

Letter of 13 May 2022 from the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation to the Senate on the added value for the Netherlands of a feminist foreign policy

On 24 March 2021, members of the Senate posed the question: what lessons can be learned from the experience of countries that have adopted a feminist foreign policy, such as Sweden, Spain, France, Luxembourg, Mexico and Canada? In response, the government undertook to inform the Senate in more detail and identify the opportunities and possibilities that such a foreign policy presents for the Netherlands. By means of the enclosed study of feminist foreign policy (*Onderzoek feministisch buitenlandbeleid*), the research and consultancy company Ecorys has surveyed these countries' experiences, as well as the potential added value of such a policy for the Netherlands. Consultations have also been held with countries that have a feminist foreign policy, and with national and international civil society and knowledge centres.

Ecorys report

Ecorys has surveyed the experience of France, Canada, Luxembourg, Mexico, Sweden and Spain. These countries do not have a single definition of a feminist foreign policy. The general premise is that there is a direct link between gender equality, economic prosperity and national security. On the basis of this rationale, they emphasise gender equality as a means of promoting economic prosperity and national and international security. Sweden states that protecting and promoting women's fundamental human rights is an international obligation, and a precondition for achieving the broader objectives of their country's foreign policy: peace, security and sustainable development. According to the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this policy is a response to the discrimination and systematic subordination that still characterise the daily lives of countless women and girls throughout the world.

These countries try to systematically integrate gender equality across the board: from choosing their countries' representatives, allocating development funding and promoting women's role in the realm of security to adopting positions in the area of international trade. Besides focusing on women, this policy also addresses power relations and gender equality more generally, and uses an intersectional, rights-based approach.

Ecorys concludes that these countries' foreign policy resulted from political commitment at a high level in a favourable political climate. The countries have identified several principles that shape their policy: human rights or a human rights approach, transformative change, intersectionality, gender and contextual analysis, and gender mainstreaming. In Sweden, which was in 2014 the first country to announce its adoption of a feminist foreign policy, the policy concentrates on four Rs: rights, representation, resources and reality check.

Besides specific priorities such as gender and climate, these countries' policy has at its heart the themes of violence against women and girls, political and social participation, economic rights, and women, peace and security. Spain and Sweden have integrated a feminist approach into the whole range of their foreign policy: diplomacy, European relations, security, trade and international cooperation. Canada focuses on a feminist approach to international cooperation, and France applies a feminist approach to both diplomacy and international cooperation.

The study shows that these countries' feminist foreign policy has led to greater efforts on gender equality, more gender mainstreaming and greater policy coherence. Specific policy changes noted in the study include a clearer focus on the consequences of international business for people, the environment and society (ICSR), tackling violence against women in relation to the arms trade, research into how women are disadvantaged in the digital domain, women's role in military and civilian missions, and the integration of gender issues into climate funding. More attention is paid systematically to gender in international cooperation programmes, and women's organisations receive more support and funding thanks to gender-responsive budgeting and gender mainstreaming in grant management broadly speaking. Ecorys states that reallocation of budgets has taken place in many countries. For example, 92% of Canadian commitments and 79% of Swedish commitments to international cooperation were allocated for gender mainstreaming. Not all countries have allocated additional budget to achieve the set targets. Internal monitoring systems range from annual reports to parliament to an accountability framework based on indicators, responsibilities and regular internal evaluation.

Ecorys states that the Netherlands has a good reputation in the field of international cooperation and diplomacy as a leader in promoting equal rights and opportunities for women and girls worldwide – and that there is nonetheless scope for higher ambitions and greater consistency. In this connection Ecorys cites the evaluation by the Policy and Operations Department (IOB), *Gender Mainstreaming in the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs - Beyond 'Add Women and Stir'*, which was sent to the House of Representatives on 27 September 2021 together with the policy response to the evaluation [Parliamentary Paper 33625-331 of 27 September 2021]. It notes that there are considerable differences in the amount of attention paid to women and girls and/or gender mainstreaming in the different Directorate-Generals of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Ecorys also discusses gender equality and representation within the ministry, and mentions the Diversity and Inclusion plan of action in this regard, which states that by 2025 50% of managers should be women.

According to the researchers, a feminist foreign policy acquires added value for the Netherlands if women's rights and gender equality are given priority in foreign policy across the board. If the Netherlands, too, were to explicitly pursue this policy, this would according to the study send a message to the world about the importance of women's rights and gender equality. In this way, the Netherlands would further strengthen its position as a global leader on this issue. On the basis of this conclusion, Ecorys has made a number of recommendations for designing a feminist foreign policy.

Policy response

Both the IOB evaluation of gender mainstreaming and the Ecorys study into the potential added value for the Netherlands of a feminist foreign policy observed that the Netherlands is an important and visible actor in the domain of advancing and protecting women's rights and gender equality. We endorse this observation.

The Netherlands belongs to a group of frontrunners that promotes international conventions and agreements focusing on equal opportunities for women and girls, gender equality and the elimination of discrimination. In addition, we recognise that there is scope for making gender mainstreaming a guiding principle within central government's foreign policy and efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). There are still gaps in the comprehensive integration of gender equality objectives into every area of the Netherlands' international engagement. In order to achieve our foreign policy objectives, more account must be taken of the gender-related implications of defence, trade, diplomacy and international cooperation.

We recognise the urgency of stepping up our efforts to advance gender equality, especially now when global gender inequality is growing, violence against women and girls is increasing and workers in the informal sector (most of whom are women) are being hit hardest economically. The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are affecting women and girls disproportionately. Moreover, the position of women and girls is coming under increasing pressure worldwide. Conservatism is gaining ground and there is still a great deal of pushback on initiatives concerning gender equality and women's rights. Women's rights organisations, women human rights defenders and independent women journalists who stand up for women's rights and gender equality are being hindered in their work or threatened.

It is essential for government to unlock the potential of half the population and ensure that everyone, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, can exercise their human rights. This is also crucial for the economy, health and security. For instance, international gender equality would have a positive impact on the Netherlands as a trading nation. If more women around the world were full participants in the economic system there would be more disposable income and, as a result, international trade would increase. International security – and by extension, national security – would benefit from greater gender equality. As confirmed in UN Security Council Resolution no. 1325, which the Netherlands signed, women play an important role in conflict prevention and resolution, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance and post-conflict reconstruction. The resolution emphasises the importance of women's equal and full participation in all efforts to maintain and promote peace and security. The COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated the importance of increasing our focus on gender, including in foreign policy.

Therefore, we have decided that the Netherlands will commit itself to pursuing a feminist foreign policy. The scope and gaps that have been identified will be worked out in detail in the coming period. In the short term, this means that the ministry will focus more attention on equality in general, on gender equality in particular, including equality for LGBTI people, and on diversity and inclusion within the organisation and in all domains of foreign policy, including an implementation plan for gender mainstreaming (motion submitted by MP Kati Piri, 35 925 XVII on 24 November 2021). This means specifically striving for greater gender equality and diverse representation within the ministry and in outgoing delegations, promoting women's entrepreneurship in trade and international cooperation, conducting gender analyses, broadening the focus on gender equality in, and making it a constant topic of, interventions during bilateral contacts and in all international forums, etc. Broad consultations will be held to ensure the meaningful development of the Netherlands' feminist foreign policy. We will inform the House and the Senate about the further design of this policy.