

Toward A Feminist Nuclear Weapons Policy

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Germany's current government included its commitment to a Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) in its coalition agreement, triggering debates on what it is, why it is of value, and how it could be applied to developments such as the uprisings in Iran or Russia's invasion of Ukraine. On March 1, Germany's Federal Foreign Office published its [guidelines](#) on how to reach the objectives set out by this approach that continue to be commented on by academics, journalists, and other civil society actors.

Germany, however, did not invent Feminist Foreign Policy. Sweden was the first state to take such an approach when its then foreign minister, Margot Wallström, introduced its Feminist Foreign Policy in 2014. Canada, Mexico, France, Spain, Luxemburg, Libya, Chile, and the Netherlands followed, all defining and implementing FFP in distinct ways. In general, different actors describe FFP very differently. While governments often focus on strengthening "[rights, representation, and resources](#)" to support women – and, increasingly, marginalized groups as well – many activists and academics would like to see a stronger emphasis placed on structural issues such as "[intersectional, \(post\)colonial, and structural causes of violence.](#)"

CONNECTING FFP AND NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Connecting nuclear weapons policy with Feminist Foreign Policy, admittedly, does not follow without introduction, but it can enrich debates on both. Feminist perspectives on nuclear weapons can address the inclusion of women in national and international decision-making bodies, our perceptions of security, and the language used to describe it. From an intersectional angle, FFP can also help illuminate the colonial heritage and structures of nuclear weapons governance.

Not coincidentally, in May 2023, nuclear weapons again play a central role in societal discussions. At this writing, Iran threatens to cross the threshold to nuclear acquisition, the New START Treaty is the only arms control agreement left between Russia and the United States, and significant tensions exist between the nuclear-armed states of India and Pakistan. Moreover, with nuclear weapon states – most dramatically, China – expanding their arsenals and Russia making veiled nuclear threats part of its war of aggression on Ukraine, the appetite for nuclear disarmament is low.

In recent months, the first publications started bringing nuclear weapons and German Feminist Foreign Policy together. In January 2023, for example, the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy (CFFP) released its policy brief “[A Feminist Take on Nuclear Weapons in Germany](#).” Further, the guidelines published by Germany’s Federal Foreign Office make clear that the ministry considers nuclear weapons to be part of FFP. In them, the Federal Foreign Office criticizes the low representation of women in “arms-control policy processes,” supports “efforts to recognize and compensate the victims of nuclear tests,” mentions the gender-specific impacts of nuclear weapons (women and girls are at higher risk of developing cancer as a result of radiation exposure), and advocates for a world without nuclear weapons.

Germany is in an especially interesting position for advancing a “Feminist Nuclear Policy.” As a member of NATO, it is embedded in NATO’s practice of extended deterrence through US security guarantees and has nuclear weapons stationed on German soil at the Büchel Air Base. At the same time, Germany is one of the pioneers of Feminist Foreign Policy and has a long history of civil society and academic engagement with matters related to it. While it will be a challenge to navigate the tensions between the strategic interests of NATO and the criticism of nuclear deterrence that has traditionally been voiced by Feminist activists and academics, the country could play a unique role in connecting FFP and nuclear weapons policy.

NUCLEAR WEAPONS: A FEMINIST ISSUE

Although Germany only introduced its FFP recently, the connection between feminism and nuclear weapons has existed for much longer. Feminist activists and academics have offered various interrogations of global nuclear politics and criticized the [gendered and exclusionary language](#) around nuclear weapons – from bombs that were called “little boy” or “fat man” to technical jargon that overcomplicates debates. Traditionally, feminist academics have [disagreed that nuclear deterrence increases security](#), partly because they have focused on human-centric rather than state-centric security, and partly because they have represented schools of thought that are critical of realist ideas. Where realists would, for instance, stress the benefits nuclear weapons are perceived to have in deterring adversaries, critical scholars would focus on the dangers of failing nuclear deterrence. Ultimately, those schools of thought are based on different explanations of why nuclear weapons have not been used. Realists refer back to a rationalistic understanding of deterrence; critical scholars add the notion of a [nuclear taboo](#), refer to [luck](#), and point to historical evidence of failing deterrence. To persuade nuclear weapon states to disarm, critical scholars frequently refer to strengthening international norms.

The [Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom \(WILPF\)](#) has a long tradition of connecting feminism and nuclear weapons, especially in Europe. Latin American and African countries, as well as global groups of (feminist) activists, had unprecedented influence in driving the adoption of the [Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#). In addition, the UN General Assembly resolution on “[Women, disarmament, non-proliferation, and arms control](#),” which states regularly discuss in the General Assembly, is led by Trinidad and Tobago. Feminist activists were also particularly involved in regions where nuclear weapons were tested with devastating effects on the local, often colonized, population – for example, the [Pacific](#).

As studies show, nuclear testing and use has biological sex-specific impacts and “[gender-specific impacts](#) due to different cultural and social roles or stereotypes based on gender.” In the spirit of intersectionality, one should not overlook the fact that nuclear testing has largely affected marginalized communities. The United States tested in the Marshall Islands and near Native American and

Mormon settlements in Nevada. The Soviet Union tested in Kazakhstan and on the Arctic Island of Novaya Zemlya, which is inhabited by the indigenous Nenets. The United Kingdom tested in Australia and on its colonies in the Pacific, France in Algeria and on the Gambier Islands, and China in Xingjiang. [Barbara Rose Johnston](#) sums up that communities that are located downwind to nuclear tests are typically “the marginal and powerless groups in society: indigenous people and other social or political minorities...What they possessed was open space that could be contaminated without political recourse.”

POSSIBLE FEMINIST NUCLEAR POLICIES

Three examples of possible policies illustrate the connection between nuclear weapons and Feminist Foreign Policy in a more tangible way. These examples were inspired by the commitments already outlined in the guidelines of Germany’s Federal Foreign Office. To provide a balance, the first two concern short-term, relatively achievable goals, and the third relates to a long-term vision that also touches upon some basic principles of German security policy.

1. All branches of the German government must recognize that nuclear weapons and Feminist Foreign Policy are connected issues and support intersectional gender-sensitive perspectives within their respective mandates. While it is most welcome that Germany’s Federal Foreign Office considers nuclear weapons policy as part of FFP, the time for mainstreaming has come. Not only does the entire government, including Germany’s Federal Ministry of Defense and Chancellery, need to take this view, but – vice versa – it also must apply a Feminist Foreign Policy lens when considering nuclear weapons.

This also encompasses further supporting the inclusion of feminist perspectives and gender considerations on nuclear weapons in international fora such as the United Nations General Assembly, meetings of the State Parties to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and meetings of the States Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons as well as in bilateral negotiations. [Germany is already pushing for gender considerations](#) in various policy areas, for example by supporting UN Women; the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda; or women’s representation in other fields.

Many of the current gender-sensitive perspectives “largely focus on women,” however, an [intersectional FFP](#) should progress beyond this simplification. Publications by the [Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy](#), the [United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs](#), and a Special Issue of the Journal *International Affairs* by Catherina Eschle and Shine Choi agree with [an article by Laura Rose Brown and Laura Considine](#) in suggesting that connecting feminism and Nuclear Weapons goes beyond addressing the inclusion of women, advocating to investigate “the links between masculinity, violent conflict, weapons, and nuclear proliferation.” To achieve this, Germany could table and amend resolutions to connect FFP and nuclear weapons and support civil society participation at conferences. The aspiration of a Feminist Foreign Policy must go beyond mere representation to actually address gender-sensitive perspectives.

2. In the spirit of an intersectional Feminist Foreign Policy, Germany should address “nuclear colonialism.” Efforts to support victims of nuclear testing and use have begun. Within the framework of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), a trust fund is being established that is intended to support communities affected by nuclear testing and use environmental remediation. Suitable allocations could include scholarships, training programs, funding of radiological or oncological research, or direct financial aid. Ultimately, the affected communities and their governments should be granted the agency to decide upon these matters.

The US government's policy on providing funding for the victims of landmines without supporting the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty shows that the application of a treaty's tools is not limited to those who have signed it. Consequently, the German government should establish contact with governments leading current initiatives, such as those on Kazakhstan and Kiribati, and advocate for states outside of the TPNW to contribute to the trust fund – especially those that bear a special responsibility for nuclear testing.

In general, based on [lessons learned from feminist funding practices](#), Germany should continue to make such practices part of its Feminist Foreign Policy, as it already does through gender budgeting. In this spirit, the German government should not only consider financial support but also take a leadership role in the policy process – for example, by hosting a conference aimed at consolidating the needs of affected communities.

3. Given that there is genuine support for a world without nuclear weapons, Germany should not abandon the project of real nuclear disarmament. Feminist Foreign Policy could teach us that nuclear weapons ultimately do not bring security. This realization could revitalize nuclear disarmament efforts in which the German government could play a key role.

Germany could help change the discourse on nuclear weapons by increasingly stigmatizing them on the international stage due to their humanitarian impact. The German government could also contribute to global nuclear disarmament by working toward the withdrawal of nuclear weapons from German soil, ideally as part of a united effort with its allies – especially Belgium and the Netherlands – to end the practice of nuclear sharing. It has been ten years since a German Foreign Minister, in this case [Guido Westerwelle, pushed for the end of nuclear sharing](#); the [German Bundestag's resolution](#) calling for an end sharing for is thirteen years old. Considering the archaic technology of the gravity bombs stationed in Germany, nuclear sharing is now mainly a symbol of Germany's support for extended nuclear deterrence; ending it could be a strong signal of support for nuclear disarmament. Germany should revitalize systematic efforts to work toward a global zero of nuclear weapons and support the norm of nuclear disarmament, particularly in cooperation with the states that already see a global zero as beneficial for their security – a majority of the world.

A GERMAN FEMINIST NUCLEAR WEAPONS POLICY

At a time when nuclear weapons are on the political agenda again, Germany should not only make the connection of Feminist Foreign Policy and nuclear weapons explicit, but also work toward the implementation of concrete policies. The FFP approach is not merely a matter of comprehensiveness and coherence; rather, it provides a unique compass for navigating complex solutions. It pushes one to focus on marginalized groups and the power structures behind marginalization. With Germany's unique position as a state intending to lead policy discussions in Europe – especially given its key role in extended nuclear deterrence and its long history of feminist knowledge production – its government should support tangible aspects of a Feminist Nuclear Policy such as a trust fund that could make a difference in the lives of those still affected by past nuclear tests and use.

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