HOW CHANGE HAPPENS:

SEVEN YEARS OF FIGHTING FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

INSIGHTS FROM THE CENTRE FOR FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY

CFFP THE CENTRE FOR FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY

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1. INTRODUCTION: PROGRESS UNDER PRESSURE

From the beginning, the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy (CFFP) was an experiment in courage and conviction. Neither of us, Nina or Kristina, had founded an organisation before. We were first-time entrepreneurs without an established network, without philanthropic backing, and without the institutional access that would later become central to our impact. What we did have was a clear vision: to push feminist principles from the margins of foreign and security policy into the centre of political decision-making. In retrospect, our naivety helped. Not yet knowing what 'could go wrong' allowed us to move with a sense of boldness that experience often tempers.

In those early years, our work focused on building what we lacked: a global network of allies, and a strong body of knowledge. We dedicated ourselves to explaining what Feminist Foreign Policy means, how feminist analysis can be applied to nuclear policy, peacebuilding, emerging technologies such as AI and cybertechnologies, development cooperation, diplomacy, and why gender equality, justice, and peace are inseparable. Back then, only Sweden had adopted a Feminist Foreign Policy, and Canada a Feminist International Assistance Policy. The idea felt radical, the space was small, and the scepticism large.

But the political landscape at the time offered room for opportunities. When we founded CFFP in Berlin in 2018, as the first organisation in the world fully dedicated to Feminist Foreign Policy, Germany was governed by a conservative-social democrat coalition, and the broad international mood - though already fraying - still held pockets of optimism about multilateral cooperation, human rights, and democratic renewal. Over the following years, we saw how tireless advocacy, coalition building, and feminist expertise could change political landscapes. When then Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock announced Germany's Feminist Foreign Policy in 2021 and later credited CFFP as a central driver of this development, it became clear that the work of our young organisation had entered the policy mainstream.

Over the years, our work has generated tangible impacts at both a local and global level. We were the first to bring Feminist Foreign Policy to the world's most influential security platform, the Munich Security Conference. We have implemented more than 60 impactful projects and published over 40 pieces of research and policy analysis - advancing feminist approaches to peace and security, human rights, climate justice, international cooperation, and anti-racism. In August 2021, following the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, we co-raised more than 160,000 euros for human rights organisations run by Afghan women within days. In October 2024, we co-organised one of the largest women's rights press conferences in Germany, calling for the decriminalisation of abortion and urgent action to prevent femicides.

At the same time, the broader context began to shift dramatically. Authoritarianism strengthened across continents, anti-feminist movements professionalised and coordinated transnationally, digital spaces became more hostile and polarised, and the political operating space for civil society shrank significantly. These dynamics started earlier, but over the past two to three years they have accelerated at unprecedented speed - reshaping what is politically possible, and what is personally bearable for those working in exposed positions.

This publication emerges from this trajectory - from the years of building, influencing, resisting, and adapting. It distils the lessons we learned as a successful and impactful feminist civil society organisation operating in an increasingly volatile environ-

ment: lessons about impact, alliances, structural constraints, leadership under pressure, and the necessity of both hope and resistance. In Chapter 2, we elaborate on the key characteristics of our approach to driving change, which we believe have been instrumental to our success, and offer suggestions for fellow civil society activists. Chapters 3 and 4 reflect on the structural and societal conditions for civil society work in Germany and present concrete policy recommendations for policymakers committed to enabling a strong and vibrant civil society. In Chapter 5 we reflect on visibility as a double-edged sword, on what it means to lead under pressure, on the protective structures that are still largely missing for those who are exposed, and on the potential of feminist leadership. Chapter 6 summarises our findings.
Our objective is not to romanticise our work, nor to offer a universal blueprint. Rather, it is to share the insights, methods, and reflections that shaped our practice and may support others working toward a more just world.

We are writing this report following the closure of CFFP in June 2025. In summary, this decision reflects a range of societal and structural conditions, some of which we describe in this publication, in this essay on digital witch-hunts and mob justice, as well as in this interview with *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* entitled *"Als Grundrauschen hast du Vergewaltigungsdrohungen von rechts und das Moralgericht von links" ["You face rape threats from the right and moral tribunals from the left constantly, like background noise"]*. We are deeply grateful to everyone who walked this path with us - especially during the most challenging moments. Our sincere thanks go to the CFFP team, with whom we closed this chapter with dedication and pride.

Feminist Foreign Policy was - and remains - a bold political experiment. So was CFFP. And the insights gathered along the way belong to all who continue - or start - the work.

2. HOW WE DROVE CHANGE

At CFFP, we worked to transform foreign and security policy with the vision of seeing a just Feminist Foreign Policy adopted globally, to promote sustainable peace. From the outset, our objective has been to influence official policies, shape political processes, and advance specific political issues and topics to the forefront of the political agenda.

Especially in the early years, 2018 and 2019 - when only Sweden had adopted a Feminist Foreign Policy and Canada a Feminist International Assistance Policy - our vision for a more just and feminist approach to foreign and security policy often clashed with existing realities. How could it have been otherwise? We were attempting to transform practices and structures in foreign and security policy that had been established and maintained for centuries.

In hindsight, five characteristics of our approach seem to have been particularly instrumental to our success in driving change by influencing foreign and security policy:

- Demanding the maximum - negotiating a compromise
- Working directly with the actors and institutions we seek to influence
- Deconstructing unjust narratives and constructing feminist alternatives
- Engaging in a non-ideological manner and forming alliances
- Applying universalism as an antidote to ideological rigidity

2.1 DEMANDING THE MAXIMUM - NEGOTIATING A COMPROMISE

Over the years, we advocated for a wide range of policy objectives, including nuclear disarmament, an end to Germany's arms export, the legalisation of abortion in Germany and beyond, a national strategy for peace, national and international development cooperation that focuses on equality and justice (instead of on poverty reduction), feminist funding principles to better enable (feminist) civil society to drive change, the inclusion of the sphere cyber peace into the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, better protection of and increased cooperation with women rights defenders, in particular in authoritarian regimes, and many others.

From the beginning, we recognised that achieving these goals required political alliances, compromises, momentum, and leadership. Even the announcement of a Feminist Foreign Policy would not instantly reform a system that has long failed many. Driving progressive change is a marathon, not a sprint.

Our strategy involved outlining short- and medium-term steps without losing sight of long-term, ambitious objectives. In November 2020, for example, we published the Policy Brief "Why the international arms trade is a feminist issue - and what Germany can do about it", in which we list the short-term recommendation of effectively accounting for the risk of gender-based violence in Germany's arms export control; the medium-term recommendation of rendering Germany's arms export control system more gender-sensitive beyond gender-based violence, and the long-term recommendation of ending Germany's arms exports. Since 2024, while remaining a strong supporter of the *Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW)*, CFFP has implemented a project that aims to identify avenues for states such as Germany that have not yet ratified the TPNW on how to better support victims of nuclear testing.

The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, a feminist peacebuilding organisation founded in 1915, followed a similar approach when its experts, together with other feminist advocates, pushed for the integration of human rights and provisions on gender-based violence into the 2013 *Arms Trade Treaty*, the first legally binding international treaty regulating the global arms trade. Some critics have argued that engaging with a treaty that, at certain points, frames international arms trade as contributing to peace and security effectively legitimises the arms trade. They suggest that advocates should have focused solely on the complete abolition of the international arms trade and avoided participating in treaty negotiations (Lunz, 2022).

In our view, the approach of 'demanding the maximum while negotiating compromise' serves a dual purpose. On one hand, it can deliver tangible improvements for women and other politically marginalised groups in the near term - for example, by ensuring better medical support for survivors of nuclear testing or by restricting arms exports that risk being used to commit gender-based violence. On the other hand, it creates opportunities to introduce feminist principles and objectives into policy processes and decision-making spaces that would otherwise remain inaccessible.

Needless to say, the risk of co-opting feminist principles is real, as is the risk of accepting too little too early. There are, of course, instances where compromises appear unevenly balanced or where initiatives primarily serve to 'pink-wash' a government's (or company's) policy. Or cases, in which - despite good intentions - the momentum is just not right. For example, in March 2019, we - together with many other German and international NGOs,

particularly the *NGO Working Group on Women, Peace, and Security* and *the Bündnis 1325* - cautioned the German government *against* introducing a new UN Security Council Resolution within the framework of the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda due to the risk that it might adopt weaker language than its predecessors, reflecting the growing anti-feminist sentiment within the UN Security Council, particularly during the first presidency of US President Donald Trump.

Finding the sweet spot between pushing for the maximum possible and keeping doors open is challenging. For us, much of this balance depended on our ability to reach, engage, and influence policymakers at multiple levels within governmental structures, particularly within Ministries of Foreign Affairs.

2.2 WORKING DIRECTLY WITH THE ACTORS AND INSTITUTIONS WE SEEK TO INFLUENCE

In 2020, just before the pandemic brought the world to a standstill, CFFP organised the first-ever feminist official side event at the Munich Security Conference (MSC), a prestigious international forum traditionally focused on militarised and state-centric security topics. CFFP's event was opened by then-Vice Chairman Boris Ruge and featured speakers including former International Criminal Court Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda. It marked the first time that issues such as women's participation, justice, disarmament, and peacebuilding were discussed from a feminist perspective at the MSC - it was the first ever event on Feminist Foreign Policy at the MSC.

We take pride in knowing that, since then, the MSC programme has included many more discussions on women's participation in peace and security, the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda, and the anti-feminist movement. At the time, our engagement with the MSC drew criticism, particularly from fellow feminists, who argued that participating risked legitimising the conference's traditional understanding of security.

We, however, believed that we were exactly where we needed to be - at the centre of decision-making, where policies are shaped and opinions formed. From the outset, CFFP made a conscious decision to engage directly with actors in ministries, parliaments, and international organisations to drive change - while maintaining financial independence from any single donor, whether governments, foundations, or others. In fact, we worked hard from the beginning to diversify our income streams (see also Chapter 3).

Building networks - both at the working and political levels of ministries and international institutions - was a core part of our work. These networks allowed us to counter scepticism toward our policies and identify windows of opportunity. They also enabled us to support allies within the system by providing resources or arguments to advance specific points, or by building alliances with like-minded partners in other institutions and countries. Often, we received feedback that we were the first to invite certain departments or programmes to have a conversation with them - instead of about them.

This networking also allowed us to drive change on multiple levels. Our high-level, women-only dinners at the MSC featured speakers such as the Vice President of Colombia, Francia Márquez; Nobel Peace Prize Laureates Leymah Gbowee, Maria Ressa, and Oleksandra Matvii-

chuk; the Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas; and German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock. These gatherings aimed to build transnational solidarity and advance feminist priorities on international peace and security agendas. In contrast, informal discussions and background conversations focused on influencing specific policies, such as Germany's arms export regime, or strengthening political will to counter anti-feminist movements.

This engagement with key stakeholders never compromised our ability or willingness to be critical of our partners' work or positions. We regularly challenged governments, in particular those that had adopted or were thinking about adopting a Feminist Foreign Policy, both publicly and behind closed doors. In the case of Germany, for example, we criticised the government for blocking the harmonisation of the definition of rape across the EU, for failing to legalise abortion, for omitting specific funding commitments to support feminist civil society in the Shaping the Feminist Foreign Policy guidelines issued by the German Federal Foreign Office, for allowing massive influence of the defence industry on Germany's foreign and security policies, and for providing funding to actors opposing feminist principles.

We fully understand and respect that other organisations and actors may choose to push for change differently, for example by applying solely public pressure on governments. We believe that different civil society actors can and should play complementary roles. In Munich in 2020, following our event at the MSC, we cheered for feminist colleagues who were demonstrating for a Munich Peace Security outside of the security zone of the MSC.

For us, it was important to be open and explicit about the approach we had chosen, both internally and externally. And to critically reflect and discuss our engagement in certain processes, cooperation with certain actors, in particular with governments. As a result, over the years, we rejected donations from certain donors as well as the participation in certain processes.

2.3 DECONSTRUCTING UNJUST NARRATIVES AND CONSTRUCTING FEMINIST ALTERNATIVES

Another core part of our work has been to deconstruct entrenched norms and dominant narratives in foreign and security policy. In our daily work, we challenged the often uncritically accepted realist worldview - one that "sees the coexistence of states without a supranational government as anarchy." This worldview and its underlying narratives stipulate further that: "In order to be influential and powerful in this situation, states attempt to dominate and oppress others - preferably by military strength and armed force. Individuals and their needs play no part in this concept, or if they do, it is only in terms of the desire to gain control over others - 'man over man'" (Lunz, 2023, p.60).

In contrast, we worked to expose the deep interdependence between foreign policy actions and domestic social structures, showing that "the higher the level of gender inequalities within a state, the greater the likelihood such a state will experience internal and interstate conflict" (Rees and Kapur, 2019, p.138; based on Hudson et al., 2008/2009), as well as increased fragility and risk of terrorism (Hudson, 2020).
We analysed how the international community's disregard for Russia's growing domestic authoritarianism - and its failure to engage with feminist movements inside the country - contributed to the regime's consolidation of power. We deconstructed the notion that the growing backlash against the rights of women and other politically marginalised groups is a natural response to 'too much progress', instead highlighting the coordinated and well-funded global anti-feminist movement actively working to influence public opinion and national and international policies. We further challenged the idea of nuclear weapons as guarantors of security by centring the lived realities of survivors and victims of nuclear testing and use, thereby questioning whose security such weapons truly serve. In short, deconstructing unjust narratives formed the bedrock of our work.

But we did not stop there. From the outset, we viewed it as our core mission not only to deconstruct unjust processes, structures, and narratives, but also to proactively design feminist alternatives for foreign and security policy - and to illustrate concrete plans for governments to realise them. We did so because we believed that, in order to create a more just world, it is not enough to tear the ugly apart - it is imperative to also envision the new, the better, the beautiful. Hence we developed, among other things, actionable recommendations on how to strengthen gender equality and democracy both domestically and internationally; outlined what a Feminist Foreign Policy towards Russia could look like; proposed strategies to counter the global anti-feminist movement; and identified measures to reduce nuclear dependence in favour of sustainable, human-centred security.

Throughout our work, our partners - particularly within governments - expressed appreciation for this approach, as it enabled them to engage with and gradually absorb our ideas and demands, which were often perceived as radical. Similar to the approach 'demanding the maximum - negotiating a compromise', this method facilitated the implementation of incremental changes in the short term, while simultaneously opening the door to more profound discussions on the need for a fundamental shift in foreign policy in the long-term.

Constructing new visions and identifying a concrete plan to achieve them is hard work. We

believe that, particularly within humanities and feminist circles - which often (rightfully) place a strong emphasis on deconstruction - less attention is sometimes given to the practice and necessity of constructing (Lunz, 2024). In fact, destroying is always easier than building. Over the past two years, we have also observed a growing reluctance to engage in constructive work, driven by the fear of producing imperfect ideas that could be criticised. Unfortunately, even within feminist communities, there is a tendency to focus on the shortcomings of ideas, at times insinuating that certain aspects or perspectives were intentionally omitted. We have come to refer to this as the 'Yes, but' approach. Such an approach discourages actors from entering the political arena and prevents promising ideas from being refined through engagement.

In contrast, we advocate for a 'Yes, and' approach: acknowledging that an idea has merit while encouraging further exploration and dialogue - e.g., "Yes, this is a great idea - and why not also consult that expert or community and consider this additional perspective?"

2.4 ENGAGING IN A NON-IDEOLOGICAL MANNER AND FORMING ALLIANCES

Another important characteristic of our approach to drive change was the conscious decision to work in a non-ideological way, from the outset. This did not mean lacking principles - quite the opposite. It meant holding our convictions with the humility required to remain open to better arguments, new evidence, and perspectives that challenged our own assumptions. We deliberately kept alive the possibility that we might be wrong, or that others might hold insights that would strengthen our work. In a political environ-

ment often shaped by moral certainty, this stance was both counter-cultural and essential to driving meaningful change.

Ideology, understood as a rigid system of beliefs and narratives, provides coherence and emotional security. But when actors become governed by ideology rather than guided by principles, movement becomes impossible. Debate collapses into dogma; disagreement becomes threat; nuances disappear. A person acting ideologically will resist persuasion even in the face of stronger arguments, avoid compromise, and retreat into moral or intellectual superiority. For an organisation working to transform complex political systems, this rigidity is not only unhelpful - it is dangerous.

A non-ideological approach, in contrast, recognises that none of us sees the world as it truly is. Political science and neuroscience alike remind us that each of us observes reality through a specific standpoint, filtered through experience, identity, and emotion. Our attitudes feel rational and self-evident to us, even when they are not. As neuroscientist Philipp Sterzer (2022) argues, our brains construct worlds that can appear internally coherent but may coincide only partially - or not at all - with external reality. For that reason, convictions should be treated not as absolute truths but as hypotheses: open to being tested, contested, and, if necessary, disproven. And they must always remain falsifiable. At CFFP, this principle shaped how we analysed policy problems, collaborated with partners, and engaged with those who disagreed with us. We saw disagreement not as a threat but as an invitation to refine our arguments. We tried to tolerate multiple truths simultaneously, and to actively engage with opposing perspectives.

This mindset also helped us resist one of the most corrosive tendencies in today's political culture: the belief that only one set of beliefs is legitimate and all others are morally inferior. The inability to accept the existence of differing positions is deepening dichotomies - between the morally 'pure' and the morally suspect - and undermining the possibility of genuine dialogue. In feminist and progressive spaces, where moral conviction is understandably strong, this dynamic has at times fuelled division, dogmatism, and exclusion. We saw this clearly in moments of public mobilisation where ideological purity tests threatened to fracture movements that urgently needed unity.

A non-ideological approach does not deny the existence of injustice or the moral urgency of speaking out. It is not neutrality. As Desmond Tutu reminds us: *"If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor."* But moral clarity does not require ideological rigidity. One can denounce violence, oppression, or violations of international law firmly - and still allow for shades of grey, differing priorities, and legitimate disagreements about strategy.

At CFFP, this meant refusing to engage in black-and-white thinking. It meant embracing ambiguity, staying curious, listening deeply, and recognising that partners - whether feminist activists, policymakers, or civil society organisations - operate within their own constraints. It meant building bridges instead of walls. We sought collaboration and alliances wherever possible, because within progressive movements - but also among democrats more broadly, including conservative actors, - there is often far more that unites us than divides us.

This belief shaped our practice. For example, in several campaigns, we brought together more than 100 prominent women from diverse political backgrounds to stand united for women's rights - even if we did not share identical views on every policy or societal issue. We rejected the logic of 'purity tests', the idea that one can only work with tho-

se with whom one agrees 100 percent on every political or societal issue. Such thinking paralyses progress, and does not reflect the need of a democratic system for allowing compromises.

The risks of this mentality are well-illustrated by a study from the UK organisation More in Common, an organisation which promotes social cohesion. Their research shows that so-called progressive activists often demand complete ideological alignment to enter into an alliance, which is rarely reflected in broader public opinion. This inflexibility prevents effective alliances and leaves movements fragmented. Or, as Rutger Bregman (2024) puts it: "You get a movement that is 100% pure but 0% effective." Of course, we had clear red lines and never collaborated with actors whose values were fundamentally opposed to human rights or democratic principles.

Thus, in our engagement with governments, parliaments, international organisations, and civil society, we prioritised dialogue over denunciation - even when we disagreed. This enabled us to support internal champions, open new political spaces, and introduce feminist perspectives into institutions often resistant to them.

Finally, a non-ideological approach depends on understanding the difference between principles and opinions. Principles - such as universal human rights or the unwavering resolve to see humanity in everyone - must remain firm. But opinions, strategies, and analyses must remain flexible, disprovable, and open to evolution. This distinction guided CFFP in moments when public pressure demanded ideological conformity or when debates in progressive spaces became hostile or exclusionary. We resisted the temptation to moralise or divide. Instead, we sought to hold space for disagreement, complexity, and growth.

In a time of polarisation, disinformation, and shrinking civic space, this posture has not always been easy. But we believe it is essential. Feminist Foreign Policy, at its core, is about building a more just and peaceful world. That requires principled clarity - but also intellectual humility, curiosity, and the courage to remain open. We remain convinced that non-ideological action is not a weakness. It is a discipline, a form of strength, and one of the most powerful tools we have for transformative change.

2.5 UNIVERSALISM AS AN ANTIDOTE TO IDEOLOGICAL RIGIDITY

The fifth characteristic of our approach of driving change that we deem instrumental for our success is what we call 'universalism as an antidote to ideological rigidity'.

A non-ideological approach requires an anchor - a set of principles that are firm but not dogmatic, clear but not exclusionary. For CFFP, this anchor was a commitment to universalism: the belief in the equal human dignity of every person, irrespective of identity categories such as gender, race, class, or social origin. Prioritising humanity over identity does not mean ignoring the structural effects of identity; on the contrary, it requires recognising that each person experiences the world through their own social realities. But it means that these differences must never override our shared humanness.

This universalist ethos has long been a foundation of progressive political thought. As philosopher Susan Neiman (2023) emphasises, universalism is central to left-wing traditions of solidarity - those movements that saw their struggle as interconnected with others across borders, whether in civil rights activism in the United States or anti-apartheid movements in South Africa. What binds people together in such movements is not homogeneity but the conviction that humans are profoundly interconnected across time, geography, and difference. Yet contemporary political culture, particularly in digital spaces, increasingly drifts away from universalism toward a more tribal logic, where belonging is defined by in-groups and adherence to specific identity-based positions. This tendency mirrors, at times, the very dynamics that characterise right-wing politics: rigid boundaries between 'us' and 'them', and an erosion of the recognition of shared human dignity. In moments of polarisation, this fragmentation weakens the capacity for collective action and undermines efforts to build broad alliances - alliances that are essential for advancing feminist policies.

At CFFP, we worked to resist this drift. Our work was rooted in the conviction that human rights must be universal, not selectively applied. We advocated policies grounded in the belief that every person deserves respect, protection, and equality - regardless of whether they belonged to one's own political, social, or ideological community. This required us to remain open to dialogue across differences, to recognise the complexity of political motivations, and to avoid casting people as morally inferior simply because they held different views or priorities.

In the aftermath of October 7th, 2023, these principles were tested in particularly painful ways. Across social media - and also within progressive movements - debates were increasingly framed through a misguided binary lens in which individuals were expected to "pick a side." We deliberately refused to participate in this football-field mentality. For us, the idea of humanity remained central as we sought to articulate our positions. Any stance worthy of the name had to rest on universalism - on the unwavering acknowledgement of the humanity of all those affected.

Thus, it was essential to us to unequivocally recognise the intolerable suffering of civilians in both Israel and Gaza. Ideologies, propaganda, and the tendency to equate people with their political leaders can obscure our view and erode our capacity to see the humanity of Palestinians and Israelis alike. Our conviction is simple: if we grieve more for certain human lives than for others - e.g. based on the actions of governments or the dominant narratives within our own societies - then propaganda has already succeeded.

Guided by this perspective, we reached out to both our Palestinian and our Israeli friends and partners. In our public and informal communication, we urged a ceasefire, denounced violence against civilians, and called for an immediate halt of German arms exports to Israel. Our focus, consistently, was to support civilians, to stand against terrorist organisations as well as extremist governments, and to advocate for a path grounded in humanity, justice, and international law.

Universalism, understood in this sense, is not an abstract philosophical stance but a practical tool to counter dogmatism and digital polarisation. It creates the conditions for genuine dialogue, allowing for disagreement without dehumanisation. It prevents progressive spaces from collapsing into the logic of purity politics. And it preserves the moral clarity necessary for advancing Feminist Foreign Policy - without replicating the exclusionary or moralising tendencies we aim to challenge. For us, universalism was therefore both a principle and a method: a way of grounding our political commitments while keeping our approach flexible, open, and resistant to ideological rigidity. It enabled us to work with a diverse set of actors, build coalitions across political and institutional boundaries, and advocate for policies that sought justice not only for some, but for all.

2.6 CONCLUSION

Driving systemic change in foreign and security policy requires persistence, creativity, and a willingness to navigate complexity. Our work at CFFP has shown that transformative progress can emerge through a combination of principled advocacy and pragmatic engagement - demanding the maximum while negotiating necessary compromises; entering decision-making spaces; and relentlessly deconstructing unjust narratives while constructing feminist alternatives that point toward a more equitable and peaceful world.

What has guided us throughout is a clear understanding that change does not unfold in a linear or uniform manner. It depends on timing, approach, on political context, and on the relationships, alliances, and trust built along the way. A key lesson has been the importance of non-ideological engagement: holding firm principles while remaining open to evidence, dialogue, and perspectives that challenge our assumptions. This approach enabled us to bring together diverse actors - including those with differing political views - while maintaining clear red lines against collaboration with actors fundamentally opposed to human rights or democratic values.

Our commitment to universalism was just as important: grounding our work in the equal human dignity of every person, regardless of identity or affiliation. Universalism allowed us to navigate polarised political landscapes without dehumanising others, to engage in difficult debates, and to advocate consistently for justice and protection for all. It served as both a moral compass and practical tool, enabling us to advance Feminist Foreign Policy while resisting dogma and ideological rigidity.

This approach has allowed us to remain both ambitious in vision and strategic in action - anchored in feminist values while responsive to the realities of policymaking.

2.7 RECOMMENDATIONS TO FELLOW CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS: HOW ADVOCACY CAN BE SUCCESSFUL

» Be strategic and explicit about the approach you chose to work towards the change you would like to see. Accept that transformative policy change is a marathon, not a sprint, and requires persistence and resilience. Outlining actionable short- and medium-term steps that advance incremental change while maintaining focus on long-term, ambitious objectives, can be useful.

» Remain open to negotiations and compromises. At the same time, be prepared to walk away when compromises undermine core values or risk legitimising harmful policies.

» Recognise the value of complementary civil society strategies: some organisations engage externally through public pressure, while others engage directly with institutions. Both approaches are necessary to drive systemic change effectively.

» Build conscious relationships with actors whose work you would like to influence. Building networks at different levels, e.g. in a ministry, helps to place ideas/demands/recommendations at different levels, which often allows for quicker or more sustainable progress. It also allows you to shift gears if one level is not advancing.

» Make an effort to understand the restrictions, concerns and positions of those whose work you want to influence. This allows you to identify windows of opportunity, address concerns, and to strengthen advocacy strategies.

» Always ensure your financial independence - from one donor, or a set of certain donors.

» Develop actionable proposals that illustrate concrete pathways for governments, institutions, and communities to achieve progressive goals, such as Feminist Foreign Policy, gender equality, or human-centred security.

» Encourage a 'Yes, and' mindset: acknowledge the value of ideas while inviting further perspectives and refinement, instead of focusing on what is missing or imperfect.

» Prioritise principles over ideology: anchor your work in universal human dignity and human rights - but remain open to new evidence, better arguments, and changing political contexts. Treat convictions as hypotheses, not dogmas.

» Embrace complexity and reject binary thinking: avoid pressure to 'pick a side' in polarised debates. Hold space for nuance, contradictions, and legitimate disagreement without losing moral clarity.

» Build broad, strategic alliances - even across political differences: work with actors you do not fully agree with when goals align. Reject purity tests. Effective change requires coalitions that reflect the diversity of democratic societies.

» Pursue dialogue over denunciation: engage institutions, policymakers, and civil society actors through conversation, not moral shaming. Dialogue opens doors that denunciation closes, especially in contested political spaces.

- » Practise universalism in advocacy and communication: apply the same human-rights lens to all communities. Resist narratives that dehumanise, essentialise, or equate people with their political leaders. Uphold the equal worth of all civilian lives.

- » Protect diversity of opinion within movements: create internal cultures where disagreement is possible without exclusion. Movements that cannot tolerate dissent cannot grow, innovate, or build sustainable power.

- » Strengthen resilience against digital polarisation: avoid participating in online outrage cycles that reward extremity. Take intentional steps to prevent social media dynamics from shaping organisational strategy or alliances.

- » Lead with humility, curiosity, and openness: a non-ideological approach is a discipline that requires continuous self-reflection. Cultivate habits of listening across differences, questioning one's own assumptions, and resisting moral or intellectual superiority.

3. OUR STRUCTURAL FRAMEWORK CONDITIONS

Across the world, civil society organisations - especially those advocating for progressive policies - are facing increasing structural and political pressures. This chapter examines the framework conditions we as CFFP have navigated, from the rights and obligations associated with non-profit status to financial insecurity and the shrinking space for civil society due to heightened scrutiny and attacks from the political right. It concludes with concrete policy recommendations for policymakers committed to supporting a vibrant and critical civil society.

3.1 NON-PROFIT STATUS: RIGHTS AND OBLIGATIONS

CFFP was founded as a non-profit/charitable organisation (*gemeinnützige Organisation*), meaning our work was 'selfless' and aimed at promoting 'charitable purposes' for the 'benefit of all', in our case principally gender equality and the promotion of international understanding.

Non-profit status is a special legal status under German tax law that comes with specific rights and obligations. The rights include to be exempt from certain taxes, to receive donations and to issue donation receipts (which in turn provide tax benefits to the donor). Many funding schemes, such as project funds from most foundations and governments, are often only open to those with a non-profit status.

3.1.1 THE DEFINITION OF 'CHARITABLE PURPOSES'

What is considered a charitable purpose is defined by German tax law. Currently, the German Tax Code specifies 27 purposes such as sport, protection of the environment, art and music, animal rights, promotion of the general democratic constitutional system, promotion of international understanding, and others. The application to be considered a non-profit organisation is submitted to the tax office (*Finanzamt*). Each year, a non-profit organisation submits a yearly report, outlining how the conducted activities contributed *exclusively* to the promotion of the charitable purposes defined in the organisation's statute. The status of a non-profit organisation is reviewed every three years. The tax office can revoke the non-profit status, which often occurs retroactively and can thus have existentially threatening consequences for organisations, as they may be required to pay back those taxes that they had previously been exempt from. Currently, the German Tax Code does not include charitable purposes such as promotion of human rights, peace, or justice – causes that typically imply and require political work. Therefore, many organisations that work for these causes often refer to the charitable purposes of "promotion of the general democratic constitutional system" and "promotion of public education," the latter being widely recognised to include political education.

In 2019, the Federal Fiscal Court of Germany revoked the civil society organisation *attac's* non-profit status, arguing that "activities aimed at influencing political decision-making and public opinion in accordance with one's own views are not considered charitable political education." It further argued that political engagement needs to be general and

independent. Advocating for specific positions such as, in the case of *attac*, for the regulation of the international financial market, a feminist economy, or against food speculation, is not charitable.

In late October 2019, the non-profit status of Campact e.V., a campaign-based organisation "advocating for progressive politics and defending our democracy" was also revoked, because strengthening political engagement and organising political participation as such are not considered charitable activities. In the end, both organisations lost their non-profit status because they were deemed too political. Campact and attac are only a few of those organisations that have since lost their non-profit status: in 2024, Volksverpetzer, which works inter alia to counter online disinformation, right-wing extremism, and antisemitism, also lost its non-profit status.

These decisions have caused significant uncertainty and insecurity among civil society organisations, including CFFP, even though political education was never part of our statute. Out of fear of losing their non-profit status, many are self-censoring their political engagement. This is particularly true for organisations that are openly positioning themselves against right-wing extremism. This feeling of insecurity and uncertainty has been exacerbated, as the AfD is instrumentalising the decision by the Federal Fiscal Court for its own political purposes. They regularly report organisations that they consider too critical of their own party to the relevant tax offices, with the goal of having the non-profit status of those organisations revoked. In 2023, for example, an AfD politician requested the Berlin tax office to investigate the well-known Amadeu-Antonio-Stiftung. Even if the non-profit status is not ultimately revoked, the process that follows such a report to the tax office creates significant costs for organisations: the association "München is bunt", which had been reported to the tax office by the AfD in 2023, explained that responding to claims made by the AfD required a lot of time and energy for the members of the organisation, who are all volunteers. In sum, the decision by the Federal Fiscal Court has massively limited organisations' options for influencing public opinion and political decisions.

Civil society organisations have repeatedly called for extending the law defining charitable purposes to include in particular the promotion of human rights, the rule-of law, anti-discrimination, and peace. Additionally, it should be acceptable by law for charitable organisations to influence public opinion, and for charitable organisations to advance their objectives through and even exclusively by political means. In response to these calls, the legislator has initiated very small reforms, which clarify that non-profit organisations do not risk their charitable status if they occasionally and as an exception, engage in (political) activities for purposes other than their own charitable objectives (such as a sports club calling upon their members to join a demonstration against racism).

The previous government had promised to reform the non-profit law to counter the insecurity that the 2019 decision by the Federal Fiscal Court of Germany had created. In the end, coalition parties could not agree on the envisioned reform before the government fell apart in November 2024. The current government commits in its coalition treaty to modernise the "catalogue of charitable purposes" and to simplify "the law on non-profit status" (author's translation).

3.1.2 FINANCIAL OBLIGATIONS AS A NON-PROFIT ORGANISATION

The obligations of a non-profit organisation further include the obligation to spend all available funds timely to implement the organisation's statute, and thus to promote the agreed-upon charitable purposes. This means non-profit organisations are very limited in their ability to create financial reserves. Combined with the fact that institutional funding is nearly inaccessible (in Germany), this creates huge challenges for organisations such as ours. As such, and similar to many non-profit organisations, CFFP was largely funded through project-based grants. This means we received funding for specific project ideas, limited to the duration of each project.

The duration, financial scope, and reporting requirements of these projects varied significantly across donors and projects. Over the course of seven years, CFFP implemented more than 60 projects with over two dozen donors. In addition to staff and activity costs, most project funding schemes include a so-called *overhead flat rate*. This rate is intended to help organisations cover essential operating expenses that make project implementation possible, but are not linked to a specific project - such as office rent, internet and phone bills, or external accounting services. These overhead expenses generally do not require submission of receipts. The percentage of overhead allowed varies considerably between donors. However, with very few exceptions, most donors allow an overhead rate between 7% and 14%. While concrete data is limited, existing analyses and surveys indicate that, in most cases, the actual overhead costs of non-profit organisations exceed what can be covered through overhead within project funding.

Additionally, even the limited overhead rate has been the subject of considerable debate. For example, in November 2023, civil society was alerted when the *Bundesamt für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten* informed partners that - while the overhead flat rate could still be included in project applications - each expense covered under it would need to relate exclusively to the project - meaning that office rent could no longer be billed proportionally. Only the rent for an office space rented *exclusively* for a specific project would be eligible. In late 2023, the Budget Committee of the German Bundestag decided to maintain the possibility of billing such costs proportionally as overhead costs, even if the expense itself does not serve a single specific project - such as general office rent. Each year, civil society organisations fear that these regulations will be changed.

These structural constraints - namely, the inability to build substantial reserves and the limited capacity to cover overhead costs through project funding - create significant challenges for organisations. For example, they make it difficult to retain staff members when a project start is delayed or when there is a gap of a few months between two projects. On the level of individual staff members, this contributes painfully to financial insecurity. It also hinders the ability to offer staff external training opportunities, improve office security measures, or invest in communication activities - which are often essential for building and maintaining networks with donors. This, however, is crucial to not creating dependencies on just a few donors - especially as many government bodies have difficulty funding more than 2-3 projects in a row, to avoid the impression that an organisation is being funded institutionally.

At CFFP, we have only been able to operate as successfully as we have by attracting a small but dedicated group of donors that granted us unsolicited donations. This allowed us to keep staff members in between projects, offer staff development opportunities and, after we received a variety of threats, improve security at our offices. It also allowed us to develop and implement initiatives entirely independently, a crucial factor that allowed us to be as critical as we deemed we needed to be. One example of this is our "A Feminist Foreign Policy Manifesto for Germany", which we published ahead of the German general election in 2021, or the large women's rights press conference calling for the decriminalisation of abortion and an end to femicides, which we co-hosted in October 2024.

3.2 SHRINKING CIVIL SOCIETY SPACES

According to the Atlas der Zivilgesellschaft, published annually by Brot für die Welt, only 3.5 percent of the world's population live in countries with unrestricted civil society freedoms, while more than 72 percent live in countries where civil society is repressed or closed. With regard to Germany, the 2025 report highlights setbacks in freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and the previously mentioned law on non-profit status. Similarly, the Human Right Watch 2024 Country Report Germany reads "German authorities stifled civic space in 2024 by restricting individuals' freedom of expression, assembly, and association. The police, among others, frequently resorted to violence at climate and pro-Palestine protests."

In an interview in the Atlas für Zivilgesellschaft, Prof. Dr. Nora Markard, Professor of International Public Law and International Human Rights Protection at the University of Münster, and board member of the Society for Civil Rights (Gesellschaft für Freiheitsrechte) states with regard to Germany: "Overall, we observe a growing presumption of suspicion against civil society: it is increasingly portrayed as a source of risk, accused of exercising power illegitimately, and alleged to pursue particular interests without adhering to the democratic channels designed for such purposes" (author's translation).

The Atlas der Zivilgesellschaft further states that far-right, right-libertarian, and populist forces are becoming increasingly influential - an influence that CFFP has felt very directly. As mentioned above, the AfD is working against civil society by reporting organisations to the tax office responsible for them. In July 2025, the AfD MP Sebastian Mack presented a detailed plan to "dry up the NGO swamp": according to this plan, four working groups will work to a) draft parliamentary inquiries about these organisations to ministries and analyse the responses; b) to develop a comprehensive database with information about the recipients of public funding; c) to specifically look for legal violations and breaches of the rules of procedure of the federal ministries; and d) to examine legal action and prepare lawsuits against specific NGOs. In June 2025, the AfD introduced a parliamentary motion calling for a law to prohibit the funding of 'party-affiliated' non-governmental organisations from public funds.

In June 2025, the ring-wing news outlet NIUS, founded by the ex-BILD editor in Chief Julian Reichelt, incited hate against NGOs. In his video "The NGO-Complex. They take your money. They want to break your will", Reichelt paints a distorted picture of reality, portraying NGOs as a "shadow government" that spreads left-wing narratives on behalf of politicians - funded with taxpayers' money. The BILD newspaper, Europe's largest publication, has engaged in defamation against CFFP and our

co-founder at least twice during our existence. In both cases, the publication led to questions by donors and partners.

However, not only right-wing parties are actively working to restrict the spaces of civil society organisations. Indeed, the NGO LobbyControl concluded in November 2025: "At this very moment, a broad alliance of right-wing and conservative politicians, media and lobby groups are trying to push democratic civil society out of politics". Both LobbyControl and the Atlas der Zivilgesellschaft highlighted that in "February 2025, the CDU/CSU parliamentary group in the Bundestag submitted 551 questions regarding the "political neutrality of state-funded organisations." The Atlas der Zivilgesellschaft argues that this development is an early sign of attacks against institutions that are supposed to defend rights, an important aspect within the rule of law. In response to the 551 questions, more than 1700 academics signed an Open Letter to Chancellor Merz, stating that it is highly alarming that the parliamentary inquiry adopts the narrative of a "deep state."

The FDP State Association of North Rhine-Westphalia expressed similar views: "The background is in particular the massive protests that took place in spring 2025 under the banner "against the right," which were at times also openly directed against democratic parties in the political centre, simply because they are positioned to the right of the political left" (author's translation). They further state that public funding of NGO is problematic "if the organisations receiving funding fail to maintain political neutrality" (author's translation) - the argument also used by the AfD (see above).

The funding programme "Demokratie leben" has come under particular scrutiny from right wing and conservative actors. The state-level funded programme was initiated in 2014, with the objective to support initiatives that 'Promote democracy. Shape diversity. Prevent Extremism'. From May to the end of July 2025 alone, the AfD sent 42 parliamentary inquiries asking questions about the programme, questioning the necessity of funding certain organisations. In June, in a parliamentary speech, AfD MP Sebastian Maack called the programme "deeply undemocratic" (author's translation). While CDU Minister Prien has committed to continue the programme "Demokratie leben", she announced comprehensive reforms in the summer 2025: in a letter to CDU/CSU, she explained that NGOs who are or have applied for funding through this programme can be subjected to a review by the domestic intelligence service. Experts that implement initiatives funded by programme have described the chilling effects of these developments: in March for example, the city council of Salzwedel (with a majority from the CDU, Afd, and FDP) rejected funding of 700,000 euros from the "Demokratie leben" programme, even though it had already been awarded. Over the course of eight years, the funds could have supported youth projects, local initiatives, and associations.

In 2025, the highly conservative newspaper WELT, published by Axel-Springer-House, mobilised twice against CFFP using well-known defamation narratives against NGOs: that we are either too close to the government, waste tax-payers money, or both. We believe that these 2025 articles were preceded by extensive requests to the German Federal Foreign Office under the *Freedom of Information Act* (FOIA), which establishes an unconditional right of access to official information held by federal authorities, with the exception of intelligence-related information or personal data protec-

ted under data protection laws. Over the years, we have become accustomed to regular press inquiries directed at us - and often in parallel to inquiries to the Federal Foreign Office regarding which projects were funded and their financial scope - FOIA requests are far more comprehensive. As part of these processes, we have had to review and analyse several hundred pages of information, carefully considering whether the disclosure of certain details would involve either CFFP staff's personal data, violate trade or business secrets, or pose a potential risk to the security of our partners, particularly in authoritarian regimes.

Needless to say, we fully support the right of citizens to access information held by federal authorities - but we have to conclude that in many cases, the inquiries are not driven by a legitimate interest in our work, but an attempt to force us to spend time on responding to these claims (instead doing fundraising work, for example), to find information that can be twisted to defame us, and/or to scare off partners who work with us. While the tactics of BILD and WELT are obvious to most of our partners and donors - and many have gone to great lengths to support us - responding to these requests also requires ministries to spend significant time and energy. With regard to the parliamentary inquiries by the AfD on the programme "Demokratie leben!", the Federal Ministry of Education, Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth said that these have led to a "noticeable increase in workload" (author's translation). In late 2023, one of our most important donors informed us that the continuous scrutiny vis-a-vis CFFP could jeopardise future funding - not because we fail to deliver excellent results or do important work, but simply because collaborating with us generates more administrative burden than working with organisations that are subject to less scrutiny.

3.3 CONCLUSION

CFFP's experience highlights the growing structural and political pressures faced by civil society organisations in Germany (and beyond) - in particular those fighting for progressive policies. Non-profit status, while providing tax and funding benefits, comes with stringent obligations that make politically active organisations particularly vulnerable.

Project-based funding and limited overhead capacities constrain financial resilience, creating operational challenges and jeopardising staff retention, training, and long-term sustainability.

Shrinking civic space - driven by right-wing political actors, media campaigns, and excessive scrutiny - has intensified the burden on organisations like CFFP. The fact is that the law defining charitable purposes and the instrumentalisation by actors such as the AfD creates immense uncertainty for civil society actors. Even high-quality, impactful work risks reduced donor support because working with scrutinised NGOs is perceived as time intensive. Collectively, these factors undermine the ability of civil society to defend democratic values, promote human rights, and influence public policy.

The recommendations outlined below - reforming non-profit law, strengthening funding structures, and protecting civic space - are essential to ensure that organisations like CFFP can continue their work without undue administrative, financial, or political constraints. By implementing these measures, policymakers can safeguard a vibrant, independent civil society capable of promoting democracy, inclusivity, and human rights both domestically and internationally.

3.4 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS: HOW TO ENABLE AND PROTECT CIVIL SOCIETY

» Reform the Non-Profit Law

o Explicitly recognise activities promoting human rights, rule of law, anti-discrimination, and peace as charitable purposes.

o Allow charitable organisations to influence public opinion and advance concrete political positions - including (exclusively) through political engagement - without risking their non-profit status.

» Strengthen Funding Structures

o Increase the flexibility and allowable percentage of overhead rates, enabling proportional coverage of general organisational costs.

o Provide mechanisms for multi-year institutional funding to reduce dependency on short-term project grants.

o Strengthen the funding scheme "Demokratie leben" and revoke the increased review of NGOs by the domestic intelligence service (Verfassungsschutz).

o Create an international democracy fund open to organisations working to strengthen democracy, human rights, and the rule of law globally.

» Protect Civic Space

o Establish the promotion of democracy as a government mandate to ensure long-term, sustainable provision of programs and funding.

o Avoid perpetuating right-wing conspiracy narratives about progressive NGOs, such as portraying them as part of a "deep state," wasting taxpayers' money, or attempting to "re-educate" the population. Highlight the importance of a vibrant and critical civil society scene.

o Ensure that reporting or inquiries from political parties or the press do not jeopardise funding or operations solely because of organisational independence or critical engagement.

4. THE SOCIETAL FRAMEWORK CONDITIONS

In addition to structural framework conditions, CFFP navigated what we have dubbed societal framework conditions. These include prevailing notions of impact and how they influence civil society work aimed at structural change, the devaluation and feminisation of civil society work, and the rising polarisation and dogmatism, particularly in the digital sphere. This chapter concludes with recommendations for fellow civil society actors and policymakers on how to navigate and improve these conditions effectively.

4.1 THE UNDERSTANDING OF IMPACT

(Feminist) civil society is crucial for advancing human rights and strengthening democracies. "According to a study by Mala Htun and Laurel Weldon, based on four decades of data from seventy countries, the mobilisation of feminist civil society is the decisive factor when measures and laws are adopted to curb and punish violence against women. The study demonstrates that a strong women's movement is much more important for such changes than national prosperity, left-wing parties, or the presence of women in government" (Lunz, 2023, pp.19/20).

Despite their crucial role in advancing human rights and strengthening democracy, civil society activities are often treated as non-essential and undervalued. This is closely tied to prevailing notions of "impact" - how it is defined, measured, and ultimately what society chooses to value. Too often, the focus remains on short-term, quantifiable outputs, such as generated revenue or other easily measured metrics, rather than long-term, qualitative, or structural effects.

Often motivated by the commendable goal of ensuring effective use of taxpayers' money, most project funding frameworks demand measurable impact within very short timeframes. Most of the projects we implemented had a project duration of up to a year, with the longest project lasting for a period of three years. Within such limited periods, achieving and measuring qualitative impact - particularly in areas focused on shifting norms and structures - is extremely challenging. Policy change, even when targeting a specific initiative, often takes years. Similarly, the value of networks and the knowledge produced in reports or policy briefs may only be realised over the long term, as it gradually influences university curricula, diplomatic training programs, and corporate strategies.

This understanding of impact is also reflected in the kind of activities that receive funding: current funding schemes, in particular those by governments and philanthropist foundations, tend to prioritise interventions addressing what we call 'symptoms of a broken system': health care services for LGBTQI communities, support for survivors of conflict-related sexualised violence, or education for girls. While these initiatives are essential, funding mechanisms should also support civil society's role in advocacy, shaping public and political discourse, and structural change through campaigns, public events, or informal engagement.

Ironically, conservative and right-wing philanthropists frequently fund actors that perpetuate systemic problems: climate-change-denying academics, free-market think tanks, conservative religious groups, and populist media outlets (Vallely, 2020).

4.2 (FEMINIST) CIVIL SOCIETY WORK: A FEMINISED SECTOR

Our team was predominantly composed of women, as were the teams of partner organisations both in Germany and abroad. Similarly, the majority of participants responding to our invitations to public events were women. Globally, it is estimated that around 70% of NGO staff are women, although only 30% of NGOs are actually led by women.

The reasons for this are multifaceted. Women often choose jobs based on an organisation's mission, while men tend to prioritise salary and career growth. These choices are rooted in gendered societal expectations: women are often expected to bear the primary responsibility for care work, whereas men are expected to provide financially for their families. Additionally, societal and political structures are not designed for women, which can create both a sense of discomfort and a strong motivation to influence political processes and outcomes. This might be one reason behind the fact that many of the recent social justice movements, such as the movement to abolish nuclear weapons or the one fighting for climate justice, have been strongly carried by feminists and their ideas.

Linked to broader societal understandings of impact and value, so-called feminised sectors - including NGOs, health, and education - are frequently less valued and less well remunerated than sectors where men predominate. This disparity highlights the systemic undervaluation of work undertaken predominantly by women, despite its critical importance to social and political change.

One way this manifested in our daily work was the constant need to advocate for fair compensation for our expertise and time. We were repeatedly asked to provide our expertise for free - whether as panellists, reviewers, or experts - often with the argument that participating in a public event or informal discussion with policymakers would increase our visibility and recognition. While visibility and recognition can be valuable, they do not pay staff salaries or cover rent. Early on, when we raised this issue with a ministry official after having been invited to give an expert input during a training, we were invited to join participants for dinner after the training - even allowing us to bring some of the food home. Sometimes, we even faced the argument that this work is our passion, insinuating that passionate work must be done for free. In 2024, when our co-founder Kristina Lunz was awarded the German Start-up Award as Impact Entrepreneur of the Year, her category was the only one out of 4 not co-sponsored by a partner, and thus while other winners received a valuable and/or prestigious additional gift, she did not.

As noted above (see Chapter 3), CFFP, like most other organisations, has been highly dependent on project-based funding. This means that funds allocated for staff time within a specific project cannot be used to prepare for a panel discussion or review an external study outside of that project - so such requests essentially asked us to work in our free time without pay. If the panel is abroad, this can easily amount to several days of uncompensated work. This challenge is even more pronounced for experts from the Global South, who often face lengthy travel, as most UN and international entities are based in the Global North. Ultimately, we - like many others - have repeatedly faced the dilemma of whether to accept such invitations, weighing the opportunity to influence processes and outcomes against working for free. Needless to say, who was asking mattered deeply to us: a representative of a government or multilateral organisation, or a young activist who had just founded their own initiative. In the latter case, we tried to accept as many invitations as possible. First and foremost, it is neither fair nor appropriate to take the expertise of civil society actors for granted, overlooking the time and resources they have invested in developing it. Doing so is also unwise. In Germany, for example, Foreign Office staff rotate regularly, often arriving as newcomers to specific topics, whereas civil society experts frequently dedicate decades to a particular issue, building not only deep subject-matter knowledge but also invaluable process expertise and institutional memory. Cooperating with civil society, therefore, can serve as a crucial source of knowledge.

At CFFP we made a conscious effort to always compensate other fellow civil society experts for their expertise. We included these honorariums in project funds or ensured that we had enough unsolicited funds (which we had generated through donations) to cover them ourselves.

4.3 DOGMATISM AND DIGITAL POLARISATION

Alongside the challenges posed by prevailing ideas of impact and the feminisation of our work, one societal factor that distorted our work was what we referred to as dogmatism and (digital) polarisation.

In recent years, the digital public sphere has become increasingly defined by moral absolutism and punitive outrage (see Chapter 2). Movements that aim to create a more just world now operate in environments where nuances collapse, disagreement is moralised, and individuals are judged publicly in real time. For civil society and progressive actors, this trend poses not only strategic challenges but fundamental threats to democratic culture.

Digital platforms amplify emotional intensity, speed, and certainty. Nobel Peace Laureate Maria Ressa said during a United Nations General Assembly speech in September 2025: "Algorithms reward outrage over empathy, spreading fear, anger and hate, pumping us full of toxic sludge." While moral conviction has always been central to social justice movements, its digital form often hardens into moralism - a posture that seeks not understanding or transformation, but punishment and purity. Once political debates take this turn, progressive spaces risk fragmenting under the weight of internal judgement and suspicion, precisely when unity is needed most.

Digital outrage follows a predictable pattern. A sentence, post, or moment is extracted from context and spread widely, often interpreted in the harshest possible light. Algorithms reward anger and escalation, ensuring that the most extreme interpretations gain the greatest visibility. Within hours, narratives solidify - often without any basis in fact - and the incentive becomes less to understand and more to condemn. As Maria Ressa reminded the United Nations, we are now "living through an information Armageddon, where lies spread six times faster than facts on social media." This dynamic accelerates the formation of digital mobs, and nuance is almost impossible to recover once outrage has taken hold.

In these dynamics, proportionality collapses. Minor disagreements, ill-phrased sentences, or misinterpretations are treated with the same intensity as structural injustice or intentional harm. The distinctions essential for political thinking - between a mistake, a disagreement, an offence, or a crime - dissolve. Digital mobs act collectively, but the harm falls on individuals who are denied context, voice, or the possibility of growth.

What appears as "holding someone accountable" is, in reality, a form of digital punishment that bypasses all democratic safeguards. It reinforces a culture where the only acceptable posture is one of instant moral certainty, and where any nuance can be read as complicity.

At the heart of digital dogmatism lies a breakdown in the ability to tolerate ambiguity: to hold complexity, uncertainty, and difference (see Chapter 2). In digital spaces, the demand is for immediate clarity and perfectly aligned moral positions. Hesitation, nuance, or requests for context are misread as moral failure. Intolerance for ambiguity undermines the very foundations of political and intellectual life. It closes the space for dialogue, reflection, and learning. It also breeds fear: people - disproportionately women, as they are targeted disproportionately - retreat from public debate, avoid proposing new ideas, and censor themselves to avoid triggering collective punishment. Over time, progressive spaces become smaller, more rigid, and more hostile to internal diversity.

This dynamic not only weakens movements; it

strengthens their opponents. Polarisation, dogmatism, and moral panic create fertile ground for authoritarian narratives that promise simplicity and security.

Digital mobs, regardless of their origin or political orientation, share several characteristics: they act without context, they deny the humanity of the person(s) targeted, and they prioritise punishment over understanding or transformation. They flatten complexity into certainty, turning individuals into symbols and disagreements into moral faults.
For civil society organisations working toward justice, these tendencies are profoundly corrosive. They distort public discourse, render collaboration risky, and undermine the trust required for collective action. No democratic movement can thrive in a culture that replaces deliberation with digital execution.

Despite these challenges, there are ways to resist the gravitational pull of digital dogmatism and foster healthier political cultures. It begins with rebuilding our ability to tolerate ambiguity - the willingness to hold complexity without collapsing into certainty. It requires slowing down in a medium that rewards speed, insisting on context in spaces that flatten nuance, and prioritising dialogue over punishment. It means cultivating practices of empathy and intellectual humility, even - and especially - when disagreement is sharp. And it demands organisational cultures where mistakes are distinguished from malice, where learning is possible, and where fear does not dictate participation.

4.4 CONCLUSION

The work of (feminist) civil society is both essential and often undervalued. While it drives structural change, advances human rights, and strengthens democracies, prevailing notions of "impact" frequently prioritise short-term, quantifiable outputs over the long-term, qualitative effects that are critical for systemic transformation. Similarly, sectors dominated by women - such as NGOs, health, and education - continue to be structurally undervalued and undercompensated, despite the expertise, dedication, and years of institutional knowledge their staff bring to the table.

At CFFP, we have sought to address these challenges by deliberately recognising and compensating expertise, by highlighting the long-term impact of our work, and by advocating for civil society's critical role in shaping policy and public discourse. Our experience highlights the need to rethink both funding structures and societal perceptions of value: without such recognition, the transformative potential of civil society risks being overlooked.

Ultimately, true impact is measured not only in immediate outputs but in the lasting changes that civil society fosters in norms, institutions, and political processes. Recognising this, and investing in the expertise and sustainability of those driving change, is central to building just, equitable, and resilient societies.
At the same time, dogmatism and digital polarisation threaten progressive movements from within. They replace solidarity with suspicion, dialogue with denunciation, and political courage with fear. Digital outrage rewards moral absolutism and punishes nuance, narrowing the very spaces that civil society depends on to generate ideas, debate strategy, and build alliances. No movement committed to justice can thrive when complexity becomes suspect and internal difference become grounds for exclusion.

We believe, to defend and advance Feminist Foreign Policy, civil society must cultivate cultures rooted in universalism, humility, and curiosity. These qualities allow us to hold firm to principles without collapsing into rigidity; to challenge injustice without dehumanising those with whom we disagree; and to build alliances across differences, rather than policing ideological purity.

Nothing justifies digital witch-hunts. A more just and peaceful world will be built not through public punishment, but through principled clarity, nuanced dialogue, and the protection of every person's dignity. Recognising the true value of civil society - and strengthening the environments in which it can act - remains one of the most powerful investments we can make in the future of democracy.

4.5 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS: HOW TO IMPROVE CIVIL SOCIETY PRACTICE

» Cultivate Haltung: inner clarity without rigidity. Hold firmly to principles - such as universal human dignity - while remaining open to complexity and uncertainty. Especially in the digital sphere, resist the demand for instant reactions and maintain the capacity to think before responding.

» Prioritise dialogue over denunciation: where disagreements arise, seek clarification before judgement. Dialogue humanises; denunciation dehumanises. Movements depend on the ability to talk across differences, not on enforcing homogeneity.

» Draw clear boundaries without abandoning nuance: it is essential to distinguish between disagreement, error, harm, and violence. Boundaries are necessary: harassment, threats, and dehumanisation cannot be tolerated. But boundaries should protect democratic debate, not shut it down.

» Rebuild the ability to tolerate ambiguity: encourage cultures - internal and external - where people can ask questions, make mistakes, and evolve. Tolerating ambiguity is not weakness; it is a democratic skill. Without it, progress collapses into polarisation.

» Advocate for structural change in digital spaces: civil society must support governance reforms that reduce the algorithmic incentives for outrage and disinformation. A healthier digital environment is essential for any feminist or democratic transformation.

FOR POLICYMAKERS: HOW TO IMPROVE FRAMEWORK CONDITIONS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

» Rethinking Impact Measurement

o Recognise long-term, qualitative impact: funding frameworks should not focus solely on short-term, measurable outputs but also value long-term structural change, norm shifts, and influence on political and societal discourse.

o Expand structural funding: beyond project-based grants, provide longer-term financing that supports advocacy, campaigns, and other activities aimed at systemic change. Feminist organisations like Mama-Cash provide clear guidance on feminist funding.

o Value networks and knowledge production: the impact of reports, policy briefs, and networking should be acknowledged, even if effects are realised over years rather than months.

» Fair Compensation and Valuing Feminised Sectors

o Ensure remuneration for expertise: civil society experts should be compensated for all contributions, including panels, reviews, and advisory work.

o Promote gender-equitable pay: sectors predominantly staffed by women - such as NGOs, education, and health - should be financially and socially valued in line with their critical societal impact.

o Challenge assumptions of unpaid "passion work": commitment or passion should not justify unpaid labour; structures should ensure fair compensation for all civil society contributions.

» Strengthening Civil Society as a Knowledge Partner

o Institutionalise the use of expertise: governments and multilateral organisations should actively incorporate the knowledge and experience of civil society actors, especially where staff turnover is high.

o Leverage continuity and institutional memory: long-term experience in NGOs should be utilised in decision-making through advisory boards, regular consultations, or co-design of programs.

5. POWER, VISIBILITY, AND RESPONSIBILITY

Over seven years, CFFP grew from a small organisation into a visible actor in national and international debates on foreign and security policy. With this visibility came access, influence, and the ability to shift narratives. It also came with something else: a level of exposure that fundamentally changed what leadership meant - for us as co-directors, for our team, and for those we worked with around the world.

Power, in this context, was never abstract. It was deeply entangled with media dynamics, digital violence, gendered expectations, and questions of responsibility - toward ourselves, toward our teams, and toward those whose struggles we aimed to amplify.

In this chapter, we reflect on visibility as a double-edged sword, on what it means to lead under pressure, on the protective structures that are still largely missing for exposed actors, and on why we believe that feminist leadership - grounded in care, accountability, and a universalist commitment to human dignity - is one of the most necessary responses to contemporary forms of power abuse.

5.1 VISIBILITY AS A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD: MEDIA LOGICS AND DIGITAL VIOLENCE

Visibility is often framed as an unambiguous good for civil society organisations. It is equated with relevance, access, and "impact". Without visibility, it is harder to place feminist perspectives on foreign and security policy, to influence debates, or to secure funding. For CFFP, public visibility was a central condition of our success: op-eds, interviews, keynotes, and social-media campaigns helped move Feminist Foreign Policy from the margins into the centre of political discourse.

But visibility is not neutral; there are costs attached to it as described in this interview with Emotion. In a media environment driven by speed, outrage, and the economics of clicks, visibility also carries risk - and this risk is profoundly gendered. Feminist actors, and especially women who speak publicly about power, policy, or sexual and reproductive rights, attract disproportionate levels of hostility. In a widely read interview with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, one of us described the reality succinctly: you face rape threats from the right and moral tribunals from the left constantly, like background noise.

This mixture is not accidental. Research on the "manosphere" - and, in Germany, the emerging "GerManosphere" - shows that antifeminist online ecosystems are neither marginal nor spontaneous. They are transnational, ideologically driven, digitally sophisticated, and explicitly invested in silencing women. These ecosystems thrive on dehumanisation, sexualised violence, and the portrayal of feminism as an existential threat. Feminist voices who gain visibility - including ours - become primary targets.

At the same time, media logics personalise and simplify political work. Complex structural advocacy is translated into individual stories. An organisation becomes its most visible representative; a campaign becomes a face. This concentration of attention amplifies influence, but it also concentrates risk. When backlash comes, it rarely distinguishes between the organisation, its work, and the

individual who happens to be visible at a given moment.

The result is a form of exposure that is not merely reputational but deeply personal. Targets of digital hostility wake up to hundreds of messages expressing hatred, contempt, or sexualised violence. Words are decontextualised, misquoted, and fed into outrage cycles. A single sentence can ignite a spiral of condemnation - not only from the far right but, increasingly, from within progressive spaces, where moral judgement forms rapidly and publicly. Visibility, under these conditions, is both an asset and a vulnerability. It raises significant questions of responsibility: who carries the burden of public exposure? Who benefits from it? And who pays the price when visibility becomes dangerous?

5.2 LEADERSHIP UNDER PRESSURE: RESPONSIBILITY, BURNOUT, CARE

Leading a feminist organisation in this environment meant carrying multiple responsibilities simultaneously. As co-directors of CFFP, we were responsible to our staff, to our donors, to our partners around the world, and to the political processes we sought to influence. We were accountable to those who trusted us with resources, to those who invited us into decision-making spaces, and to those who looked to us for solidarity - for example, women human rights defenders in authoritarian regimes.

At the same time, we were responsible for ourselves. And here, the expectations of leadership can easily slide into over-responsibility: the belief that one must always respond, always speak, always absorb the attack so that others do not have to. This belief is particularly entrenched among women leaders, who are socially conditioned to protect, to hold, to absorb.

Yet this comes at a cost. Constant exposure to threats, disinformation, or defamatory media coverage creates chronic stress. The precarity of civil society funding, the risk of losing non-profit status, or the knowledge that one's work may be used as a political battleground all add layers of insecurity. Burnout in such contexts is not simply "too much work" - it is the cumulative effect of hostility, responsibility, and systemic instability.

It is also intensified by guilt. Rest can feel like abandonment. Setting boundaries can feel like betraying the cause. And saying "no" can feel like letting down those one seeks to protect.

A feminist understanding of leadership must therefore centre care as a political principle - not as an afterthought, not as a private luxury, but as an organisational and strategic necessity. Care means recognising limits, naming psychological strain, and acknowledging that no individual should be expected to embody a whole movement's hopes, fears, and vulnerabilities. It means creating cultures in which people can speak openly about pressure, in which stepping back is legitimate, and in which survival is recognised as a political priority.

For us at CFFP, these lessons were learned sometimes late, but deeply. We learned that refusing to set (personal and organisational) boundaries is not strength. That working through threats without pause weakens the work. And that leadership must include the courage to rest, to delegate, and to share the burden.

5.3 BUILDING PROTECTIVE STRUCTURES FOR EXPOSED ACTORS

One of the most sobering lessons of our work is how few protective structures exist for feminist leaders and civil society actors who are exposed to digital violence, coordinated attacks, or defamation.

While, fortunately, there are increasing resources for journalists at risk or human rights defenders in certain regions, feminist civil society actors in Germany and Europe largely navigate exposure with improvised and fragile tools.

At CFFP, we had to build many of these structures ourselves - often only after attacks had already occurred. This included upgrading office security, developing internal threat-response protocols, securing legal advice, and investing in communications capacity to counter misinformation. We were only able to do this because we had access to a small amount of unrestricted funding - a privilege many organisations do not have (see Chapter 3).

Protective structures are needed at multiple levels:

» **Individual level:** access to trauma-informed counselling, psychosocial support, legal assistance, and digital-security training.

» **Organisational level:** protocols for handling threats; staff training; dedicated points of contact; resources earmarked for safety, security, and crisis communication.

» **Ecosystem level:** solidarity networks that can be activated when individuals or organisations are attacked; coordinated pushback against defamation; and rapid-response mechanisms from allies and donors.

» **Structural level:** recognition of digital violence as a threat to democratic participation; safeguards against the weaponisation of Freedom of Information Act/Informationsfreiheitsgesetz (FOIA/IFG) or parliamentary inquiries; and clear expectations for ethical media conduct.

Protective structures do not prevent all harm. But they redistribute the burden. They signal to exposed actors that they are not alone. And they show that digital witch-hunts and online mob justice are not individual "incidents" but structural attacks on democratic participation.

5.4 FEMINIST LEADERSHIP AS A RESPONSE TO ABUSE OF POWER

The forms of abuse of power we have described - digital witch-hunts, misogynist targeting, politicised defamation, and structural harassment - reflect broader crises of democracy and public discourse. They are enabled by unequal power relationships, by digital architectures designed to reward outrage, and by actors who seek to undermine trust in civil society.

Feminist leadership, as we understand it, offers a fundamentally different way of wielding power. It is grounded in universalism, dignity, accountability, and care - and it refuses the methods of domination, humiliation, and dehumanisation that characterise the forces we oppose.

Its core elements include:

- **Universalism and humanity as the guiding lens:** a Feminist Foreign Policy insists on the equal human dignity of every person. Feminist leadership extends this principle to how power is exercised: refusing dehumanisation, resisting personalised shaming as a political tool, and recognising the humanity even of those with whom we deeply disagree.
- **Commitment to care and boundaries:** feminist leadership treats care as an ethical and strategic imperative. It opposes burnout culture, honours limits, and recognises that overwork and chronic exposure to hostility are themselves forms of violence.
- **Courage to be nuanced:** feminist leadership refuses binary thinking. It combines moral clarity with an openness to complexity, uncertainty, and ambiguity. It acknowledges that disagreement can be legitimate and that nuance is not a form of weakness but a democratic skill.
- **Refusal to replicate abusive patterns:** feminist leadership does not counter dehumanisation with dehumanisation. It does not answer mobbing with counter-mobbing or shame with shame. Instead, it seeks to transform conflict through practices rooted in dignity, accountability, and the possibility of growth.

For us at CFFP, feminist leadership was - and remains - a continuous practice. We made mistakes. We learned. We recalibrated. But again and again, we experienced how deeply this mode of leadership resonated with partners, staff, and allies searching for ways to act without becoming what they oppose.

In an era in which digital mobs can destroy reputations overnight, in which antifeminist ecosystems invest heavily in silencing feminist voices, and in which civic space is shrinking, feminist leadership is not a luxury. It is a necessity. It offers a way to hold power - and to be held by it - that protects dignity, makes space for disagreement, and keeps alive the possibility of a politics that is both principled and humane.

4.5 CONCLUSION

The reflections in this chapter illustrate that visibility, responsibility, and leadership are never neutral territory for feminist actors. Instead, they are shaped by intersecting pressures: gendered hostility, media logics that reward outrage, structural gaps in protective systems, and the emotional and political labour inherent in leading under pressure.

For CFFP, visibility brought impact and influence, but it also brought exposure. Leadership created opportunities to shift narratives, but it also required navigating the often unseen psychological, organisational, and ethical burdens that come with being publicly associated with feminist struggles. In these conditions, power is neither abstract nor distant - it is embodied, personal, and constantly negotiated. Our experience shows that feminist leadership is not simply an approach but an act of resistance against contemporary forms of abuse of power. It is a deliberate commitment to dignity, nuance, boundaries, and care at a time when public discourse incentivises the opposite. Feminist leadership recognises vulnerability as a political reality, not an individual failing. It understands that no one should stand alone in the face of coordinated harassment and that survival itself can be a political achievement.

Ultimately, the question is not whether visibility is good or bad, but how we build ecosystems capable of protecting those who speak out, how we distribute responsibility more fairly, and how we cultivate forms of leadership that strengthen rather than deplete. The lessons we learned at CFFP - sometimes painfully and too late - point to a simple but profound truth: feminist work requires feminist structures. And without those structures, the promise of a more just foreign policy cannot be sustained.

5.6 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR POLICYMAKERS: HOW TO BETTER SUPPORT HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS AND ORGANISATIONS

» Recognise Digital Violence as a Democratic Threat, e.g. by

- o integrating digital violence, targeted harassment, and coordinated intimidation campaigns into national security, digital governance, and democracy-protection strategies.
- o improving cross-government cooperation to improve protective structures for (feminist) human rights actors.

» Create dedicated public funding streams for digital security, legal support, psychosocial counselling, and crisis communication for human rights organisations.

» Publicly acknowledge and condemn digital harassment and misogynist targeting of human right actors.

» FOR CIVIL SOCIETY: HOW TO BE BETTER PREPARED AGAINST ATTACKS AND THREATS

» Build Internal Protective Structures, which can include e.g.

- o Developing organisational protocols for handling threats, including escalation pathways, communications strategies, and crisis-response teams.
- o Organising staff receive training in digital security, and safe media engagement.
- o Investing proactively in legal advice, security infrastructure, and psychosocial support - not only after attacks occur.
- o Normalise setting personal and organisational boundaries.

» Build networks that can be activated rapidly when individuals or organisations come under attack, e.g by coordinating public statements, social media responses, and offers of legal or strategic support.

» Reflect upon your own expectation towards publicly visible individuals and other human rights organisations.

6. SUMMARY: HOW CHANGE HAPPENS – INSIGHTS FROM THE CENTRE FOR FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY

The Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy (CFFP), founded in Berlin in 2018 as the world's first organisation fully dedicated to advancing Feminist Foreign Policy, demonstrates how a small, courageous initiative can generate systemic change under challenging entrenched norms and conditions. Over seven years, CFFP implemented over 60 projects, published more than 40 research and policy analyses, and influenced both national and global policy, including Germany's adoption of a Feminist Foreign Policy in 2021.

Its approach to change combined principled advocacy with pragmatic engagement, demanding ambitious goals while negotiating necessary compromises, entering decision-making spaces, deconstructing unjust narratives, constructing feminist alternatives, and building alliances across political divides grounded in universal humanness. CFFP's experience underscores that transformative change is non-linear and depends on timing, context, relationships, and trust, requiring persistence, creativity, and strategic action anchored in feminist principles.

At the same time, civil society actors face structural and societal constraints: non-profit regulations, financial insecurity, and shrinking civic space create operational vulnerabilities, while prevailing notions of "impact" favour short-term, quantifiable outputs over long-term structural effects. Feminised sectors, including NGOs, continue to be undervalued and undercompensated despite decades of expertise and institutional memory, and digital polarisation and dogmatism threaten solidarity, dialogue, and coalition-building.

The experiences of CFFP further show that visibility, responsibility, and leadership are never neutral territory for feminist actors. Public exposure brings influence to create impact but also significant risks, including gendered hostility, scrutiny, and digital violence which is intensified by structural gaps in protection. Feminist leadership - grounded in care, accountability, and dignity - is essential for sustaining advocacy, distributing responsibility fairly, and ensuring that those who speak out are protected, making transformative change both possible and resilient.

Policy implications from CFFP's experience are clear: policymakers must actively work to protect civil society spaces, ensure sustainable and long-term funding mechanisms and recognition of long-term, qualitative impact to enable civil society to thrive. Civil society actors, in turn, should prioritise strategic coalition-building, maintain principled engagement, and invest in cultivating expertise and institutional memory to navigate volatile political and social landscapes. Together, supportive policies and resilient civil society practices are essential to advance human rights, strengthen democratic resilience, and build more just, equitable, and peaceful societies.

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