

The Scottish Government's Feminist Approach to International Relations (FAIR). Is it Feminist? Is it Fair?

Introduction

The Scottish Government (SG) has for some time now sought to carve out a position for Scotland as a good global citizen in world politics, resting that commitment on its wish to “mak[e] a constructive contribution to addressing global challenges” (Scottish Government 2021a; see also Mills and Birdsall 2024).¹ As such, it has developed an increasingly ambitious role in the global arena, centred around its international development strategy, climate justice work, and trade vision, in addition to commitments to uphold human rights, the rule of law, and multilateralism. Furthermore, the SG's Programme for Government 2021-2022 (Scottish Government 2021b, 110), titled “A Fairer, Greener Scotland,” promised a new “global affairs framework ... to guide Scotland's international engagement, grounded in a values-based approach, and a feminist approach to foreign policy.” The commitment to develop a feminist approach to international relations culminated in the release of a position paper in late 2023, the SG's *Feminist Approach to International Relations* (FAIR) (Scottish Government 2023a).

With FAIR, the SG joins a growing number of governments (Canada, Chile, Colombia, France, Liberia, Libya, Luxembourg, Mexico, Mongolia, the Netherlands, Slovenia, and Spain) that have adopted a feminist approach to international relations (Feminist Foreign Policy Collaborative 2023).² These policies reflect the work of feminists – within the formal structures of governments and civil society – to advance feminist foreign policy goals of a more just, equal, peaceful and environmentally sustainable world order. This growth in feminist foreign policies (FFP) is mirrored in a surge in policy and academic publishing on the topic, which largely finds that the impact of FFPs to date is disappointing (Guerrina,

¹ The Scottish Government is committed to working towards the attainment of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in its domestic and foreign dealings and has a National Performance Framework (NPF) aligned to the SDGs. In addition, the Scottish Government is committed to “Policy Coherence in Sustainable Development,” an approach that the OECD highlights as key to achieving the SDGs (OECD 2024).

² Until 2022, Sweden was amongst these states, but despite being the originator of FFP under the Social Democratic-Green Party coalition government in 2014, it has since, with a change of government, abandoned the feminist foreign policy. Argentina declared in 2023 that it would adopt a feminist foreign policy but after the electoral victory of Javier Milei in October 2023 the country's feminist credentials have been severely challenged.

Haastrup, and Wright 2023; Thomson 2022 and 2020; Robinson 2021). This article assesses the distinctiveness of the SG's articulation of FAIR, and asks whether the SG's FAIR has the potential to bring about said feminist goals? To what extent can FAIR contribute to, as the Programme for Government 2021-22 phrases it, a fairer and greener world?

FAIR was developed before the re-election of Donald Trump as US President. It was launched in a period where there was a energy for progressive government interventions, such as those designed to enable states to “build back better” from the Covid 19 pandemic and/or to tackle the climate and inequalities crises together. It is a very different world now, of course. In recent years, with the election of ‘strongman’ populist leaders such as US President Donald Trump, who disparage international treaties and institutions and gladly accept the acquisition of territory by force, foreign policy has returned to a highly masculinised era of global politics. Wars in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan and beyond intensify, with powerful states doing nothing to bring about sustainable peace. Authoritarianism is rising across the world, and in the US, democracy is collapsing at a pace that citizens and outside onlookers alike struggle to comprehend. Trump's assaults on the world trade system have pushed other states into being more nakedly transactional and self-serving. In many ways, there could not be a less auspicious time for launching a Feminist Approach to International Relations. It is surely, some might argue, destined to sink without trace.

We strongly disagree. We think that it is important to evaluate the Scottish Government's FAIR as well as other feminist and progressive elements of states' foreign policies. Faced with this new world disorder, states have two choices: to acquiesce and accept the principles of militarism and fight for survival, or, alternatively, attempt to rebuild a world based on rule of law, human rights, and cooperative multilateralism. Only the latter approach, the attempt to rebuild a solidaristic internationalism, is a tenable route out of the current insecure, anti-feminist and hostile world. Thus, we recognise the potential of feminist approaches to international relations to rebuild the world, with the SGs' FAIR being worthy of close examination.

There are some reasons to assume that FAIR could be more transformative than other FFPs to date. The SG adopted a bottom-up, consultative, collaborative approach in the development of FAIR, expressing an explicit willingness to learn from a wide range of stakeholders, including women civil society representatives in Scotland as well as representatives from the Global South, international organisations, and other states that have adopted FFPs. It also has

a record of introducing feminist domestic and international policies, for example in relation to gender-based violence, gendered patterns of poverty, as well as a feminist approach to international climate finance. The Scottish National Party (SNP), the party in government during the development of FAIR, ultimately seeks independence. Its desire to demonstrate its ability to be a fully functioning “real state,” different from the rest of the UK and the then ruling Conservative Party (see Dellepiane and Reinsberg 2023), and, more recently, the Labour government, provides a motivation for a distinctive and more progressive approach than some other FFPs.

That said, there are several factors which would caution against the assumption that the SG could produce a more progressive feminist approach than those of other states. The first and most obvious point to make here is the scale of the challenge. In most feminist analyses, the goals of equality, justice, peace, and environmental sustainability demand radical transformations of existing social structures, from militarism to extractivist capitalism. To think that a single state’s FFP could achieve that level of structural change is far-fetched. Scotland is a sub-state, without the full powers of a sovereign state, creating an additional layer of barriers to developing and implementing a FFP, barriers that will be detailed and explored further below. The record and ambition of its domestic feminist policies are a work in progress; Scotland is not a feminist utopia.³ This set of conflicting indicators makes the question of the relative progressiveness of the SG’s FAIR an interesting one to explore.

This article has two research aims. First, it aims to assess the extent to which FAIR could contribute to a “fairer, greener” and gender-just world? And, second, it aims to explore what the case of Scotland and the SG’s FAIR reveal about what is often termed “paradiplomacy”, that is, international activities that are practiced by sub-state actors. The article proceeds as follows. In the first part, it presents feminist visions for a foreign policy that would be conducive to a more just and peaceful world. Drawing on decades of feminist scholarship and activism, it discusses feminists’ calls for states to closely cooperate to tackle the root causes of insecurities, inequalities, and injustices. The second section sets out the framework with which we analyse FAIR. Our analytical approach draws upon a conceptual framework first introduced by feminist scholars Bergman Rosamond, Duncanson and Gentry (2022). The authors propose that the “3Rs” - first introduced by the Swedish government and often used

³ See, for example, the work of Engender, Scotland’s feminist membership organisation, and its briefing for parliamentarians: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Engender-Parliamentary-Briefing---Scottish-Budget-2025-26.pdf>

to evaluate FFPs – rights, representation and resources⁴ –should be replaced with measures that could more effectively capture progress towards the changes required for a fairer, greener, and gender-just world. The third section reflects on Scotland’s constitutional status within the UK, the constraints that emerge from it, and the SG’s active efforts to engage in international relations using soft power and paradiplomacy. The fourth section contains the substantive analysis, and the fifth section concludes our discussion.

Feminist Insights for Foreign Policies: Building a Conceptual Framework

In this section we locate our study within feminist international relations (IR) scholarship, which provides a fruitful conceptual platform for a critical analysis of Scotland’s feminist ambitions beyond borders. We draw on a long-established feminist research agenda that seeks to identify and tackle the structural causes of inequalities and insecurities in global politics. This requires an analytical and ethical commitment to deconstructing the power hierarchies and structures that drive, underpin, and legitimize gendered inequalities, insecurities, and harms globally.

Feminists have criticised mainstream ways of conceptualising and practicing global politics for many decades (Tickner and True 2018). Feminist scholars, often in coalition with women’s civil society activists, have sought to present a model for feminist foreign policy that could bring about a more equal, just, peaceful, and environmentally sustainable world.

Feminist IR scholars and activists focus on the *drivers* of inequality, insecurity, and war. These drivers were neatly laid out in scholar/activist Cynthia Cockburn’s manifesto that marked the centenary of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, the world’s foremost feminist peace and justice NGO (WILPF 2015; see also Cockburn 2010). The structures that she identifies include militarism, the policy approach and practice whereby perceived interests are likely to be pursued by “weaponry rather than words;” the capitalist economic system and the “exploitation of the labour and resources of the many by the few, that wantonly harms people and the environment, generating conglomerates of global reach and unaccountable power;” and imperialism, including rivalry between states,

⁴ The Swedish Government added a fourth R, ‘realism’ at a later stage, to make the point that foreign policies had to be realistic about what they could achieve. This fourth R did not play such a defining role in FFPs, in Sweden and beyond, nor in the frameworks used to evaluate FFPs, so we make reference to the 3Rs throughout this article.

occupation as well as racialised, colonial and patriarchal systems of violent oppression (WILPF 2015, 1).

With Cockburn, we argue that militarisation is sustained by masculinity (Kronsell 2012). States' extraordinary levels of military spending (Enloe 2023) have translated into a massive proliferation of arms around the world, with tremendous impact on women and girls in conflict zones: domestic violence, electoral violence, and heightened risks of conflict in local communities.⁵ The devastating impacts of war, militarism, and nuclear radiation on women's health, climate change and the environment are visible in contemporary global politics.

The drivers of war, inequality, and insecurity can only be challenged if nation-states refrain from prioritising their commercial and military self-interests. Indeed, such prioritisations generate colonial and imperialist projects, inter-state rivalry, invasion and occupation, contested borders, and, inside those borders, policies of extraction and the rise of populist and far-right politics. A critical approach to the study of FFP, which is offered below in the context of Scotland, actively seeks to expose such anti-feminist and often violent projects.

In the current context of record-breaking forcibly displaced people amounting to 123.2 million (UNHCR 2025), intensifying inequalities (Oxfam International 2022), eco-systems on the point of collapse (IPCC 2021), and devastating wars in Ukraine, Gaza and South Sudan amongst others, it is becoming clear to feminists that foreign policies that try to make small tweaks to orthodox foreign policy practices are insufficient. While the inclusion of women in foreign policy making, and/or educating and empowering girls in the Global South are important goals, such initiatives are not sufficiently connected to the structural changes that are required to tackle escalating inequalities, violence, and ecological destruction on a broad front (Cohn 2023; Bouka 2021; Goetz 2021; Robinson 2021; Achilleos-Sarll 2018). This involves recognising that states that profess to be feminist in their foreign policy outlook, while having benefited from colonialism, have a special responsibility to structurally change the global order. States all too often conceive of gendered inequalities as arising from patriarchal cultures "over there," airbrushing colonial violence out of the picture (Ansorg, Haastrup, and Wright 2020; Bergman Rosamond 2020). A feminist approach to foreign policy, by contrast, demands accountability through a thorough reckoning with the past, and

⁵ This is evidenced in numerous reports, such as <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/resource/small-arms-survey-2014-women-and-guns>; also see Ray Acheson and Madeleine Rees, "A Feminist Approach for Addressing Excessive Military Spending," in *Rethinking Unconstrained Military Spending* UN Office for Disarmament Affairs, 2020.

payment of meaningful reparations, as part of an effort to transform global economic and political structures.

Notably, feminist approaches to foreign policy should be concerned not just with tackling gender inequalities, but with the eradication of all forms of oppression and domination (hooks 2000). Central to feminists' conceptual framework is the concept of "intersectionality" (Collins and Bilge 2020; Crenshaw 1989), the idea that people's lived experiences are shaped by interlocking structures of inequality based on gender, class, and race/ethnicity, among others, and the recognition that many groups of men also suffer oppression and exploitation. Thus, the goal is not just for women to be equal with men, but for all people to live lives free from oppression, exploitation, and domination. For ecofeminists, concerned with the destruction and pollution of the natural world, this goal extends beyond human life to all life: the goal is human and planetary flourishing (Braidotti 2021).

Fundamentally, feminist IR focuses on the ways in which gender operates to legitimate violent, exploitative, and extractive practices. Gender operates as an ideological system to naturalise the dynamics that perpetuate inequalities and insecurities, particularly in the dominance of masculinity in global politics (Runyan 2018). Challenging this ideological system is an important part of the endeavour of achieving peace and security, gender-justice and environmental sustainability. To explain, gender is not just a property of bodies, but also acts as a symbolic system, shaping the lives of all individuals. In this system, activities, behaviors, policies, and practices are coded as masculine or feminine, with the former valued over the latter in subtle ways (Cohn 1993). Pointing out that "many of our assumptions and beliefs about which security policies will be effective arise from a series of gendered ideas about how to most effectively exercise power, what it means to be 'strong' and what 'works' to keep us secure" (Cohn 2019, 9), feminists argue for investing in foreign policy approaches that often have been discarded as weak, naïve, or "unrealistic" (Cohn 2019, 10; see also Robinson 2021, Sjoberg 2006, Tickner 1992). Feminists contend, in other words, that masculinity's association with strength, toughness, and military and economic superiority enables and legitimizes adversarial foreign policies, thereby delegitimizing approaches that are more cooperative, empathetic, and caring (Aggestam, Bergman Rosamond and Kronsell 2019; Gentry 2013).

Likewise, feminists argue that the association of masculinity with the task of dominating and deploying nature legitimizes the extractivist economic system that has led us to a point of

near planetary collapse (Sultana 2022; Salleh 2020; Plumwood 1993; Merchant 1980). Since colonial times, masculinity has been closely linked to the domination of nature, to the point that the use of and pollution of nature are seen as normal practices (Merchant 1980). Such domination, not least in times of climate crises and biodiversity collapse, produce gendered inequalities and insecurities often affecting women particularly severely (Cohn and Duncanson 2020). Global North states committed to feminism in foreign policy must acknowledge their historic role as chief emitters and be proactive in transferring resources to the Global South, and committed to transforming the economic system that drives ecological collapse. Economics and ecology are interlinked. The structural drivers of poverty, found in a global economic system which interacts with patriarchal cultural relations, not only systematically drains wealth from the Global South to Global North, but also have devastating environmental impact on local communities. (Abed and Kelleher 2022; Actionaid 2022; WEDO, WWG-FFD, FEMNET and PACJA 2021).

The global trade system, for example, promotes a model of economic competitiveness that depends on a “flexible” and deregulated labour market that puts downward pressure on wages. Such a model often reinforces the marginalization of women in the Global South, as they tend to be concentrated in the most poorly paid, vulnerable, and part-time roles in the economy (Busse and Spielmann 2006). Additionally, trade liberalisation, through the reduction of tariffs, denies Global South governments revenue (Gender and Development Network 2017) and income that could be used to strengthen public services such as childcare, education, water, and sanitation, which are all critical to advancing women’s human rights. Trump’s imposition of high tariffs and the breakdown of a rules-based trading order only exacerbates the harms inflicted on the most marginalised in the Global South. A feminist approach to international relations and foreign policies needs to be attentive to these dynamics (Third World Network 2019).

Feminists have long-sought new, feminist informed approaches to foreign policies. Therefore, there was some excitement when the Government of Sweden announced its intention to adopt a Feminist Foreign Policy in 2014. However, much of the feminist commentary on FFPs, emerging from both academic and civil society actors shows that FFPs fall short of the feminist vision that we have presented above (Bergman Rosamond, Duncanson and Gentry 2022; Thomson 2022; Robinson 2021).

They have made little headway in tackling the aforementioned structural drivers of gendered, colonial and racialized insecurities, injustices, and inequalities (Guerrina, Haastrup and Wright 2023; Saleh 2024; Bergman Rosamond, Cheung and deLeeuw 2023; Cheung 2025; Thomson 2022; Robinson 2021). A number of FFP states emulated Sweden's 3Rs of rights, representation, and resources, with Germany being a prominent example here, without reflecting on their limits in achieving feminist structural change. The 3Rs have done little to tackle the root causes of armed conflict, colonial oppression, and a wide range of gendered harms and injustices, including displacement, conflict-based sexual violence, conflict-induced poverty, and climate breakdown (Tetali 2023; Myers 2024).

To add insult to injury, the pioneer of FFPs, Sweden, abandoned its feminist foreign policy FFP in October 2022, with the former Conservative Minister for Foreign Affairs Tobias Billström noting that it no longer served Swedish national interests in times of war and conflict in Europe (Bergman Rosamond 2024).⁶ Germany, often seen as Sweden's successor, has also indicated its scrapping of FFP, following the recent election of a right-wing CDU-led coalition government. Similarly, both the Netherlands and Luxembourg have significantly reduced their commitment to feminism in foreign policy. FFPs are in a tenuous position in the current global era of highly masculinised politics. That said, they also represent a route for navigating out of this authoritarian, destructive and violent system, and thus deserve our close attention. Below we introduce our analytical framework for the analysis of Scotland's FAIR.

Assessing Feminist Foreign Policies: an analytical framework

In response to the news that the Scottish Government was seeking to develop a feminist approach to external relations, Bergman Rosamond, Duncanson, and Gentry (2022) proposed that the SG should replace the 3Rs with the '3As': ambition, authenticity, and accountability. The three authors argue that a feminist approach to foreign policy should move beyond the goals of women's rights, representation, and (limited distribution of) resources. Instead, a FFP should *ambitiously* aim to transform the harmful structures that undermine women and other marginalised individuals' rights, prevent their representation, and expropriate their resources. It should also be *authentic* – that is, there should be policy coherence between feminist commitments at home and those directed outward. Finally, a truly feminist FFP

should hold states *accountable* for the harms wrought by their implication in colonialism and imperialism, most notably, racial hierarchies, extreme inequalities of power and wealth, and the current climate and biodiversity crises.

The three As framework, we think, is better than frameworks based on the 3Rs⁷, because it comes closer to measuring FFPs against the standard of the ideals put forward by feminist IR scholars and activists. It is clear from the discussion of feminist IR scholarship above that the feminist goals of peace, equality, justice and sustainability require foreign policies focused on structural change. Foreign policies have to be geared towards transforming the structures that drive war, inequalities, insecurities and eco-system collapse. This demands ambition, coherence between domestic and foreign policies (authenticity) and for states in the Global North to be accountable for the role they have played in creating harmful structures in the first place. Below we ask if FAIR is ambitious enough to transform the global power structures that drive gendered inequalities, injustices, and insecurities? Is the SG acting in consistent, coherent or, as it could be termed, “authentic” ways, demonstrating coherence between domestic and global feminist policy commitments? Is the SG, through the FAIR, holding itself accountable for its role in driving global gendered inequalities and injustices? As FAIR was developed before the election of Trump as well as the emergence of an increasingly unstable and turbulent world order, we cannot really ask here if it provides an adequate response to the challenges associated with the growing global acceptance of the acquisition of territory by force, the disparagement of international treaties and institutions, as well as the dismantling of the trade system, and the negative implications of these moves for international peace, security, equality, justice and sustainability. Nonetheless, we can ask if FAIR contains principles and policies that progress the structural changes required to achieve these feminist goals.

Of course, a single state cannot alone achieve structural change, but to be considered feminist more than in name, a foreign policy needs to be rooted in policies that, at the very least, progress that agenda. Policies need to have the character of Gorz’s “non-reformist reforms” (Gorz 1968, see also Eisenstein 2019). Drawing upon the feminist conceptualisation above as well as the 3A framework the analysis below explores whether FAIR is ambitious, authentic,

⁷ Such as the Feminist Foreign Policy Collaborative’s Defining FFP, available at: <https://www.ffpcollaborative.org/defining-ffp-2023-edition>

and accountable. Before these questions can be addressed, however, Scotland's constitutional status and particular context must be discussed.

Scotland's Constitutional Status and Paradiplomacy

As indicated in the introduction, Scotland's constitutional status within the UK prevents it from conducting an independent foreign policy in a traditional sense, feminist or otherwise. The 1998 Scotland Act (Parliament 1998) states that "international relations, including relations with territories outside the United Kingdom, the European Union (and their institutions) and other international organisations, regulation of international trade, and international development assistance and cooperation are reserved matters." Thus, powers over defence and national security, foreign affairs, immigration and asylum, trade and industry are reserved to the Westminster government. Because Scotland is not an independent member of the United Nations, it can neither negotiate nor ratify international treaties. Likewise, it is not a member of the World Trade Organisation and cannot negotiate any trade agreements. These constraints create potential challenges for the SG, as a substate, to implement a feminist approach to foreign policy.

At the same time, the Scottish Government has a range of mechanisms through which it can pursue a feminist approach to its external relations. The Scotland Act allows Scottish Ministers to communicate with other countries, regions, or international institutions "so long as they do not purport to speak for the UK or to reach agreements which commit the UK" (Scotland Act 1998). The Act makes clear that Scottish Ministers can pursue their interests internationally, sign agreements that are non-binding treaties, and work with UK Ministers on international matters. As such, the Scottish Government does have some powers and responsibilities.

The SG has developed considerable external relations that reflect its international outlook. Today, the SG has nine international offices enabling it to promote Scotland's international relationships, plus engagement strategies with the USA, China, Canada, India, and Pakistan. It is active in a range of regional and subnational multilateral coalitions. While it cannot sign trade agreements, it has developed a trade policy, the Vision for Trade, and has well-developed strategy to increase exports and inward investment. It has an International Development programme, which, despite being relatively small is growing, from £10 million in 2021 to £15 million in 2026, and supports the SDGs (Scottish Government 2025). As

noted in the introduction, the SG has in recent years styled Scotland as a Good Global Citizen, reflecting not just the aspirations of the International Development programme but also its commitment to multilateralism, the rule of law, human rights, and ensuring a more just global trade regime.

In many ways, the carving out of an international role emerges from the SNP's interest in demonstrating that Scotland could be a full state with its own foreign policy. Moreover, FAIR can be seen as the SG's way of reimagining the nation, expanding its scope for international relations, and asserting its own agenda and values apart, or against, the orthodoxy of Westminster. Paradiplomacy brings visibility and credibility to the Scottish nationalist project, communicating externally that Scotland is ready and equipped to be an independent state.⁸ During Nicola Sturgeon's years as First Minister, in particular, the UK had a Conservative government that moved increasingly right which incentivized the SG to design more progressive policies to differentiate itself from the Westminster government.⁹

The development of Good Global Citizen agenda, and the inclusion of a feminist foreign policy in the Programme for Government 2021, reflects the leadership of Nicola Sturgeon, who took over from Alex Salmond as First Minister and leader of the SNP in 2014, and who was a champion of progressive and feminist causes. However, by the time the FAIR Position Paper was published in 2023, much had changed within the SG. Sturgeon was replaced by Humza Yousaf, as First Minister in 2023, a role that John Swinney took over in 2024. Sturgeon's two successors have seemed less committed to a feminist agenda. They are however, leaders of a party generally held to be more progressive than either of the main parties at Westminster. Yet, as demonstrated below, this generally progressive orientation does not always translate into transformative policy.

⁸ There is evidence that this strategy has enjoyed some success – Scotland's FAIR policy often figures in lists of international actors dedicated to feminism in foreign policy. Though Scotland was the first substate to adopt a feminist approach to IR, the government of Catalonia has recently reiterated its role as a "global leader in the sphere of feminism and feminist policies" and its dedication to a "better world, free of inequality, free of racism, free of injustice, free of discrimination, free of violence"(Catalan Government 2024, 1).

⁹ The first ruling party, Scottish Labour, which headed the Scottish Government from devolution in 1999 to 2007, was in part led by Jack McConnell, Scotland's First Minister (2001-2007) and Minister for Education, Europe, and External Affairs (2000-2001), who championed external relations and pioneered the International Development agenda.

How Does FAIR Fare?

This part of the article assesses if and how the SG's Feminist Approach to International Relations (FAIR), published as a 21-page position paper in 2023, fulfils the three the 3As criteria (ambition, authenticity, and accountability) (Bergman Rosamond, Duncanson and Gentry 2022). The Scottish Government's FAIR is outlined in a 21-page position paper comprised of three sections. The first asks what "a feminist approach is" and why it is needed, providing several key definitions and principles. The second part of the document details the scope of the policy by presenting four main policy areas: international development, climate justice, peace and security, and trade, with a section on a range of cross-cutting proposed actions. Finally, the document sets out the next steps for the Scottish Government, providing a Framework for Delivery and reflecting on plans for monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning.

Ambition: How Ambitious is FAIR?

As feminist scholarship argues, if a policy is to contribute effectively to tackling gendered inequalities and insecurities, it needs to address the structures driving these inequalities and insecurities, chief amongst them militarism and extractive capitalism. No single state can achieve structural change on its own. Yet, a state that aspires to be feminist in its foreign policy conduct needs to pursue policies that at least progress that agenda, adhering to non-reformist reforms, so as to achieve actionable, intersectional and progressive change (Davis, Dent, Meiners and Richie 2022)—change which truly reforms the system (Engler and Engler 2021). There are many examples in the FAIR of the SG's ambition, especially in its opening sections on definitions, rationales, goals, and principles. The SG's FAIR also demonstrates ambition in recognising that a feminist approach involves aiming for global structural change, tackling intersecting inequalities and oppressions in the world order.

For instance, FAIR articulates early on that the advancement of "gender equality and the rights of women, girls and marginalised groups in pursuit of a fairer world" means "challenging existing power structures" (Scottish Government 2023a, 4). It is explicit about the need for structural change, calling for transformation no fewer than six times. The then Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development, Christine McKelvie, wrote in her forward that "We must ensure that our feminist approach is transformative and takes us towards a fairer international system that works for all. Moreover, FAIR's commitment to be

“transformative,” which is defined as “addressing the shared systemic barriers which drive inequality and insecurity” (Scottish Government 2023a, 8), is the first of the six principles underpinning the SG’s approach.

The SG also indicates its commitment to structural change by repeatedly mentioning the need to tackle the “root causes” of inequalities and insecurities, in line with our conceptual reasoning above. According to Minister McKelvie’s forward, the SG’s “approach is driven by a focus on understanding and addressing the root causes of inequality and the shared global challenges that drive insecurity” moving “towards an international system that works for all” (Scottish Government 2023a, 1). Her elaboration indicates that this involves moving beyond a more liberal feminist agenda:

[A feminist approach] means championing democracy, multilateralism, and a rules-based international system. It means promoting a postcolonial and anti-racist vision of international policymaking. It means protecting and promoting human rights, paying particular attention to protecting and promoting the rights of the most marginalised. It means considering the collective wellbeing of both current and future generations (Scottish Government 2023a, 4).

Through these statements, FAIR demonstrates a high ambition level, moving beyond FFPs that rest on the 3Rs. Indeed, the SG (2023, 4) explicitly highlights the need for ambition:

in the current global climate it is more important than ever that we drive an ambitious and progressive agenda to ensure equality, inclusion, and human rights are embedded in all we do, both at home and abroad. These global challenges are interconnected and gendered. Tackling the root causes and power structures which cause these inequalities will benefit all of us (Scottish Government 2023a, 4).

It is clear that the SG wants to position Scotland as a progressive, anti-colonial, anti-racist, and global nation.

Yet, there are significant silences in the FAIR. In the International Development section, the SG speaks of its ambition, and its goal of transferring power to communities in partner countries, but there is little substantive discussion about the structural drivers of poverty and how they will be tackled. For example, the SG proclaims its

ambition to drive forward the equalising power agenda, also known as ‘shifting power’ through adopting partner-country led development and amplifying Global

South voices with the aim to promote more equitable, people-led development (Scottish Government 2023a, 10).

How this people-led development will be realized, however, is not so clear. Although there is emphasis on delivering the services people need, such as health, inclusive education, and renewable energy, there is nothing about tackling the way the current global economic system works to deprive governments in the Global South of providing those services to their citizens. Even with the constraints facing a single sub-state, there are objectives the SG could have included that would better constitute steps towards structural change, or “non-reformist reforms.” Feminist prescriptions for a fairer economic system, one that ensures that governments in the Global South have the fiscal space to be able to provide public services, include debt cancellation, a UN tax convention, reform of the trade regime, constraining the power of multinational corporations to ignore human rights and environmental regulations, and an end to the IMF’s imposition of austerity policies. The FAIR could have included a commitment to build coalitions that call for these measures at every given opportunity.

FAIR exhibits ambition in the area of climate change but falls short of the structural change feminists advocate. On the one hand, FAIR recognises the gendered injustice of climate change:

[i]n a climate justice approach, we recognise the inherent injustice of climate change, its ability to exacerbate existing inequalities ... In particular, there is an important gender dimension to the great injustice at the heart of the climate challenge. Across many communities, women are at the frontline and remain disproportionately affected by climate change and nature loss (Scottish Government 2023a, 14).

Moreover, it acknowledges that to address such historical gendered harms FAIR seeks to promote the “transformation to a just and inclusive global economy by taking steps towards a long-term goal for structural change that reduces inequalities” (Scottish Government 2023a, 14). Yet, again, the opportunity to build a detailed, positive case for a global just transition away from fossil fuels to renewables, from extractivist economies to wellbeing economies, or other just, inclusive and sustainable alternatives is missing.

FAIR is cautiously ambitious in its commitment to global peace and security, emphasizing the values of democracy, multilateralism, the rule of law, and fundamental human rights for addressing armed conflict and gendered violence. To this end, FAIR recognises the importance of actively involving the ‘gender peace and security stakeholders’ who were

consulted prior to adopting FAIR. It also supports the Women's Environment & Development Organisation and through its Climate Justice Fund as well as the Women in Conflict 1325 Fellowship (Scottish Government 2023a, 4). Moreover, the SG seeks to pressure "the UK Government in the strongest terms to refuse or suspend licenses when there is a risk that arms could be used to violate human rights and ... reduce the environmental impact of the UK's armed forces" (Scottish Government 2023a, 16). As opposed to a range of FFP states the SG remains "firmly opposed to the threat and use of nuclear weapons" by "pursuing the safe and complete withdrawal of all nuclear weapons from Scotland" (Scottish Government 2023a, 16). But where is the ambition to move away from militarism and arms manufacturing?

Building on Scotland's wider Vision for Trade (Scottish Government 2021c), which sets out five principles that underpin its decisions on trade: wellbeing, inclusive growth, sustainability, net zero, and good governance, FAIR shows that the SG is committed to a "values-based approach and the positioning of trade within a broader economic, social and environmental context" (Scottish Government 2023a, 14). FAIR also "recognizes the roles of women as workers, consumers, entrepreneurs, carers and public service users, and the barriers they face in participating and accessing the full benefits of international trade" (Scottish Government 2023a, 14). But where is the ambition to work with other states to reform a global trading system that feminists argue drive inequalities between and within nations?

As proposed above, for feminist foreign policies to deliver social and political gender justice they need to be rooted in the logics of ambitious and actionable "non-reformist reforms." Yet, FAIR sticks largely to more orthodox and reformist ways of doing foreign policy.

Authenticity: Does FAIR align domestic and foreign policies?

As indicated above, if feminist foreign policies are to be effective, they should mirror or stand in alignment with internal policies, bringing consistency and coherence between what the government aims to do domestically and what seeks to accomplish internationally. In short, they should be *authentic*. Advancing the physical and economic security of women and other marginalised groups cannot be achieved by privileging domestic interests over global ones. Nor can it be achieved by failing to see the interconnectedness of domestic and foreign

policies. Through its emphasis on ‘coherence,’ the SG recognises the importance of such authentic consistency, though not always as ambitiously as might be expected.

FAIR seeks to “ensure coherence between international, domestic, and local policies, integrating feminist principles across all aspects of our international policymaking” (Scottish Government 2023a, 7). Additionally, this alignment begins to ensure some level of accountability, as what is wanted for a state or nation’s own people is often desired by other nations as well. Notably, since 2019, the SG has been committed to the concept of Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development, tasking an Inter-Ministerial Group with developing the PCSD initiative that same year.¹⁰ That longstanding commitment undergirds FAIR, with the SG recognising its relevance for its feminist approach to global inequalities. Furthermore, the SG’s trade vision connects international and domestic policy by for example recognising the differential impacts of trade within Scotland, including within social groups according to gender, ethnicity, disability, and age, amongst other factors. The SG, moreover, seeks to make sure that *UK* trade agreements are rooted in gender analysis, not least by exploring the ‘gender-specific impact that trade has on the ‘rights of women and girls’, seeking to provide strong monitoring and institutional support around these provisions. In brief, the SG, in part at least, seeks to undertake actional policies that enhance the benefits of trade for women.

FAIR is clear in its support of the SDGs and this comes through in its commitment to feminist climate justice (Scottish Government 2023a,17). As the FAIR document notes, the SG has relatively ambitious emissions targets and has committed to a Just Transition from oil and gas to renewable energy. These domestic commitments are important if the SG is not to risk undercutting the FAIR’s commitment to “gender-responsive climate action” overseas. Of importance here is also the SG’s position outlined in FAIR on nuclear weapons, with nuclear weapons and disarmament being central broader feminist goals, as we have outlined above. FAIR records that the SG remains “firmly opposed to the threat and use of nuclear weapons, pursuing the safe and complete withdrawal of all nuclear weapons from Scotland” (2023a, 16). There are significant domestic pressures on the Scottish Government to continue to host

¹⁰ Policy Coherence for Development emerged from the realisation that donor countries were often undermining their international development goals with their other international policies such as trade, defence, or other non-aid policies. This developed into a commitment to ensuring that domestic and foreign policies cohere to support sustainable development, as reflected in the OECD definition as “an approach and policy tool to integrate the economic, social, environmental and governance dimensions of sustainable development at all stages of domestic and international policy making” (OECD, 2019).

the UK's nuclear deterrent in Scottish waters, so the commitment to nuclear disarmament is an important example of both ambition and authenticity.

Authenticity also undergirds FAIR's commitment to the wellbeing of refugees. As opposed to the wider-UK policies, especially under the 14-year Conservative Party leadership but also under the current Labour government, the SG is more welcoming to migrants seeking shelter in Scotland. In FAIR, the SG (2023a, 16) affirms its desire to "work with local community-led organisations and partners to support migrants, refugees and people seeking asylum." In this context, FAIR highlights (Scottish Government 2023a, 16) the *New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy* (Scottish Government 2023b) as it provides a platform for Scotland's more generous and welcoming approach to refugees and people seeking asylum. In this regard, the SG avoids the incoherence of states who claim to be championing human rights and development overseas, but violating the human rights of people forced to flee.

While there are several policy areas in FAIR that indicate a recognition of the impact of domestic policies on global gendered inequalities and insecurities, the SG's authentic commitment can also be questioned. For instance, FAIR inadequately considers the injustices of the current economic system despite the SG having been a champion of alternative economic models in Scotland. Throughout Nicola Sturgeon's tenure as First Minister, the Scottish Government attempted to establish itself as a pioneer of Wellbeing Economy, a Circular Economy, a Just Transition, Community Wealth Building, and other alternatives to an extractivist, capitalist economic model (Macfarlane and Brett 2022; Hassan and Barrow 2020). Yet, despite its work with other Wellbeing Economy Governments, the SG does not do much to champion alternative economic models in its international development and trade work, nor does it take an active role in spearheading debt cancellation.

Similarly, FAIR offers little reflection on the policy coherence between Scotland's domestic and global commitments to economic justice and green transition. While FAIR (2023; 13) notes that "Scotland's global outlook on climate justice is underpinned by our domestic action on tackling climate change," there is little recognition of the nation's continued reliance on oil and gas and the resistance to green transition in many Scottish regions which are dependent on these industries.

There is a similar elision to Scotland's relationship with military industrial and defence industries. This is a key sector in the Scottish economy, with over 33,000 direct employees

(Scottish Government 2024).¹¹ Despite FAIR's stated commitments to democracy, multilateralism, rule of law and human rights, it says little about the ways in which Scotland manufactures and exports arms, contributing to wars and human rights violations in Yemen, Palestine and elsewhere. Indeed, the SG subsidises this industry with grants (Learmonth 2022), with FAIR being entirely silent on those subsidises. The Government defends grants from Scottish Enterprise to arms manufacturers on the basis that it is not funding the arms themselves, but "diversification". In order to be an authentic voice for a fairer, greener world, FAIR do more to make sure that its domestic policies do not undermine its stated commitment to a less militaristic vision of international relations.

Accountability: Does FAIR acknowledge Scotland's distinct history?

As well as ambition and authenticity, states or substates professing to be feminist in their vision of international relations need to be willing to be held accountable for their wrongdoings, past and present. Thus, they need to account for the role that they have played historically in driving the global gendered inequalities, insecurities, and injustices still observed today. For Scotland, this involves recognising its role in colonialism (Bond and Morris 2023), being part of one of the biggest historical emitters of greenhouse gasses (Ritchie and Roser 2020) and in perpetuating a global economic system that still operates to extract wealth from Global South to North.

Notably, FAIR is attentive to the need for a decolonial approach to external relations, demonstrating willingness to hold itself accountable for its past implications in colonial oppression and extractive practices beyond borders. In the foreword of FAIR, Minister McKelvie notes that a feminist approach to international relations "means promoting a postcolonial and anti-racist vision of international policymaking" as well as staying attentive to "the most marginalised ... considering the collective wellbeing of both current and future generations" (Scottish Government 2023a, 4).¹² Yet, FAIR does not specifically refer to Scotland's own role in colonialism and empire, the legacies of which produce intersecting

¹¹ In the SG's Building a New Scotland: An Independent Scotland's Place in the World, published in March 2024, it claims that: "The defence industry in an independent Scotland would play a key role in helping to build up our capability over time" (Scottish Government 2024).

¹² Although Minister McKelvie uses the term "postcolonial," which Global South scholars tend to reject, because it implies that colonialism is something that happened in the past, rather than continuing to impact the present, it seems clear from the context here that she is trying to make a progressive statement about the need to undo colonial harms. Global South and feminist scholars and activists would tend to use 'decolonial' to convey the project of undoing colonialism.

power hierarchies that continue to impact on the lives of women and other marginalised groups in the Global South.

It should be noted that there is significant interplay between ambition, authenticity and accountability, especially since decolonisation cannot happen without a reckoning on how environmental degradation, militarisation, and unfair trade practices drive coloniality. Many of the concrete policies that we suggest would be indicative of a more ambitious approach under each of the four policy areas – international development, climate justice, peace and security and trade – would also constitute an attempt to be more accountable. Being ambitious, we propose, means taking steps towards structural change to tackle the root causes of gendered insecurities and inequalities, and, as such, means reckoning with Scotland's historic role in creating and maintaining those structures. Some of the examples of knowledge-sharing and 'power-shifting' in FAIR – such as the Global Renewables Centre (Scottish Government 2023a, 11) are positive steps, but they do not amount to being decolonial in the sense of undoing or helping to make significant reparation for historical harms.

The same might be said about the efforts of FAIR to be more inclusive of marginalised groups. For example, FAIR places some emphasis on including more women in trade (Scottish Government 2023a, 16). These efforts are in many ways laudable – exclusion is a form of injustice – but such efforts do not undo colonial structures. Whilst support for women's participation in trade might, if it is done in a careful way, lead to advances for some women, without attempts to tackle the systemic injustices within the global trade system, it will not be enough to lift significant numbers of women in partner countries out of poverty or progress gender equality in a sustainable way.

To be accountable, FAIR would also need to accept the role that Scotland has had in driving the climate crisis. This involves taking responsibility for its past as a historical major emitter and implementing an immediate halt to all new investments in fossil fuels. It would include supporting climate adaptation and making reparation for the loss and damage caused by climate change in the Global South instead of relying solely upon untested, unsustainable and imposed technological fixes such as carbon capture and storage and geoengineering. In brief, a fully accountable FAIR would need to take steps towards a less extractive and more regenerative, circular economy for the future. These are the demands African women made at

the UN Climate talks in 2023 (African Feminist Task Force and Women and Gender Constituency 2023).

Even though FAIR is more progressive than many other FFPs, it could go much further, be more ambitious and adopt an accountable approach that reflects Scotland's historic role in colonisation which continues to generate wealth and security for the Global North at the expense of other parts of the world.

Conclusion

In this article we have posited that, to be truly feminist and transformative, foreign policies need to be rooted in a commitment to structural change, achieved through non-reformist reforms. We have argued that in many ways the SG's FAIR is progressive, not least by recognising feminist insights into the limitations of the international policies and practices that have prevailed over many decades. If some of these policies and practices are now being undermined in the era of strongman politics, their replacement takes us even further away from feminist goals.

FAIR acknowledges that structural change is required. FAIR, as we have shown through our assessment of its feminist contents, is ambitious in several ways – it mentions transformative and progressive policy initiatives and highlights the importance of tackling the root causes of injustices, emerging from the uneven distribution of global income. By recognising such root causes FAIR indicates the SG's commitment to tackle the structural gender injustices and insecurities emerging from war, militarism and the capitalist world economy. Yet, in actual fact, Scotland is implicated in irresponsible climate and extraction practices, militarism, causing harm to women and other marginalized groups worldwide. Missing from FAIR are concrete policy initiatives that seek to bring about structural change in line with the insights of feminist IR scholarship for a more peaceful, just, equal and sustainable world.

FAIR is steeped in a particular feminist worldview which tends to focus on the inclusion of women and girls in policy practices, trade relations and economic endeavours, which we argue is a necessary but insufficient version of feminism. As we argued above, while working towards the inclusion of women in development, peacebuilding or trade initiatives might further gender equality in particular contexts, they are unlikely, on their own, to amount to a challenge to the structures that drive the gendered inequalities and insecurities at a global scale.

Fundamentally, FAIR faces the same challenge that all FFPs do. One state or substate alone cannot produce the transformative changes and progressive international policies that are required to make the world more meaningfully peaceful, equal and sustainable and ultimately gender just. Structural change requires collaboration between states and other global actors. To construct a more just global economic system, with fairer taxation, trade and investment systems, states and their leaders need to come together to agree on how to enforce international norms, rules, regulations, including gender justice and equality, and, ensure that they are fully implemented in global politics. To strengthen and renew mechanisms for the peaceful resolution of conflict, they also have to agree on international laws and how to prosecute those who violate them. To tackle the existential crises of climate change and biodiversity collapse, state and non-state actors have to work together not just to manage the transition from fossil fuels to renewable source of energy, but to manage the extraction of finite natural resources extraction on a shared planet.

This is where FAIR stands out – it is rooted in a strong commitment to a collaborative approach to global politics. From the very first paragraph of the Ministerial foreword, to the definition of a feminist approach, to the underlying principles, the importance of collaboration and cooperation are highlighted. As the Minister puts it: “collaboration is crucial.”¹³ FAIR argues for “prioritising collaboration and cooperation over adversarial processes” (p4) and proclaims, as part of its first principle, (the intention to be transformative): “We prioritise addressing the shared systemic barriers which drive inequality and insecurity. We collaborate and speak out in pursuit of innovative, progressive solutions” (p.6).

These commitments to collaboration could also be read as the recourse of the weak, and, as such, the only viable option for a relatively small sub-state unit, with limited powers, due to its constitutional status as a substate, to exercise influence in the global order. From a feminist perspective, however, whether it emanates from being a sub-state or not, the commitment to collaborating with other states provides a template for a better way of doing international relations, one more fitting for the global challenges the world is currently facing. Based on feminist insights about our fundamental interdependence, as political communities and as people, feminists champion cooperation, collaboration and care as

¹³ The full paragraph reads: “The global challenges we face today – climate change, pandemics, conflict – serve as a reminder of our global interconnectedness and the reality that what happens in the Global North also affects the Global South and vice versa. To address these challenges, collaboration is crucial.” (Scottish Government 2023, 1.

platforms for progressing the goals of peace, justice and sustainability. The route out of the insecure and hostile world that is currently being created by the likes of Trump, Putin and other highly masculine leaders, is to build coalitions, institutions and systems on the basis of shared respect, rules and reciprocity. It might be in its normative commitment to collaboration, international law and norms, rather than any specific policy proposals, that FAIR makes its most significant and most feminist contribution to a fairer, greener world.

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