

FEMINIST DEVELOPMENT POLICY: WHAT DOES THE POPULATION THINK?

Results of a representative survey

Key findings

- In September 2022, the term “feminist development policy” had already become better known among the German population than the United Nations’ 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- There are reservations towards feminist development policy. In comparison to other possible thematic priorities in development policy (such as development policy based on human rights or peace promotion), it receives the most negative average rating.
- From the viewpoint of the general public, the most compelling reasons for a feminist development policy are those that place an emphasis on equal rights for everyone.

The continued lack of gender equality is an urgent global challenge. Against this backdrop, the German Federal Government announced in 2021 that it would include a feminist foreign policy in its coalition agreement (Federal Government, 2021). The aim of this policy is to strengthen the rights, representation and resources of women and marginalised groups and to promote the recognition of diversity (“3R+D”, Federal Foreign Office, 2022). The Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) has also committed itself to a feminist development policy.

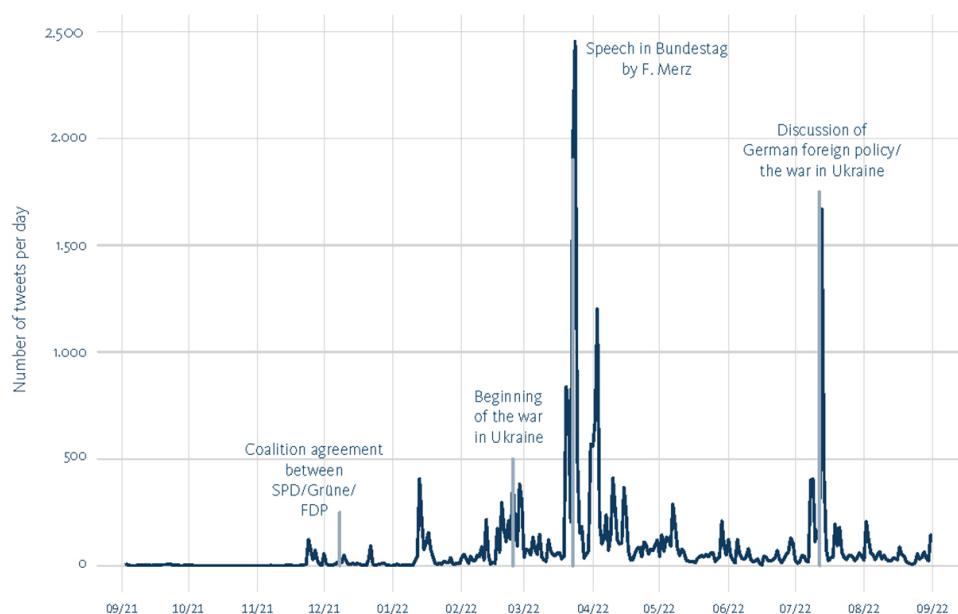
Various people have voiced criticism right from the outset. One prominent example is the speech given by opposition leader Friedrich Merz in the Bundestag on 23 March 2022. In

this speech, the CDU politician argued that the planned special funding for the German Armed Forces should not be used for feminist foreign and development policy, thus expressing his reservations towards this foreign policy mission statement. The feminist orientation of foreign and development policy is also subject to discussion in the (social) media, especially since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, as is shown by an analysis of the microblogging service Twitter (see Figure 1).

A feminist orientation in foreign and development policy therefore meets with diverging views in political debate and provides cause for discussion in the (social) media. But what is the attitude of the general public? Aiming to answer this question, DEval examined public opinion on feminist development policy as part of its Opinion Monitor for Development Policy by evaluating a representative survey that the Development Engagement Lab (DEL) conducted among 2,059 individuals aged 18 and older in Germany in June 2022. The findings provide an initial insight into the general public’s attitudes in this topic area.

Feminist development policy has quickly become better known

In the survey, 12 percent of the population claimed to know what is meant by feminist development policy. A further 22 percent have at least heard the term before. However, it is not known to the majority of the population (59%). This means, nevertheless, that “feminist development policy” is already better known than the SDGs six years after they were passed (8% know what the SDGs involve, while 21% are at least familiar with the term; see Schneider et al., 2022). These results support the findings of the Twitter analysis and show that the concept of feminist development policy has quickly gained awareness and attention.

Figure 1 Feminist foreign and development policy on Twitter

Source: DEval, own visualisation; data basis: Meltwater (Twitter); period 1 September 2021 – 31 August 2022. The figure shows the number of Twitter posts, or "tweets", per day that mention "feminist development policy" or "feminist foreign policy". In comparison, a query of the number of all German-language tweets from Germany for randomly selected days revealed around 400,000 to 600,000 tweets per day.

The general public is rather sceptical

What opinion does the general public have towards feminist development policy? On a scale from 1 = "very negative" to 7 = "very positive", it receives a neutral rating with a mean value of 4.0 on average (see Figure 2, left, dark blue point "Average"). There is a remarkably large number of people answering "Don't know" (38%). This indicates that only few people had already developed a clear opinion of feminist development policy in mid-2022. The variance among the answers (standard deviation = 1.8 scale points) is slightly higher in comparison to the alternative development policy priorities queried, showing that the opinions on feminist development policy were slightly more discrepant.

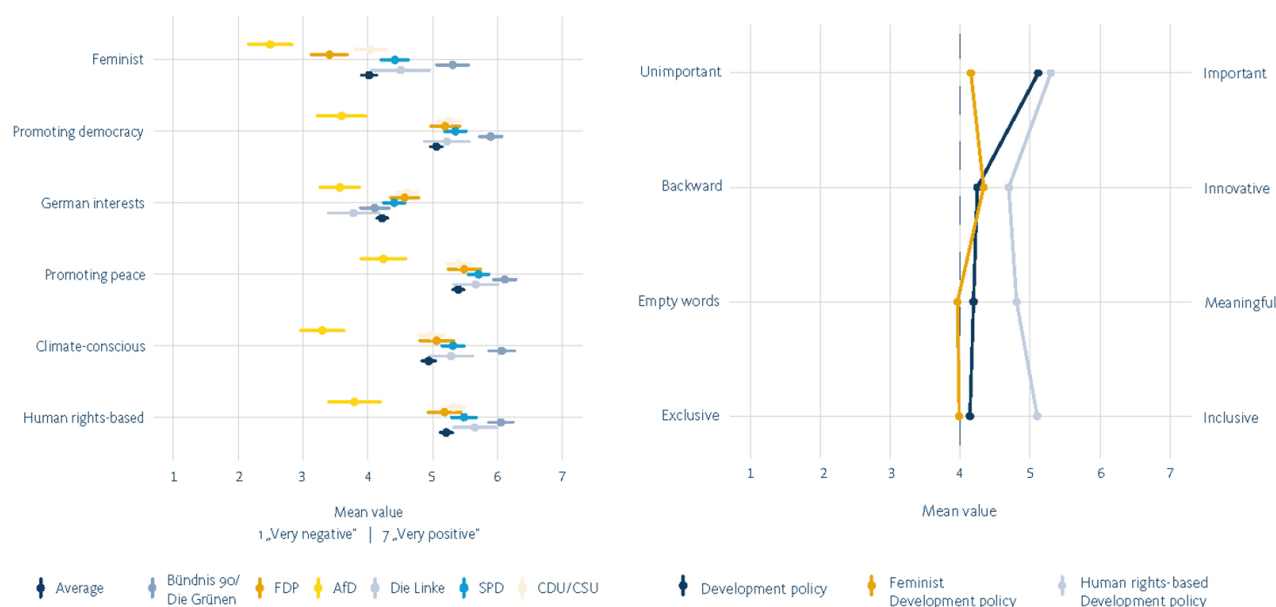
Overall, the general public rated the approach of feminist development policy more negatively compared to other possible thematic priorities in development policy. The most positive ratings went to development policy based on human rights (support = 5.2) and development policy to promote peace (support = 5.4). This might be influenced by the war in Ukraine, which dominated public discussion at the time of the survey. On the other hand, precisely these contexts of

violence could generally promote support for feminist development policy due to the particular vulnerability of women and girls – but this has not been apparent in the data up to now.

The aforementioned assessment can largely be found across all parties. Even people who voted for the SPD in the most recent parliamentary elections – and thus the party of Development Minister Svenja Schulze – rate a feminist development policy markedly less positively (mean value = 4.4) than a development policy that is based on human rights, promotes peace, protects the environment or promotes democracy (all mean values between 5.3 and 5.7). Only development policy geared towards German interests receives an equally poor rating among SPD voters (mean value = 4.4).

A polarising issue

It is notable that a feminist development policy has a comparatively strong polarising effect. The difference between the assessment of AfD supporters (mean value = 2.5) and of those who vote for the Green Party (mean value = 5.3), at 2.8 scale points, is larger than for all other development policy

Figure 2 Attitude towards various development policy orientations

Source: DEval, own visualisation based on the DEL sandbox survey (6/2022); N = 2,059. Left: The statements were gathered based on a scale from 1 = “very negative” to 7 = “very positive”. The results are broken down for the last party elected. Right: Randomised allocation of respondents to three treatment groups. The same four questions (pairs of opposite adjectives) were shown to all groups. The introductory text varied depending on the development policy orientation in question. The endorsement values were queried on a scale of 1 to 7. The precise formulations are available on request.

orientations included in the survey. The opinion of those who vote for the remaining parties (CDU/CSU, FDP, Die Linke) is also notably more negative than the opinion of those who vote for the Green Party. In the case of the other development policy approaches, there is not such a difference between the opinions of those who vote for the various parties – with the exception of AfD voters. Overall, a feminist development policy constitutes a progressive development policy orientation which, however, is less capable of achieving a consensus across various political camps than possible alternatives. In terms of FDP supporters in particular (see Figure 2, left, orange-coloured dots), it is apparent that the label of “feminist” development policy receives a markedly more negative rating than among the supporters of the other centrist parties. This difference is not seen for the other development policy orientations that the survey asked about.

But what distinguishes, in the eyes of the general public, “general” development policy from “feminist” or “human rights-based” development policy? To answer this question, we used four contrasting pairs to determine how people view these terms. The result was that a feminist development policy received the lowest rating for three of the four contrasting pairs (see Figure 2, right).

Although people consider it to be slightly more innovative than development policy in general, they also consider it to be less meaningful, less important and more exclusionary than “general” development policy or “human rights-based” development policy. The latter consistently receives the most positive rating.

Equal rights for everyone as the foundation for a feminist development policy

Which reasons for a feminist development policy does the population find convincing? Most people rate possible reasons as convincing if they place an emphasis on equal rights for everyone. For example, 42 percent are convinced by the statement that feminist development policy is right because it is morally indispensable to involve all genders. This is closely followed by two solidarity-based reasons, which emphasise the contribution for disadvantaged groups and gender equality (39% and 41%). The lowest endorsement was recorded for the statement that feminist development policy is right because it effectively helps to combat poverty and settle conflicts (29%).

Implications for development policy practice

The results show that, in committing itself to a feminist (foreign and) development policy, the Federal Government has chosen a rather challenging label. Even though the finding that the issue is known to just 35 percent shows that it is an issue of interest only to a minority of the population – as is development policy in general – the Federal Government’s commitment to a feminist development policy can contribute to stimulating productive societal debates on gender equality and development policy. At the same time, a strongly polarised discussion of development policy can put the broad development policy consensus of the past (Schneider et al., 2022) into question and cause the general public to perceive certain types of development policy as being more strongly connected to specific parties and their programmes. The implementation of a progressive development policy agenda that focuses particularly on questions of gender equality can give rise to a need for a more intensive public

debate. Possible ways of communicating a feminist development policy more convincingly might include combining the concept with attributes that are related in content but are more capable of achieving a consensus (e.g. “human rights-based”) and stressing the popular value-oriented foundation of feminist development policy, namely equal rights for everyone.

In the medium term, the acceptance of a feminist development policy will also depend on how it is actually put into practice. If it plays a role in triggering relevant changes in the way that development cooperation is currently practised and contributes towards improving gender equality, this could help to convince a broader public of its meaningfulness (for details of the current situation in development policy and possible ways of adjusting it to make it feminist, see Heucher et al., 2022). A feminist development policy that is geared towards such impacts would thus also have a better chance of winning over the majority of society for this development policy approach.

Literature

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