

DISARMAMENT AND DEMILITARISATION

Introduction

People-centered and gender-transformative approaches to peace and security are gaining new currency in foreign policy debates globally. A feminist approach to security, foreign, and development policy incorporates a broad understanding of security, including food, environmental, and health security, and seeks to transform oppressive social, economic, and political systems to prevent conflict and foster equality and justice. It recognises and transforms the social and gender norms and structures that drive inequality, conflict and violence – including [militarised masculinities](#). Such an approach is intersectional, inclusive, and prioritises human security over state or national security. It promotes cooperation, dialogue, and social justice, advocates for an end to the reliance on weapons and violence to achieve 'security', and advances towards disarmament and demilitarisation. It interrogates power by acknowledging the colonial and patriarchal legacies that have shaped its structures.

A central dilemma for those advocating for a feminist foreign, development, and security policy is that even where authorities have indicated support for feminist ideals, the transformative ambitions of such an approach are often beyond the political capacities of policymakers to deliver. This can lead to policies being labelled as 'feminist' while falling short of the transformative aspirations of a genuine feminist foreign policy, which risks undermining efforts to support a [sustainable peace and security](#) for all, as well as the work of feminist activists. Countries with stated feminist foreign policies – including Germany, Canada, and formerly Sweden (which withdrew its policy in 2022), are far from progressing in these objectives. They fail to pursue demilitarisation policies, are amongst the world's top arms exporters, and their practices continue to consolidate unequal and exclusionary structures.

A feminist foreign, development, and security policy would mean taking effective steps to end arms production and exports, investing in human security instead of military structures, and developing participatory security policies that recognise and transform structural inequalities as drivers of conflict and violence. It is a long-term political, cultural and economic undertaking that requires strong feminist leadership and a clear-eyed approach to striking the balance between what is politically and practically possible in the short-term while charting a path towards its more transformational aspects.

This briefing offers suggestions on how to reconcile the tension between policy-making aspirations and constraints, with a particular focus in the last section on practical recommendations in the right direction towards a feminist security, foreign, and development policy.

International Commitments

The UK's international commitments include a number of instruments relating to gender, arms and militarisation, but they fall short of the full aspirations advocated for by proponents of the feminist approach to security, foreign, and development policy. The UK's approach is largely focused on the inclusion of women in security decision-making, the consideration of gendered impacts in conventional weapons transfers, and analysis or commitments to disarmament limited to specific types of weapons, rather than a general commitment to disarm and demilitarise advocated by supporters of feminist foreign policy.

These commitments can be found in United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, UN General Assembly resolutions, treaties, and conventions¹, and the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action. Themes covered include equal participation of women in decision-making, protecting women and girls from conflict-related sexual violence facilitated by weapons, gendered conflict analysis, and accountability of security and justice actors to women and children.

1. Such as the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and General Assembly resolution 65/69 (2010) and subsequent resolutions on Women, disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control.

The [Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action](#) is the closest to a general commitment to disarmament and demilitarisation, articulated through its commitment ‘to reduce excessive military expenditures and control the availability of armaments’ and to ‘promote non-violent forms of conflict resolution’. Otherwise, the UK’s commitments are limited to bans on specific weapons including landmines, cluster munitions, and chemical and biological weapons. The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) obligates the nuclear-armed States Parties to negotiate and achieve the elimination of their nuclear arsenals, but the UK has not yet complied with this legal obligation.

The UK is party to the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), which places restrictions on the sale and transfer of conventional weapons, including if there is risk of the weapons being used to commit acts of gender-based violence or other human rights abuses or international humanitarian law violations. However, the UK continues to sell weapons into zones of conflict and to states with a track record of [violating international law](#).

Thus, while some of the UK’s commitments to disarmament and arms control noted above do limit the use, stockpiling, or sale of certain kinds of weapons, these commitments—and the UK’s implementation of them—do not fully meet the aspirations of a feminist foreign, development, and security policy. These commitments suffer from three common pitfalls: they risk being tokenistic and not transformative; often lack teeth and concrete implementation measures; and the UK is not fully implementing its treaty-based commitments to disarmament and arms control, particularly in relation to nuclear weapons and the arms trade.

UK progress towards a feminist foreign, development, and security policy?

This section explores three elements of UK policy-making to evaluate how they fit alongside the UK’s international commitments. The following section outlines what further steps towards a feminist approach to these policy areas could entail, providing practical recommendations.

UK security policy: By combining defence, development, foreign policy, and security, the UK’s Integrated Review (IR) approach to security offers opportunities to incorporate a feminist lens. The 2021 IR included several promising commitments to address non-traditional security challenges, such as climate change and rising authoritarianism, but at the same time other parts of the IR failed to incorporate a more comprehensive gender analysis and instead pushed for more militarisation, which was also reinforced in later policy documents. The threat assessment that informs the IR approach fails to consider the different experiences and impacts of security on people of all genders and the norms that perpetuate violence and conflict.

Nuclear policy is one area where the government approach has gone further away from disarmament, failing to consider the [negative impacts](#) on women and girls. The IR reverses a commitment from 2010 to reduce nuclear stockpiles to no more than 180 warheads by the mid-2020s, instead outlining a decision to increase warheads by 40% to 260. The UK takes a two-track approach: committing to the non-proliferation of chemical, biological and nuclear arms, among others, and seeking to build norms around controlling the spread of new technologies, while simultaneously increasing its nuclear arsenal and taking steps to increase weapons exports and the development of new weapon technologies.

The 2023 IR Refresh and revised 2023 Defence Command Paper reinforced the aspects of the IR that focused on state threats rather than broader issues like climate change and declines in democracy. These updated policies diminish prior commitments towards conflict prevention in favour of short-term de-escalation measures that fail to account for root causes of conflict or transform inequalities and other drivers of conflict. Addressing these factors with consideration for the differential and gendered impacts of conflict is critical to achieving long-term stability. The current UK posture thus takes a short-term and circumscribed view that ultimately risks perpetuating cycles of conflict.

Therefore, at the highest levels of UK security strategy there has been a shift away from a more holistic understanding of security towards militarisation. Yet at the operational level there are tools and policies which are a step closer to a feminist understanding of security. For example, the UK Government’s stabilisation guidance, while limited and short term, emphasises gender sensitivity and service delivery as part of achieving stability. The UK needs to do far more to couple this approach with political and social transformation, and mainstream it through the highest levels of policy-making.

Military versus peacebuilding investment: A feminist approach to foreign policy calls for demilitarisation and the use of gender-transformative diplomacy and mediation. However, the UK's trend is to increase investment in military solutions and reduce investment in peacebuilding. Global military spending [climbed by 3.7%](#) in 2022, totalling US\$ 2,240 billion. The war in Ukraine and the potential threat that this implies for the UK has been used to justify an increase of £5 billion of additional funding over two years for the UK military, reaching 2.2% of GDP in 2023. Out of these, ['£3 billion will be invested across the defence nuclear enterprise'](#) and the remaining £2 billion will be used to increase weapon stockpiles. In addition, the UK [committed £2.3](#) billion in military support to Ukraine in 2022 and pledged to match or exceed this figure in 2023. This is on top of [the £24 billion already secured in the 2020 Spending Review](#), which was intended to strengthen the British Armed Forces particularly in digital warfare and cybersecurity.

At the same time, the UK has been reducing its support for civilian peacebuilding, conflict prevention and resolution from \$514 million in 2016 to \$184 million in 2021. As a proportion of the aid budget, it has been reduced from 4% in 2016 to 2% in 2021. Some [modest gains](#) have been made in targeting this budget at achieving gender equality but the UK's National Action Plan (NAP) on UN Security Council resolution 1325 does not have a budget and overall gains are still dwarfed by the billions of pounds spent in the service of militarisation. Meanwhile, alternative, non-militarised approaches to the insecurity faced by people in the UK are also deprioritised. Domestically, inequalities remain in areas like health and employment, which have a bearing on people's wellbeing and which have been made worse by [austerity](#), with women, people from minoritised ethnic backgrounds, and households on lower incomes [particularly affected](#). The UK is thus deprioritising conflict prevention and civilian-led approaches to human security issues while increasing investments in militarised responses to crises and threats, both domestically and overseas, a trend that must be reconsidered if the UK seeks to make steps towards a feminist foreign policy.

Arms transfer controls: Despite some positive developments on paper the UK has in practice fuelled [violence against women](#) through its arms exports. In 2021 the UK's general prohibition against transferring equipment that might ['be used to commit or facilitate gender-based violence or serious acts of violence against women or children'](#) was explicitly elaborated in criteria relating to preventing internal repression and preserving peace and security. As these considerations form part of broader criteria, it is difficult to see how this specific component is incorporated into assessments in practice. [Routine publication of licence denials](#) furthermore do not disaggregate on the grounds of the risk of gender-based violations.

The impact of current UK arms transfer policy produces an outcome at odds with the aspirations of a feminist foreign policy, and can be largely characterised as ensuring a continuous flow of arms and weapons systems that advance militarisation. The UK licensed the export of over [£25bn](#) in military and dual-use equipment in the last five years of data available. Many of the top recipients of UK arms, for example Saudi Arabia, are repressive autocratic regimes implicated in human rights violations including the rights of women, LGBTQI+ people and other marginalised communities.

The focus of the UK licensing system on the impact of individual pieces of equipment, assessed on a case-by-case basis, means that often the wider political and social impact of a long-term cumulative supply of arms is ignored. Equipment such as small arms and light weapons, tear gas and surveillance technologies, alongside the strengthening of defence and security institutions, are prioritised over civilian-led peace-oriented approaches. Once a defence and security relationship has been established with a state that involves arms transfers, defence cooperation, and other forms of security assistance, there is little chance to halt arms sales to regimes despite evidence of misuse, in a system that requires linking a specific piece of equipment to specific risks of future acts of violence. This approach [frequently ignores](#) the history and future possibility of violence, taking a very narrow view of the recipient's behaviour. This system is further buttressed by the [blurring of lines](#) between state and private arms manufacturers and [various subsidies](#) for arms development, research and marketing.

Key recommendations

There are positive practical steps that UK policymakers can take that fulfil both a short-term improvement in policy while contributing towards the longer-term goals that would constitute a more feminist foreign policy:

Redefine UK security policy to focus on gender equality, human security and prevention

- Integrate an intersectional and context-based gender analysis into all UK policies and policy reviews. Policies should recognise and respond to the differentiated experiences and roles of people of all genders and sexual orientations and the gendered drivers of conflict and violence. This is particularly critical for risk assessments for arms transfers and security assistance.
- Ensure that UK national and foreign security is aligned with and complements existing domestic and international strategies and commitments on human security. This includes tackling gender inequality and gender-based violence, climate change, health crises, economic insecurity, and social services, among others.
- Develop transparent accountability mechanisms for security policies and programmes. These mechanisms should detail intersectional and gender-related actions, indicators, and impact in a transparent and accessible format to allow parliamentarians, academics, and civil society to monitor and evaluate results.

Consolidate the meaningful participation of diverse women and LGBTQI+ people in security policies and practices, including arms transfer control

- Ensure that all security-related policies and programmes are developed in collaboration with, in response to, and appropriately account for, the needs and concerns of diverse women, girls, LGBTQI+ people, and other marginalised groups, and contribute to their full participation in security-related decisions, negotiations and diplomacy.
- Support the work of WROs and organisations working for gender equality in conflict-affected states by providing direct, core, and flexible funds so that they can continue taking part in the development of national and international security policies and strategies in an independent and autonomous manner.

Redirect a proportion of military investments to improve social infrastructures, reduce inequalities and mitigate climate change

- Provide a dedicated budget for the UK NAP and increase the proportion of aid spending focused on gender equality as a principal objective to 15%, in line with UN targets and the UK NAP.
- Re-prioritise spending on social infrastructures and programmes to facilitate access to services for all, climate action, and gender and social inequalities at national and international levels.
- Reverse the downward trend in spending on civilian peacebuilding, conflict prevention and resolution by restoring commitments to 2016 levels in cash terms and from 2% to 4% of the aid budget. The UK should also increase gender-sensitive support to related fields including demining and arms control, women's movements and civil society, legal and judicial reform, freedom of the media, and anti-corruption.

Reduce the salience of arms exports in foreign policy

- Adopt a rigorously implemented presumption of denial (rather than the current presumption of export) system for countries on the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)'s human rights priority list and increase monitoring of how equipment is used by recipients.
- Establish a permanent parliamentary committee to scrutinise arms transfer policy and licensing decisions, reinvigorating multilateral efforts to expand universalisation and implementation of the Arms Trade Treaty, and champion new controls on emerging, dual-use, and potentially dangerous technologies.
- Ensure the arms industry complies with obligations regarding human rights due diligence, including in accordance with the UN [Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#) and its specific note on responsible business conduct in the arms sector.
- Reduce government subsidies to the arms industry with a view to termination of such subsidies over time.