credibility in German feminist politics.

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However, what would a feminist approach to the Middle East conflict look like, and what possibilities would the German government have not to completely marginalise itself internationally through its unconditional solidarity with Israel but rather make a fair and effective contribution to improving the situation in line with its self-imposed values? At the core of feminist foreign and development policy is its human rights-based approach, with the fundamental conviction that all people have inherent rights and dignity. International and humanitarian law must apply to all. The definitions distinguishing civilians from combatants must remain clear, and it is essential to avoid diluting them. Collective punishment cannot be imposed on entire population groups.

When access to electricity, water, petrol and medicine is restricted or completely blocked, as has been the case in Gaza since the beginning of the war, representatives of feminist foreign and development policy should cry out loud. As this would mean that the sexual and reproductive rights of women and other minorities are also restricted, if not denied. Fifteen per cent of pregnant women in Gaza will suffer complications during childbirth, and the lives of many newborns are at risk. If feminist politics is to stand up for the rights of women and other marginalised people, it must do so consistently and coherently. But while experts, including feminist ones, warn that international law is being undermined by the Israeli government, German representatives of supposedly feminist politics have so far kept a low profile.

They should also remember the simple and obvious principle that feminist foreign policy should promote political rather than military solutions. Its set aim is to promote the representation of women — in conflict situations, this is primarily about the participation of women and marginalised groups in peace negotiations. However, if no one is searching for a political solution, the question of women's participation does not even arise.

Contrary to this, the behaviour and rhetoric of German politicians gives the impression that the military superpower Israel is being granted free hand in its fight against the terrorist organisation Hamas following the atrocities of 7 October. This is anything but de-escalating and rather favours the assertion of military power.

Decolonialisation

Speaking of power: feminist foreign policy and development cooperation have in common that questioning power structures forms their theoretical foundation, which would mean contextualising the spiral of violence in the Middle East — acknowledging that the conflict did not just begin on 7 October is crucial in the discourse. Explicitly, this does not mean justifying or minimising the mass murder and abduction of civilians in any way. In order to really ensure the security of Israel, Germany's much-invoked *Staatsräson*, the causes of the violence must be addressed in the long term — contextualisation is essential for this and would be in line with the feminist approaches to which the Federal Foreign Office and the BMZ have committed themselves.

Feminist foreign and development policy must enable a debate that recognises the structural asymmetry in the distribution of power between a military superpower and an increasingly fragmented and disenfranchised society.

A major point of contention at present is the postcolonial approach linked to issues of power. The BMZ has incorporated post-colonial and anti-racist development policy into its strategy. But framing Hamas terror as anti-colonial resistance is fatal and completely misleading. It contradicts any humanist approach to justify the injuring, kidnapping and killing of civilians as resistance. However, framing any post-colonial discourse as anti-Semitism, as was recently done by Robert Habeck's 'Speech to the Nation', does not allow for a productive exchange.

Feminist foreign and development policy must enable a debate that recognises the structural asymmetry in the distribution of power between a military superpower and an increasingly fragmented and

disenfranchised society. Feminist organisations from the Global South, together with donor organisations, show how it is possible to address decades of displacement, occupation and siege as causes of violence and, at the same time, show solidarity with all civilian victims of this conflict and the victims of increasing hate campaigns.

A feminist lens

Another core objective of feminist foreign policy is to combat sexualised and gender-based violence in armed conflicts. Accordingly, documented acts by Hamas must be condemned as a violation of international humanitarian law.

But caution is advised when an exclusive victimisation of women, which denies them their agency, leads to wars being justified with the supposedly feminist goal of protecting women, children and minorities. This so-called securo-feminism is also evident in the rhetoric surrounding the Gaza war, when allegations of rape are used, unchecked, for the right of defence or when an Israeli soldier is holding a rainbow flag on ruins in Gaza, proclaiming that he is acting 'in the name of love'. To put it bluntly, one could speak of 'empowerment through bombing'. If women and the LGBT+ community can only be liberated and empowered once the patriarchal regimes in whose snares they find themselves have been militarily flattened – and they themselves along with it – this has little to do with feminist principles of peace, human security and non-violence.

Even before the current war, feminist strategies in international politics were scrutinised critically and examined to see to what extent they could actually change power structures when these are so embedded in historically grown inequalities between the Global North and the Global South. In view of the current humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, Germany is massively losing credibility in the Global South and especially among progressive and feminist actors, as well as movements that could have been valuable partners for the implementation of German foreign and development policy.

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Feminist development and foreign policy must condemn Hamas terror but must not collectively penalise all Palestinians as alleged terrorists. At the same time, Israel must be protected as a safe state for Jews, and for this reason, it should become clear that the current response in the response of the widespread bombardment of Gaza does not contribute to this security but will likely generate the next

the course of the war. wave of hatred and violence.

Feminist foreign and development policy should promote progressive voices on both sides and create spaces for them. It is clear that neither anti-Semitism in the name of supposed anti-colonial resistance nor Islamophobic and anti-Arab racism in the name of so-called unconditional solidarity with Israel have a place in these spaces. But feminist foreign and development policy should not fall into the trap of making one more important than the other. Both must be equally identified and banned, while other voices cannot be prejudged and excluded. Feminist calls for a ceasefire scandalise both anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim violence, which have risen dramatically all over the world and especially in the West in the course of the war.

Feminist approaches offer the language that many currently lack in order to respond appropriately to the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza. They also offer instructions for action for a just policy that applies equally to all. At the moment, however, the German political community and the government seem to be failing to apply these in Gaza.



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