

Feminist and Postcolonial Perspectives into the EU's Foreign Policy and Gender Action

Plan: Feminist Foreign Policy Proposal to the EU

by

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Presented to the Department of English & Communications

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

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Acknowledgments

We live in a chaotic world where it's hard to understand the rules. Because why do some people get to belong, while others are illegal on the same land we all live on? How does a person end up a refugee in their own homeland? Why do some lives matter more than others when we count the losses of war? Sometimes, I too feel overwhelmed by this chaos. It's no surprise that people begin to lose faith in the good. We are all entangled in this chaos, and what we do today shapes tomorrow. Dr. Hourig Attarian is the person who helped me keep believing in that good. My real academic journey began the day she introduced me to Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, and since then, I haven't stopped questioning systems of oppression. I want to thank you for bringing me to where I am now, for helping me see and challenge injustice, and for allowing me to dream that a better system is possible. It's an honor to be your student. The hope and humanity you've shown me are lessons I'll carry with me for life.

I'd also like to thank Dr. Rafik Satrosyan, Dr. Anna Aleksanyan, and Prof. Davit Isajanyan. Their classes and lectures have profoundly shaped how I view oppressive systems and have helped me see the connection between power and gender. Their courses have been fundamental in my academic journey and have influenced not only this research but also every future academic work I undertake.

I'm incredibly grateful to my support team, Silvi and Tatev, who have stood by me throughout my research journey and never let me feel alone with this work. Special thanks to Tatev for her immense support and guidance, for always being there to listen, answer my questions, and comfort me when I felt confused or anxious. It was during our discussions on Haraway, Code, hooks, and others that I began to see the direction of this research. You have been the most supportive mentor I could've asked for.

And finally, I'd like to thank my parents, who taught me to never accept injustice with my silence and to always stand up for what matters to me. You helped me sort out my priorities, and I'm deeply grateful for that.

Abstract

This capstone analyzes the European Union's approach to gender equality and women's empowerment through its foreign policy. Drawing on decolonial methodologies and feminist epistemologies, it critically examines the EU's Gender Action Plan III (GAP III) to uncover the ideological foundations of its vision for peacebuilding, gender equality, and security. The analysis reveals that the EU's external action strategy often fails to address the root causes of inequality and, in some cases, reinforces patriarchal and neoliberal structures. The findings suggest that the EU's efforts to empower marginalized groups are frequently driven by their strategic value to Western liberal agendas rather than by a genuine commitment to global justice. Consequently, this research argues for the adoption of a formal Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) at the EU level as a crucial step toward building a more just and inclusive foreign policy, particularly in conflict-affected settings.

Feminist and Postcolonial Perspectives into the EU's Foreign Policy and Gender Action Plan: Feminist Foreign Policy Proposal to the EU

As an Armenian woman coming from a postcolonial and deeply patriarchal country shaped by various imperial forces and often labeled as a conflict-prone, “troubled” region, I’m driven to explore the accountability of global powers in today’s geopolitical scene. I’m willing to understand their responsibility to challenge the oppressive power dynamics caused by their colonial past.

As a product of my postcolonial environment, I grew up learning to accept the histories of the powerful as universal and believed that global powers are just neutral mediators of conflicts and peacemakers in “troubled” spots like my country. I grew up not questioning imperial subjugators or demanding historical justice for the political instability they caused in my country. Instead, I was led to believe that the troubled were at fault for their own struggles.

Today, when we talk about the accountability of global powers for conflicts caused by their imperial ambitions, they are no longer seen as direct contributors; they’re neutral “mediators.” The goal of my capstone is to challenge this construct. Global powers have never been, and will never be, neutral. My research views global powers as the actual contributors to systemic instabilities. I want to position myself as someone who challenges these unequal power structures and not someone who accepts them.

For this research, I chose to focus on the European Union because of its unique supranational and intergovernmental structure, along with its reputation as a leader in promoting gender equality and empowering marginalized groups. Choosing to set the EU as a stage for my research comes from my personal fascination with Europe as an area of study. To me, Europe is a region of profound complexity - home to the origins of many global conflicts and inequalities.

Yet, it still holds the actual potential, as a global actor, to challenge today's racist, patriarchal, and male-dominated power structures, many of which are tied to its colonial past.

My project reflects my sincere belief that unjust power structures can be challenged and that the EU can become an active force in addressing how its colonial history has impacted women globally. For international politics to be fairer and more cohesive, the EU must rethink its approach through a feminist lens focused on political change, one that prioritizes care and moves beyond seeing demographic issues only in numerical terms. The formal adoption of a Feminist Foreign Policy by the EU, which this research strongly advocates, may not happen soon. However, its growing presence in international foreign policy discourse is already a meaningful progress and an important step forward. I see research on FFP as an invitation for activists and scholars to engage, reflect, and take action. It has the potential to inspire the urgent conversations needed to push the EU toward becoming a more just and equitable force in international politics. Through this research and my future academic endeavors, I construct my voice as critically hopeful, meaning I will not stop striving to imagine and create a different lifeworld that addresses oppressive power structures.

Key Terms and Definitions

Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) – A foreign policy framework that centers gender equality, human rights, and peace, challenging traditional security priorities

Gender Action Plan (GAP) – The EU's official plan to integrate gender equality into its external action; the current version is GAP III (2021–2025)

European External Action Service (EEAS) – The EU's diplomatic body responsible for implementing foreign and security policy

Feminist IR Theory – A critical approach to international relations that examines how gender shapes global politics and power structures

Postcolonial Feminism – A feminist theory that critiques Western universalism and highlights the effects of colonialism on gender and power

Decolonial Methodology – Research approach that resists colonial power dynamics by centering local knowledge, histories, and marginalized voices

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) – A method for studying how language constructs and reflects power, ideology, and inequality

Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) – A type of CDA that connects discourse to its historical and political context

Literature Review

This literature review begins by examining feminist political theory and its role in redefining traditional understandings of politics, autonomy, and justice. It explores how political structures have historically been shaped by male-centered perspectives and how feminist theorists challenge these foundations by broadening the definition of what is considered political. By exposing these gendered foundations, feminist political theory provides a critical lens for analyzing the EU's peacebuilding agenda, revealing how colonial legacies and exclusionary power structures influence its foreign policy.

The next section focuses on Feminist International Relations (IR) theory, which critiques traditional state-centered approaches by emphasizing the role of gender and lived experiences in global politics, particularly in security and conflict resolution. This perspective is essential for understanding how gendered power dynamics shape the EU's peacebuilding efforts and

underscores the need for a more inclusive, human-centered approach to security and gender equality in conflict zones.

Following this, the review delves into the enduring legacies of colonial histories in global politics and peacebuilding. Colonialism has shaped many of today's frameworks of governance, international relations, and conflict resolution. To better understand the intersection of colonial histories, feminist scholarship, and global political practices, particularly in the context of the EU, the next part engages with the critical insights of postcolonial feminist scholars such as Chandra Mohanty, Gayatri Spivak, and Cynthia Cockburn.

Finally, the last section examines the case for the EU's adoption of a feminist foreign policy (FFP) and the role of gender equality in its foreign relations. It highlights the shortcomings of the EU's current gender policies, the challenges to women's rights, and the gaps in its approach to peacebuilding. This section also introduces the concept of a "new gender contract" as a framework for reshaping EU policies to be more inclusive and transformative.

Feminist Theory in Politics

The main political theories aim to give people new ways of thinking about what counts as political, how people engage politically, and concepts like autonomy or justice. Feminist political theory does the same but explicitly considering identity. It asks whether autonomy is a category that all people can equally claim and questions whose perspective shapes our understanding of justice and whether it ensures access for everyone (Tucker, 2011). In other words, feminist political theory helps to uncover how the political world, as traditionally understood, often misrepresents or neglects women's experiences and concerns, both past and present.

Feminist political theorists argue that the subject of political theory, especially in liberal and democratic traditions, has been shaped in the image of a man. The liberal subject is seen as a

political agent – someone who possesses rights, upholds political and social freedoms, and actively works to protect them (Tucker, 2011). This political agent is traditionally portrayed as independent, rational, and autonomous. While these qualities are often claimed to be universal, they have been used, and still are, to exclude women and other marginalized groups.

If the political is defined as any type of speaking at all, then the private realm of home, family, and motherhood becomes political. In *Feminists Theorize the Political*, Kirstie McClure sees this as part of a “new definition of politics” in which every aspect of social life and human interaction is political (McClure, 1992). Existing accounts of women’s political theory see their goal as normative (to emancipate women), scientific (to explain the subordination of women), and practical (to transform society) (McClure, 1992). These seem to be noble aims, but McClure finds them to limit women’s political sphere. She insists that no single “type” of feminism, such as radical, socialist, or liberal, or its underlying theory can serve all women or guide all feminist political action (McClure, 1992). While various theoretical foundations should be assessed based on their plausibility and ability to accurately define women’s realities, they must not exist in competition with each other. The critical power of feminism lies in its politicization of activities traditionally excluded from “the political,” and more specifically in its erasure of distinctions between public and private life, between political and domestic economy (McClure, 1992, p.346). Thus, the new definition of politics preferred by feminism “includes the management or government of every aspect of social life” (McClure, 1992, p. 347).

McClure criticizes feminist philosopher Alison Jaggar’s critique in her “Gender and Global Justice” of feminist theory because Jaggar grounded her argument in notions that a theory is better or more plausible when it is based on notions of scientific empiricism (McClure, 1992). She insists, feminist political theory cannot be assessed based on empiricism and must be seen as

a process (McClure, 1992). Any act of theorizing by women on behalf of women becomes a political act in a political space. Theory cannot and should not be a singular guide to practice, and feminists must understand that:

Theory alone will not liberate women. But women's liberation seems equally unlikely to result from simple activism, not grounded in a systematic understanding of women's situation... If the assumptions and implications are not reflected consciously and systematically, then they are likely to be problematic. (McClure, 1992, p. 357)

Thus, feminist political theory seeks to challenge traditional politics by revealing its male-centered foundations and broadening the definition of what is considered political. By dissolving the boundary between public and private, it redefines politics as embedded in all aspects of life. Rather than offering a single path to liberation, it sees theory as an evolving process – one that must engage both reflection and action to truly transform society.

Feminist Perspectives in International Relations

Feminist approaches entered the International Relations field in the mid-1980s through work on development politics and peace research (Ali, 2023). Feminist international relations theory focuses on highlighting women's experiences, ideas, and contributions while examining concepts of gender and gender identities. The theory aims to uncover and emphasize the role of gender in international relations and to move beyond traditional gendered assumptions through collaborative scholarship. It engages with major theoretical debates in IR, introduces new areas of analysis, and challenges conventional categories within the field.

Feminist IR is often described as a “dialectical process” because it focuses on understanding the subjective meanings women attach to their lived experiences (Narain, 2014, p.188). It seeks to deconstruct the dominant concepts of the field. Feminists argue that

international politics function within “a patriarchal system that works for men at the expense of women” (Daddow, 2017, p. 186). Therefore, challenging the supposed neutrality of positivist science and recognizing the subjectivities in the construction of knowledge in the study of IR is essential for women to succeed in challenging the world of international policymaking.

Cynthia Enloe (1989) explains how gender makes the world go round. She explains that by allocating gender at the center where national and international political affairs orbit, International Relations theory is entirely reconstructed by a new, comprehensive, and real significance (Enloe, 1989). In global political affairs, when a woman attains the privilege of holding high office, it is usually because she doesn't pose a threat to the male-dominated status quo. She writes, “The international political arena is a sphere for men only, or those rare women who can successfully play at being men, or at least not shake masculine presumptions” (Enloe, 1989, p.13). Women who rise to power without challenging these norms might enjoy individual success, but their positions often do little to dismantle the gendered hierarchies that underpin the system. Therefore, there should be applied “feminist curiosity” to the study of International Relations for a deeper examination of how gender influences the structures and power dynamics within global politics (Enloe, 1989). The field of IR, as it has been traditionally understood, is incomplete because it overlooks the ways in which gender shapes both state behavior and international interactions. By urging scholars to center on women's lived experiences, Enloe challenges to recognize how global politics affects and is affected by domestic spaces, gendered labor, and societal expectations of femininity and masculinity (Enloe, 1989). This approach not only expands the scope of IR but also fills it with a moral imperative – to question whose stories and experiences are being marginalized and why.

Another focus of feminist IR theory is security and peacebuilding. The feminist critique of traditional international relations suggests that it is necessary to rethink how security, power, and the state are conceptualized. Conventional IR theories, particularly realism, center on the state as both the primary actor and the guarantor of individual security (Ali, 2023). Such a perspective overlooks the nuanced and often contradictory realities of human security within state borders, where the state's mechanisms of power largely serve as sources of insecurity for its citizens. However, feminist IR theory shifts this focus from states to people (Ali, 2023). It stresses the social relations and lived experiences that traditional approaches often ignore. By foregrounding individual experiences, particularly those of marginalized groups, feminist scholars expose the limitations of state-centric models of security. The feminist perspective broadens the scope of IR to include nontraditional actors and spaces, such as households, communities, and local economies, which are all crucial to understanding global dynamics but, for some reason, remain invisible in traditional paradigms (Ali, 2023).

The feminist critique also calls attention to the inherently gendered nature of state behavior. The conventional pursuit of security through military force often reinforces insecurity, particularly for those already vulnerable to systemic violence, such as women and children (Ali, 2023). This is why feminists advocate for redefining security in human-centered terms. Security, from this perspective, is not just the absence of military threats but the presence of conditions that ensure dignity, autonomy, and well-being for all individuals (Ali, 2023).

The state's reliance on military coercion to achieve security perpetuates cycles of violence and power asymmetry. The militarized approach to security further fuels issues like gender-based violence, economic exploitation, and political oppression (Ali, 2023). By questioning the very foundations of what constitutes security, feminist scholars challenge IR

practitioners to reimagine how peace and stability can be achieved without reinforcing the hierarchical and exclusionary structures that currently dominate global politics. This re-evaluation of security, one that considers the vulnerabilities and needs of individuals rather than the strategic interests of states, offers a more just understanding of global politics.

Thus, by shifting the focus to people and their lived experiences, Feminist IR theory exposes the limitations of military-based security, which often reinforces violence and insecurity, particularly for women and children. Feminist scholars advocate for redefining security to prioritize human dignity, autonomy, and well-being, challenging the hierarchical structures that dominate global politics and offering an inclusive approach to peace and stability.

Postcolonial Feminism and the Politics of Representation in Peacebuilding

Postcolonial critiques of modern imperialism argue that colonialism did not end but transformed into new forms. Economic dependency, cultural assimilation, and political interference by former colonial powers perpetuate a global order that exactly mirrors historical colonial dynamics. Chandra Mohanty's seminal work, "Under Western Eyes" (1984), critiques Western feminist practices for their universalizing tendencies that often obscure the diverse realities of women in postcolonial contexts. Mohanty argues that Western feminist discourses construct women in the Global South as monolithic victims of their cultures, which erases their agency and perpetuates colonial narratives of superiority (Mohanty, 1984, p. 333). In the context of peacebuilding, this critique translates to the framing of non-European societies as inherently conflict-prone and in need of European intervention.

Western feminist scholarship on the Third World must be critically analyzed within the context of specific power dynamics and struggles. This scholarship cannot be understood as resisting or countering a universal patriarchal system unless one assumes the existence of a

global male conspiracy or a singular, unchanging power structure that transcends history and context (Mohanty, 1984, p. 335). Mohanty brings here the insight of Abdel Malek about the West's hegemonic position today: "Contemporary imperialism is, in a real sense, a hegemonic imperialism, exercising to a maximum degree a rationalized violence taken to a higher level than ever before-through fire and sword, but also through the attempt to control hearts and minds." (Abdel Malek as cited in Mohanty, 1984, p. 335). This statement eloquently reflects on the nature of contemporary imperialism and positions it as a multifaceted system of domination. The phrase "hegemonic imperialism" suggests a form of dominance that operates not just through brute force but through systemic and calculated strategies. The reference to "rationalized violence" implies a shift from acts of aggression to methodical, institutionalized violence. This resonates with the role of the military-industrial complex, where technological advancements and strategic planning have made warfare more devastating and precise.

Mohanty's critique of contemporary imperialism serves as a critical lens through which the EU's external actions, policies, and identity as a global actor today can be interrogated. Despite its progressive self-image, the EU's external actions often reinforce the very systems of imperialism it claims to oppose. Its military, economic, cultural, and technological interventions frequently prioritize hegemonic control over genuine partnerships. To disrupt these dynamics, the EU should critically examine how its policies replicate colonial hierarchies and embrace frameworks that center local agency and historical accountability.

Another major scholar who critiques Western feminist ideals is Spivak. In her seminal "Can the Subaltern Speak?" she argues that the resistance by subaltern women is often futile if they lack the necessary infrastructure to make their resistance recognized (Spivak, 2015, p. 82). She critiques how British imperialists exploited the suffering of subaltern women and the sexism

of their environments to justify imperialism as a civilizing mission. This served as a way for imperialists to “speak on behalf of the subaltern,” framing their actions as necessary while ignoring that their very presence perpetuated the systemic barriers preventing these women from being heard (Spivak as cited in Kinnvall, 2009, p. 320). This highlights the colonial roots in so-called resistance against patriarchy, where feminism is co-opted to legitimize imperialism. For example, subaltern women today still face deeply ingrained misogyny, such as being told to act more “ladylike” in environments that tolerate patriarchal norms, leaving them without the freedom to resist, as women in more liberal societies might (Kinnvall, 2009). Even now, white advocates often step in to speak for these women rather than empowering them to speak for themselves. While such advocacy may be rooted in empathy, it risks reinforcing the very silencing it seeks to challenge. Instead, efforts should focus on enabling subaltern women to advocate for themselves, as they have the clearest understanding of the systems contributing to their oppression.

Spivak’s critique speaks directly to Cynthia Enloe’s insights about the gendered dimensions of international politics and power dynamics. Enloe brings up how women’s resistance is dismissed and depoliticized in patriarchal and militarized contexts. Spivak’s point about subaltern women being denied the “infrastructure” to make their resistance visible resonates with Enloe’s work on how global systems devalue the political contributions of women at the margins (Enloe, 1989; Spivak, 2015).

Liberal Bargain

An important theoretical contribution to this discussion is the concept of liberal bargain, introduced by Cynthia Cockburn. This process often involves adopting liberal epistemologies, even as individuals face barriers due to race, gender, or ethnicity (Cockburn, 2004). Critiques of

the liberal bargain frequently view it as a compromise or a denial of systemic oppression. However, Cockburn argues that examining how marginalized individuals adopt “modes of knowing” within such systems can reveal nuanced and dynamic social identities and behaviors (Cockburn, 2004). She exemplifies this concept with the case of Palestinian women citizens of Israel. These women live under the constraints of Israel’s ethno-national agenda and face intersecting oppressions tied to their gender, ethnicity, and national identity (Cockburn, 2004). Despite these challenges, they navigate a complex interplay of political awareness, cultural authenticity, and engagement with modernity and liberalism. The liberal bargain framework offers insights into these dynamics and moves beyond essentialist identity politics to acknowledge disjunctions between social location and social consciousness.

The liberal bargain is an important concept because it reframes marginalized individuals’ engagement with hegemonic orders as a negotiation rather than a denial of systemic barriers. This adds depth to discussions of how marginalized groups navigate oppression and agency. By addressing the intersections of liberalism, ethnicity, and patriarchy, the framework critiques essentialist identity politics. It offers a pathway to build solidarity among women from diverse backgrounds through shared identification rather than divisive identity markers (Sa’ar, 2005). The liberal bargain also aligns with postcolonial feminist critiques emphasizing how marginalized groups adopt and adapt dominant ideologies. It once again challenges binary understandings of oppression and privilege.

Consideration of these postcolonial feminist critiques can offer significant implications for the EU’s foreign policy and peacebuilding agenda. To align with Spivak and Enloe’s insights on feminist political action, the EU should prioritize creating conditions where subaltern women can advocate for themselves. This can involve both dismantling colonial power structures within

global peacebuilding systems and also ensuring that interventions don't merely reflect Eurocentric feminist ideals but that they're grounded in the situated knowledge of local women. Such an approach avoids the danger of neo-colonial advocacy and, at the same time, helps strengthen the EU's legitimacy as a peacebuilding actor who is truly committed to inclusion and equity. This reframing can help the EU move beyond the performative aspects of its gender equality agenda through foreign policy toward an approach that actually disrupts entrenched systems of power and oppression.

“Gender Contract” to the EU

Although gender equality is a central value in the EU's set of norms, it has yet to adopt a feminist approach in its external relations, which include foreign affairs, security, defense, trade, development, climate policy, and diplomacy. As challenges to these values intensify, ranging from anti-gender movements in East-Central Europe to the disproportionate impacts of global crises on women and marginalized groups, the EU faces a critical moment to reaffirm its commitment to gender equality (Petö et al., 2024). Especially in a current period of setbacks with regard to the rights of women and minorities, there is a strong pleading for a renewal of the gender equality contract. In 2024, with the upcoming European elections and the growing influence of far-right parties, gender plays a pivotal role in shaping the Union's resilience and the state of democracy across Europe. In many European states, anti-gender groups frame gender equality as a form of “colonialism,” portraying it as a Western imposition of liberal values and policies by elites during the “Europeanization” process, allegedly against the will of the people (Petö et al., 2024, p. 18). These attacks on gender are fueled by the term's ambiguity at the EU level and the individualized interpretations of gender within feminist, LGBTQ+ activism, and

gender theory, which right-wing populist parties exploit to advance anti-gender rhetoric (Petö et al., 2024, p. 19).

While gender has often been a rallying point for anti-gender movements, bringing together unlikely alliances against equality, the new gender contract of the EU aims to reframe the conversation (Kováts, 2015). Gender experts with multidisciplinary backgrounds from across Europe propose a new gender contract to the EU which argues that to create fairer, more unified, and effective international politics; the EU should adopt a feminist perspective that prioritizes care, avoids reducing demographic issues to bare numbers, and focuses on addressing inequalities. It focuses on how gender can act as a unifying force – a “symbolic glue” for feminist actors to build a more inclusive, equitable, and transformative Europe for the future (Kováts, 2015).

The past two years specifically have been marked by grim events – devastating war in Ukraine, ongoing conflicts in North Africa, genocidal crimes in the Middle East, ethnic cleansing in Artsakh, climate-related disasters, and this list goes on. Women, girls, and marginalized groups, already disadvantaged by historical and structural inequalities, have borne the brunt of these crises. To enhance its peace promotion efforts, the EU must integrate a stronger gender perspective. This includes turning the EU’s Women, Peace and Security (WPS) action plan into tangible results and upholding the commitments outlined in the EU Pact for Civilian Crisis Management (Petö et al., 2024).

For over two decades, the EU’s WPS Agenda has sought to address these disparities (Petö et al., 2024). Yet, women remain underrepresented in peace processes. In 2021, they accounted for only 19% of participants in UN-led peace efforts, despite evidence that their inclusion makes peace accords 35% more likely to last at least 15 years (Petö et al., 2024).

Women's participation enriches peace agreements by introducing diverse perspectives and priorities, leading to more sustainable outcomes.

New Feminist Contract for Foreign Policy

Examining the EU's external agency through a feminist lens is a valid approach for a number of reasons. First, all policies (whether they address gender directly or not) have gendered impacts. The EU's external actions affect women, men, and all individuals across the gender spectrum differently, which makes it necessary to create a foreign policy through a feminist perspective that highlights these differences. Also, since the EU is increasingly adopting gender-focused policies, it's important to assess how they influence objectives and processes in a gender-transformative way.

Over the past decade, as an "ethical alternative to realpolitik," Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) has emerged in order to challenge traditional, hyper-masculine nationalist approaches to diplomacy and international relations (Petö et al., 2024). First introduced by Sweden in 2014, FFP has since gained traction within and beyond the European Union as an innovative framework for reimagining foreign policy through a feminist lens (Petö et al., 2024). Rooted in a liberal tradition of gender equality, FFP's aim is to disrupt the status quo of international policymaking by addressing systemic inequalities, discrimination, and injustice (Petö et al., 2024). Critical approaches to FFP have further enriched the field by highlighting its limitations and potential contradictions. Scholars have questioned the extent to which FFP genuinely incorporates intersectionality and whether it challenges or reinforces neoliberal economic structures. Additionally, postcolonial critiques have problematized FFP's engagement with marginalized communities, particularly in the Global South, arguing that feminist rhetoric must

be accompanied by structural changes in global governance and economic systems (Petö et al., 2024).

The development of FFP in the EU has largely been influenced by Sweden's pioneering efforts. While Sweden's FFP was lauded for its holistic approach – framing policy around the principles of rights, representation, and resources – it ultimately failed to bring about radical transformation, particularly in the face of geopolitical crises such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Bergman Rosamond & Hedling, 2022). The dismantling of Sweden's FFP in 2022 demonstrated the vulnerability of feminist foreign policy to shifts in domestic politics and raised questions about the sustainability of FFP within the EU (Petö et al., 2024). Lessons from Sweden's experience suggest that for an EU-wide FFP to be meaningful, it must move beyond nation-branding and integrate feminist principles into the structural fabric of EU foreign policy.

Therefore, the EU's engagement with feminist principles in its external action strategies will require addressing the economic structures that perpetuate global inequalities, critically examining militarization, and ensuring that feminist policy extends beyond rhetoric to tangible transformation. Moving forward, continued academic inquiry into FFP will be essential for assessing its impact and shaping its future trajectory within the EU's foreign and security policy landscape.

Research Questions

The main objective of this capstone is to uncover the colonial underpinnings of the EU's peacebuilding agenda within its foreign policy through a postcolonial feminist lens. It explores the ways in which postcolonial feminist critiques offer a framework to reassess the EU's historical accountability in global conflicts and peacebuilding. It also attempts to answer why the EU needs to officially implement Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) at the EU level and how its

implementation will empower women in conflict settings. By centering gender and colonial responsibility in the EU's peacebuilding agenda, this research emphasizes the need for a transformative shift in the EU's foreign policy.

Methodology

This study critically examines the colonial underpinnings of the EU's peacebuilding agenda within its foreign policy through a postcolonial feminist lens. It employs critical discourse analysis (CDA) as the main methodological tool, focusing on its discourse-historical approach to trace how the EU constructs gender equality and peacebuilding in its external actions. This approach allows for an in-depth examination of how historical power structures and colonial legacies shape contemporary EU policies, particularly in today's conflict settings. The analysis centers on the European External Action Service's (EEAS) foreign policy, with a particular focus on the EU's Gender Action Plan III (GAP III) as a guiding framework for external action. Additionally, this study assesses the Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) proposal developed by Aline Burni and Laetitia Thissen to evaluate how a formalized FFP at the EU level could address the shortcomings of the current policy framework. By integrating postcolonial feminist critiques, the research investigates how the EU's discourse on gender equality universalizes women's experiences, often overlooking intersectional perspectives.

This study is anchored in Sandra Harding's feminist standpoint theory and Linda Tuhiwai Smith's decolonial methodologies to ensure that the analysis remains attentive to marginalized voices and alternative epistemologies. Through this lens, the research interrogates how the EU can reassess its historical accountability in global conflicts and peacebuilding, as well as why the institutionalization of Feminist Foreign Policy is necessary for empowering women in conflict

settings. By centering gender and colonial responsibility, this study calls for a need for a transformative shift in the EU's foreign policy.

Feminist Epistemologies and Decolonial Methodologies

Sandra Harding's feminist standpoint theory posits, "Feminist issues couldn't be pigeonholed and ignored as only women's issues, but instead had to be seen as valuably informing theoretical, methodological, and political thought in general" (Harding, 2004, p. 2). In my research, I use Harding's standpoint theory to position gender not as a separate or isolated issue but as a critical lens through which to examine broader socio-political dynamics, particularly in the context of the EU's foreign policy and peacebuilding efforts. This theory allows to approach the subject of gender equality and peacebuilding from a standpoint that recognizes the interconnections between gender, race, colonial histories, and global power structures. By applying feminist epistemologies, this study can critically examine whose knowledge is centered in the EU's policymaking and whether it recognizes structural inequalities or treats women's empowerment as a technical policy solution.

Postcolonial feminism combines postcolonial and feminist thought while challenging the gender-blindness of postcolonial theory and the Eurocentrism of Western feminism. A key critique shared by postcolonial feminist scholars is the rejection of the universalization of women's experiences, a tendency often found in Western feminism. Instead, postcolonial feminism highlights how factors like race, culture, and class shape and differentiate women's oppression and experiences (Lewis & Mills, 2003). By questioning Western feminist dominance and the power imbalances between the Global North and South, postcolonial feminists offer alternative perspectives to reshape global understanding. As Harding puts it, they seek to "gaze back" at Western imperialism and global male supremacy (Harding, 2008, p. 156).

At the same time, in order to account for the EU's historical colonial accountability and its engagement with feminist foreign policy, I also incorporate the lens of Tuhiwai Smith's decolonizing methodologies into my analysis.

Tuhiwai Smith states that "The reach of imperialism into 'our heads' challenges those who belong to colonized communities to understand how this occurred, partly because we perceive a need to decolonize our minds, to recover ourselves, to claim a space in which to develop a sense of authentic humanity" (Smith, 2012, p. 24). I use Smith's insights to interrogate how the EU's gender equality and peacebuilding narratives are shaped by colonial histories that continue to influence global power dynamics. Her approach helps me understand that the EU's conception of gender equality is not neutral; it is informed by historical and ongoing power imbalances that privilege Western ideologies and experiences. By combining these two theories of methods, I position my research as a critical reexamination of the EU's historical responsibility in global conflicts and its current peacebuilding efforts in the political landscape.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) serves as a crucial methodological tool in this research, as it allows for a deeper interrogation of how the EU constructs gender equality, peacebuilding, and feminist foreign policy within its external action. CDA is not merely a descriptive method; rather, it is an analytical approach that critically examines how discourse reflects and reinforces power structures, ideological assumptions, and systemic inequalities (Khosravini, 2015, p. 47). CDA has sometimes been criticized as being overly political and lacking rigorous scholarly content. However, if being political means focusing on power relations, then CDA is appropriately situated within political analysis. Political analysis is essentially the study of how power is exercised and distributed. Thus, CDA's emphasis on

exposing and challenging inequalities aligns with its commitment to social transformation (Khosravinik, 2015, p. 48). Despite its political orientation, CDA adheres to strict academic standards, such as systematic analysis and retroductive reasoning and offers both theoretical insights and practical relevance (Khosravinik, 2015).

By employing CDA, my study critically engages with the ways in which the EU constructs gender equality and peacebuilding within its external policies. Given the EU's historical positioning as a global actor, its foreign policy cannot be understood in isolation from Europe's colonial and geopolitical history that continues to shape contemporary narratives of peace, security, and gender equality. One of the central strengths of CDA is its ability to reveal not only what is present in a discourse but also what is absent, which is a crucial aspect when assessing the EU's approach to gender and peacebuilding. As Khosravinik (2015) argues, discourse is shaped by social, political, and historical contexts, meaning that the language is never neutral. This approach helps to uncover how women's roles in conflict and security are framed, and whether the EU's policies reinforce a Western-centric, binary understanding of gender that positions women as passive victims rather than active agents.

Discourse-Historical Approach

Once the foundational understanding of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and its critical nature is established, Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) offers another key methodological perspective for this study. DHA focuses on the relationship between the Self and the Other within discourse (Khosravinik, 2015). As Wodak (2015) explains, DHA is "problem-oriented," meaning that linguistic analysis alone is insufficient; discourse must be examined within its broader historical, social, and political context. This includes considering how a text relates to other discourses, the setting in which it is produced, and the power structures that shape

its meaning. By integrating discourse with its context, DHA seeks to uncover the deeper complexities of how meaning is constructed and sustained (Wodak, 2015, p. 3).

DHA also emphasizes that discourse is both socially constructed and socially constitutive – it shapes social practices while simultaneously being shaped by them. In this view, discourse is not just a collection of linguistic practices but a means of reinforcing or challenging dominant ideologies. It operates through ‘validity claims,’ normative positions involving multiple social actors (Reisigl & Wodak, 2017, p. 89). Additionally, Wodak differentiates between discourse and text, where text is a material representation of discourse and contributes to the process of shaping meaning (Reisigl & Wodak, 2017). By critically analyzing discourse through DHA, researchers can reveal the implicit power structures embedded in language and better understand how discourse influences social and political realities. As for my study, DHA will be instrumental in examining how colonial histories continue to shape contemporary EU peacebuilding discourses, particularly in assessing whether the EU acknowledges its historical responsibility in global conflicts or positions itself as a neutral actor. DHA’s emphasis on historical context allows for a critical analysis of how past colonial legacies are embedded in the language and narratives of EU foreign policy. By situating policy texts and official statements within their broader sociopolitical and historical frameworks, DHA helps uncover whether the EU’s discourse reflects an awareness of its colonial past or if it erases, minimizes, or reframes its role in shaping global conflicts.

Furthermore, DHA’s focus on intertextuality, how texts refer to and interact with previous discourses, will help trace continuities or shifts in the EU’s approach to peacebuilding. By analyzing references to historical events, former colonial relationships, or patterns of intervention, this method can reveal whether the EU’s policies perpetuate a Eurocentric,

depoliticized vision of peace and security. DHA's emphasis on the construction of the Self and the Other is crucial in assessing whether the EU presents itself as a benevolent peacebuilder while positioning former colonies and conflict-affected regions as passive recipients of its policies. This will allow for a deeper understanding of whether the EU's foreign policy discourse reinforces neocolonial power structures or genuinely seeks to address historical injustices.

Overall, this paper weaves together the analytical rigor of Critical Discourse Analysis and the contextual depth of the Discourse-Historical Approach to reveal the interplay between historical colonial legacies and contemporary EU peacebuilding narratives. Together, these methodological tools enable an analysis of the transformative framework proposed by Feminist Foreign Policy and help to understand its future in today's Europe. The integration of feminist epistemologies and decolonial critiques ensures that the analysis goes beyond surface-level interpretations and invites a transformative reexamination of how historical injustices continue to shape the EU's external actions.

Research Findings and Analysis

The two main documents chosen for this analysis are the policy framework of the EU's Gender Action Plan III (GAP III) and the policy brief of Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) by Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) developed by policy advisor Aline Burni and senior policy analyst of gender equality Laeticia Thissen. A close analysis of the ideological implications within both texts will help uncover how the EU envisions gender-transformative change, and compare how women's empowerment in the EU's external action is framed in the official EU document versus the FFP approach.

The Gender Action Plan III is the EU's commitment to promote equality and women's empowerment in EU external action from 2021 to 2025. It introduces the rules for applying and

monitoring gender mainstreaming across different sectors. This comprehensive gender action plan promises to scale up the EU contribution to reach SDG 5 in all EU internal and external policy areas and across the 2030 Agenda.

Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) is officially defined as a state's approach to interacting with other countries, movements, and non-state actors in a way that prioritizes peace, gender equality, and environmental sustainability (Thompson, 2020). It aims to uphold and protect human rights for everyone. At the same time, the policy seeks to challenge colonial, racist, patriarchal, and male-dominated power structures. In 2014, when Sweden first introduced the concept of feminist foreign policy, the idea of incorporating gender into foreign policy was not entirely new, but it was initially met with skepticism and even mockery (Petö et al., 2024). At first, it was difficult to explain the value of this approach to the Foreign Service, and even experienced male ambassadors struggled to see its importance. However, after overcoming this resistance, Sweden began applying a feminist perspective across all areas of foreign policy, including security, trade, and development, focusing on women's rights, resources, and representation (Petö et al., 2024). Although progress was slow at first, increasing support from progressive politicians, NGOs, and academics eventually led to about 15 countries adopting feminist foreign policies (Petö et al., 2024). This shift has resulted in real outcomes, including more gender equality initiatives and new actions in foreign trade, development, and security, proving the effectiveness of this policy approach. Increasingly, more feminist scholars, politicians, activists, and policy advisors are urging the EU to adopt a similar approach. The increased interest in FFP is a result of a search for more peaceful and secure societies. This policy proposal arises from the continued limited access to decision-making processes in foreign and security policies for women and other marginalized groups. As the original proposal of FFP

claims, it looks not only at addressing urgent security concerns during armed conflicts but also at overcoming inequalities, gender, and racial stereotypes, along with colonial legacies and global power imbalances (Burni & Thissen, 2024). By breaking down gender power relations, FFP offers a path to challenge systemic discrimination and the structural obstacles that stand in the way of creating more equal societies. This approach is much more nuanced and intersectional than the EU's current GAP III, which focuses solely on binary gender imbalances.

The following sections will analyze how both FFP and GAP III explicitly shape the EU's foreign policy goals, narratives, and decision-making processes through four main themes. First, it will examine the neoliberal rationale, focusing on how GAP III instrumentalizes gender and how FFP responds to this tendency. Next, the analysis will explore structural blindness, particularly how Europe's colonial responsibilities are (or are not) addressed in the EU's current external action and peacebuilding efforts. The third theme will focus on the understanding of security, comparing the militarized, patriarchal approach to security with the feminist vision of peacebuilding grounded in the absence of structural violence. Finally, the last section will address the limits of women's inclusion in EU peacebuilding efforts.

Together, these four priorities advocate for transformative change in the EU's external action. The discursive patterns revealed through the analysis will show that, for the EU to position itself as a credible global actor committed to justice, peace, and security, it must undergo an ideological shift away from neoliberal, patriarchal, and colonial frameworks in its external policies.

Neoliberal Rationality and the Instrumentalization of Gender

While GAP III presents itself as a progressive step toward gender equality in EU foreign policy, this section questions what lies beneath its empowering language. It explores how gender

is framed not as a matter of justice, but as a means to boost economic growth and efficiency, which raises concerns about whether such an approach truly challenges inequality or simply repackages it in market-friendly terms.

GAP III Framework

The relationship between gender equality and the EU's foreign policy has its longest-standing roots in development cooperation. The formulation of the GAP III, which aims to promote gender equality and women's empowerment across all areas of the EU's external action, represents a step forward. GAP III makes important conceptual and operational advances, particularly in its commitment to intersectionality, gender mainstreaming, support for civil society, and policy coherence. Notably, it sets a quantifiable target that by the end of 2025, 85% of all new external actions will contribute to this objective (EU Commission, 2020, p. 2). This ambition is strengthened through operational standards, such as "mandatory gender analyses, gender-sensitive indicators and sex-disaggregated data, integration into all development dialogues and strategies" (EU Commission, 2020, p. 4). The document suggests that to tackle the root causes of gender inequality, three core principles should be considered: taking a gender transformative approach, addressing the intersectionality of gender with other forms of discrimination, and following a human-rights-based approach.

The European Commission will strengthen and update the methodology connecting gender equality, the right based approach encompassing intersectionality in its Toolbox: a right-based approach, encompassing all human rights for EU development cooperation. (EU Commission, 2020, p. 3)

Such formulation projects an image of the EU as a normative power committed to justice and equality, using terms like "empowerment," "non-discrimination," and "participation" to align its

external engagement with global human rights standards. While the document is framed in the rhetoric of rights, inclusion, and empowerment, a closer analysis reveals that its later formulations are shaped by a neoliberal logic, one that presents gender equality as a tool for economic efficiency and a strategic asset in the EU's external relations. The EEAS's gender budgeting strategies often portray women as bare tools for economic growth, rather than recognizing gender equality as a fundamental human right. This instrumental view risks worsening existing inequalities. GAP III highlights that "bringing an additional 600 million women online could increase global GDP by EUR 13 billion" (EU Commission, 2020, p. 20). Funding for gender mainstreaming is framed as a way to boost human capital rather than to promote justice. This reflects a clear neoliberal logic where investing in women is justified because it brings benefits like improved public health, education, and employment, without addressing the deeper political and structural barriers that prevent women from accessing these services in the first place.

Further, the action plan says, "Empowering women economically is key to reducing poverty and to achieving inclusive and sustainable growth under the 2030 Agenda. Estimates show advancing gender equality could add about EUR 11 to 21 trillion to global GDP by 2025" (EU Commission, 2020, p.11). Again, this statement exemplifies a market-oriented framing of gender equality by tying women's empowerment directly to poverty reduction and economic growth. Rather than positioning gender equality as a standalone value or a matter of justice, the discourse constructs it as a means to achieve development goals. By presenting gender mainstreaming as a pathway to "improved public health, education, and employment," the discourse individualizes responsibility; it suggests that women's inclusion will automatically generate social benefits. This simplistic view overlooks the fact that systemic inequality cannot

be solved by inclusion alone, especially when the systems themselves remain unchallenged. Such strong reliance on economic estimates simply quantifies women's empowerment and pushes the notion that women's value lies in their economic contribution. This framing commodifies equality but suggests that its worth is contingent on the financial benefits it yields for society. Moreover, this logic aligns with the narratives, where the inclusion of women is justified primarily through their potential to enhance market efficiency and productivity. By doing so, the policy sidesteps deeper structural questions, such as how global economic systems themselves produce and maintain gendered inequalities.

When GAP III says gender equality is an “imperative to well-being, economic growth, prosperity, good governance, peace and security” (EU Commission, 2020, p. 2), it's not making a false claim. There's solid empirical evidence that gender-equal societies tend to have better health outcomes, lower conflict, more inclusive governance, and higher economic growth. The problem with such formulations is not that gender equality contributes to well-being, prosperity, or peace, because it does. The issue lies in how and why gender equality is being framed in a particular discourse, and what that framing does politically, ideologically, and structurally. By stating that gender equality is a tool for achieving other goals (economic growth, peace), GAP III simply instrumentalizes it.

Linking gender equality to macroeconomic outcomes and good governance depoliticizes the radical and collective roots of feminism. Instead of challenging patriarchy, capitalism, or colonial legacies, GAP III largely avoids addressing who holds power and wealth, and how exploitation is gendered. Such discourse shifts the solution of gender inequality to a mere market inclusion and individual empowerment (especially entrepreneurship). This translates feminist struggles into neutral development objectives. It can only sound progressive while it actually

ignores questions of structural justice. The current GAP III framework still reflects the legacy of the Women-in-Development approach and therefore cannot be considered fully gender-transformative. Although the policy acknowledges gender issues, it does not go far enough to challenge or dismantle the deeper power structures that produce gender inequality.

FFP Framework

The policy brief of FFP explicitly positions itself against the neoliberal framework that has shaped much of the EU's approach to gender equality in foreign policy, particularly as exemplified by the Gender Action Plan III. While GAP III largely adopts a technocratic and instrumental logic, the FFP policy brief calls for a fundamental shift toward a political and truly transformative understanding of feminism.

As stated in the policy brief, a few states have previously adopted FFP on a national level; nonetheless, most of those countries still have not succeeded in effectively implementing it (Burni & Thissen, 2024). For instance, Canada introduced its own version in 2017, called the Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP), which aims to fight poverty through international aid and sees the private sector as a partner in achieving feminist goals (Cadesky, 2020). However, Burni and Thissen criticize this model for promoting a neoliberal version of feminism, which focuses mainly on economic empowerment while ignoring deeper structural inequalities and forms of oppression.

Canada's approach tends to underpin a neoliberal understanding of feminism, presenting women and girls as "superwomen" and suggesting that their empowerment is a precondition for the local communities economic growth, which limits the policy's potential impact. The ambiguity around the notion thus bears the risk of stripping it from its transformative potential or being instrumentalized politically in support of measures

failing to dismantle patriarchal systems entrenching gender inequalities. (Burni & Thissen, 2024)

This passage offers a strong critique of how neoliberal logic infiltrates feminist policymaking by revealing the commodification and instrumentalization of gender equality. This exposes how neoliberalism co-opts feminist language to depoliticize structural critique to make it more market-compatible. The framing of women and girls as “superwomen” exposes a discourse where empowerment is no longer about dismantling patriarchal systems but about optimizing individual potential for market productivity.

The repeated emphasis in Canada’s FIAP on “women and girls” as the central agents of change relies on a logic that equates gender equality with one’s productivity and economic participation. As Burni and Thissen (2024) note, this approach narrows “gender equality” to a binary framework and depoliticizes the systemic nature of gender oppression. This depoliticization shifts the focus away from structural critiques of patriarchy and power toward individualized empowerment strategies. This orientation is known as a form of “feminist neoliberalism,” where women’s empowerment becomes a means to improve economic outcomes rather than dismantle gendered hierarchies (Cadesky, 2020). Such an approach sidesteps real issues like masculinity, institutional violence, or intersectional marginalization. Instead, it reinforces Canada’s self-image as a benevolent, progressive state on the global stage and avoids the discomfort of addressing patriarchal norms.

We propose that an EU-based FFP should move beyond (neo)liberal feminism, by being authentic, ambitious, and accountable in its approach and conduct. It should be grounded in an intersectional perspective that seeks to actively recognize the interweaving and complex

nature of contemporary power relationships beyond the confines of a restrictive and violent gender dichotomy. (Petö et al., 2024, p. 180)

This passage directly challenges the discursive limitations of neoliberal feminism and advocates for a reorientation of the EU's foreign policy toward a more politically radical and structurally conscious framework. By grounding the proposed policy in intersectionality, FFP introduces a discursive rupture that moves from an individualized view of gender to one that emphasizes structural power. Intersectionality functions here not just as a methodological tool but as a discursive strategy that expands the frame of analysis beyond binary and hierarchical gender models. The rejection of a "restrictive and violent gender dichotomy" shows an awareness of how neoliberal feminism reinforces exclusionary gender norms when claiming to be progressive. In this way, the policy's formulation constructs a counter-discourse to neoliberal rationality, one that emphasizes complexity and structural accountability over market-based outcomes. FFP's proposal exposes how neoliberal discourse masks structural injustice through the strategic deployment of feminist terminology and calls attention to the urgent need for politically grounded, intersectional frameworks in foreign policy.

Colonial Legacies and Structural Blindness

This section shifts attention to how colonial histories and structural inequalities are largely ignored in the EU's Gender Action Plan III. Through a postcolonial feminist lens, it contrasts GAP III's silence with the more self-reflective and decolonial ambitions of the FFP framework. It questions what kind of foreign policy can truly promote gender equality without confronting Europe's imperial past.

GAP III Framework

One of the crucial ways of making a progressive shift in the EU's external action is by adopting a more ambitious approach to FFP, which will include deconstructing the Eurocentric and colonial paradigm and embracing historical consciousness within its foreign policy. Europe's failure to fully confront its colonial past affects the EU's foreign policy today. Some EU officials still argue that colonial history is no longer relevant or that not all EU countries were involved in it. But unless the EU and its member states seriously examine the impact of colonialism, their foreign and security policy will continue to face problems. The failure to consider gender, structural inequality, and colonial thinking during the policy design stage creates major obstacles to effectively promoting gender equality in and beyond the Union.

In this light, the EU's Gender Action Plan III presents itself as a progressive framework to promote gender equality globally. However, when analyzed through a postcolonial feminist lens, significant issues emerge in how the EU frames itself and its relationship to the Global South. The document doesn't interrogate how the EU's past involvement in colonization, structural adjustment policies, and military interventions continues to influence global gender inequality today. It tends to present empowerment as exportable rather than co-produced.

In the 21st century, disasters and human-made crises, including conflict, have become more complex, protracted, and increasingly linked to global challenges, such as climate change, environmental degradation, displacement, and more recently, pandemics. (EU Commission, 2020, p. 17)

This frames conflicts as technical and environmental issues, rather than a result of political, historical, or structural inequalities. Conflict becomes something that "happens" as part of an evolving global landscape, when it should be framed as a product of military intervention and postcolonial governance structures that European countries and institutions had directly shaped.

There is also no reference to colonial borders or the role of the EU and its member states in sustaining fragile statehood through exploitative policies and arms sales that contribute to ongoing conflicts. In this document's formulation, conflict is a problem "over there," where the EU remains outside the frame of critique. However, without acknowledging the EU's colonial accountability, the EU transforms its foreign policy and gender action plan into soft-power tools of European hegemony. Then, the GAP III agenda becomes less about dismantling patriarchal and colonial structures and more about disciplining the Global South into adopting Eurocentric norms of gender equality. This mirrors what Chandra Mohanty has called the feminist civilizing mission, where women's empowerment is delivered to "backward" societies without listening to or centering local feminist voices or histories of resistance (Mohanty, 1984).

FFP Framework

Burni and Thissen's policy framework directly calls out the EU's colonial legacies and structural blindness by identifying two interlinked failures: failure to acknowledge colonial legacies and structural blindness in the EU's current external action policies (Burni & Thissen, 2024). The FFP framework suggests ways to decolonize the EU's foreign policy through the lens of cultural diversity and intersectionality. One of the most direct acknowledgments of colonial responsibility appears in the statement that FFP "looks not only at the immediate security needs in times of war and conflict to overcome inequalities, gender, and racist stereotypes but also colonial legacies and asymmetries of power in global relations" (Burni & Thissen, 2024, p. 5). This line explicitly recognizes that colonial histories are not just in the past of Europe; they actively shape current global hierarchies and must be confronted as part of ethical foreign policymaking.

A decolonial approach is also evident in how the passage expands the scope of foreign policy beyond traditional security concerns, stating that FFP “applies to all international efforts: peace and security but also trade, development aid, diplomacy, consular services, and immigration” (Burni & Thissen, 2024, p. 5). By widening the policy lens, it urges the EU to examine how everyday policies (not just military interventions) reproduce colonial power structures. For example, development aid and trade policies often continue to benefit European interests at the expense of countries in the Global South. FFP challenges this by calling for “consistency across all domains of influence” (Burni & Thissen, 2024).

It is indispensable that a European FFP is aware of and addresses the European colonial history and its impact on current power asymmetries in international relations and gendered social structures, including by adopting a post-colonial approach in its relations with partners. (Burni & Thissen, 2024, p. 5)

As seen from this framing, the authors directly urge the EU to recognize its historical legacy as an imperialist power. This challenges the EU’s self-image as a benign and normative actor in global affairs. Referencing colonial history in the policy recommendation as something that continues to shape power hierarchies, the brief exposes the continuities between past imperialism and present global inequality, particularly in how gender and geopolitics intersect.

Further, it says:

The EU should recognise its historical legacy as an imperialist power and start to debate issues of power asymmetries and colonial legacies internally and how existing policies might be reproducing them, intending to change policies and practices that only reinforce unjust and unequal relations. (Burni & Thissen, 2024, p. 10)

This sentence is discursively powerful in a way that it reframes the subject position of the EU from benevolent leader to complicit heir of colonial structures. It disrupts the EU's normative role of being a "peace project" or "value exporter" to economically and socially disadvantaged women. Instead, it names the EU as an imperialist agent and assigns to it historical responsibility. The call to "debate ... internally" suggests that coloniality is embedded in the EU's existing policy logics and needs to be named, questioned, and dismantled from within. Such a self-reflexive approach is very rare in foreign policy discourse, but the authors find this the only way to move from the Eurocentric "donor-recipient" model of aid and power. Conventional foreign and security policy frameworks largely uphold the same status quo and fail to protect the majority while actively harming the most vulnerable. In contrast, FFP offers a comprehensive model that centers women's and marginalized communities' agency. It confronts and dismantles systems of oppression, and importantly, doesn't shy away from listing colonization among them. Ultimately, FFP serves as a tool for rethinking and reshaping global power relations to address the root causes of inequality and structural violence.

The EU's Security Through Militarism: A Patriarchal Contradiction

Although the EU formally promotes gender equality in its foreign policy through frameworks like GAP III, its security strategies continue to rely on militarized and coercive practices. This section analyzes how these frameworks construct gendered notions of peace and security to discuss the contradiction between feminist goals and the EU's operational realities.

GAP III Framework

When it comes to addressing the EU's defense and security initiatives, GAP III articulates its vision of gender equality that seeks to be transformative and inclusive. It refers to the EU's Women, Peace and Security agenda, which has been the main framework for addressing gender

aspects of conflict, crisis management, and peacebuilding over the past 12 years. While GAP III claims to promote women's participation and leadership, it does so within existing structures of power, such as the military and security forces.

The EU objectives on WPS should be achieved, among others, through political and diplomatic engagement of EU leadership and by integrating a gender perspective and ensuring women's participation and leadership in all peace and security-related contexts. It is also necessary to take specific measures, including targeted training for the military, justice and security forces. (EU Commission, 2020, p. 17)

This passage starts with a rhetorical emphasis on inclusion and gender equality, yet at the end reinforces a top-down, institutional framework that preserves the centrality of militarized actors. It doesn't go deeper into questioning inherent patriarchal logic in peacebuilding. As a result, gender equality is framed as an add-on rather than a transformative challenge to the dominant peace and security paradigm.

Also, GAP III heavily emphasizes regional and international cooperation. The document explicitly affirms that the EU is a global advocate for gender equality and references diverse regional frameworks and peace initiatives it is working on, such as Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children, the Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration and the Montevideo Strategy in Latin America (EU Commission, 2020, p. 6). All of these initiatives focus on combating violence against women and children, trafficking, disaster response, and maternal health in different conflict regions and aim to create a safer environment for women. However, there is a stark contradiction in the EU's external actions, as while it supports peace and gender equality initiatives in places like Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, it also funds authoritarian

governments to police its borders. This funding often leads to violence and human rights abuses against women and children, which goes against the EU's promises to promote human rights and fair peace.

A 2024 investigation by *Le Monde*, Lighthouse Reports revealed that EU funding is being used by governments in Morocco, Tunisia, and Mauritania to arrest and forcibly remove migrants, which meant abandoning them in remote desert or mountainous areas (Gasteli et al., 2024). These actions are intended to block migration to Europe along major routes like the Central, Western, and Atlantic Mediterranean paths, which have resulted in serious human rights violations. Migrants shared accounts of being detained, imprisoned, and left without food, water, or legal support (Gasteli et al., 2024). Hence, despite the EU's commitments under frameworks such as GAP III or the WPS agenda, and various regional partnerships to promote gender equality and human dignity, these practices tell a different story. Women and other marginalized groups, who are supposed to be protected and empowered under the EU's peacebuilding initiatives, are instead being subjected to violence and abandonment, sometimes with the EU's resources directly. This exposes a troubling contradiction at the heart of the EU's external action. Peace and security cannot be gender-equal or inclusive if they are built on the backs of invisible and disposable lives.

Moreover, the study conducted by the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy reveals that common criticism of the EU's approach to the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda is that it treats gender as an added bonus rather than integrating it into core security practices. This includes how threats are assessed, priorities are set, and actions are taken (Bernarding & Lunz, 2020). This issue is not exclusive to the EU and is made worse by the WPS agenda's focus on increasing women's roles within military systems, such as national armies or UN peacekeeping

missions. Critics argue this reflects a trend of “securitising gender” rather than “gendering security” or what some call the “militarization” of the original WPS resolution (Bernarding & Lunz, 2020). So, instead of transforming the military system, women are being absorbed into it. However, the WPS agenda was never about making war more equal, it was about preventing war altogether. Thus, starting with rethinking what security truly means, by putting people’s safety and well-being at the center, can help build a more inclusive and meaningful approach to peace and protection in the EU’s external action strategy. The EU’s emphasis on military solutions simply strengthens ties with the patriarchal defense industry, which goes against feminist goals.

FFP Framework

FFP defines peace as the absence of structural violence, not just war, including colonialism, militarism, and other forms of oppression (Burni & Thissen, 2024). The heart of the FFP’s discourse is the idea of disarmament and centering marginalized voices in the peacebuilding processes. Unlike GAP III, FFP directly questions the EU’s use of militarism in achieving peace. Traditional foreign and security policies have maintained the status quo and often failed, harming most people, particularly the most vulnerable and marginalised. Thus, FFP critiques policies that place women in military roles without addressing the systems themselves. FFP takes a step outside the black box approach of traditional foreign policy thinking and its focus on military force, violence, and domination by offering an alternative and intersectional rethinking of security from the viewpoint of the most vulnerable (Burni & Thissen, 2024). By positioning a feminist vision of security as a step “outside” this framework, the discourse establishes FFP as both a critique and a transformative alternative. The use of “intersectional rethinking” is an epistemological shift. It highlights inclusivity and the centering of marginalized perspectives in redefining what security means. In such redefining, security is no longer

portrayed as state-centric or militarized, but it is instead reimagined from the standpoint of those typically excluded from traditional power structures. FFP's brief about security and defense acknowledges GAP III's stated commitment to intersectionality, yet it critiques it for being superficial.

GAP III, though committed to intersectionality, that is, the recognition that there is a whole array of intersections of power relations and gender identities which affect people's lives in global politics, tends to equate gender with women and girls, without fully problematising the vulnerabilities of some men and boys. Nor does GAP III provide a fruitful analysis of the role of military masculinity in fostering war, conflict, gendered harms and inequalities – here, the EU could take its cues from both feminist scholarship and activists who have long pointed to this relationship. (Rosamond, 2024, p. 8)

The passage underscores GAP III's strategic silence on military masculinity, which is not an accidental erasure but a politically convenient decision. Military masculinity is rooted in domination and emotional suppression and is purely a gendered logic that sustains the very conflicts the EU claims to mitigate. Its absence in the EU's gender discourse shows a deeper reluctance to critique the militarized foundations of its own foreign and security policy. Pointing this out requires the EU to confront how its own reliance on militarized policies contributes to gendered violence. Such an admission would challenge the foundations of the EU's authority and disrupt the EU's narrative as a neutral promoter of peace and equality.

Rosamond critiques GAP III not just for what it includes, but more forcefully for what it excludes, like the concept and impact of military masculinity and the historical and racialized harms of empire and colonialism. By naming these absences in the policy recommendations, she

shifts the discussion to a demand for epistemic and structural reform. This brief does not accept the EU's use of intersectionality at face value; it challenges its application. It recommends a more sophisticated and developed approach that takes into account not just identities, but the interlocking systems of power that shape them (Rosamond, 2024, p. 8).

In addition, the brief openly critiques several EU member states that adopted Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) in their foreign affairs but failed to apply it at the security and defence level. Countries like Sweden, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and others, while aligning with the peace-oriented logic of the WPS agenda, have not embraced pacifism as a core feminist idea (Rosamond, 2024).

For example, despite its commitment to progressive feminist goals, the Netherlands recently announced a 10% increase in defence spending, investing in military equipment and systems, justifying this through Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Rosamond, 2024, p. 7). At the same time, France, while integrating a comprehensive FFP agenda, does not see a contradiction in treating defence as a key pillar of its FFP and has committed to NATO's target of 2% GDP defence spending (Rosamond, 2024, p. 5).

Germany has also significantly increased its defence budget since its adoption of FFP, again justifying this in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The German government explicitly rejected pacifism and claimed that FFP is not a "magic formula" and that military means are necessary to protect human lives (Rosamond, 2024, p. 6).

Sweden, the first country to ever implement FFP, also disregarded its demilitarisation premise. Its FFP also coincided with rising military expenditure, the return of conscription, heightened border securitisation, and ultimately, its recent NATO membership (Rosamond, 2024, p. 6). In October 2022, Sweden's conservative-led government officially dropped the FFP, stating

it no longer served national interests and distanced itself from the previous social democratic government's feminist project (Rosamond, 2024, p. 6).

These cases show that all these EU states appear to use FFP as a label or symbolic gesture when their actual policies contradict its foundation. The fact that these countries adopted FFP and simultaneously increased their military budgets, reintroduced conscription, and some pursued NATO alignment creates the impression that FFP is treated as a certain political performance rather than a serious commitment to feminist peacebuilding. In fact, none of the EU members seriously considers FFP's nonviolent, anti-military foundation for implementation. In this way, they will continue to reproduce patriarchal logics of securitisation, which undermine the effectiveness of their FFP commitments. Thus, it is crucial that the European Union, as a supranational body, takes full ownership and responsibility for FFP's adoption to prevent member states from treating it as a mere buzzword.

Participation Without Power: The Limits of Inclusion

Women remain largely underrepresented in decision-making roles at national, regional, and international levels. In the EU, women are still missing from top leadership positions in security and peacebuilding operations, and only a few have led civilian missions (European Parliament, 2025). A 2020 European Parliament resolution on women's role in the EU's foreign and security policy highlighted this gap. It reported that between 1992 and 2018, women made up just 13% of negotiators in major peace processes, only 4% of signatories, and a mere 3% of mediators (European Parliament, 2025, p. 2).

While the European External Action Service (EEAS) often stresses the importance of including women in conflict resolution to acknowledge their experiences during war, it stops short of granting them real influence in shaping peace processes (Bernarding & Lunz, 2020).

What usually happens is that women are invited to share what they have lived through conflict, but not to take part in deciding what comes next. As a result, peace agreements end up looking much the same as those made without any female presence, which fail to reflect women's priorities and lived realities. With such an exclusionary strategy, the EU's peacebuilding initiatives marginalize women from the Global South and reinforce the same colonial, paternalistic narrative.

Strategic policy documents like the EU Global Strategy (2016) tend to mention women in ways that mostly include middle-class European women, especially those working in traditionally male-dominated security roles. This focus overlooks women from other parts of the world. As the CFFP report points out, this not only limits opportunities for non-European women but also portrays European women's involvement as the only valid form of participation (Bernarding & Lunz, 2020). This can be used to exclude subaltern women and silence their voices. Similarly, Mara Stern's study notes that the EU's earlier European Security Strategy reflects a mindset where the EU positions itself as a certain "civilizing patriarch" who tries to reform so-called 'barbaric' others, sometimes through guidance, but other times through force (Stern as cited in Bernarding & Lunz, 2020, p. 29).

Interviews conducted by the authors as part of this study have reinforced the idea that women from EU partner countries are (subconsciously) seen as 'beneficiaries' of EU conflict prevention while the expertise and perspective they bring to the table are overlooked or not taken seriously. (Bernarding & Lunz, 2020, p. 29)

This remark suggests that women from the EU's partner countries are denied epistemic agency. Their lived experiences and knowledge are not seen as legitimate contributions to conflict

prevention. This exactly reflects a postcolonial power dynamic, where Europe again defines the terms of participation and recognition. Such an unequal knowledge hierarchy reproduces colonial logics of governance, where those in the EU act as knowledge producers in conflict resolution and peacebuilding, and those outside are simply targets of the policy.

Within the FFP framework, participation is redefined as a shared process rooted in inclusive and intersectional policymaking (Burni & Thissen, 2024). It centers the agency of feminist movements, as well as non-binary voices, and subaltern communities, calling for structural transformation. Instead of simply bringing a symbolic number of women into existing systems, FFP challenges how those systems function, who sets the agenda and whose knowledge counts.

The centrality of care and dialogue is what underpins the moral ambitions of FFP, which ‘takes into account the situated moral stories and experiences of individuals and in particular women whose voices have not been considered in traditional foreign policy analysis and IR.’ Following the lines of care ethics scholars in foreign policy thus implies a qualitative shift in IR from a sovereign-based logic (‘the right to intervene’) to an ethics of global care based on ‘the responsibility to protect. (Burni & Thissen, 2024, p. 5)

This stance explicitly points out that women whose voices have not been considered are now being acknowledged through FFP. The phrase “situated moral stories” invokes Donna Haraway’s notion of situated knowledges that emphasizes context-specific, embodied experiences, especially those of women often excluded from IR discourse. This is a move away from universalizing discourses in traditional male-dominated foreign policy and international relations. FFP also challenges the dominant, masculine logic of sovereignty and intervention and

instead proposes a more relational, care-based framework. Within this approach, women's participation becomes meaningful precisely because it brings new epistemologies and values such as care, empathy, and dialogue into the field.

A truly feminist foreign policy does not stop at numerical inclusion; it demands a shift in who defines knowledge and how peace is imagined. If the EU is determined to transform its foreign policy, it must move beyond token gestures and center the voices and leadership of those it has historically silenced. Only by redistributing power and validating marginalized ways of knowing can peace be genuinely sustained.

Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

This capstone is first and foremost limited by its focus on the discursive and ideological level. It primarily looks at how gender equality is talked about and framed in the EU's existing external action agenda versus the Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) framework. However, it does not go deeper into how these ideas are actually put into practice. While this approach helps to understand the values and assumptions behind the policy, it does not show whether FFP has led to tangible changes in the EU member states where it has been partially implemented in the past. A complete evaluation would require looking across different tools and policy areas, such as sanctions, trade, and diplomacy, to see how FFP is implemented and whether it achieves its goals. Also, this research does not include a comprehensive evaluation of how feminist foreign policies have been carried out in countries that have adopted them. It also does not examine whether these policies contributed to peacebuilding efforts or led to long-term structural change. Thus, the gap between the EU's rhetoric and its actions is not thoroughly analyzed here. Future research could explore how FFP works in practice and whether its promises are being fulfilled.

Another main limitation of this capstone is that this research doesn't produce its own body of data since it mainly relies on policy briefs and official EU agenda documents. The paper does not include voices from people who are directly affected by EU foreign policy, especially women and marginalized groups in conflict zones, which considerably narrows the range of perspectives in the research. This limits the analysis because it mostly reflects the views of institutions, not those on the ground. Future studies could include interviews, local perspectives, or field research to better understand how these policies are received and resisted. This approach would place the experiences of women and marginalized groups at the heart of the analysis and make sure their perspectives guide the research focus. Broadening the scope in these ways would offer a more comprehensive understanding of both the possibilities and limitations of Feminist Foreign Policy.

Given these limitations, this research study should be seen as an important first step toward bringing Feminist Foreign Policy into the EU's foreign affairs discourse. As a relatively young and still emerging concept, FFP remains largely unrecognized within EU policymaking processes and lacks institutional visibility. The primary aim of this capstone is to highlight the need for further research on FFP and to help elevate its profile at the official EU level. My research advocates for the fair inclusion of marginalized voices in policymaking and peacebuilding efforts among global political actors such as the EU. Future research can build on this foundation and further examine the practical implementation of FFP, compare approaches across different countries, and incorporate the lived experiences of those directly affected.

Conclusion

This paper has critically examined how the EU's GAP III contributes to gender equality and the empowerment of women through its external action. The discursive patterns of my research findings reveal that, while GAP III employs progressive language on gender equality, its underlying logic still remains rooted in neoliberal, patriarchal, and colonial frameworks. In contrast, the FFP policy brief shifts the conversation toward transformative, intersectional, and decolonial practice. Without adopting a feminist foreign policy that moves beyond the binary categorization of gender, the EU risks maintaining policies that only benefit those who fit neatly within traditional categories. This is a real concern considering the current rise of the far right within and beyond the EU. Therefore, this paper advocates for the EU to take direct ownership of feminist foreign policy and strengthen it. Doing so can help the EU focus on more complex political goals of feminism. By labeling its foreign policy "feminist," the EU can show that its gender equality agenda goes beyond addressing social disparities between men and women and is also capable of dismantling structural inequalities.

This research also contributes to a growing body of scholarship calling for a decolonial and feminist reorientation of international relations. It concludes that only through critically reassessing its historical role and centering marginalized voices, the EU can move towards a genuinely emancipatory foreign policy that addresses both gendered and colonial injustices in global conflict settings. For a Feminist Foreign Policy to be taken seriously, it needs to be consistent and applied to all areas of foreign policy without exception. Putting it into practice will surely take time, as shifting an entire policy field cannot happen overnight. However, with strong leadership and meaningful inclusion, this transformative process is possible. Adopting a Feminist Foreign Policy shows that a different, more just, and peaceful world is possible.

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