

Letter of 8 November 2022 from the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation to the House of Representatives on feminist foreign policy

Further to the letter to the House of 13 May,¹ and with reference to the undertaking made to the Senate (T03442), we are pleased to inform you of the government's efforts to pursue a feminist foreign policy.

The principle of equality is firmly rooted in the first article of the Dutch constitution. All people in the Netherlands must be treated equally in equal circumstances. The government is firmly convinced that this principle is an universal value, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The pursuit of full equality is a core element of Dutch foreign policy. Yet major steps still need to be taken globally to achieve universal equality, particularly for women and girls. Although they account for half the world's population, systemic gender inequality still exists. The situation is often even worse for minorities such as LGBTIQ+ people. Other factors, including ethnicity, religion and physical or other disabilities often determine the extent to which people experience additional unequal treatment.² In view of article 1 of the constitution, and of article 90 (on promoting the development of the international legal order), the government has opted for a policy of highlighting and addressing this systemic inequality. A feminist foreign policy, in other words.

What is feminist foreign policy?

In the government's view, feminism is about equal rights and equality. The government's feminist foreign policy is an attempt to reduce inequality and work towards equal status for men, women and non-binary people. It has a particular focus on the position of LGBTIQ+ people. Women, girls and LGBTIQ+ people all over the world feel the impacts of inequality, though to varying degrees. If more people have equal opportunities, the world will become a safer, more stable and more prosperous place. Systemic gender and other inequality is after all a root cause of conflict.³ This policy will thus enhance the effectiveness of Dutch foreign policy as a whole.

In short, Dutch feminist foreign policy is about protecting the human rights of women and LGBTIQ+ people and promoting their meaningful participation in decision-making processes. In adopting this policy, the Netherlands joins an international group of pioneering countries that are pursuing a feminist foreign policy. Feminist foreign policy focuses on the 'four Rs': rights, representation, resources and reality check.⁴ Women all over the world must be able to claim their universal rights and know that they are free from violence (rights). They must be represented and take part in political decisions (representation) and there must be sufficient resources to achieve these goals (resources). Since conditions differ around the world, and a particular approach will not have the same effect everywhere, we have to implement our policy goals in a way that is appropriate to the local context (reality check). The government has adopted this 4R approach, and will give it a specifically Dutch interpretation by devoting additional attention to LGBTIQ+ people and by actively involving men and boys in efforts to change negative gender norms.

Why do we need a feminist foreign policy?

Women make up half the world's population, yet it is rare to find a place where they are equally represented at governmental and political levels where decisions are made about their lives. Some

¹ Parliamentary Paper 34 952-162.

² This approach to inequality is known as intersectionality.

³ World Bank and UN (2018), *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*; UN General Assembly Resolutions 1325 (2000); 1889 (2009); 2242 (2015).

⁴ The new Swedish government recently decided to discontinue Sweden's feminist foreign policy.

1.2 billion women live in countries where the right to safe abortion is not guaranteed. Violence against women, including domestic violence and honour crimes, are human rights violations that occur on a large scale all over the world.⁵ Caring responsibilities and other unpaid work place an unfair burden on women, putting them at a disadvantage on the labour market, and preventing them from attaining financial and economic equality or accumulating assets.⁶ In regions hit by disasters and conflict, women disproportionately fall victim to sexual violence. Women are also systematically underrepresented in conflict resolution, whereas research has shown that if women are involved in peace talks they are almost always successful, and the agreement reached has a greater chance of being implemented and of holding for longer.⁷

A recent study by the UN found that the COVID-19 pandemic has undone much of the progress made in terms of women's rights and gender equality. If the world continues tackling inequality (including inequality before the law) between men and women at the current pace, it will take many more decades for the situation to improve – on paper, and certainly in practice.⁸ As long as the socioeconomic rights of women and girls are not adequately safeguarded, they will remain vulnerable to discrimination, including financial and legal discrimination, in terms of access to property, land, inheritances, loans and education, for example. This violates the rights of women and girls, exposing them to poverty, dependency and violence.

In 2015 the McKinsey Global Institute calculated that if there were full equality on the labour market, global GNP could grow by 26%.⁹ Such growth in prosperity could bring poverty to an end in large parts of the world. German foreign minister Annalena Baerbock recently memorably dubbed it 'economic lunacy' not to pursue a feminist foreign policy.¹⁰

There is thus every reason for Dutch foreign policy to focus more on equality, equal treatment and equal access for all to the political and social sphere. This, after all, is an effective way of helping to address and eliminate the root causes of poverty, economic inequality, extremism, conflict and traditional and hybrid wars.

What is the Netherlands already doing?

Promoting women's rights and gender equality has been a key focus of Dutch foreign policy for some time. Since 2014 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has had a Women's Rights and Gender Equality Task Force, one of whose tasks is to integrate gender into foreign policy across the board. It has also appointed an Ambassador for Gender Equality and Women's Rights. Over the past few years a great deal of attention has been given to gender mainstreaming in the Ministry's policies. In practical terms, this means ensuring meaningful participation by women, and considering the effects that policy has on women, in grant awards, diplomacy and EU and multilateral negotiations. The Netherlands also promotes women's rights, gender equality, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. In doing so, it seeks to collaborate with other countries, and actively draws on the expertise of civil society, in order to enhance the impact of these efforts.

⁵ [UNWomen](#); [Atria](#); [UNWomenNed](#).

⁶ [Global Gender Gap Report 2022 | World Economic Forum \(weforum.org\)](#).

⁷ Krause, J., Krause, W. & Bränfors, P. (2018); Nilsson (2012), 'Anchoring the Peace: Civil Society Actors in Peace Accords and Durable Peace'.

⁸ UN (2022), 'Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2022', 11.

⁹ McKinsey Global Institute (2015), *The Power of Parity: How Advancing Women's Equality Can Add \$12 Trillion to Global Growth*, 2

¹⁰ Annalena Baerbock (2022, 12 September), [Speech by Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock at the Conference on Shaping Feminist Foreign Policy - Federal Foreign Office \(auswaertiges-amt.de\)](#).

One key instrument for the Netherlands' work on these issues is the funding of activities and programmes. With a budget of €510 million for 2021-2025, the Netherlands' SDG 5 Fund is one of the biggest funds for women's rights and gender equality in the world. Its resources are used for things like promoting women's participation in political decision-making, peace processes and reconstruction. The fund also supports female entrepreneurship, women's rights organisations and human rights defenders. Support includes direct funding for women's organisations in the South. When it comes to international business, female entrepreneurs are a priority group, with the goal of enabling them to do more business in other countries. More international trade by female entrepreneurs boosts sustainable earning capacity. Besides the SDG 5 Fund, the Human Rights Fund, Stability Fund and Climate Fund also reserve funding specifically for projects about or with a strong focus on women's rights and gender equality.

The Netherlands has international influence on these issues, so a feminist foreign policy is a logical next step. The activities described above will continue, and will be stepped up and given greater emphasis in Dutch foreign policy.

In recent months the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has put its feminist foreign policy into action in various ways, both in The Hague and at the missions. Conflict-related sexual violence was an important focus of the Ukraine Accountability Conference in The Hague, and various subjects associated with gender, SRHR and abortion were raised in bilateral talks in Strasbourg, Texas and Bulgaria, for example. The Netherlands also spoke out against homophobia and discrimination in Slovakia after the recent murder there of two LHBTIQ+ people. It condemns the violence of the Iranian security services in response to the peaceful protests there as well, and supports European sanctions in response to the large-scale violence against women in Iran.

What else does the Netherlands plan to do?

As the study by the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB) found, though steps have already been taken towards gender mainstreaming, there is still room for improvement and translation into practice.¹¹ The internal consultations conducted at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the responses of external stakeholders to the survey on a feminist foreign policy also suggested that improvements could be made to various aspects of policy, implementation and organisation, and a higher level of ambition would be appropriate.

On the basis of lessons learned to date, policy evaluations and the recent consultations, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will focus on:

- Setting the agenda: the Netherlands plays a strong international role in setting the agenda. The government will continue to do so, and indeed step up its efforts, in the context of feminist foreign policy, focusing on the points set out above. Universal equality and equal opportunities for all, with specific focus on the rights of women, LHBTIQ+ people and minorities, will be raised in bilateral talks with like-minded and non-like-minded organisations and governments, and in multilateral forums. The Netherlands will act in close collaboration with France, Germany, Spain and other like-minded member states, forming coalitions through the EU where possible to act as an international driving force.
- A gender lens will be embedded in the entire policy cycle. This means that the question of what policy will mean for women and girls and LHBTIQ+ people will always be considered when policy is developed and implemented, to assess whether anything needs to be changed.¹² Gender analysis will thus become a standard element in devising strategy and policy. Successive gender

¹¹ See Letter to the House of Representatives 33625-331 setting out a policy response to the IOB evaluation of gender mainstreaming at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

¹² See also the Integrated Assessment Framework's quality standard for impacts on gender equality.

strategies with gender-specific goals and activities will become a permanent feature of policy implementation and monitoring.

- Gender budgeting will become the point of departure for funding decisions.¹³ This means that gender analysis will become a standard element of decision-making on potential programme and grant expenditure. The OECD-DAC gender equality policy marker will be used for this purpose, and the goals will be specified in a gender-disaggregated way.¹⁴
- The root causes of existing power structures and inequality will be investigated and become a well-considered part of policy considerations and decision-making.
- A range of civil society organisations – including local and women’s organisations – will be meaningfully involved and consulted in policy- and decision-making processes.
- Policy will be evaluated – including interim evaluations – to ascertain its impact on women and LGBTIQ+ people, and adapted if necessary.
- Since everything we promote abroad begins at home, the Ministry will also continue to look critically at its own organisation, increasing its capacity for gender analysis implementation through training and knowledge development. Diversity, inclusion and gender parity in all job grades at the ministry will remain a continuous focus of attention. When putting together delegations, the goal will always be to ensure diverse and inclusive representation. This will not be possible on every mission, but the entire organisation will be expected to follow the guideline ‘comply or explain’, on this and the other points set out above.

Dutch efforts to pursue feminist foreign policy, as outlined in this letter, will be fleshed out in more detail over the coming year in a practical guide. Further consultations will be held as part of this process.

Finally, in autumn 2023 an international conference on feminist foreign policy will be organised as a follow-up to the first conference, held in Berlin in September 2022. The Netherlands hopes in this way to help expand knowledge and facilitate discussion of this subject.

¹³ Gender budgeting means that priorities, choices and the awarding of funding in budgets must promote gender equality as much as possible. Analysing expenditure/funding from a gender perspective makes clear their impact on different genders, and decision-making concerning these matters becomes transparent as regards gender equality. Gender budgeting must be applied in all areas of foreign policy.

¹⁴ [OECD-DAC](#); Gender-specific data (male, female, possibly non-binary) must be available in order for policymakers to assess the situation and develop appropriate, evidence-based responses and policy measures.