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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Feminist Foreign Policy Without Migration? Examining Exclusions in Germany's FFP Guidelines

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Abstract

Germany's 2023 Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) Guidelines commit to a transformative, intersectional agenda across diplomacy, security, and climate policy, but omit migration. This article examines how and why migration was excluded, despite its centrality to foreign policy and the involvement of civil society in the drafting process. Drawing on practice theory, Black feminist and postcolonial scholarship, we analyze state–civil society consultations as a community of practice shaped by epistemic hierarchies based on race and coloniality. We show how the Foreign Office's reliance on established, Germany-based policy actors with limited expertise in gendered mobility sidelined migration as a feminist concern. The consultation format constrained participation and reinforced boundaries around what counted as legitimate feminist knowledge. Bridging literature on migration and FFP, the article advances understandings of how institutional and epistemic power shape feminist policy-making. It calls for a more inclusive FFP attentive to the gendered and racialized dynamics of mobility.

Keywords: feminist foreign policy; migration; practice theory; epistemic hierarchy; community of practice; Germany

Introduction

"As long as women are not safe, no one is safe." With these words, Germany's first female Foreign Minister, Annalena Baerbock, introduced the Federal Foreign Office's first Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) Guidelines on March 1, 2023.[1] In its external policies, the Foreign Office promised to mainstream gender and promote equality through a "transformative and intersectional approach"

(German Federal Foreign Office 2023).[2] The Guidelines cover a broad spectrum of foreign policy fields, including peace and security, diplomacy, humanitarian assistance, human rights, crisis management, climate governance, and energy policy. Yet international migration — a defining issue in German and European politics — is almost entirely absent, mentioned only once in relation to climate change (German Federal Foreign Office 2023, 48). In response, civil society actors have described migration, refugee, and border policy as 'the missing guideline' (1325 Network 2023) in Germany's FFP.

This omission reflects a broader puzzle. Across different national contexts, FFPs have been criticized for failing to engage with questions of migration, displacement, and border politics (Achilleos-Sarll et al. 2023; Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond 2016; Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy 2021). Feminist scholars and activists have highlighted how these policies often remain 'refugee-blind' (Achilleos-Sarll et al. 2023, 17) and insufficiently address the gendered and racialized dimensions of global mobility (Cheung and Scheyer 2024). This is all the more surprising given growing awareness, both in policy and academic debates, of the gendered dynamics of migration. Research has shown how gender, sexuality, and other intersecting inequalities shape access to mobility, international protection, and citizenship (for an overview, see Cleton and Bonjour 2022; Hall and Welfens 2025). In response, governments and international organizations have increasingly adopted initiatives to "mainstream gender" in migration and border governance (Querton 2019; Freedman 2010).

Germany offers a particularly relevant case for exploring the absence of migration in FFP. As one of the EU's major destination countries for labor, family, and forced migrants, questions of external migration governance, from border control to cooperation with third countries, have dominated national political debates for nearly a decade. Germany's Foreign Office plays a central role in shaping such international migration policies. While domestic security, asylum, and return measures fall primarily under the Ministry of the Interior, the Foreign Office leads, for instance, on visa policies, humanitarian residence law, and has a task force dedicated to European migration cooperation (German Federal Foreign Office 2024). Notably, during the very period in which the FFP Guidelines were drafted, the Foreign Office oversaw large-scale evacuation operations from Afghanistan, one of the most visible and politically significant migration efforts in recent German foreign policy. Moreover, Germany's foreign minister Annalena Baerbock, who positioned herself as leader of FFP, is a member of the Green party, which was very critical of restrictive migration policies in the past. Yet, migration remains absent from the Foreign Office's FFP framework.

What makes this absence even more striking is that the Foreign Office developed its FFP Guidelines through a civil society consultation process, involving women's organizations, think tanks, research institutions, and individual experts. One would expect that such an approach would have provided space to integrate migration as a relevant foreign policy issue. Against this backdrop, our paper asks: How has the deliberation process behind the German Foreign Office's FFP Guidelines contributed to the exclusion of migration? We see this question as essential to understanding how migration continues to be sidelined within FFP

frameworks, even in cases where civil society is actively involved in shaping policy.

To answer our research question, we trace the policy-making process of the Foreign Office's FFP guidelines from the first declarations of intent, via civil society consultations, to the Guidelines' publication. Using international practice theory, we conceptualize the actors involved as a community of practice, to highlight social interaction, learning, and the recognition of expertise (Adler and Pouliot 2011; Bueger and Gadinger 2014). To address critiques of the community of practice concept as overly harmonious and inattentive to power (e.g., Marshall and Rollinson 2004), we draw on Black feminist and postcolonial scholarship (Chessé and Sondarjee 2024; Hill Collins 2019). This allows us to foreground epistemic power and explore how race, coloniality, and intersecting inequalities shape whose knowledge and competence are recognized as legitimate within the policy-making process.

In particular, we suggest that epistemic hierarchies influence two critical dimensions of inclusion/exclusion in the process: first, which individuals and groups are invited to the community of practice, and second, whose knowledge, particularly around migration and global mobility, is ultimately taken up in the FFP Guidelines. Through this lens, our analysis proceeds in two steps. First, we examine the formation of the consultation process, paying attention to the positionality and knowledge of those included. Second, we assess which forms of knowledge and dynamics of inclusion and exclusion shaped the final content of the Guidelines, with a particular focus on the absence of migration.

Our analysis shows that the German Foreign Office's FFP consultation process reproduced epistemic hierarchies that ultimately sidelined migration as a policy issue. The process relied heavily on Germany-based, established foreign and security policy actors with limited expertise in gender, intersectionality, or global mobility. Knowledge shaped by postcolonial and migration-focused perspectives was marginalized throughout. These exclusions were reinforced by the top-down design of the consultations, which required physical presence in Germany, fluency in German, familiarity with policy-making norms, and adherence to a narrow understanding of what counts as 'foreign policy.'

Thereby, the article makes a three-fold contribution. Empirically, it offers one of the first studies of how FFPs are shaped through state-civil society deliberations, with a focus on the understudied case of migration. Theoretically, it brings feminist and postcolonial perspectives into dialogue with international practice theory, advancing our understanding of how epistemic power shapes policy-making processes. More broadly, the article contributes to scholarship on FFP, migration governance, and the politics of knowledge in global governance.

The article proceeds as follows. We first situate our work within the literature on FFP and feminist critiques of migration governance. We then outline our theoretical framework and methodology. Our analysis examines inclusion/exclusion dynamics (1) in forming the community of practice, and (2) deliberating the content of the Foreign Office's FFP, in which migration got sidelined. We conclude by reflecting on the implications for both FFP research and feminist policy-making.

FFP, Migration, and Gender

FFP can be seen as part of the broader project of integrating gender perspectives into foreign policy, building on longstanding efforts of gender mainstreaming in international relations (Hudson et al. 2013; Robinson 2021; True and Mintrom 2001). Frameworks such as the Beijing Platform for Action and the UN Security Council's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda have emphasized the importance of addressing structural gender inequalities in global politics (cf. Tickner 2011, 2018; True 2016). FFPs build on these foundations but seek to embed feminist principles, such as equality, care, and intersectionality, more systematically at the center of foreign policy decision-making (Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond 2016; Thompson et al. 2020; Zilla 2022). Yet, as this section shows, the ambitions and practices of FFPs remain uneven and contested, especially in relation to migration.

A decade after Sweden introduced the first FFP in 2014, the literature can be divided into normative and empirical studies (cf. Achilleos-Sarll et al. 2023). Normative perspectives examine FFP's normative and ideological foundations (Achilleos-Sarll 2018; Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond 2016; Aggestam et al. 2019; Robinson 2021; Zilla 2022). Empirical studies analyze concrete case studies and implementation, many focusing on Sweden and Canada and the type of feminism applied (Aggestam and Rosamond 2019; Herrmann 2023; Morton et al. 2020; Robinson 2021; Thomson 2020, 2022).

The implementation and significance of FFP vary greatly between states. Sweden's FFP is known for its focus on Rights, Representation, and Resources, yet is criticized for overlooking militarism, despite Sweden's role as a major arms exporter (Bergman Rosamond 2020). Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy centers on development and poverty reduction. Both approaches are largely rooted in liberal feminism, with Sweden emphasizing legal rights and Canada focusing on economic development (Thomson 2020). Other countries, such as France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Mexico, have been developing (and abandoning — such as in the case of Sweden, the Netherlands, and Germany) FFPs. FFP has also been taken up by states of the Global South such as Mexico, which has been criticized for its lack of credibility due to high rates of femicides (Runyan 2024). Importantly, postcolonial feminist scholars point out that feminist practices of foreign policies have existed in the Global South before the Global North developed the idea of FFP (cf. Parashar and D'Costa 2017).

This article contributes to the scholarship on FFP by examining dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in both the policy-making process and the scope of FFPs, with a particular focus on migration. First, regarding the policy process, research on the WPS agenda, closely linked to FFPs, offers important insights. The WPS agenda has a long-standing tradition of involving civil society in both its origins and national implementation (Björkdahl and Selimovic 2019). Scholarship shows that these state–civil society interactions crucially shape which issues are included and how gender and feminism are conceptualized in policy (Björkdahl and Selimovic 2019; Joachim and Schneiker 2012). At the same time, research highlights how civil society engagement in the Global North has often marginalized actors from the Global South, privileging the knowledge of large,

well-established organizations based in the North (Achilleos-Sarll 2024; Basu 2016; Haastrup and Hagen 2020; Muehlenhoff 2022; Parashar 2018). Building on these insights, our analysis of state and civil society interactions explores how epistemic hierarchies, shaped by race and coloniality, structured who participated in the process and whose knowledge was considered legitimate and worthwhile.

Second, we are interested in the thematic scope of FFP, which excluded migration in the German case. Scholarship has indicated that FFPs hardly challenge dominant practices of foreign policy — including the privileging of Global North knowledge, persistent militarism, neoliberal economic practices based on human and environmental exploitation as well as the practicing of violent borders (cf. Achilleos-Sarll et al. 2023; Cohn and Duncanson 2020; Shepherd 2016). Yet, only a few studies explore the political intersections of FFP in relation to policy fields such as the climate crisis (Cohn and Duncanson 2020) or migration, offering insights into the opportunities and challenges that FFPs face in different political contexts (Achilleos-Sarll et al. 2023; Cheung and Scheyer 2024; Roshani and Diaby 2022). Regarding migration, Achilleos-Sarll et al. (2023) shows that Sweden considers migration most comprehensively in its FFP but this is limited to the impact of migration on women and girls and hence to "making borders safer for women without questioning the very nature of the border as gendered, racial and colonial constructs that delineates who is (and who is not) considered worthy of asylum and protection" (Achilleos-Sarll et al. 2023, 17). The limited attention to migration in FFP is surprising, because understanding what FFP means for migrants and refugees, hence the most vulnerable populations, also enhances our knowledge of how inclusive, intersectional, and transformative FFP really is.

More generally, the question arises — similar to, e.g., the case of militarism (cf. Achilleos-Sarll et al. 2023) — whether an FFP in migration entails a total rejection of border regimes or follows a reformist agenda accepting borders but asking for gender-sensitive policies (Achilleos-Sarll et al. 2023). At its minimum, a feminist postcolonial approach to migration means acknowledging that dynamics of human mobility are influenced by gender and its intersection with other social axes, such as nationality, race, age, social class, and the body (Cheung and Scheyer 2024; Welfens and Bonjour 2020; Yurdakul and Korteweg 2021). As feminist research on migration has shown, whether external migration and development policies take a gendered dimension to mobility into account impacts whether or not mobile populations are safe in different phases of their migratory journey (Cleton and Bonjour 2022; Hoijtink et al. 2023; Sachseder et al. 2022; Stachowitsch and Sachseder 2019; Welfens 2020). Inversely, "[m]igration can both disrupt and reinforce gender roles [...] However, these intersectional-feminist approaches have yet to be widely adopted in the mainstream of broader migration research" (Knapp and Koch 2024, 60–61).

What feminist migration policies should concretely entail and who they should serve remains contested. Early feminist investigations focusing on forced migration advocated for a gender and sexuality-sensitive definition of refugee law, considering gender- and sexuality-specific forms of protection claims, such as homosexuality, female genital mutilation, or forced marriage (Querton 2019;

Spijkerboer 2000). Gender-sensitive approaches to displacement can involve special procedural guarantees for vulnerable groups, typically women, children, and sexual minorities, in host countries and asylum procedures (Freedman 2010). However, such approaches often rely on essentializing assumptions of vulnerability and special needs. Feminist scholarship on border governance has shown that policy actors' commitments to protecting migrants and "womenandchildren" can also serve as pretexts for restrictive migration control and border violence (Sachseder et al. 2024; Welfens 2020).

While women are the primary focus of gender-sensitive approaches to migration, there is debate over which groups should be prioritized. Some argue that gender-specific risks mainly concern women (Freedman 2016; Martin 2004) and sexual minorities, while others propose a more intersectional, context-specific approach that includes vulnerable migrant and refugee men (e.g. Turner 2019). Others argue that a feminist approach should go beyond singling out disadvantaged groups and problematic elements of migration governance and rather shift the perspective toward a people-centered view of security and migration. A postcolonial feminist perspective further emphasizes colonial injustices and postcolonial responsibilities of Global North States in the global migration regime (Achilleos-Sarll et al. 2023; Achiume 2019; Bhambra 2017, 2022). Yet, many contemporary migration and border policies aiming to regulate, control, and deter mobile populations are reportedly violent and often fatal, making them incompatible with the ethics of feminist and postcolonial justice.

In sum, while FFP has been promoted as a vehicle for advancing feminist principles in foreign policy, questions of migration remain largely absent in both scholarship and practice. Meanwhile, feminist research on migration governance has shown how mobility, borders, and displacement are shaped by gendered, racialized, and postcolonial hierarchies. Yet, debates persist over what a feminist approach to migration should entail. Against this backdrop, our analysis examines how migration was excluded from the German Foreign Office's FFP process, and how power relations, epistemic hierarchies, and narrow constructions of expertise shaped participation and policy scope. To do so, we rely on a Black feminist and postcolonial reading of practice theory, which we elaborate on in the following.

Theorizing FFP-deliberations: Communities of Practice, Epistemic Power, and Feminist Postcolonial Critique

To study the consultation process behind Germany's FFP Guidelines and its exclusions, we conceptualize the actors involved as a community of practice. Communities of practice are typically defined as groups of individuals informally linked by shared expertise and enthusiasm for a common endeavor (Wenger 1999). The concept is particularly useful for analyzing learning, knowledge, and competence in international relation as they take shape in concrete on-the-ground practices and through social relations (Adler and Pouliot 2011). However, scholars have debated whether such communities emerge organically or can be actively shaped, and how power structures determine who is included, whose

knowledge counts, and how meaning is negotiated (Fox 2000; Marshall and Rollinson 2004).

In this article, we use the concept to analyze state–civil society interactions during the FFP drafting process and thus embrace the notion that communities of practice can be purposefully formed by powerful actors. In the context at hand, the German Foreign Office played a constitutive role in shaping the community of practice — designing, selecting, and convening a group of experts and organizations it deemed relevant for FFP. Many of these actors were already embedded in a broader foreign policy community of practice, including think tanks, research institutes, and advocacy groups. From this pre-existing network, the state temporarily curated a more focused community of practice around FFP, aimed at deliberation and knowledge exchange to inform policy.

International practice theory offers key insights for understanding this process. It emphasizes how communities of practice are held together by shared background knowledge, routinised patterns of interaction, and evolving understandings of what constitutes competent practice (Adler and Pouliot 2011; Bueger and Gadinger 2014). Competence is seen not as static expertise but as something learned through participation: a practical, embodied form of knowledge that guides action (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 6–7). Crucially, participants are recognized as competent to the extent that they align with the community's implicit norms and interpretive frames.

Yet, this focus on internal coherence and tacit learning often overlooks how epistemic hierarchies shape access to and recognition within communities. To address this gap, we draw on feminist and postcolonial scholarship that foregrounds epistemic power and positionality (Chessé and Sondarjee 2024; Sondarjee 2022). This perspective highlights how actors bring differently situated knowledges to a community, shaped by race, colonial histories, gender, and other intersecting structures, and how this influences who is seen as competent, whose expertise is valued, and whose perspectives are marginalized or excluded. Bringing these literatures together allows us to ask: first, how did epistemic hierarchies influence which actors the Foreign Office invited into the FFP consultation process? And second, how did these hierarchies shape which forms of knowledge were ultimately taken up, or sidelined, in the final Guidelines?

Feminist work has pointed out how epistemic power is gendered (cf. Harding 1991; Smith 1990). What we deem more important, however, in the context of a community of practice around FFP is the constitutive role of race/ethnicity and coloniality for epistemic power. Black feminist standpoint theorists have shown that there is not just one woman's point of view but that race, class, and gender interact in discrimination. Crenshaw's (1991) work on intersectionality and the compounding effects of race and gender for Black women is seminal.

Focusing on the academy, Black feminist scholars have considered epistemic power in knowledge communities. Hill Collins (2019, 127) writes that "epistemic power generates ever-present frameworks that identify (...) which topics are worthy of investigation as well as the best strategies for investigating what's worth knowing." "Resistant epistemologies" or "resistant knowledge projects" then unsurprisingly often generate themselves through links to activism, outside the formal institutions and structures (Hill Collins 2019, 128–29). Hill Collins' description of academic communities in the context of the challenges that

scholarship on intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991) encounters bears resemblance to communities of (policy) practice:

> Belonging to communities of inquiry and enjoying the privileges of membership often rests on a willingness to adhere to its assumptions and to play by its rules. Epistemology takes form within specific communities of inquiry, all of which have distinctive understandings of what counts as legitimate knowledge for them. (Hill Collins 2019, 127–28)

Hill Collins's standpoint theoretical approach (2019) centers positionality as a source of knowledge. For her, "[w]omen, black people, and similarly subordinated groups'" standpoint and experience are important for knowledge production. "Yet experience as a way of knowing is routinely dismissed as mere opinion rather than informed testimony that illuminates the truths of being silenced and subordinated" (Hill Collins 2019, 137).

Of course, positionality and intersectional knowledge are not only constituted by individual differences but also by "intersecting systems of power" and "a post-colonial world infused by systemic racial hierarchies" (Chessé and Sondarjee 2024, 6–7). As Sondarjee (2024, 330) writes, "practices of inclusion of civil society actors by multilateral organizations have meant a renewal of coloniality of power in novel forms." Coloniality of power (Grosfoguel 2011) can be defined as "an epistemic hierarchy that privileges Western knowledge and cosmology over non-Western knowledge and cosmologies (...)". Mignolo (2012, 112) explains how after the 1950s the scientific world was reorganized according to a First, Second, and Third World, with the First World being the West, the Second World being the East, and the Third World being the South. Only theory and knowledge from the First World was seen as legitimate and nonideological (Mignolo 2012, 114). This has brought about long-lasting epistemic racism which still privileges "Western epistemology as the superior form of knowledge and as the only source to define human rights, democracy, citizenship, etc." (Grosfoguel 2009, 98), or epistemic violence referring to the subordination of some knowledge deemed invaluable and disruptive (Spivak 1988).

Most of the above discussion on epistemic power has centered on the academy, but epistemic power is, of course, also at work in policy-making and their communities of practice (cf. Sondarjee 2024). Inclusion and knowledge recognition are closely linked, yet even within predominantly White policy spaces, intersectional knowledge may still emerge. We therefore analyze the consultation process in two steps: first, by examining how the community of practice was formed and who was included, with particular attention to positionality and intersectionality (e.g., racial/ethnic background); second, by assessing which forms of knowledge, especially on migration, were ultimately incorporated into the FFP.

Methodological Approach

To investigate the absence of migration from Germany's FFP Guidelines, we apply a practice-oriented, interpretive methodology. Specifically, we conduct what

Pouliot (Adler and Pouliot 2011; Pouliot 2014) terms practice tracing, a methodological approach that combines interpretive policy analysis with process tracing to examine how policies emerge through situated, patterned social practices. Practice tracing emphasizes that practices are both particular, embedded in local social contexts, and general, manifesting as recurring patterns that can reveal broader mechanisms shaping policy (Adler and Pouliot 2011; Pouliot 2014). We extend this framework by drawing on Black feminist and postcolonial scholarship that centers (intersectional) positionality as a source of knowledge and the shaping of epistemic power through race and coloniality (Hill Collins 2019; Mignolo 2012; Sondarjee 2024). This allows us to analyze who was in- and excluded and whose knowledge mattered.

Our empirical analysis combined a close-reading of policy documents and semi-structured interviews. We closely examined 50 publicly available policy documents, including (1) the Foreign Office's official guidelines; (2) press statements and website content of the Foreign Office, including all available expert inputs from the civil society consultation process; and (3) other reports and statements by civil society actors. Documents were selected based on relevance to the FFP development process, accessibility, and availability as of April 2024.

We conducted eleven semistructured interviews, mostly in German and online, between February and April 2024. Participants included three representatives from the German Foreign Office, five from civil society, and three from the Ministry for Development Cooperation and its implementing agency, to contextualize how FFP strategies across ministries intersect and diverge. While helpful for background, these interviews inform our analysis only to a limited extent. We combined purposive and snowball sampling, aiming to capture both state and diverse civil society perspectives (NGOs, scholars, think tanks), with a focus on actors working on migration or positioned intersectionally in terms of knowledge and identity. Civil society interviewees were selected based on their explicit input on migration in the FFP consultation or their reported influence in the process. Additional interviewees were contacted through referrals.

Our interview guide included three larger themes, which we shared ahead of the interviews: (1) the development of the FFP guidelines; (2) the presence/absence of migration in the deliberation of the guidelines and respondents' understanding of FFP in the area of migration; (3) the implementation of the guidelines, including in the area of migration. With the latter, we aimed to examine whether, despite the absence of migration-related aspects in the guidelines, FFP principles might still be implemented in practice in the area of migration. We analyzed interview transcripts, together with documents, inductively with a focus on community of practice and relevant inclusion/exclusion dynamics.

While the full list of institutions and individuals that the FO contacted was not made available to us, the list of contributors who agreed to share their written contributions is publicly available (see Table 1 below). We assigned them to three self-selected categories and, where possible, followed their self-description: Civil Society/NGOs; Think Tank/Scholars; Governmental/Political.

Our interviewees predominantly represent established, well-networked organizations, many of which were engaged in gender policy but not necessarily

Table 1. Institutions invited to contribute to CSO consultations on Germany's FFP Guidelines

Institution
Civil Society/NGOs:
Brot für die Welt
BUND
Center for Feminist Foreign Policy (CFFP)
Domovsina
Frauen für Freiheit e.V.
Gender Associations
GenderCC - Women for Climate Justice e.V.
HelpAge Deutschland e.V.
HiveTracks
Internationale Frauenliga für Frieden und Freiheit
International Federation of Business and Professional Women
Kober Stiftung
OutRight Action International
Violence Prevention Network
Zentrum für Internationale Friedenseinsätze
Think Tank/Scholars:
Bucerius Law School Hamburg
Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik (DGAP)
Deutsches Zentrum für Integrations- und Migrationsforschung
Freie Universität Berlin
German Institute for Global and Area Studies
Global Public Policy Institute
Igarapé Institute
Institut für Friedensforschung und Sicherheitspolitik
Institut für Zeitgeschichte
International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas
Junge DGAP
Maastricht University
Politilab
Researcher at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health

(*Continued*)

Table 1. *Continued*

Institution
Researcher at Harvard University
Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
University of Stirling
Governmental/Political:
Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
Member of the German Parliament

in explicitly feminist or migration-focused work. Several smaller grassroots and migration-specific organizations either declined participation, citing noninvolvement in the FFP process, or did not respond to interview requests. Moreover, the majority of our interviewees were White cis women, besides two women of color and two White men. Given the relatively small group of organizations and state actors involved in the Foreign Office's FFP, to guard the anonymity of our respondents, our analysis mainly differentiates between organizations and state respondents.

FFP-Consultations With(out) a Feminist Community of Practice

Towards Germany's First FFP

In comparison to other Northern and Western European states, Germany is regarded as a latecomer with regard to gender equality issues, the promotion of LGBTQI+ rights, and explicit commitments to feminist policy approaches. Yet, as scholarship has shown, also during the Merkel era, there has been important progress, however mostly with respect to domestic policies (Ahrens et al. 2022; Schotel 2022). With respect to the external realm, former Foreign Office minister Heiko Maas pushed for a publication on gender equality in German foreign policy (2020) and the Foreign Office's diversity strategy (German Federal Foreign Office 2021).

The first explicit commitment to FFP in external policies came only with the first post-Merkel government, a coalition of Social Democrats, the Greens, and the Liberal Democrats, which branded itself as the "coalition of progress" (Coalition parties 2021). In its coalition agreement of November 2021, the Government 2021–2025 was the first one in Germany to subscribe to an FFP. In the section on "multilateralism" the coalition agreement (Coalition parties 2021) declared that

> in the spirit of a feminist foreign policy, together with our partners, we want to support rights, resources and representation of women and girls worldwide and promote social diversity. We want to appoint more women to international leadership positions and ambitiously implement and further

develop the National Action Plan for the implementation of UN Resolution 1325 and develop it further.

In line with other national FFP strategies (Thompson et al. 2020), this brief declaration highlights the "three Rs" of FFP as well as social diversity, representation of women and girls, and FFP's roots in the UNSCR 1325.

Based on the coalition agreement, two federal ministries — the Foreign Office and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) — developed their FFP, with the Foreign Office drafting "Guidelines" and the BMZ a "Strategy" (German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development 2023). Though both involved stakeholder consultations and high-level events, the processes were independent, led by different ministries (the Greens and the Social Democrats), and resulted in divergent definitions. As such, no unified federal FFP emerged. However, both ministries jointly launched their documents in March 2023. In what follows, we focus on the Foreign Office's FFP Guidelines.

The 89-page Guidelines begin with FFP objectives, followed by 10 feminist guidelines — six focused on external policy and four on internal matters. This study centers on the external Guidelines, covering peace and security, humanitarian aid, human rights, climate and energy diplomacy, trade and investment, and cultural diplomacy. The Guidelines also introduce the "four Ms" instruments of FFP: Mainstreaming, Multiplier, Gender Budgeting ("Mittel"), and Monitoring.

The objectives of Germany's FFP Guidelines are based on "the three Rs", similar to the ones originally developed by Sweden's FFP: rights, resources, and representation. Simultaneously, these Guidelines are intended to influence the Foreign Office's internal operations and foster a cultural transformation. Across all areas of activity, they aim to install a "feminist reflex" within the Foreign Office (German Federal Foreign Office 2023). First, in the realm of rights, the Guidelines advocate for the global advancement of women's and girls' rights, aiming to close legal gaps and promote gender equality (German Federal Foreign Office 2023). Second, representation entails striving for equitable participation of women and marginalized groups across all sectors of society, including politics and economics (German Federal Foreign Office 2023). Third, the policy stresses equal access to financial, labor, natural, educational, and network resources for women and marginalized groups to fight poverty and exclusion. Gender budgeting at the Foreign Office aims for most funding to be gender-sensitive and transformative by 2025 to promote global gender equality (German Federal Foreign Office 2023).

Curating the Community of Practice: Inclusion/Exclusion Dynamics

The coalition agreement marked the initiation of the Foreign Office's internal and external consultation process for the FFP Guidelines. Both consultations were centrally coordinated by the Planning Department, positioned as an internal think tank bridging Foreign Office staff with external experts. This department formed a small, fluctuating editorial team starting mid-2022, composed primarily of staff previously involved with human rights and the WPS

agenda. Personnel turnover and understaffing contributed to limited capacity (interview 4, state official).

Reportedly, the knowledge and expertise that shaped the Foreign Office's FFP agenda internally was not particularly diverse and intersectional. Overall, the staff of the Foreign Office tends to be White, highly educated, many with a background in law and public administration, and born in (Western-)Germany (German Federal Foreign Office 2021). Only about 15 percent of diplomatic staff have a migration background, compared to around 27 percent insociety (German Federal Foreign Office 2021). As one of the members from the planning department acknowledged, the predominantly White, German, middle-class composition was one of the reasons to bring in civil society actors (interview 4, state official).

Although there was no official consultation process amongst the internal staff, various groups within the Foreign Office joined forces and tried to shape the policy-making process internally. These included groups supporting the interests of respectively women, employees identifying as LGBTQI+, and those with disabilities, as well as the "diplomats of color" group. They pushed for a more intersectional approach (interview 1, state official). However, their proposals did not find their way into the Guidelines, besides intersectionality as a buzzword. Overall, for staff involved in these internal deliberations, the process felt top-down, opaque, and more cosmetic than transformative (interview 1, state official). Hence, even *within* the Foreign Office, minority positionalities (in terms of ability, sexuality, and race) and their knowledge — which would be crucial for an intersectional FFP — were not seen as competent and sidelined (cf. Chessé and Sondarjee 2024; Hill Collins 2019).

Complementing internal deliberations, the Foreign Office initiated an external consultation process to broaden input. A representative noted that engaging civil society actors was intended to introduce a wider range of perspectives and critical scrutiny, particularly around embedding intersectional feminism (interview 4, state official). However, this consultation also functioned partly as a legitimacy mechanism rather than a genuine incorporation of civil society knowledge (interview 4, state official).

The process of curating the external community of practice was opaque and highly selective. Even some staff and invited experts were unclear about the selection criteria (interviews 2, 3, 6 — all civil society). Ultimately, the consulted group stemmed largely from existing foreign and security policy networks, with some links to feminist policy circles such as the WPS agenda (interview 4, state official; Table 1). While this certainly diversified the knowledge base and inputs, the demographics of most of the actors invited to contribute did not differ significantly from the White, middle-class, (Western-)German composition of Foreign Office staff. Practical issues such as reliance on outdated contact lists further limited inclusion (interview 8, civil society). Importantly, from Table 1 and our interviews we know that the Foreign Office did not contact migration/refugee-focused actors or migrant-self organizations. Thus, from the start, the community of practice excluded marginalized communities, which would have brought in different knowledge based on their positionality and/or expertise (cf. Chessé and Sondarjee 2024).

Also feminist organizations were largely underrepresented in the consultation process. One notable exception to that was the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy (CFFP), Germany's only group dedicated exclusively to FFP until its closure in 2025 (Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy 2020, 2021). Yet, the CFFP's dominance led grassroots feminists to feel excluded (interviews 3, 6 — both civil society), especially since its early leadership was mostly White and aligned with liberal feminism (Conway 2024). Critics also noted the absence of other FFP experts, highlighting the Foreign Office's limited efforts to ensure inclusivity and transformation (interviews 2, 6 — both civil society). In 2025, the CFFP itself faced backlash for excluding voices in feminist debates, triggering public controversy. Ultimately the CFFP shut down. This underscores broader exclusionary dynamics within Germany's FFP and feminist policy networks.

From the viewpoint of some civil society interviewees with expertise on gender, the focus on established players such as the CFFP or DGAP with a certain prestige together with a rather short time frame to respond also led to the exclusion of smaller and more activist-oriented organizations, including migrant self-organizations (interviews 2, 8 — both civil society). Similarly, civil society representatives highlighted that organizations, think tanks, and experts that are considered to be sufficiently established and visible in Germany were automatically consulted, although at least some had no specific expertise on FFP, or gender-related issues, and were not explicitly committed to feminism (interviews 2, 3, 6 — all civil society). This curated a community of practice for FFP which did not center feminist or intersectional knowledge but instead was based in (Western) Germany, White, and already part of the mostly Berlin-based think tank policy bubble (interviews 2, 3, 6, 8 — all civil society).

Moreover, international development or peace organizations — which even though often large and professionalized do have more local knowledge and contacts on the ground — are hardly found on the list either, not to mention CSOs from the Global South. This confirms earlier (feminist) scholarly findings which saw the exclusion of smaller and more activist groups in state civil society interactions (Achilleos-Sarll 2024; Jaeger 2007; Martín de Almagro 2018). Such exclusions foreclose the possibility of incorporating intersectional knowledge into the FFP process and reduce the prospects of challenging dominant policy paradigms, including those governing migration and border control.

In sum, the Foreign Office formed the community of practice in a rather top-down and opaque manner, without involving migration-focused CSOs. It hence excluded differently situated knowledge and reproduced the idea that competence lies with established think tanks and large CSOs.

Deliberating FFP: Pushing Migration to the Margins

Consultations with external organizations and individual experts started in July 2022 with a formal invitation in German to provide written input on Germany's FFP Guidelines — a so-called "Call for Papers." Sent in late July 2022, the invitations by the Foreign Office asked for a contribution of 3000 characters, a short CV, and a photo to be sent by late August 2022 and offered a compensation of 500 Euros (personal communication). With the consent of contributors, the

Foreign Office published the inputs on its website (German Federal Foreign Office 2023a). According to the website, "[m]ore than 40 independent experts from civil society, culture, business and the media responded to this call." One civil society representative described the outreach as highly formal and lacking what they considered feminist language (interview 6 — civil society). This speaks to differences within the community of practice in terms of a lack of a common language and ways to interact, and most likely increases the sense of belonging to the community of practice for think tanks and professional organizations, whereas it does not speak to smaller, more activist and feminist CSOs. Moreover, with the invitation the Foreign Office set the boundaries of FFP, and hence, which knowledge was deemed relevant and competent within FFP consultations. The invitation referred to the goals to "strengthen the rights, resources and representation of women and girls" set out in the coalition agreement and highlighted some policy areas as particularly relevant (Coalition parties 2021). From the perspective of a civil society representative, the list of suggested topics - climate change, security and, influenced by Russia's war on Ukraine, emerging conflicts - reflected political priorities at the time but also implicitly pushed other topics to the margins (interview 6 — civil society).

Notably, the invitation did not explicitly mention migration, displacement, or border governance. At the same time, all three topics highlighted — climate change, security, and conflict — are closely, sometimes causally related to migration and displacement (cf. Cohn and Duncanson 2020; Triandafyllidou 2018) leaving some scope for interpreting the topics freely. In fact, various written contributions highlighted international migration and displacement as central domains for FFP. Feminist scholar Haastrup (2023), for instance, emphasized that

> If human rights are central to FFP, it cannot be exempt from how governments deal with migration. Often the vulnerabilities of women migrants as well as their agency is ignored in migration policy formations. Migrant men are often positioned as threats to hosting societies by political narratives and policy interventions, while intersecting vulnerabilities such as racism, homophobia and transphobia are absented from policy frameworks. For Germany's Foreign policy to be remotely feminist, it must consider the gendered and racist nature of status quo responses at the national and supranational levels.

Similarly, representatives from the think tank Polis180 in their contribution explicitly called for a 'feminist migration policy' in response to racist power structures (2023), stating that

> [i]n hardly any other policy field are the effects of racist and patriarchal power structures as visible as in the area of migration policy. Racialized people, women, children, LGBTQI+ and other politically marginalized groups suffer the most from the lack of safe and regular migration routes. They are affected by gender-based violence in countries of origin, refugee

> camps and detention centers and are (re-)traumatized by asylum procedures. The current migration policy is not even remotely compatible with feminist standards or the fundamental right to human dignity and is a constant source of human insecurity. The German Federal Government must include migration policy as a priority in the guidelines on feminist foreign policy.

The remainder of the contribution makes suggestions for what an FFP in migration would mean, such as creating more safe pathways, introducing state-led search and rescue missions (SARs) at sea while ending the criminalization of nongovernmental organizations' SARs and migrant mobility. Importantly, it highlights the shared responsibility in this policy area with the Ministry of the Interior and underscores the third WPS National Action Plan as an additional point of reference for these migration-related requests. Hence, despite the think tank's rather homogenous White, middle-class composition (Müller-Dormann and Spörcke 2020), it tried to put intersectional knowledge onto the agenda.

Regardless of these contributions, migration was not further discussed in the consultations. Following the call for papers, the Foreign Office organized three in-person workshops to continue the dialogue with representatives from different organizations. They were expected to provide input on prewritten drafts, which, however, they neither received beforehand nor afterwards (interview 2, civil society). All workshops took place in Berlin and in the German language, limiting the possibility for non-German-speaking experts to participate in these follow-up discussions. This set-up made it impossible for migrant/refugee organizations and civil society from the Global South to join and made the German language a condition for competence and belonging in the FFP community of practice, reinforcing colonial and racialized epistemic hierarchies (cf. Chessé and Sondarjee 2024; Hill Collins 2019).

Despite efforts to include diverse perspectives, attempts to center migration and decolonial approaches in the FFP consultations were effectively marginalized, exposing epistemic power dynamics within the process. Instead, the list of organizations included (see Table 1) and how the workshops were conducted set traditional boundaries around what foreign policy entails and only invited those voices with the same (policy) language to speak. As a civil society representative reflected, the hierarchical organization created an atmosphere where there seemed to be no room for new ideas outside the predefined foreign and security policy field (interview 2, civil society). This speaks to an existing coloniality of knowledge within German foreign policy, which could not be challenged in the drafting of the FFP Guidelines (cf. Grosfoguel 2011).

Similar to what scholars have found with the WPS agenda (cf. Davis 2019), the Foreign Office's overall women-focused framing of FFP generally left little space for a topic like migration which is not exclusively about women but also pertains to racism, colonialism, and other inequalities (interviews 2, 3, 6, 8 — all civil society). Hence, the community of practice only allowed the questioning of conventional security and foreign policy paradigms if it followed a rather liberal women-centered feminism, or stayed more vague in terms of its demands for an

intersectional perspective, not pushing for particular topics of intersectional relevance (interview 2, civil society).

It also remains questionable whether the discussions in the workshops could have made any substantial impact on the scope of the Guidelines in light of the tight timeline, with the drafting process beginning in June 2022 and the publication in March 2023. Whereas civil society was expected to be involved in cocreating knowledge and providing feedback on draft texts, the Foreign Office approached the process with a more general approach to engaging with each other, without sharing draft texts. This led to confrontations in workshops (interview 2, civil society). Unlike the BMZ, which provided clear documentation of inputs and decision-making processes, the Foreign Office declined to provide similar transparency due to capacity constraints. This lack of transparency and accountability makes it challenging to understand why certain inputs were included or excluded from the final Guidelines (interview 8, civil society). Moreover, it makes it questionable what the intentions of the consultation process really were.

The absence of migration in Germany's FFP Guidelines was also problematized after their official launch. In a joint statement, CSOs working on WPS highlighted the silences around migration, asylum, and border policies as "the missing guideline" (1325 Network 2023):

> In view of the fact that the number of refugees has been growing for years, it is shocking that the guidelines fail to either mention the challenges posed by this situation or articulate positions on a human rights-oriented migration policy. (...) The inhumane border regimes at the EU's external borders, which are also widely supported by Germany, prevent people seeking protection from legally applying for asylum while creating zones of lawlessness and impoverishment. (...) As part of a feminist foreign policy, the Federal Foreign Office has a responsibility to strive for greater cooperation with the Ministry of the Interior in order to facilitate a human rights-based asylum and migration policy.

Despite concrete proposals by civil society actors — including legal recognition of gender-based persecution, improved protection for pregnant refugees, and gender-sensitivity training for frontline staff (interviews 2, 3, 6 — all civil society) — migration-related concerns were omitted from the final Guidelines. From the perspective of civil society, this omission is not accidental. As one representative notes (interview 2, civil society), the absence of migration enables the Foreign Office to present a feminist agenda without addressing one of the most contested and racialized dimensions of German foreign policy. The repeated framing of migration as outside the Foreign Office's competence is thus not just bureaucratic, but a boundary-drawing practice that limits the scope of feminist critique and shields core areas of state power from contestation.

Representatives from the Foreign Office mobilized two justifications for the absence of migration in the final Guidelines. First, they noted that migration policy mainly falls under the responsibility of the Ministry of the Interior, and including it would require a lengthy interministerial consultation amid polarized

debate and the Ministry's conservative resistance to feminist principles (interview 4, state official; interviews 2, 8 — all civil society). However, the Foreign Office itself manages numerous migration-related areas — including national visa regimes, European migration policy, residence law and return, country-specific and regional issues, in addition to visa units at local offices (German Federal Foreign Office 2024). This suggests the rationale served to deflect responsibility.

Second, and in contradiction with the first justification, Foreign Office staff emphasized that FFP Guidelines, and the "feminist impulse" (German Federal Foreign Office 2023), would be mainstreamed across all foreign policy areas, including in its various migration-focused activities (interviews 4, 11, both state officials). For instance, the Foreign Office was keen to highlight existing activities on migration and gender, gender mainstreaming initiatives such as the UN Women Project "Making Migration Safe for Women" and the "Migration and Diaspora Support Program for Engaged Women in the Diaspora" (interview 11, state official). While such projects provide some support for women within migration, they do not come close to what civil society and scholars within the FFP consultations described as a feminist policy on migration; namely one that prioritizes the safety and rights of all marginalized groups, including racialized people, women, children, LGBTQI+ individuals, and politically marginalized groups (interviews 1, 2, 3, 6 — state official and civil society).

In sum, the Foreign Office predefined the topical boundaries of the consultation process on FFP, thereby foreclosing the idea that migration and any related intersectional knowledge were considered relevant for the FFP community of practice to begin with. The top-down set-up and the reference to ministerial competences reproduced epistemic hierarchies shaped by race and coloniality which did not allow for the cocreation of intersectional migration-focused knowledge in an FFP community of practice. Hence, despite civil society efforts, migration is once again absent in FFP.

Conclusion

In this article, we examined the absence of migration in Germany's FFP Guidelines by drawing on a feminist reading of international practice theory. We asked: How has the deliberation process contributed to the absence of migration in Germany's FFP Guidelines? Although the exclusion of migration from FFPs has been noted in previous cases, little research has examined why and how migration is sidelined within feminist foreign policymaking. By studying the recent case of Germany's FFP Guidelines, we contributed to an understanding of how migration concerns are marginalized even when civil society is given access to policy deliberations.

Our empirical analysis unfolded in two parts: firstly, we scrutinized the dynamics of in- and exclusion in the formation of the community of practice involved in the deliberations of the FFP Guidelines. Secondly, we delved into the deliberative processes showing how migration concerns were marginalized. By unpacking the consultation process through the lens of epistemic power and

communities of practice, our study demonstrated how the exclusion of migration was not incidental but the product of deliberate and structural dynamics that shaped who was included in the policy-making process, whose knowledge was recognized, and which issues were deemed legitimate. The Foreign Office's curation of its FFP community reinforced existing epistemic hierarchies shaped by coloniality and race by privileging established foreign and security policy actors, mostly White, highly educated, and embedded in a Berlin-based policy bubble. Despite calls from civil society to include migration as a critical element of FFP, their inputs were sidelined, and their contributions dismissed or ignored. Consequently, migration remained peripheral, confined mostly to a brief mention linked to climate change, rather than treated as a critical, intersectional foreign policy concern.

Our findings demonstrate that the FFP consultation process was more of a performative exercise aimed at legitimating already established positions rather than a genuine cocreative process. The lack of transparency, short response timelines, language barriers, and restrictive workshop formats excluded a wide range of voices and knowledge forms, especially those shaped by lived experience, migrant positionality, intersectional expertise, and postcolonial critiques. This top-down approach perpetuated epistemic hierarchies within global governance practices, limiting FFP's capacity to engage with systemic inequalities and the complexities of global mobility and border regimes.

These findings have implications beyond the particular case, including for advocacy and policy-making actors. For FFPs to fulfill their transformative potential, they must transcend tokenistic inclusion and instead foster genuinely diverse, intersectional communities of practice. Ministries must ensure that migrant-led organizations, feminist scholars of migration, and activists from the Global South have a seat at the table, not only as participants but as recognized experts. This is particularly urgent in light of the political marginalization of grassroots feminist organizations, which we documented in the German case. It also calls for addressing internal institutional cultures that marginalize minority positionalities and knowledge within the Foreign Office itself.

Ultimately, without structural changes in how migration is debated and governed, FFP risks becoming an exclusionary project that fails to engage with one of the most pressing gendered policy challenges of our time. Addressing this requires not only rethinking FFP's engagement with migration but also advocating for a feminist domestic policy that supports feminist migration policies. Without such changes, the promise of a truly inclusive and intersectional feminist foreign policy will remain elusive.

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AI Statements. We have used ChatGPT (2025 version) to assist with rephrasing, improving clarity, and shortening parts of this manuscript. The tool was used solely for language refinement, with all intellectual contributions, arguments, and analyses being our own.

Notes

1. This article focuses exclusively on the Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) Guidelines issued by the German Foreign Office (Auswärtiges Amt). In parallel, the Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) has adopted an FFP Strategy, based on a separate consultation process with distinct dynamics. While questions of migration are also marginal in the BMZ Strategy, we do not systematically analyze this process here.
2. While the German Federal Foreign Office introduced its first Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) Guidelines in 2023 under Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, the government changed following the 2025 federal elections. The new coalition agreement does not mention Feminist Foreign Policy, suggesting that the approach may no longer be a priority in the current administration. In fact, the Foreign Office Website does not mention FFP anymore and relevant documents are no longer available via its website.

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