

# VICE VERSA

journalism on  
global development

SPRING 2023

FFP SPECIAL

A portrait of Frida Kahlo, looking directly at the viewer. She has dark hair styled in a bun, adorned with a crown of red and orange flowers. She is wearing large, ornate earrings and a necklace. The background is a textured teal color. The text 'The future is feminist' is overlaid on the bottom left of the image.

The  
future  
is feminist



## Colophon

**Publisher** Vice Versa Foundation

**Editor-in-chief** Marc Broere

and Eunice Mwaura

**Guest editor-in-chief** Laila Ait Baali

**Final editors** Edward Geelhoed

and Pius Okore

**Production** Angelique Chin

**Editors** Eva Nakato, Cynthia Omondi,

and Nicera Wanjiru

**Contributors to this issue**

Marusja Aangeenbrug, Ans Boersma,

Anne-Floor Dekker, Sarah Haaij,

Lizbeth Hernández, Jan-Albert Hootsen,

Nadia van der Linde, Marlies Pilon,

Qader Shafiq, Anika Snel, and Elian Yahye

**Art direction, design and layout**

Charlotte Heijmans and

Selma Sofie van Gorkum

**Cover** Baik Sung Baik

**Printer** Veldhuis Media

**Editorial address**

KIT Royal Tropical Institute

Mauritskade 63, 1092 AD Amsterdam

**Website** viceversaonline.nl

**Email** info@viceversaonline.nl

**A Vice Versa membership** costs 50 euros

per year or 25 euros for students

**Information about subscriptions and**

**request of single issues**

**Website** abonnement.viceversaonline.nl

**Email** abonnementen@viceversaonline.nl

**This edition is a joint publication**

of *Vice Versa*, *Count Me In!*,

*Our Voices*, *Our Futures* and

WO=MEN, Dutch Gender Platform



## The editor's note

**Following the example of other countries**, the Dutch Cabinet also wants to push for a feminist foreign policy (FFP)—last November, a letter was published to the Lower House of Parliament on the matter. As such, it wants to reduce inequality and strive for equal positions for men, women, and non-binary people worldwide.

That announcement prompted *Vice Versa* and WO=MEN to produce a special edition and explore the topic in more depth. We are delighted, but we also see some significant challenges. And what exactly does it mean when you say you are initiating a *feminist* foreign policy? The Dutch variant will focus on four Rs: on rights (protecting women's rights), representation (involving women in policy-making and implementation), resources (funds must also benefit women), and a reality check (are there any unexpected negative consequences for women?)—and all four are featured in this issue.

And for every R there are still steps to be taken; only 0.13 percent of all global funds go to women's organisations, according to the round table discussion we had with representatives of feminist funds.

And a reality check also remains badly needed. Take the Dutch investment policy and the extraction of raw materials, which often have negative consequences—not only in terms of sustainability, but also in terms of gender equality, especially for indigenous and rural women. Marlies Pilon's final article on the extraction of natural resources in Guatemala speaks volumes.

**With this special, we want to inform and inspire** people to contribute to making the forthcoming FFP relevant and impactful. Wonderful examples abound in this magazine; not only from women, but also from men who are championing feminist principles. It is no coincidence that *Allies*, *partners* is the headline of Elian Yahye's article that convincingly shows that feminism is in everyone's interest.

It is about breaking unequal power relations and bringing about systemic change. That goes beyond empowering half of the world's population, so that it can participate in existing systems that have actually contributed to structural inequalities. How do you ensure that an FFP does not become a facade, as it did in Mexico? Read the investigative piece by Jan-Albert Hootsen.

Particular attention is paid to the role of movements in the South, which need to be involved in everything in a meaningful way, both in the making of the plans and in the implementation. They also give concrete recommendations to the Dutch government—we think it would be a good idea to listen to them, because only *then* will the new policy really have a chance of succeeding.

**Laila Ait Baali**, director of WO=MEN, Dutch Gender Platform

**Marc Broere**, editor-in-chief of *Vice Versa*

PS Speaking of Mexico—Frida Kahlo, the artist and feminist icon, is the epitome of someone who persevered, who continued to rebel despite her misfortune. 'Feet,' she said, 'what do I need you for, when I have wings to fly?' For a magazine full of ardent activists who even risk their lives for human rights, she is a very relevant and inspiring cover model.

# I8



## 4. Dreaming of a feminist future

'It's not about completing a checklist, but about real systemic change'

by Sarah Haaij and Marlies Pilon

## 13. The Qatarisation of achievements

A column by Qader Shafiq

## 14. Featured—refugee women

'Unloading the baggage, listening to the stories'

by Marusja Aangeenbrug

## 18. Femicide became commonplace in Mexico

But outwardly, it boasts about its FFP

by Jan-Albert Hootsen

## 22. Featured—war and peace

'We are in fact the first aid'

by Marlies Pilon

## 24. The web is still too much a 'sinister territory'

Jan Moolman on intersectional internet

by Elian Yahye

## 27. Cyber violence as a multi-headed monster

In Pakistan, journalists are being targeted

by Elian Yahye

## 30. 'Let movements survive and flourish'

Beth Woroniuk urges the Canadian government

by Ans Boersma



# 4



# 36

## 34. Featured—nature and environmental policy

'Anyone who wants to make a difference, starts with local women'

by Marusja Aangeenbrug

## 36. 'What's truly risky is *not* doing it'

Round table discussion: feminist funding

by Sarah Haaij and Marlies Pilon

## 42. 'Feminism felt like liberation'

A word from four male allies

by Elian Yahye

## 46. In the brothel, clandestine and disenfranchised

On the Kenyan coast, sex work is 'criminal'

by Eunice Mwaura

## 50. Featured—extractivism

'The earth: source of life or raw materials?'

by Marlies Pilon





Indigenous women of the JASS movement from Central America and South East Asia, during a climate march in New York

# 'So many people are feminists' —whether they know it (yet) or not

Text: Sarah Haaij and Marlies Pilon

There's something in the air: a dream of a new future. You can hear whispers of a more equal one, yes: a *feminist* future—and they are growing, gradually spreading across the world. This is the beginning. Welcome to a foreign policy for all.

If you look closely, you can see the dream materialising now and then: small glimpses of radical equality flicker to life. You could sense it in the raised fists of the more than twenty thousand activists of all ages at last year's Women's March in Amsterdam. They were addressed by women of colour, members of the LGBTI community, and women with disabilities.

Iran's women and men are taking to the streets to protest decades of oppression, and it can be seen in their eyes. They are now demanding respect and autonomy. Or in Oklahoma, on the banner that screams 'KEEP YOUR CHURCH OUT OF MY CROTCH!' after conservatives turned back the clock by fifty years with an abortion ban.

The dream exists in the minds and hearts of millions of people around the world. There is room to flourish—and not only for those who identify as female, this dream demands equality and justice for all.

For the young people who glue themselves to the streets to raise awareness on the exploitation and destruction of the earth and show the world what climate justice is. For indigenous land defenders, members of the LGBTI community, and people of colour.

For anyone who believes that the crises of our time have their roots in a system that needs to be fairer. For the average Joe who hopes his children will grow up in a healthy and happy world. For those who believe in a feminist future.

Although they will also be able to tell you that there is not *one* vision for the future. Hope is shared, and diversity and polyphony are celebrated.

In the Netherlands, too, we see glimpses of that dreamed-of feminist future—and sometimes at unexpected moments. 'I am a feminist,' Wopke Hoekstra said, when he began as the new Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs.

In doing so, he defended himself for personally blocking the appointment of the first woman as Director-General of Political Affairs. Why did he blow off the—potentially—historic moment, at the last minute? 'We didn't click,' he said, before appointing a man.

Six hundred civil servants from his department then wrote an urgent letter calling for a more inclusive and women-friendly policy. The classic culture of the old boys' network prevents the advancement of ambitious and capable women, and there are plenty of them in the department, they wrote.

## 'We didn't click,' Hoekstra said, before appointing a man

Many appointments are made through the informal circuit—the people who move in the same circles—so, women all too often lose out and the key positions continue to go to men. 'Really brave,' Hoekstra responded to the urgent letter, after which he decided to present himself more strongly as a feminist from then on.

The word did not come out of the blue: behind the scenes, gender platform WO=MEN has been advocating for it for a long time, and for two years it has been making inroads within the diplomatic offices of The Hague.

The kick-off came from D66 Senator Petra Stienen (see the portrait below), who asked parliamentary questions on behalf of her political party on the 24th of March last year about why the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was not focusing more strongly on gender equality in its programmes. In her plea, she pointed to forerunner Sweden, which was the first country in the world to introduce a feminist foreign policy (FFP) in 2014.

According to the definition of the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy, it is about improving the well-being of structurally disadvantaged people: 'To address gender inequality and unequal power relations through reflection on—and transforming—foreign policy.'

'What can we learn from such an inclusive policy?' Stienen wondered aloud in the Senate. Via Zoom, she explains: 'Feminism in Dutch politics often does not go further than a few men in dark-coloured suits who say that there is also a woman in the team.'

'Or there is a debate about whether feminism is getting out of hand. I would say, then, that gender-based violence costs the European Union alone 366 billion euros a year. *That* is what's getting out of hand.'

The astronomical amount has been calculated by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) and is the sum of the costs of



medical care, police, and justice, among others, but also the lost economic activity of the victims.

For Stienen, an FFP offers the tools to look beyond one’s world, to truly integrate gender: ‘In the current Defense policy document, the word “gender” appears only once, just like the word “woman.” How is that possible? Or take Afghanistan: everyone wants girls and women to have access to school, but how exactly? There must be a comprehensive vision and a gender-sensitive policy behind it. That’s often lacking, now.’

Stienen and her colleagues’ parliamentary inquiries had consequences. The Ministry decided to commission research into the opportunities and possibilities of an FFP for the Netherlands. All members of Parliament received the result in the autumn of 2021: Ecorys presented an analysis of four countries that have already followed the Scandinavian example.

The first paragraph of the study hits the mark straight away: ‘These countries are responding to a growing body of academic

research that establishes a direct link between gender equality, economic prosperity and national security.’

That is convincing: on the 13th of May 2022, the Ministers Hoekstra and Liesje Schreinemacher jointly spoke out in favour of introducing a feminist foreign policy.

The following countries have an FFP: Sweden (2014-’22)\*, Canada (since 2017), France (2018), Luxembourg (2019), Mexico (2020) and Spain (2021), and these countries are working on it: Germany, Libya, Chile, Liberia, Colombia, and the Netherlands.

*\*After the far-right won the elections in October, the country dropped its policy*



The Trans Rights Now Collective, in India

At the moment, the Ministry is busy with the precise development of the feminist diplomacy of the future. How exactly it will take shape is not yet a done deal, but that it will be in place by 2023 is a fact.

So, it is high time to investigate what the dream of an FFP might look like in reality. Three feminist pioneers, Geeta Misra, Petra Stienen, and Saskia Ivens, explore the dream with us.

All of them know that dreams are rarely universal. Feminist policies may have different meanings in different places and situations. However, they are a way to address the most pressing global problems—violence and war, climate change, and structural inequality.

Gender equality, intersectionality, and women’s rights consultant Saskia Ivens wrote the fifty-page Ecorys study on an FFP together with inequality and women’s rights expert Barbara van Paassen. They, too, searched for that meaning and found overlapping elements.

Via Zoom, Ivens—who has just returned from a feminist policy workshop for up-and-coming diplomats from South America and the Caribbean—talks enthusiastically about what she noticed.

‘In many of those countries,’ she says, ‘you see that feminism and an intersectional view are topics of discussion. It is on people’s minds.’ Internationally, the Netherlands has always been at the forefront when it comes to women’s issues—which is why, according to Ivens, we need to get on board quickly. Even though it is already doing a lot globally, in terms of gender equality and women’s rights.

Innovative programmes such as *Leading from the South*, *Count Me In!* and *Power of Women* do more than empowering women’s organisations and women leaders in countries such as Nicaragua, Kenya, and India. They shift power and ownership from the conference

rooms in The Hague to the women’s organisations in those countries themselves.

At UN summits and international meetings, the Netherlands is never afraid to speak out in favour of the right to abortion and about the position of the LGBTI community. It was not too shy to criticise Turkey when it stepped out of the Istanbul Convention in 2021, a treaty that aims to combat violence against women.

Or with SheDecides, through which it’s challenging the anti-SRHR policy of the US. Aren’t ‘we’—the Dutch—already doing enough to realise the dream? Do we need to do even more? The answer is ‘yes.’

A UN report from last September shows that we are nowhere near achieving gender equality by 2030—at the current pace, it ‘may not be a possibility for another three hundred years.’ UN women’s chief Sima Bahous said: ‘The longer we wait to take action to improve the position of girls and women, the steeper the costs are for the whole world.’

**Study after study shows: investing** in the economic, political, and social representation of women and girls pays off. Take peace and security: reasearch (such as by Futures Without Violence) shows that the oppression of women and the peace of a state are closely related.

The more a country oppresses women, the more violent it becomes, including towards other countries. Without women-friendly governments, there is no international security and lasting peace.

A feminist vision also has an economic advantage. ‘If you invest in gender equality,’ says Stienen, ‘many economies will improve by ten to fourteen percent. This is evident from a McKinsey report, among other sources.’

With a better legal position for women, we do save ourselves costs,

**Petra Stienen** is a feminist jack-of-all-trades, Senator, author and advisor who helped launch the Dutch FFP by asking questions on behalf of the D66 party.

One day, sometime in 1969, four-year-old Petra was seated in her parent’s kitchen in Roermond. Her father—‘quite an authoritarian man’—addressed her: ‘Petra, fetch me something from the living room.’

‘Why?’ she asked.

‘Why? I’m the man of the house, I’m the boss! When I tell you to fetch something, you do it.’

Little Petra didn’t think that was a good reason at all. ‘And I still don’t think so today,’ she laughs, now at 57.

She cites the anecdote because the clash with her father marked a defining moment, even though her four-year-old self could not fully comprehend it at the time: ‘I was already a feminist then, without realising it.’

As a former human rights diplomat in the Middle East, and as a current member of the Senate, an advisor, coach, and supervisor on boards, Stienen still calls herself a full-fledged feminist.

She’s one that likes to echo her beliefs for gender justice, and who does not shy away from the word ‘feminist’

—avoided by some, because it would have negative connotations.

Why should she? Through her many positions, Stienen can influence the current discourse. Her voice and her words on topics such as gender rights, equality, and inclusiveness are heard.

Whether in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (the human rights watchdog for 46 European countries), in the Senate or during coaching sessions: ‘I always ask questions about gender equity and equality.’

Why are there separate meeting tables for women during trade missions to the Middle East? Why does the word gender only appear once in the most recent Defence policy document?

Anyone who, like Stienen, looks at the world through a gender lens will have endless questions. There is still an incredible inequality between genders—and as long as that inequality exists, there is work to be done to address it.

‘Of course,’ says Stienen, ‘women today have more rights and opportunities than my mother, and my 24-year-old daughter already has more opportunities than me. But even so, she too still encounters a lot of gender inequality, just like my nephews of the same age.’

Don’t forget: boys and men are also stuck in the same patriarchal structures.

**Petra Stienen**

© Eveline van Eijdom

‘The key is to make things more accessible to everyone.’

Where does Stienen herself draw her inspiration and stamina from, for the struggle for equality? It is the optimism of this young generation, the activism of Greta Thunberg and the voice of all those activists that you could characterise as the fourth feminism wave.

‘At a climate march, I now see women and men of all ages. It’s suddenly not just about the environment, but also about inclusion, racism, feminism, and ableism. That all these themes are related, that to me is the core.’ In other words, intersectionality, a term that she herself was educated on by her daughter. Basically: ‘It is the foundation for an equal and feminist future,’ she says.

‘A feminist foreign policy works if you include all the components of a foreign policy—and you also commit to gender equality in your country.’



as Stienen often explains to doubtful officials in The Hague. While she doesn't think it is the most important argument, 'it is effective.' Many people benefit from economic health, and besides that: it helps. 'Especially to get the sceptics on board.'

So, gender equality and feminist policy are not just 'a pleasant addition'—they are crucial for the dream of a more equal future. Both in the defence against oppression and in the pursuit of a peaceful world and in achieving economic progress.

According to Stienen, Margot Wallström, the Swedish former Minister of Foreign Affairs, said it best: 'As long as women—half of the world's population—have less access to education, health care, the labour market, property, financial resources, and the public and political arenas, gender equality policies will be necessary.'

Stienen also emphasises that we need to focus more on the responsibilities of men to stop violence against women and to ensure greater equality.

We now know that major crises, such as Covid-19 and the climate crisis, only exacerbate existing inequalities between men and women. In her report with recommendations for governments and politicians for the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (*The gender dimension of foreign policy*), Stienen describes how women have fallen victim to Covid lockdowns. How collectively staying at home has increased gender inequality and exacerbated domestic violence.

Crises disproportionately affect girls and women around the world, pushing them into the marginalised role of refugee, teenage mother, or child bride. Currently, a comprehensive gender lens to prevent and otherwise mitigate the impact of these blows, wherever possible, is lacking.

In other words, a feminist foreign policy is the *grand finale* to realising gender equality. A policy in which gender is not a separate programme, but is intertwined in all expressions. But where do we start? That's what Ivens and Van Paassen have figured out.

# 'Women belong at the table, not hidden away in a separate room, to talk about "women's issues"'

For success, they conclude, it is imperative to provide clarity from the beginning about what exactly feminist policy entails. That is quite a tough job, Ivens admits, because different definitions are circulating and every country has different emphases within its FFP.

Former frontrunner Sweden, for instance, asks four fundamental questions: about rights (do girls and women have the same rights as boys and men?), representation (are women represented at all levels of government?), resources (are sufficient resources being tapped to improve the disadvantaged position of girls and women?), and real-

## Data on gender (in)equality

- Gender equality can generate 10.8 billion euros annually for the Dutch economy. (Source: the ABN AMRO Bank)
- With the current crisis, poverty is on the rise again, worldwide. Women will be hit hardest: by the end of 2022, according to the UN, 383 million women and girls will live in extreme poverty, compared to 368 million men and boys.
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is aiming for fifty percent of women in leadership positions by 2025, which is currently just over thirty percent. Women occupy only a quarter of the highest salary scales.
- Women's involvement in peacebuilding increases the success of long-term peace agreements by 35 percent. (Source: Council on Foreign Relations)
- The annual cost of providing contraceptive services to meet the needs of all women and girls in developing countries is estimated to be twelve billion dollars—just 0.6 percent of global military spending in 2020. (Source: United Nations)
- Did you know that Cuba, Slovenia, and Benin have recently implemented progressive gender laws?

ism (you can't change the patriarchal system in a few years; what is realistic?).

Sweden applied that view to all its foreign programmes and diplomacy. 'There is no single definition of an FFP,' says Ivens. 'You do see that all countries with such a policy share certain principles. The commitment to gender equality goes hand in hand with an eye for human rights and fighting inequality in a transformative way. That means they try to tackle the social norms that cause inequality.'

It is also about intersectionality; the realisation that exclusion occurs based on gender, but that race, colour, class, and sexual orientation also come into play. It is the system that breeds inequality that needs to change.

'If we look at other countries,' Ivens continues, 'we see that an FFP should be applied not only to the field of international cooperation, but to all foreign policy. So, the same goes for trade, security, economic relations, and diplomacy.'

'Our research shows that such a comprehensive approach also has the most added value, because it automatically emphasises policy coherence and mutual coordination. That is still lacking in the department.'

So whether it's about planning aid programmes, hiring diplomats, drawing up trade agreements or putting together peacekeeping missions, a feminist perspective is needed.

A water project in South Asia? Those who have an FFP will have to ask themselves how it can be gender-inclusive and transformative. How, precisely, will the people who are normally excluded be helped by the project, by tackling the root causes of inequality? That means long-term impact by empowering women in all their diversity and reducing gender-based violence.

A truth mission to Ukraine to investigate war crimes? Then a feminist perspective ensures that there are women in all diversity in the mission team, so that victims of sexual violence are not afraid to tell their stories. The experts understand that men and transgender and non-binary people are also victims of sexual violence, so do not 'forget' to explore that.

That an FFP—or a policy based on it—makes such a real difference has already been demonstrated by Norway. In negotiations with the Taliban, it demanded that they also talk to female Afghan leaders.

'That used to be a real no-go,' says Ivens. 'It is a shining example of how an FFP thinks just a bit further: women belong at the table,

not hidden away in a separate room, to talk about "women's issues." It may not have an immediate concrete effect, but it is a diplomatic revolution.'

Just as Sweden has insisted on gender equality as an overarching theme in every diplomatic conversation, whether it's about refugees or climate. She is also positive about Canada, where Ivens herself has worked.

'The government,' she says, 'conducted a gender analysis of its free trade agreements. It was assessed, like: what does this treaty mean for men, women, different demographics, and professions in those countries?'

Ivens calls the fact that these questions were asked *before* the policy was made groundbreaking. Stienen agrees: 'That's what an FFP can do. We should look at all trade missions and treaties through that gender lens!'

'Gender, as it functions today, is a grave injustice. We should all be angry. Anger has a long history of bringing about positive change, but in addition to being angry, I'm also hopeful because I believe deeply in the ability of human beings to make and remake themselves for the better.'

—Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie,  
from *We should all be feminists*

When Geeta Misra is asked what an FFP is all about, she first takes a sip of her double espresso. It's still early. The rain draws fluid shapes on the windows of the Carlton hotel in Haarlem, where she has settled together with other representatives of women's organisations from all over the world.

The reason? A meeting of the *Count Me In!* consortium that supports feminist organisations, with help from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. By now, you can call Misra a veteran of feminist foreign policy.

She sits on the steering committee of the global FFP network and travels the globe to talk about it. Just last July, she spoke in America with seven governments that are interested in an FFP, including the Netherlands. She still has some advice for Wopke Hoekstra.



Female fish seller at the market in Masaka (Uganda)





The Fearless Collective (a partner of Mama Cash in Sri Lanka) with their own mural

‘The Netherlands has been a forerunner in financing women’s rights and sexual and reproductive health and rights for so long. Now I say: start working on this feminist policy with the same ambition! And not just with your policymakers in The Hague, no: make sure you develop a policy where the people you are talking about, from the South, help *shape* that policy. That’s where the strength lies.’

The director of CREA takes another sip and explains that she dreams of a feminist future based on the principles of justice, peace, and pacifism. That is why the new generation must take a critical look at underlying power relations—not only on the street, but also in the world.

**‘So, Wopke: be proud of it, don’t be afraid to embrace it. *It is too urgent not to... Dream!*’**

Here, at the Carlton hotel, she shares her basic recipe for a solid FFP. ‘As far as I’m concerned,’ she says, ‘it contains at least the following five ingredients: co-creation with feminist organisations, a clear definition, a plan on how to implement it, measurable and time-bound goals, and policy coherence.’ The latter is ‘the icing’ on the cake for her.

When Misra explains what she means by icing, a frown appears on her face. Irritated: ‘Well, look, when it comes to aid, most Western countries talk about women’s rights and systemic change. But what about your backyard, when it comes to *your* interests?’ she asks rhetorically.

Trade, immigration, climate justice, deforestation, and pollution: all these themes are still far too vague about equality and justice, she

says. ‘We are still living in a time where the subject of women’s issues ends up in a folder on the desk of the gender task force. That happens in a lot of organisations where I have worked before.’

According to her, an FFP intends that the gender lens takes precedence everywhere, even at home—when receiving refugees, gender is a top priority, and climate policy has an eye for the impact on men, women, and the ‘structurally excluded.’

‘So it’s not about checking boxes on a checklist,’ says Misra. ‘The dream of an FFP is about real systemic change. Time to wake up and get to work!’

**Unfortunately, dreams can also take** a dark turn. Hard-won progress can easily be undone, as these turbulent times have shown. One look across the ocean, to the USA of 2022, we find a country where the federal right to abortion has been lost.

Meanwhile, under the Taliban, women are once again banned from public life in Afghanistan and a young woman has been killed in Iran over a headscarf. In Italy, controversy arose around the children’s cartoon character Peppa Pig, because a character with two mothers was dismissed as an ‘indoctrination of gender theory.’

Back to traditional values, back to the family, and do away with gender equality, said Putin in Russia, Orbán in Hungary, Erdoğan in Turkey, Museveni in Uganda, and—until recently—Bolsonaro in Brazil and Duterte in the Philippines.

Misra, Stienen, and Ivens can all agree: the space for gender equality and women’s and girls’ rights is under pressure, even in Europe. The word ‘gender’ was once coined to indicate the systematic oppression of women—now movements that oppose the so-called gender ideology are gaining momentum.

Leaders who are pursuing a patriarchal and heteronormative world are gaining ground. Their conservative, populist ideas are also well-funded. The European Parliament calculated in 2021 that European anti-gender clubs have received more than seven hundred million euros since 2009, and that the funding of campaigns against women’s and LGBTI rights is increasing exponentially.

‘Especially now,’ says Stienen, or ‘more than ever,’ says Misra, feminists must unite against these anti-forces and stand up to them—before the dream turns against us. ‘Pushing back the pushback,’ Misra calls it, ‘and a feminist foreign policy is a very good tool for that.’

**Saskia Ivens** is a gender expert who collaborated on a feminist foreign policy for Canada and now uses her experience for the Netherlands.

At ICCO, in Zambia, for the United Nations and at the Canadian Ministry—wherever Saskia Ivens (1975) goes, she delves into the world of gender, a theme that is dear to her heart. Why?

‘Because gender is about equality and about breaking inequality; a subject that concerns us all.’ Ivens also knows that as a Dutch woman, you don’t necessarily have to cross national borders to experience that inequality.

At her primary school—‘very strict in its doctrine’—boys and girls, and what they should and could do, were not considered equal. *Strange*, she thought as a young girl.

Just as strange as the time her father went to do engineering experiments—with her younger brother, that is. ‘I was the eldest, so usually the first, but in this case it was not meant for me. Why not?’

It is that surprise that has taken her around the world. First she worked

as a civil servant and most recently as a consultant for the Canadian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Development Cooperation. ‘A very exciting period, when Canada was working on the implementation of its FFP.’

It was the time when Prime Minister Trudeau was one of the first male world leaders to publicly declare he was a feminist. ‘And in which I saw how much can change in terms of gender equality and power relations when a country starts working with an FFP.’

And now there is a study by Ivens and Barbara van Paassen with recommendations for the Dutch version of such feminist politics.

What do we mean by feminism? Why is the word embraced in Canada or Spain, and why does it evoke resistance in the progressive Netherlands, of all places? These are questions that fascinate her.

Just like the question of whether, with possible negative connotations, one should speak of a feminist foreign policy. ‘Yes, call a spade a spade!’ she says. ‘That is what I have experienced and learnt. Make it extraordinarily clear what you mean and what you are going to do.’



Saskia Ivens

Of course, that’s unsettling—and she thinks so, too. ‘I am quite nervous,’ she says. ‘How will the idea of an FFP work internationally? How is it going to take shape in the Netherlands?’

On many SRHR topics, the Netherlands is a forerunner, but that does not mean that an FFP is cut-and-dried—it depends on how well it is set up. ‘In such a way that it permeates all facets of foreign policy.’

If that succeeds, if the feminist perspective becomes part of the DNA of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, then you will come close to the ideal point, says Ivens, in which the word feminism is no longer needed.

When a world leader who proclaims to be a feminist is treated with a shrug: *So, you are a feminist? So what?* ‘So many people have realised it now...’

*‘i stand/ on the sacrifices/ of a million women before me/ thinking/ what can i do/ to make this mountain taller/ so the women after me/ can see farther’*

—Rupi Kaur, from *The Sun and Her Flowers*

**Wopke Hoekstra, like ‘our’ other Ministers**, therefore has an important task ahead of him. The success of the feminist course that has been initiated depends on how his Ministry—in consultation with women’s rights groups and activists around the world—will now shape the policy.

Crucially, its development is a co-creation process. If you strive for equality, it is necessary that everyone who has to deal with structural exclusion is also part of the dream and thus of the decision-making process.

When it comes to implementation, the entire Ministry, with Hoekstra and Schreinemacher at the forefront, must ‘stand firm,’

says Ivens. ‘Preferably with the Prime Minister of the Netherlands—Mark Rutte—there. A logical starting point, therefore, is to make a concrete FFP and give feminism a face.

‘Consider the image of Obama calling himself a feminist, or Trudeau, who says the same and is proud to raise his son in a feminist way, then we might get past the outdated idea that feminism is radical, or against men. No, *everyone* benefits from it.’

Stienen, Ivens, and Misra think it is only logical that public officials in The Hague also follow the gender-transformative route. The urgent letter in which Hoekstra’s civil servants demand a more inclusive policy confirms the need.

According to a 2021 report, gender in terms of peace and security, economic diplomacy, and corporate responsibility is not given enough attention today. There will have to be clear policies on these topics and Foreign Affairs officials will have to expand their expertise on them, the evaluation argues.

Other countries show that a feminist foreign policy works best if employees also receive gender training themselves, that they look in the mirror and reflect on their behaviour and their norms and values.



**Geeta Misra** is an Indian feminist who is driving the future of feminist foreign policy worldwide with the international NGO CREA.

Anyone who, like Misra (1963), grew up as a young woman in India cannot help but look around and conclude to be a feminist. That's how it happened to her, anyway. 'In India,' she says, 'you encounter inequality from an early age. It is all around you.'

During the annual car trips on which Misra's father took the family across the country, she already noticed that she was treated differently from her cousins.

At school, she faced girls who had to fight to stay in class, were married off young and could not control their own lives. Feminism offered her ways to think about such justice issues.

'It gives you tools,' she says, 'to contemplate power structures and to question and *shift* that power.' With CREA, she hopes to do just that: 'We want people to be able to look differently at gender, sexuality, and human rights, so that they change their actions, too, and with that the balance of power.'

CREA is the human rights organisa-

tion she co-founded in 2000—a fearless, questioning, colourful, edgy and sexy flock of birds, in her sparkling description. These are words with which you could just as easily characterise Geeta Misra herself, as a figurehead of global feminism who advocates for radical equality fearlessly.

'We are a group that stands up for people who are structurally excluded, operating internationally and based and led from the Global South.'

Oh, but then... isn't CREA a feminist organisation?

She looks amused. 'Of course it is! But that feminism, it's so obvious... it's in our hearts. I don't even need to mention that.'

Which themes does CREA address?

'Well, about sex workers, for example; sex work is work and everyone who does that work should be protected.'

But also the sexual desires of people with disabilities. For Misra, it is precisely this sexuality—a topic that often gets lost in feminist programmes—that is important. 'We need to move towards inclusivity and consent.'

She is almost sixty years old and this colourful bird is still committed every day to creating space for young people

**Geeta Misra**

and all those others who are structurally excluded, and whose sexuality is not given space.

Where does she find inspiration for her relentless struggle? Close to home and at a high altitude, in the books of compatriot and writer Arundhati Roy and on the summit of the Kilimanjaro, which she has already climbed twice.

Sometimes she hears the breath of change whispered, like when same-sex relationships between adults were decriminalised in India four years ago. These are those golden moments, when she thinks: *yes, it can be done, we can all change the way we think and act.*

A feminist foreign policy helps to drive that change further, she says: 'We must continue together, step by step, towards the feminist future!'

For example, public officials in Sweden were reminded daily that the feminist perspective is the number one priority on every issue they face. 'That lens is burned onto the retina there,' Ivens laughs.

Meanwhile, Stienen is looking forward to Hoekstra's first speech about the new policy, 'a speech that oozes feminism and pride.' But she does not see the Minister beating the drum anywhere. 'It's still so quiet,' she says. 'It makes me a bit impatient.'

There is no need for that trepidation, says Stienen. She recalls Wallström's first plea for the Swedish FFP, which included Gandhi's famous quote: 'First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win.'

And, indeed: Wallström, Stienen, and all those other advocates were initially laughed at—but now we see the FFP becoming a reality here and there. 'So, Wopke: be proud of it, don't be afraid to embrace it. It is too urgent *not* to... Dream!'

The tricky thing about dreams is that they sometimes raise more questions instead of giving answers, says Ivens. Is a feminist policy also automatically pacifist? What does it mean that Libya is working on an FFP? Are the Dutch civil servants ready for this earthquake? How do we ensure that it does not become a Western policy document, but a starting signal for fundamental change?

These are all questions that will shape the debate in the coming period and will be examined in this special—and in doing so, we must keep daring to dream, Misra concludes, even though in these times of crisis we are often told to be realistic and sober.

'It may seem, then, that this is not the right time to dream big,' she says. 'I think it is. Change always starts with acts of imagination, the urge to create something new and better. It is precisely a crisis that calls for deep-seated change, the world begs for it. So, the Netherlands, aim high!' ●

**Qader Shafiq**



# The Qatarisation of achievements

In the news, you can see the general decline of democracy—even in countries that you thought were on a democratic course, populist autocracies are emerging that question the achievements of equality, freedom, and solidarity.

It worries me when I see our country, once a leader in the field of core democratic values, being forced by recent global political developments to move away from its corresponding duties and responsibilities—especially when it comes to women's rights.

I keep repeating that I once asked this country for asylum, because I thought: *the Netherlands is the promised land of democracy*. More and more, I get the feeling that—as a naive person—I have been seduced by the pretty packaging.

For instance, Minister Schreinemacher's answers about an urgent letter sent to Dutch politicians by female students from the Dutch-funded agricultural college in Afghanistan were downright disappointing. These students, unlike their male counterparts, are not allowed to complete their education, despite the promises...

A reprise of all the lovely slogans that have been uttered to Afghan girls and women from the political stands of this country. Remember? The reconstruction mission to Uruzgan would mainly be aimed at promoting girls' participation in education and introducing women's rights.

How about the police mission to Kunduz? Back then, Prime Minister Rutte spoke of an Afghan 'trias politica' and 'more female police officers!' had been shouted.

Even after the sinister Taliban movement took over, Dutch Ministers resumed the successes allegedly achieved in emancipation and women's education. The embarrassment over the blunders made during the evacuation of some interpreters and employees of Dutch NGOs, who were able to reach Kabul airport, soon disappeared into collective oblivion.

The political exaggeration and the media boasting about the efforts by the Dutch in Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq blinded us to the reality that women, young people, and dissenters were confronted with there. Development programmes that cost hundreds of millions of dollars did not prevent the outflow of young intellectual capital.

While those programmes received plenty of attention, fertile land was used in East Africa to grow our green beans and flower bulbs. And despite the big words from government Ministers about the exploitation of women in the clothing industry, the clothing racks of 'our' Primarks here did not get any emptier.

My mother, a teacher, believed that the socio-economic and cultural development of a society benefits from an active and proportionate share of women. That is why she devoted herself to the education of girls for over forty years.

She was proud and happy when she saw her students becoming highly educated and even reaching leadership positions. Sometimes I think that she has achieved more on her own than all the projects directed from The Hague put together—which even involved misogynistic warlords.

She and hundreds of her colleagues worked on the enlightenment of society from intrinsic conviction and commitment, which increased their influence, I think. Unfortunately, the magnifiers and binoculars of Dutch development policy could not align with the available capacity of women with natural authority and a sense of ownership.

Dutch foreign policy is the well-known split between the good intentions of political preachers and the hard-nosed merchant mentality that is dominated by geopolitical interests.

The Netherlands *isn't* sincerely and morally making the case on the international stage for freedoms, specifically for

the rights of women elsewhere. If that does happen, it will be selective and temporary—that illustrates its vision of citizenship. Even the so-called Dolle Mina's could not see beyond their idealised world of symbolism.

So when the Foreign Minister explained the presence of the Dutch delegation in Qatar, in front of the cameras, a vicarious embarrassment prevailed in me.

I remembered all the discussions I had in Farsi, Pashto, and Russian in defence of the Netherlands as a free and equal society. From the announcement, a merchant's decree could be heard that hushed up violations of human rights and dignities for women.

I talk to my mother every week. No longer do I dare to talk to her about her favourite themes: education and the emancipation of women. The fruits of her labour have been destroyed by a plague—and that plague was confirmed by the US-Taliban deal of February 2020, in Doha, Qatar.

So it is time for a new Dutch feminist movement in which top women from education and business, as well as women from the migrant diaspora from the Irans and Afghanistans of this world, join forces. Supplemented, possibly, with women who no longer want to be victims of 'child benefits scandals'...

To me, Qatarisation represents capitulation—of hard-won gains in Afghanistan and of credibility around human rights and civil liberties for a football show dominated by commerce.

Allow me to be the naive person one more time and express my hope that a fresh, new Dutch feminism can square up to the global trend of Qatarisation of democratic gains.

*Qader Shafiq is a columnist, poet and director of Bureau Wijland, partner in diversity and sustainability. In 2020 he was named Nijmegen Resident of the Year*



# Unloading the baggage, listening to the stories



© New Women Connectors

**Refugee women are particularly vulnerable—which is why they need to be given more consideration in policy, argue Anila Noor and Tahmina Ashraf, both of whom once fled to the Netherlands themselves. They emphasise: it doesn't work to only start thinking about gender when all plans are already in place. Text: Marusja Aangeenbrug**

Often, refugee women and girls have already been through a lot before and during their escape. 'If they come from a country at war, there is a good chance that they have experienced violence, sexual or otherwise,' knows Tahmina Ashraf, director of Voice of All Women, who fled Afghanistan herself as a seven-year-old.

Her organisation is committed to empowerment and support for female refugees and asylum seekers in the Netherlands.

But when people apply for asylum, the conversation mainly revolves around practical matters: 'Why did you flee, why did you come to this country?' Often, women have agreed on a story with their husbands beforehand and do not share what happened to them along the way.

They barely get a chance to process what happened, says Ashraf. 'You immediately have to arrange all kinds of practical stuff: the residence permit, housing, a school for your children—that's difficult for someone who has had a lot to endure.'

And it can surely be difficult to settle down in the Netherlands. Her mother, a feminist who had a good job in Afghanistan and spoke English well, certainly had a hard time.

'She quickly learned Dutch,' says Ashraf, 'but she had no one to talk to and became isolated for ten years. Mental health is an important point of attention for women who have fled.'

In 2010, her mother founded Voice of All Women to work on integration, participa-

tion, and gender equality in marginalised communities. Ashraf has been the director for two years, now.

In the Voice of All Women discussion groups, all kinds of taboo subjects are spoken about, such as forced marriage, honour-related violence, equality between men and women, and abandonment in the country of origin. 'They can unload their baggage and listen to stories from others in similar situations.'

**Refugee activist Anila Noor**, the director of New Women Connectors in the Netherlands, has also fled herself. She arrived here from Pakistan in 2015.

New Women Connectors is a European platform of female migrants and refugees.

The goal: European policies that better meet their challenges. Noor often meets with governments, politicians, and policy-makers to lobby.

She believes it is important that international refugee policy looks beyond merely the vulnerability of women, 'because then you mainly assume that they must be protected.' Instead, also look at the change they have to make and what they have to offer, she advises.

'Perhaps a woman has always been told: "You only are a good woman if you wear a hijab," but in the new country she suddenly has to comply with different standards.'

Often refugee women are lacking information. 'You can explain as often as you want that as a woman of colour you can make your own decisions here, but they have other problems and are often financially dependent on their husband or son.'

They generally feel deeply distanced from the host country's culture, 'but that doesn't mean they don't have it in them,' says Noor. 'They just have to be given enough information.'

That makes education and training vital: 'When we organise an activity, we let them talk about their problems and from there on we start thinking about what is needed to improve their situation.'

**'You do whatever it takes and as soon as you're settled in, you think: thank God, peace at last'**

**Anila Noor is pleased** that the Dutch government is working on a feminist foreign policy, but, she warns: 'Don't focus on one policy area, it's about an intersectional approach. We must work inclusively in all areas and bring them together—so the conversation has to be about discrimination and privilege as well.'

That inclusive view must be there right from the start. 'You cannot develop policy first and then incorporate the gender perspective afterwards,' she says. 'That does not lead to sustainable change. It's not just about women, as many people think. It's

about inclusion, about equality in society. That should be the starting point, not an afterthought. Otherwise, it won't get off the ground.'

She already puts a few critical questions on the table: 'Feminism is often approached in a Eurocentric way,' meaning that there is often no real debate. 'It is assumed that the situation is fundamentally fine, that it just needs some tweaks, but I think we need to redefine it first: what do we actually mean by feminist foreign policy? Who benefits from it, and with whom do we talk to about it?'

Also, policy cannot succeed if the women concerned are not involved. Noor advocates co-creation: 'They have the knowledge about their own situation, but also ponder how you can involve them—because they experience barriers.'

'For instance, how do they get the information? And if they are invited for an interview, how do they get there? Sometimes they don't have access to transport.'

Ashraf hopes for a more gender-sensitive refugee reception and asylum procedure policy. 'The *National Action Plan 1325* focuses on safety,' she says, 'but many women do not feel safe at all when they have their first meetings here. They have been through a lot along the way, and then they have to tell their story to a stranger. It would help if it was a woman asking the questions.'

If a woman tells the immigration services that she has been sexually abused en route, her story often does not end up with the agency for asylum seekers. 'That has to do with privacy, but it has to change, because now the story gets stuck in one place and the woman is left with the trauma.'

The women must also be able to indicate what they need. 'The current asylum procedure is mainly process-oriented, but is there a place for a pregnant woman where she can meet other women who have gone through the same thing? Or is there a psychologist available for someone who needs therapy?'

**A gender-sensitive approach** is not a luxury, but crucial for their integration, Ashraf emphasises: 'When you apply for asylum, you go into survival mode. You do whatever it takes and as soon as you're settled in, you think: *thank God, peace at last*.

'But if they did not yet had the chance to process things, all the memories will surface at *that* time—and then you can end up in isolation. Then they often withdraw into

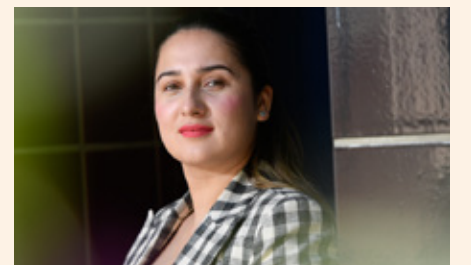
their own community, and they become very conservative.

'So it can help if they can unload their mental baggage at the beginning of the process. We have all kinds of methodologies that you can use for a gender-sensitive approach and there are many more organisations that have in-house knowledge on this front.'

She knows that some of the staff use a culture- and gender-sensitive approach of their own accord. 'That's great, but not everyone does that—which I don't blame anyone for, because they are swamped and have to stick to processes. But that is precisely why it is so important that policy is developed; that can solve a lot of problems.' ●



*Anila Noor is the director of New Women Connectors, a European network for international lobbying on migration, asylum, and inclusive policy. It aims to make the voices of migrant and refugee women in Europe heard by policy-makers, politicians, governments, and international organisations*



*Tahmina Ashraf is the director of Voice of All Women, which focuses on empowerment and support for female refugees and asylum seekers in the Netherlands. She wants to achieve gender equality in marginalised communities in the Netherlands, Afghanistan, and worldwide*





1125 mil  
millones  
para las  
Fuerzas  
armadas

#CatrinaPorLasVidas

#NosEstánMatando

A girl made up like Catrina holds up a pink cross in memory of the murdered women, as has been observed annually in Mexico City since 2016

© Lizbeth Hernández



# With the appearance of feminism

Text: Jan-Albert Hootsen | Image: Lizbeth Hernández

Domestically, Mexico has been struggling with rising violence against women for years, but it has taken a completely different course across the border: in 2020 it was the first in Latin America to embark on an explicitly *feminist* foreign policy. It was

applauded elsewhere in the world, but what is the result, after almost three years? 'Sadly, we can be short about that.'



**Just a selection of recent articles** in Mexican newspapers. On the 31st of October, a 33-year-old woman was fatally stabbed at her home in Huauchinango, in the southern state of Oaxaca. A day earlier, the lifeless body of a sixteen-year-old girl was found on a vacant lot in Toluca, just west of Mexico City.

*Femicide rate on the rise in Mexico*, headlined the *El Financiero* daily on the 20th of October. In Mexico City, Puebla, and Morelos, women set up altars with pink crosses for the *Día de Muertos*, the Day of the Dead; a traditional Mexican holiday that coincides with All Souls' Day and is dedicated to remembering deceased loved ones. The pink crosses symbolise the many thousands of women who have been murdered in recent years because of their gender.

According to official figures, at least ten women are violently killed every day in Mexico—the number of non-fatal violent incidents is countless. In quite a few of the 32 states, local and federal authorities have declared a 'gender alert,' giving the police and judiciary special powers to address gender violence.

Crimes against women are hardly investigated, according to human rights organisations, such as Amnesty International. Every year they warn that—in a country where more than ninety percent of all crimes go unpunished—women are hardly taken seriously by the authorities when they report violence.

As alarming as the situation may be, Mexico shows a completely different face beyond its national borders, because for the past two and a half years it has belonged to a select group that has been trying to pursue an FFP.

The *política exterior feminista* was announced by Mexico in 2017, the same year in which Luxembourg and France did so, too, and following Sweden and Canada, the first two countries to embed feminism in their foreign policy. It officially took effect in January 2020 and was initially to be put into practice over a period of four years.

'Mexico's FFP is based on a set of principles that promote government action to reduce and eliminate structural disparities, gender gaps, and inequalities,' the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a press release. 'For a fairer and more prosperous society.'

**According to the Mexican government**, it consists of the following guidelines: foreign policy with a gender perspective and a feminist agenda, gender equality within the Ministry, the eradication of sexual and gender violence within it, and visible equality and feminism in all parts of the Ministry.

In practice, according to the official sources once again, it basically means that manuals for gender-friendly conduct are drawn up, that embassies and consulates abroad strive against discrimination and international certification with regard to equality between women and men in the workplace, and that the Mexican government supports the *HeForShe* programme (a UN solidarity movement).

The grand plans quickly received a lot of praise abroad, and not just because they sound good on paper. Mexico has a rich and successful diplomatic tradition, and—in sharp contrast to the corruption, human rights violations, poverty, and abuse of power by authorities at home—has built a reputation over the past twenty years as one of Latin America's most progressive players on climate, environmental, and human rights issues.

'The antecedents of the new policy have already shaped Mexico's behaviour both domestically and on the global stage,' said Lyric

Thompson, policy and advocacy director for the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) think tank, shortly after the official launch of the FFP in the American magazine *Foreign Policy*.

'For example, Mexico took a clear leadership position at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP25) in Madrid, where the government advocated gender equality as a non-negotiable part of any agreement on climate change.'

The ICRW had plenty of reason to be enthusiastic, because its work has been frequently incorporated into foreign policy by the Mexican government. It cites a few key points that the think tank included in a report last year, on how to define an FFP, including 'prioritising where others don't.'

**'We have not been able to find anything... For now, the FFP seems to consist mainly of rhetoric'**

According to both the ICRW and the Mexican Ministry, this is about more than just women's rights; the rights of other minorities, such as the LGBTI community, must also be taken into account. In other words, intersectionality.

**The enthusiasm about Mexico's** apparently very progressive FFP was initially great, but how much of it—halfway through the time period set by Mexico itself—has actually come to fruition?

'Not much,' is the sobering conclusion of Daniela Philipson, the co-founder of *Feminista Internacional*, a platform that conducts multilingual research on feminism in government policy in Mexico and elsewhere.

Together with co-researchers Dinorah Arceta and Ana Velasco, she published a comprehensive report on Mexico's FFP in September, which so far is the only thorough investigation into the content and effectiveness of the new policy.

'We can—unfortunately—be brief about the effectiveness: there is hardly any, if at all,' she explains. 'We have looked for impact by any means, including sending requests to the National Institute for Access to Information, but we have not been able to find anything that shows something meaningful... For now, the FFP seems to consist mainly of rhetoric.'

In the forty-page report, Philipson, Arceta, and Velasco state that there is a lack of structure, coordination, and clear goals, so that in reality little of the intentions actually did materialise. Moreover, they argue, only one directorate in the Ministry is actively pursuing feminist policies at all, so most departments have achieved little or nothing.

A telling example, Philipson says, can be seen in the way the embassies and consulates deal with emergencies involving Mexican women abroad.

'There, too, not much seem to come of the FFP,' she says. 'Mexico has a reputation for paying a lot of attention to its own citizens





racism, or transphobia.

Protests against such violence are getting louder, especially on International Women's Day: in recent years, demonstrations on the 8th of March have consistently mobilised many tens of thousands of women. The anger is directed in particular at the authorities, who, according to them, not only do far too little to protect women, but are also regularly involved themselves. For example, there is a shockingly high number of women who have been sexually abused by police officers in recent years, particularly in Mexico City.

One source of the anger is President López Obrador himself. He was overwhelmingly elected in 2018 (after two previous unsuccessful attempts), promising not only to rid the country of corruption, poverty, and crime, but also to champion human rights, minorities, and women.

That led to high expectations, which the President even seemed to live up to at first. Not only did he announce a package of measures in 2019, to crack down on violence against women, but he also seemed to set a good example by having half his cabinet made up of women, a novelty in Mexican history.

And for the first time, too, the federal Congress half consists of female MPs, a consequence of women's quotas respected by both López Obrador's party—the National Regeneration Movement—and the opposition.

## However, the last two years in particular have seen significant cracks in the president's progressive image

However, the last two years in particular have seen significant cracks in the president's progressive image, in terms of women's rights. Not only has his administration failed to curb violence against women, but the President himself also seems increasingly turned away from women demanding security and justice.

A colossal blunder by AMLO—as he is popularly referred to, calling him by his initials—was his commentary during the Covid-19 pandemic, which has claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Mexicans.

While the country has repeatedly restricted public spaces with partial lockdowns, domestic violence against women and children rose sharply. However, the President denied that there had been an increase in the number of emergency calls to police and emergency services at all, claiming that ninety percent of those calls were 'false.'

For many Mexican feminists, women, and human rights groups, the President's stubborn support for Félix Salgado Macedonio during his campaign for governor of Guerrero, last year, was the last straw. Salgado—a veteran of the federal Senate, who enjoys great popular-

ity in the poverty-stricken state in southern Mexico—was accused of sexual abuse by several women in the run-up to the election. Despite massive protests against his candidacy, the President adamantly refused to withdraw his support for Salgado, an ally and personal friend.

'It was a terrible sign that the President just kept supporting him,' says Yolitzín Jaimes, a feminist from Guerrero who campaigned frantically against Salgado's candidacy. 'For me, it was actually the moment I realised that Mexican women do *not* have an ally in López Obrador, but rather the opposite. I've said it before: for me, AMLO and his government have severed the ties they had with feminism.'

Jaimes is therefore sceptical about the FFP. 'It is incomprehensible to me that there is so much violence against women in Mexico, that feminists are being arrested for demonstrating against violence, but that the government at the same time is also outwardly trying to promote feminist policies,' she says. 'How do you communicate that to other countries?'

*Vice Versa* has repeatedly tried to get clarification from both the President's office and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but received no response. Nevertheless, the Mexican government explained the contradiction between the FFP and the situation at home, underlined by feminists, in a report by the International Centre for Research on Women, last year.

'It would not be coherent to promote such policies if gender gaps and inequalities persist domestically—that is why we are interested in international cooperation with countries with feminist policies,' the Mexican commentary stated. 'From their experiences, we can learn how to promote the building of equal and more inclusive societies.'

**For Daniela Philipson, too, the contrast** between the domestic and international spheres is stark. 'The existence of the FFP is without a doubt a contradiction if you look at the situation at home,' she says. 'I also see that there's not much openness in the Ministry to talk about policy. We have tried a few times to present our report to them, to no avail.'

However, that does not mean that the FFP is completely doomed to fail, she emphasises. In their report, she and her co-researchers make a series of recommendations to push policy in the right direction. Among other things, the team suggests setting clear criteria to measure the policy and giving it more resources to implement it.

'Measuring the impact is especially important. Feminist policies are new and it is not always clear how exactly they can be implemented,' she says. 'That is not strictly a Mexican problem, but it is necessary for the Mexican government to clarify exactly how it wants to achieve its goals.' ●

*At a demonstration, an elderly woman shows the pink cross, the symbol against femicide, and is then hugged*



abroad, certainly compared to other countries in Latin America.

And that's *exactly* where there is a lot to be gained, now.'

In the report, they cite a specific case of how the Mexican consular services, despite the existence of the FFP, are still seriously flawed. In June last year, Mexican Paola Schietekat, an economist living in Doha, Qatar, was the victim of violence at the workplace by a colleague.

Instead of investigating the case, the authorities arrested her on charges of 'cohabitation outside of marriage,' which carries a prison sentence of up to seven years in Qatar.

According to Schietekat, the Mexican authorities—including the embassy in Doha and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—failed to respond to several requests for help. Only after she resorted to Mexican media and social networks in February, in desperation, did the Ministry take action and the case was finally resolved thanks to direct intervention by Minister Marcelo Ebrard.

'The case in Qatar demonstrates how the Mexican government could and should pursue a feminist foreign policy,' says Philipson. It is important that all embassies and consulates know the context of women's rights in the countries they work in. Regarding the Schietekat case, the consulate turned out not to have given her proper advice and did not respond decisively—precisely *that* should be a priority in an FFP.'

**And then there's the elephant in the room**, which cannot be ignored: the shocking violence against women in Mexico and the rhetoric and domestic policies of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, which stand in stark contrast to the progressive plans of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. That contrast makes the FFP downright not credible, according to critics.

In recent years, Mexican women, women's organisations, and allies in civil society have become increasingly vocal and furious in their demonstrations against gender violence. Not only are many hundreds of women murdered every year because of their gender, but the way in which they are killed also seems to be becoming increasingly cruel and extreme.

Horrific headlines and pictures of women who have not only been killed, but have also been sexually abused, tortured, or vanished in the process, regularly appear in the tabloid press.

Sexual and gender-based violence in Mexico does not only target women in general. Trans people and women belonging to one of the many indigenous ethnic groups are particularly at risk of violence. In their case, gender-based violence is linked to homophobia,



# ‘We are in fact the first aid’

**The terrain of war and peace is still hypermasculine: anyone thinking about it will imagine rows of army commanders, macho soldiers, and anonymous, crying women. Before, during, and after the conflict, women are virtually excluded from negotiations and decision-making—that is bizarre and a terrible pity.**

Text: Marlies Pilon

**Is everyone still alive?** What happens next? It is Friday, the 25th of February, the day after Russian tanks unexpectedly invaded their country. Ten Feminist Workshop activists have agreed to meet at the office for coffee, solidarity, a shoulder.

There, right in the centre of the Ukrainian city of Lviv, the conversation quickly takes a turn, recalls co-founder Yosh Pshyk. Her translator, Kira Leonova, offers assistance where necessary.

‘We were suddenly talking about how we could shelter and support fleeing families from Ukraine, because we knew that people—afraid of Putin’s bloodlust—would flee west, towards Lviv. What if we could provide them with housing, food, and psychological help?’

One day, Feminist Workshop was still a network of feminist activists in Ukraine, with educational Instagram posts and street demos against sexual violence. The next day, it decided to be a shelter for refugee

children, teenagers, single mothers, people with disabilities, the elderly, and pets.

That shelter would serve as a dormitory, food bank, baby centre, support group for teenagers and LGBTI people, senior living facility, a tech hub and a psychosocial service provider all in one. Pshyk realised the plan could only succeed with funding, but that thinking about strategy and fundraising does not work when the background noise is the air-raid siren.

‘I decided that day that if I wanted to help Ukraine, I had to leave the country. I had received an invitation from a feminist partner organisation in Berlin; it could accommodate me if war broke out. As a young woman with a passport, it was not difficult for me to flee my motherland.’

That night she left. Since then she has been working from England with Feminist Workshop in Ukraine, which has already given shelter and support to hundreds of refugees—and a few cats and dogs.

‘Our activities may have changed, but our feminist vision is still the guiding principle: whether we are looking after a refugee mother’s baby so that she can work, or when we listen to and record the war trauma of a newly widowed woman... And we have a “fem apartment,” for activists from other parts of the country.

‘Our motto? One learns by doing. We do not work hierarchically, but horizontally. We make room for reflection and for sharing experiences and knowledge, also with other groups. Only together and in solidarity can we carry this shelter.’

**While the Ukrainian Pshyk** has fled to England, Wopke Hoekstra is stuck in a bomb shelter in Kyiv at the time of writing. During a visit by the Dutch delegation, a signal came in about Russian missiles flying around.

Dutch newspaper *Het Parool* quoted the Foreign Affairs Minister while underground:

‘There can only be one answer to that: that is to continue—to continue supporting Ukraine, to continue sending weapons, to continue sending humanitarian aid.’

**‘Feminists are usually pacifists, but we simply cannot afford that in this situation’**

Notable: in pictures of the Dutch delegation in Kyiv earlier that day, you only see male politicians and male soldiers. Like the images of Vladimir Putin, who is advised at his endless table by an army of all-male commanders.

How exactly does Hoekstra want to continue to support Ukraine? He has—should he return unscathed—a few more months to prepare the Dutch FFP. Now that the possibility exists, Pshyk hopes that the policy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will also take into account the way the war will affect women differently.

‘You see existing relationships being magnified,’ she says. ‘Men have to fight. The vulnerable groups who have to flee (single mothers, women with disabilities, members of the LGBTI community, and older people) lose not only their homes, but also their networks, their friends, and possibly their jobs.

‘They end up in places with few amenities, where social institutions often no longer work properly, schools are overcrowded or closed and food is scarce. In that situation, they have to look after themselves and often others, taking on the role of breadwinner.

‘Where the fighting is still going on, the situation is even more dire, often with a lack of information and electricity, and with a lot of gender-based and sexual violence.’

Over the last seven years, international military spending has continued to rise, reaching an absolute peak of 2.1 trillion euros in 2021. (Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute)

**Pshyk’s organisation is now** interviewing refugee women, to get an accurate picture of their experiences. ‘Human rights violations must be documented and justice must be served for victims,’ she says

‘Yet, this is still often categorised as a “women’s issue,” while it is men and unbalanced power relations that are to blame for it—so therefore it is mainly a male problem!’

From England, she takes every opportunity to connect with feminist and civil society organisations in Europe. ‘It’s important that the experience and knowledge of feminist activists and NGOs counts and gets supported. We are in fact the first aid, we know what is needed and what is going on.’

Feminism focuses a lot on conflict prevention and peace. UN Resolution 1325 on the importance of involving women in peace negotiations is a milestone in this regard, but its practical implementation still leaves much to be desired; in reality, there are still very few women at the table.

It is painful that the experience and representation of half the population are handled that way. Research shows that the more women participate in negotiations, the greater the chances of long-term peace.

Between 1992 and 2019, thirteen percent of negotiators in peace processes were women—or six percent for mediation and the signing of peace treaties. Seven out of ten peace processes did not include a single female mediator or signatory. (Source: United Nations, 2020)

**Pshyk is happy that Hoekstra** wants to continue to provide financial support and humanitarian aid to Ukraine. ‘Feminists are usually pacifists, but we simply cannot afford it to be like that, right now.

‘We must be able to defend ourselves against imperialist aggression. Something else the international community can do is stop trading with Russia and Russian oligarchs.’

It still not happens frequently enough, she believes: ‘This is an imperialist war for plain raw materials and power, which can easily derail. It is naive to think that Putin’s hunger stops at our borders; this is a dan-

ger for Europe as a whole.’

That is why, she says, a feminist foreign policy should stand firmly for human rights and gender equality—over doing business and making deals with authoritarian regimes and imperialist governments.

Of all Defence Ministers, twelve percent are women. (Source: United Nations, 2022)

**The new Dutch policy** document for the Ministry of Defense only names the word ‘woman’ once, just like the word ‘gender’—which means that the Defense organisation ignores feminist foreign policy. In an interview for this special, Petra Stienen regrettably calls this ‘a weakness of policy-makers.’

All conflicts are related to dominating and power imbalances, which is why an integrated foreign policy is needed, Stienen says:

‘Whether we send weapons or not, a good gender analysis is needed to make informed decisions and maintain a broad perspective.

‘Such an analysis is not just about women, but looks at all forms of violence and trauma, including long-term ones. For men in combat, women who are left behind, fleeing transgender people...’ All parts of Foreign Affairs—including Trade and Defence—need such a view and analysis, Stienen believes.

Meanwhile, Feminist Workshop continues to provide support to babies, children, teenagers, women, the elderly, and pets who have fled. Together with a network of organisations in Lviv, it is preparing an exhibition for the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence, in December. She now feels, even *more* than before the war, how important her work is for her and her country’s future.●

Yosh Pshyk





# 'The internet isn't neutral'

The emergence of the world wide web has presented feminism with new opportunities and challenges, the South African Jan Moolman observes. A conversation about the gender gap, online activism, and digital pioneers. 'It is a misconception to assume that we will ever be one big happy family, online,' she says, 'because offline we aren't either.' But hope prevails.

Text: Elia Yahye



Jan Moolman has a love-hate relationship with the internet—or, rather: with the internet as it is today. The South African feminist coordinates the women's rights programme of APC, an international network organisation that uses ICT for social justice.

Her goal: creating an online environment where everyone feels at home. 'Now it's the white boys from Silicon Valley who define what the internet looks like for everyone,' she says.

The rise of the internet has brought feminism a lot, and as an African woman, Moolman experienced it firsthand: 'I suddenly had access to a wealth of information.' With a few mouse clicks, a world opened up: on blogs like *HOLAAfrica!* and *Adventures from the Bedrooms of African Women*, she got an intimate insight into the experiences of other African women with love and sexuality.

'The internet gives a voice to people who were previously not being heard,' she says. 'That's a classic feminist theme.' But there also turned out to be a downside to the rise of the web.

When the internet as we know it emerged in the 1980s, it was surrounded by utopian expectations. This new and revolutionary technology—democratic and decentralised—would connect everyone in the world. The idea was that the internet would be a great equaliser, and minorities and marginalised groups in particular would benefit from it. 'Of course, that was very naive,' Moolman sighs.

Little is left of that original utopianism. Whistleblower Edward Snowden showed in 2013 how governments use the internet to spy on citizens and in documentaries such as *The Social Dilemma*, the architects of social media platforms apologise for the scroll addiction and online bubbles they have created.

For women, in particular, Moolman observes, the world wide web is often still a sinister territory: 'It is not surprising that existing power structures and misogyny are also emerging online—we could have known that would happen.'

She points to the ubiquity of 'online gender-based violence.' This relatively new term encompasses the various ways in which women are harassed and intimidated on the internet, from cyberstalking to revenge porn. Women—especially when they express opinions—are also prime victims of fake news campaigns. 'These are often specifically aimed at female journalists and politicians.'

APC was founded in 1990, when the web was still in its infancy. 'We started as a network of women and organisations from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, interested in new communication technologies.'

It advises the United Nations and in 2016 published a manifesto, drawn up after consultations with more than a hundred feminists, that outlines the contours of a new kind of internet. 'There was an increasing focus on the political aspect of the web,' she says.

Two years before the start of APC, in 1988, the Netherlands became the second country in the world to be connected to the inter-



Jan Moolman

net. Under Minister Liesje Schreinemacher, digitisation has now become one of the spearheads of Dutch development policy.

That in itself is a positive thing, says Jan Moolman, but: 'The internet isn't neutral. Women have different experiences than men and in the Global South there are different challenges than in the West.'

## Governments do not shy away from shutting down the internet or spying on dissidents online

Such as internet access, for instance. While more than ninety percent of people in the West can access the internet, connectivity is still a luxury in many areas of the world. 'In part, that is due to the costs: it is terribly expensive in many Southern countries.'

Moolman's sister once told her that during online university exams she had to be selective in which questions she would or wouldn't answer. 'She didn't have enough data to submit the whole test...'

And in addition to this digital divide between North and South, there is also a digital gender gap: women have less access to the internet than men—especially in the South. According to the World Wide Web Foundation, men are up to fifty percent more likely to have internet access than women in the least developed countries. Africa is the only continent where that gap appears to be widening.

After the publication of the Dutch policy intentions, the NGO Plan International wondered how they would 'benefit girls who have never been connected to WiFi.' Moolman agrees: 'Women in the South—like everyone else—have the right to use the internet. It's about freedom of choice.'



**Yet more and more African women** are finding their way to the web. According to research agency Afrobarometer, the number of women who regularly go online has more than doubled in five years, from eleven to 26 percent.

In many cases, they use their internet connection as an activist tool, says Ugandan blogger and journalist Rosebell Kagumire. In an article for news platform *The Elephant*, she writes that a fourth feminist wave is emerging in Africa, in which the use of digital resources is at the centre.

The hashtag #SudanWomenProtest sparked the 2019 protests that ended the reign of dictator Omar Al-Bashir, and in Nigeria online feminists spearheaded the #EndSARS demonstrations against police brutality.

## And the alternatives do exist, Moolman observes: *at the edges of the web, the internet is being reinvented*

At the same time, the rise of the internet is a double-edged sword, says Kagumire. When a well-known Ugandan poet criticised the government on Facebook for not providing sanitary pads to teenage girls—who had stopped going to school over that issue—she was sentenced to a year in prison.

Governments do not shy away from shutting down the internet or spying on dissidents online. Several African governments were recently embarrassed when it was revealed that they were using the infamous spying software Pegasus, by the Israeli company NSO. ‘And it’s always the marginalised groups,’ says Moolman, ‘who are hit the hardest.’

A few years ago, APC was told by an increasing number of women’s rights activists that their Facebook pages were being blocked. They used their online reach to draw attention to the position of women and to discuss socially sensitive topics.

Moolman: ‘Their messages were reported en masse and flagged as “inappropriate.” If there are many reports, the reported profiles will be removed.’ The Facebook policy was used to nip unwelcome opinions in the bud. ‘We see it happening more and more with women standing up for their rights—or for the rights of other groups.’

It partly stems from a blind spot at the big tech companies: Facebook, Twitter, and Google. ‘When it comes to content policies and terms of use, they use a one size fits all approach. There is no regard for the local context—and therefore no consideration of how policies affect marginalised groups.’

It worries her that Silicon Valley’s grip on the web is getting stronger. ‘It’s concerning that the internet is increasingly in the hands of three companies: they determine everything for the rest of us.’

Moolman believes more internet access is needed in the South,

but you also have to look at the effect digitisation has on marginalised groups. And ‘that’s where taking a look through the intersectional glasses is required,’ she says.

Digital technology is potentially emancipatory, but it can also reinforce forms of oppression. ‘So always ask the question: how does it affect girls or sexual minorities?’ Or, in other words: to which internet exactly are they being offered access?

**The internet needs to be decolonised**, she continues—and that is partly a matter of money. Poor countries currently benefit very little from the digital revolution: according to UNCTAD, ninety percent of the revenues from online platforms accrue to US and Chinese companies.

But the current internet is also colonial in terms of language offerings, she says. ‘The platforms are dominated by the English language,’ which means that cultural diversity is being erased online, but also that the internet is less accessible. ‘You can often only approach large social media companies in English.’

Platforms also need to be democratised, she thinks: ‘Let people vote on what features are offered there, or what rules are applied—that is completely opaque at the moment.’ The tech giants claim that they are willing to reform, but the extent to which this is sincere remains to be seen, according to Moolman. ‘Above all, there need to be more alternatives.’

And the alternatives *do* exist, Moolman observes: at the edges of the web, the internet is being reinvented. Manyverse is a free social medium ‘without the bad stuff,’ which does respect users’ privacy, is not owned by a company and does not show ads.

Brazilian activists launched messaging services that can withstand internet shutdowns and feminist hackers from Brazil and Mexico even invented an open-source, wireless network that is completely separate from the internet and can be used to securely share digital content. ‘A lot more energy needs to go into initiatives like that,’ says Moolman.

Because although they are succeeding in outlining a radically different vision for the internet, they are fighting a losing battle. ‘They are mainly on the fringes, still; much more investment is needed.’

The Dutch government can play a role in that process—though it would have to abandon its mercantile spirit. Moolman: ‘Above all, we need to look at the concept of innovation in a different way. Now it is still defined in a very capitalistic manner: new technologies and platforms must first and foremost make a lot of money.’

Fuxico, Manyverse, and similar initiatives are not innovative when viewed through that lens. ‘They are open source and often use free software—making profit is not the main focus.’ But it is precisely because they stem from the needs of users and local communities that they are so valuable, says Moolman. ‘We need to empower people to be active online on their own terms.’

Although there is still a world to win, the work of the digital pioneers gives her hope. She also believes the growing attention to the problematic sides of the current internet—white, Western, and patriarchal—is a good sign.

But, she stresses, the internet will never be perfect. The virtual world has much to offer, especially to those on the sidelines, but a healthy dose of realism is in order. ‘It is a misconception to assume that we will ever be one big happy family, online, because offline we aren’t either.’ ●



# ‘Online and offline discrimination cannot be viewed in isolation’

**Pakistan has seen a digital revolution in recent years, but the rise of the internet does have a downside: cyber violence threatens both the lives of Pakistani women and press freedom. ‘And yet we are in favour of anonymity,’ argues Verónica Ferrari, of APC—because it provided privacy and protection for many women and members of the LGBTI community. A dissection of a ‘many-headed monster.’**

**Text: Elían Yahye**

**It was a miracle she was still alive.** Pakistani student Khadija Siddiqui was attacked out of the blue by her classmate on a spring day in 2016: the man had stabbed her 23 times with a knife, in broad daylight, and yet it was not a given that the perpetrator would be punished.

Because he was the son of a prominent lawyer, everyone advised Siddiqui against suing—all but one young lawyer, that is. He advised her to post the photos of her injuries online. Facebook groups soon emerged, such as *Justice for Khadija*, and #FightLikeKhadija was trending on Twitter.

Under pressure from public opinion, the authorities decided to take action: the perpetrator was sentenced to five years in prison. ‘Social media turned my cause into a nationwide movement,’ Siddiqui told Pakistani newspaper *The Express Tribune*.



The attack is no anomaly; gender-based violence is a persistent problem in Pakistan. Activists even call the violence against women—often sexual in nature—a ‘silent epidemic.’ Every few years, the Thomson Reuters Foundation publishes a list of the most dangerous countries for women. Pakistan came sixth, the last time around.

Social media campaigns give victims of violence a face—and they are especially effective in Pakistan, says Sadaf Khan, of Media Matters for Democracy (MMfD). The NGO, founded in 2016, investigates, among other things, how media and democracy can be strengthened through digital means. Pakistan is relatively illiterate, Khan explains, ‘so you can reach a lot more people with audio and video than with the written word.’

**Still, Khan sees no reason for too much optimism.** The emergence of the internet has a clear downside: in 2012, the country was shocked by the death of five girls from Pakistan’s Kohistan region.

Two years earlier, a video had gone viral, showing the girls singing and clapping while a boy was dancing. It eventually turned out that the girls had been murdered by relatives; honour killing was the motive. ‘The internet,’ says Khan, ‘has not made women’s lives any safer.’

## Pakistani politicians and policy-makers themselves are often instigators of online hate campaigns

The rise of digital technology sheds light on the widespread violence against women and girls in the country, but at the same time it is a catalyst: an innocent photo or video can be the trigger for deadly violence. Many Pakistani families try to keep their daughters off the internet as much as possible, Khan says. She sighs: ‘And, deep down, I can understand that.’

A digital revolution has been taking place in Pakistan over the past two decades. At the beginning of this century, one percent of the population had access to the internet, which rose to 54 percent last year, according to studies by Google and market researcher Kantar. That means there are currently 118 million Pakistani internet users.

Women who go online are often the target of harassment and hate campaigns. The Federal Investigation Agency is responsible for handling cyber crimes. ‘Every year, it reports that the highest number of complaints come from women,’ says Khan. ‘These concern death threats, or women being blackmailed with intimate photos.’

According to the Digital Rights Foundation, an NGO that uses ICT for democracy and human rights, forty percent of all female internet users experience online harassment. A few years ago, the

organisation set up a special helpline for victims of cyber violence—and it has barely been able to keep up with the number of complaints ever since: more than eleven thousand have been received in the past five years.

**Female journalists and activists are** the main targets of online aggression. Especially on Twitter, hate and intimidation campaigns seem to be the order of the day.

Khan: ‘They are generally well organised. If you are critical of something, you are immediately flooded with a stream of violent language and threats.’ A common tactic is doxing: posting addresses and other personal information online without permission.

Male journalists are also harassed online, Khan emphasises. They are accused of sensationalism or spreading fake news, ‘but they are not accused of having slept with anyone,’ Khan says. ‘Their intimate photos are not auctioned online.’ With men, the hatred focuses on the content of their work, she notices. ‘With women, it’s about their bodies and their behaviour.’

Cyber violence in Pakistan even threatens the freedom of the press. Female journalists are increasingly afraid to speak up, research by MMfD shows: ‘Ninety percent of journalists say they practice self-censorship.’ Any critical article is about to endure a barrage of hate, threats, and insults. ‘Many journalists no longer dare to share their stories online.’

They shouldn’t expect much from their government: Pakistani politicians and policy-makers *themselves* are often instigators of online hate campaigns. Benazir Shah, a reporter for the Pakistani channel Geo News, complained about their role in an interview with the *South Asia Journal*, last year. ‘As soon as a Minister or an official accuses you of something,’ she said, ‘you see the number of insults skyrocket.’

According to Khan, it is difficult to prove that politicians are also directly involved in setting up and coordinating online harassment campaigns, but there are strong indications. Swarms of accounts—mostly bots—sometimes share as many as hundreds of tweets per minute. ‘All of them have the party’s flag or an image of the political leader as their profile picture.’

**During the Covid pandemic, a journalist** shared a picture of her arm on social media, showing a white bandage. She had just received her Covid-19 vaccine and called on her followers to get vaccinated as well.

‘She was wearing a modest T-shirt,’ says Khan. Yet she was confronted with a stream of negative reactions, men tumbled over each other to call her to order. ‘They said: “How dare you show your arm like that?” It was insinuated that she was not a true Muslim.’

For Pakistani women, it’s no novelty that their behaviour is under a magnifying glass, but in the digital world, there is social control on steroids. ‘It used to be people from your own environment who called you out on something, people you knew personally. Now you get a whole army of angry male strangers coming at you—who apparently feel their masculinity is compromised at the sight of a journalist’s photo.’

The insecurity of women—both online and offline—is a problem around the world, but Pakistani women face more obstacles than women in many other countries, Khan says. ‘The legal system is set up in favour of men.’

According to the Asian Human Rights Commission, women are

more often disadvantaged in criminal justice in particular. For instance, Shah Hussain, the man who had stabbed Siddiqui 23 times with a knife, was allowed to leave prison after three years—without Siddiqui being aware of it.

According to UN Women, less than two percent of women dare to report violence. Police officers often do not take reports seriously, or see them as problems that must be resolved within their own social circle.

Khan: ‘Or, even worse: they resort to victim blaming. As a woman, you are held responsible for the harassment you encounter.’ The same applies to women who report cyber crimes. ‘Online and offline discrimination,’ says Khan, ‘cannot be viewed in isolation.’

**Verónica Ferrari came to the same conclusion.** She’s from Argentina and she works at APC on global policy, with a focus on cyber security. In her position, she is involved in international forums—including UN conferences—on digital themes. ‘The online and offline world are not two different realities, they are a continuum.’

The meaning of cybersecurity has evolved over the years, explains Ferrari: ‘Initially, it mainly concerned states.’ Governments were concerned about hostile hackers, who could steal classified documents or bring down the digital infrastructure. ‘At a certain point, that shifted more to what cyber security means for people. We focus on that approach.’

APC published the report *Why Gender Matters in International Cyber Security*, in 2018. Through statistics and anecdotes from experts and victims of cyber violence, it paints a picture of the insecurity women face online. ‘It was the first report to focus on women’s experiences.’

The examples underline how online and offline insecurity intertwine. Reference is made to a notorious WikiLeaks file from 2017, in which databases containing the personal data of millions of citizens from Turkey were exposed on the web. A gross violation of privacy—which could even be life-threatening for women.

The report quotes Turkish sociologist Zeynep Tüfekçi, who puts into words what is at stake for female victims: ‘Any stalker, any ex-partner, disapproving relative, or random lunatic now has access to their address.’

There is increasing attention to the ways in which cyber security and gender are intertwined in international forums, Ferrari sees. She notices that more and more women are in the country delegations during cyber security meetings. ‘It is still really a new topic, though.’ Violence against women has long been a theme for the UN, ‘but the first resolution that also looked at the online dimension only appeared in 2018.’

**Ferrari is pleased with the growing attention.** Yet there are not always easy solutions to the cyber violence women face. Threats, harassment, and hate campaigns can thrive due to the anonymity the internet offers.

If an online expression is found to be criminal at all, it is not always possible to trace someone—and then it remains to be seen whether the statement was made by a real flesh-and-blood human being. Ferrari: ‘Still, we are in favour of anonymity and encryption software.’

APC published a manifesto in 2016, outlining the core values of a feminist internet. It states unequivocally: ‘We defend the right to be anonymous and reject all attempts to limit online anonymity.’

For many women and members of the LGBTI community, this anonymity has provided the necessary privacy and protection. As soon as that is legally restricted, there is a chance that the baby will be thrown out with the bathwater, says Ferrari. ‘We need to think about these things in a balanced way.’

Ferrari believes a lot can be achieved with better legislation and regulation. Governments and companies should offer women and other groups disproportionately affected by online violence *at least* a seat at the table. ‘They should get a say in public policy and the terms of use of online platforms.’

APC partners with women to take matters into their own hands. ‘We should not expect governments and companies to come up with all the solutions,’ says Ferrari. In 2006, Take Back The Tech (TBTT) was launched, an international movement of bloggers, activists, journalists, and organisations who use technology to combat violence against women.

Since then, local TBTT initiatives have sprung up like mushrooms. A campaign was launched in South Africa to collect old telephones for victims of domestic violence, which they could use to collect evidence. A partner organisation of APC in the Philippines came up with an app that helps women facing cyberbullying, identity theft, or online harassment.

Cyber violence may be a multi-headed monster, but women are not powerless, Ferrari sees: ‘Technology can be used for good.’ ●





# 'There is not one single definition of feminist'

**For Beth Woroniuk it is clear: a stronger feminist foreign policy is needed worldwide. Her home country Canada has come a long way, but still lacks a clear policy plan. 'I keep telling the government: if you want an FFP, you have to talk to feminists everywhere.'**



Beth Woroniuk

Text: Ans Boersma

**Beth Woroniuk is vice president** of the Equality Fund—a similar organisation to Mama Cash. In 2019, it received a grant of three hundred million Canadian dollars, the largest investment in global feminist movements ever made by a government.

The Fund's primary mission: an equal world for men and women. It aims to change the way resources and power get into the hands of girls, women, and transgender people, through sustainable funding of feminist movements worldwide.

In 2021, there were 179 of them. 'Our main goal is to research and support those movements,' says Woroniuk, 'but we are aware that our funds will never be enough. The gap is rather large.'

## How would you describe Canada's feminist foreign policy?

Woroniuk: 'First, it is necessary to mention that Canada does not have a policy document explaining the objectives of its FFP—we hope the guideline will be published soon; it has been delayed due to the elections. Discussions have been going on since 2020.'

'The government has, however, already stated the pillars of the foreign policy: international feminist assistance (still a lot of work to be done, but progress has already been made), the *National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security*, and a progressive trade agenda. And our defence policy is the last focal point.'

'As civil society, we have said that's not enough: we need a framework that diplomats, negotiators, and security analysts can consult and that makes it crystal clear what an FFP is all about.'

'Now is the time for a distinct roadmap, with concrete steps and resources for implementation—with a lack of clarity comes a lack of action. The guideline also sends a clear message to the rest of the world.'

## You just mentioned women, peace, and security: UN Security Council resolution 1325. Is it high enough on the agenda, in Canada?

'That is always a good question, whether it's high enough... As civil society, we are rarely satisfied—that's difficult, we want to go higher and higher. I think this is an area where significant progress has been made in Canada. The third *National Action Plan* is coming in early 2023, and it has many strong points.'

'We have an ambassador who focuses specifically on this theme and the government is also committed to a gender perspective in global issues, such as disarmament. Canada was one of the leaders of the *Elsie* initiative, which aims to increase the number of women in peacekeeping operations.'

'There is a growing awareness of the connection between wom-

en's insecurity and global insecurity. Instead of saying: "It is a niche issue, we should support women because it's simply the right thing to do," it's now seen as a critical key on a global scale. Without a gender perspective, we cannot understand what is going on, those connections are becoming more and more obvious.'

## What are Canada's challenges?

'Those are in our history with indigenous people. Many used to say: "Canada is not a colonial power, we didn't have overseas colonies," but we had to be constantly reminded that we were an *internal* colonial power and had colonised an entire area. So... how do we reflect that in our FFP?'

## How do you see a holistic approach to feminist foreign policy that includes decolonisation and inclusion?

'My feminism is anti-racist and based on decolonisation, my feminism is intersectional and climate justice is part of it. Feminism also means being comfortable with multiple expressions of it—many people have a narrow view of what it is, such as: getting women into high positions.'

'If we want to build an inclusive feminist movement and involve more people, we can't be exclusive. There is not a single definition of a feminist. We need to be open to those who advocate an intersectional feminist approach by asking questions about power and who is excluded.'

'The space for that exchange needs to be created: among Canadian citizens, but how do we ensure that voices from the South are engaged? I keep telling the government: if you want an FFP, you have to talk to feminists *everywhere*. Listen to activists in different parts of the world, so you understand what it means to them.'

**'That we think differently about power, that we don't see international relations as a zero-sum game: I only win if you lose'**

## What can other countries learn from Canada's FFP?

'First of all, no government is perfect, there is still a lot to learn and it is necessary for the government to adopt a constructive and open attitude. As a civil society, we must hold it accountable and be critical, but also see what is going well and build on that.'

'To answer your question, Canada has done some positive things, such as recently supporting women's organisations in Ukraine. It has devoted much attention to women's reproductive rights and to sexual violence as a weapon of war.'



'Some policy components ought to be applauded, but again: the policy is not consistent. Canada has spoken out on the situation of women in Afghanistan, but there is no coherent plan.'

'The Canadian Foreign Minister has convened a meeting with female Foreign Ministers to discuss the situation in Iran. Such moral support for the protesting women is great, but then: what is the next step?'

'Yet it is important to recognise what is going well, despite the fact that more can be done. As an advocate, that can be challenging: often we focus on what is missing, but for governments that want to go in this FFP direction, it is necessary that we recognise where things are going well, from an enthusing point of view.'

## In your ideal world, what should be the ultimate goal of Canada's FFP?

'That our foreign policy is one that recognises and strengthens the rights of women around the world. That we add a gender perspective to traditional hard security issues and that we think differently about power, that we don't see international relations as a zero-sum game: I only win if you lose.'

'As a global community, we are confronted with major problems: climate, inequality, emerging authoritarian governments. How can we insert feminist questions and insights to address some of those issues? I hope for a much more collective approach to global affairs.'

'Currently, less than two percent of all climate funding goes to feminist organisations, while it is precisely women's organisations that are forerunners in that field—that could well be higher. We often fail to see the connection between feminist movements and strengthening democracy, but where there is a strong autonomous feminist movement, we see changes that are positive for the country, economy, society, and politics.'

'It is not so much about having women in positions of power. More important are independent, strong feminist movements that have the resources, space, and opportunities to advocate for change. A goal for governments is to financially support those movements, so they can survive and flourish.' ●





*This expansive transgender face is a milestone in the work of the Aravani Art Project, as the first immense mural—in this case executed in collaboration with St+art India. In their own words, this one has created their 'own visual language.' The title is written on the wall: We exist, in Kannada (one of the oldest Dravidian languages)*



# Anyone who wants to make a difference, starts with local women



Women from the village of Long Pelban (in North Kalimantan) cross the Kayan River to work as day laborers on the palm oil plantation—without any legal protection. When the hydroelectric plant is ready, they will have to move

© Just Associates

**‘Only then do environmental policies have a chance of succeeding,’ as Mela Chiponda from Zimbabwe and Jannah\* from Indonesia say—and they don’t say it lightly. When nature is violated, women are the first and most affected. ‘They have the right to protect their own land.’** Text: Marusja Aangeenbrug

‘Actually, it’s very simple,’ says Jannah\*, an Indonesian human rights activist. She works for Just Associates and the Sustainable Forest Circle Association. ‘Women are closest to the natural environment, so they also want to protect it as much as possible.’

She explains what she means: ‘Globally, women often work in or around the house, for example in the kitchen—and that is directly connected to the natural environment.’ Is there clean water available in the area, does the land provide enough food, are they sufficiently protected against natural disasters? These are all questions that concern women on a daily basis.

‘They carry out many, many tasks and are always trying to make sure their family survives,’ affirms Mela Chiponda, an ecofeminist and human rights defender from Zimbabwe. She saw it again, recently, with women left homeless after a natural disaster.

‘They also took care of grandparents, or people with disabilities. Their work may be largely invisible, but many people depend on them.’

**So, decisions about** the environment, climate, or living conditions not only directly affect their lives, but also those of the people they care for. Yet women are usually not involved, Jannah knows. ‘If a mining company wants to claim land in an area, often only the men are heard.’

Development—no matter how well-intentioned—often excludes women, says Chiponda: ‘Women do not get a say, and they also structurally face marginalisation, exclusion, and violence. Development is unevenly distributed, which means that they are also harder hit by ecological and other crises.’

Feminist foreign policy should therefore

focus on climate change and the environment, Jannah believes.

Women increasingly want to hold back development in their environment, Chiponda notices, because it often means that agricultural land is taken away from them. ‘That means they can no longer grow anything.’

Another example is industrial food production: ‘Many pesticides end up in rivers, where indigenous women get their water.’

They usually don’t sound the alarm of their own accord, Jannah knows: ‘Sometimes we ask: “Do you know what will happen to the land that has been bought up?” All too often they reply: “No, that’s a matter for the men.” But those mining companies and plantations directly affect their lives. They have the right to protect their own land.’

That’s why the Sustainable Forest Circle Association provides training to women,

both legally and to increase their self-confidence. ‘If they gain insight into what is going on and become involved in the policy in their own village,’ says Jannah, ‘then they can influence the decisions.’

The organisation is also committed to social forestry, in which local people are closely involved in forest management, protection, and reforestation.

‘That requires local policy: which rules and methods do we apply, how do we choose the people who monitor? We explain what social forestry entails and how it helps to regain control of the forest.’

‘It is very important that women are involved from the start, because often areas turn out to have already been claimed by companies, who want to build a palm oil plantation, for example.’

Besides, it’s often difficult for Just Associates to find out which investors are behind it: ‘A lot of data is barely recorded,’ says Jannah. The organisation is currently developing a method to map out the stakeholders and the context. ‘We hope that foreign governments will financially support our effort.’

**‘Their land would be taken away—and where are they then supposed to get their water from?’**

**According to Chiponda,** it is necessary to change the power structures, because whether it concerns the distribution of land, climate policy, or the production of food or seeds: there is often a clear hierarchy—and the women who are directly affected by it are at the bottom of the ladder.

‘There can be enough for everyone,’ she says. ‘Subsistence agriculture can coexist with industrial agriculture; there is no need to take land away from the poor.’

‘Protect indigenous seeds so that women can trade them among themselves. But for that to happen, unequal power structures must be addressed. We look for solutions not only from governments and companies, but also from the population.’

If you want to achieve something at the government level, start with the local population, she advises. ‘We help indigenous

groups to get their needs clear: “What exactly don’t you want? What is your vision?” With their input, I can then sit down with the national government.’

As an example, she cites the plans for a coal mine. ‘Good for employment, but it would cost three billion dollars, while Zimbabwe is already deeply in debt... Besides, why invest in coal when the whole world is crying out for renewable energy?’

Village women and indigenous groups protested: ‘Their land would be taken away—and where are they then supposed to get their water from? After all, coal production requires a lot of water.’ The government eventually cancelled the mine.

**By giving local women** a voice, feminist foreign policy can ‘protect their dignity and interests,’ says Chiponda.

‘So ask yourself: how do you work with women, how do you tackle the unequal power structures, together with local and indigenous communities? How do you involve women, people with disabilities, young people?’

‘We have already received support from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs to build a movement around climate justice and support for female human rights defenders.’

‘But my plea also applies to investors. Can the Dutch government ensure that Dutch companies looking to invest in Africa also protect women’s interests?’

Jannah calls the safety and mental health of female human rights activists crucial, within the policy. ‘We sometimes are directly up against the army, the government, or companies. They have more resources than we do. We are intimidated, chased away, threatened. We have not yet been physically

attacked, but this work is mentally taxing.’

‘When you build a movement, you challenge existing structures,’ Chiponda also knows. ‘As a result, you automatically put your life at risk. There is a need for feminist foreign policy to make room for supporting and protecting minorities—not just women, but also the LGBTI community.’

Jannah also advocates for safe spaces, so that human rights activists can recover mentally. And she points to the importance of capacity building.

‘Support for that would help us develop a strategy,’ she says, ‘not only for our internal organisation, but especially to build a movement and raise funds. We cannot do this work alone. We want to involve as many parties as possible and form a movement.’ ●

*Jannah\* is an Indonesian human rights activist who is committed to women, rural communities, and the environment. For Just Associates, she mentors local groups in Indonesia.*

*She also works with the Sustainable Forest Circle Association for environmental conservation and supporting local rural communities and women to manage their natural resources.*

*\*For security reasons, her name is fictitious—her real name is known to the editors*

*Mela Chiponda is a Zimbabwean researcher, ecofeminist and human rights defender. For over twenty years, she has been involved in themes such as the environment, climate, raw materials, land rights, protection of female dignity, and human rights.*

*She wants to increase the empowerment of women and indigenous groups; to this end, she works together with local groups as well as with governments and companies*

A community gathering with Mela Chiponda





# Gaps in understanding and budget

(for a feminist future)

Text: Sarah Haaij and Marlies Pilon

**It's quite a task: taking a stand against the anti-gender movement, realising social and economic justice, standing up for the rights of girls, women, refugees, migrants, and the LGBTI community... and doing so with a nearly empty wallet. Women's rights organisations and feminist activists are needed more than ever, but globally they only receive 0.13 percent of the total development budget (according to AWID). Why? And can an FFP turn the tide?**



© Mama Cash

**Look, there's Faye Macheke, from Cape Town.** The video is not entirely sharp, but the warm voice of the co-director of the feminist membership organisation AWID is clearly audible.

From Honduras, where it is six o'clock in the morning, a coffee-drinking Sofía Marcía, the brand-new programme director of Fondo de Acción Urgente, the feminist fund for Latin America, is logging in.

In Kenya, Tina Lubayo cheerfully waves to the camera. Behind the head of partnerships and communication of the African, feminist participation fund UHAI EASHRI, palm trees sway in what really does seem like a sea breeze. Is that a Zoom background, or is it real? 'Completely real!' she says. 'We are on a retreat with the team.'

'We're jealous!' the others confirm.

When Happy Mwende Kinyili, co-director of the international women's fund Mama Cash, also enters the digital conference room, the party is complete. Another round of caffeine is grabbed and then nothing stands in the way of an exploratory dive into the world of funding for feminist organisations.

Or, at least, that's the idea—one that has reckoned beyond the nuance of these dyed-in-the-wool gender rights activists. In an effort to get to know each other a little better, the interviewers prepared some short questions and statements.

Number one: 'I am a feminist.' Yes: hand up, no: hand down—that would serve as a practice round, but instead of the four raised hands that were expected, there is a frown and a raised eyebrow here and there. Hands are raised hesitantly, and then quickly lowered again.

'The word "feminist" is too narrow for me,' says Kinyili. 'I prefer to call myself an "African queer feminist," that's important to me.' Why the word itself isn't suitable? 'Because I think whoever is comfortable with that word, is not comfortable with my presence.'

As will often happen, the others nod in agreement. 'I'm also a pan-African feminist,' Macheke adds.

'Feel free to add anti-capitalist and anti-racist to that,' says Marcía—and again the faces in the other video frames move up and down affirmatively.

**It should be clear—anyone who wants** to delve into the question of what it means to make donor money flows feminist will not come up with a simple yes or no. As the round of proposals continues, there will be more frequent discussion or nuance.

Do we need a feminist foreign policy? Certainly, according to the majority, but under certain conditions. Can the anti-gender movement count on more funding than the feminists? Yes, the anti-movement receives three times more funding than the rights movement, Macheke reports, but the answer to that backlash is a lot more complex than 'there should be more money.'

Only in the final statement is there a convincing all-hands-raised moment: 'I am hopeful for the future,' to which the 'yes!' sounds from four throats. After all, donors do *not* have to do much to make their financing more inclusive, Macheke clarifies the positivism.

'Feminist movements know very well what needs to be done,' she says. 'Donors just have to free up a seat at the decision-making table and finally listen to them!'

Or, as in this case, to just read carefully: four lessons on the need for feminist funding.

**One—It is now more important than ever that we support feminist movements**

For feminist donors such as Mama Cash, UHAI and the Urgent Action Fund, it is more than obvious that their funding is also feminist, that the money they spend ends up with structurally excluded organisations, communities, and movements that strive for gender justice.

**Why is it particularly crucial now that funding goes to gender justice?**

'There is a lot of research showing that funding feminist movements is a good thing,' says Kinyili, 'that it contributes to social change and democratisation, to the realisation of human rights.'

'If you look at history, you see that feminists participated in the freedom movements that were successful—because of them, economic justice and democracy are more likely to be achieved. So why is it necessary to support gender equality? Because it benefits everyone!'

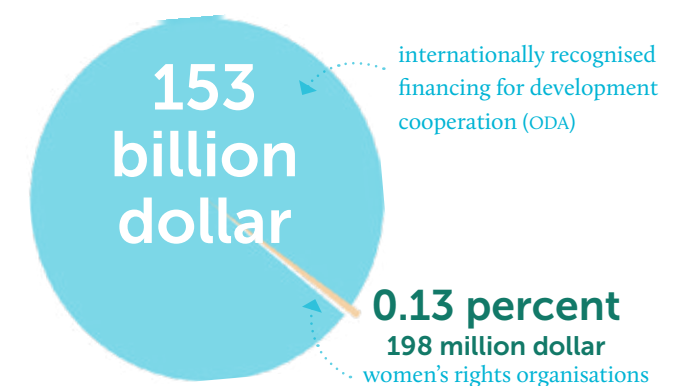
'And that is true now more than ever; in these times of mounting crises, feminist movements offer a unique vision. They work from the idea that another world is possible. A world in which we can all flourish, which is just. A world where people are free and can live joyful lives. So, unlike the people who are currently determining policy, feminists have an actual vision for the future, to move towards.'

'We all came out of the pandemic together,' Lubayo adds, 'and everywhere you hear people saying that it has exposed the economic inequalities of our world, that lessons have been learned and that we need to do things differently from now on...'

'But does that truly happen? Do more marginalised genders now have a seat at the decision-making table? The rich are still getting richer—and those rich people are still mostly conservative and influence the geopolitics that shape the political, economic, and social realities of the marginalised groups.'

'Support for gender equality is not just about male or female, but also includes gender-expansive people, such as transgender and non-binary people. Gender equality is about power dynamics and structures, about who has a seat at the decision-making table and how we can make it more multi-voiced.'

That multi-voicedness is, indeed, 'more important than ever,' says Macheke: 'Wherever hard-fought human rights are lost, women's and equality rights are the first to go under. Those who already were



Source: OECD (2020), in an AWID report



## Three feminist funds and a membership organisation

- UHAI EASHRI (the East African Sexual Health and Rights Initiative) is Africa's first indigenous, feminist, and activist participatory fund for and by sexual and gender minorities and sex workers, supporting civil society in seven East African countries.
- Mama Cash is an international women's fund founded in the Netherlands, in 1983. It supports initiatives of and led by women,

girls, and trans- and intersex people around the world through 'participatory grantmaking,' a model where feminist organisations decide where the money goes.

- Fondo de Acción Urgente is a regional feminist fund for Latin America and the Spanish-speaking part of the Caribbean that contributes to the sustainability and

empowerment of activists and their movements.

- AWID (the Association for Women's Rights in Development) is an international feminist membership organisation committed to gender equality, sustainable development, and human rights for women. Feminist NGOs, civil rights movements, donors, and governments join forces.

marginalised—women, the LGBTI community, the non-binary and intersex people—are hit twice as hard.'

If we want to prevent the emancipation work from failing again, we must now provide extra support to those groups, says Marcía: 'All those people who are at the forefront of the struggle and who are demanding justice, need our support. Only then will they be able to tackle the crises.'

### Two—Feminist funding has not (yet) reached its final destination.

Women's rights organisations and feminist movements are crucial players in protecting and promoting gender equality. Over the last century, they have secured the right to vote for women, expanded women's access to reproductive health care, education, and economic opportunities, and begun to enshrine gender equality and LGBTI rights at the domestic, national and international levels. In order to continue to do their emancipating work, they need more financial firepower, especially in these times of turmoil and crisis.

**'They live in that reality! They are the experts and have the solutions, not those who fund them'**

**Why is it that over 99 percent of development money still does not reach women's rights and feminist organisations directly?**

'Well, that's simple,' says Macheke, raising her hand first. 'Policy-makers are full of nice words, but they fail to recognise that women's rights organisations are drivers of social change.

'So, that's where we have to start, because if you don't value something, you won't fund it—we saw that once again during the pan-

demic. There are plenty of examples of women's rights organisations and feminist movements that have literally sustained entire communities, fed those mouths, and provided care.

'And all without additional resources, mind you, but that just isn't appreciated. As so often, the work and expertise of women is undervalued.'

'I agree,' says Kinyili. They say the fact that almost no money flows to feminist movements is also due to the way the world views women, members of the LGBTI community, and other minorities.

'The whole system of aid and funding,' she explains, 'is actually antithetical to the people concerned, to the communities. Donors—like the OECD—have built a system that ensures that the money doesn't flow to the people who are most affected. The demands are too high, there are too many hoops to jump through.

'You always hear donors, governments, and private parties say that they think it is too "risky" to support communities directly: "Why should we send so much money there?" they ask, but that is of course very crooked, because what *exactly* is the risk? Surely, that would be that human lives are at stake!'

It is this reluctance of big donors, says Kinyili, that has ensured that there are funds such as Mama Cash, UHAI, and Urgent Action.

'We stand between the donors and the communities,' she continues. 'To bridge the gap, to ensure that the work of the structurally excluded communities is seen and supported. We fund those groups that the governments and big donors don't want to fund, but that is, of course, not right—we shouldn't be needed!'

'Donors often don't understand what it means to support "organic" movements,' says Lubayo. 'It's time for them to open up to the themes and ideas of all those feminist movements around the world, which are organised in different ways—so that they can put people at the centre of their policies, because it is people who are at the heart of social movements.'

### Three—The anti-gender movement is gaining ground globally.

The post-World War II generation watched the world become increasingly women-friendly and tolerant, but it appears that acquired freedoms—such as the right to abortion and LGBTI rights—are now also about to be trashed with the rise of authoritarian and conservative regimes.

The European Parliament calculated that the funding of cam-

paigns against LGBTI and women's rights is increasing exponentially. Financiers in America appear to be mostly conservative and right-wing religious foundations, such as those of DeVos and Charles Koch, and in Russia, they are ultra-wealthy oligarchs, and, closer to home, Catholic foundations from France, Italy, Germany, Spain, and Poland, a 2021 report from the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy revealed.

They invest their dollars, roubles, and euros in opposing feminist regulations through lobbying and influencing policy and lining the pockets of conservative politicians, and through social media campaigns.

### How can feminist funders contribute to the resistance against the anti-gender movements and anti-abortion and anti-LGBTI legislation?

'I'll take that question!' exclaims Marcía. As a Latin American activist, she only has to look around to see the rise of the strong anti-gender movement.

'The hate speech of that anti-agenda is omnipresent,' she says, 'and the worrying thing is: that movement also has the money and connections to dominate public opinion. For example, more LGBTI activists are murdered here than anywhere else in the world—and in Bolsonaro's Brazil, human rights hardly meant anything anymore.

'Elsewhere in the region, too, you see that many basic rights are at stake; people have to fight for proper healthcare and education, and then you notice that the rights of minorities, women, and members of the LGBTI community receive even less attention. So we need resources to counteract the movement.'

As an example, Kinyili mentions the Polish Aborcynjny Dream Team, with which Mama Cash collaborates. Despite Poland's near-total ban on abortion, the four-member female team continues to provide direct abortion assistance to those in need—although, as of recently, only three are still active.

'Now one of the activists has been arrested, because she gave an abortion pill to a woman who wanted to terminate her pregnancy, but was not allowed to do so by her abusive husband...

'The other three are beating the drum internationally because of the arrest. They are affiliated with Amnesty International and MEPs and ensure that the matter is put on the map. At the risk of their own lives, they push back against the pushback.'

Kinyili is therefore sometimes annoyed by governments who say that it is 'too risky' to support these kinds of small feminist organisations directly. 'I then tell them that it is only truly risky *not* to, because then you give the Polish anti-gender movement an even stronger foundation. The Dream Team stands firm; *that* is risky, that is where the money should flow to if we want to turn the tide.'

Macheke nods in agreement. 'What Sofia sees happening in Brazil and what the situation is like in Poland... it is now happening everywhere,' she says. 'The Global Philanthropy Project has calculated that between 2013 and 2017, the anti-gender movement received a whopping 3.7 billion dollars—more than three times as much as all LGBTI groups worldwide.'

The answer is simple, she says, although it now feels like a broken record to her: 'Financing for feminist organisations must be more direct, more flexible, and long-term. Not the donors, but the activists themselves know best how to spend the money to resist the pushback—they live in that reality! They are the experts and have the solutions, not those who fund them.'

For her, it also means that feminist activists have a say in and contribute ideas to a feminist foreign policy. 'At least if all the countries that are now embracing an FFP are really serious about putting suppressed voices at the centre.'

### Four—A Dutch FFP can make a difference, if it lets feminist organisations play a key role.

The Netherlands is an international leader in funding the activism of girls, women, gay, transgender and intersex people who are fighting against injustices such as racism and exclusion. For instance, all interviewees for this article are part of the *Count Me In!* consortium, a collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that focuses on strengthening feminist movements.





**What can the Netherlands, through its FFP, do better in terms of feminist funding?**

On this question as well, Macheke, Lubayo, Marcía, and Kinyili all present a unified view. It is 'very welcome' and 'worthy of applause' that the Netherlands commits itself to feminist policy, but critical comments then follow immediately. Is it *more* than fine rhetoric, or just a nice but toothless political gesture?

'I only like nice words if they go hand in hand with actually changing money flows, so that they directly support autonomous feminist organisations, because they are the ones who have to re-alise the goals of an FFP,' says Kinyili firmly, who believes that the Netherlands can do better.

'Within the *Power of Voices* partnership, for example, we only see two Southern organisations with a leadership role—that really needs to go up, for the credibility of such a programme.'

Another problem emerges that, according to all of them, needs to be drastically overhauled: working with certain focus countries and regions.

Marcía: 'Many Caribbean and Latin American countries do not qualify for something like *Power of Voices*, because the Dutch Ministry sticks to a predetermined list of countries. That, of course, does not mean that there is not a desperate need for funding for feminist human rights defenders in the other countries!'

In Africa, Lubayo notices, much less money goes to sex worker and LGBTI programmes in French-speaking areas. 'We have already raised the issue in The Hague, but it seems that they just don't want to understand it,' says Kinyili, who hopes that the Ministry, as Mama Cash already does, will in the future follow the leadership and movements of feminists globally—without binders full of demands and limitations.

'The feminist issues are not isolated, they are connected; the movements go beyond national borders. So don't let the application form, but the movement *itself* be the guide.'

According to Kinyili, Mama Cash had to put a lot of effort and resources into presenting the organisation's administration and structures to the Ministry in such a way that it would be eligible for funding. 'But the Dream Team in Poland simply doesn't have the time, money, or resources for that.'

Lubayo also thinks of all the LGBTI and sex work activists in Africa

who demand respect for their communities, and Marcía of the activists in Brazil who fight for the preservation of the Amazon. That is why, all of them agree, direct funding for feminist organisations is a must: 'It is needed, right now.'

In addition, coherence is essential, says Macheke. For her, a successful FFP starts with a strong responsibility towards feminist organisations. She bases the degree of responsibility on the financing model.

**'What do we ask? That we enter into dialogue, that we have a seat at the table and that our expertise matters. Is that too much to ask for?'**

'Is there a political will to increase it by one percent and, if so: are all Ministries aware of it? If Defense or Commerce do not operate through the feminist lens, then you still negate all the other work.' That sentiment is shared, judging by the strongly nodding faces.

They draw hope for the future from the fighting spirit, solidarity and warmth of the groups and activists from all over the world—and also from new initiatives, such as the Alliance for Feminist Movements, founded in 2021.

'It unites the forces of financiers, governments, philanthropic organisations, and women's groups,' says Macheke enthusiastically. The aim is to close the gaps in understanding and budget. 'A lot is expected of feminist organisations. What do we ask? That we enter into dialogue, that we have a seat at the table and that our expertise matters. Is that too much to ask for?' •

Happy Mwende Kinyili



Sofía Marcía



Faye Macheke



Tina Lubayo





# Allies, partners

**Everyone benefits from gender equality. Four men from three different continents explain why they call themselves feminists, why the fight against patriarchy is also of interest to men, and what they hope to see reflected in Dutch foreign policy. 'Feminism felt like a liberation.'**

**Text: Elian Yahye**

**Luis Lineo (46) has been busy.** As party secretary of the Feministiskt initiativ (F!) he campaigned during the Swedish national elections in recent weeks.

F! was founded in 2005, with the fight against patriarchy as its *raison d'être*. The party, which to date has not won any parliamentary seats, acts mainly as a thorn in the side of the established politics. 'What appeals to me about feminism is the critical view of society,' says Lineo.

This year, the right-wing bloc—which includes the far-right Sweden Democrats—won a majority of seats. Conservative slogans did well with voters: less migration, more security cameras, and higher prison sentences. Lineo sighs: 'All stereotypically male, patriarchal talk.'

*The Women's March in Los Angeles, in 2017*



© Samantha Sophia (Unsplash)

He has been actively involved at F! for five years, but he has been a feminist since childhood, although he did not have the words for it back then. He was raised by his mother without any help from family. 'I saw how much injustice she faced as a young, single woman.' He continues, with a wink: 'Since then, I have always been on the side of women.'

As a teenager, he didn't really know how to relate to his manhood. He was particularly annoyed by stereotypes: 'I felt I was being pigeon-holed.' He played rugby fanatically for years—a rough, violent sport, typically 'masculine.' He continued, laughing: 'But I also loved dancing. Yet then everyone thought that was gay.'

When he went to university, a world opened up: the feminist theories he discovered gave him the vocabulary he lacked in childhood. 'All the puzzle pieces fell into place.'

His mother's bad experiences, the stifling gender roles, and the macho behaviour of some heterosexual men were not isolated, but rather part of a much larger system: the patriarchy. Since then, he has been a vocal 'ally'—'feminism,' he says, 'felt like a liberation.'

**'I wonder if there are any specific policies that anger them,' he then says. 'So far, I haven't heard that before'**

In addition to his political activism, Luis Lineo also works as a sex educator and is involved in Fanzingo, a media house that focuses on young people in underprivileged neighbourhoods. He also works at the secretariat of the European branch of MenEngage, an international network organisation that tries to involve men in gender equality. 'I work with teenagers and young men from all walks of life.'

He notices that there is a lot of resistance to the feminist movement among them. 'They have the idea that feminists are mainly against men.' Then, smiling: 'Or they refer to Andrew Tate videos.'

That kickboxer and influencer was removed from various social media platforms earlier this year, due to his misogynistic statements. The videos of the self-proclaimed 'king of toxic masculinity' have been viewed *billions* of times.

Paradoxically, the fact that anti-feminist rhetoric is catching on with young Swedish men is partly a good sign, according to Lineo: 'It shows we have won.' Feminist ideas have become the norm in Swedish society, to some extent, 'and anti-feminism is seen as a way to upset the system,' he says.

Their criticism, he observes, is often not directly related to the content. 'That remains fairly superficial. They say: "Why is feminism necessary? Don't women already earn enough?"' It never becomes clear which feminist ideas they actually disagree with. Lineo stays silent for a moment. 'I wonder if there are any specific policies that anger them,' he then says. 'So far, I haven't heard that before.'

It does not mean that there are no social problems that disproportio-

tionately affect men. 'Seventy percent of all suicides occur among men,' he says, and they also struggle with loneliness more often.

However, those problems are often also caused by patriarchal ideas: that it's not masculine to talk about your feelings, or that you only matter if you achieve a lot. 'I always say: I'm not against men, I'm *for* men. I don't want them to die or be lonely.'

**Lineo was born in what is now Ukraine.** His parents, both from Chile, had gone to the Soviet Union for their studies and had met there. When he was twelve years old, he emigrated to Sweden with his mother. Bewildered, he saw on television how Russian tanks drove into his homeland, last year.

War violence and gender, he says, are closely related: 'We see that young men are not allowed to leave their country because they have to fight in the army.' Women and children, on the other hand, have the most to fear from a hostile occupying force. 'They are treated the worst.' Rape and other forms of sexual violence, says UN representative Pramila Patten, 'are part of Russia's military strategy.'

Militarism, Lineo says firmly, is by definition not feminist. 'It's a patriarchal way of doing things. It's about power, about coercion—thinking that you can solve problems with weapons.' He points to his coffee mug, which bears a logo of the anti-nuclear weapon organisation ICAN. 'The nuclear bomb is the ultimate patriarchal weapon, the ultimate display of power. That is why Putin is threatening us with it.'

Sweden has also indulged in military macho behaviour in recent years. Arms exports abroad are on the rise again after a period of decline and it decided in 2019 not to ratify the TPNW treaty, which seeks a global ban on nuclear weapons.

And Lineo regrets that his country, after a long tradition of neutrality, now wants to join NATO. In a way, he can understand that wish, given Putin's military adventurism, 'but ultimately, the question is: how do you make peace sustainable?'

He points to the astronomical amounts that are annually spent on weapons worldwide: in 2021, global military spending was more than two trillion dollars. 'What would have happened if we had used a fraction of that money to support peace organisations in Russia and Ukraine? Could this situation have been prevented?'



**Luis Lineo**



As the first country in the world, Sweden has pursued a feminist foreign policy since 2014. The new right-wing government announced in October that it would stop doing so.

Margot Wallström, former foreign minister and founder of this policy agenda, said in an interview with *PassBlue* earlier this year that it is 'needed now more than ever'. She points to the deteriorating position of women in autocratic countries and in democracies, such as the US.

According to Lineo, feminist foreign policy was a step forward. 'Good results have been achieved', he says, but there was still a blind spot. He points to the war in Yemen, where, according to the UN, the most acute humanitarian crisis in the world is unfolding.

'We give aid for peacebuilding and gender equality, but at the same time we sell arms to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates... and they then use them to kill Yemeni women and children.'

His advice for the Netherlands, which has also embraced a feminist policy agenda since this year, is short and concise: 'Don't be hypocritical.' Feminism encompasses more than the classic themes, such as education for girls or access to contraception. 'You can have wonderful SRHR programmes, but what good is it if you are simultaneously encouraging violence?'

**Sohanur Rahman (26) is a young activist *par excellence*:** he heads a Bangladeshi youth parliament, which educates young people about the political system of Bangladesh, and offers them a platform to engage with policy-makers. As a coordinator of YouthNet for Climate Justice, he is committed to the fight against climate change. Having completed a MenEngage training, Rahman is also a vocal feminist. He learned that climate change is caused by an economic system based on exploitation and extractivism, 'which is inextricably linked to patriarchy,' he says.

In Bangladesh, with its low-lying deltas, the consequences of global warming are already visible: drinking water is becoming salinised at a rapid pace and hurricanes are becoming more frequent. By 2050, it is expected that one in seven people will be forced to move.



**Sohanur Rahman**

A radical change of course is needed, Rahman notes—and feminists and climate activists are therefore natural allies. 'Feminists also recognise that systemic change is warranted.'

Not everyone around him shares that view. 'Feminism is a dirty word among some men.' There are many misconceptions about what it exactly means: it is thought to be a movement against men, or yet another neo-colonial fad of the West. This resistance is sometimes motivated by religious considerations. 'They think feminism is *against* religion.'

**'The new generation is a lot more radical, and sometimes *does not want to work with men at all*'**

Rahman himself sees no conflict between Islam—the religion adhered to by ninety percent of Bengalis—and gender emancipation. He points to writer and activist Begum Rokeya, one of South Asia's leading feminists: 'She was staunchly Muslim.'

Rokeya went door-to-door urging families to send their daughters to school. Her organisation Anjuman-e-Khawateen-e-Islam (Islamic Women's Organisation) organised debates and meetings on the social position of women. 'Feminism is not solely a Western thing.'

In fact, Bangladesh has a long history of male advocates for women's rights. Take nineteenth-century social and religious reformer Raja Rammohan Roy, for example. 'He managed to get widow burnings officially abolished.' Or Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, a writer and teacher who championed the right of widows to remarry and the abolition of child marriages.

Both men were prominent figures during the Bengal Renaissance, a socio-cultural renewal movement spearheaded by both Hindus and Muslims. The struggle for gender equality is deeply intertwined with Bangladesh's historical identity. 'When I speak to men,' Rahman says, 'I find that this works well as an argument.'

Around him, he sees women climbing the social ladder. 'Our Prime Minister is a woman, as is the speaker of our Parliament and our representative at the UN.'

According to Rahman, feminism is not complete without the emancipation of LGBTI people. *Hijra*, a term mainly used to refer to transgender women, was officially recognised as the third gender category in Bangladesh, in 2014. 'I think important steps are being taken,' he says.

So, feminism is not solely something Western, but that does not mean that it is not possible to cooperate with Western governments, he says. For instance, he is very fond of Sweden's (past) feminist foreign policy. 'That had a lot of focus on the role of female leadership in the fight against climate change.'

However, feminism is currently still seen too much as a women's issue. 'We have to give men the idea that it also concerns them.' The Hague can play a role, there: 'It would be nice,' he says, 'if the Dutch strategy focuses on engaging the male allies.'



**Douglas Mendoza**

**Hernando Muñoz Sánchez**

**Douglas Mendoza (46) grew up in** a traditional Nicaraguan family; his father was a man of the old school: 'He was dominant, very patriarchal. My mother was always more in the background.' It was unthinkable for Mendoza to discuss his feelings—or, worse, his insecurities—with his father. 'He was very aloof and authoritarian.'

Mendoza soon realised that he did not want to become that kind of man himself. He started looking for alternatives and immersed himself in feminist ideas about gender and masculinity.

'It changed my life,' he says, enthusiastically. When raising his sons, he does try to discuss emotions and personal struggles. 'Eduardo is sixteen and he now says: "When I am old enough to work, I also want to commit myself to gender equality."'

Mendoza became involved in the Latin American branch of MenEngage, where he met Hernando Muñoz Sánchez, a Colombian researcher, now in his sixties, who holds a PhD in Gender Studies.

Mendoza and Sánchez work with men from all walks of life: 'Military personnel, police officers, students... you name it,' says Sánchez. 'We can't achieve gender equality if men don't change on the inside.'

The need for this change is reflected in the widespread and persistent violence against women and children. Sánchez teaches at the university, he is familiar with the sexual violence on the campuses—against which there are demonstrations.

And in Mexico, people have taken to the streets en masse in recent years to protest against 'femicide,' the murder of women where their gender is a leading motive. According to Amnesty International, at least ten women and girls are killed every day, there.

Men are not inherently violent, Sánchez and Mendoza stress, it's rather a matter of learned behaviours. *Machismo* is one of the key words in the conversation: 'It is the idea that men are automatically entitled to more power and privileges,' says Mendoza. 'It's all about authority, always wanting to be the strongest.'

Sánchez nods, then adds: '*Machismo* comes from what hegemonic society demands of you as a man. That you are the protector of your family, that you must always be able to provide economically.'

In Latin America, this form of militant masculinity is often intimately intertwined with religious ideas, he explains. 'People say: just as Jesus is the head of the Church, the man is the head of his family and of society.'

This idea is particularly strong in the Pentecostal movement, which is growing rapidly across the continent. Sánchez: 'Conservative Catholics are of course also conservative when it comes to abortion or LGBTI emancipation, but we see that the Protestants are even more radical in their anti-feminism.'

They also tend to be politically involved, Mendoza says. 'Pastors

from megachurches have a seat in parliaments and governments.' In Brazil, evangelicals ('beef, *Bible*, and bullets') form the hard core of former President Jair Bolsonaro's supporters. The right-wing hardliner ran long tirades against feminism during his re-election campaign.

Mendoza: 'People are scared of "gender ideology," of feminists whose aim is to "undermine the traditional family."'

But the feminist movement itself is also well organised. Last year, *The Jakarta Post* wrote that Latin American countries are being 'swamped by a new wave of feminism.' Sánchez himself calls gender 'the political issue of the twenty-first century.'

Several countries have successfully campaigned for tougher action against sexual violence and femicide, and for the expansion of abortion laws. 'It is important that men also do their part.'

Not all feminists are keen on that. Sánchez sees a difference between the old generation and the activists now taking up the baton. 'We notice that the new generation is a lot more radical, and sometimes does not want to work with men at all.' He understands that resistance, but thinks that the attitude is counterproductive. 'Instead, we should try to remove the barriers as much as possible.'

Two years ago, Mexico became the first Latin American country to announce that it would adopt an FFP. That the Netherlands has now also taken that step is good news, according to both men.

**It is thought to be a movement against men, or yet another neo-colonial fad of the West**

Sánchez: 'The Netherlands should insist more on the need for gender equality in discussions with Latin American governments. Many governments here are dictatorial or conservative, they are not very concerned with the issue.'

Mendoza adds: 'There is a particular need for evidence-based results of policies that work well, so we can show them that gender equality benefits everyone.' ●





© Vera Rodriguez

# They do not belong on the fringes'

Sex worker rights are human rights

Text: Eunice Mwaura

To protect sex workers from harassment, feminists in Kenya are calling for the criminal laws against them to be repealed—because violence is the order of the day, but with the police, they are met with deafening silence. Wounds and stigmas remain. 'What could I have done?' Maua\* asks. 'I was destitute and my work is illegal, I had no choice but to let it go...' Visiting the brothel, where a turnaround isn't inconceivable.

Malindi is one of many towns on the Kenyan coastline. One could not describe it, label it, without mentioning the Italian population that has settled there and is large enough to exert a certain cultural influence.

The verdant landscape—bordered on one side by swaying palms and on the other by the warm Indian Ocean—is probably great for a holiday, but this coastal community has more than white sand beaches and breathtaking scenery.

Pronouncing 'Karumaindo' often produces a sceptical look. It is one of the most prominent resting places of Majengo, an informal settlement within the city. Towering over a cluster of tin roofs, its three floors house sex workers who live and work there. 'I was born and raised here,' says Riziki Bondora, as evidenced by the number of people nodding to her as she walks through the narrow corridors.

She is now forty and has spent the past 26 years as a sex worker, so she has seen it all and she concludes that the injustice goes beyond all bounds. She raises her right hand, showing a scar on her middle finger. 'Of all the issues of violence I have raised,' she says, 'this is the only one for which I have received justice.'

As we approach the reception area, women are strategically positioned to bring in customers. Some approach me, indicating that they do not count mere men among their clientele. As we walk past the rooms on either side, a thick stench of khat and liquor hangs in the air.

We make our way to the top floor, where three women are sitting in front of their doors. As they all tell their stories, one of them, Miriam\*, realises it pretty much comes down to the same thing.

One of the challenges, she reveals, are the both arbitrary and targeted arrests by law enforcement, which has now caused her to be temporarily relocated from Nairobi. 'You don't get that kind of harassment here,' she says, but of all the difficulties, the lack of health care is the most dire.

'We are suffering because the nature of our work requires us to protect ourselves,' she says, 'but we have been without access to condoms and lubricant for some time now—putting our lives and the well-being of society at risk. If it were given priority, we would be much safer and we would be left with much more of our meagre earnings.'

Decriminalisation still seems a long way off for them, but they do have a few wishes: less police harassment, a legal system that does not turn against them and better access to care. When we say goodbye, they ask Bondora for condoms, and she promises to do her best to obtain some.

Bondora currently works for Amkeni, which provides health services and advocacy work for marginalised and vulnerable sexual minorities and groups. Although it is essentially an organisation for the LGBTI community, Bondora has arranged for her female colleagues in sex work to be included in the target group as well—and thus be able to get care, condoms, and psychosocial and legal support.

27-year-old Maua\* is here for the latter. After recounting her ordeals in one such legal session, she sits facing the lawyer with an expectant look. The henna painting of flowers conceals the blood clots on her arms. When she is reminded of the time she had to fight two vicious dogs, she begins to break down. 'I'm ashamed of the scars...' she says, 'but I can't help but learn to live with them.'

She nods when the lawyer asks if she ever reported the case—she even contacted the authorities three times, but the aggressor had already used his fortune to get away. 'What could I have done?' she asks. 'I was destitute and my work is illegal, I had no choice but to let it go and heal my wounds...'

An officer from Malindi's gender bureau admits that sex workers have issues with sexual and gender-based violence, but that most go unreported. In 2004, such offices were set up across Kenya, under police control, meant to close the gap in access to services for victims of such violence.

Though this officer does not think there is a gap in the legal system, for sex workers. 'At the police station, they feel like victims,' he says, 'but on what grounds can we pursue their cases for prosecution? Their work is illegal and unless the constitution is changed, there is not much we can do.'

The term 'sex work' is yet to be defined in Kenya's legal and policy framework, although it is often classified as prostitution. The latter is not prohibited in itself, but some aspects—such as earnings from sex work—fall under criminality in the Penal Code.

Other laws against prostitution include public indecency, soliciting, and disorderly conduct and can be used to prosecute sex workers.

Back in Nairobi, I meet Caroline Njoroge, the deputy director of the Kenya Sex Workers Alliance (KESWA). She proudly identifies as a sex worker, a bold statement in light of the country's strict religious, cultural, and legal background. 'Sex work is work like anything else,' she says. 'I am no less than a driver who uses his hands to make ends meet, by transporting people.'

KESWA is the umbrella network of sex worker-led groups and community-based HIV organisations in Kenya. It was the second of its kind on the continent, following the establishment of the African Sex Workers Alliance in South Africa.

It came after a few current KESWA representatives attended the first-ever African sex workers conference in Johannesburg, calling for a movement to start. 'Legally,' says Njoroge, 'we are known as the Key Affected Population Health and Legal Rights Alliance, but we prefer to be called KESWA.'

Due to the policy and legal framework, forming a union or a collective is a difficult process. Since its inception in 2013, KESWA has highlighted the plight of its members on health and human rights issues by raising awareness and strengthening their capacity to advocate for justice—within the prevailing context.

'In many ways, sex workers are susceptible to violence by agents, clients, and passers-by,' Njoroge continues. 'The provisions have exacerbated violations of their human rights, such as their right to basic care and living conditions, but these are almost never discussed... and their voices are constantly silenced.'

'A lot of issues, like Maua's, remain unreported and undocumented. Because they mistake us for criminals, we already risk being punished if we report crimes committed against us—so our legal protection is quite weakened. No group is more vulnerable to violence than sex workers: they should protect us better, but it seems that the law has been used against us.'

'I'm in good hands with KESWA, which is not to say that I have to give up my identity as a sex worker—I am doing my job and I like



At the Kenyan coast

it quite a lot. Most people think such women are some kind of victims and that they only turn to sex work because they had no other chance to earn money.

'You cannot get any further from the truth. We have invested heavily in the inclusive economic growth of the sex workers we serve. We have educated them in microeconomics and equipped them with knowledge about savings, resource allocation, and constructive financial decision-making.

'One group has completed the training on economic and entrepreneurial "literacy" and is currently running a large poultry farm, but most members nevertheless still prefer sex work. KESWA believes everyone should decide for themselves, without getting involved.

'We care about their financial security, so if they choose to continue working in the sex industry, they will have to be able to do so in a safe way—partly through economic empowerment.'

## 'They should protect us better, but it seems that the law has been used against us'

Although criminalisation *does* affect how the law views and treats them. It entrenches the stereotypes and false narratives of 'good' and 'bad' people, who deserve to be seen and heard by the law.

Inclusion of everyone—including sex workers—is essential to achieving true gender equality and respecting human rights. Proponents of criminalisation in the feminist movement must choose who and what should be shielded in the name of that endeavour.

Riziki Bondora, who has completed KESWA's mentorship and capacity training, is currently launching her own movement in Malindi, which will do everything possible to make sex workers' rights a human right, a matter of dignity and respect.

'The formation of member groups,' says Caroline Njoroge, 'has brought us an extraordinary amount, enabled us to reach as many sex workers as possible, regardless of their diversity. The course has prepared us for that, to stand up for our needs.

'We want to ensure better understanding, more awareness about

our movements and needs, because many people still don't know about them. During our lobbying work, we continuously encountered misinterpretations and our right to exist was even questioned. But without such organisations, the fight for equality and visibility would even be impossible.'

KESWA's global advocacy focuses on decriminalisation as the first and most crucial step towards legislation and practices that would better protect sex workers. According to Njoroge, it should include the abolition of at least part of the laws and policies on prostitution—if not all of them.

'There simply is a market for paid sex,' she says, 'whether it is prohibited by law or not—that makes the need for governments to support it even greater. Criminalising us exacerbates the problems we already have anyway, including access to care, a fundamental human right. It has become a source of discrimination, stigma, and abuse. Often, the attempts to obtain those services have been compromised or rejected outright.'

Criminalisation has also been identified as a significant driver of HIV infections; the virus is disproportionately hitting sex workers. Estimates show that it is about thirty times more common among them, globally.

'We have worked with and maintained ties with government agencies, such as the National AIDS Control Council. For us, that's a big thing: a form of recognition, of participation in the discussion.' While there have been gains in reducing HIV and AIDS among sex workers, the government still lags behind in reforming the legal system to eliminate stigma and discrimination.

These are phenomena that are particularly apparent in the health-care sector. 'Some service providers in the hospital are hostile and abusive,' says Regina\*. 'They deprive you of treatment by making you wait unnecessarily long hours, or by blaming you for your illness.'

She prefers a private clinic, where she is welcomed with dignity and respect: 'There is a general hostility among public service providers.' Those who cannot afford private care often do not seek treatment at all. They then stay with the ailment or injury until the bitter end, just to avoid suffering the stigma—so you can remedy that by decriminalising the whole thing, Regina thinks.

**And that can ensure that sex workers** will participate in conversations that have long been held without them, something Njoroge feels coming, within regional and international human rights organisations.

Especially since Phelister Abdalla, the current KESWA national coordinator, joined the Civil Society Advisory Group of the Generation Equality Forum (GEF), last year. There she highlighted the rights of

sex workers, so that they can be reflected in the Forum's conclusions.

'We have been networking and collaborating with other women-led or feminist-led movements,' she says, 'to see how our agendas could converge, because they are quite similar. With the feminists, that has led to our participation in the revision of the Maputo Protocol, on the rights of African women.

'It allowed us to bring in much-needed points of reflection on human rights treaties, to consider more inclusive ways and to stretch the boundaries of the protocol, to serve, improve, and protect the rights of *all* women—not *some*. During the review, we developed an advocacy strategy for sex workers.

'This includes access to labour law. We would like to participate in larger discussions about the systemic reform of women's status, on platforms where we can talk about safer practices and labour rights with civil servants. Such conversations do take place, but our voice has always been completely ignored.'

Sex work is not yet recognised as work by existing labour laws and human rights treaties, which means that sex workers do not currently enjoy the protection offered.

'As a result, the perpetrators of sexual abuse or exploitation are not directly convicted—and the few reported cases linger somewhere in the justice system. The sentences are also too lenient, they do not have a deterrent effect... and that is reflected in the increasing number of cases.'

**KESWA has set up a toll-free emergency** number that sex workers can call throughout Kenya, which is staffed by trained counsellors. The number of reported issues has increased by two percent and victims were there in time for telephone counselling.

Due to the enormous stigma within the care centres, KESWA has also worked with the Global Fund to set up a prevention programme for sex workers—and their clients—in Kajiado North, to provide them with stigma-free HIV, SRHR, and psychosocial support, and to provide condoms.

To bring about decriminalisation, a strong movement is needed—and KESWA now has 75 member groups, including the human rights organisation UPR Kenya, which helped KESWA participate in the review and provide recommendations to the Kenyan government.

They have set up a three-year decriminalisation strategy that now serves as a roadmap of engagement between the groups and the outside world, telling stories about sex workers and engaging with people.

And they advocate for sex workers' rights with a diversity perspective, acknowledging the existence and experiences of male, trans-

gender, drug-using, HIV-positive, refugee, and migrant sex workers. They constantly encounter mixed forms of discrimination, criminalisation, and marginalisation, which you cannot address separately.

The nature of sex work is shifting, due to the limitless possibilities that technology offers. It needs to be made clear that sex workers make their money through their services *because it is their job*, as others have other jobs—a financial requirement for all of us to make ends meet.

For some, sex work is exciting work that gives them the opportunity to explore and express their sexuality. And in many cases, it is the only option—especially for low-skilled people or for people who are discriminated against because of their skin colour, trans identity, disability, or lack of residence papers.

Society stigmatises them because many institutions do not see and treat them as 'equal people' before the law. They often have to endure all kinds of violence and intimidation, including from the government, even though the authorities are supposed to protect them without discrimination.

It is important to keep thinking freely and not to make assumptions: 'A sex worker is a human being, someone's mother, father, daughter or son,' says Caroline Njoroge, in conclusion. 'They are not "creatures" that belong on the fringes of society—so you shouldn't treat them like that.' •

*\*For security reasons, their names are fictitious—their real names are known to the editors*







# The earth: source of life or raw materials?

The Mayan highlands of Guatemala are the backdrop and the stakes of a years-long stand-off of mythical proportions: a line of female land defenders—singing, holding hands—facing a battalion of fully equipped soldiers, weapons ready to go. In the background the reason: the gold mine El Tambor.

Text: Marlies Pilon | Image: JASS

Our Western consumer society is built on extractivism; extracting natural resources—mainly from Southern countries—for the world market. And this postcolonial form of overexploitation of nature hits girls and women hard.

Female land defenders resisting the destruction of their habitats have one of the deadliest ‘jobs’ in the world: on average, one has been killed every two days over the past decade, according to a 2021 report by the human rights organisation Global Witness.

It is an unfair fight. Imagine reading in the local newspaper that a foreign company is going to build a huge mine in your neighbourhood, forcing hundreds of families to leave their homes, and the scarce drinking water to be poisoned.

The gold and silver from the mine—like

the profits—will disappear abroad. Not a single agency has discussed it with the local residents; the authorities have been keeping quiet about it all this time and refuse to give explanations when asked. What would you do?

Residents of San José del Golfo, a town in the Guatemalan highlands, spring into action when they see miners and trucks moving towards the mine one day. They literally throw their bodies into battle and block the entrance to the mine.

This human roadblock grew into the peaceful resistance movement La Puya (The Barb), figurehead Miriam Pixtún says, proudly, via Zoom. ‘As you know, technology sometimes lets us down,’ she apologises, with a wink, because she joined fifteen minutes late.

She looks combative and cheerful as she talks about their formula for success: ‘We don’t use violence. Everyone in the community participates in the rotating twelve-hour shifts—and we are not giving up.’

The now legendary line-up in front of the mine entrance has a motley and diverse character: pregnant women, children, grandfathers and grandmothers. ‘A flu or birthday is no excuse!’ Pixtún laughs.

But, seriously: ‘If the police or the army arrive, the grandmothers will come into action. They will stand in front and sing in unison about peace and forgiveness. That strategy works, because despite the tear gas, the shelling, the arrests by the army and police, we continue to block the entrance. We protect our country, our lives: we aren’t going anywhere!’

0.13 percent of the world’s population, mainly from Northern countries, consumes eighty percent of the natural resources.

(Source: Oxfam, 2021)

## Research into extractivism

shows that the guidelines for consultation and input from people living in areas where gold, palm oil, or minerals can be obtained are hardly adhered to. The ‘no’ of residents is simply not respected.

Typical of extractivism is the enormously unequal balance of power: the local population against a foreign multinational, which often cooperates with the national government. Does a community say no? Then the next step, usually, is a military intervention.

The struggle of Miriam Pixtún and her community is great, but not an isolated one: in Guatemala, almost three-quarters of all land is now in the hands of a small elite. The government gives away land rights to the highest international bidder, often without respect for the residents’ right to information and consent.

All over the world, land and environmental defenders are watching anxiously: what will be the fate of La Puya? They know the chilling statistics; violence against environmentalists and land defenders is the order of the day, it is even the deadliest task in the world (Global Witness).

From New York, Alexa Bradley explains why: ‘When you don’t know who is threatening your country, your livelihood, and sometimes your life, impunity reigns supreme and there can be no real justice.’ She is a programme director at JASS, which amplifies women’s voices worldwide through a large network, strategy, and security.

‘We also support female land defenders, especially in Central America—that’s how I met Miriam Pixtún and La Puya four years ago. What courage and perseverance I saw there!’ But she also saw that an essential ingredient was missing: information. ‘And that’s how extractivism came on our radar.’

JASS created a digital toolbox for women activists and land defenders to find out who pays for extractivism, who profits off of it and in whose name violence is used.

Bradley: ‘Follow the money, indeed, and since these really are multi-billion-dollar projects,

that knowledge gives power.’ For example, Pixtún’s organisation started a lawsuit against the Guatemalan government, which was subsequently forced to revoke the mining permit.

The State has appealed and the American mining company has subsequently held the government responsible for lost profits of an estimated three hundred million dollars. A verdict is expected soon.

Miriam Pixtún hopes the world is watching, and she also knows what she needs from the West: ‘A foreign policy that calls itself feminist should at least be coherent,’ she says.

‘Now we receive support in the form of funds for environmental activists and human rights fighters, but in the meantime we have to deal with a trade policy that undermines the rights of women leaders and democratic institutions.’

Bradley cites the example of land defender Berta Cáceres, from Honduras, who was murdered six years ago: ‘She stood up for the rights of the indigenous people and opposed the construction of the Agua Zarca dam, which was co-financed by the Dutch development bank FMO.

‘Although the perpetrators of the murder have now been convicted, the principals are still at large—a lack of information and a lack of international attention to these kinds of cases enabled that...’

Both women say that as a world we are at a ‘critical crossroads.’ Bradley: ‘This is a systemic problem, which you also see in terms of climate, gender, and North-South relations. We cannot continue to smooth over with one hand what we destroy with the other.

‘To be credible, an FFP

must focus on the wishes of women like Miriam and Berta, not only in terms of aid, but also in terms of trade. The communities and indigenous groups should benefit from and have a say in these kinds of projects from the start—that is the only way to prevent more conflicts.’

**‘Although the perpetrators of the murder have now been convicted, the principals are still at large’**

For Pixtún, a feminist foreign policy is about stopping all forms of violence: ‘Against us, female land defenders, and against all people and animals on earth, but also violence against our nature must stop. Look up: see the sun, moon, and stars—they are watching over us all.

‘We don’t want a fight, we also protect our country for the next generation, and for the generations after that. This is actually about our relationship with the earth. A feminist foreign policy must reflect on the destructive power of extractivism while it still can.’ ●

Natural resources have been linked to at least forty percent of the conflicts of the past sixty years.

(Source: Oxfam, 2021)







SUPPORT  
VICE  
VERSA

# BECOME A MEMBER

Support journalism on  
global development and  
subscribe to *Vice Versa*.



in-depth international news,  
talked-about **events**,  
inspiring thinkers and doers,  
informed **opinions** and  
current **background stories**



# VICE VERSA

journalism on  
global development

## Check out

[www.viceversaonline.nl/abonnement](http://www.viceversaonline.nl/abonnement)