

International Women's Day 2025

Beware the backlash: Feminist development policy at the crossroads

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Bonn, 6 March 2025. Following a global trend, Germany introduced feminist development and foreign policies almost two years ago, in March 2023. Yet, with shifting global dynamics and a rising misogynistic backlash, policy attention has been redirected elsewhere. Nonetheless, policymakers should resolutely work towards equal rights, representation, and resources for marginalised genders on local, national and global levels so that *all* members of society are empowered to meet current economic, political, ecological, and security challenges.

Women's Day on March 8 calls for assessing the progress countries with feminist policies have achieved in prioritising gender equality laying the

basis for sustainable development. Alas, in contrast, rising support for nationalist, conservative, and exclusionary policies has become a common pattern. The United States under Trump has reversed legal recognition of other gender identities and discontinued USAID funding, limiting access to social infrastructure in over 120 countries. These shortsighted decisions have deepened global gender inequality, across the world. Social media spaces further polarise by advancing anti-democratic and anti-gender agendas and propagating gendered disinformation. This backlash raises the urgent question of how to ensure that past gains towards gender equality are not only maintained but accelerated, despite the current challenges facing feminist policies worldwide.

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Clearly, structural disadvantages and continuous gender exclusion make a poor basis for solving developmental challenges, as two projects at IDOS highlight with reference to different partner countries and regions. A GIZ-funded project on ‘Feminist Employment Policy’ found that women are systematically disadvantaged by household dynamics rooted in restrictive social norms, limiting their ability to take on paid work and advance into more formal wage jobs, to the detriment of their entire community’s economic situation. The results of a GIZ and IDOS-funded project on ‘Local feminist perspectives as transformation levers for greater gender equality’ suggest that collaborative transnational networks and solidarity need to be facilitated to address systemic barriers to the rights and representation of marginalized genders. Both projects highlight the importance of addressing feminist dimensions in international cooperation, particularly given the growing challenges and polycrises affecting marginalized genders disproportionately. Building resilient communities is more crucial than ever and excluding over half of the population undermines its development.

Engaging the Global South might become even more relevant to build alliances to protect democracy and rights for all genders globally. International partner countries like Mexico are committed to gender equality in their internal and external policies. Committed to multilateralism and building on experiences gained from feminist policies, Germany and its partners have the tools to implement ‘real’ gender mainstreaming, by incorporating gender considerations into a policy mix of different areas (such as gender-responsive social protection and employment policies).

This year holds many opportunities for Germany, the EU and their partners to come together, build multilateral alliances and advocate for gender equality in global fora, for instance along the processes of the 30th anniversary of the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995). The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda will celebrate its 25th anniversary, creating momentum for states’ representatives, civil society and other actors to call for more gender equality. Also, political processes in the field of sustainable development and climate action provide promising entry points for gendered perspectives to be brought forward: the next High Level Political Forum (HLPF) in New York with inter alia a focus on Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality, and the next Conference of the Parties (COP) under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Brazil.

Gender issues are an integral part of different policy fields and need to be shielded from populist discussions, which only aim to shift attention from the real issue – suppressed development chances stemming from gender discrimination. For instance, heated discussions on woke language fuelled by anti-feminist discourses ultimately distract from in-depth exchanges on how to achieve gender equality. Supporting gender-transformative development and international cooperation is in all our interests. Not despite but because of the current political climate, Germany and its partners can make a case for gender equality – do not only talk about it but do more for equal opportunities!