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Humanitarian action in the era of feminist foreign policy

Narratives, ambition and opposition in Canada and Germany

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About this report

HPG's work is directed by our Integrated Programme (IP), a multi-year body of research spanning a range of issues, countries and emergencies, allowing us to examine critical issues facing humanitarian policy and practice and influence key debates in the sector. This paper is part of HPG's 'People, power and agency' IP. The authors would like to thank HPG's IP donors whose funding enables us to pursue the research agenda.

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Acronyms

BMZ	German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung)
FFP	feminist foreign policy
FIAP	Feminist International Assistance Policy
GBV	gender-based violence
GAC	Global Affairs Canada
GBA+	Gender-Based Analysis Plus
GFFO	German Federal Foreign Office (Auswärtiges Amt)
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IHL	international humanitarian law
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
LGBTQIA+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual plus
OCHA	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PSEA	prevention of (or protection from) sexual exploitation and abuse
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SRHR	sexual and reproductive health and rights
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations Refugee Agency

Executive summary

Introduction

Over the last decade, more than a dozen countries have laid claim to feminist foreign policies (FFPs), marking a notable shift in rhetoric and attitudes towards gender, feminism and foreign policy objectives in international forums. Many such policies are focused on international assistance over other realms of foreign policy, and of these, Canada and Germany are amongst the most prominent humanitarian donors.

This study forms part of a two-year research project examining the role of narratives – that is, prescriptive stories like FFP that motivate spending and decision-making – in humanitarian policy and practice. The study is based on a literature review and 17 semi-structured interviews with a sample of government and civil society actors in both countries.

Feminism in humanitarian policy and practice to date

Sweden instigated the first FFP in 2014 with its '3R model' of rights, representation and resources for women and girls. Canada, France, Spain, Germany and others have since emulated and expanded that model, but still often conflate a feminist approach with attention to gender-based violence (GBV), sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and women's leadership. The dominance of international assistance in FFP positions it as a strategic narrative emanating from the west, belying a long history of feminist activism in foreign policy, especially in the Global South.

Several FFPs still lack any kind of written policy, even years after being announced, and more still lack clear definitions and conceptual frameworks, but most are explicit about humanitarian action falling under their remit. That said, little in those policies references humanitarian timeframes, funding models, or ways of working, which frequently diverge from other areas of foreign policy, and neither do they address humanitarian resistance to agendas understood to be 'political'. Feminism's transformative ambition seemingly brings it into conflict with a narrowly interpreted humanitarian mandate that sees itself as neutral and needs-based – and this perceived tension will require open engagement to resolve. This impasse is significant in light of longstanding and mostly unrealised efforts to acknowledge the gendered impact of crises and bring about gender-responsive humanitarian action, which have been described as 'insufficient and not very ambitious' (Abellán et al., 2022: 1).

Nonetheless, there have long been efforts by feminist movements, women-led civil society organisations and activists inside humanitarian agencies to change how assistance is designed and delivered. An increasing number of arguably feminist approaches have made their way into the sector, coming from grassroots movements and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) alike, making this a critical moment for humanitarians and governments who claim the label 'feminist' to elaborate on and implement feminist approaches to crisis.

Canada

As a narrative device, Canada's 'Feminist international assistance policy' (FIAP) codified longstanding commitment to gender in Canada, but applying that ethos to humanitarian response is more recent. Launched in 2017 following a year of consultations, the FIAP attempted to link idealism with pragmatism by framing 'investing in women and girls [as] the right thing to do and the smart way to reduce poverty and inequality' (GAC, 2017a: 1). It covers humanitarian response under the 'Human dignity' action area, detailing risks to women and girls – including a focus on SRHR – as well as the gains to be made through inclusion. Canada recognises crises as opportunities to bring about change in social norms, and thus subscribes to gender-transformative humanitarian action 'where and when possible' (GAC, 2019a). The same funding targets apply across the FIAP: 80% of bilateral funding would integrate gender equality as a significant goal and 15% as a principal goal.

Normatively, the FIAP positioned Canada as an ally to gender justice globally. A major capacity scale-up was mirrored in GAC's institutional culture, which had previously seen one civil society actor report 'getting laughed out of spaces for using feminist and humanitarian in the same sentence'. Canada also upped funding, with 88% of projects having gender equality as a significant goal in 2019–2020 and 90% in 2020–2021, although the proportion targeting gender as a principal goal dipped (Papagioti et al., 2022). At the same time, Canada has been criticised for lacking an official definition of 'feminist' (Thompson et al., 2023), for instrumentalising gender equality as a solution to poverty (Brown and Swiss, 2017), and for reinforcing foreign policy silos (Bouka et al., 2021).

Thus far, key performance indicators for humanitarian response under the FIAP are limited to percentages of projects with gender components and numbers of people reached, with no indicators of (for example) funding to women-led action or representation in key humanitarian spaces (GAC, 2019b). A report by Canada's Auditor General (OAG, 2023) criticised the depth and impact of the FIAP, and while that report explicitly excluded humanitarian programming, the exceptions applied to humanitarian funding mean that evidence of the FIAP's impact in humanitarian settings is likely to be weaker still. Nonetheless, this has not dimmed civil society's support for the FIAP, recognising that change takes time.

The seven years of the FIAP are therefore a story of progress but also of a long road ahead. GAC has pursued a relatively ambitious approach to FFP in the sphere of humanitarian action, not explicitly managing tensions with principles but also not privileging them. It would seem that ambition is let down not by vision but by financing and decision-making structures that impede major change, affecting not just FFP but localisation, accountability and other areas.

Germany

The most recent country to launch an FFP (in 2023), Germany is new to both FFP and humanitarian donorship. Its FFP is organised around the 3R framework and 10 'guidelines' – six on foreign policy activities and four on internal transformation. Its language on intersectionality; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual (LGBTQIA+) inclusion; and colonialism reflects 10 years

of further thinking than Canada's FIAP. Guideline 2, entitled 'Humanitarian assistance and crisis management', vows to 'systematically include women and marginalised people [...] and take into account gender-specific risks and intersectional vulnerabilities'. Most notably, it commits 100% of humanitarian assistance to be gender-sensitive and gender-targeted 'wherever appropriate' (GFFO, 2023: 29).

A strategy on gender and humanitarian response – drafted prior to the FFP process and launched in 2024, reportedly without significant adaptation – equates Germany's existing gender work to a feminist approach. It lacks new commitments beyond the funding targets and has led to disagreement over the extent to which Germany's ways of working need to change. Whether such a strategy could (or should) be reasonably characterised as 'feminist' was questioned by both government and civil society informants. The continued reliance on concepts like gender mainstreaming seems to point to the persistence of pre-existing narratives positioning humanitarian response as timebound, apolitical and compartmentalised away from wider social, political and economic drivers of inequalities, risks and vulnerabilities.

It is admittedly early in the day to assess implementation, but press reporting indicates that 70% of funding is meeting commitments (Fasbender and Eichhorn, 2024). Any change in the quality of funding remains to be seen, and many voiced concerns over how indicators will be used and the role of civil society, both in Germany and in crisis settings.

There is clearly much to be done to conceptualise and operationalise Germany's FFP for humanitarian response. Internally, the FFP was seen as contributing to a much-needed mindset shift, but Germany's new 'feminist reflex'[1] has yet to generate appetite to examine how humanitarian responses are delivered.

More meaningfully feminist humanitarianism

Persistent conceptual confusions

FFP exists as much in the realm of pure narrative as it does in everyday realities. This norm imprecision can be good – making it easier to assimilate into different contexts, allowing advocates to ascribe a more progressive vision to their country's FFP – but it is also problematic for implementation and leaves FFP vulnerable to co-optation by governments simply relabelling existing work as 'feminist'.

Beyond women, beyond gender

Where there was already a tendency in the humanitarian sector to use the term 'gender' when what is actually meant is 'women and girls', that slippage now applies to 'feminist'. Humanitarians are struggling to understand FFP beyond targeting women and girls, sometimes even despite claims of intersectional, relational and systemic approaches. Awareness is low that a feminist approach should bring changes to the systems through which humanitarian assistance is delivered and should challenge its patriarchal nature.

1 Germany has committed to cultivating what it calls a 'feminist reflex'. This institutional process is about changing systems and processes as well as minds. See Section 4.4 for more.

Perceived tensions with humanitarian principles

Resistance to FFP in humanitarian circles tends to situate feminism as antithetical to principled and needs-based response. This tension was much more evident in Germany, described as 'a rift between [government] and civil society'. Far from unique to Germany and Canada, many humanitarians have expressed concern for impartiality and neutrality in the face of gender-transformative or even gender-responsive imperatives. Nonetheless, this tension depends on a narrow reading of humanitarian principles that is not universally accepted. The opposition of needs and rights is also false, given that the definition of needs is always a question of rights.

Systemic change in the humanitarian sphere

An evident and largely unexplored way to embrace the transformative potential of FFPs is by bringing them and feminism into system transformation debates. The Grand Bargain and other parallel mechanisms for change remain gender-unaware; FFP offers not just an opportunity to add gender to these platforms but also an analytical toolkit for redressing the paternalist nature of the current humanitarian system and elaborating alternative models. Making system reform and transformation the purview of FFP is also a way for FFP donors to be more transparent about their own power and be held accountable to meeting more meaningfully feminist goals.

Facing humanitarian dilemmas

In emerging crises like Ukraine and Gaza, both humanitarian response and FFP are seeing profound criticism for their unresolved relationship to peace and insufficient allyship with populations living amidst occupation and colonialism. For both, the current strategy of proffering humanitarian aid to assuage the impacts of military violence, while the same governments generate humanitarian need by aiding, abetting and arming parties to a conflict, points to paradoxes within both humanitarian response and FFP. Greater thinking and learning across agendas could help to foment responses that resist complicity and irrelevance to the lived realities of crisis-affected people.

Change without transformation?

While humanitarian response in the era of FFP presents a very incomplete story of the potential of feminist humanitarianism, it nonetheless raises important questions about how to achieve change within systems – that is, by diluting demands for change and risking their becoming less meaningful, or by insisting on idealism that puts success out of reach. Embracing truly feminist humanitarian action means pursuing alternative paradigms and narratives of crisis response, beyond the narrow frames that shape humanitarian action at present. Grounded in operational thinking and the everyday leadership of women, girls and gender-diverse people in crisis settings, these alternative narratives challenge the 'master frame' of humanitarian exceptionalism – a frame that the FFP narrative thus far leaves largely undisturbed. With global backlash, co-optation, mounting crises and electoral challenges on the horizon, thoughts must turn to holding the gains – and deepening understanding of and commitment to FFP and meaningfully feminist humanitarianism.

1 Introduction

Over the last decade, feminism has appeared on foreign policy agendas, marking a notable shift in rhetoric and attitudes towards gender, feminism and foreign policy objectives in international forums. From 2014, it took seven years for the first seven countries to announce FFPs, but then momentum increased with seven more taking up the agenda over the course of only one year in 2022–2023. These policies address diverse areas of foreign policy – for example, defence and security, international trade, climate and energy, and diplomacy – with a particular focus in many FFPs on international assistance, including development and humanitarian response. They sit alongside more recent calls for Indigenous, anti-racist, or climate-justice foreign policies, part of the same broad trajectory towards more ethical or justice-oriented foreign policies (Blackwell, 2021; Nair, 2022).

Feminists and other progressive voices have critiqued FFP's state-centric framework as paternalist, top-down and colonial in its approach to global gender justice (Rivera Chávez, 2022; Bergman Rosamond et al., 2023). Its prominence on policy agendas has also been criticised for deflecting attention from decades of work by civil society, activists, grassroots social movements and even some humanitarian agencies to bring a feminist lens to crisis prevention, response and recovery in practice, including in crisis settings in the so-called Global South.[2] Nonetheless, the notion that foreign policy can and should be feminist seems to be gaining momentum, even as some countries begin to pull back from the label, with Sweden's recent FFP withdrawal in 2022.

However, commitments to FFP have not penetrated all sectors of foreign policy equally:

> [Feminism] is a term that provokes suspicion, concern and denial in certain spaces, including the humanitarian field, which is not surprising as it advocates a transformative change in the patriarchal system that perpetuates inequalities and privileges hegemonic masculinity. (Abellán et al., 2022: 1)

Despite such hesitations, humanitarian response does not sit outside of this current in international affairs but rather at the heart of it, given the focus in many FFPs on international assistance spending and programming. That said, while there is vibrant debate in academic and policy circles alike about how FFP should be defined and operationalised, to date surprisingly little of this examines humanitarian action. Importantly, while FFP represents a significant agenda in international policymaking, it should also be understood as just one part of the growing debate over conceptualising and realising feminist humanitarianism (see Box 1).

2 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 author acknowledges 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.

Ultimately, a more nuanced understanding of FFP as a policy agenda and – in parallel – the potential of feminist approaches to crisis response is overdue in the humanitarian sector. Humanitarian actors need to understand and engage with FFP: the humanitarian sector is not immune to calls for more justice-oriented approaches and attention to inequalities within its own systems and structures. FFP also highlights the priorities of prominent donor states against a backdrop of funding restrictions. These calls demonstrate a growing awareness of racialised, gendered and other forms of unequal power in humanitarian action and beyond, and are evidenced by the #AidToo and #AidSoWhite movements, which saw aid workers share experiences of sexual violence and racism on social media, as well as by demands to decolonise, rethink or even dismantle the international architecture of development, peacebuilding and humanitarian assistance (Centre for Humanitarian Leadership, 2021; GADN, 2022).

The humanitarian system – its origins, structure, financing and culture – is facing profound challenges to its legitimacy. The opportunity that a feminist lens presents to humanitarian action, and the wider foreign policy arena in which it sits, is to make crisis response more relevant, more attuned to the functioning of power, more inclusive and more ethical.

1.1 Understanding narratives

This study forms part of a two-year research project, carried out by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) and entitled 'Remaking aid: ethics, politics and narratives'. This project explores the salience of narratives in humanitarian policy and practice, which can be helpfully understood as:

> stories and frames constructed and deployed to shape beliefs, attitudes and ultimately decisions relating to humanitarian crises and humanitarian aid – in particular, to justify why, when and where humanitarian aid is needed, who should deliver it and how, and who should receive it. (Saez and Bryant, 2023: 12)

Narratives are therefore 'stories with a purpose' (ibid.: 9) that not only describe policy dilemmas but set out potential solutions by delineating what can and should be done about those dilemmas.

With that in mind, FFP can be understood as a narrative in its own right, as it posits that foreign policy (a field traditionally understood to be a realm of self-interested pragmatism; see Willitts-King et al., 2018) should be, or should become, feminist – that is, it should serve perceived ethical imperatives, especially with regard to gender justice and challenging patriarchal structures (see Box 1). Zhukova et al. (2022) describe how states translate international norms like FFP into their own domestic context, producing strategic narratives that help them exercise soft power. Arguably, FFP also helps countries construct a progressive identity, both domestically and internationally.

In the context of persistent calls for system reform and change in the humanitarian architecture over the last 30 years, FFP can therefore be understood as yet another narrative of change, alongside – for example – the use of cash transfers to deliver humanitarian assistance. Bryant and Fouad (2024) argue that the transformative potential of cash has not been reached, in large part because the design and

delivery of cash programmes still conform to a traditional humanitarian narrative that positions users of assistance as the deserving, vulnerable and passive recipients of assistance from enlightened and altruistic humanitarians. This 'master frame' positions humanitarian action as a timebound, apolitical response to exceptional crises, focused on relieving symptoms rather than tackling the social, political and economic drivers of those crises (Saez and Bryant, 2023). Seen in that light, the FFP narrative therefore further incites humanitarian response to be not just efficient and demand-led, but also feminist in its motivations, objectives, methods and impact (see Boxes 1 and 2).

There are also key parallels with calls to decolonise humanitarian response, which have gained prominence in the sector. At the same time, 'decolonisation' is rapidly being depoliticised into a 'comfortable buzzword' or technical exercise, focused almost entirely on funding local responders rather than confronting the structural exclusions that gave rise to inequality in the first place. As will be discussed further below, FFP is at risk of similar co-optation, with gender-based violence (GBV) programming and women's leadership in humanitarian action becoming proxies for more transformational change and governments labelling their policies 'feminist' without making meaningful changes.

The purpose of this study is not to argue for or against FFP in its current form(s), but rather to understand its impact – and the impact that it could have – on efforts to foment more inclusive, accessible, demand-led and just humanitarian responses. It is also to better understand how a narrative like FFP has circulated in the humanitarian sector and has been adopted by some governments, and where it falls short in addressing and effecting structural transformation in the humanitarian sector. This study therefore represents a snapshot of what the application of FFP to humanitarian response has looked like to date, using the experiences of two major humanitarian donor states as a lens.

1.2 Methodology

This study examines the relationship between FFP and humanitarian action, taking Canada and Germany as key examples. Of more than a dozen countries that have laid claim to FFP, Canada and Germany are amongst the most prominent humanitarian donors. Having adopted its Feminist International Assistance Policy in 2017, Canada is one of the longer-standing proponents of FFP and offers insights into its operationalisation and implementation, while the 2023 launch of Germany's FFP reflects nearly 10 years of thinking and development since the agenda emerged in 2014.

For this study, research consisted of a review of existing academic and grey literature on FFP and humanitarian response, alongside 17 semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of government and civil society actors in Canada and Germany. Interview transcripts were analysed using a combination of inductive and deductive coding to discern patterns and emerging themes.

As a light-touch exploration of the debates and tensions animating humanitarian response in countries with FFPs, this study is not intended to be comparative or comprehensive but rather constitutes a

snapshot of a policy space that is in constant flux. Much more work remains to be done to evaluate FFP as it has been applied to humanitarian policy and practice, or indeed the prospects for meaningfully feminist humanitarian response.

1.3 Structure

This working paper begins with a survey of existing knowledge on FFP and humanitarian response, examining the emergence and development of FFP as a foreign policy agenda, how humanitarian response has been conceptualised in existing FFPs, and the overlapping but broader growth of purportedly feminist approaches to humanitarian policy and practice. The policies of Canada and Germany are then examined in turn, before the paper concludes with a discussion of the implications for humanitarian actors and humanitarian response, as well as the potential for meaningfully feminist approaches in the sector and beyond.

Box 1 What is feminist foreign policy?

There is no single definition of FFP – rather, each country pursues it slightly differently, with many lacking a clear definition in their policies and still others lacking publicly available policies altogether. In each setting, a policy's content is also the result of distinct histories and contextual factors:

> In France, it is strongly linked to Republican values; in Spain, it is connected to recent large-scale social movements and protests; and in Sweden, it is part of a decades-long feminist state agenda. (Achilleos-Sarll and Thomson in Achilleos-Sarll et al., 2023: 3)

Amid that diversity of origins and orientations, there are a number of common themes that tend to be shared amongst existing FFPs, either explicitly or implicitly:

- Multilateralism and respect for international institutions, norms and conventions;
- The rights of women and girls, especially relating to GBV and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR);
- Representation of women inside foreign ministries;
- A consultative approach to policy development (Alwan and Weldon, 2017; Thomson and Färber in Achilleos-Sarll et al., 2023).

In its inaugural FFP, Sweden pursued a '3R' model organised around rights, representation and resources, especially for women and girls – a benchmark framework that has since been replicated by Colombia, Germany and the Netherlands, and others. Sweden eventually expanded this model to include 'reality' before repealing the policy in 2022. The FFP Collaborative – a network of advocates for FFP in civil society and inside governments – adds 'research and reporting' and 'reach' to the assessment framework for its annual *Defining feminist foreign policy* report. Other governments have also elaborated on the '3R' approach – for example, Colombia describes its approach as pacifist, participatory, intersectional and transformative (Thompson et al., 2023). Equally, some FFPs (those of Germany, Mexico, Sweden) take gender justice as the core objective of FFP, while others – like Canada's – position tackling gendered inequalities as both a good in itself and a strategy to achieve poverty reduction. Some policies come with indicators and assessment frameworks, while others are limited to normative statements.

Arguably, all existing FFPs demonstrate the gaps between governments' and feminist movements' ambitions for FFP. For example, the FFP Collaborative defines the concept as follows:

> The policy of a state that defines its interactions with other states, as well as movements and other non-state actors, in a manner that prioritizes peace, gender equality and environmental integrity; enshrines, promotes, and protects the human rights of all; seeks to disrupt colonial, racist, patriarchal and male-dominated power structures; and allocates significant resources, including research, to achieve that vision. Feminist foreign policy is coherent in its approach across all of its levers of influence, anchored by the exercise of those values at home and co-created with feminist activists, groups and movements, at home and abroad. (Thompson et al., 2023: 1)

The Berlin-based Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy offers a similarly aspirational definition with an emphasis on human security, feminist peace and critique of the 'destructive forces of patriarchy, capitalism, racism, and militarism' (CFFP, 2021: 2).

As more countries adopt and launch their own FFPs, the diversity of lenses, mechanisms and objectives for FFP is only growing, as well as the potential for more transformational and less prescriptive FFPs. For example, Papworth (2024: 8) notes that Chile and Colombia's FFPs 'liberate the concept from its association with foreign aid or assistance, which has been a key component of FFPs in many wealthy countries'. Importantly, FFP also does not represent the entirety of feminist approaches to humanitarian response (see Box 3).

2 Feminism in humanitarian policy and practice to date

To date, 15 governments have adopted FFPs, or indicated a commitment to do so in the future, including key humanitarian donors. In interviews, two respondents referenced Beyonce's 2014 performance on a stage emblazoned with the word 'feminist', the same year that Sweden announced the world's first FFP, as key to understanding the particularly amenable cultural and political climate towards feminism in the early 2010s.

A decade later, countries including Germany, Chile and Colombia are adopting FFP against a landscape of backlash against women's rights; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual (LGBTQIA+) rights; and reproductive rights, which may be weakening commitment to feminist approaches (Khan et al., 2023). There are also profound challenges to humanitarian capacity, resources and legitimacy (Moallin et al., 2024; Tridimas, 2024). This political and sociocultural context forms the backdrop for any interaction between FFP and humanitarian response, alternately providing further impetus for the scene and complicating it.

2.1 The rise of FFP as a policy agenda

FFP's accepted founding story generally positions Sweden's then-foreign minister, Margot Wallström, as its instigator, tracing its growth through Canada, France and other settings, as evidence of its global diffusion (Thomson and Färber in Achilleos-Sarl et al., 2023). While the label was indeed new, Sweden's initial FFP was less of a substantive shift than the extension of a strong gender focus that had already been in play for years, as noted above (Tiessen and Smith, 2021: 128). Here, Sweden was drawing on its state feminist tradition and support for the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, but Wallström's own leadership has also been called 'particularly noteworthy' as a 'central initiator and advocate' of FFP in her country and around the world (Aggestam and Bergman Rosamond, 2019: 38). Other countries, like Canada, Spain and Germany, also made their feminist declarations following the election of new governments, seizing a window of opportunity to distinguish themselves as progressive alternatives to preceding administrations (Ivens and van Paassen, 2021). France emphasised its position as the first of the United Nations (UN) Security Council's five permanent members to espouse FFP, similarly using it as a branding exercise to enhance the country's global reputation (El-Khoury and Da Costa Vieira, 2024). Formed in January 2022 at the United Nations, the FFP+ Group now includes more than 20 countries that have either announced their own FFPs or indicated an interest in pursuing feminist approaches.

Several FFPs still lack any kind of written policy, even years after being announced, and more still lack clear definitions and conceptual frameworks: as Färber (in Achilleos-Sarll et al., 2023: 5) explains, newly elected governments have been keen to hit the ground running with a policy announcement, or to take advantage of the FFP 'zeitgeist'. There is also significant diversity in terms of what the label

'feminist' signifies to each government that adopts it (see Box 1). Importantly, many conflate their 'feminist' approach with gender, leaving the difference unclear between FFP and women's rights, gender mainstreaming or other related policy concerns.

The narrative of FFP therefore represents a kind of 'normative re-orientation of foreign policy' aimed at projecting soft power and standing amongst peers interested in multilateralism and international norm diffusion (Zhukova et al., 2022). It positions gender justice in relation to – and sometimes even operationalises it in pursuit of – poverty reduction, sustainable development, climate action or peace and security (Aggestam and Bergman Rosamond, 2016: 323). This positioning of FFP as a strategic narrative emanating from Europe and the west belies a long history of feminist activism in foreign policy around the world, and especially in the Global South (Parashar and D'Costa, 2017: 28; see also Bouka, 2021). Some of these efforts have been explicitly aimed at elaborating meaningfully feminist approaches in humanitarian action (see Box 3 in Chapter 4). Led overwhelmingly by western governments in its earliest stages, there has been little real space for women in crisis settings or their organisations to participate in the construction of FFP as a new narrative in global affairs or define what it would signify in practice.

While a few – notably including Sweden – have since officially scrapped their own policies, and many governments, agencies and other actors (including feminists) remain sceptical of the project of FFP, the movement towards FFP is continuing apace amidst growing calls for justice-oriented policies and adoption by Global South countries like Chile, Colombia, Liberia and Mongolia.[3] In humanitarian response (and beyond), FFP is explicitly linked to donor states like Canada and Germany's priorities for funding, political will and decision-making, making it incumbent on humanitarian actors and governments alike to understand the potential and limitations of this narrative for more inclusive, effective and accessible responses to crises. For feminist and gender-justice advocates within the humanitarian sector – whether they are situated in feminist movements and women-led organisations or inside major international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and UN agencies – FFPs can also be a useful mechanism to hold governments to account.

2.2 Humanitarian response in FFPs

A review of existing written FFPs shows that most are explicit about humanitarian action falling under their remit – for example, Spain's 2019–2026 humanitarian strategy commits to developing a 'feminist and transformative agenda for Spain's humanitarian action' (Gobierno de España, 2019: 39), while Sweden's most recent FFP prior to its repeal described how its feminist approach had strengthened its commitment to gender justice in crisis settings (Riksdagen, 2019). Germany and Canada's policies are also explicit on this front.

3 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' 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; Zhukova et al., 2022; Thomson, 2022); or whether states can be feminist actors (Duriesmith, 2018).

That being said, little in those policies references humanitarian timeframes, funding models, or ways of working, which frequently diverge from other areas of foreign policy, and neither do they address humanitarian resistance to agendas understood to be 'political', which is rooted in humanitarian principles.[4] Academic and grey literature on FFP also has very little to say about humanitarian response (see Bernarding and Lunz, 2020; Cheung et al., 2021; Thompson et al., 2023; CFFP, 2021; Gill-Atkinson et al., 2021). A major gap therefore exists around understanding what FFP might or could mean for humanitarian response, and there is also little awareness or sense of urgency around that gap.

This lack of engagement, seemingly from both FFP advocates and humanitarians, is significant in light of longstanding and mostly unrealised efforts to acknowledge the gendered impact of crises and bring about gender-responsive humanitarian action. These efforts to date have been described as 'insufficient and not very ambitious' (Abellán et al., 2022: 1; see also Holloway et al., 2019; Hart and Krueger, 2021; Daigle, 2022).[5] Key mechanisms like the Grand Bargain[6] and the Flagship Initiative have also remained mostly gender-unaware (ActionAid, 2021; Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2021; GAPS, 2023; see also Figure 1).[7] Similar efforts to bring the WPS agenda into conversation with humanitarian response have also seen little traction to date, despite the 'natural entry point' in the agenda's relief and recovery pillar (GADN, 2021; GAPS, 2023: 1).[8]

Thus, despite the humanitarian sector increasingly adopting a gender focus, due to both internal impetus and external pressures from donors and guidelines, this approach is still quite limited. It also has not translated into support for a feminist framing, which can perhaps be traced to a long-

4 The core humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence, which many international humanitarian actors – especially those based in the west – understand as the basis for their activities, were first elaborated by Jean Pictet and the International Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (ICRC), and later affirmed by the United Nations 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). See O'Callaghan and Leach (2013).

5 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.

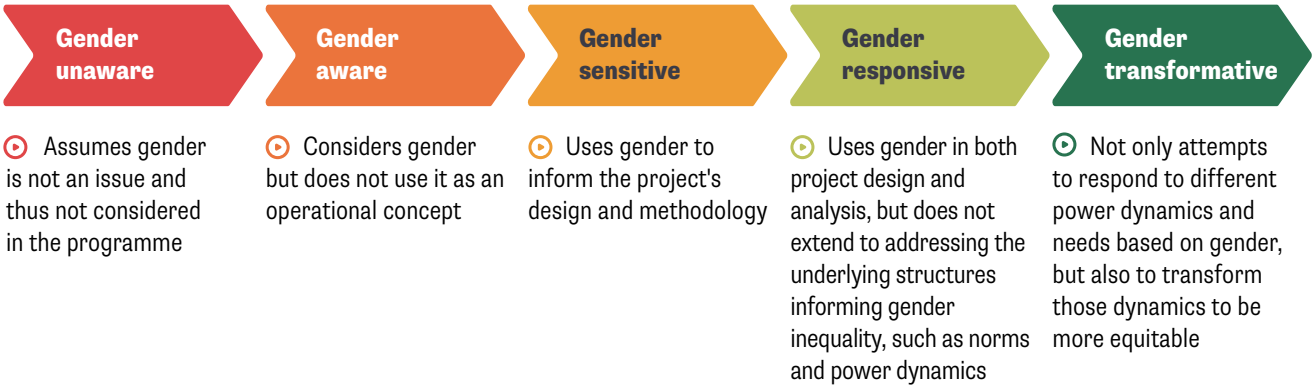
6 Launched in 2016, the Grand Bargain began as a five-year agenda to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian aid. Gender was not included in the language, leaving gender advocates to attempt to use the Grand Bargain as a mechanism to propel other agreements on gender forward. The Grand Bargain 2.0 was agreed in 2021, but even this lacks a meaningful gender lens (ActionAid, 2021; Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2021).

7 While the term 'gender-blind' is frequently used to describe approaches to humanitarian action that takes no account of gender dynamics, we prefer the alternative 'gender-unaware' to avoid assigning negative meaning to the term 'blind'.

8 At the Generation Equality Forum in 2021, the WPS–Humanitarian Action Compact was introduced as the latest effort to inspire better coordination across the two agendas (UN Women, 2023).

standing scepticism toward equity and justice orientations. The centrality of rights to virtually all FFPs also means that many humanitarians see it as inherently conflicting with needs-based and principled humanitarian response, narrowly conceived.

Figure 1 A spectrum of approaches to gender



Source: adapted from Butt et al. (2019)

2.3 Feminism in humanitarian response

While the international humanitarian system is lagging on gender relative to other sectors (Abellán et al., 2022), not to mention feminist approaches (which demand much wider and deeper transformation), there have long been efforts by feminist movements, women-led civil society organisations and allies inside humanitarian agencies to change how assistance is designed and delivered. These include, for example: work by GENFAMI in Colombia to join up responses to and embed a feminist lens across internal displacement, post-conflict recovery and Venezuelan displacement in Colombia through participatory dialogues (Veloza Martinez, 2024); using their embeddedness in communities to provide critical support to populations that cannot be reached by international actors, like the Women's Affairs Technical Committee in northern Gaza (Al Bakri, 2024); advocating for and providing services suited to people who experience multiple forms of marginalisation, like the Community Association for Vulnerable Persons Cameroon (Ngum Ndi, 2024); and delivering agile and holistic rapid-response activities tailored to the needs of crisis-affected communities across eight countries during the Covid-19 pandemic (FHN, 2021). It also includes nascent efforts by major INGOs including Oxfam, ActionAid and the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) to better support efforts such as these and develop their own feminist principles and ways of working (see Box 3 in Chapter 4).

Along these lines, one respondent described their own experience, which pre-dated any formal notion of FFP:

> [Back in 2008–2009] we were getting frustrated at the lack of progress that was happening around gender and inclusion, and by 'we' I mean a cohort of us who were working on this in humanitarian [action]. [...] And so one day we sat down, and we're just like, 'What do we want?' And we created this whole vision that we then decided to name feminist humanitarian assistance [...] [and] we developed it as a pilot project. [...] At the time the idea was, what do we mean by feminist humanitarian response? Let's actually put this together and work with some [...] women's organisation partners to give them the money and give them the training so they can talk the language of the 'big boys' – literally, not figuratively – and see what happens. (Civil society, Canada)

Other respondents describe similar debates and internal advocacy within major INGOs that precede the advent of FFP by years, often in the face of considerable resistance. As a result, in a 2019 speech at the Georgetown Institute of Women, Peace and Security, International Rescue Committee (IRC) president David Miliband said: 'We cannot be a truly successful humanitarian organization [...] until we are a feminist organization' (Miliband, 2019). In a similar vein, Oxfam launched its own set of feminist principles in 2020 (Oxfam, 2020; see also Box 3).

As noted above, however, feminist approaches have an even more considerable history when viewed through the lens of work by local and place-based women leaders and their organisations in crisis settings. Feminists and gender-justice advocates have long argued for women's rights groups to be recognised for their critical and lifesaving humanitarian work, but the leadership roles that women and their grassroots and local organisations already play as early responders and promoters of community resilience in crisis settings are still not fully acknowledged in humanitarian policy, practice or funding modalities (Njeri and Daigle, 2022). 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, marks an important development in terms of better understanding what accessible, collaborative and participatory humanitarian response might look like.

These instances are limited but promising, contributing to making this a critical moment for reflection, and for humanitarians and governments who claim the label 'feminist', whether through FFP or other avenues, to engage meaningfully with elaborating and implementing feminist approaches to crisis. The transformative political ambition of these feminist efforts, however, comes quickly into tension with humanitarian response's much more limited, needs-based and short-term focus. This tension relates to understandings of the appropriate mandate, principles, scope and scale of crisis response, as well as of the very definition of 'crisis' (see Box 3 in Chapter 4). As the following chapters will demonstrate, this clash of narratives around the nature of crisis and response would seem to limit FFP's potential and scope in the field of humanitarian action.

Box 2 From women to gender... to feminism?

Gender has been on the radar of international humanitarian actors for at least 30 years, but progress on understanding and accounting for gendered risks, needs and opportunities in crisis response has been patchy at best (Holloway et al., 2019; Daigle, 2022). Early efforts were explicitly aimed at the protection of women and girls in crisis settings, such as UNHCR's 'Policy on refugee women' in 1990 and Oxfam's 1993 commitment to prioritise women's needs and rights (Bryer, 1999). After the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, however, the tide turned towards a 'gender' framing with the proliferation of 'gender mainstreaming' in the development and humanitarian sectors. More recently, a range of descriptors has emerged to indicate the extent to which awareness of and sensitivity to gender concerns shapes programming, though not all organisations agree on these terms or their meaning (see Figure 1).

While the use of 'gender' rather than simply 'women' is meant to indicate an awareness of the relational and socially constructed nature of such concerns, it has been amply argued that current 'gender' approaches still just amount to a focus on women (Holloway et al., 2019; Daigle, 2022). It is also important to note that none of these – 'gender' or 'women' as lenses, or the mechanisms and frameworks described below – is sufficient to constitute a meaningfully feminist approach (see Box 3).

Gender mainstreaming

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, resulting from the Beijing Conference in 1995, used the term 'gender mainstreaming' 23 times, with the aim of fully integrating women into policies, programmes and operations of states and the UN system. The UN General Assembly later adopted the following definition:

> The process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality. (UNGA, 1997: 24)

Thus, far from innovative in the current context, gender mainstreaming had become 'standard development speak' by the late 1990s. Its approach, which adds women and girls into existing processes, systems, roles and structures without fundamentally reconsidering how power functions within those same spaces, makes addressing gendered inequalities into a technical exercise rather than a fundamentally political one. Furthermore, by dispersing responsibility for gender across departments, units and bureaux, mainstreaming makes gender justice everyone's – and therefore no one's – problem. As such, it has arguably failed to deliver on representation, shifting norms and reducing GBV, leading Parpart (2009: 51) to call it an 'uncritical, triumphalist discourse' that lacks true transformational or innovative potential.

Gender markers

A key way to demonstrate commitment and monitor progress on agendas like FFP is in terms of resourcing, although some governments – like Canada – make these claims without reference to externally verified (or verifiable) markers or codes, and their data is also self-reported.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Development Assistance Committee (OECD DAC) Gender Equality Policy Marker allows funders to tag projects as having a 'principal' or 'significant' gender focus, with defined criteria for what qualifies under each. Many governments have integrated the OECD DAC marker into their internal frameworks. This marker is widely used by databases seeking to track the gender content and potential impact of spending and projects.

Using the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Gender with Age Marker (GAM), projects can be coded (tagged) on a 0–4 scale indicating their level of gender sensitivity. While the GAM is currently used by two databases tracking humanitarian financing (the Financial Tracking Service and the country-based pooled funds, both run by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)), neither allows filtering by the GAM and thus data on gender-related financing in humanitarian response remains scarce and difficult to analyse (O'Donnell et al., 2021).

Gender-responsive or gender-transformative?

Numerous respondents, especially from civil society, argued that a gender-transformative (rather than merely gender-sensitive or -responsive) orientation should be a non-negotiable for humanitarian action to be considered feminist. Notably, this is not a settled view: pursuing gender-transformative humanitarian action has been criticised not only by FFP's detractors but also by some feminists working in humanitarian response, especially where it is promoted or led by international intervenors rather than place-based organisations and movements embedded in the local context and priorities (Daigle, 2022). In that vein, some respondents were sceptical of the appropriateness of gender-transformative interventions:

> We were being asked to do transformative work in nexus settings, in a place where you can't do this from a do-no-harm perspective. [...] given the context and budget, we had to just say that there's a risk that we could do harm if we push for this, but we're not there long enough to track norm change, backlash, all the things we need to track. (Civil society, Canada)

> I'll give the humanitarians this one, which is timelines, right? [...] full transformation, responsible transformation, supportive transformation that works in people's lives, can take a really long time, and should, frankly. (Civil society, Canada)

3 Canada: seizing the political moment

Canada launched its 'Feminist international assistance policy' (FIAP) in 2017, two years after Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Liberal Party formed government and following numerous public commitments to gender-equal and feminist principles. Canada was already well known for its prioritisation of gender in development, global health, humanitarian response and even trade prior to the FIAP. Several interviewees pointed to the existence of a gender equality policy as early as 1990 and the integration of Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) across the Canadian federal government as evidence of this.[9] Referring to Canada's technical capacity for gender in its aid work, one respondent said, 'we actually had an over prevalence for quite a while'.[10]

Despite this track record, the previous Conservative government had narrowed Canada's gender focus by, for example, imposing severe restrictions on funding for safe abortion care. The new Liberal government was therefore seeking to differentiate itself:

> They were very keen to embrace it almost as a shock factor politically [...]. It sort of came out of its granola, hippie, chaining-yourself-to-fences, Greenpeace-type connotations from the seventies and eighties [...] They were elected in very much that kind of zeitgeist and were very keen to embrace it. (Civil society, Canada)

FFP therefore emerged out of an interest on the part of a new government to highlight its progressive political positioning through narratives that explicitly centred justice, equality and norms-driven policy as a marked shift from what came before. Domestically, the Liberals had targeted women voters with promises of a new national strategy on GBV, consideration for gendered impacts in all government decisions, a nationwide inquiry on 'the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls', and arresting Canada's decline in the UN's gender equality index (Gerster, 2019).

FFP itself, having been established by Sweden a year before the Trudeau government's election win, was a convenient mechanism to distinguish Canada among the mid-sized powers on the international stage, while also codifying an already established prioritisation of gender in Canadian international assistance. Nevertheless, the jump from a gender focus to an explicit commitment to FFP still came from above and very quickly – one civil servant called it 'a flip of the switch' – with staff within Global Affairs Canada (GAC) tasked with formulating what it meant and how it could be accomplished.[11]

9 GBA+ is an analytical tool for ascertaining gendered impacts of policies and programmes that has been used by the government of Canada since 1995. See: www.canada.ca/en/women-gender-equality/gender-based-analysis-plus/what-gender-based-analysis-plus.html

10 Canada's work on gender dates back to the 1976 Women in Development Strategy, the 1995 Policy on Women in Development and Gender Equality, and the 1999 Gender Equality Policy (Tiessen, 2016).

11 Similar comments were made about Sweden's first FFP in 2014 (see Towns et al., 2023).

3.1 'Feminist international assistance policy'

That the FIAP was ordained from the highest levels is not out of the ordinary for government ministries, but it is indicative of the way that a feminist approach was adopted and then later elaborated:

> The FIAP was fast-tracked, a document published, resources devoted, developing each of the action areas. In parallel, the department was trying to get its head around what this means in terms of a broad foreign policy framework. (Government, Canada)

In the course of formulating the FIAP, GAC embarked on a period of consultation that eventually reached over 15,000 participants in 65 countries through GAC missions:

> We called 2016 the year of consultations because there were so many different consultations launched at the time. (Civil society, Canada)

Civil society was invited to make written submissions and attend in-person consultations, which GAC then distilled into an online report titled 'What we heard' (GAC, 2016). GAC seemed to find the process very helpful for developing the FIAP, although the immense scale and duration of consultations left some wondering if the resulting policy would ever launch (Brown and Swiss, 2017). The document itself was then written by an in-house policy shop, incorporating learning from colleagues in Sweden and taking gender from a cross-cutting focus to 'the centre of everything'.

The resulting document attempted to link idealism with pragmatism by framing 'investing in women and girls [as] the right thing to do and the smart way to reduce poverty and inequality' (GAC, 2017a: 1). It was couched in terms of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and promised that, by 2021–2022, 80% of Canada's bilateral international assistance would integrate gender equality as a significant goal and 15% would target it as a principal goal (ibid.: 9). Partners and grantees are required to report on projects through this lens.

The FIAP covers humanitarian response under an action area entitled 'Human dignity', alongside health, nutrition and education. The FIAP details the particular risks facing women and girls – including a particular focus on SRHR – as well as the gains to be made through inclusion:

> When women and girls are included in the planning and implementation of humanitarian responses, it improves humanitarian outcomes overall. These efforts also prepare women to lead post-crisis recovery and reconstruction. (GAC, 2017a: 29)

References are made to commitments from the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 and in successive WPS national action plans. Notably, the document also indicates that Canada will 'advocate for humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law, including by shining a light on the ways in which humanitarian crises present unique challenges for women and girls' (GAC, 2017a: 31).

The FIAP was widely welcomed, in Canada and beyond, for its wide-ranging approach – integrating areas not always considered to be core humanitarian concerns, like SRHR – and for positioning women and girls as agents of change. At the same time, it has been criticised for lacking an official and public definition of the term 'feminist' (Cadesky, 2020; Thompson et al., 2023); for instrumentalising women by positioning gender equality as a solution to the problem of poverty (Brown and Swiss, 2017; Zhukova et al., 2022); and for reinforcing foreign policy silos (Bouka et al., 2021). Although welcome, the focus on GBV and SRHR is deemed by Thompson as 'hardly boundary pushing' (in Achilleos-Sarll et al., 2023: 21–22). While broadly supportive of the FIAP and the momentum it engendered, respondents from Canada's civil society tended to agree:

> When you read the text of the FIAP, it's not particularly radical – it's just talking about women and girls and prioritising women and girls and doing proper needs assessment [...] That's not particularly radical. (Civil society, Canada)

3.2 Operationalising the FIAP for humanitarian action

As a narrative device, the FIAP served to codify and advance a longstanding commitment to gender in Canada. That said, applying that ethos to humanitarian response – a much more recent development – triggered relatively early discussions regarding what humanitarian action under the FIAP could look like:

> [Feminism] wasn't a driver of programming, it wasn't a driver of thinking. It wasn't a driver of an agenda until FIAP, and with FIAP it was because humanitarian was part of the policy. (Government, Canada)
>
> But the biggest tension about operationalisation, and that has been present on the development side but even more on the humanitarian side, is what does it mean to actually do it? (Civil society, Canada)

Operationalising the FIAP's explicitly 'transformative and activist' approach (GAC, 2017a: 11) for humanitarian response therefore posed a challenge, even though Canada's humanitarian units sit alongside development within GAC.

GAC launched a strategy entitled 'A feminist approach: gender equality in humanitarian action', detailing how gender-responsiveness 'strengthens our entire humanitarian response' (GAC, 2019a). It is notable here that feminist language is used much less than in the FIAP itself, but the document carries forward the focus on women and girls in crises:

> Canada supports gender-responsive humanitarian action, which is needed to address the specific needs and priorities of people in vulnerable situations, particularly women and girls, to support their empowerment and to ensure that our aid has a greater and more lasting impact. By adopting a feminist approach, Canada is thus determined to respect humanitarian principles in the delivery of its humanitarian assistance by ensuring that this assistance appropriately meets the specific needs of people affected by a crisis. (GAC, 2019a)

The document also links these to other commitments under the Grand Bargain and the Agenda for Humanity. The strategy recognises crises as potential opportunities to bring about change in social norms, and thus it subscribes to gender-transformative humanitarian action 'where and when possible', with attention to both targeted and cross-cutting approaches in four areas: humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law (IHL); GBV; SRHR; and empowerment of women and girls (GAC, 2019a).

As noted above, GAC explicitly positions its feminist ethos alongside a principled approach, but the document lacks any engagement with how a feminist approach (or indeed a gender-responsive or -transformative one) fits into understandings of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence (GAC, 2019a; see also 2019c; 2017b). At the time of the strategy's release, civil society responses pointed to the lack of a costed plan to achieve its aims or to fund women-led action, making it 'unclear how the government will ensure at least 15 percent of its humanitarian funding goes directly to stand-alone initiatives focused on gender in emergencies' (Singh, 2019; see also Care Canada, 2019).

Subsequently, the 'Feminist approach – innovation and effectiveness guidance note' (2019c) sought to further elaborate feminist principles, while Canada's 'Policy for civil society partnerships for international assistance – a feminist approach' (2017b) set out parameters for working with organisations in the Global South. The latter makes the first explicit call to deploy 'human rights-based approaches' in humanitarian assistance, an ambitious if limited move in the context of hesitations to address rights, root causes of inequalities and barriers to change in the humanitarian space. Both documents focus on IHL and principles, the key role of women's organisations in meeting humanitarian needs, and the need to shift 'from using international assistance as a tool to meet needs to using it as a tool to advance human rights' (GAC, 2019c).

These documents also note the internal transformation that will be required to 'credibly and capably achieve the transformative change that it seeks to deliver', gesturing at questions of staff capacity; power analysis and partnership dynamics; disaggregated data; new funding mechanisms, like multi-year funding and country-based pooled funds; and developing feminist monitoring and evaluation (GAC, 2017b; 2019c). All of these areas feed into the modernisation process that interviewees mentioned as being underway at GAC, to streamline and improve its internal systems and processes.

The roll-out of key performance indicators for the FIAP in 2019 has ostensibly enabled GAC to provide data on the results of the policy at an aggregate level, but for humanitarian response these are limited to percentages of projects that include GBV or SRHR components and numbers of people reached by SRHR services, with no indicators of (for example) funding to women-led action or representation of women in key humanitarian spaces (GAC, 2019b).

3.3 'The devil's in the implementation'

In the years following the launch of the FIAP and associated policies, moving from narrative to impact took centre stage:

> [The FIAP] was widely acknowledged, I think, as a good solid document, but like any strategy, the devil is in the implementation and the funding. And I think that's where we hit a bit of a roadblock. (Civil society, Canada)

Importantly, overlapping commitments like the IASC Gender with Age Marker also emerged in the 2010s, meaning that the FIAP was likely the most prominent of a set of factors driving the change described below.

3.3.1 Normative impact

Respondents pointed to the immediate normative effect of the FIAP and associated policies, the launch of which had cemented Canada's position as an ally for gender justice internationally. This catalysed important changes in the sector domestically as organisations sought to align with GAC's priorities, such that a 2020 report found that two-thirds of organisations surveyed had made investments in organisational capacity influenced by the FIAP, including hiring gender experts and designing new programmes, although without any additional technical support or funding from GAC (Rao, 2020: 4). Interviewees concurred on this point:

> It was really hard to break into the sector in Canada despite my experience overseas [...] it was really hard to get into an NGO. That shifted when the FIAP started to take prominence. It started to become apparent to every organisation that they'd better step up their work on gender equality, rights-based work, GBV. [...] I had multiple offers after seven months [...] there were so few gender advisors, and suddenly everyone wanted one and needed one. But we also saw the same from the Government of Canada, who started poaching because they needed support to move this policy forward. There was a huge amount of scrambling over scarce resources. (Civil society, Canada)

GAC soon began scrutinising the consultation processes, partnerships, monitoring and accountability mechanisms of the INGOs and multilateral agencies that it supported, and subjecting all projects to its GBA+ tool, which was implemented across government ministries and departments:

> Suddenly, no matter where you sat in the federal government, you have to take a GBA+ training course where, like, no one had talked about that before. (Government, Canada)

In 2020, Canada also developed its first Gender Equality and Empowerment Measurement (GEM) tool using a feminist methodology.[12]

Government informants described experiences of demanding gender analysis from the World Bank and the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) for the first time, which they argued would not have happened without the FIAP, although the impact of these demands on international agencies' practices

12 See more on the GEM Tool here: www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/funding-financement/introduction_gender_emt-outil_renforcement_epf.aspx?lang=eng.

was unclear. During its 2018 presidency of the G7, Canada also spearheaded the Whistler Declaration on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls in Humanitarian Action, which argued that steps like the World Humanitarian Summit and the Call to Action on Protection from GBV in Emergencies have 'not yet sufficiently changed the way humanitarian assistance is being delivered to affected populations' and calls for further action on accountability, prioritisation and evidence generation (G7, 2018: 2).

3.3.2 Funding sufficiency and modalities

Canada stepped up funding significantly, with 88% of all GAC-funded projects having gender equality as a significant goal in 2019–2020 and 90% in 2020–2021, making it the most prolific donor amongst FFP countries, although advocates noted that the same period saw a small dip in the proportion targeting gender as a principal goal due to diversion towards pandemic-related spending (Papagioti et. al, 2022; Thompson et al., 2023). Government informants noted the value of the set funding targets in helping them reach these levels, particularly in the humanitarian sphere:

> We ended up making these commitments that I think really moved the mark because you had to actually show that you were putting funding towards this. And from a humanitarian perspective [...] that was really tough, right? Because they just sort of said [...] We can't do targeted programming. That's not how you do humanitarian work. [...] I can remember that being the most difficult of the action areas with the minister's office, and being rewritten, and pushing and pushing to go further, and I think there were people who were still in that mindset of, it's not possible, but now they said yes, like we have come so far and really moved the marker. (Government, Canada)

GAC also began allowing prospective grantees to include budget for gender and GBV advisors in their proposals, which constituted a significant step forward, as well as a dedicated budget line for local partners' overhead costs, which emerged in interviews and secondary sources (IASC, 2023).

Nonetheless, it is clear that there has been far less change in what GAC funds and how it does so, as civil society informants described the 'usual sector approaches' as well as an overall increase in one-year funding cycles, resulting in less agility and innovation than anticipated at the launch of the FIAP. One government informant noted:

> We rely entirely on our partners and their capability to make real our feminist agenda in the humanitarian space, which isn't necessarily true in the broader development space. (Government, Canada)

Civil society informants repeatedly noted that these partners still do not meaningfully include grassroots, place-based or national organisations, including women-led organisations, in crisis settings. Despite commitments under the FIAP and the associated partnership policy, GAC is not equipped to fund directly due to the humanitarian impetus to push large amounts of funding out in a small number

of tranches. One civil society informant even reported being asked to remove a project component focused on women's leadership and empowerment from a proposal. GAC thus supports women-led action indirectly only by channelling funds to multilateral agencies, INGOs and pooled funds.

Government respondents were quick to highlight the difficulties of shifting humanitarian funding modalities, given the many exceptions that are applied to crisis-response funding pots, the need to disperse funds quickly, and the bureaucratic barriers to bilateral or direct funding for humanitarian action in particular:

> Those barriers [...] are real and it's a hard point of tension to resolve. As a result, we advocate to our multi[lateral] partners and to the pooled funds and all of it for better tracking, including disaggregation and better reporting. And this will continue to be what we do. (Government, Canada)

Civil society actors were frank in their assessment of progress thus far on applying feminist principles to humanitarian funding and the obstacles cited to shifting modalities:

> It's an excuse. But that doesn't mean it's not true [...] Civil society organisations on the ground, especially small ones, need things to be flexible. They need it to be multi year, they need it to be agile. [...] However, the management and implementation modality has not transformed. It is still a control-based, contractual system. So the flexibility, that agility, etcetera is being given to the larger groups, the multis or the INGOs, and then they're being subcontracted basically to then send the money out to civil society. So the people who need it most are not necessarily getting it. [...] We're leaning on the systems the way they already exist to do it, and we're using that as an excuse to not look at how do we come up with other modalities. (Civil society, Canada)

Thus, despite its feminist principles, Canada remains 'one of the most overly bureaucratic in terms of their requirements for grants and contributions', setting higher hurdles for organisations based in crisis settings than domestic Canadian agencies and thus far avoiding developing workable funding modalities to support women-led humanitarian response and women's leadership in crisis settings. This is an area where some government informants seemed to recognise the scale of work ahead, noting that 'we need to walk the talk a bit there too', engaging more with perceptions of risk and innovative solutions. One promising development here is Canada's role in co-developing and co-leading the Alliance for Feminist Movements, a multistakeholder engagement group focused on resourcing and including a pillar on supporting feminist movements in crisis response.

3.3.3 Impact and reporting

The primary reporting mechanism is GAC's annual report to parliament, but these operate on an 18-month delay and tend not to provide easily comparable data:

> They can choose to include basically what they want in the annual reports [...] They can vary the format, so it's very hard to track year to year. And yeah, it's on such a delay as to be very hard for accountability in the moment. (Civil society, Canada)

Reports generally note performance against the key spending targets, reaching a peak in 2021–2022 of 99% of bilateral humanitarian assistance projects 'integrat[ing] gender equality considerations, with the exception of funding for humanitarian logistics operations' (GAC, 2023: 46). In the most recent report, however, the FIAP and its action areas no longer provide the framework for the report, in contrast to 2021 and 2022, instead treating gender as a programmatic theme (GAC, 2023).

In 2023, the Auditor General found that GAC had exceeded its target of 80% funding towards gender as a significant goal, but that some projects entailed as little as 'simple gender-based data collection'. Over-performance in this area may have also detracted from the goal of 15% towards gender as a principal goal, which was unmet (OAG, 2023: 11). The report found weaknesses in GAC's information management systems, reporting against set indicators and reflection on longer-term impact. While this explicitly excluded humanitarian programming, the exceptions applied to humanitarian funding mean that reporting is likely to be weaker still.

These reports have not dimmed civil society actors' support for the FIAP, recognising that GAC – like any bureaucracy of its size – is a 'huge beast' and that change takes time. Rather, informants highlight the need to continue developing and improving feminist monitoring and evaluation methodologies to capture impact in more inclusive and accessible ways. They argued that feminist principles call for not just sufficient but high-quality funding and power analysis that queries the colonial and hierarchical relationship between funders and their grantees.[13] With all of this in mind, interviewees were hopeful about GAC's current modernisation process, a major initiative targeting its systems and processes:

> I think they're looking at the system, I guess, like the contracting and all that stuff and seeing how they can make that less burdensome and be fit for purpose, rather than heavy reporting. (Civil society, Canada)
>
> GAC now has a big modernisation project to try and supposedly address both the back end, the literal mechanics and IT systems of how they grant, but also hopefully their risk tolerance and attitude to how they deliver aid, to hopefully better align it with FIAP. So that's still on... that's only just started. (Civil society, Canada)

Civil society informants also noted efforts by GAC to organise trainings and workshops on, and to develop new tools for, feminist evaluations as promising steps.

13 In 2023, 77 Canadian international aid organisations issued a joint call for increased funding to meet its feminist commitments. See: https://cooperation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Open-Letter-to-Chrstia-Freeland_ENG_v2.pdf.

3.4 Transformation on the inside

By all accounts, the period immediately following the FIAP's launch was characterised by a 'huge scale-up' of staffing at all levels (in the words of one civil society actor), as well as a culture shift, including internal diversity and inclusion work. While the ministry is doing well on representation of women within its ranks (see Thompson et al., 2023), capacity is an ongoing problem, with gender-relevant concerns like GBV, SRHR, preventing sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) and LGBTQIA+ issues often overlapping in the same staffing portfolios and expertise not being developed on the humanitarian side:

> The gender equality division in GAC is really only equipped to deal with the development angle and there's an awareness of that gap. (Government, Canada)

The capacity scale-up is mirrored in GAC's institutional culture, which saw one civil society actor reporting 'getting laughed out of spaces for using feminist and humanitarian in the same sentence' in the years prior to the FIAP. Interviewees variously indicated 'grumbling' amongst humanitarian staffers in early stages of developing and institutionalising the FIAP, a belief that pre-existing efforts like GBA+ were sufficient for a feminist approach, and resistance related to perceived tensions between feminism and humanitarian principles:

> Within global affairs, there was a mixed understanding of whether or not this was something new. [...] So I think there was some tension around whether this was an inflection point and this was something different, or was this just gender equality as a cross cutting theme with a shiny new coat? (Civil society, Canada)
>
> Culturally, I think that most of the folks working in development programming are very inclined that way. [...] Maybe not quite as keen in the humanitarian [sector]. There's a little more, like, 'we gotta save lives and just get it done'. A little more practical focus. (Government, Canada)
>
> But I do know there was a lot of tension around this idea that feminism is transformative versus humanitarian needing to be needs-based and responsive, and – I love this one – principled, a.k.a., capital P. Impartial, neutral [...] I do know that that is what led to the development of the GRHA [gender-responsive humanitarian action] sub-policy.[14] It was an attempt to marry or resolve this tension. I do know that that is why there are four pillars where pillar four is empowerment. I do know that was part of these discussions about whether or not it's possible in a humanitarian space. And that will continue to be a conversation as this moves forward. (Civil society, Canada)

As the policy bedded down, some even found that the debate 'swung the other way', with GAC requesting that even short-term interventions be gender-transformative, which grantees sometimes

14 This refers to GAC's strategy document, 'A feminist approach: gender equality in humanitarian action', which is discussed in section 3.2 above.

found inappropriate (see Box 2 in Chapter 2). The majority, however, reported internal resistance amongst humanitarians that played out 'very subtle, very under-the-radar' ways. The modernisation process described above also comes into play here:

> There's obviously therefore an entire back end and culture shift that needs to happen internally to be able to use the systems that will need to be in place. I do think there's a lot of political will on the humanitarian side given the intensity, shall we say, of the due diligence systems and the level of effort [required] to manage the internal systems, reporting, filing, you know, granting and like all of it. (Government, Canada)

These tensions transcend GAC itself and apply widely to the sector, where hierarchical ways of working prevail between donor governments and perceived tensions with principled responses are commonplace, as will be discussed below. It is notable, however, that multiple interviewees report new language, conversations and even hiring happening inside GAC that they never would have thought possible 15 years earlier, as well as a will to change:

> It's one of those things, right? Power recreates itself. So I don't think it's malicious. I don't think people are sitting there being like, how do we get out of doing the hard work? (Civil society, Canada)

Internal transformation is also an area where the power of a specifically feminist narrative (rather than one that simply focuses on gender) comes into play, as it makes clear that the task is not one of tackling gendered inequalities 'out there' in crisis settings, but rather that GAC's own systems and ways of working are on the table to be re-thought and changed – even if not at the level that a truly feminist transformation might require. At the very least, linking the FIAP to GAC's internal modernisation process and efforts at localisation has upped the ambition and scope of a 'feminist' approach.

3.5 What lies ahead?

The seven years of the FIAP is a story of progress but also a long road still ahead. GAC has pursued a relatively ambitious approach to FFP in the sphere of humanitarian action, not explicitly managing tensions with principles but also not privileging them. It would seem that ambition is let down not by vision but by financing and decision-making structures that act as an impediment to major change, affecting not just FFP but also localisation, accountability and other areas. GAC's success on allocating funds to projects with gender equality as a significant goal also somewhat overshadows the shakier progress on gender as a principal goal; these classifications have also been criticised for lacking independent verification.

While thinking on intersectionality, gender diversity and other elements of a feminist approach has arguably moved past the language of the existing FIAP, interviewees were nearly unanimous in opposing any policy refresh, which would only complicate matters, even as they acknowledged the work still to be done:

> They've only just dipped their toe in. [...] Could there have been more? Absolutely. Would I say that GAC's focus on humanitarian programming is feminist? Absolutely not. [But] in 2010, the conversations were radically different. (Civil society, Canada)

> I don't think we're all the way there yet in the humanitarian space, even in our programming, in part because it's difficult to assign a particular code to it, but there's now the imperative to do it, which there wasn't before [...] now we have to track it and because we have to track it, there's accountability. (Government, Canada)

Importantly, while the language of feminism has been evident beyond GAC in the Canadian government, the promised white paper on FFP that would link the FIAP to other areas of foreign policy has yet to materialise, which limits how integrated the approach can be across foreign policy, much less across government.[15] Given the role of diplomacy in negotiating and maintaining humanitarian access, this also has a direct impact on crisis response.

There is also growing concern about waning commitment to the FIAP in the face of competing concerns like climate justice. A looming federal election in 2025 divided respondents, as government actors insisted that important changes like GBA+ and funding targets will persist even if the FIAP is scrapped, while civil society was less sure:

> The funding pool is continuing to shrink in this country – this country's focus is not on humanitarian support. As needs go up and funding shrinks, that's where the rubber hits the road. Will they continue with [gender], or will they revert to needs, needs, needs? If we see a change of government, the lack of FIAP will have a bigger impact on humanitarian than on the development side. [...] The development side is better positioned to hold the gains. (Civil society, Canada)

Nearly 10 years' commitment to the FIAP, underpinned by the preceding portfolio of gender equality work, seems to have more fully permeated GAC's development work than its humanitarian side. The belief that the FIAP will be repealed by a future government is a cause of anxiety, particularly around agendas that are likely to suffer as a result, such as comprehensive SRHR programming, but it is also an impetus to push through more important changes and paradigm shifts while it still stands. The time remaining will therefore be a test of what commitment there has been to translate the FFP narrative into sustainable, institutionalised change.

15 A small number of civil society interviewees had seen and provided feedback on a draft of the white paper. See also Thompson et al. (2023).

4 Germany: coalition politics in action

As the most recent country to launch its own policy, Germany is quite new on the FFP scene and also quite new to humanitarian donorship. Since 2011, the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO)'s contributions have increased almost every year, rising from €82 million to nearly €2.6 billion 10 years later (Bundesfinanzministerium, 2023 in Kreidler et al., 2023). German humanitarian capacity is thus also quite nascent and very limited, developing from a small task force (Arbeitsstab) in 2011 to three divisions from 2022, all seated within GFFO.[16] As a result, Germany hosts a 'fragmented NGO landscape', populated by smaller organisations and many newly founded German branches of INGOs that are less engaged in policy debates than in comparable national settings (Quack, 2016; Kreidler, et al., 2023; Hövelmann and Sudhoff, 2023).

FFP in Germany came about following years of activism led by the Berlin-based Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy (CFFP), as well as work on the WPS agenda and other gender issues by the Netzwerk 1325, Verband Entwicklungspolitik und Humanitäre Hilfe (Association for Development Policy and Humanitarian Aid, or VENRO) and transnational activists, which together amounted to 'a very clear wave coming from Sweden into Germany', as per one civil society interviewee. The Deutscher Frauenrat (National Council of Women's Organizations) adopted a resolution calling for FFP at its 2021 assembly, and not long after, a coalition government was formed by the Social Democrats, Greens and Free Democrats with an explicit commitment to FFP in its manifesto (DF, 2021; Koalitionsvertrag, 2021: 114).

Where Germany had been criticised for an approach to crises that lacked longer-term thinking and amounted to 'muddling through', the new government's commitment to a 'Zeitenwende' (sea change) would come to include a new national security strategy, increased defence spending, significant support for Ukraine – and implementing FFP. The FFP narrative therefore supported wider, more overarching narratives seeking to distinguish the new coalition government from predecessor Angela Merkel's administration, part of 'a desire to break this cycle and leave the past behind' (Dinkel et al., 2022: 2). Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, the first woman to hold the post in Germany, has been the principal face of the new policy – and, like Trudeau in Canada, her ascension to high office has been seen as a moment of optimism: 'her main asset is her capacity to embody the desire for change that is currently sweeping the country' (Van Renterghem and Robinet-Borgomano, 2021). In the lead-up to the 2021 election, as a candidate for the chancellery, Baerbock stated, 'I am running as a candidate for renewal. For the status quo, there are already enough candidates' (in Van Renterghem and Robinet-Borgomano, 2021). In that vein, Politico named Baerbock one of five 'disruptors' in its annual ranking of the most influential people in Europe (Politico, 2023).

16 An evaluation by GFFO and the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) in 2011 found that 'German humanitarian assistance as a whole is very fragmented and compartmentalised' and recommended that humanitarian capacity should move to BMZ rather than GFFO (Weingärtner et al., 2011: xxiii in Kreidler et al., 2023: 15). This recommendation was not taken up, and thus humanitarian response remains with GFFO.

Despite this impetus towards change, and despite the advocacy of CFFP, Netzwerk 1325 and Deutscher Frauenrat described above, the inclusion of FFP in the coalition agreement was still received as surprising and, according to one civil society interviewee, coming 'totally out of nothing'. Some interviewees speculated that FFP was seen as a 'state-of-the-art' or 'avant-garde' stance that would raise Germany's profile in foreign policy circles, but others wondered whether FFP could ever be a 'German concept' and whether its inclusion in English in the coalition agreement was indicative of a shallow commitment (Koalitionsvertrag, 2021).

Here it is important to note that responsibilities for international assistance are strictly separated between GFFO and the Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung (Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development, or BMZ), a division that is monitored and enforced by Germany's federal audit office. Where GFFO (led by the Greens) covers humanitarian action as well as WPS, human rights and other areas, BMZ (led by the Social Democrats) is responsible for development strategy, programming and funding. BMZ developed and released its own 'Feminist development policy' (BMZ, 2023) simultaneously to GFFO's guidelines, and while this study remains focused on GFFO for its relevance to humanitarian response, it will occasionally draw comparisons with BMZ's policy and process.

4.1 'Feminist foreign policy guidelines'

Like Canada's FIAP, Germany's 'Feminist foreign policy guidelines' came about via a top-down process, and one that was still fresh in informants' minds. Consultations progressed through a call for papers, the flagship 'Shaping feminist foreign policy' conference hosted in Berlin in September 2022, in-person consultations in December 2022, and a policy launch in 2023. Government informants spoke warmly of a constructive, two-way relationship with civil society experts during the consultation period, a view not shared by interviewees based in INGOs and networks, who described the consultations as a 'complete nightmare':

> I was never invited for any consultation. We always just invited ourselves. (Civil society, Germany)
>
> We all invested a lot of time in this and it was a very not welcoming process. We actually forced [our inputs] on them. And then the policy was presented [...] and seriously, every German media outlet had received the policy beforehand, not German civil society. We saw the policy the first time at the presentation in the Foreign Office. And every single media outlet reported about the content beforehand, and it was really like, okay, this is really not how you cooperate with the people. (Civil society, Germany)

Interviewees said that no draft paper was shared for comment, little background thinking or training for GFFO staff had been done prior to consultations, and sessions were rushed and unprepared. Some lamented that GFFO had never been very consultative with civil society, in the tradition of diplomatic

discretion, which stood in stark contrast to BMZ's much more inclusive and consultative approach.[17] Neither civil society nor government informants had a clear sense of whether consultations in crisis settings had been conducted.

The guidelines were drafted by a purpose-built desk within GFFO, drawing on discussions, mostly with Sweden but also Canada and Spain, and building on Sweden's '3R' model of rights, resources and representation. 'We are pursuing feminist foreign policy because it is desperately necessary', wrote Baerbock in her foreword to the guidelines (GFFO, 2023: 2). The document itself is organised around the 3R framework and attempts to unite feminist principles with pragmatism, proposing a set of 10 'guidelines' – six focused on foreign policy activities and four aimed at transforming GFFO itself. The policy commits 85% of GFFO's project funding on a gender-sensitive basis and 8% on a gender-transformative basis by 2025, using OECD criteria as a guide (GFFO, 2023).

Guideline 2, entitled 'Humanitarian assistance and crisis management', acknowledges that diverse crisis-affected people have not always benefited equally from Germany's assistance. Under the FFP banner, German humanitarian assistance therefore commits to:

> systematically include women and marginalised people in crisis prevention, stabilisation and peacebuilding measures and take into account gender-specific risks and intersectional vulnerabilities. We utilise our crisis management efforts to make progress towards more gender-equitable societies. (GFFO, 2023: 29)

Most notably, the policy states that 100% of GFFO's humanitarian assistance will be deployed in a gender-sensitive manner and 'wherever appropriate' in a gender-targeted manner. The policy states that the 'instrument of gender budgeting serves this purpose' (ibid.).

The guidelines were recognised as a major milestone, with the funding targets described by Care Deutschland (2023: 3) as 'probably the biggest surprise in the guidelines, which we expressly welcome'.[18] GFFO informants also called it the 'right timing' for their humanitarian desks, in keeping with moves in the sector to take gender more seriously. Interviewees did criticise the lack of whole-of-government approach and low levels of coordination between GFFO and BMZ on their respective policies:

> If you have something like that in a coalition agreement, and I mean foreign policy is quite a huge concept, you know, you would expect that the Chancellery is taking the lead on this. Because it's more than just the Foreign Office. I mean, why do we have now two papers, one in the Ministry of Development and one in the Foreign Office? [...] So what about Ministry of Defence, Ministry for

17 BMZ shared a draft policy for comment and provided a clear process for written and in-person consultations, both in Germany and in the Global South. Informants described that ministry as 'way further down the road when it comes to feminism' and having 'a much longer history of really co-creating with civil society'.

18 Translated from the German: 'ist wohl die größte Überraschung in den Leitlinien, welche wir ausdrücklich begrüßen'.

> the Environment... There's a lot of ministries could work on that, but it was not taken on by the Chancellery. And the Chancellery also didn't give authority to the Foreign Office to do a governmental paper. (Civil society, Germany)

This may be due in part to coalition politics, but the two parallel processes complicate matters given that BMZ and GFFO sometimes support the same partners to do similar work in the same countries and have not elaborated any strategies for cooperation (Care Deutschland, 2023; VENRO, 2024; IRC, 2024).[19] Interviewees pointed to other areas of contention: the absence of concrete indicators and commitment to gender-transformative humanitarian action; lack of clarity on using the OECD gender markers and the term 'gender-targeted', which is not widely known; and an unclear role for civil society, including in crisis settings (GWI et al., 2023; Biehler and Meier, 2024; and IRC, 2024):

> It is clear what is missing with regard to humanitarian aid: the participation of women-led or women's rights organisations and their financing as an important element for needs-based and effective humanitarian aid is not mentioned. This means that in the future there will be no direct funding from GFFO to those who know their societies best: the local civil society organisations. (Care Deutschland, 2023: 4)[20]

At the time of their interviews, German informants were unsure of what lay ahead in the new strategy for gender humanitarian response, but keen to use the new guidelines as best they could.

4.2 Operationalising the guidelines

GFFO respondents were proud to say they were already incorporating gender into their humanitarian work prior to the launch of the guidelines, which they believed amounted to a feminist approach:

> So when the GFFO received a feminist foreign policy, we did not really have to adapt the way we did our humanitarian assistance much because gender was already a big part of it as a cross-cutting topic and [...] we had we had already worked on our strategic trajectory of how to better include gender within humanitarian assistance a few years before the feminist foreign policy was implemented. (Government, Germany)

Interviewees indicated that a strategy on gender and humanitarian response had already been drafted before the FFP development process began and then paused until the guidelines launched, and that

19 By contrast, six different ministries were able to collaborate on Germany's most recent WPS national action plan (GFFO, 2021).

20 Translated from the German: 'fällt deutlich auf, was im Hinblick auf humanitäre Hilfe fehlt: Die Beteiligung von frauengeführten oder Frauenrechtsorganisation sowie deren Finanzierung als wichtiges Element für bedarfsgerechte und effektive humanitäre Hilfe wird nicht erwähnt. Damit wird es von Seiten des AA auch zukünftig keine direkte Finanzierung derer geben, welche sich in ihren Gesellschaften am besten auskennen: den lokalen zivilgesellschaftlichen Organisationen.'

this draft would soon be launched without significant adaptation or update. This led to disagreement amongst GFFO staffers and civil society over whether or not a feminist approach was something new and the extent to which their ways of working need to change.

Civil society respondents were hopeful that the anticipated strategy would include set targets for gender-transformative humanitarian action, which were missing from the guidelines themselves, and called for the strategy to 'anchor feminist approaches uniformly in German humanitarian aid, not as a side chapter' (IRC, 2024: 8).[21] Indeed, in her foreword to the guidelines, Foreign Minister Baerbock seems to agree, stating that FFP 'means that we do not just see particular vulnerabilities but strategically tackle them, including in our project funding or humanitarian assistance' (GFFO, 2023: 2).

Interviewees within GFFO, however, seemed ready to resist these calls from both inside and outside the ministry:

> So obviously there was the political pressure to put the label 'transformative' on everything, and that was something that we then opposed internally. Not because we, you know, wanted to be contradictory, but just because we do hold this line of principled humanitarian assistance. (Government, Germany)

In the resulting strategy, titled 'Gender in Germany's humanitarian assistance' and launched in 2024, there is little reference to feminism. Rather, humanitarian principles and needs-based approaches are front and centre, with links drawn to commitments made under the Grand Bargain, the Whistler Declaration, Germany's WPS national action plan, and GFFO's humanitarian strategy. Germany's leadership of the Call to Action on GBV in Emergencies is noted, as well as support for country-based pooled funds, Germany's position as the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund's biggest donor, and other initiatives like the UN Trust Fund for survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse and the Gender Standby Capacity Project, or GenCap (GFFO, 2024a).

The strategy does not point to any new plans to introduce more feminist systems or ways of working, for which civil society interviewees had advocated (see also Care Deutschland, 2023), or any vision for future humanitarian work. As humanitarian response constitutes GFFO's single biggest individual budget line, it is also notable that there is still no goal set for 'gender-targeted' work, as had been hoped – for example, Care Deutschland (2023) had called for 4% of funds to be earmarked for women-led organisations in crisis settings and for 25% of implementing organisations to be women-led. Terms like 'gender-targeted' are also still left undefined.

On implementation, GFFO policy documents and interviewees also regularly point to a 'gender mainstreaming' approach as key to their pursuit of feminist goals. It is worth briefly noting here

21 Translated from the German: 'so feministische Ansätze einheitlich, und nicht als Nebenkapitel, in der deutschen humanitären Hilfe verankern'.

that gender mainstreaming has been criticised as instrumentalist, and for specifically not calling for structural change but rather adding women and girls into existing systems as part of a broadly technocratic exercise (see Box 2 in Chapter 2).

A related policy commitment, the 'Gender strategy for foreign policy crisis engagement' (GFFO, 2024b), was launched around the same time for GFFO's crisis prevention, stabilisation and peacebuilding work. It elaborates a rights-based approach, prioritising tackling root causes of discrimination and support for women-led action. Given its framing around crises, it is unclear whether and how a neat line can be drawn between this and the gender and humanitarian strategy, which would appear to be a missed opportunity to demonstrate overarching commitment to more feminist approaches and a coherent narrative around FFP in German humanitarian action.

Whether the gender and humanitarian assistance strategy could be reasonably characterised as 'feminist', or even whether it was intended to be, was questioned by interviewees who had seen an early draft, given that it does not broach any forward-looking commitments or ambitions around systemic change:

> It was neither a strategy, nor was it in any point feminist [...] it was just a paper pulling together what Germany's doing already. (Civil society, Germany)
>
> At the point at which the guidelines were launched, the humanitarian division directly said to us, there will be no feminist humanitarian aid. This has to be excluded because it's against the principle of neutrality and yada yada. [...] I do think that the political leadership of the House wants an ambitious feminist foreign policy that is inclusive of humanitarian foreign policy, but I don't think they're championing feminist humanitarian policy. I think the humanitarian piece is something they might be willing to sacrifice. (Civil society, Germany)

This perspective seems to be at odds with commitments under the guidelines, but it is not at all contrary to what government interviewees reported, as they expressed concerns for principled and needs-based response. One said they personally 'would never apply the term feminist to humanitarian assistance', continuing:

> We want to go beyond, you know, just putting a band aid on. We do want to reduce needs, so within gender-targeted funding, that means also funding measures such as community involvement [...] which obviously goes towards transformative measures [...]. But at the same time, it's also just a part of sensible needs-based humanitarian assistance [...] but we would not use the term of gender-transformative humanitarian assistance for ourselves. [...] we just say we try to make our humanitarian assistance as needs-based as possible and that for us means [...] it being gender-responsive, age-responsive, disability-responsive. [...] It will not be gender transformative. (Government, Germany)

While this view is striking, it was not universally shared amongst government respondents. Applying feminist approaches to humanitarian response remains an explicit commitment under the guidelines, but one that is contested within the ranks of GFFO's humanitarian desks.

4.3 Laying the groundwork for implementation

While it is certainly early to draw any conclusions about implementation of the strategy or the guidelines, interviewees pointed to indications that GFFO's approach is already taking shape. One government interviewee was also hopeful that the guidelines will provide policy cover for internal advocacy:

> The thing is, if there is a political will and a policy and it's a top-down request, then things can move or have to move. Whereas when there was no such policy, it was much more difficult to basically set these things on the table and improve them, because then the argument would be, well, this is not our aim or goal. (Government, Germany)

Civil society actors also highlighted instances of Germany taking more outspoken stances, like raising gender concerns at recent meetings in Iraq or refusing to fund response activities in Afghanistan where women were not allowed to work. They saw these as stemming directly from the guidelines, although it is unclear whether these interventions altered the outcomes of those meetings.

On funding, press reporting indicates that 'a good 70 percent of GFFO funding is already being used in a "gender-sensitive" or "gender-transformative" way' (Fasbender and Eichhorn, 2024). Any change in the quality of funding remains to be seen, however, as government respondents pointed to grants to country-based pooled funds, the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund, the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and UN Women:

> The Foreign Office needs to provide flexible funding. So we don't even know what partners do with the money and we still require them to comply with all these requirements. So I think this is a little bit of the tension that we're seeing. [...] And it's also bit contradicting because then we want to reduce the reporting burden and administrative burden, and then on the other hand, we ask everyone to disaggregate every data and report in advance and in between and at the end. (Government, Germany)

Interviewees both in and out of government said that GFFO should begin requiring greater transparency, accountability and reporting against indicators from these grantees as a meaningful first step.

Developing ways of working with women leaders and their organisations in crisis settings, especially through direct and flexible funding relationships, was also noted by nearly all civil society respondents as key to a feminist approach. All government interviewees similarly noted the need to work at 'eye-to-eye level' with women-led organisations in crisis settings, but GFFO (like GAC) does not fund them directly for humanitarian response, and many such organisations do not meet criteria for pooled funds or other mechanisms on which GFFO is relying to deliver on its feminist claims.

The strict divide between GFFO and BMZ also complicates funding for women-led action: whereas BMZ can engage directly with women's rights organisations in the settings where it works, GFFO-funded projects cannot, nor can they seek to address root causes of vulnerabilities in crises, even though these distinctions make little sense for place-based and grassroots organisations:

> It's a bit of a homemade problem because of these budget structures, that you would understand that there can be humanitarian projects that actually really have a transformative approach and lead to transformative impact. But in practice, because we have this separation, they can't. There will be a problem with the financial court in Germany that would say, oh, but these projects should be with the development ministry. (Government, Germany)

There is therefore little clarity thus far on how GFFO will go about engaging place-based women leaders and their organisations in humanitarian response under the new guidelines and strategy, or whether its 'gender-sensitive' funding can be made to go deeper than simple box-ticking, especially in the absence of any further commitments. While some were confident that budget targets would be sufficient for a 'feminist' approach, others were less sure:

> All they [GFFO] do is, like, moving money and administering project budgets. And with that, they believe when they can tick the box and say, okay, 80% of our projects are gender-sensitive and 8% are gender-transformative or whatnot, then we're feminist or our humanitarian assistance is feminist, and there is no way of really measuring the quality. There was no discussion around how can we actually make sure that the impact is what we're looking for. (Government, Germany)

Others noted an appetite to go further by developing ways for Germany's own marker to generate qualitative data, but GFFO's limited humanitarian capacity will be a key constraint to assessing just this kind of progress against commitments, as highlighted by interviewees as well as Kreidler et al. (2023) and Berlin's Centre for Humanitarian Action:

> Sweden employs three times as much staff per Euro/US dollar spent as Germany, the USA four times as much and DG ECHO nine times more staff. (Hövelmann and Südhoff, 2022: 4)
>
> They have far less staff than any other humanitarian desk worldwide, you know, and Germany is aware of that. (Civil society, Germany)

This staffing problem is also cyclical as employees go on rotation: 'especially during summer months [...] there's just nobody there'.

At this early stage, there is clearly much to be done in terms of conceptualising and operationalising Germany's FFP for humanitarian response, not least when it comes to understanding whether and how feminist approaches could change how humanitarian assistance is designed, delivered and measured.

4.4 Developing a 'feminist reflex'

In a departure from many other FFPs, including Canada's FIAP, Germany's policy dedicates four of its 10 guidelines to internal transformation and commits GFFO to cultivating what it calls a 'feminist reflex' (GFFO, 2023: 14). This institutional process is about changing systems and processes as well as minds, and was welcomed by Netzwerk 1325 and its members as 'undoubtedly the prerequisite for a feminist

foreign policy' (GWI et al., 2023: 3).[22] As above, interviewees argued that this will require additional capacity in terms of staffing numbers but also diversifying that staff and providing opportunities for training, as well as time to complete that training, both of which are currently lacking. Mittelhammer (2024) notes that representation of women inside GFFO is already improving, rising from 30% to 35% in the last year, although still below the federal government average of 43%. GFFO has also rapidly begun paying attention to the composition of its diplomatic missions and rosters of speakers at its events.

Equally important will be a process of shifting mindsets inside GFFO with regard to how humanitarian assistance is perceived, designed and delivered. Interviewees from both civil society and government described how the institutional culture of GFFO and the wider sector has not always been friendly to feminist approaches:

> It was for years totally clear [that when] you name it feminism, the moment, you lose people, actually. [...] When the coalition agreement was published [...] I was in total shock because to be honest, I didn't see it coming. (Civil society, Germany)
>
> I think Germany is seen as very, you know, progressive and whatever, but actually in a lot of aspects it's not. [...] What I just said applies as well to the Foreign Ministry. In some regards, the Foreign Ministry is even more behind than other ministries. [...] it's actually not as political as or dynamic as one would imagine [...] And certain structures, to change them, it just takes decades because it's this civil servant system that really takes time to change. (Government, Germany)

With regard to GFFO's humanitarian ranks and the wider German government, the FFP was seen as contributing to a much-needed mindset shift, and one that may already be beginning:

> I remember one prominent person saying that we have already been doing this [feminist approaches]. We don't need the word. (Civil society, Germany)
>
> The problem is really the elder white male middle management figures that have very clearly communicated to us, no, we don't want that. We will not do that. And I do feel that this resistance in middle management is slowly eroding. (Civil society, Germany)

Several interviewees referred to personnel changes and discursive shifts in how staff talk about gender and feminist approaches in recent months that they found encouraging. One government respondent described being 'positively surprised' by the willingness, openness and enthusiasm of colleagues who had 'sprung to life' with the launch of the guidelines. Staff have established a cross-ministry gender working group hosted by the stabilisation unit with the aim of developing their own understanding.

22 Translated from the German: 'zweifellos die Voraussetzung für eine feministische Außenpolitik'.

Continuing resistance, particularly to labelling the work 'feminist' and pursuing more systemic feminist reforms within GFFO's humanitarian ranks, however, continues to revolve around compatibility with humanitarian principles:

> I think [humanitarians] felt especially challenged by the policy because they feel it's very political and the word "feminist" is for them charged politically, even though, you know, a lot of the principles are human-rights-based and not political. (Government, Germany)

Biehler and Meier argue that, 'without a fundamental cultural change in German humanitarian aid and development cooperation, these power asymmetries cannot be completely eliminated' (2024: 73).[23] This point of contention over principles feeds resistance to FFP within GFFO's institutional culture, as well as amongst those civil society actors who share this view, where the 'feminist reflex' has yet to generate appetite to examine how humanitarian responses are delivered.

4.5 What lies ahead?

The director of the Berlin-based Global Public Policy Institute recently wrote, 'There is a revolutionary aspect to feminism that spells trouble with a core tenet of diplomatic culture' (Rotmann, 2022). Germany's FFP reflects a further 10 years of global thinking and development on feminist approaches relative to Canada's FIAP, resulting in stronger analysis around (for example) the importance of intersectionality, inclusion of LGBTQIA+ groups, and acknowledging the impact of colonialism. The impact of these analytical advances is limited, however, by the siloed approach that both divides GFFO and BMZ and neglects a whole-of-government line, as well as the lack of concrete definitions.

The reluctance to change within GFFO's humanitarian ranks and reliance on concepts like gender mainstreaming also seem to point to the persistence of pre-existing narratives positioning humanitarian response as timebound, apolitical and compartmentalised away from wider social, political and economic drivers of inequalities, risks and vulnerabilities. Thus, the subsequent humanitarian strategy promises no innovative ways of working or changes, and no detail on linking a feminist approach to more locally led responses, despite calls from civil society (see also GWI et al., 2022; 2023; Mittelhammer, 2024). Interviewees were sceptical as to how even this limited approach would be affected by upcoming funding cuts and pressures to lighten the humanitarian programme cycle, but they were even more unsure of the prospects for applying FFP to more meaningful, systemic change in Germany's humanitarian assistance.

Like Canada, Germany's FFP likely also faces a challenge in upcoming federal elections in 2025. Resistance to the guidelines is real in parliament and the governing coalition, which one respondent attributed to a failure to 'translate' the FFP narrative for an audience beyond the foreign policy sphere. Interviewees were concerned the policy will not survive this first challenge:

23 Translated from the German: 'Ohne einen grundlegenden Kulturwandel in der deutschen humanitären Hilfe und EZ können diese Machtasymmetrien nicht vollständig abgebaut werden'.

> I was very positive at the beginning of this year, but I'm starting to become more and more desperate about it, and I fear the whole atmosphere, the political narratives, to change that much also in Germany. I'm afraid it's not going to survive this government. (Civil society, Germany)
>
> But I feel like the momentum for the term feminist is already shrinking again, like it was kind of sexy for a few years and it feels like it's going down in a way. (Civil society, Germany)

In the time remaining before the next election, civil society actors in particular are keen to anchor targets, processes and staffing positions within both GFFO and BMZ to turn the narrative into tangible change and safeguard any gains:

> Things that the next government cannot that easily get rid of. That's because we also have, I think, [...] this perception that it's probably not going to last longer than the next few years. (Civil society, Germany)
>
> Part of our input to the humanitarian strategy was how can we make sure that we really weave this feminist foreign policy into the DNA of the ministry in this very short timeline of four years because, yeah, the Greens may very well be part of the next government, but maybe not. Social Democrats probably won't. (Civil society, Germany)

Advocates pointed to the creation of FFP-related posts in German embassies around the world and a special envoy for FFP, Gesa Bräutigam, at headquarters as concrete advances. Government actors in particular thought that spending targets – what they called 'gender budgeting' – would likely stay, alongside attention to differentiated vulnerability analysis by gender, disability and other factors. Whatever is to come, it is clear that the momentum of the last year has made an impact:

> I don't think you can take that back. (Civil society, Germany)

Germany's more circumscribed approach, which sets humanitarian response to one side in practice, would seem to face considerable challenges in achieving its transformative potential for crisis response. Indeed, where Canada has run up against the obstacles of system and structure in bringing its FFP narrative to life, Germany faces an even more formidable set of strictures due to its separation of responsibilities between GFFO and BMZ.

Box 3 Thinking beyond FFP: what is feminist humanitarianism?

As noted above, FFP does not represent the full depth and breadth of feminist work in the humanitarian sphere, which tends to be grounded in everyday practice and the realities of life amidst crises, rather than conceptual thinking or top-down policymaking. Importantly, feminism itself is not singular but rather entails a plurality of lenses and frameworks grounded in diverse contexts, histories and priorities. This means that limiting feminist humanitarianism to a single definition runs the risk of foreclosing a diversity of viewpoints, practices and actors.

Feminist humanitarianism begins with a feminist notion of 'crisis': whereas the international humanitarian response system has tended to conceive of crises as atomised, timebound shocks, feminists emphasise that crises do not emerge in isolation but rather are interconnected with pre-existing social, political and economic conditions. Crises as we know them are therefore not novel, arbitrary, unforeseen or atomised – rather, they are the predictable result of structural inequalities, and they cannot be divorced from their contexts and root causes. A feminist lens on crisis itself therefore reveals how excluded and marginalised groups exist in 'a *constant state of crisis* that transcends humanitarian settings themselves' (Holloway et al., 2019: 33; emphasis in original). In a recent exploration entitled *Unfolding the tapestry*, a group of researchers and commentators assembled by the Equality Fund wrote that:

> The feminist perspective on crises firmly rejects oversimplifications, insisting on recognizing complex histories and the interconnected causes behind crises. This approach provides a more profound and comprehensive analysis of their structural underpinnings. [...] Defining and naming crises becomes inherently political—a deliberate choice that brings certain aspects into sharp relief while shrouding others in obscurity. Those who define the crisis have the power to shape public perception and policy responses. (Equality Fund, 2024: 9–10)

With this in mind, feminist responses to crises are not neutral to the systemic exclusions that create differential impacts. They respond to root causes as much as symptoms, with holistic responses that are based on community-led diagnoses of crises and their causes. Some of these responses are described in section 2.3, as well as in Njeri and Daigle (2022) and the 85th edition of the *Humanitarian Exchange* magazine, 'Women-led organisations in humanitarian response' (Tsongo et al., 2024).

Beyond simple attention to gender, including GBV and SRHR, feminist approaches also entail critical assessment and redress of how power operates within the humanitarian system itself. Thus, the Feminist Humanitarian Network, a global collective of women-led organisations and feminists working to transform humanitarian action, aspires to a system that:

> Acknowledges the patriarchal and colonial dynamics within itself, that often exclude or downplay the contribution of those identifying as women and minorities, particularly those from the Global South [...] Takes responsibility for identifying unjust formal and informal power relations within itself by regularly critiquing the extent to which its structures and processes reinforce patriarchal power relations through humanitarian action. (FHN, n.d.)

Major INGOs have also begun adopting and promulgating feminist principles and ways of working of their own. A recent Oxfam internal discussion paper seeks to balance humanitarian principles against feminist ones, positing that, 'a feminist approach to humanitarian aid is as much about changing the system as it is about how it delivers humanitarian action' (Oxfam, 2024: 29). Similarly, ActionAid (2023) and IPPF (2024) argue that a feminist approach should be focused on women's rights and leadership, community-based and participatory, holistic, non-linear, intersectional, and challenging toward patriarchy, colonialism and other structural inequalities.

Feminist responses are therefore much more than attention to women and girls, or to gender, encompassing a thorough critique of hierarchical systems, unequal power relations and resources concentrated in the hands of a few privileged actors. It entails centring the experiences, leadership and perspectives of women, girls and gender-diverse people not just in what is prioritised but also how those priorities are delivered.

5 Implications and prospects for feminist humanitarianism

For both Germany and Canada, the FFP narrative has represented an opportunity to distinguish themselves on a world stage and support wider ambitions as middle-ranking powers in the foreign policy arena (Zhukova et al., 2022). Importantly, it has also served to position their current governments as progressive relative to international norms of gender justice and multilateralism:

> State behavior towards women has often provided an opportunity not only to differentiate among states but also to evaluate and rank states in a hierarchical manner. (Towns, 2010: 6)

Much has been written about the development and implementation of FFPs, particularly in Sweden and Canada, often highlighting the gaps and discontinuities in their 'feminist' claims.[24] However, very little of the existing commentary deals with humanitarian response beyond passing mentions, and this is a gap that humanitarians should be more invested in filling. Many agreements and guidelines over the last 30 years, including successive iterations of the Grand Bargain and the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative,[25] have committed humanitarians on paper to more inclusive, accessible, efficient and demand-led approaches across the sector. In parallel, calls for more justice-oriented frameworks led by decolonial, anti-racist and feminist thinking are challenging the relevance and legitimacy of internationally led humanitarian action.

With that in mind, a better understanding and application of FFP (however limited its vision of feminism may be) could arguably start humanitarians down a path to meaningful change. The international humanitarian response architecture is patriarchal and colonial, both in its form – that of a hierarchical, prescriptive system with decision-making power concentrated in the hands a few privileged actors – and its culture, which centres masculine notions of response and recovery while downplaying the unseen labour, care and perspectives on crisis and response that are contributed by women, girls and gender-diverse people, especially from the Global South (FHN, n.d.; Daigle, 2022). Hart and Krueger

24 FFPs have been criticised for paying insufficient attention to issues of sexuality, non-binary gender, racialisation, disability and other elements of a meaningfully intersectional approach; paid and unpaid care; colonial histories, violences and ongoing power asymmetries; domestic gender inequalities (Scheyer and Kumskova, 2019; Gill-Atkinson et al., 2021; Zhukova et al., 2022; Thompson et al., 2023; Achilleos-Sarll et al., 2023). Some critics have also viewed it as a branding exercise lacking depth of commitment (Conway, 2024) or responsible for erasing the heritage of feminist activism and movements, particularly in the Global South, by centring feminist efforts on FFP countries that are mostly in the North (Parashar and D'Costa, 2017).

25 The Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative is an informal donor forum founded in 2003 to enhance donor coordination, effectiveness and accountability. Members endorse a set of 24 principles for funding, standards, implementation, learning and modalities of assistance. For more, see: www.ghdinitiative.org/ghd/gns/home-page.html.

(2021: 1, 11) write that patriarchy is a 'structuring element of all systems', and that transformation is needed within humanitarian agencies themselves before they can undertake transformational or feminist work in crisis settings.

The following section offers reflections on the challenges that the FFP narrative has faced in gaining traction in the humanitarian space and, at the same time, on what can be learned and taken forward in pursuit of a more meaningfully feminist model of humanitarian response, within or beyond the framework offered by FFP in its current forms.

5.1 Persistent conceptual confusions

It is clear from interviews that FFP exists as much in the realm of pure narrative as it does in the everyday realities of designing and delivering international assistance, as very few respondents felt confident that they knew how 'feminism' was being defined within their own country's framework of FFP:

> We have not defined it. We have artfully dodged it. (Civil society, Canada)

> For the first moment, we were just glad that the paper is out and that kind of we have something now. And then we looked at it and then we were not 100% sure what was actually standing there. (Civil society, Germany)

This imprecision also extends to core concepts like intersectionality, as well as 'gender-targeted', which some German civil society actors believed GFFO had invented. Here, the point is not to define a singular feminism for FFP (see Box 1) but rather to understand the shifting ground on which this debate is unfolding. Commentators like Bouka et al. (2021: 7) note that Canada has 'privileged symbolism over process', falling short of turning narrative into tangible change, while interviewees in Germany lament the lack of effort to bring people onboard with the project of FFP, from GFFO's humanitarian desks to the German parliament. As noted, the German-language coalition agreement even refers to FFP in English (Koalitionsvertrag, 2021: 114):

> I was like, that's weird. And they said that, yeah, it was like a compromise because not everyone wanted the concept and the agreements. So writing it in English somehow, like, softened it supposedly. (Civil society, Germany)

Norm imprecision can make narratives like FFP easier to assimilate into different national and linguistic contexts (Cadesky et al., 2019; Zhukova et al., 2022), and it can also provide opportunities for advocates to ascribe a more progressive vision to their country's FFP and hold governments to account. But it becomes a problem for implementation when policies and ministries continue to lack their own internally consistent understanding:

> I think it's very possible to say that there are multiple feminisms. But I don't think that's the same as saying you can do anything you want and call it feminist, right? [...] Where's the bar? What's the minimum we expect? Because I think [...] there's a real danger of people just putting the label on. (Civil society, Canada)

As this interviewee describes, a persistent lack of clarity leaves concepts like FFP vulnerable to co-optation where governments or other institutions can simply re-label their existing gender work as 'feminist' without making significant changes. It also feeds confusion over, for example, the centrality of foundational concepts like human rights – a universally agreed component of FFP – and rights-based approaches to humanitarian action, as this interviewee illustrates:

> Personally, for me there is no difference between truly needs-based humanitarian assistance and the feminist approach to humanitarian assistance. I think those two should be the same. (Government, Germany)

This is also reflected in the resistance seen inside GFFO and (to a lesser extent) GAC to applying FFP to their humanitarian work, even if that resistance may eventually be overcome. It was also reflected in Sweden, where an assessment of its FFP following repeal showed that aid and trade specialists in the Swedish government 'explicitly stated that the FFP did not include them' (Towns et al., 2023: 101).

While there is no set definition of FFP, feminists inside and outside humanitarian agencies have been engaging with this problem conceptually and operationally for many years already – and frequently in ways that are more critical state-centric and paternalist models than FFP has been – as noted in section 2.3. This can and should serve as a starting point to engage in more depth with what a feminist approach is asking of humanitarians and how they can deliver it.

5.2 Beyond women, beyond gender

Where there was already a tendency in the humanitarian sector to use the term 'gender' when what is actually meant is 'women and girls' (Hilhorst et al., 2018; Holloway et al., 2019), the conceptual confusions described above mean that the slippage now applies equally to 'feminist'. This study demonstrates that humanitarians are struggling to understand FFP beyond targeting the needs and vulnerabilities of women and girls, sometimes even despite claims of a more intersectional, relational and systemic approach. Thus, where Canada's FIAP focuses heavily on meeting the needs of women and girls, and Germany's guidelines take a much more expansive and intersectional view of marginalisation, neither is necessarily building structural change in the humanitarian system into their 'feminist' approach. The humanitarian sector is also particularly beset by the tyranny of the urgent, where the rush to respond to crises and meet immediate needs in a timely fashion tends to foreclose reflection:

> If you make sure you know who has the highest needs and what these needs are, and you respond to their needs, [...] in most cases it's women and girls and the elderly and people with disability or, like, the most vulnerable, right? (Government, Germany)

> I mean it's uncomfortable to think, how we do feminist work beyond gender or in other areas than gender, because once we ask this question then we notice that what we meant by gender before was actually women. (Civil society, Germany)

While it is clear that the risks facing women and girls in crisis settings are immense, and the attention to comprehensive SRHR and GBV response are very welcome, a singular focus on women and girls instrumentalises them in the pursuit of other humanitarian objectives – a longstanding concern of gender-justice advocates in the sector (Olivius, 2014: 94). This has been a recurring criticism of Canada's FIAP, which has been described as taking a 'neoliberal feminist' approach (Parisi, 2020: 164) and treating the targeting of women and girls through international assistance as a magic bullet to resolve global problems such as poverty and inequalities (Cadesky et al., 2019; Rao and Tiessen, 2020).

Conversely, awareness is low that a feminist approach might entail changes to the structures and systems through which humanitarian assistance is delivered and questioning the patriarchal nature of the system itself. This, along with the gaps in understanding that FFP does indeed apply to humanitarian response noted above, suggests that a further challenge for FFP governments may lie not just in understanding the relevance of feminism to structural transformation but also in communicating that relevance to colleagues inside relevant ministries, departments, bureaux and desks. This will bear important implications for the workings of various institutional processes and systems.

5.3 Perceived tensions with principles and needs-based approaches

As interviews with respondents in both Canada and Germany have shown, resistance to FFP in humanitarian spaces tends to orbit around the idea that feminism is antithetical to principled and needs-based approaches, and consequently around the appropriateness of gender-transformative humanitarian interventions. The neutrality of humanitarian response is seen as essential for maintaining access to populations in crises and the safety of humanitarian workers, but it has also created a perception on the part of many humanitarians that their work is apolitical, and that they must resist politicisation.

This tension was much more evident in Germany, where one government interviewee described disagreements over principles as 'a rift between us and civil society'. These hesitations are expressed in terms of explicit concern for principles but also implicitly in resistance to feminist, gender-transformative and rights-based (as opposed to needs-based) approaches, all of which are read as political (or politicising):

> And we, as a GFFO, hold up to the line that principled humanitarian assistance cannot be gender-transformative, because gender-transformative measures mean addressing underlying systemic reasons for, you know, gender-based challenges and transforming norms and values. And that's not something that humanitarian assistance can do, while at the same time upholding the principles of neutrality and impartiality and independence. We feel that this is a conflict [...] So obviously it's something to do with the way you interpret the humanitarian principles. They were not written in stone. But this is the line that we're taking. (Government, Germany)

> Yeah, I've heard a head of unit [at an event] say that a feminist approach is at odds with the principle of neutrality [...] He was just saying, yeah, that if we focus on women and if we perpetuate women's rights, then that's taking basically an ideological stance to push something on someone. (Civil society, Germany)

Similarly, interlocutors from GFFO were firm in their commitments to needs-based approaches, which would seem to be at odds with feminist ethos that specifically centres the rights of women, girls and (increasingly) gender-diverse people (FFP Working Group, 2021: 12). Rights-based approaches are important in the context of a global backlash against women's rights, but they are not universally or even widely accepted in humanitarian response. Although Canadian respondents were certainly not immune to this logic, and it was clear that these debates had shaped early discussions around the FIAP, the language of feminism and transformation seems to be much more assimilated into GAC's internal discourse.

These tensions are far from unique to GFFO and GAC: a range of core humanitarian agencies such as UNHCR and the ICRC have expressed concern for the impartiality and neutrality of responses when asked to take on gender-transformative or even gender-responsive work, and field-based international humanitarians often cite principles as 'inhibitors to engaging more meaningfully on gendered norms, roles and power relations' (Daigle, 2022: 19). These dynamics are also part of why humanitarians have been slow to recognise their own role in perpetuating gendered injustices and patriarchy (Fal-Dutra, 2019; Abellán et al., 2022).

In the face of funding cuts and challenges to humanitarian legitimacy, international humanitarian donors and practitioners are moving 'back to basics', refocusing on principles and immediate needs. This threatens to leave them less aligned than ever with the objectives and motivations of FFP. Importantly, though, this is not the only possible reading of humanitarian principles, as was repeatedly highlighted by civil society respondents:

> When you do neutral or sensitive humanitarian programming, by definition you're saying you're working with the existing gender norms. You're aware but you're saying it's not for you to deal with. [...] You're reinforcing those gender norms. Is that impartial? (Civil society, Canada)
>
> I totally understand the importance of the humanitarian principles. I've been brainwashed, etcetera, but I think at some point it defeats the purpose if you just use it so defensively all the time, rather than to ask, what can it actually include? (Government, Germany)

This is in line with other voices arguing 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).[26] The opposition of needs and rights is also a false one, given that the definition of needs is always a question of rights, subordinating some needs (especially those of women, girls and gender-diverse people) to others (Petchesky, 2000; Daigle and Spencer, 2022).

26 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).

It is notable that none of the interviewees for this study reported problems with access or acceptability arising from their country's FFP or organisational feminist principles, but these questions continue to animate humanitarian thinking and throw up obstacles to meaningful engagement. That so many FFPs, under which humanitarian response falls, place rights at their very core and are seen to clash with humanitarian principles is therefore a tension that merits much further engagement from governments, FFP advocates and humanitarians alike. There is a clear need for arguments based in IHL that engage frankly and openly with perceived tensions.

5.4 Systemic change in the humanitarian sphere

Thinking about what it means to take a feminist approach beyond a simple focus on women and girls, a key consideration should be how to use that approach to foment structural and systemic change in the system. This 'transformative potential' is an area where FFP in general is frequently seen to have stalled, as it has failed to challenge the hierarchical power relations and structural forms of exclusion and harm that make up the status quo in global affairs (Rao and Tiessen, 2020; Conway, 2024), but a meaningfully feminist approach should take this up.

An evident but, to date, largely unexplored way to do this is by bringing FFP and feminist principles into humanitarian system transformation debates. As Saez and Bryant (2023: 6) write, over the last 30 years, the international humanitarian response architecture has been 'dogged by well-evidenced and systemic failures' in cases like Darfur and the Indian Ocean tsunami, which were deemed fragmented, low quality and marginalising to the people they purportedly sought to assist (see also Bennett et al., 2016; Saez et al., 2021). While humanitarians are not necessarily familiar with the salience of gender and feminism in such debates, FFP offers a mechanism to build that understanding and confront the patriarchal nature of the system, 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).

Thus, major mechanisms like the Grand Bargain contain little reference to gender. The Grand Bargain has remained largely gender-unaware through two subsequent renewals, a point that has been criticised in successive independent reviews and by the creation of the ad hoc Friends of Gender Group as a reaction to the official process (ActionAid, 2021; Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2021; GAPS, 2023). Similarly, the Global Compact for Refugees was affirmed by the UN General Assembly in 2018, but according to an audit of commitments at the 2020 Global Refugee Forum, 85% included no gender-specific information and 99% no information on LGBTQIA+ refugees, amongst other diversity concerns (UNHCR, 2020). There is also little indication that the Flagship Initiative, a relatively new attempt to reimagine and create a more sustainable and ethical humanitarian system, will bring attention to gender or feminism.

FFP is an opportunity to add gender components to these platforms, but it is also much more than that: by bringing FFP into spaces such as these that are not expressly about women, feminist approaches can become an analytical tool for assessing and redressing the hierarchical, paternalist, often unaccountable and supply-driven nature of the current humanitarian system, as well as help to

elaborate alternative models of leadership, consultation, evaluation and delivery. This feminist critique of power is mirrored in calls to decolonise the humanitarian system and others seeking to foment more inclusive, participatory and demand-led responses, but it is not being taken up sufficiently (or, arguably, at all) by FFP to date. One of the core critiques of FFP has been its paternalist association of gender and feminism with the 'foreign', implying that FFP governments based mostly in the purportedly gender-equal Global North are in a position to lead on questions of gender justice and feminist transformation (Morton et al., 2020; Rao and Tiessen, 2020; Bergman Rosamond et al., 2023).[27]

This also emerged from some interviews:

> So this is where maybe I'm being naïve, where I get frustrated. Why are we still having this conversation? What's feminist is: are we starting with people's needs and capacities, and are we giving up our own power – yes or no? I mean, truth is, right now we're not even remotely. At all. Anywhere. [...] I'm just like, dudes, every system we put in is just about reinforcing our own power. Like that is so anti-feminist, it's not even funny. That would be really feminist, actually, if the system could really let go, like, just trust people. (Civil society, Canada)

Conceptualising FFP and feminist humanitarian response is not about delineating a singular feminism, but rather about recognising and working across multiple visions of feminism held by all parties to a response.[28] Thus, Bouka et al. (2021:9) write that resistance to FFP, WPS and other international agendas for gender justice has 'less to do with the substance of the agenda (although this is part of the equation) than a hyper vigilance to its origins and the identity of its champions'.

Critically, FFP in humanitarian action should not be limited to discussions amongst policymakers and 'high-level' decision makers – which would run contrary to feminist ideals – but rather include insights from local and grassroots feminist and women-led organisations, whose feminism is rooted in lived experience of crisis response rather than top-down concepts. Applying a meaningfully feminist FFP to humanitarian system change therefore also means practising feminism with humility, and acting as 'reflective allies to feminist causes rather than independent agents of change', as Duriesmith (2018: 52) argues. The reverse, however, is also true: making humanitarian system reform the purview of FFP and feminist approaches is one way for FFP government donors to put themselves – their funding flows, institutional structures and decision-making power – on the agenda.

27 This positioning is not only misrepresentative of Global North countries' records on gender but also glosses over instances where they have used notions of gender justice in pursuit of other geopolitical aims, as in 'saving' the women of Afghanistan (Abu-Lughod, 2002), or selectively in places like Gaza – see section 5.5.

28 One interviewee noted that some partner organisations based in crisis settings have queried the limits of a feminist approach in terms of inclusion, with reference to purportedly 'feminist' anti-trans rhetoric in recent years, especially in the United Kingdom. This is a useful corrective to the assumption that resistance to FFP is necessarily anti-feminist or that FFP countries are necessarily best placed to instruct others on inclusive approaches.

5.5 Facing humanitarian dilemmas

While FFP certainly has the potential to advance key agendas for change in the humanitarian sector, it is also important to acknowledge the risks. An FFP narrative that rewrites a feminist framework into a narrow, instrumentalist or disingenuous version is problematic indeed – and it also shares parallels with humanitarianism's 'master frame' calling for a limited, needs-based and avowedly apolitical orientation towards crisis.

Emerging crises have proven a flashpoint for critiques of FFP and how it has been exercised in response to current events, raising questions about the relationship between the FFP narrative and peace. To date, most strands of feminism have been oriented towards peace and demilitarisation, with feminist peace activism at the local, national and international levels forming the basis for the WPS agenda. Germany appears to be constructing a different story with its FFP, especially around crisis response, arguing that FFP is 'not synonymous with pacifism' (GFFO, 2023: 13). In her speech to launch the guidelines in March 2023, Foreign Minister Baerbock reflected on crisis response in Ukraine, Afghanistan and Yemen:

> This also shows that feminist foreign policy is not easy, that it involves incredibly difficult decisions. Because it is not just about lofty words, it is about the real problems of real people. We are familiar with realpolitik – this is 'realfeminism'.

The German government's 'more confrontational approach' to security in Europe since Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a major departure from Germany's positioning since the Second World War, frequently highlighting the war's impact on women and girls (Pierobon, 2024: 285). Some Ukrainian feminist groups have also demanded military support to defend themselves against Russia (Ukraine Solidarity Campaign, 2023; Kotliuk, 2023), a stance that departs from much of the history of feminist activism but is very much in keeping with self-determination. This tension foregrounds questions about what it means to promote the FFP narrative and respect local demands without paternalism, while also supporting the arms industries that exacerbate humanitarian need and gendered harms in conflict and crisis.[29]

How FFP governments like Canada and Germany have responded to the current collective punishment of civilians in the Gaza Strip, which has escalated into a humanitarian catastrophe, has also proven a litmus test. While Colombia and Chile have withdrawn their ambassadors and Spain has vocally criticised Israel's actions, for example, Canada and Germany have both firmly backed Israel's right to self-defence. Potvin and Lefurgey (2024) write that Canada's 'tepid' approach is casting doubt on the 'strength and sincerity of its feminist commitments'. Germany has been an especially staunch defender of Israel's actions, leading one commentator to call its FFP a 'farce' for its failure to address the

29 Not unlike Germany pressing its FFP into service as a justification for military support to Ukraine, forthcoming research by Hargrave et al. (2024) shows that the Ukraine response has highlighted disparities in narratives on refugees in otherwise hostile host countries, drawing in part on gendered and racialised notions of vulnerability to mobilise support Ukrainians over refugees from other settings.

disproportionate suffering of women and girls while fuelling humanitarian need through the supply of arms (Engelcke, 2024). Humanitarians, too, have faced criticism for an arguably 'tepid' response to Gaza (Murphy Madia, 2023; Moallin et al., 2024).

In the face of such dilemmas, both humanitarian response and FFP are seeing profound criticism for their unresolved relationship to peace and insufficient allyship with populations living amidst occupation and colonialism. For both, the current strategy of proffering humanitarian aid to assuage the impacts of military violence, while the same governments simultaneously and actively generate humanitarian need by aiding, abetting and even arming the parties to a conflict, points to paradoxes within both humanitarian response and FFP. For humanitarians, and especially those who seek to avoid politics with a staunchly needs-based approach, both Ukraine and Gaza show the limits of this 'back to basics' model of humanitarian assistance. Where needs-based response is often understood as a 'safe' option in the face of challenges to their neutrality or impartiality, these crises reveal needs-based response itself is a narrative – and one that is being cast as either insufficient bordering on irrelevant (Ukraine) or actively complicit in military aggression (Gaza). Advocates for FFP should similarly see the limits of a feminist approach that applies itself only to international assistance, or that treats crises (and indeed response) as existing in a vacuum, without reference to the root causes of vulnerability and the interconnectedness of all areas of foreign policy.

A truly feminist approach, to both FFP and humanitarian response, demands intersectional and decolonial ambition across all areas of foreign policy. Really seeing and understanding the structural dimensions of vulnerabilities in crises means engaging with their causes, from heteropatriarchy to colonial oppression to socioeconomic deprivation. This feminism also must be grounded in the everyday humanitarianism of women responders living and working in crisis settings, rather than the prescriptive narratives of policymakers in donor countries. Thus, these humanitarian dilemmas point to the unresolved questions thrown up by attempts to reconcile narratives of FFP with limited, needs-based and apolitical humanitarian action. These quandaries carry real implications for the sustainability and legitimacy of humanitarian response, and thus they require further engagement from humanitarian actors to sift through these thorny questions and arrive at workable solutions.

6 Conclusion: change without transformation?

> And so, on and on for the coalition of the willing. I think that's part of it for me: like, okay, we have all of this momentum now, and [...] it might be incomplete feminisms, but part of that is because we need that vision. We need that long game. We need that strategy. (Civil society, Canada)

While humanitarian response in the era of FFP presents a very incomplete story of feminist humanitarianism, it raises important questions about how to achieve change within systems – that is, by diluting demands for change and risking their becoming less meaningful, or by insisting on idealism that puts success out of reach.

To embrace truly feminist humanitarian action means seriously considering alternative paradigms of crisis response, beyond the narrow frames that shape humanitarian action at present. Where the FFP narrative has positioned feminism as operating from the top down, alternative framings will mean starting at the bottom with operational thinking, within humanitarian agencies and well beyond them in movements, networks and organisations led by women, girls and gender-diverse people (as well as Indigenous groups, organisations of persons with disabilities, refugee-led organisations and others). Even if full transformation of systems and structures is to remain elusive, the change achieved should still be meaningful and tangible under a 'feminist' umbrella. With that in mind, Canada and Germany should ask themselves what will remain – what benchmarks, mechanisms or legislated gains that cannot be so easily wiped away – if their policies are eventually rolled back.

Canada and Germany's experiences thus far also demonstrate the persistence of a 'master frame' of exceptionalism in humanitarian response, which the overlaid narrative of FFP has failed thus far to meaningfully challenge. This master frame positions crises as exceptional, timebound problems to which humanitarian assistance offers a compartmentalised, short-termist and technocratic solution provided by specialised, apolitical actors (Saez and Bryant, 2023). By divorcing crises from their political, social and economic contexts, this framing drives an apolitical focus on principles and needs over rights, context, nuance and joined-up responses to complex, multifaceted and persistent crises. By pursuing a narrative of FFP that limits its scope to targeting gendered (or even intersectional) risks and needs, rather than rethinking funding models, timescales or ways of working across silos, donor governments are setting out an FFP vulnerable to backslide. With both countries facing electoral challenges to their FFPs, thoughts must turn to holding the gains – and deepening understanding and commitment.

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