

# Nuclear Risk Reduction: A Feminist Foreign Policy Perspective

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## Introduction

Nuclear risk reduction and Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) might, at first glance, seem fundamentally at odds. Nuclear risk reduction operates within existing security frameworks, focusing on incremental diplomatic and technical measures to prevent the use of nuclear weapons. FFP, on the other hand, seeks to disrupt power hierarchies and reframe security through justice, inclusivity, and human-centered approaches. However, these frameworks are not contradictory— with its focus on communication and cooperative approaches, FFP can support present operational and technical nuclear risk reduction efforts while facilitating a shift from a reliance on deterrence and coercion to cooperative peace.

This paper argues that aligning the pragmatic tools of nuclear risk reduction with the transformative principles of FFP can address gaps in vision and implementation, paving the way for resilient, inclusive, and human-centered risk reduction efforts with the ultimate goal of nuclear disarmament.

# Situating Feminist Foreign Policy in nuclear weapons discourse

There is no unified definition of FFP, but the commonly agreed goal is to anchor women's rights – and increasingly also encompassing marginalized groups – across all areas of foreign policy. Sweden became the first country to adopt an FFP in 2014, focusing on the “three Rs”: rights, representation, and resources, although it has since revoked the policy. Since Sweden's initiative, fourteen other countries followed suit, including Canada, Luxembourg, France, Mexico, Germany, Chile, Liberia, the Netherlands, Colombia, Argentina, Mongolia, and Slovenia, each adapting FFP principles to their national contexts. The shift toward FFP seeks to dismantle traditional power hierarchies embedded in foreign policy and security (Aggestam and Rosamond, 2016).

FFP offers a critical opportunity to reframe nuclear weapons discourse by promoting a more inclusive, cooperative, and human-centered approach to international security. At its core, FFP challenges traditional power dynamics and seeks to transform the structures that have historically shaped foreign and security policy—not merely by increasing representation, but by addressing the deeper, systemic inequalities embedded within global governance. For countries such as Germany, Mexico, the Netherlands, and Spain, FFP reflects a commitment to move beyond narrow conceptions of “women's issues” toward a broader agenda that prioritizes justice, accountability, and sustainable peace.

The FFP concept was initially adopted by states and later taken up by academics and activists, eventually evolving into a distinct subfield of feminist international relations. Feminist IR scholars contest the traditional, state-centric, and militarized models of security that dominate nuclear policy. They advocate for a holistic approach that centers human security and community well-being, revealing how nuclear discourse is shaped not only by gendered assumptions, but also by racialized and colonial legacies (Choi and Eschle, 2022). Applied to the nuclear field, feminist analysis exposes the hierarchical norms that inform nuclear weapons policies and opens space for alternative security frameworks grounded in cooperation, equity, and collective responsibility.

# Where does FFP fit into NRR?

Nuclear risk reduction measures are often promoted as pragmatic and tangible steps with broad appeal across geopolitical divides (see Krepon, 2019; Wan, 2019; Williams and Adamopoulos, 2022; Joyner, 2023). While proponents of nuclear risk reduction argue that it offers practical measures to prevent the use of nuclear weapons, critics highlight its limitations, including feminist scholars. Risk reduction, they argue, perpetuates reliance on nuclear deterrence (Pelopidas et al., 2022) and can sometimes serve as a distraction from genuine disarmament. These are all valid perspectives, and disaggregating nuclear risks can help clarify where feminist approaches can complement existing measures and where they may offer transformative contributions to the broader security paradigm.

Operational and technological nuclear risks arise from the routine management of nuclear systems and are exacerbated by factors such as human error, misinterpretation, technical malfunction, cyber threats, and vulnerabilities in command and control (C2) structures. These risks persist even in times of peace and can escalate significantly during periods of heightened political or military tension. While typically addressed through safeguards and protective measures, these efforts are most effective when paired with trust-building and communication mechanisms. Feminist approaches can complement and strengthen such measures—such as hotline agreements, confidence-building initiatives, and military-to-military dialogue—by emphasizing cooperation, transparency, and harm reduction. These tools not only mitigate immediate risks but also support longer-term frameworks that may reduce reliance on nuclear weapons altogether.

Strategic stability risks, by contrast, stem from the structural dynamics of nuclear deterrence itself, including adversarial postures, escalatory doctrines, and the perpetual threat of nuclear use as a means of securing peace. While some of these risks can also be mitigated through transparency and communication, they are ultimately rooted in a security paradigm that relies on the credible threat of catastrophic violence. From a feminist perspective, this reliance on nuclear weapons not only perpetuates global power imbalances but also reinforces a model of security built on fear, dominance, and exclusion.

As Shaz rightly notes in her essay “From the Cuban Missile Crisis to Russia’s War in Ukraine: Strategic Empathy as Feminist Foreign Policy” certain aspects of “great power competition” namely nuclear “brinkmanship” cannot be reconcilable with FFP; she argues that FFP “must be a paradigm shift in the norms and institutions that undergird international decision-making, not simply a set of policy recommendations for state interaction” (Shaz, 2024).

Applying a gender lens to the nuclear weapons discourse reveals how gendered assumptions, rooted in traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, shape ideas and policies surrounding nuclear weapons. Whereas nuclear weapons, rationality and military power have always been associated with masculinity, nuclear disarmament has been perceived as emasculation or feminization as well as caring about the humanitarian and environmental impacts of nuclear weapons (see, e.g., Tickner, 1992; Duncanson and Eschle, 2008 or Acheson, 2018). “If disarmament is emasculation, how could any real man even consider it?” (quoted by Cohn, 1987a).

Rather than retreating from nuclear risk reduction debates, feminist approaches are well positioned to address the systemic drivers of nuclear insecurity, eliminate the very conditions that justify their existence and propose alternative pathways to security grounded in cooperative peace. Feminist approaches to nuclear risk reduction would naturally position such efforts as a steppingstone toward the broader goal of complete nuclear disarmament. This aligns with global norms, as reflected in the 2022 NPT Review Conference: although the conference failed to produce a final document due to geopolitical disagreements, the draft outcome clearly affirmed nuclear risk reduction as an interim solution, pending the complete elimination of nuclear weapons as the ultimate risk reduction measure.

## **International engagement on NRR – lessons for FFP**

Much of the analytical work on nuclear risk reduction has originated in the Global North. For example, in 2018, the Netherlands Institute of International Relations presented eleven policy options for nuclear risk reduction drawing from a pool of previous research on the topic.

Additionally, in 2019, UNIDIR published a study on nuclear risk reduction, funded by Australia, Finland, Sweden, and Switzerland, identifying “use pathways” such as doctrinal, escalatory, unauthorized, and accidental risks (Wan, 2019). While the latter report “Closing Pathways to Use” does a better job of including perspectives from the Global South/Majority, there is a need for more diverse perspectives on nuclear risk reduction measures, which states with FFP are well positioned to support.

However, the Global South has made important practical contributions to nuclear risk reduction long before it was conceptualized as such, through treaties such as the *Treaty of Pelindaba* and the *Treaty of Tlatelolco*, which established nuclear-weapon-free zones in Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean. These agreements not only prohibit the development, testing, and stationing of nuclear weapons, but also promote transparency and cooperation. In doing so, they reflect the paradigm shift that FFP seeks—moving away from coercion and deterrence toward inclusive, trust-based approaches to security. While these treaties do not directly engage with nuclear-armed states or deterrence doctrines, they offer valuable models of nonviolent governance and collective responsibility that future FFP-informed risk reduction efforts can build upon.

Recent developments also show opportunities for feminist engagement with evolving nuclear risk reduction agendas. For example, at the 2023 NPT Preparatory Committee Meeting, China introduced a draft working paper proposing ten risk reduction actions, including a no-first-use policy and disarmament verification research. By linking risk reduction with broader disarmament and conflict prevention goals, such initiatives echo FFP principles and could benefit from further active integration of feminist perspectives.

In this regard, the United Nations system provides a useful, though still underutilized, platform. Since 2000, the UN General Assembly has passed nine resolutions under the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, beginning with Security Council Resolution 1325, which recognized the gendered impacts of armed conflict and the need for women’s participation in peace and security processes. Although the WPS agenda has rarely addressed nuclear weapons explicitly and most National Action Plans (NAPs) omit them (Myrtilinen, 2020), recent efforts are pushing to bridge this gap. Similarly, FFP states’ commitments to nuclear disarmament and their integration into FFP frameworks are either largely absent or reluctant.

Mexico and Germany are notable exceptions, having explicitly addressed nuclear weapons in relation to FFP. Foreign policy actors informed by gender or feminist strategies should actively work to integrate nuclear issues into policy frameworks, drawing on the foundations laid by UNIDIR's Gender and Disarmament Programme. This is essential for advancing a risk reduction agenda that is inclusive, evidence-based, and attuned to the lived realities of those most affected by nuclear harms.

## **The Stockholm Initiative: A practical example facing challenges**

The Stockholm Initiative illustrates how FFP has already moved beyond rhetoric to pragmatic engagement in nuclear diplomacy. The Stockholm Initiative was launched in 2019 under the leadership of Sweden's then Minister for Foreign Affairs, Ann Linde, and other foreign ministers from participating countries. This was during the tenure of Sweden's Social Democrat-Green Party government, which also championed Sweden's FFP. The same government officials were involved in both initiatives, including Ann Linde, who played a key role in promoting both nuclear disarmament and gender equality efforts internationally.

This Initiative brought together diverse states with a track-record of bridgebuilding. The coalition of 16 states pushed for the “Stepping Stones” approach towards nuclear disarmament, and under the framework of the NPT. These efforts were not grounded in idealism but in solution-oriented diplomacy aimed at identifying incremental steps toward disarmament. The Initiative also emphasizes the importance of engaging younger generations and integrating gender perspectives into disarmament efforts.

The impasse of the Stockholm Initiative, exacerbated by debates over whether to call out Russia's aggression, highlights the fragility of narrowly-focused initiatives. This challenge underscores the need to analyze FFP frameworks to ensure they can withstand geopolitical shocks without sacrificing their principles.

# FFP pitfalls to avoid in Nuclear Risk Reduction

Gender equality has emerged as a key foreign policy issue, with many advocating for feminist policies. However, resistance is rising, fueled by internal and external challenges such as the spread of military values, gendered disinformation, and right-wing populism. These factors have cocreated a climate in which the impact of feminist-informed foreign policies has significantly regressed, with some states retreating from their commitments to FFPs. Feminist activists and academics argue that state-developed frameworks often fall short of aligning with feminist principles and fail to translate promises into meaningful, transformative action. This has led to increasing skepticism within the feminist community, including among civil society leaders who were once strong advocates of the concept.

Marissa Conway, former director of the Center for Feminist Foreign Policy, for example, published a revisionist piece noting the utilization of the feminist foreign policy “branding,” while ignoring feminist principles such as nonviolence and human security. For feminist approaches to nuclear risk reduction to be meaningful and effective, they must remain grounded in these principles, avoid neglecting structural inequalities and maintain a consistent focus on the deeper paradigm shifts required to move toward a future free of nuclear weapons.

Conway’s piece also highlights the problem of “girlbossification,” where privileged white women talk about the root causes of gender violence in conflict affected places without internalizing the nuances of the situations and indigenous particularities.<sup>1</sup> To avoid replicating such dynamics, feminist approaches to nuclear risk reduction must prioritize the inclusion of voices historically excluded from nuclear discourse. In particular, centering the testimonies and experiences of Hibakusha and communities affected by nuclear testing is essential to building an approach that is truly just, inclusive, and transformative.

Additional pitfalls to avoid include the over-reliance on representation without meaningful participation, where increasing the number of women in security spaces does not necessarily translate into more feminist or human-centered policies.

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<sup>1</sup> [Is Feminist Foreign Policy Still A Good Idea?](#)



# Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

While FFP and nuclear risk reduction may appear to operate in separate spheres, this paper has argued that their complementary strengths make them potential allies in redefining nuclear security. FFP's pragmatic engagement through Stepping Stones and the Stockholm Initiative demonstrates its capacity to work within existing structures to advance disarmament goals. However, the collapse of these initiatives highlights the need for renewed cooperation, network-building, and knowledge creation—tools that FFP can uniquely offer. By creating a feminist action plan for nuclear risk reduction, we can synthesize vision and practice, building frameworks that are resilient, inclusive, and responsive to today's security challenges.

FFP states are also well positioned to make meaningful contributions to nuclear risk reduction by advocating for the centralization of risks to human life and planetary health—particularly the well-documented consequences of nuclear weapons use, as in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the long-term effects of nuclear testing. Grounding risk reduction strategies in these historical realities ensures that human-centered security concerns are elevated alongside traditional, state-centric security priorities. FFP states can also play a critical role in promoting inclusive and representative policymaking by ensuring gender-balanced participation in NRR negotiations and amplifying the voices of the Global South, Indigenous communities, and civil society actors. Moreover, as Shaz has noted, applying a feminist lens to historical cases of near nuclear use can reveal how communication, empathy, and diplomacy—rather than aggression or coercion—often played a decisive role in de-escalation which can inform future approaches. This perspective reinforces the importance of cooperative approaches in nuclear policy and aligns with the broader transformative goals of FFP.

To achieve this, we propose the following **recommendations**:

- 1) Convene stakeholder networks linking FFP and nuclear risk reduction communities to produce actionable roadmaps for risk reduction with a human-centered focus.
- 2) Analyze the causes of the retreat of FFP and implement appropriate measures to make it more resilient to geopolitical shocks and changes in the societal climate.

- 3) Hold a UN-sponsored multistakeholder conference that includes civil society as well as ministers from all FFP States to align gender-sensitive frameworks with nuclear diplomacy efforts.
- 4) Explore methods for de-escalating tensions while maintaining accountability mechanisms grounded in feminist principles.
- 5) Promote reparation and remediation for nuclear harm, targeting communities affected by nuclear testing and prioritizing environmental recovery.
- 6) Invest in knowledge generation to support research initiatives on gendered impacts of nuclear policies and use this knowledge to inform policy frameworks at the NPT and beyond.
- 7) Establish meaningful connections between the nuclear risk reduction agenda and the UN's WPS resolutions, National Action Plans, and FFP frameworks.
- 8) Mainstream the racialized hierarchy in international security to highlight how nuclear diplomacy is shaped by colonial legacies and racial power structures, ensuring this is reflected in its implementation.

By pursuing these recommendations, policymakers can foster a transformative approach to nuclear risk reduction, grounded in feminist principles and inclusive security.

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