

The Scottish Government's Feminist Approach to International Relations. Is It Feminist? Is It Fair?

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In 2023 the Scottish Government (SG) released its position paper *Feminist Approach to International Relations (FAIR)*. While the SG initially used the label *feminist foreign policy (FFP)* that label has shifted in favour of an approach that better reflects Scotland's constitutional status. 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 explores what the case of Scotland and the SG's FAIR reveal about what is often termed "paradiplomacy". Most FFPs have done little to challenge the injustices of the global order that produce gendered harms and injustices. Scotland's constitutional status as a devolved nation adds a layer of complexity as it does not have power to negotiate its own foreign policy. This article asks whether the SG's FAIR has the ability, legal power and desire to recognise the transformations that feminists wish to see in international relations? In short, does FAIR have the potential to bring about a "fairer, greener," and gender-just world? The article discusses feminists' calls for global actors to closely cooperate to tackle the root causes of insecurities, inequalities and injustices. Moreover, it reflects on Scotland's constitutional status within the UK, in particular the SG's active efforts to engage in international relations. By way of conclusion, the article posits that FAIR has features of ambition, authenticity and accountability, while containing silences and inconsistencies.

En 2023, el Gobierno escocés publicó su documento de posición titulado *Enfoque Feminista de las Relaciones Internacionales (FAIR)*, por sus siglas en inglés). Aunque el Gobierno escocés usó, inicialmente, la etiqueta de política exterior feminista, esa etiqueta ha cambiado a favor de un enfoque que refleja mejor su estatus constitucional. Este artículo tiene dos objetivos de investigación. En primer lugar, tiene como objetivo analizar en qué medida el FAIR podría contribuir a un mundo «más justo, más verde» y con igualdad de género. Y, en segundo lugar, el artículo estudia lo que revelan el caso de Escocia y el FAIR del Gobierno escocés con respecto a lo que, a menudo, se denomina «paradiplomacia». La mayoría de las políticas exteriores feministas han hecho poco para desafiar las injusticias del orden global que producen daños e injusticias de género. El propio estatus constitucional de Escocia como nación delegada añade un nivel de complejidad, ya que no tiene poder para negociar su propia política exterior. Este artículo se pregunta si el FAIR del Gobierno escocés tiene la capacidad, el poder legal y el deseo de reconocer las transformaciones que el movimiento feminista desea ver reflejadas en las relaciones internacionales. ¿Tiene el FAIR el potencial para lograr un mundo «más justo, más verde» y con igualdad de género? El artículo analiza los llamamientos por parte del movimiento feminista a que los actores globales cooperen estrechamente con el fin de abordar las causas fundamentales de las inseguridades, desigualdades e injusticias. Además, el artículo reflexiona sobre el estatus constitucional de Escocia dentro del Reino Unido.

En 2023, le gouvernement écossais (GE) a publié son exposé de position *Feminist Approach to International Relations (FAIR)*, ou *Approche féministe des relations internationales* en français). Bien que le GE ait initialement employé le nom de politique étrangère féministe (PEF), ce nom a évolué en faveur d'une approche qui reflète mieux son statut constitutionnel. Cet article a deux objectifs de recherche. D'abord, il vise à évaluer la mesure dans laquelle FAIR pourrait contribuer à un monde « plus juste, plus vert » et plus équitable du point de vue du genre. Ensuite, il s'intéresse à ce que le cas de l'Écosse et de la FAIR du GE révèle s'agissant de ce que l'on qualifie souvent de « paradiplomatie ». La plupart des PEF n'ont pas beaucoup œuvré pour remettre en question les injustices de l'ordre mondial qui produisent des préjudices et des injustices genrés. Le statut constitutionnel de l'Écosse lui-même, une nation bénéficiant d'une délégation de pouvoirs, complexifie encore la situation, car elle n'a pas le pouvoir de négocier sa propre politique étrangère. Cet article se demande si la FAIR du GE dispose de la capacité, du pouvoir juridique et du désir d'approuver les transformations que les féministes aimeraient voir en relations internationales. La FAIR est-elle en mesure de faire advenir un monde « plus juste, plus vert » et plus juste du point de vue du genre ? L'article s'intéresse aux appels féministes pour que les acteurs collaborent étroitement au traitement des causes profondes des insécurités, inégalités et injustices. En outre, il propose une réflexion sur le statut constitutionnel de l'Écosse au sein du Royaume-Uni.

Keywords: gender; feminist foreign policy; ethics/ideas; regionalism/integration; territory/secession; international relations.

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

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challenges” (Scottish Government 2021a; see also Mills and Birdsall 2024).¹ As such, it has developed an increasingly ambitious role in the global arena, centered 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 (FAIR) culminated in the release of a position paper in late 2023, the SG’s FAIR (Scottish Government 2023).

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 (IR; *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 (FFP) goals of a more just, equal, peaceful, and environmentally sustainable world order. This growth in FFPs 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 (Robinson 2021; Thomson 2020, 2022; Guerrina, Hastrup, and Wright 2023). This article assesses the distinctiveness of the SG’s articulation of FAIR, and asks whether it has the potential to bring about said feminist goals. To what extent can FAIR contribute to, as the Programme for Government 2021–2022 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 an 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 masculinized 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 United States, 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 IR. It is surely, some might argue, destined to sink without trace.

We strongly disagree. We think that it is important to evaluate the SG’s FAIR as well as other feminist and progres-

sive 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 recognize the potential of feminist approaches to IR 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 and 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 organizations, 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 and 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 United Kingdom 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 that 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 substate, without the full powers of a sovereign state, creating an additional layer of barriers to developing and implementing an 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 substate 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 analyze FAIR. Our analytical approach draws upon a conceptual framework introduced by feminist scholars Bergman

¹The Scottish Government is committed to working toward 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).

²Until 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 FFP. Argentina declared in 2023 that it would adopt an FFP, but after the electoral victory of Javier Milei in October 2023, the country’s feminist credentials have been severely challenged.

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

Rosamond, Duncanson, and Gentry (2022). We propose that the “3Rs”—first introduced by the Swedish government and often used to evaluate FFPs—rights, representation, and resources⁴—should be replaced with measures that could more effectively capture progress toward the changes required for a fairer, greener, and gender-just world. The third section reflects on Scotland's constitutional status within the United Kingdom, the constraints that emerge from it, and the SG's active efforts to engage in IR 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 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 criticized mainstream ways of conceptualizing 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 FFP 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 and occupation as well as racialized, colonial, and patriarchal systems of violent oppression (WILPF 2015, 1).

With Cockburn, we argue that militarization 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 prioritizing their commercial and military self-interests. Indeed, such prioritizations 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), ecosystems 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 policymaking, 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 (Achilleos-Sarll 2018; Bouka 2021; Goetz 2021; Robinson 2021). This involves recognizing 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 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” (Crenshaw 1989; Collins and Bilge 2020), 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 naturalize 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 endeavor 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 exer-

⁴The 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.

⁵This 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.

cise 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 Tickner 1992; Sjöberg 2006; Robinson 2021). 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 (Gentry 2013; Aggestam, Bergman Rosamond, and Kronsell 2019).

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 (Merchant 1980; Plumwood 1993; Salleh 2020; Sultana 2022). 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, produces 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 that interacts with patriarchal cultural relations, not only systematically drain wealth from the Global South to the Global North, but also have devastating environmental impact on local communities (Abed and Kelleher 2022; Actionaid 2022).

The global trade system, for example, promotes a model of economic competitiveness that depends on a “flexible” and deregulated labor 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 liberalization, 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 exacerbate the harms inflicted on the most marginalized in the Global South. A feminist approach to IR and foreign policy needs to be attentive to these dynamics (Third World Network 2019).

Feminists have long-sought new, gender-informed approaches to foreign policies. Therefore, there was some excitement when the Government of Sweden announced its intention to adopt an FFP 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 (Robinson 2021; Bergman Rosamond, Duncanson, and Gentry 2022; Thomson 2022).

They have made little headway in tackling the aforementioned structural drivers of gendered, colonial, and racialized insecurities, injustices, and inequalities (Robinson 2021; Thomson 2022; Bergman Rosamond, Cheung, and deLeeuw 2023; Guerrina, Haastrup, and Wright 2023; Saleh 2024; Cheung 2025). A number of FFP states emulated Sweden’s rights, representation, and resources framework, with

Germany being a prominent example here, without reflecting on its 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 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). 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 masculinized 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 SG 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. We argue that a feminist approach to foreign policy should move beyond the goals of women’s rights, representation, and (limited distribution of) resources. Instead, an FFP should *ambitiously* aim to transform the harmful structures that undermine women and other marginalized 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 3Rs,⁶ 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 toward transforming the structures that drive war, inequalities, insecurities, and ecosystem 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 ac-

⁶Such as the Feminist Foreign Policy Collaborative’s Defining FFP, available at <https://www.ffpcollaborative.org/defining-ffp-2023-edition>.

countable 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 conceptualization above as well as the 3A framework, the analysis below explores whether FAIR is ambitious, authentic, 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 United Kingdom 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 organizations, regulation of international trade, and international development assistance and cooperation are reserved matters." Thus, powers over defense and national security, foreign affairs, immigration and asylum, and 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 Organization 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 SG 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 SG 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 IRhps, plus engagement strategies with the United States, 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 a well-developed strategy to increase exports and inward investment. It has an international development program, which, despite being rela-

tively small, is growing, from £10 million in 2021 to £15 million in 2026, and supports the SDGs (Scottish Government 2025). The SG has in recent years styled Scotland as a Good Global Citizen, reflecting not just the aspirations of the international development program 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 IR, 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.⁷ During Nicola Sturgeon's years as First Minister, in particular, the United Kingdom had a Conservative government that moved increasingly right, which incentivized the SG to design more progressive policies to differentiate itself from the Westminster government.⁸

The development of Good Global Citizen agenda, and the inclusion of an FFP 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.

How Does FAIR Fare?

This part of the article assesses if and how the SG's FAIR, published as a 21-page position paper in 2023, fulfills the three 3As criteria (ambition, authenticity, and accountability) (Bergman Rosamond, Duncanson, and Gentry 2022). The SG'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 SG, providing a framework for delivery and reflecting on plans for monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning.

⁷There 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).

⁸The first ruling party, Scottish Labour, which headed the SG from devolution in 1999–2007, 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.

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 et al. 2022)—change that truly reforms the system. 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 recognizing 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 marginalized groups in pursuit of a fairer world” means “challenging existing power structures” (Scottish Government 2023, 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 foreword that “We must ensure that our feminist approach is transformative and takes us toward 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 2023, 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 foreword, 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 2023, 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 2023, 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 2023, 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 2023, 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 substate, there are objectives the SG could have included that would better constitute steps toward 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 recognizes 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 2023, 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 toward a long-term goal for structural change that reduces inequalities” (Scottish Government 2023, 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 well-being 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 recognizes 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 and Development Organization through its Climate Justice Fund as well as the Women in Conflict 1325 Fellowship (Scottish Government 2023, 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 2023, 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 2023, 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: well-being, 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 2023, 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 2023, 14). But where is the ambition to work with other states to reform a global trading system that feminists argue drives inequalities between and within nations?

As proposed above, for FFPs 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 FFPs 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 marginalized 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 recognizes 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 2023, 7). Additionally, this alignment begins to ensure some level of accountability, as what is wanted for a state's 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.⁹ That longstanding commitment undergirds FAIR, with the SG recognizing its relevance for its feminist approach to global inequalities. Furthermore, the SG's trade vision connects international and domestic policy by, for example, recognizing 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 gendered impacts that trade often 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 2023, 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" (2023, 16). There are significant domestic pressures on the SG to continue to host 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 well-being 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 (2023, 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 2023, 16) the *New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy* which 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 that 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 SG 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. 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 (Scottish Government 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 that are dependent on these industries.

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

⁹Policy Coherence for Development emerged from the realization that donor countries were often undermining their international development goals with their other international policies, such as trade, defense, or other non-aid policies. This developed into a commitment to ensuring that domestic and foreign policies cohere to support sustainable development.

(Scottish Government 2024).¹⁰ 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 subsidizes this industry with grants (Learmonth 2022), with FAIR being entirely silent on those subsidies. The government defends grants from Scottish Enterprise to arms manufacturers on the basis that it is not funding the arms themselves. In order to be an authentic feminist voice for a fairer, greener world, the SG must ensure that FAIR stays committed to a peaceful vision of international relations rather than engaging in militarism.

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 IR 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 recognizing its role in colonialism (Bond and Morris 2023), being part of one of the biggest historical emitters of greenhouse gases (Ritchie and Roser 2020) and in perpetuating a global economic system that still operates to extract wealth from the Global South to the 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 IR "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 2023, 4).¹¹ Yet, FAIR does not specifically refer to Scotland's own role in colonialism and empire, the legacies of which produce intersecting power hierarchies that continue to impact the lives of women and other marginalized groups in the Global South.

It should be noted that there is significant interplay between ambition, authenticity, and accountability, especially since decolonization cannot happen without a reckoning on how environmental degradation, militarization, 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 toward structural change to tackle the root causes of gendered insecurities and inequalities, and, as such, means reckoning with Scotland's historic role in creat-

ing and maintaining those structures. Some of the examples of knowledge-sharing and "power-shifting" in FAIR—such as the Global Renewables Centre (Scottish Government 2023, 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 marginalized groups. For example, FAIR places some emphasis on including more women in trade (Scottish Government 2023, 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 major historical 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 toward 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 at the UNFCCC 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 colonization, 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 recognizing 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 recognizing 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. For example, on September 3, 2025, First Minister John Swinney stated to the Scottish Parliament that his government would "pause new awards of public money to arms companies whose products or services are provided to countries where there is plausible evidence of genocide"

¹⁰In 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).

¹¹Although 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.

while suggesting that there are clear signs of genocide being committed in Gaza (Scottish Government 2025).

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.

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 endeavors, which we argue is a necessary but insufficient version of feminism. As we argued above, while working toward 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, and 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 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 is highlighted. As the minister puts it: “collaboration is crucial.”¹² FAIR argues for “prioritising collaboration and cooperation over adversarial processes” (4) 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” (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 substate 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 substate or not, the commitment to collaborating with other states provides a template for a better way of doing IR, 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 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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¹²The full paragraph reads: “The global challenges we face today—climate change, pandemics, conflict—serve as a reminder of our global interconnectivity 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).

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