CFFP THE CENTRE FOR FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY

# Feminist Foreign Policy So White?!

## A Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy Briefing

### *Personal note*

For the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy (CFFP) the fundament of feminism is intersectionality. It is therefore key for us to constantly work on dismantling the oppressive structures that prevent racial justice. At CFFP, we are committed to being attentive to the power dynamics within our own structures and with external partners that reproduce the marginalisation of minority groups. For this reason, we started gathering resources to support an ongoing honest discussion about the consequences of white domination in the field of Feminist Foreign Policy, hosting two webtalks on "(Feminist) Foreign Policy So White" in July 2020. This policy brief is intended to continue the conversation. As our work unfolds, we aim to cover as wide a scope as possible and remain open to constructive criticism and suggestions. As a white-led[1] organisation in the Global North,[2] we understand this commitment as our obligation and responsibility.

### *The Issue*

Current foreign policy debates take place in a global system characterised by the exclusion and oppression of marginalised groups. In recent years, an emerging discourse on the nature of gendered inequality has led to a recognition of this fact, initiating an interrogation of sexism and patriarchy while creating opportunities for the increasing articulation of feminism alongside foreign policy processes and discourse.[3]

However, a consideration of gender alone is not enough to rebalance structural inequality. Indeed, gender does not exist in isolation. It operates in a series of complex interactions with other social categories, such as race, class, age, (dis)ability and sexual orientation. When it comes to race, colonial legacies in policy-making have long prioritised the interests of the white dominant group, creating particular experiences of discrimination for those marginalised by racial hierarchies. For Black, Indigenous and Women of Colour (BIWoC), this aggravates existing circumstances of sexist exclusion to create an even more concentrated experience of injustice and oppression. BIWoC who flee the paradigm of patriarchy and refuse to live according to its domination suffer constant retaliation. [4]

Thus, as a feminist organisation, our interrogation of patriarchy must be one that centres intersectionality and recognises the potency of racist structures in dominant policy paradigms.

A failure to recognise the whiteness of such frameworks will only naturalise and reproduce whiteness and as an accepted form of social control. Our intervention is intended instead to disrupt the primacy of whiteness and to open up space for an investigation of the underlying assumptions, narratives and biases that guide foreign policy decision-making. In so doing we can begin to think differently about how such concepts may inform a more productive, inclusive Feminist Foreign Policy.

## *Defining Whiteness*

"Whiteness is not about attitudes or about individual identity, it is an ideology and a set of practices that have been institutionalised in economic, social, and cultural processes globally. Whiteness is a framework that encodes values and standards of superiority and inferiority, which are anchored in racial difference and in commonsensical, colonised understandings of us and them.
Whiteness is not a biological category; it is a network of ideas and practices about race grounded in white supremacy and the legacy of slavery and empire. As Noel Ignatiev explained, "whiteness is like an ideological club where members accept the benefits without awareness of the costs to others."
Whiteness is a policy frame that incorporates the values and common-sense logic of white supremacy and converts them into political demands and policymaking." [5]

Professor Chandra Talpade Mohanty, CFFP Advisory Board Member

## *I Don't See Colour and Other Fairy Tales*

White people rarely recognise whiteness in Foreign Policy because they have always identified whiteness as the norm and as the starting point or reference point for any measure. Most international organisations have their base in the Global North and the permanent members of the UN Security Council reflect a power dynamic rooted in legacies of imperialism. Whiteness is everywhere in diplomatic structures, so pervasive and influential that it is often perceived as normal. This means that if someone or something deviates from this white reality, it is often marked as "irregular" or "outside of the box". Ironically, members of the dominant group feel entitled to identify "others" and to determine the boundaries of "normality" while also failing to critically reflect on their own positionality as white actors. Based on this fact, it is not surprising that white domination in Feminist Foreign Policy preserves whiteness as the norm.

White domination in Feminist Foreign Policy is harmful because it leads to a distorted perception of the international system, one centred around white interest and white success. For example, in the widespread "Africa Rising" narrative,[6] the implication is that Africa has been at the margins of international affairs and economy until only very recently. This narrative erases the continent's well-documented and enduring prominence in international politics before imperialism and ignores the richness of the culture and heritage that existed before white colonisers set foot on its land.

White domination also leads to a limited understanding of the intersecting oppressive structures that marginalise particular groups - outside and within feminist movements. Even if feminist actors outside the white norm obtain access to white spaces, they have to adapt to white feminist thought, reasoning and language in order to be heard. If they do not, they run the risk of not being recognised, heard or understood by the dominant white group. Within this white feminist space, the crucial role that white actors play in reproducing marginalising patterns is often unacknowledged. The unwillingness of white people to deal with the impacts of racial hierarchies in foreign policy is expressed, for example, through instances of white saviourism.

## *From Saving Women to Saving Feminism*[7]

"White saviourism" in Feminist Foreign Policy evolves from colonial patterns of racial hierarchy.[8] The term refers to the behaviour and attitude of white people who position themselves as “saviours” of Black, Indigenous and Brown bodies who have been historically exploited and oppressed. Examples occur in adoption processes, volunteering work or fundraising campaigns with celebrities like Victoria Beckham and Natalie Portman.[9] Despite their lack of professional and cultural knowledge, white actors identify themselves as “experts” in solving gender issues in the Global South, while the richness of local knowledge remains ignored and replaced by the strategies of white-led development agencies, foundations, and humanitarian organisations. Too often, feminists from the Global North feel entitled to export their feminist knowledge to the Global South assuming that there is no knowledge there at all. This assumption is grounded in the fact that Eurocentric and Western feminist understandings have always been identified as the legitimate ones. For centuries, the Global North has dominated academic knowledge production and policy design through (neo-) colonial instruments such as financial investments, armed conflicts or religious interests. In other words, feminist history has been written by white feminists for white feminists.

This asymmetric power balance has nurtured the white saviour complex in Feminist Foreign Policy design. As Toni Haastrup has argued, countries looking to adopt a Feminist Foreign Policy must be cautious not to “reinforce enduring blind spots within the field and practice of international relations by ignoring race.”[10] In this, Haastrup cautions against Feminist Foreign Policies that focus their attention on the hardship of women in countries with developing economies and thus position themselves as better equipped to deal with the challenges of gender discrimination. In imagery of this nature, the relationship between the Global North and the Global South becomes racialized. Powerful states invoke their own experiences as best practices to tackle the issue of gender-based discrimination “elsewhere” while failing to reflect on their own shortcomings domestically or to consider seriously the impact of the racialized legacies of colonialsim that led to conditions of gender discrimination in the Global South. [11]

## *Consequences of whiteness within the United Nations' Women, Peace and Security Agenda*

Within the context of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, colonial patterns of securitisation have silenced feminist voices from the Global South and have therefore created a dynamic in which other voices from the Global North to try to speak for those who cannot be heard.[12] This creates a circumstance that forces BIWoC to depend on organisations and governments from the Global North to be able to voice their concerns on a regional or global stage, for example within the UN Security Council. Furthermore, actors in the Global North not only speak for BIWoC, they also define what counts as security and what does not. For instance, as Soumita Basu elaborates in her article, The Global South writes 1325 (too), UN Security Council Resolution 1325 can be interpreted as "a tool that is used by powerful countries, located in the Global North, to establish favourable policies in post-conflict countries, located primarily in the Global South, in the name of gender equality".[13] Indeed, the majority of National Action Plans (NAPs) from countries in the Global North are focused predominantly on foreign and development policy, expressing ambitions to "export" progressive gender norms to other regions. Those from countries in the Global South tend to focus on domestic policy with international actors identified as crucial partners. [14]

In addition to this, white domination has also influenced the agenda setting with regards to countering violent extremism (CVE). For example, Swati Parashar's article from 2018 examines attempts to include the WPS agenda in the development of policies designed to CVE.[15] For instance, she highlights the Global War on Terror after 9/11 as another example of how Western governments justify military operations in the name of gender equality and Women, Peace and Security.  Certainly, as feminist activists like Nadje Al-Ali and Mossarat Qadeem have argued, US security policies have only intensified gender inequality in Iraq and Pakistan instead of empowering women and other marginalised groups. In the case of the Iraq war, Al-Ali highlights the hypocrisy of the US advocating for greater female representation in post-conflict reconstruction processes while simultaneously exacerbating women's daily burden of survival through[16] drone strikes carried out without a UN Security Council mandate in the name of the Global War on Terror. In the case of Pakistan, Mossarat Qadeem argues that CVE initiatives have led to further militarisation of policy, perpetuating an already hyper-masculinised understanding of security in the country.[17]

Feminist Foreign Policy cannot accept gender equality as a justification for war or hostile counter-terrorism measures. The most common response mechanisms used  to counter extremism focus primarily on increased border monitoring and control, intelligence gathering, law enforcement, and military defense mechanisms - not on strengthening human security. A Feminist Foreign Policy stands for demilitarisation, in particular of security structures. Violence towards Black, Indigenous and Brown bodies under the guise of gender equality and empowerment is not acceptable for feminist strategies in foreign policy.

"Decolonisation has to be a deeper, insurgent process that involves the transformation of self, of community and of governance structures at all levels. It must involve an active withdrawal of consent and a resistance to practices of psychic and social domination."[18]

Professor Chandra Talpade Mohanty, CFFP Advisory Board Member

## *Consequences of whiteness within the Climate Justice Movement*

Dominant discourse on gender and the climate emergency has consistently highlighted the particular vulnerabilities faced by women as a result of the degradation of the environment.[19] Reiterated in policy debates, programming and practice, this discourse has further stressed the inflammatory effect of existing social, economic, and political inequalities on such vulnerability, suggesting that women experience the greatest disadvantage in regions where gender norms are most restrictive.[20] With this reasoning in mind, widespread representations have come to depict poorer rural women in the Global South as the ultimate "victims" of the climate emergency, as unequal societal power relations compound geographical risk to create an exacerbated experience of hardship.[21]

However, despite the legitimacy of these concerns, these representations have created contrasting depictions of agency and vulnerability in feminist climate justice discourse and activism.[22] In these depictions, women in the Global South are more likely to be presented as passive recipients of environmental decline, while women in the North are portrayed as more environmentally conscious and as active agents of their own well-being.[23] As we know, lived experiences are much more complex than these representations suggest. Disproportionate attention to the vulnerability of women in this context perpetuates an image of a "helpless" population in need and erases the productive capacity of women actors in the Global South.

Indeed, the complex challenge of responding to the climate emergency is best conceptualised at the microlevel, with action organised into areas of mitigation and adaptation.[24] In this sense, while women in rural areas can be most exposed to the harmful effects of environmental decline, they are also often the most prominent and efficient agents of positive transformation, uniquely positioned to offer local knowledge that can inform effective alternatives and solutions to alleviate anthropocentric pressures. Often undocumented and overlooked, the Global South is rich with individual and collective climate movements with women at the forefront. An inclusive mechanism of feminist climate justice, therefore, is one that goes beyond reductive depictions of vulnerability to prioritise the voices and knowledge of marginalised people. It goes beyond tokenistic inclusion to ensure the meaningful participation of disadvantaged groups at local, national and international levels.

In January 2020, Climate advocate Vanessa Nakate called out racism in media representation and climate discourse after she was removed from a photo taken with other white activists attending the World Economic Forum in Davos.[25]

## *Decolonise Your Mind!*

Colonial legacies in Feminist Foreign Policy, must be tackled by white-led organisations. This demands an ongoing process of self-reflection and radical honesty - even when it hurts. Decolonisation is not intended to restrict discussion with opinion policing or "political correctness" but to open up dialogue, to stimulate critical thought and to reveal new and diverse forms of learning.[26] These are some concrete steps white people working in the field can take in order to use their privilege to dismantle racial hierarchies:

- Refuse to cooperate with partner organisations that are racial gaslighting.
- Undermine colonial narratives that solely locate silence, powerlessness, and oppression in the Global South and in BIPoC communities.
- Bring people from marginalised communities in without patronising and tone policing them with your views on feminism.
- Challenge and remind institutions about their anti-racists commitments and diversity strategies.
- Continue to question, learn and grow - educate yourself and others.
- Start now!

## *Learn More*

1. *Transformation Solidarity Statement by Organizations and Individuals Against Racism and Discrimination* by Women of Color Advancing Peace, Security and Conflict. Available at: https://issuu.com/wcapsnet/docs/june_9_wcaps_sign-on_letter_2_
2. *Crafting a Feminist Foreign Policy* episode by the Press the Button Podcast of Foreign Policy Interrupted. Available at: https://africanarguments.org/2020/07/21/our-african-colleagues-on-the-limits-of-diversity-in-development/
3. *Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism* by Sara Ahmed. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/15479980/Declarations_of_Whiteness_The_Non_Performativity_of_Anti_Racism
4. *So, you want to talk about race?* by Robin DiAngelo and Minneapolis-based trauma specialist Resmaa Menakem. Available at: https://onbeing.org/programs/robin-diangelo-and-resmaa-menakem-in-conversation/
5. *Feminist Foreign Policy Cannot Ignore Race* by Dr Toni Hastrupp. Available at: https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/03/why-is-mainstream-international-relations-ir-blind-to-racism-colonialism/

## *End Notes*

1. We're writing "Black" in capital letters. It is neither an adjective and nor a skin colour - Black is a politically chosen self-designation, in rejection of colonial racist terms. We have decided to write "white" in small letters to emphasise that it is not about skin colour, but about privileges.
2. This term refers to countries in the Northern Hemisphere, with the exception of Australia and New Zealand.
3. Government Offices of Sweden, Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2019. Handbook: Sweden's Feminist Foreign Policy. [online] Available at: [Accessed 31 August 2020].
4. Cordeiro, N. (2018) Lesbian thinking and global structures: the voices of the south shaking the system. Disrupted, (2), p.28-30.
5. Quote extracted from Chandra Talpade Mohanty's key note speech at CFFP's event 'Foreign Policy So White?!'. The recording of the webinar is available at: https://centreforfeministforeignpolicy.org/events
6. Foreign Policy (2020) Why is Mainstream International Relations Blind to Racism? Available at: https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/03/why-is-mainstream-international-relations-ir-blind-to-racism-colonialism/?mc_cid=8547341c4f&mc_eid=8d4fb9217b [Accessed: 31 August 2020]

7. Wording from Swati Parashar's article " The WPS Agenda: A Postcolonial Critique" (2018)
8. Haastrup, T. & Hagen, J. (2020). Global Racial Hierarchies and the Limits of Localization via National Action Plans. In Basu, S., Kirby, P., & Shepherd, L. (Eds.), New Directions in Women, Peace and Security. p. 133-152.
9. The Ugandan NGO "No White Saviors" strives to disrupt white saviourism in international development, aid, and missions. Part of their work is to name examples which illustrate the harm of white saviourism.
10. Foreign Policy (2020) Why is Mainstream International Relations Blind to Racism? Available at: https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/03/why-is-mainstream-international-relations-ir-blind-to-racism-colonialism/?mc_cid=8547341c4f&mc_eid=8d4fb9217b [Accessed: 31 August 2020]
11. Wengraf, L. (2019) Legacies of colonialism in Africa: Imperialism, dependence, and development. [Accessed: 31 August 2020].
12. Bertrand, S. (2018). Can the subaltern securitize? Postcolonial perspectives on securitization theory and its critics. European Journal of International Security, 3(3), p. 281-299.
13. Basu, S. (2016). The Global South writes 1325 (too). International Political Science Review, 37(3), p. 362-374.
14. See Global Analysis of WPS National Action Plans established by Professor Laura J. Shepherd
15. Parashar, S. (2018) Discursive (in)securities and postcolonial anxiety: Enabling excessive militarism in India. Security Dialogue. 49(1-2), p. 123-135.
16. Al-Ali,N. (2010) Embedded Feminism- Women's Rights as a Justification for War. Available at: https://www.gwi-boell.de/en/2010/11/24/embedded-feminism-women%E2%80%99s-rights-justification-war [Accessed: 31st August 2020]
17. Qadeem, M. (2019) Preventing and Countering Women's Participation in Violent Extremism in Pakistan: A Practitioner's Perspective. Available at: http://www.boell.org/en/2019/12/10/preventing-and-countering-womens-participation-violent-extremism-pakistan-practitioners [Accessed: 31st August 2020]
18. Quote extracted from Chandra Talpade Mohanty's key note speech at CFFP's event 'Foreign Policy So White?!'. The recording of the webinar is available at: https://centreforfeministforeignpolicy.org/events
19. WHO (2004) Gender, Climate Change and Health. Available at: https://www.who.int/globalchange/GenderClimateChangeHealthfinal.pdf?ua=1 [Accessed: 31st August 2020]
20. UNEP (2016) Gender Equality and The Environment: A Guide to UNEP's Work. Available at: https://www.unenvironment.org/resources/policy-and-strategy/gender-policy-brief-and-success-stories-2016-guide-un-environments

21. Simon-Kumar, R. et al (2018) Towards North-South Interconnectedness: a Critique of Gender Dualities in Sustainable Development, the Environment and Women's Health: Gender, Environment & Health in the North-South Gender, Work & Organisation
22. Arora-Jonsson, S. (2011) Virtue and vulnerability: Discourses on women, gender and climate change. Global Environmental Change 21(2) p. 744-751
23. Simon-Kumar, R. et al (2018) Towards North-South Interconnectedness: a Critique of Gender Dualities in Sustainable Development, the Environment and Women's Health: Gender, Environment & Health in the North-South Gender, Work & Organisation
24. de Castro, D. (2019) Climate Justice: Building Opportunities for Women's Participation and Leadership in the Climate Change Regime, Peace, Reconciliation and Social Justice Leadership in the 21st Century (Building Leadership Bridges, Vol. 8), Emerald Publishing Limited, p. 161-176.
25. Aljazeera (2020) Anger as Ugandan activist cropped out of photo with white peers. Available at: Aljazeera/News/Africa, 25th February 2020 [Accessed: 31st August 2020]
26. Haffner, D. (2018) Learning to unlearn: towards decolonising international relations teaching. Disrupted, (2), p.16-18.

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