

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Troubled Encounters: Feminist Foreign Policy and Donor-Implementer Relations in Peacebuilding

Niklas Balbon  and Younna Christiansen

Global Public Policy Institute, Berlin, Germany

Corresponding author: Niklas Balbon; Email: nbalbon@gppi.net

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Introduction

As more governments commit to feminist foreign policies (FFPs), this commitment trickles down to a central foreign policy area: peacebuilding. As a field, peacebuilding has historically been dominated by western states and western-dominated institutions performing interventions along the hegemonic liberal peacebuilding paradigm (Lederach 1997; Mac Ginty 2008). This has, in turn, provoked significant feminist criticisms and interventions (Duncanson 2016; Hewitt and True 2021; McLeod 2018). When Germany, the largest peacebuilding funder globally (Rotmann, Li, and Stoffel 2021; UN Peacebuilding 2024), announced their FFP in 2023, this development opened up the prospect for substantial feminist change, but also raised questions about what such change might look like in practice.

To guide the implementation of its FFP, the German Federal Foreign Office funded a series of research and policy projects, including our “Building Peace, the Feminist Foreign Policy Way: Good Practices” report. The report presents examples of good feminist practices in peacebuilding and extrapolates principles on how to improve the funding for feminist peacebuilders (Balbon et al. 2023). Our aim in writing the report as think-tankers was to highlight existing feminist peace initiatives around the world. We also felt that real-world examples could best illustrate how feminist peacebuilding materializes in practice, thus providing foreign policy officials with ideas on how to implement FFPs.

While we believe that a focus on good practices is vital, we also recognize that it comes with one fundamental drawback: it leaves little room for a critical examination of mainstream peacebuilding. This is somewhat ironic given that in many of our 48 interviews, peacebuilders from around the globe were quick to point out dysfunctionalities of the peacebuilding system, especially with regard to donor-implementer relations. Moreover, a good practice approach also fails to

take into account the breadth of critical literature on the global development and peacebuilding industries, in terms of their role in reinforcing patriarchal and neocolonial hierarchies between donors and recipients (e.g., Chishti 2020; Hudson 2012; Moyo 2009; Ziai 2015).

In this Note from the Field, we focus on this critique. We argue, first, that the peacebuilding industry remains largely unfit to promote local feminist solutions for peace, due to a widespread tendency among funders to dismiss the importance of feminist peacebuilding. Second, we observe that donors are unwilling to adjust their funding to account for hostile environments that feminist peacebuilders often operate in. Third, we discuss funders' indifference to the organizational challenges stemming from the smaller size of feminist peacebuilding organizations. Finally, we consider the extent to which these problems have so far been addressed by FFPs, reflecting on their emancipative limits and potentials.

The Importance of Donor-Implementer Relations

FFPs are not the first feminist interventions to target problematic structures and practices in peacebuilding. Over the last two and a half decades, scholarship on the gender dimension of peacebuilding has proliferated. This includes — but is not limited to — critical feminist perspectives on the liberal peace concept (e.g., Chishti 2020; Hudson 2012), the WPS agenda (e.g., Almagro and Bargués 2022; Olonisakin, Hendricks, and Okech 2015), peace- and state-building practices (e.g., Castillejo 2013; Hewitt and True 2021), and the exclusion of women from peace processes (e.g., McLeod 2019; Pankhurst 2003). However, one area remains underexplored: the relationship between local feminist peacebuilders and international donors.

Curiously, this relative lack of feminist attention to donor-implementer relations coincides with the rapid growth of critical literature on power relations and localized dynamics of peacebuilding. While instrumentalist approaches argue that localization leads to greater peacebuilding success, critical approaches scrutinize the power relations and colonial continuities in peacebuilding that reinforce hierarchical donor-implementor relations and marginalize local agency (Leonardsson and Rudd 2015). The breadth of scholarship in the latter camp demonstrates that critical scholars have been aware of the problems in donor-implementer relations that perpetuate neocolonial hierarchies in peacebuilding.

On a practical level, these problems take the form of inequalities in decision-making and agenda-setting power (Manji 2011), lack of institutional or core funding (Heideman 2013), short-termism (Eze 2021), and risk-aversion on the side of international donors (Pfaffenholz, Poppelreuter, and Ross 2011). Our search for good practices in feminist peacebuilding, however, revealed that there are additional structural barriers for feminist peacebuilders, which have not yet been discussed widely in the literature. From an emancipatory perspective, this is problematic because the relationship between local feminist peacebuilders and international donors could be a direct route for FFP-induced change.

Barriers for Local Feminist Peacebuilders

Nearly all of our interviewees pointed to many of the abovementioned problems in donor-implementer relations in peacebuilding. However, they also highlighted additional structural barriers that were either unique or disproportionately applicable to local feminist peacebuilders. Above all, many feminist peacebuilders felt that donors did not recognize feminist solutions for peace as innovative approaches to peacebuilding. Instead, donors tended to see “women’s issues” or activities as things that were “nice to have,” as opposed to being approaches that were fundamental to building peace. When asked why they thought the importance of their work was overlooked, feminist peacebuilders pointed to the internalized understanding among funders that the “key” to peace lies “elsewhere,” reinforced by a peacebuilding industry largely designed and run by Western men.

For instance, feminist peacebuilders who work on transforming violence-centered masculinities reported that many donors simply did not appreciate that the transformation of masculinities tackles one of the root causes of violence. Similarly, many feminist peacebuilders reported that such dismissal of the relevance of their work was structural and therefore detrimental to their fundraising efforts. This is because it narrows down funding options and increases workloads related to grant applications and competitive bidding processes. Additionally, the dependency on a smaller selection of potential funders often leaves feminist peacebuilders in insecure financial situations and amplifies risks associated with changing donor priorities.

Another structural barrier that feminist peacebuilders experience more drastically than other local peacebuilders are hostile operating environments. Feminist peacebuilders are often confronted with social opposition or direct government scrutiny. For instance, social backlash against feminist activism leads to challenges in recruitment, heightened mental burdens for employees, security concerns, and overall difficulties in growing professionalized organizations. Some interviewees even pointed to instances where governments prohibited feminist peacebuilders from operating entirely, for instance, in contexts where all LGBTQ+ organizations were declared illegal.

While feminist peacebuilders face disproportionate challenges in navigating hostile environments, international donors are too often ill-equipped to provide the necessary support to overcome these challenges. For instance, many international donors require partner organizations to be registered as legal entities to be eligible for funding. This requirement effectively excludes LGBTQ+ organizations from receiving any funds in the above-mentioned contexts where they cannot legally exist. While rigid reporting and due diligence standards of international funders represent barriers to all local peacebuilders, this example demonstrates how feminist peacebuilders can be hit particularly harshly.

On the positive side, our report highlights examples of intermediaries who receive funding from international donors and redistribute it to local feminist peacebuilders who are unable to meet donor requirements. These intermediaries, who are themselves often women-led and feminist organizations, absorb the financial risk of funding small and local feminist peacebuilders that large international donors are unwilling to bear. While these arrangements benefit

the local recipients of funds, they also mean that the burden of an ill-equipped funding system is outsourced from one feminist actor to another.

Feminist peacebuilding initiatives tend to be smaller in scale than other local peacebuilding initiatives. This is partially due to the problems described above and exacerbates some of the common problems in donor-implementer relationships. Specifically, smaller feminist organizations struggle with their reliance on project funding, creating several issues. Project funding leads to short-term planning, repetitive fundraising, increased workloads, and financial insecurity or bankruptcy in the worst-case scenario. With fewer staff members, the burden of fundraising, project work, and organizational development becomes more difficult to manage. Additionally, smaller organizations struggle to create overhead that can be reinvested in institutional development, leading to negative economies of scale and a higher burden of fixed costs. As a result, smaller feminist peacebuilding organizations often experience economic insecurity, a lack of resources and time for sustainable development, and precarious working conditions for staff. According to the feminist peacebuilders we spoke to, international funders are aware of these problems but nonetheless refuse to adjust their funding models.

More of the Same Under a Different Name?

Based on our research, we argue that local feminist peacebuilders face distinct structural barriers within the peacebuilding system. As some of the dominant peacebuilding funders have recently committed themselves to FFPs (e.g., Germany, France, Sweden, Canada), one might expect these barriers to gradually be dismantled. However, is this the case, or purely wishful thinking? Our conversations with feminist peacebuilders from across the globe allowed us to identify three trends worth pointing out.

First, our interviewees pointed out that over the last two decades, there has been a notable increase in attention to and funding for feminist peacebuilders. While we do not have enough data to judge whether this is a direct consequence or a correlate of the implementation of FFPs and to what extent it will be sustainable, it is a noteworthy trend that should be further investigated. Second, we identified a variety of innovative feminist funding mechanisms¹ that acted as intermediaries between governments and feminist peacebuilders and that extended trust and care to their recipients in ways otherwise unmatched in the funding industry. Many of these intermediary funds are themselves established and funded by FFP countries. Accordingly, they represent a promising avenue for how FFPs can push for positive changes in the peacebuilding industry.

Third, however, the inception of new feminist funding mechanisms coincides with a lack of change of conventional funding structures. As many of our interviewees noted, international funding structures and practices remained remarkably stable over the period that more and more governments committed to FFPs. This also means that their patriarchal and neocolonial character largely prevails. Ironically, there are even countries such as Germany, which contribute to feminist funding mechanisms, while refusing to reform their regular funding

streams. As most of the peacebuilding money is still spent through the latter, this raises serious concerns about the potential reach of FFPs. It could even be argued that the support of feminist funds can be instrumentalized by international donors to create a facade of progress that lends legitimacy to an otherwise unchanged funding system.

Reflections

Our research reveals a sobering picture of the conditions of funding for feminist peacebuilders and the extent to which the FFP environment dislodges the status quo. This is not to discredit the FFP concept *per se*. Instead, we underscore the need to critically question the discrepancies between political rhetoric, on the one hand, and its real-world materialized manifestations, on the other. For example, Germany's FFP guidelines set the goals of directing attention to marginalized communities and dismantling global hierarchies and inequalities in peacebuilding. However, our interviews show that major donors' commitments to FFPs did not affect such changes. Simply put, real-world FFPs have not resulted in the structural changes of the architecture of international aid that their egalitarian rhetoric promises.

Several lessons can be drawn from our findings, which governments should consider if they wish to reduce the harmful, yet preventable impacts of their engagements. First, trusting in the knowledge and ability of local actors is a key premise of a feminist approach. As long as feminist issues are belittled as "women's issues," and the crucial role of violence-centered masculinities in protecting and sustaining economies of violence is not seriously recognized, international donors are sabotaging potential windows of opportunity for peace.

Second, the example of LGBTQ+ organizations facing repression in certain contexts highlights the need for FFP actors to pay particular attention to contextual factors to counter the further marginalization of society's most vulnerable groups. Keeping an intersectional, relational eye on peacebuilding dynamics is a precondition to an all-encompassing, whole-of-society approach to resolving violent conflict.

Third, donors should undertake a self-critical reexamination. International donors should not focus on whether local feminists can be trusted with spending their funding in a meaningful way. Rather, they should ask themselves whether the structures they are imposing on implementers are in line with their stated rhetorical purpose and goals.

The good news here is that, at least theoretically, foreign policy bureaucracies have the agency needed to address the above-mentioned problems. For instance, given the right political will, foreign policy bureaucracies can decide to provide core funding and extend trust to their local partners. Yet while such kinds of technocratic adjustments of funding processes are necessary, they are not sufficient.

It will be vital to challenge discourses in foreign policy bureaucracies deeming feminist approaches to peacebuilding to be inferior. Without normative contestations of what peace means and what "desirable" or "effective" peacebuilding is,

technocratic adjustments to funding instruments will not deliver the kind of change feminists envision. For FFPs to have an impact on peacebuilding, a mixture of technocratic, normative, and structural change is needed. Without such efforts, the very actors implementing FFPs will remain the main barriers to achieving their intended effects.

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Notes

1. In our report, we present the following innovative feminist funding mechanisms: Equality Fund, FRIDA: The Young Feminist Fund, Innovative Peace Fund, Leading From the South, Resourcing Change.

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Niklas Balbon is a PhD Candidate at Freie Universität Berlin and a Research Fellow at the Global Public Policy Institute: nbalbon@gppi.net

Younna Christiansen is a Senior Consultant at BwConsulting and previously a Research Assistant at the Global Public Policy Institute: younna.christiansen@sciencespo.fr

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