

FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY PRINCIPLES IN CZECHIA

PRACTITIONERS' PERSPECTIVES AND WAYS FORWARD

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SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This participatory SWOT analysis examines how practitioners perceive the application of feminist foreign policy's five principles – Intersectionality, Empathetic Reflexivity, Meaningful Participation, Accountability and Active Peace Commitment – in the Czech context. Feminist foreign policy extends beyond focusing on women and girls and promoting gender equality. Still, the feminist label can be off-putting to many potential supporters; a better approach

might be to work with its principles through individual topics such as meaningful participation, rights at large, or social and climate justice. A viable strategy could be to focus on a single, tangible issue – such as reproductive rights – in order to gradually shift public discourse toward a feminist approach in both domestic and foreign policy. The informal feminist foreign policy network should be sustained, with greater efforts to engage men in its activities.

INTRODUCTION

Feminist approaches to foreign policy and comprehensive feminist foreign policy (FFP) strategies are on the rise. Since Sweden took the lead in 2014, fifteen countries have committed to FFP, including larger countries such as France and Germany, as well as others like Scotland, Colombia, or Chile. In Czechia, a strong tradition of human rights and civil society engagement provides a good basis for implementing FFP principles here as well. The time is ripe for discussing to what extent Czech foreign policy is feminist now, what the outlook is in terms of its adopting an FFP strategy in the future, and, importantly, under what label.

FFP inserts the feminist agenda into the everyday practice of diplomacy and international politics. Its scope is much broader than a simple focus on women and girls and a push for gender equality. In principle, FFP advocates for a transformation of the international order with a focus on human rights, eliminating injustice, inequality and poverty and preventing conflicts, while addressing their deep roots, including imperialism and the legacy of colonialism (see the box below). Despite the controversy surrounding feminist terminology and feminism itself, FFP's comprehensive approach has the potential to resonate across diplomatic, political, and civic spheres.

The principles of feminist foreign policy – and what they look like in practice:

1. **Intersectionality:** Foreign policy acknowledges intersectional disadvantage, i.e., multiple discrimination and inequality tied to sex, gender, ethnicity, economic status, age, disability and sexuality.
 2. **Empathetic Reflexivity:** Diplomats and foreign policy practitioners are aware of Europe's historical and political responsibility and impact on current living conditions around the world.
 3. **Meaningful Participation:** Foreign policy actively involves all groups, especially women and girls, as well as disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in general, in its agenda-setting.
 4. **Accountability:** Foreign policy is accountable to those whose lives it affects and seeks to improve, and this approach to accountability is promoted domestically as well.
 5. **Active Peace Commitment:** Foreign policy, through both its strategies and actions, promotes the structural conditions necessary to achieve a peace built on justice and equality.
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SOURCE: ADAPTED FROM CHEUNG, J., ET AL.: PRACTICING FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY IN THE EVERYDAY: A TOOLKIT [↗ LINK](#).

The hereunder presented attitudes towards the application of FFP principles have been gathered not from literature but rather in a participatory manner from more than 30 representatives of the public administration, civil society and academia, who were selected based on contacts from previous projects and snowball sampling [↗ LINK](#). The two focus groups, consisting of 29 women and 3 men in total, which were held in June and September 2024 at the Institute of International Relations Prague in collaboration with the Prague office of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, provided the input for a SWOT analysis [↗ LINK](#) of the application of individual FFP principles. Using a TOWS matrix [↗ LINK](#) as well as recommendations from the focus groups, we then created a series of possible strategies for strengthening the

feminist framing of human-rights [↗ LINK](#), development [↗ LINK](#) and security [↗ LINK](#) principles of Czech foreign policy. We are offering these to the broad foreign policy community to use as a starting point for further discussion, prioritisation, testing and development of concrete, relevant and realistic recommendations.

INTERSECTIONALITY

STRENGTHS

The good news is that over the past decade, the foreign policy sector as such has **shifted its outlook on gender**, moving from outright ridicule of the agenda and counting up the number of women in diplomatic services or development projects to a more complex understanding of gender in foreign policy and human rights. The gender dimension of the Ukrainians' flight from the Russian invasion was a factor in this shift in perception, as feminist NGOs actively alerted the government to this aspect while they were addressing it on the ground.

Some grant calls coming out of the Czech Development Agency actually **work with intersectionality** by both explicitly aiming to improve opportunities for women and calling for social inclusion, including for the LGBT+ minority.

WEAKNESSES

On the other hand, gender is largely still perceived as a **basic dichotomy of men versus women**. By contrast, the feminist approach inherently includes other disadvantaged groups such as people with a disability, ethnic minorities, migrants, the elderly, LGBT+ people and other socially vulnerable groups. This intersectional approach is still mostly absent from the public administration, political representation and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

The wider Czech foreign policy community is small and generally **lacks gender expertise**; this includes even large NGOs and research organisations. Since gender has had low priority and has not been seen as a horizontal issue, insufficient funds have been allocated to this agenda – even though in development projects, for example, it is not at all uncommon to work with women of two different ethnicities and rights within the community, which, absent an intersectional analysis of the power relations at play, can create conflict and significantly reduce the aid effectiveness.

OPPORTUNITIES

Intersectionality might be mostly invisible under normal circumstances, but the current **crises make multiple disadvantages more apparent**. For Czech society, this is personified by the women refugees fleeing Ukraine after Russia's full-scale invasion. Even at the political level, the gendered nature of these crises and their consequences is being debated, as is the need to include a gender perspective in newly proposed legislation.

That is because development projects have shown over and over that even small gender-informed provisions, such as providing safe restrooms and spaces for breastfeeding in public markets, can have a **substantial impact on women's participation** in the workforce.

In specifically women-focused projects, small changes have been shown to save women a lot of time, which in turn benefits the whole household, including men. Therefore, projects with a gender component can be presented as universally beneficial.

Development and foreign policy, but also humanitarian aid practice, can also take inspiration from science and research, which should serve as a source of evidence-based policies. Here, **accounting for gender and various forms of disadvantage is becoming a requirement** for all grant applications. It is also worth noting that women are often active agents despite their disadvantaged position. For example, in many countries, ecological activism is primarily done by women, whose livelihoods are often most directly threatened by the destruction of the environment, and who tend to be more persecuted than men precisely because of their gender.

THREATS

However, experience from development practice shows that **women do not always necessarily act as agents of progress**. They are also wives, mothers and grandmothers responsible for bringing up men in a culture of toxic masculinity, and in some contexts, they force harmful practices on girls more than men do, as in the case of female genital mutilation. Even in our own foreign service, there are successful female diplomats who reject measures promoting women's rights and the gender agenda.

EMPATHETIC REFLEXIVITY

STRENGTHS

There are many women in the Czech diplomatic service, the NGO sector and academia who have developed a **deep understanding of local cultural contexts** through their trips, foreign missions, development projects and field research. The presence of a woman in a dominantly masculine environment can signal a greater willingness to adopt a more participatory and empathetic approach to project implementation. Even just their visibility contributes to the dismantling of stereotypes. In addition, even a long-called-for move towards using gender-inclusive language in the home organisation will eventually trickle down into external communication and lead to a higher sensitivity to gender-related topics in general.

WEAKNESSES

However, not every woman representing Czech diplomacy or organisations embodies female-coded qualities such as empathy. Women, like men, are **often ignorant of the privilege their background in a rich Western country affords them** over their colleagues – both female and male – in the developing countries they come to work in. The Czechs' privilege is all the more covert because the everyday diplomatic agenda tends to play out in the field of economic diplomacy, i.e. dealing with the local elite, rather than the field of disadvantaged citizens' human rights and direct contact with socially marginalised individuals.

Furthermore, Czechia frequently assumes the **role of a historical victim**; there is practically zero debate of decolonisation or our direct and indirect role in the exploitation of the Global South. We bring our specific historical traumas, such as the occupation by

the Soviet Union or the ‘about us without us’ politics of the Munich Agreement, into our foreign policy practice, and tend to see ourselves as a small, insignificant country; this limits our willingness to actively push for a larger social and political transformation.

And finally, certain **long-time, a priori held positions** of Czechia on the European and global political stages, e.g. regarding migration or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, are antithetical to the very principles of FFP and hinder our ability to discern the complexities of people’s lives under occupation, their fleeing from their homes, etc. In general, the double-standard politics and dehumanisation of specific ethnic groups or nations can be seen as a result of a lacking empathetic reflexivity.

OPPORTUNITIES

On the other hand, ad hoc activities such as the ammunition initiative have proven our **ability to act as global leaders** in multilateral diplomacy, though so far only in areas of broad political consensus and inter-institutional collaboration, such as support for Ukraine. An opportunity could be seen in taking up a specific feminist foreign policy issue, such as reproductive rights, in a similar fashion.

THREATS

Coming from a White person without an in-depth understanding of the local context, a gender-sensitive approach **can be perceived as patronising**, even if its messenger is a woman. Because of the perceptions of gender and feminism as a Western import, it might be strategically advisable to use the more general language of universal rights, inclusivity and participation.

MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION

STRENGTHS

Over the past decade, the principle of participation has gained prominence in diplomacy and development policy. In development cooperation, the **participatory approach has become the norm**, and the efforts to involve stakeholders, especially the actual beneficiaries, in the implementation of projects, have naturally led to a greater participation of women.

WEAKNESSES

Foreign policy mirrors the domestic attitudes with an undercurrent of **lasting gender stereotypes**; a meaningful participation of women and other disadvantaged groups in the public sphere has not been achieved completely. This has to do with conditions in the labour market such as the dearth of flexible jobs, the persisting wage gap and the stereotypical role of women as primary caregivers. Entering heavily masculine structures can be difficult for women in general and even more so for groups facing other, sometimes multiple disadvantages.

The fairly limited involvement on the part of civil society is another factor: the foreign policy arena almost completely **lacks representation from NGOs with feminist expertise**. On the one hand, many gender organisations do have this kind of expertise but have

not taken up foreign policy as an area of focus. On the other hand, the development organisations which do deal with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) see the gender agenda as a marginal topic rather than a priority.

In practice, this situation results in projects where the **participation of women and girls is monitored only formally** (e.g., as a statistical indicator related to the target group), yet without any further actions tied to it. At the same time, NGOs, while constantly providing free-of-charge expert services to the state, suffer from a chronic and worsening lack of resources.

OPPORTUNITIES

A focus on participation on its own is not a silver bullet, but it can spur a shift towards a **truly meaningful participation** of women in both diplomacy and domestic policy. This would mean not only the presence of women from various backgrounds but also opportunities to influence policy and processes in an emancipatory way. Domestic and foreign policy influence one another; a meaningful participation of women in foreign policy can therefore provide an opportunity to communicate the same principle domestically. Women in prominent positions, both at home and abroad, can serve as role models for other women and their career choices.

By taking part in important political and other media-covered events, high-ranking female diplomats can project a message about the role of women in the public sphere, especially in societies with a limited public representation of women. Therefore, it is important not only to collaborate on the governmental level, but also to **approach local communities and work towards greater inclusivity**.

On the domestic level, both **professional and informal networking** can be a source of support for women. An example that can serve as a source of inspiration in this regard is that around thirty female directors of Czech NGOs (with both domestic and foreign agendas) have started an informal network which has been functioning on a regular basis and yielded remarkable results.

THREATS

In reality, however, both the government and donors often end up approaching participation as a **mere formality or a box to be checked**, unless it is already rooted in the organisation's own culture. There are many dimensions to participation, and as Sherry Arnstein's classic 'ladder of participation' ⁹ [LINK](#) shows, it can end up causing more harm than good in the end. Oftentimes, participation limited to informing and consultation serves to legitimise decisions that have already been made.

Hate campaigns are a different sort of threat to women's participation in the public sphere, including in the online space. And even without hateful speech, women are much more often subject to sexual objectification than men. A higher meaningful representation of women is therefore also contingent on the cultivation of the public arena in general and social media in particular.

ACCOUNTABILITY

STRENGTHS

Czechia has committed to implementing gender equality in both its national strategies and foreign policy, including through supporting the Sustainable Development Goals, which include the goal of gender equality. Czechia's international gender commitments are indisputable.

WEAKNESSES

However, foreign policy generally lacks monitoring for the benefits and gender equality impacts of any given policy. Gender is often mentioned in concept notes, but **without any practical implications**. Gender equality principles then remain on paper as a way to declare our fulfilment of the commitment to gender equality that is required by international organisations.

Development and transition promotion projects are not required to monitor who their specific benefactors are, and there is **no qualitative assessment** evaluating the projects' benefit to their recipients or their impact on gender categories and other forms of disadvantage, such as belonging to the LGBT+ minority. Due to a lack of capacities and/or expertise, only formal criteria are being followed while a deeper analysis is absent.

The Czech development cooperation and transition promotion policy also suffer from **limited options in terms of implementing complex multi-year projects**. However, long-term work is necessary if sustainable social change is to be achieved in the ways envisioned by the development cooperation in general, and this is the case even more so where deep-seated gender norms are concerned.

OPPORTUNITIES

A possible path is through supporting the localisation of development cooperation **via those organisations that are open to working on gender**. Many local and partner organisations are open to working towards gender equality, i.e., Goal 5 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, by default.

The Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs could start approaching **gender equality as an obligatory horizontal principle**, demanding its worked-out implementation similarly to the way the EU structural funds – or even the Technology Agency of the Czech Republic – do. Making this a general requirement would mean each project would have to be grounded in deeper considerations and gender analysis.

THREATS

Although Czechia's commitments are indisputable and stable on paper, their **implementation can suffer in practice** under a new political representation. For example, a new government may discard a strategy that the public administration, civil society and political leadership had previously agreed on.

Many challenges regarding accountability arise in **working with partners from various cultural contexts** in countries of the Global South which restrict women's opportunities to serve in leadership positions and their professional growth, even when the local context does not forbid it. However, the fulfilment of certain rights, e.g., land ownership,

may be explicitly prohibited for women by local legislation or customary law. In some contexts, violence against women is common, and finding ways of working with the perpetrators is a specific challenge.

ACTIVE PEACE COMMITMENT

STRENGTHS

Czechia **has gender-oriented tools for supporting peace**, particularly the National Action Plan for the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda and the Gender Equality Strategy. Although no funding has been allocated to them, even the very existence of these gender strategies is a positive fact. They represent a series of tasks which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other ministries are required to complete within set timelines. Civil society is able to help move the agenda forward by taking part in the consultations and providing important feedback. All of this ensures that the government is working on this agenda and trying to act on it.

WEAKNESSES

However, the gender dimension of peace and security lacks a sufficiently strong **basis in the form of research and the involvement of gender organisations**. The Czech Women's Lobby, the Czech platform of women's and gender equality organisations, is not working on international issues. Development cooperation implementors from the ranks of the Czech private sector practically never work with gender equality principles. The Czech Forum for Development Cooperation's gender equality working group has been inactive for several years due to its limited capacities and funding. Educational project implementors take gender into account haphazardly and in a limited way that is dependent on the project financing. There is no funding dedicated to gender equality as a priority, and policies are not being tied to the UN gender equality goals.

Since gender is not being applied as a cross-cutting principle across the various stages of international development cooperation, a separate financing dedicated explicitly to women and girls, as well as other disadvantaged groups, is needed. Intergenerational transformational change is also **impossible to achieve without the involvement of men**, which, however, is still limited. The majority of the projects, which are one-year only, do not allow for the lasting structural changes that could be characterised as transformational. This is also true in the context of armed conflict and humanitarian catastrophes.

Finally, **silos mentality runs high in the Czech government** and the Finance Ministry has a lot of say, which complicates the adoption of gender-sensitive positions internationally as well. Foreign policy strategies proposed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs must be aligned with domestic policy, which is generally not favourable toward gender equality issues. However, the MFA has a lot of leeway in incorporating the mainstreaming of gender as a horizontal principle into all foreign policy tools, especially in the area of economic diplomacy and gender analysis of armed conflicts.

OPPORTUNITIES

On the broadest general level, the **UN Sustainable Development Goals can help make the case** for advocating gender equality. Czechia's commitment to the global goals can serve as an argument within the partner organisations. On the other hand, on the most specific level, an effort to bring the caring roles, which have traditionally been the domain of women's experience, closer to men, can enable women to grow professionally and promote gender equality in foreign policy.

The human rights agenda can explicitly add in women, children and vulnerable groups so that human rights would cease to be synonymous with men's rights, similarly to how it is done at the UN level. This tends to be viewed as acceptable even in countries of the Global South. Inspiration in this regard can often be found easily by **looking at existing projects abroad**. For example, certain donors fund projects supporting female leaders in the Sahel, which aim to create a more flexible work environment and reconcile the women's socially expected and valued parental role with their public one.

THREATS

Neither the MFA nor the Czech Development Agency (CZDA) **has sufficient capacities**. The CZDA has a high staff turnover, while diplomatic post rotations make it difficult to implant gender expertise and interconnect it in a lasting way with other agendas. In this context, gender indeed cannot become a key agenda, or a priority. At the same time, there has been no willingness at the governmental level to increase the CZDA's capacities.

Paradoxically, while Ukrainian refugees as well as the women involved in the fighting in Ukraine have made the gender dimension of war more visible, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has at the same time pushed the gender discourse into the background. Voices from both the diplomatic sphere and academia have often **claimed that gender is a 'luxury issue that can be addressed later**, once all the important things have been dealt with.' The generally higher proportion of men in higher positions means there is always a risk of gender equality principles getting pushed aside as unimportant, e.g. during the drafting of strategic documents.

FRAMING AND BRANDING OF FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY

STRENGTHS

In the past, Czech diplomacy has been able to join the progressive positions favouring gender equality, be it within the EU or in other multilateral forums. While few high-ranking diplomatic positions are occupied by women, Czechia does have a relatively **high and still growing proportion of women mayors and representatives** on the local government level (compared to the national government), which has contributed to the high level of public trust in women politicians. Meanwhile, the situation in diplomacy is improving as well, and for most junior diplomats, both female and male, sensitivity to gender issues is the norm thanks to both generational change and more international experience.

Moreover, Czechia has a **strong legacy in topics related to Feminist Foreign Policy**: increasing the participation of women, including in politics, has been a traditional Czech priority issue in the UN Human Rights Council, the Economic and Social Council, and a part of the development policy agenda during the last Czech presidency of the Council of the EU.

WEAKNESSES

Gender as a term has a bad reputation in Czech society. It is a foreign term that is **widely misunderstood and unpopular**. An aversion to ‘feminism’ and ‘gender’ considerations is often proclaimed even by people who otherwise share their values. Similarly, the public is still largely ignorant of the meaning of intersectionality or feminist policy, and the majority of people, even the most highly educated, have little idea what FFP means besides women’s rights.

OPPORTUNITIES

In gender-averse contexts – including the domestic one – a **strategy of using general terms and emphasising our shared identity** as human beings and universal rights tends to be more effective than one emphasising female identity and women’s rights, especially when the former comes from women. Taking gender into account can also be justified by the widely accepted principles of *do no harm* and *leaving no one behind*. Promoting participation as meaningful representation can automatically help in including women’s perspectives in politics and other areas.

FFP **principles can also be incorporated through other related topics** such as the climate, while efforts are made to find a language that would invite the support of other players. Specific impacts of the climate crisis such as floods and droughts have helped our society to accept climate change as a whole; similarly, FFP sub-topics can aid the acceptance of feminism as an umbrella concept. Support for FFP can also be won by focusing on its individual aspects, such as intersectionality or disadvantaged groups, and other players can be persuaded by accentuating the theme of social justice.

Therefore, it is important to **communicate FFP through smaller, concrete issues** which help explain it as a whole. Two examples could be long-term conflict resolution and building of sustainable peace, where it is apparent why they work better than traditional politics. This is an opportunity for Czechia, which might not find common ground in promoting the FFP brand, but could well find an issue where it has sufficient ground to build on and which could become the flagship of the Czech FFP – e.g. the topics of sexualised violence and reproductive rights. Public discourse can be shifted in favour of FFP similarly to how it was done in the United Kingdom, which has a Special Envoy on LGBT rights.

THREATS

With even those most in favour of feminist policy shying away from supporting it publicly, it will be harder still to win support outside this allied group. In Czechia, feminism is often perceived as an insult more than anything else – an ivory-tower term isolated from the rest of society. Therefore, it is unlikely to become a political priority; and even if it did, in a top-down way, anti-gender forces would likely seize it. In the context of a **growing anti-gender movement**, promoting gender policy can be labelled as pushing the ‘woke’ Western ideology and therefore rejected. The anti-gender movement is one of the reasons the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention) has not been ratified by Czechia, which is a fact that

has undermined the legitimacy and credibility of the Czech FFP. An investigation of the financing of these anti-gender campaigns, as well as of the ways they spread disinformation and impact security in Czechia is needed.

As **feminism moves into the mainstream, it is often drained of meaning** and narrowed to the liberal issue of equal representation. Society tends to view the gender agenda through the lens of liberal feminism, which means that the general view is that women should occupy the same roles as men without any requirement that men should make adjustments. The daily agenda and insufficient capacities prohibit practitioners from dedicating more time to gender. ‘Gender fatigue,’ a feeling of exhaustion from repeatedly raised gender issues, is a real phenomenon. And even the very brand of FFP faces the threat of co-optation. Some countries that have signed on to it, such as Germany, have been criticised for failing to actually change their politics, which continue to be inconsistent with feminist values; in these cases, the feminist community itself is questioning the given country’s commitment to FFP.

Not only are even seemingly unproblematic **terms such as inclusivity still boycotted** by ministries run by the Czech conservative parties during inter-ministerial consultations, but hiding gender under apparently neutral terms like inclusivity and participation can result in no true gender analysis being done; women, girls and other disadvantaged groups can be sidelined as a result.

CONCLUSION AND FORWARD-LOOKING STRATEGIES

Below is a summary of possible further action strategies for members of the informal FFP network as well as institutional players, including the MFA, all of which were either voiced in the focus groups or emerged from the TOWS matrix. In methodological terms, these are not recommendations but rather a list of steps necessary for utilising strengths to take advantage of opportunities and face threats, as well as reducing weaknesses in order to maximise opportunities and minimise the impact of threats. These suggestions are meant to be discussed and assessed for their relevance, and they are put forward without any ranking or prioritisation.

- Systematically engage men in FFP-related activities.
- Maintain the informal ‘Friends of FFP’ network and consider institutionalising it when possible.
- Raise awareness of FFP, especially within the MFA, the CZDA and the private sector.
- Push for multi-year financing for development and other projects promoting the social change called for by FFP.
- Continue promoting a higher representation of women in diplomacy, as both leaders and role models.

- Continue dismantling gender stereotypes; i.e., focus on domestic issues which have negative repercussions in foreign policy and undermine its legitimacy in the area of gender equality and human rights.
- In development cooperation and transition promotion projects, make a comprehensive gender analysis a requirement for compliance with gender equality standards.
- Focus on those FFP principles which already resonate with both the public and political arenas and formulate priority topics accordingly.
- Raise awareness of the cultural perceptions of Western approaches in the postcolonial context in order to better understand and apply feminist approaches outside of Europe.
- Rally support for FFP principles by connecting them to the wider issues of human rights, democracy, inclusivity and participation.
- Communicate FFP through specific tangible topics which can serve to explain FFP as a whole.
- Since diplomats often work within an environment of positive achievements in terms of gender equality, harness their greater legitimacy for promoting these achievements to Czech society as well.
- Taking advantage of the generational change within Czech society, focus on the younger generation of men, who are already increasingly participating in care. A positive shift can be expected in diplomacy and foreign policy practice as well.

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